Hope Despite Horror

Theorizing Oppositional Horror and Aesthetics of Resistance in Multicultural Horror

by

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ABSTRACT

Horror, more than a genre, manifests in marginalized communities through real-life violence and oppression perpetuated by state powers. This project focuses on both horror as a genre, and horror as an analytic of how oppression, social death, and white supremacy works itself out on the lives of the marginalized. I analyze numerous multicultural horror texts, including *Especially Heinous* by Carmen Maria Machado, *The Devil's Highway* by Luis Alberto Urrea, and "The Finkelstein 5" by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, to demonstrate the potential of resistance within the genre. I name this form of horror-as-resistance "oppositional horror." Oppositional horror operates as subgenre of horror and a theory through which to understand how the tenets of horror—excessive violence, ambient terror, and monstrosity—are used by state powers to perpetuate the oppression of minority populations. Although the horror genre often replicates gendered and racialized stereotypes, it is also capable of resisting systems of oppression. By labeling these systems as horror, the violence is exposed as excessive, terrifying, and dehumanizing.

Oppositional horror draws on theories of social death, haunting, and monstrosity as methods to resist state powers and manifestations of violence. Each chapter demonstrates how social death affects different marginalized communities and the multitude of ways in which social death can be resisted. The first chapter argues that gendered violence is dismissed as normal and acceptable, but by constructing victims as monstrous—because monsters are inherently outside of the norm—destabilizes the normality of their deaths. The following chapter centers state powers as intentionally

allowing migrants to die or go missing on the U.S./Mexico border. In the texts analyzed in this chapter, body horror and hauntings make the deaths of migrants visceral and present, refusing to be disregarded or ignored. The final chapter contends that Black people are kept socially dead through narratives of criminalization and racism. The texts of this chapter position police brutality and the unjust killing of Black people as a tool of white supremacy enforced through fear. Ultimately oppositional horror, by marking violence against marginalized communities as horrific, offers methods of resistance against social death and white supremacy.

For Marina, steadfast jewel

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If you know this you don’t need to continue,
but the cemetery in Douglas, Arizona, is right next
to the Mexican border. The fence is right there
next to the graves from the Depression and stones
that will never move. Dog packs bred
in the days of Villa. The smell of sulfur
not letting the spirits inhale peace.

Mi tio ran cross country for the Douglas High School
Bulldogs, and at night, the stories go, he’d run through
the cemetery, over the fence, through the holes
in the fence, maybe under the fence and go
investigate the cantinas in Agua Prieta.
Returning later and crawling
through a bedroom window
quiet like a content, tequila infused ghost.

-Christopher Rubio Goldsmith, Curfew Dog

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INTRODUCTION:

AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN HORROR AND HORROR

“The caller is in the house. The calls are coming from inside the house!”
Stg. Nash in *Black Christmas*

“See the turtle of enormous girth? On his back he holds the earth.”
Stephen King, *It*

My dad introduced me to horror in the first grade with all the old Universal monster flicks. I cut my little child’s teeth on *The Night of the Living Dead*. I would cower behind the couch as my mom watched *the X-Files*, a show that we now both love. Later, in the dying age of the video home rental industry, my friends and I would scour the horror sections of Blockbuster and Hollywood Video looking for the horror movie with the most outrageous covers. We giddily showed each other the most compelling covers and would rent them and watch them in a friend’s basement. Fond favorites were the woman’s hand desperately grasping for help on *The Evil Dead*, the little pumpkin boy on the cover of *Trick R Treat*, and the two surfers whipping the waves in front of the gapping maw of a crocodile on *Blood Surf*. We didn’t care about quality or even quantity. We wanted a good time, be it scary or be it goofy. It was the schlock we were after and the rush of finding a diamond in the rough that could actually scare us. It surprises me sometimes how little my tastes have changed when it comes to the horror genre. I still

mostly want schlock, and I'm still looking for diamonds in the rough. But more than all of that, horror became, and remains, a communal activity for me.

As I've gotten older, horror has revealed a different face to me, one that is just as communal, but it haunts me wherever I go. In the past decade alone, I have lost nearly ten loved ones. Each loss compounds the others, they press down on my chest like stones and if there is a way to escape the weight, I haven't found it. The magnitude of these losses is almost impossible to grasp. In researching this project and how death and haunting have been theorized, I came across the work of scholar José Esteban Muñoz, who conceived of melancholia as a "mourning that does not know when to stop" (64). I deeply resonated with Muñoz's sentiment. When your father has had to call you almost once a year for over ten years, the mourning can't end because there is always another loss. Mourning becomes a way of keeping the dead with you, and, like the turtle, you carry them on my back.

The genre of horror and the horror of reality have become parallel in my life: I watch it or read it, but it also comes to me through a phone call. In the cult classic 1974 film *Black Christmas*, a house of sorority girls being killed off by an unknown man who has been calling the sorority house with threats to kill the girls. The police are desperately trying to solve the murders and trace the calls, only to make the chilling discovery that the calls are coming from inside the house. At this revelation, Sgt. Nash proclaims the iconic line, "the caller is in the house! The calls are coming from inside the house!" The killer has been in the home all along. Sini Mononen writes about this trope in horror (seen also in *When a Stranger Calls* (1976) and its remake in 2006), stating that, "stalker

films frequently represent the telephone as a violent auditive tool, which I call a weaponized telephone [sic]" (2). The telephone ringing becomes a representative of death-as-coming, or death-has-happened. Although the film's caller is a crude rendering of a mentally ill sex-crazed murderer, the women's fear in *Black Christmas* resonates with me. I know what it was like to hear the phone ring and the palpable dread that came with it. I dread unexpected phone calls, and the news that they might carry. My cell phone, the silly little box with its silly little apps, has become a manifestation of horror in my life.

In many ways, the first time my father had to call me about a death in the family, felt like an invasion. Something terrible had broken into my life, and like so many of the protagonists in the genre that I love, I was wholly unprepared for it. Home invasion has never been one of my preferred horror subgenres. Humans being violent to other humans without some element of the supernatural or fantastical just isn't my thing. However, in trying to understand my own losses and my own experience with horror, I find myself thinking of my life as a home that death has invaded. Of the home invasion genre, Dario Marcucci expands on Carol Clover's conception of horror existing in a "terrible place" (Clover 197). He writes, "the space of horror is always perceived as "elsewhere," a space faraway from everyday life, and an unlimited source of the uncanny" but in the home invasion genre, the terrible place is the victim's house (253). In home invasion films, the house becomes the locale of the horror rather than a sanctuary from it. In films like *Black Christmas* and *When a Stranger Calls*, the home has already been invaded without the

characters knowing. The twist of the calls coming from inside the house can only work if the invader has been there all along.

These two thoughts—that death can be a home invader and the caller that is already inside the house—have gnawed at me as I attempt to make sense of my grief and the uncanny terror that it has instilled in my life. If melancholia is a mourning that does not end and is "a mechanism that helps us (re)construct and take our dead with us," as Muñoz writes, then we must carry them wherever we go. If our dead live in the houses of our bodies, our hearts, then we must carry the home on our backs like a turtle shell. Death, that most terrifying caller, snuck into my turtle-shell-home years before I noticed and stays there still.

It is one thing for horror to come to me through the phone, but it takes on a wholly other face for my loved ones. While some of my loved ones died well, many did not: car crashes, suicide, cancer, drug addiction, inadequate health care, chronic illness. Many of these deaths came with a loss of dignity. Some lived long lives, but others were cut far too short. The majority of these deaths have been my abuelita's family. The eldest of nine children, my abuelita has had to bury both her parents and five of her siblings. There have been so many deaths in one family and although each cause of death has varied, a unifying cohesive factor has emerged: the U.S./Mexico border and its legacy of violence and discrimination against Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Many of the deaths in my family are rooted in systemic oppression and how centuries of racism work themselves out on the very real lives of marginalized peoples. Drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, inability to access adequate healthcare—these are the symptoms that my

family died of, but the illness was the U.S./Mexico border, the illness was Douglas, AZ, the illness was the discrimination against Mexicans that the United States has fostered and strengthened since long before the Mexican-American War in 1846. These are the horrors, the deaths, which arose from structures of power.

It has sometimes been difficult to make the tragedies of my family's deaths understood to others because social death has marked them as deviants, or criminals, or valueless because they couldn't participate in the cruel machine of capitalism. In her book *Social Death*, Lisa Marie Cacho demonstrates how the lives of marginalized communities are framed by state powers as criminal and without value in the face of systems of power that prioritize white hetero-patriarchal subjects, identities of which much of my family did not fit. Some of my family were complicated people—their lives marked with substance abuse or mental illness that could make them hard to know—but they cannot be reduced to these traits. They were also filled with laughter, had boundless creativity, were capable of beautiful artisanship, and possessed a great capacity for love. Kara F.C. Holloway writes of those whose lives are continually and systematically devalued that "these were lives of importance and substance, [that] these were individuals, no matter their failings or the degree to which their lives were quietly lived, who were loved" (181). The big sister, my abuelita's love for her family is both tender and formidable, and she dignifies their losses in the face of state powers that worked so hard to deny it. To see the depth of these losses in my family, to see value where social death has dictated that there isn't any, one has to look no further than my abuelita's eyes.

Although deeply personal, mourning my family's deaths is also political. Scholars like José Esteban Muñoz (1999), Antonia Viego (2007), and Leticia Alvarado (2019) have situated mourning as a political act that reinforces the value of lost persons of color and queer subjects that have long been dehumanized and viewed as "less than" by state powers and systems of oppression. The refusal to overcome loss, to let the mourning become (as Muñoz frames it) pathological, emphasizes the tremendousness of the loss, even in the face of systems that would say that the people who died held no value. In her analysis of Chicanx public mourning, Durán states that "the expression of grief conventionally follows cultural norms and scripts so that mourning becomes something configured, integrated, and disciplined in society…mourning is often marked with a temporal quality that puts emphasis on overcoming grief" (5-6). Social death plays an active role in how different subjects are mourned and what forms grief may take, and how long that grief lasts. The logic of social death dictates that the deaths in my family and those like it should be easily put to rest and overcome. But, in the poignant words of Cacho, speaking of her cousin's death, "how much we hurt was evidence of how much he was valued" (158). Our grief may be a complicated one, but it runs deep.

This dissertation project reflects both my love of the horror genre and how I have come to understand how horror operates in my life and in the lives of my community. With so much horror surrounding me, I have returned to my favorite genre both for comfort and in pursuit of hope, which in such a harsh world is that most precious of diamonds in the rough. If horror was what was causing my family's death, then what could be done with horror? How can horror be something other than a genre of violence

and loss? How can horror as a genre become a tool against the very systems that cause lived horror? I wanted to do something with horror that both spoke to my love of it but also could be used to resist the state powers and oppression that has been the root of so much mourning in my life. Over the many years of doing this project, I developed my theory of oppositional horror. Oppositional horror is both a genre of multiethnic political horror and an analytic for understanding how systemic oppression is present in the daily lives of marginalized communities. Born of hope in the face of death and injustice, oppositional horror is a tool through which to understand the many facets of horror and the ways in which horror can be liberating.

Social Death Meets Oppositional Horror

Murderous, mutant, cannibal hillbillies stalk the hills of the Nevada desert. The white nuclear family, the Carters, are beset by this incestuous, white nuclear family of cannibals, Jupiter's clan. What follows in Wes Craven's 1977 road horror film *The Hills Have Eyes* is a torrent of violence, murder, and rape. *The Hills Have Eyes* pits the white nuclear family and their German Shepherds against the wasteland of the desert-made-murderous by mutant cannibals. *The Hills Have Eyes* reinforces the social value of white heteronormativity by showing the Carter women ravaged and the white men on a righteous quest of revenge against the darker-skinned and swarthy cannibals. Although both Jupiter's Clan and the Carter family are white, Jupiter and his cannibal family have dark hair and dark eyes, they were crude "indigenous" jewelry, and speak poorly. These elements reinforce the social value of the Carters.

Almost 40 years later, Jonás Cuarón's 2015 film *Desierto* echoes *The Hills Have Eyes*: people are hunted down, the desert hides and harbors a vicious killer, and there is even a well-trained German Shepard dog who chases down and kills people. Where *Desierto* diverges, however, is in the social value of the victims. While white subjectivity and lives are protected and reaffirmed in *The Hills Have Eyes*, *Desierto* aims to humanize undocumented Latinx migrants attempting to cross the desert into the United States from Mexico. The film does this by situating the migrants as the victims of a lone white killer, Sam, who uses his sniper rifle and dog to hunt down and murder the migrants. Sam, the serial killing white man, becomes a representative of anti-immigrant sentiments in the United States, and takes that bigotry to a place of extreme violence. By situating the source of violence on the white sniper, and making the migrants the innocent, brutalized victims, the film seeks to place social value on undocumented migrants, a group typically rendered in popular and political culture without sympathy and sometimes even without humanity.

The horror genre can be deployed to depict, either literally or through metaphor, contemporaneous social fears and reinforce the status quo. *The Hills Have Eyes* demonstrates horror's penchant for reinforcing the social value of whiteness, and more specifically the preservation of the white nuclear family. The hyperviolence and brutality of *The Hills Have Eyes* positions the Carters as victims of a foreign and cruel wilderness. *Desierto* uses the same horror trappings in *The Hills Have Eyes*—the threat that lurks in the desert, a sudden and unavoidable violence, a helplessness against cruelty—for an entirely different project. Whereas *The Hills Have Eyes* prioritizes heteronormative white

social value, *Desierto* attempts to position the social value and personhood of undocumented migrants at the center of the film. By positioning the migrants as the victims of a white serial killer, *Desierto* works against the hegemonic tendencies of the horror genre that most often prioritize white victimhood. *Desierto*'s positioning of migrants-as-valued speaks directly against how migrants are criminalized by political powers, media representations, and are often the real-life victims of state-sanctioned violence that ignores the personhood of marginalized populations. The horror in *Desierto* emerges not from the presence of mutant cannibal, but from the very real violence and hatred spewed at migrants. I name this shift in horror—from the reinforcement of the status quo to a proclamation of personhood of socially marginalized populations—"oppositional horror." I theorize oppositional horror as an emerging genre wherein cultural workers, like Jonás Cuarón with *Desierto*, deploy elements of horror to critique the horror of everyday life for socially marginalized communities.

This project theorizes oppositional horror and explores how it operates in two complementary formations: a genre of Latinx and US multiethnic horror, and an analytic paradigm that makes legible the underrecognized, hidden, slow and legal violences that target marginalized communities (Nixon 2011, Menjívar and Abrejo 2012). In terms of genre, I contend that oppositional horror is horror media that resists (or attempts to resist) how mainstream horror reinforces the structures of power that construct the status quo. I draw from bell hooks' theory of the oppositional gaze. hooks writes, "even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (hooks 116).

Oppositional horror “gazes” back at the horror genre, a genre prone to enforcing structures of domination like heteropatriarchy and white supremacy and manipulates the genre into a resistance tool that emphasizes those structures as horrific. While mainstream horror is characterized by, “lapses in realism, by excess,” I conceptualize oppositional horror as horror that has excessive realism; oppositional horror recognizes how the reality of everyday lives of marginalized communities is already, often, horrific (Williams 3). In oppositional horror, one need not solely rely on a random family of killer cannibals because for marginalized communities, “horror…is the norm, not the exception” (Saldivar 194). Mutant cannibals in *The Hills Have Eyes* represent a violence that is aberrant and a threat to the status quo. The white sniper in *Desierto*, a direct echo of the very real Minute Men on the border, represents a violence born from real-life hatred and a manifestation of state-sanctioned violence. He is also a manifestation of the already and always dangerous threat of the desert itself. Oppositional horror deploys an excess of real-life violence to prioritize the personhood and value of socially marginalized communities.

To understand oppositional horror, one must begin by recognizing the force against which oppositional horror responds: social death. At its core, social death is a prescriptive state that denies value, personhood, and rights to marginalized communities that results in the normalization and reinforcement of their oppression. According Cacho, social value is “made intelligible through racialized, sexualized, spatialized, and state-sanctioned violence” (4). The state affords some people social value and personhood (such as the wealthy and middle class, the documented, the educated, white and white-

passing, etc.) and refuses value and rights to others (such as the undocumented, the imprisoned, transgender peoples, etc.) through structures of power. For example, for the undocumented, social death preserves itself not only through state-sanctioned violence (e.g., forcing migrants to cross through deadly geographies or policies that prevent the undocumented from accessing social services), but also through the rhetorics of meritocracy and the "good" and "bad" immigrant. The logic and enforcement of social death forces the undocumented into a state of rightlessness and denies them personhood. If, as Robin Wood argues, mainstream horror is about when "Normality is threated by The Monster" (i.e., whiteness from the other), then films like *The Hills Have Eyes* reproduce the logic of social death by prioritizing the pain and victimhood of socially valued individuals (Wood 26). In contrast, oppositional horror counters the logic of social death by giving value to the socially unvalued.

Just as oppositional horror is a genre, it also provides an analytic that can be used to understand structures of oppression. Oppositional horror texts directly engage with the political project of horror, developing a critique of the sociopolitical conditions of marginalized communities. Further, oppositional horror, as an analytics, characterizes aspects of the everyday lives of marginalized populations as horrific. For example, Miriam Gurba's memoir *Mean* (2017) opens with a true account of a woman being stalked, much like a blonde in a slasher horror movie might be stalked, by the man who rapes and kills her. *Mean* engages with the aesthetics of horror—a faceless and nameless villain pursuing a victim in the dark of night—that paints the real world as a place of terrible violence against marginalized groups. Oppositional horror functions as both a

subgenre of horror and as an analytical lens through which to interpret and understand how oppressive power systems, such as white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, can be read as horror. Characterizing oppressive power systems as horror engages those systems with social death, and oppositional horror serves to resist that horror.

Horror Scholarship: From the Barrio to the 'Burbs

This project of oppositional horror makes an intervention in three overlapping fields: horror studies, Latinx studies, and multiethnic horror. More specifically, this project situates itself in the burgeoning field of Latinx horror studies and how that field interacts with the broader field of horror studies and draws on the wealth of scholarship on Black and U.S. multiethnic horror. The editorial for the inaugural issue of *Horror Studies* (2010) posits that horror studies, spurred by Robin Wood's influential collection *The American Nightmare* (1979), emerged from a push to legitimize the study of a mainstream and "low" art form to the academic community while also appealing to and being for fans of the horror genre (3). Although early horror studies were primarily concerned with cinema, horror studies has evolved to encompasses a broad category of multi-media research: film and television, short stories and novels, podcasts, and internet short stories known as "creepypastas" (Browning 2017). Oppositional horror contributes to both fields by providing an analytical lens through which the liberation and resistance elements of horror can be understood and deployed.

Horror studies encompasses a vast expanse of topics: aesthetics, genre, gender, race, historical analysis, and houses a variety of theories, from psychoanalysis to

Althusserian methodology to affect theory, to a more modern theorization of the post-millennial digital age. The field has transitioned away from its psychoanalytic roots (such as Carol Clover's foundational "Her Body, Himself" (1987) gendered analysis of the slasher genre) to a more affective and aesthetic-driven study, with scholarship focusing on the aesthetics of the grotesque, monstrosity, and the neo-gothic. *The Philosophy of Horror: Paradoxes of the Heart* by Noël Carroll (1990), although heavily controversial in the field, still permeates the field's discussions of monstrosity, the grotesque, and the affective response and pleasure to horror media. However, the field of horror studies has yet to fully contend with horror in the new millennium. New American scholarship addresses a dearth of developments in the horror genre, having to contend with a body of work that ranges from rise and fall of torture porn horror like *Saw* (2004) and *Hostel* (2005), and the current advent of Black horror cinema with films such as *Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019), and the remake of *Candyman* (2021). Analysis of torture porn often situates the affective enjoyment of that torture; a genre wherein the horror comes just from a fear of the torturer and not an outward social source (Morris 2010). In contrast, much of Black horror scholarship focuses on the process of othering and the social configurations like racism and historical trauma that led to situations of horror (Coleman 2013). Contemporary horror studies can no longer sustain a unifying theoretical approach, as with the heyday of psychoanalysis or studies of repression (Wood 1979) and must be able to contain multiple modes of analysis.

The contemporary emergence of Black horror cinema, and its coinciding scholarship, signals the growing concern over race within the broader field of horror

studies. Black Horror studies often focuses on the aesthetics of the abjection of the Black body and the violence enacted on them, or the violence they are forced to commit. As in Latinx horror studies, Black horror scholarship analyzes the portrayals and denials of humanity for marginalized persons in horror. Two scholars doing such work are Jessica Baker Kee, author of "Black Masculinities in Post-Modern Horror," (2015) and Brady Simenson in their dissertation "Get Out, Us, and Jordan Peele's New Black Body Horror" (2020). Both pieces of scholarship argue for a paradigm of horror based on an understanding that horror often positions the Black body in a state of abjection (made other and made monstrous) as a reflection of social prescriptions of humanity and value. Latinx horror echoes the issues presented in Black horror scholarship and argue for a similar paradigm. The work of Black horror scholars speaks to the current fissure in horror scholarship; how can a field as diverse as horror find unifying, without homogenizing, paradigms of horror? Horror studies needs a new collection of theorization and critical paradigms that can account for the contemporary state of the horror genre and representations of race. The project of oppositional horror operates in the current ambivalence of the horror field, in particular because of its focus on race and marginalized communities. Oppositional horror speaks to both changes in the genre and offers a new paradigm through which to understand horror media.

Oppositional horror, as both an analytical lens and a subgenre, offers a paradigm to contemporary horror media that situates oppressive power systems, the logic of social death, and the experiences of marginalized populations as the locus of horror. Scholarship on race, gender, queerness, and other marginalized identities are not new to the field of

horror studies. However, oppositional horror, as a lens, makes discussions of power, otherness, and the everyday experience of violence essential to the analysis of horror media. Oppositional horror contends that horror and power systems like white supremacy and patriarchy are intrinsically tied together and that by acknowledging those power systems, it becomes possible to resist them. This understanding of oppositional horror aligns it with the resistance project of Latinx horror scholarship.

Resistance narratives, and studies of resistance, are far from new in Chicanx and Latinx studies. Resistance features as a central concern of the field: how is resistance enacted? what are the aesthetics of resistance? how can resistance narratives flatten or expand our understanding of Chicanx history? These are not new questions, but they are central to the project of Latinx horror scholarship and the project of oppositional horror. Resistance narratives in Chicanx media and literature have taken a variety of forms, one of the most notable being the poem *Yo Soy Joaquín* (Gonzales 1967). *Yo Soy Joaquín*, an affirmation of Chicanx identity and chronicling of Mexican American history, was a product of the resistance narratives emerging from the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Much of Chicanx resistance narratives are focused on establishing, and recovering, and sometimes creating a historical record. Américo Paredes's *With a Pistol in His Hand* (1958) explores both the history of the revolutionary Gregorio Cortez as well as the folk legend that was built around him. Paredes's work uses Cortez, both the man and the legend, to create a lineage of resistance in Chicanx history. The collection of essays in *Furia y Muerte: Los Bandidos Chicanos* (1973) has a similar pursuit. The text

makes an argument for the "social bandit," a reconfiguration of real Mexican Banditos into revolutionaries and activists against injustice (Castillo and Camarillo 1973).

More recent scholarship in Chicano/a/x Studies has developed a more complex view of Chicanx resistance. Contemporary resistance narratives and its lineage operates as a social justice pursuit, a project of decolonization, a narrative structure and impulse, and sometimes all three at once. However, more contemporary scholars also look at the complexity of establishing and creating a history of Chicanx resistance, such as Lee Bebout's theorizing of mythohistorical interventions, wherein histories and their myths coalesce to form narratives of resistance and social struggle (Bebout 8). Additionally, Bebout notes the complication of popular narratives of resistance in the Chicano Movement, in particular the rhetorics and practices of Chicano nationalism that reinforced patriarchy and erased the resistance work done by women and specifically queer Chicanas.

Chicanx resistance studies often risk flattening the complexities of history in order to create an uncomplicated narrative. Guidotti-Hernandez takes the flattening tendencies of Chicanx resistance narratives further, into the complicated history of Chicanx participation in state-violence and genocide. She argues that narratives of resistance risk erasing the violence perpetuated by groups who have been historically marginalized (Guidotti-Hernandez 30). Oppositional horror, as a resistance tool, is not immune to the risk of flattening complex histories and social systems in pursuit of resistance. For example, although the film *Desierto* aims to assert the personhood of the migrants, it still gleefully partakes in the killing of those migrants as well as setting up

dichotomies of the good and mad immigrant. It may be tempting to read oppositional horror texts by marginalized communities as all-or-nothings, as either resistive or complicit, but it is crucial to recognize how narratives of resistance are complex and multi-dimensional.

Narratives of resistance are already a common thread in the scholarship of the emerging field of Latinx horror studies. Latinx horror scholarships begins with an understanding that "horror and terror have been endemic to and have textured Latin@ populations and history" (Merla-Watson and Olguín 3). For instance, Christopher Carmona's short story "Strange Leaves" (a reference to the famous Billie Holiday's song "Strange Fruit) welds the history of murdered women on the border to contemporary cartel forces raping women on the border and hanging their undergarments on trees. Carmona uses horrific imagery to illustrate the extreme violence that the woman survived, but also to undercut the lack of response or urgency from law enforcement to find the perpetrator, emphasizing the state's disregard for migrant women. Of this shorty story, Saldivar writes that, "Chicanx horror calls for collective action to rectify historical atrocities that still plague the Latinx community" (Saldivar 196). In "Strange Leaves," collective takes the form of a digital campaign and the hashtag "#rapetressarereal" to raise awareness of violence against women on the border. Latinx horror media and scholarship deploys horror as a resistance tool against the oppression and subjection of Latinxs being acceptable collateral of maintaining the status quo.

Like Chicanx resistance narratives have reclaimed or retold lost histories and folk legends, the boogeyman figure *La Llorona* has similarly been reclaimed by Chicanx

feminists. The folk legend of *La Llorona*, the weeping woman in white who drowned her children and now wanders the riverways as a ghost, has been transformed into a figure of resistance by Chicanx feminists. Domino Renee Perez's *There was a Woman* (2008) traces the multitude of appearances of *La Llorona* across media to argue for her cultural importance Mexican and Mexican identity. Traditionally used as a boogeyman story that reinforces patriarchal values of chastity and purity, other scholars have argued for the feminist potential of *La Llorona* (Morales 2013). For example, Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) transforms *La Llorona* into a woman escaping her abusive marriage with the help of women. The horror story of *La Llorona* becomes a figure of Chicana resistance. Her story reflects both the sexism so prevalent in Mexican and Mexican-American culture and how Chicanx theorists have used that patriarchal assumption of *La Llorona* to open up feminist possibilities.

The emergent state of Latinx horror scholarship makes for a fluid field that welcomes new paradigms. Although oppositional horror functions as a transferable theory, the genesis of this project is in Latinx horror and the specific forms of violence and oppression that characterize the lives of Latinx peoples. This project applies oppositional horror to issues like immigration and border violence that are particularly relevant to Latinxs, and extends this analysis to other manifestations of violence, like the prevalence of rape-homicides of women and police brutality against Black people. Oppositional horror analysis can be applied to other violences, such as the prison industrial complex, the exponential murder of transgender people, and the continued subjugation of Indigenous peoples and their rights.

Further, oppositional horror provides a much-needed theory of horror that can be applied to Latinx cultural works that engage with horror as well as other marginalized groups. In this project, I center oppositional horror on the experiences of Latinx populations to generate a discussion of horror that highlights how they have both been erased through the logic of social death and made monstrous by the systems of power that reinforce that social death. Oppositional horror makes another critical intervention into the field of Latinx horror scholarship. It enables an analysis of Latinx non-horror texts to be read as horror. As an analytical tool, oppositional horror moves the discussion of Latinx horror away from texts with vampires, werewolves, and hyperviolence, towards an aesthetic of Latinx horror. This aesthetic includes placing such novels as Ana Castillo's *The Guardians: A Novel* (2007) as border-gothic or reading Myriam Gurba's autobiography *Mean* (2017) in the tradition of the horror-comedy. Oppositional horror doubles as an analytic that realigns horror as a production of power, and as a subgenre that generates an aesthetic understanding of Latinx lives being characterized by horror.

Theory and Methods: Building a Spine for Oppositional Horror

Oppositional horror calls for a marrying between the aesthetics of horror media and the sociopolitical conditions of horror in the real world. Material conditions of horror— genocide, narco-violence, detention camps, femicide, lack of health care, modern day slavery in the farmworking industry, hyperviolence against transgender people, etc. — are created through deliberate deployments of state-sanctioned violence and the perpetuation of hegemonic power structures. State powers create, maintain, and enact violence. The state benefits from violence against marginalized groups, often in

pursuit of maintaining its power and a structure of white heteropatriarchal supremacy. Oppositional horror works to make state violence, and the erasure of that state violence, visible.

The theory of oppositional horror draws on the concepts of social death (the denial of personhood and rights to marginalized persons) and haunting (the erasure of violence as an impetus to action), to create and understanding of everyday, real-life horror and then reflected in the aesthetics of horror media. Oppositional horror uses these two sociological theories of violence and its effects to analyze horror media. In this way, oppositional horror generates a theoretical lens, born of an understanding of social death and haunting, that is applicable to both the atrocities of modern existence and to the aesthetics of resistance in horror media.

The logic of social death is a modern mode of dehumanization that leads to conditions of horror. Not only does social death deny personhood, it is a "process of criminalization that regulates and regularizes targeted populations, not only disciplining and dehumanizing those ineligible for personhood, but also presenting them as ineligible for sympathy and compassion" (Cacho 37). Social death works to criminalize marginalized populations and through that criminalization, make their deaths and the violence enacted on them seem just and justified. Migrants "deserve" to die because they crossed the border illegally, cartel members "deserve" to die, as well as addicts, because drugs are illegal; the imposed criminality of the marginalized enforces an acceptable quota of violence. And, ultimately, because the violence is justified, it is easily erased. There is no outcry, no indignation, no condemnation of that violence from the white

heteropatriarchy, and so the violence is erased. Alice Driver writes, “the narrative of unexplained violence, of disappeared bodies, of prostitutes on dark streets and narcos who behave like beasts, is one that allows the State to shirk its responsibilities, to claim that such inhuman action, such horror, is both outside its realm of control and also involves the murder of people who deserve to be killed” (68). The logic of social death reinforces the economic benefits of violence for state powers while also working to make that violence acceptable and in that acceptance, erased.

Oppositional horror responds to the acceptance and erasure of violence, as generated by social death, by engaging with the theory of haunting. Hauntings works directly against the erasure of violence against marginalized populations. Avery Gordon lays out the process of haunting as such; violence occurs, trauma incurs, and the violence is erased through the state apparatus, but it leaves behind a seething presence that incites a haunting. Put simply, a haunting draws attention to violence that have been historically ignored or been erased. Gordon writes that hauntings “comprehend the living effects, seething and lingering, of what seems over and done with, the endings that are not over” (195). The haunting is an excess of ignored violence that refuses to be ignored; it makes itself known. Most crucially, hauntings are impetus to action. Hauntings stimulate resistance to the erasure to past, and even present, violence. Artist Teresa Margolles displays, and sometimes embroiders, textiles from cites of narco-violence that have been stained with blood and fluids in order to index and hold accountable state-sponsored violence (Shelly 26). Margolles’ textiles represent a haunting. The textiles are products of violence that refuse to be ignored and erased. Further, they generate the viewer to engage

with the realities of that violence, actively making it impossible to ignore the gore and grotesque. The haunting provokes engagement with horrific realities. Hauntings are a result of state violence and social death. Hauntings demand a reckoning with the state apparatus that created it by making histories of violence and trauma visible.

Oppositional horror media respond to hauntings and horror in the real world. For example, Carmen Maria Machado's novella *Especially Heinous* emphasizes the horrific and monumental cases of femicide by manifesting ghosts out of the victims to haunt the police until their cases are solved. The excess of ghosts makes apparent the sheer volume of unsolved cases of femicide and how the judicial system continues to ignore those cases. Hauntings signal an erased violence (the unsolved cases), and oppositional horror seeks to engage with that violence in a way that reinstates the personhood denied by the logic of social death (ghosts insisting their cases be solved). Although it is unavoidable that oppositional horror partakes in an economy of violence, the violence of the genre and analytic not only makes ignored violence visible, but it also removes the acceptability that social death prescribes. Oppositional horror places value, extreme value, on marginalized groups; it injects compassion for groups and identity regularly denied personhood by state power. Oppositional horror both responds to hauntings as well as deploying it as a literary tool. Oppositional horror analyzes those texts as hauntings—a result of the logic of social death and gore capitalism that cannot be ignored any longer.

Literature is in constant conversation with the real world. There is a continual exchange between the real and the imagined. The power structures reinforced in the real world inform the power structures of fiction. Ana Castillo's *The Guardians: A Novel*

(2007) is structured around real-world cartel violence and capitalist predation on undocumented labor. Real world power systems enact themselves on the characters of the novel. Further, literature and the fictive are capable of informing the real world. Of this exchange between the real world and the fictive, Gordon writes that literature “often teaches us, through imaginative design, what we need to know but cannot quite get access to with our given rules of methods and modes and apprehension” (25). Media and literature have the distinct advantage of being able to fill in the gaps where the real world has erased marginalized people’s stories and identities. Erased stories and histories emerge from the fictive and alter how the real world and its intricacies can be understood. Take, for example, Emma Pérez’s novel *Forgetting the Alamo, Or, Blood Memory* (2009) which tells the story of a butch lesbian during the Mexican-American War. Micaela’s story is plagued with rape, genocide, murder, and racism. The intent of the novel is to create a history for queer identities when the real-world historical record has ignored or erased those identities. The novel in this case informs on the real world. The exchange between the real world and the fictive deepens our understanding of each.

Genre fiction, such as with horror, further transforms how the real world can be understood and its power systems explored. Although genre fiction is a wild and open category, it is nonetheless often rooted in the familiar social constructs of its real-world context; you may be a Chicana lesbian vampire with a shapeshifting lover, but you’re still embroiled in the gang violence of the barrio (de la Peña, “Refugio” 1996). Genre fiction, alongside being informed by real world oppressions and power structures, is capable of demonstrating the violence of the real world in imaginative and poignant ways. The

fictive and the real are constantly circling each other. They inform one another and are capable of broadening our understanding of the effects of power, social death, and the call to action of haunting.

Inside the Necronomicon: Chapters and Scope

This project analyzes three different forms of violence in order to demonstrate how state powers and state-sanctioned violence manifest as horror in the lives of marginalized communities. More specifically, this project examines the twenty-first century contemporary landscape of oppression and violence. While the violent oppression of marginalized communities is far from a contemporary phenomenon, it is important to understand how histories of violence have influenced contemporary politics and policies. With the exception of Luis Albert Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* (2004), the media analyzed in this project have been published or released in the last ten years of this writing. Violence may be an almost omnipresent factor in the lives of the marginalized, but it does not manifest homogenously. It is outside of the scope of this project to cover the particularities of horror across all identities, however it is important to consider the nuances of oppression that different communities experience, while being umbrellaed under an understanding of social death. Like a vivisection, this project uses three manifestations of violence to build a larger understanding of social death in the body of state power.

This project addresses gendered violence against women and queer peoples, the deaths of migrants on the U.S./Mexico border, and police brutality and the unjust killing

of Black people. These forms of violence are far from a summation of state-sanctioned violence and social death, but they each demonstrate different strategies that the state uses to enforce the logic of social death. All three forms are deeply embedded in the state's intentional disregard and histories of violence against marginalized communities. I use a variety of contemporary texts to demonstrate how oppositional horror mitigates and resists the logic of social death.

The first chapter of this dissertation, titled "Resistance in the Excess: A Theorizing of Oppositional Horror in Carmen Maria Machado's *Especially Heinous*," argues that many forms of violence, and in particular gendered violence, becomes normalized and acceptable because the subjects are socially dead. The novella *Especially Heinous: 272 Viewings of Law and Order: SVU* addresses gendered violence against women and queer peoples through a surrealist retelling of the hit TV show *Law and Order: SVU*. Haunting lies at the center of the novella: characters are haunted by the ghosts of victims of rape-homicides whose murders have not been solved, they are haunted and stalked by doppelgangers that want to steal their lives, and they are haunted by their pasts. These horrific apparitions that present as "girls with bells for eyes" are often described in gory and brutal terms. They represent an excessive violence—excessive not in the body horror but in a way that they are so "over the top" that they cannot be ignored. The killings of women and queer peoples (and especially women and queer people of color) are so often neglected or dismissed by police departments and state powers that excessive and brutal violence is necessary for them to be noticed at all. In this way, the excess of deaths become a means of resisting the erasure of those deaths.

The second chapter of this dissertation, titled “El Chucho Sarnoso: Border Horror Aesthetics and Resistance in Migration Narratives,*”* connects the very real migrant deaths on the border, and the political and social conditions that lead to them, to horror-representations of immigrant narratives on the border. This chapter converges an analysis of oppositional horror in the film *Desierto* (2015) and the graphic novel *Barrier* (2018) with real-world documenting of migrant deaths on the border with Luis Alberto Urrea’s *The Devil’s Highway* (2004). All three texts, although they have their nuances and differences, focus on the violence of border crossing, while highlighting white racism and the destruction of the body. The texts ultimately aim to resist the logic of social death by asserting the personhood of the migrants. They engage with the cruel reality of the desert and its effect on the bodies of migrants; their bodies aren’t just destroyed; they are also disregarded by government officials who make only minimal efforts to identify the migrants to return them to their family. These fictive works, when placed in conversation with each other, develop an aesthetic of border horror that is reliant on harsh depictions of the desert, racism, and body horror, each of which are very much connected to the reality of actual border crossings.

The final chapter frames police brutality and the unjust killing of Black people as horror propagated and allowed by state powers. The chapter, titled “Specters of Black Death: Police Brutality, State Violence, and the Politics of Fear,” analyzes the 2017 comic series *Destroyer* and the short story “The Finkelstein 5.” *Destroyer* and “The Finkelstein 5” tell stories about the unjust deaths of Black children and how their deaths affect their community. Both pieces of fiction are deeply concerned with Black futurity

and how the indiscriminate killing of Black children by the state both symbolically and literally stymies that futurity. The chapter further argues that the state weaponizes fear of Black people, both men and women, in order to enforce the logic of social death. Fear plays a pertinent role in police brutality and in the murders of Black people committed by citizens. Both *Destroyer* and "The Finkelstein 5" draw on the real-life murders of Black children and people, especially George Zimmerman's murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and Officer Derek Chauvin's murder of George Floyd in 2020. Both cases incited national outrage—both at the deaths but also outrage from labeling these murders as race-motivated. The outrage against race being a motivating factor aligns with the logic of social death by absolving the murders of any glint of oppression and the state of any wrongdoing. As works of oppositional horror, both texts tightly link fear and futurity with the continued violence and oppression against Black People.

The conclusion of this project focuses on the political power of camp and horror. Camp sensibility, an amorphous concept sometimes defined as the art of having bad taste but also sometimes defined as "you know it when you see it," often involves exaggerated aesthetics, humor, and an emphasis on artifice. While politics are not intrinsic to camp, camp can easily be deployed as a political tool. Camp horror offers an alternative perspective to oppositional horror that centers humor and the absurd rather than an overwhelming sense of dread and fear. The conclusion of this dissertation analyzes two alternative drag performances, the first by Landon Cider and the second by HoSo Terra Toma. Both were aired on the drag competition television show *Dragula* in 2019 and 2021, respectively. Landon, a Mexican-America drag king, uses monstrosity and

sensuality to critique anti-Mexican and anti-immigrant sentiment. HoSo, a Korean-American drag performer, deploys aesthetics of filth with the blackest of humor to critique how Asian and Asian-Americans were villainized throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Like much of the other horror analyzed in this project, and Landon's and HoSo's performances relies heavily on body horror and gore, but diverge in their embrace of humor and camp, and low-brow and home-made aesthetics. Each performance exposes the artifice inherent to white supremacy and the logic of social death. The intent of this conclusion is to offer an application of oppositional horror that considers the humorous, the camp, the low-brow, and the cheap as an integral function of the horror genre that is capable of its own unique aesthetics of resistance.

CHAPTER 1

RESISTANCE IN THE EXCESS; THEORIZING OPPOSITIONAL HORROR IN "ESPECIALLY HEINOUS"

In her 2017 novella "Especially Heinous: 272 Views of Law & Order: SVU," Carmen Maria Machado transforms the first twelve seasons of the long-running TV show *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* into a series of episode summaries like those found in TV guides or on the media website IMDB.[1] "Especially Heinous" uses this format to blend the genre conventions of the police procedural with those of supernatural horror. Machado appropriates the two protagonists of the show, Detective Olivia Benson, and Detective Elliot Stabler, as well as the format of the police procedural, to reconceive of *Law & Order: SVU* as a ghost story, as a story about trauma, and a story about relationality and overcoming. The plot of the novella, linear but only barely, follows Benson as she tries to solve all of the cases of the women and girls that manifest as ghosts that are "girls-with-bells-for-eyes" and that haunt her, peppered with side arcs of doppelgangers, Stabler discovering his wife was raped, and some characters becoming prophets and others being kidnapped by demons.

Fully embracing the absurd, "Especially Heinous" may appear to be an odd, highly experimental foray, particularly when compared with the other haunting stories in Machado's collection *Her Body and Other Stories* (2017). However, by drawing together

[1] Law and Order: SVU was created by Dick Wolf and has been running from 1999-present.

and playing with the genre conventions of both the police procedural and supernatural horror, “Especially Heinous” turns an oppositional gaze at *Law and Order: SVU*’s abundance of sexual assault, murders, and robberies by inserting ghosts, doppelgangers, hauntings, and rituals that transform the show into a horror story that challenges how *SVU* depicts violence as normal, expected, and accepted. As a form of what I term “oppositional horror,” “Especially Heinous,” makes apparent the grotesque gendered and, often, racialized violence featured so prominently in its show counterpart. In this essay, I demonstrate how “Especially Heinous” makes legible the logics of social death that permeate TV crime dramas and mainstream horror narratives. Moreover, “Especially Heinous” responds to the social death bound to these genres and their conventions by advancing a vision of what I theorize to be “oppositional horror,” an emerging genre wherein cultural workers deploy elements of horror to critique the horror of everyday life for socially marginalized communities.

Contextualizing Horror in Especially Heinous

Alongside the police procedural, the logic of social death often permeates the horror genre, manifesting in some of the genre’s key conventions and how they relate to race, gender, and sexuality. A classic convention is that characters die in the order of their social value; dying first or near first indicates less or no value. Think, for instance, of the high mortality rate of people of color in horror films such as in the *Friday the 13th* franchise, where at least thirteen out of nineteen Black characters have been killed (1980-2009). While white characters also die frequently, there are more of them, and they are given more screen time. Additionally, horror often ignores characters of color altogether

and when they are included, they are tokenized. When Black characters are present, their depiction often relies on tropes of the hyperviolent, the hypersexual, and the hypermasculine (*Candyman* (1992)*, Climax* (2018)) that result in the abjection of the black body (Baker Kee 54). Think also of the trope of the sexually promiscuous woman getting her comeuppance with a kitchen knife in *Halloween* (1978) or a machete in *Friday the 13th* (1980), or the abundance of scenes of violence against women being concomitant with scenes of sexual acts (*American Psycho (*2000), or how the trope of the "final girl" being the lone survivor is often dependent on her being sexually "pure" (Clover 1987, Welsh 17). Horror films also have the tendency to treat queerness as "a monstrous condition" as in such films as *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) and the incredibly controversial *Cruising* (1980) about a gay serial killer (Benshoff 116). The genre imperatives of horror demonstrate the prescription of social death on marginalized communities by reinforcing value through who lives, who dies, and who kills.

In contrast, active resistance to the logic of social death is an integral function of oppositional horror. I propose a genre of oppositional horror as horror that resists (or attempts to resist) how mainstream horror reinforces the structures of power that construct the status quo. For undocumented peoples, the anticipatory terror of deportation is always a looming threat, and then there is the intense criminalization of life on the borderlands (Rosas 2012). Or they may have already endured environmental violence while crossing the desert into the United States (Urrea 2009). For the women of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, femicide became an everyday horrific reality (Arriola 2010). Even separated from physical violence, there is the terror and horror of poverty; the terror of

medical bills, the horror of dead-end minimum wage jobs in *maquiladoras* or farm fields or service jobs (Cacho 2012). In oppositional horror media, the horror scenario comes from an excess of the quotidian and a violent, if not always physical, enforcement of structures of power. Oppositional horror functions to realign horror media into an understanding that horror is more than rampant cannibals and demonic possession or even a lone serial killer lurking in a rundown motel; horror is a lived reality and the product of oppressive power structures.

Latinx Horror Studies and Monstrous Resistance

The dynamic and tension between social death and oppositional horror make a critical intervention in the emerging field of Latinx horror studies. As the field of Latinx horror studies continues to grow, such questions emerge: how does Latinx horror stand against mainstream horror? How does horror act as both a vehicle for normative and dominant social value and as a tool of resistance for Latinxs and other marginalized communities? Latinx and Chicanx horror scholarship explores how the everyday lives of Latinx populations are already imbued with horror. Although Latinx horror studies is an emerging field, this is already a common thread that connects the scholarship. Jesse Aléman writes of Chicanx horror that it, “emerges out of the specific haunting history of Chicanx lives…as a result of the social, national, and personal pressures forged out of the fissure between the United States and Mexico” (Aléman 53). An extended branch of Latinx horror scholarships emerges from using horror as lens to read “various states of terror” on Latinx lives (Merla-Watson and Olguín 3). For instance, Cynthia Saldivar’s

essay on the short story “#rapetreesarereal” marks a young women’s rape during a border crossing as a horrific element of Latinx lived realities.

One way in which Latinx horror and the everyday come together is through the monstrous. Latinxs have been both scripted as monsters by dominant society and deployed by Latinx cultural workers as a form of resistance in Latinx horror. Monster theory has a long legacy in horror scholarship. Jeffrey Cohen theorizes monsters as, “as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment of a time, a feeling, and a place” (Cohen 4). Paul Wells, a preeminent horror scholar, adds to the theory of monsters that “in whatever way the monster is conceived and acts…it serves to operate as a mode of disruption and breakdown of the status quo” (Wells 9). Latinx horror scholarship similarly approaches monster theory from an understanding of cultural construction and a disruption of the status quo. Tanya Gonzales argues that monsters (or abjections as she calls them) are visually and rhetorically constructed “by those invested in maintaining the status quo” (Gonzales 23). Gonzales’ sentiment echoes how Latinxs have been culturally constructed as the monstrous in mainstream U.S. media productions, the remorseless cartel member, the stalking rapist, the filthy worker. However, as William Calvo-Quirós argues, it is because of that history of cultural construction that Latinxs can find resistance in the construction of their own monsters: “monsters have provided a method to unpack the effects of violence…upon [Latinx] communities. Their study has shown how marginalized communities truly understand their oppressed conditions and utilize the imagination and the fantastic as tools for emancipation, liberation, and to envision a different world” outside systems of oppression (Calvo-Quirós 391). Latinx horror using

the monstrous-as-salvific can be seen in the Latinx vampire scholarship done by Linda Heidenreich (2017) and Luz Maria Gordillo (2017). Both scholars position the queer Chicana vampire as figures of resistance. Orquidea Morales notes the failure of Chicano slasher films to use the monstrous, folkloric La Llorona as a tool against patriarchal norms, instead making her into another mindless killer. Nonetheless, Morales believes in the resistance power of La Llorona. Monsters are ambivalent tools; they can both be in service of the status quo, as with Gonzales, or can be used to resistant and disrupt the status quo, as with Calvo-Quirós.

Latinx horror is not exempt from replicating social death, as with Morales' analysis of the Chicanx slasher films about La Llorona. However, as Sandra Cisneros demonstrates in her feminist revision of La Llorona in *Woman Hollering Creek,* Latinx horror has the power to be transformative. I draw from the ambivalence of Latinx horror to theorize oppositional horror as horror that can use the monstrous in resistance to systems of power that devalue and perpetuate violence against Latinxs and other marginalized populations. "Especially Heinous" is particularly conducive to demonstrating monstrous resistance in oppositional horror because of the horrific girls-with-bells-for-eyes and the uncanny doppelgangers that stalk through the story. Additionally, "Especially Heinous" is not entirely mired in the monstrous. It also heavily relies on the horror of everyday lives; the threat and terror of rape, assault, and murder haunts the novella and is omnipresent. This dual aspect of the everyday mingled with the monstrous demonstrates the potential of oppositional horror to be a genre of resistance.

In the following pages, I demonstrate the interplay between the logic of social death, the limitations of genre imperatives, and oppositional horror through an analysis of "Especially Heinous" and the quotidian excess of horror. I frame my analysis of "Especially Heinous" through a theorizing of monstrosity and hauntings. Further, I use "Especially Heinous," and its countering of the genre of the police procedural show, to frame the quotidian in terms of excess and aberration. Although the novella is vast, I will be focusing predominantly on the plot of the doppelgangers and Benson's haunting by the "girls-with-bells-for-eyes," and the way that they resist the devaluing logic of social death. Ultimately, I contend that "Especially Heinous," resists the logic of social death and that, more broadly, oppositional horror can serve as an analytic for understanding the everyday realities of marginalized and oppressed communities.

Genre Imperatives and Oppositional Horror

Like in *Law and Order: SVU,* Detectives Benson and Stabler in "Especially Heinous" work in the Special Victims Unit of the New York Police Department, "Manhattan's rapiest police department!" (Machado 69). The Special Victims Unit (SVU) is the police unit dedicated to sexually based offenses, which the law considers "especially heinous." Although the novella has the same police procedural setting as the show, it is completely fanfiction that "rewrites and transforms" the events of the show and the characters arcs of Olivia Benson and Eliot Stabler (Coppa 4). The plot and characters of the show are absent. The novella's Benson and Stabler are nearly unrecognizable from their TV counterparts. The novella's Benson and Stabler are just husks, recognizable only by their last names. These husks, although familiar in their

shape to Olivia and Elliot of *Law and Order: SVU*, are blank slates that can experience the hauntings and trauma of the plot. Besides the names "Benson" and "Stabler," the only thing Machado keeps from *SVU* is the title of the episodes. Using only the episode titles frees Machado to craft a fantastical story about doppelgangers, hauntings, prophecy, and symbolically rotting vegetables.

Machado's fanfiction novella is formatted like the episode summaries in a TV guide or IMDB page. The novella is broken up into twelve "seasons" and each season has 23-25 "episode summaries," and each episode ranges from the mundane to the absurd. The episode summaries follow three main plot threads in "Especially Heinous:" Benson is haunted by the victims of unsolved rape-homicide cases that appear to her as "girls-with-bells-for-eyes," Stabler looks up his wife's old police report against her will and discovers that she was raped, and finally, Henson and Abler, Benson and Stabler's doppelgangers, appear and interfere with Benson and Stabler's ability to solve cases. Each of these plots is underscored by the "two-toned heartbeat" of New York City, and it is eventually discovered that the city hungrily feeds off of violent crimes and that the doppelgangers work to keep the city fed (Machado 76). The city is characterized as "a hungry beast that lives below" and that demands sacrifices (Machado 105). Benson and Stabler must defeat their doppelgangers before they can start to solve the cases of the girls-with-bells-for-eyes.

Contextualizing *Law and Order: SVU* is imperative to understanding the oppositional horror project of "Especially Heinous" and its countering of social death. *Law and Order: SVU* began its run in 1999 and as of this writing is in its 21st season and

is firmly rooted in the detective police procedural subgenre of the crime genre. Like in the novella, the show's versions of Benson and Stabler investigate sex crimes, which the law considers "especially heinous, cruel, or depraved" (*Walton v. Arizona*). *SVU* both falls into and helps define the police procedural genre as practiced in the 21st century: there is "an evil offender, a violent crime, at least one go-getter police officer who is willing to bend the rules to serve justice and a just resolution of the case at the end of the [episode]" (Britto et al. 39). Each episode of *SVU* functions independently as a self-contained story, readily summarized. The show's permanent characters experience minimal change and their development and conflict usually begin and end in a single episode. This consistency allows for an ever-revolving list of victims of the sensationalized crimes that Benson and Stabler can react to without requiring them to reckon with the traumatic events that the show depicts.

Among the genre imperatives of the police procedural that enforce the logic of social death in *Law and Order: SVU* are episodic plots, repetitive and grotesque crimes that violate social norms, the normalization of police violence to include violation of individual rights, and the development of a "special victim" in each episode. In *SVU,* these genre imperatives are localized around the detectives who, despite the show purporting to be about the "special victims" are prioritized in the show's narratives. Offenders are usually unredeemable and disposed at the end of the episode, and victims are often, alive, or dead, reduced to just a brutalized body, their individuality subsumed by their physical destruction. This leaves the detectives as the only constants in the show.

Law and Order: SVU normalizes sensationalist depictions of crime by presenting them as both aberrant and commonplace. But sensationalism is another form of erasure. For Nicole M. Guidotti-Hernández, violence and sensationalism are linked: "to sensationalize something is to empty it of meaning, to aim for violently exciting effects calculated to produce a startling but superficial impression" (Guidotti-Hernández 40). Sensationalist violence, like the kind seen in the overly repetitive *SVU*, erases the trauma and pain that accompany violence. The formulaic structure of the episodes parades an endless stream of victims, traumas, and pains that are relevant for 42 minutes and then forgotten in the next episode. This presents a set of contradictions; extremely violent crimes occur in abundance, but they are also so common that they are forgettable. Police procedurals like *Law and Order: SVU* present a further contradiction that the world is both a lawless and chaotic place and that the justice system is somehow efficient and effective. The violent crimes are somehow, "scary and ludicrous, satirical and sometimes wry, they ask to be taken seriously and lightly at the same time" (Rafter 89). The sensationalist crimes of the television series become indistinguishable from each other, even the more absurd ones, and crime can never be effectively dealt with, or deterred, because the formulaic structures of the plot will always necessitate a new evil offender, and a new victim, so that the detectives can once again restore order.

Over its vast expanse of seasons, *SVU* has developed a specific profile for who is a victim, whose trauma is important, and for whom justice should be restored. A 2007 content analysis of season five of *Law and Order: SVU* that deconstructed who constitutes being a "special" victim in the "Special Victims Unit" (Britto et al.). The study concluded

that the “special victims” were young, white, and male. This conclusion was drawn from comparing the 2003 violent crime statistics of Manhattan, NY to a coded analysis of victim demographics in *Law and Order: SVU*. In 2003, 11% of the victims of violent crimes were male, compared to 89% being female. In *Law and Order: SVU,* 39% were male and 61% were female (Britto et al. 46). Although women still made up the majority of victims, *Law and Order: SVU* greatly over-represents male victimhood. Further, the show also exaggerates the ratio of white victimhood versus victims of color. In Manhattan, 47% of the victims are white in 2003, whereas in the show that number is 62%. Comparatively, according to the 2003 National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), Hispanic victims make up 26% of violent crime. In *Law and Order: SVU*, that number is only 6% (Britto et al. 46). Combining these statistics with the police procedural genre trope of solving the vast majority of crimes, no matter how unlikely, “the viewer is left with a vision of an efficient justice system that fights for justice for white, male victims” (Britto et al. 49).

Further, the study found that there was an exaggeration in the show of women sex offenders, shifting the profile of the average victim on the show to white male homicide victims, despite the crime demographics of Manhattan clearly showing that the overwhelming majority of homicide victims are women of color. Britto et al. state that by “focusing on the white victim [the show] portrays the criminal justice system as primarily fighting to protect white [male] citizens” (Britto et al, 52). The importance of white male victims in *Law and Order: SVU* directly correlates to the prioritization of white personhood and rights as supported by the criminal justice system and the logic of social death. For a show that is primarily concerned with sexual assault and sexually based offenses, there is

an abundance of episodes about women raping men. Further, when women are the victims, they are typically white and portrayed as sympathetic (and if they are not, it is because they are sex workers, who are almost always portrayed as vicious, bitter, and manipulative), while women of color are more likely to be portrayed as bitter, angry, and less sympathetic and to have their bodies visibly battered. Through the police procedural format, *SVU* firmly places value on white subjectivity and victimhood.

The social value of white male victimhood in *Law and Order: SVU* determines whose victimhood is aberrant and whose is expected. An episode from the first season of the show exemplifies the uneasy dynamic of white male victimhood as aberrant and the victimhood, this time of sex workers, is normalized and expected. The episode 'Russian Love Poem' in the first season of the show begins with the sexually charged murder of a multi-millionaire and features the violent and sensational deaths of the sex workers who murdered him.[2] The death of the lawyer is treated with sympathy despite his being a serial adulterer. The sympathy arises from his status as the white, upper-class victim of heartless and salacious women. He is socially valued: the social value of his race, gender, and class status is what makes his death aberrant and abhorrent. Without these markers, there is no violation of social norms for the heroes to remedy. Although the women are white, their status as sex workers and immigrants who violate the social order by killing a wealthy white man establishes their lack of social value and need to be punished. Both

[2] To avoid confusion, I use single quotation marks to signify episode titles for the TV show *Law and Order: SVU* and double quotation marks for the episode titles from "Especially Heinous"

alive and in death, *Law and Order: SVU* treats the sex workers in "Russian Love Poem" as disposable and their deaths are crucial for the reestablishment of the status quo.

The correlating episode in "Especially Heinous" actively works against the logic of social death that operates in the television version of 'Russian Love Poem.' In Machado's work, Benson and Stabler investigate crimes in order to establish and reiterate the personhood and subjectivity of the victims of rape-homicides, or other sex-related offenses:

> When they bring the mother up to the stand, the new DA asks her to state her name. She closes her eyes, shakes her head, rocks back and forth in her chair. She begins to sing a song softly under her breath, not in English, the syllables running out of her mouth like smoke. The DA looks to the judge for help, but he is staring at the witness, his eyes as distant as if he were lost in the forest of his own memory. (Machado 66)

The victim in this "Russian Love Poem," although unseen and not named, is loved, and valued. The tender singing of her mother communicates her depth of grief. There is a sense of loss that is invoked in the mother's rocking body, the image of words dissipating into smoke. The loss is for a victim that the viewer has not seen or met, but whose absence is ardently felt. Further, the mother provokes the DA to experience the loss as well. Although the novella is not a one-to-one equivalent to *Law and Order: SVU*, compared to its correlating show episode, the murder of Sonya in *SVU*, the sex worker, takes on importance and poignancy. Her life inspires loss, despite the logics of social death that deemed her valueless. Operating under an understanding of oppositional horror, "Russian Love Poem" in "Especially Heinous" transforms into a haunting. The mother's loss and grief reveal a

seething presence- a type of haunting that Avery Gordon defines as a haunting resulting from the erasure of violence and trauma, and that generates a compulsion to action. Especially Heinous" counters the absence and loss of value perpetuated by *Law and Order: SVU* through the immaterial but tangible haunting of the mother's loss. Just as "Especially Heinous" forms a counterpoint to *SVU* and its genre imperatives, within the novella Benson and Stabler encounter doppelgangers who embody *SVU*'s logic of social death.

Doppelgangers and the Refusal of Closure

The doppelgangers, Henson and Abler, don't appear until the beginning of season four in the novella, long after the arrival of the girls-with-bells-for-eyes and Stabler's discovery of his wife's rape. It takes even longer for their meaning to be made clear; Henson and Abler become stand-ins of the show's versions of Olivia Benson and Elliot Stabler. Benson and Stabler are forced to confront their hyper-efficient, untraumatized, and unburdened doubles. Doppelgangers have their own horror genre imperatives as well; they are "a projection of particular threats, fears, and contradictions that refuse coexistence with the prevailing paradigms and consensual orthodoxies of everyday life" (Wells 9). In "Especially Heinous," the doppelgangers embody the contradiction perpetuated by *Law and Order: SVU*; that hyper-violent crimes can exist without trauma, and that crime can be never-ending while the justice system is still efficient. Additionally, doppelgangers distort the everyday into the uncanny—our almost-but-not-quite world. The uncanny is "undoubtedly related to what is frightening---to what arouses dread and fear" and so then in "Especially Heinous" what is frightening and dreadful is not the ghosts of the girls-with-bells-for-eyes, but the systems of power embodied in the

television-doppelgangers (Freud 219). Henson and Abler serve to make the police procedural elements of "Especially Heinous" uncanny and terrifying. Whereas Benson and Stabler are caught in the murky mire of hauntings and the trauma of their jobs, Henson and Abler are perfect detectives who solve all of their cases with ease. When Henson and Abler solve cases, it is with precision and with apathy, as is the case in the episode called "Privilege," where the doppelgangers' precise detective work makes the forensic procedural elements uncanny and strange:

> [they] notice the bullet casing buried in the dirt. They notice the smear of blood near the door frame, the orientation of the street. They look at each other and know that they're each calculating the sunlight on this avenue at the time of the crime. By the time they get inside, they know to arrest the wife. They don't even have to ask her any questions. (Machado 82)

This episode both demonstrates how the novella mimics the genre trope of the procedural (e.g., noticing obscure clues, "the wife did it") and also highlights how Henson and Abler distance victims from the crimes. The victims are absent from Henson and Abler's crime scenes, but they haunt the periphery.

Benson and Stabler employ elements of the police procedural genre with an absurdist bent that foregrounds their work's horror, about which they exchange multiple "theories" throughout the novella. Those theories rarely relate to crime-solving, which violates the genre expectations of the police procedural. For instance, after a small group of children-with-bells-for-eyes begin to haunt her, Benson theorizes, in one episode, that there is no god (Machado 79). In another, Benson changes her theory; there is a god, and

he is hungry (Machado 112). The endless murders and rapes haunt Benson, their horror becoming a permanent part of her life. In contrast, for the doppelgangers, the horror of the crimes doesn't even register.

The doppelgangers serve a more sinister purpose in the novella than simply being cardboard cut-outs of police procedural tropes. The doppelgangers also enforce social death by silencing the victims and reducing them to nothing more than a litany of stories and injuries—not unlike *Law and Order: SVU*. In terms of the plot, the doppelgangers actively waylay Benson and Stabler's efforts to solve cases, which only adds to the rising number of hauntings in the city. Abler stalks Stabler and his family until Stabler begins to obsess over him instead of solving his crime cases. Then, Henson steals the hammers of the bells of the girls-with-bells-for-eyes, effectively silencing their bells and stymieing Benson's efforts to solve their murders. The doppelgangers are agents of the ever-hungry god of New York City; they keep the city fed on the endless violence and murders. On a more metatextual level, Henson and Abler emphasize the ambivalence towards the victims of social death and the paradoxical fascination with their murders and deaths as perpetuated by *Law and Order: SVU*.

The doppelganger Henson plays an additional role in the novella alongside the sinister double. The novella positions Henson as not just a perfect cop but also as a storyteller. In "Scheherazade!" Henson becomes a stand in for the mythic narrator of *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* (Haddawy, et al.). As the story goes, Shahryar, a monarch, discovered that his wife was unfaithful and so he had her killed and then vowed that each day, he would wed a virgin and then kill her after one night so that she would

never have the chance to be unfaithful. After 1,001 nights and 1,001 deaths, Scheherazade offered to spend the night with Shahryar but survives by weaving fantastic stories that keep the monarch fascinated. She placates him with stories for 1,001 nights after which he professes his love for her. Henson plays the role of Scheherazade as made evident in the "Scheherazade!" episode summary:

> "Let me tell you a story," Henson whispers to the DA as they curl up in her bed, the air heavy with the smell of sex. "When it's over, I'll tell you what you want to know about Benson, about Stabler, about all of it. Even about the sounds." The DA mumbles her assent, feeling drowsy. "The first story," Henson whispers, "is about a queen and her castle. A queen, her castle, and a hungry beast that lives below." (Machado 105)

As the novella goes on, Henson's stories emerge as the stories of all of the deaths and murders and rapes that Benson and Stabler are unable to solve.

"Especially Heinous," through Henson-as-Scheherazade, characterizes consumers of the show, and of the novella itself, as monstrous perpetrators of violence. Viewers and readers actively participate in the endless cycle of hyper-violent crimes by continuing to consume the story, either of the novella or the episodes of *Law and Order: SVU.* They are as much the horror villain as the doppelgangers. In the episode "Screwed," Henson-as-Scheherazade acknowledges that the DA is not doing her job and is part of the inept, incompetent, lazy, and even corrupt bureaucracy that is a frequent trope in crime fiction: "The DA calls in sick, again. 'The sixty-fifth story,' Henson whispers into her ear, 'is about a world that watches you and me and everyone. Watches our suffering like it is a game. Can't stop, won't stop. Can't tear themselves away. If they could stop, we could stop, but they won't, so we can't'" (Machado 108). "Screwed" positions the consumers of

the show as enabling and necessitating continued violence against an endless stream of, if not nameless, then forgettable, victims. The novella forces readers to acknowledge their complicity in the crimes; if the reader would stop reading, and if the viewer would stop viewing, the violence would not happen because no one would be there to consume it.

The novella directly critiques its own readers on another occasion. Stabler, who has been obsessing over Abler stalking his family and attempting to impersonate him, becomes "suddenly certain of something [and] runs out into the street and stares up at the sky. "'Stop,' he begs. 'Stop reading. I don't like this. Something is wrong. I don't like this'" (Machado 111). Notably, the episode in which Stabler does this is titled "Authority," as it places the readers in charge; they are put in control. Both "Screwed," and "Authority" position the readers and viewers as participants with a choice to either continue or to end the suffering and discomfort of not just Benson and Stabler but also of the parade of victims.

The doppelganger plot ends with Benson and Stabler shooting down Henson and Abler (in a mimicry of the *Law and Order: SVU* episodes that end with the detectives shooting down an offender as an act of justice). It is only after Benson and Stabler defeat the doppelgangers that finally they begin to solve the cases of the girls-with-bells-for-eyes. Henson and Abler's deaths conclude the stream of victims and their suffering. Instead, "without Henson and Abler, Benson and Stabler…go back, slowly, to old files. The missing girls and women. The dead. 'Let's get them out,' Stabler says, newly confident. 'Let's set them free.'" (Machado 120). The doppelgangers die in the last episode of season eleven, and the entirety of season twelve, the final twenty-four episode

summaries, brim with cases being solved, with victims being named, and with healing and reconciliation. There is also, importantly, an ending. Where *Law and Order: SVU* is on its twenty-first season with no signs of stopping any time soon, “Especially Heinous” concludes after twelve seasons. “Especially Heinous” forces the reader to stop reading and to stop their perpetuation of suffering and violence. The horror story ends—it wrests control from the reader.

However, despite the novella ending, it avoids the naïve presumption that violence is also at an end, or that the logic of social death no longer exists, despite Benson and Stabler solving the girls-with-bells-for-eyes’ cases. Instead, the novella acknowledges that “there are more-there will always be more” but there is something that can be done about it (Machado 122). The haunting has not ended, the seething presence has not been banished, but its demand for action has been carried out and will continue to be carried out. In reference to this, the DA repeats Henson’s last story to Benson, “‘In the beginning, before the city, there was a creature. Genderless, ageless. The city flies on its back. We hear it, all of us, in one way or another. It demands sacrifice. But it can only eat what we give it’” (Machado 123). “Especially Heinous” offers this solution: although the creature will always be hungry, and although there will always be violence and ghosts, the victims don’t have to be the food. The city doesn’t have to feed on the nameless dead. Something else, like the laughter and companionship between Benson and the DA can feed it. This ending is only possible without the presence of the doppelgangers, and by extension, only possible by the removal of *Law and Order: SVU*, its correlating prioritization of white male victimhood, and the disavowal of the logic of social death.

A Seething Presence, or Benson Takes the Girls-With-Bells-For-Eyes Dancing

An analysis of how "Especially Heinous" counters the logic of social death would be incomplete without an examination of who the victims are in the novella. The plot of the girls-with-bells-for-eyes goes like this. Two underage models are raped and murdered. A haunting arises from the circumstances of their deaths after the police confuse the two underage models with two other underage models who were also raped and murdered. After the police close the investigation, they bury the four girls in the wrong graves. And then, one of them "begins to haunt Benson. She has bells for eyes, tiny brass ones dangling from the top of each eye socket, the hammers not quite touching her cheekbones. The ghost does not know her name" (Machado 68-69). After the first ghost comes an avalanche. The ghosts of the victims of rape-homicides, appearing as girls-with-bells-for-eyes, start to fill Benson's apartment, demanding justice—demanding that Benson find their bodies, learn their names, and return their silenced voices. Benson resists at first, attempting to cast them out of her apartment, but finally, she resolves to help them and then she comes to love and feel loved by the girls.

Later in the novella, Henson stymies Benson's efforts by stealing the hammers from the girls' bells. This silences their only means of communication. Only then does Benson invite the girls-with-bells-for-eyes into herself, to possess her, so that they may talk, or laugh, or touch, and, eventually, dance. After Benson and Stabler defeat the doppelgangers, solving the girls-with-bells-for-eyes' cases comes easily and they leave Benson's body: "On a Wednesday, they catch so many bad guys that Benson throws up seventeen girls in one afternoon. She laughs as they spill out of her, tumble into her vomit

like oil slicks, and dissipate into the air" (Machado 122). Although the girls-with-bells-for-eyes are ghosts, and although they haunt Benson, she grows to love them and to find comfort in them and grieves when the last girl leaves her. Although there will always be more ghosts, the novella ends on a sweet, if not necessarily happy, note as the last of the girls-with-bells-for-eyes leaves Benson's head with a thank you and a sigh.

The novella situates the girls-with-bells-for-eyes in two horror subgenres, framed through the police procedural: the ghost story and the exorcism, or possession, narrative. These subgenres both make the police procedural framing horrific as well as give the girls-with-bells-for-eyes agency. Additionally, the girls-with-bells-for-eyes make the police procedural horrific by comingling the genre imperatives together. For example, the episode "Execution" in the novella combines a scene where a medical examiner tells the detectives what happened to a victim with the terrifying image of the victim's eyes melting away: "the medical examiner pulls back the sheet from the dead girl's face. 'Raped and strangled,' she says, her voice hollow. 'Your murderer pressed his thumbs into the girl's windpipe until she died. No fingerprints, though'…Benson is certain that she can see the jelly of the girl's eyes receding beneath their closed lids, certain she can hear the sound of bells" (Machado 77). The rote scene of the informational medical examiner, mixed with Benson's ghostly haunting, creates a slippage between the horror and the police procedural genres.

Further, the possession subgenre destabilizes the normalized violence in the police procedural through the deployment of the monstrous feminine, which is a staple of the possession subgenre. The monstrous feminine is the feminine body made abject by,

"images of blood, vomit, pus, shit" and "sexual immorality and perversion, corporeal alternation, decay, and death; human sacrifice, murder, the corpse; bodily waste," (Creed 39, 45). "Especially Heinous" deploys the monstrous feminine, which is typically "constructed within a patriarchal and phallocentric ideology," to reframe the passive corpse of the police procedural as a seething and active abjection (Creed 38). The episode "Families" in "Especially Heinous" demonstrates the connection between the girls-with-bells-for-eyes and grotesque abjection. At a Thanksgiving dinner, Benson prepares the turkey: "her fingers push through gristle, meat, and bones and close around something. She pulls. Out of the turkey comes a string of entrails, decorated with strings of tinkling bells, slick with blood" (Machado 89). The body of the turkey becomes the monstrous body of a girl-with-bells-for-eyes. Despite being ghosts, the girls-with-bells-for-eyes are intensely embodied through the monstrous feminine. Their embodiment counters the passivity of the corpses in the police procedural.

The novella uses the girls-with-bells-for-eyes to draw attention to processes of dehumanization at the hands of violent and oppressive power systems. The story of the girls-with-bells-for-eyes, with its use of horrific imagery, its embrace of the tenets of a classic ghost story, and its not-quite happy ending, demonstrates how horror can be used as an act of resistance to the logic of social death. If social death is a "status of dead-to-others," then the girls-with-bells-for-eyes make themselves not-dead to Benson (Cacho 168). Their presence demands reckoning with the systems that devalue them and that do not investigate their rape-homicides. Theirs is a seething presence that provokes and demands "a something-to-be-done" (Gordon 202). For Avery Gordon, a "seething

presence" is a result of trauma and a resistance to social erasure. A seething presence offers a means of moving beyond the logic of social death by making apparent not just historical violence, but also states of present violence at the hands of systems of oppression. As seething presences, the-girls-with-bells-for-eyes testify to the power systems that surround social death, not in a correlating one-to-one, victim-to-ghost ratio, but as an amassing of ignored or erased historical and social trauma in which their presence is material and effective.

Even though "Especially Heinous" offers an oppositional gaze towards social death, it's treatment of race is ambivalent, and the novella demonstrates this through the plot and portrayal of the girls-with-bells-for-eyes. Although there are infrequent physical descriptors that racialize the ghosts (one example is a girl with cornrows, and two other episodes feature Black girl victims), race, including whiteness, is largely unmarked in the novella. Rather, the victims' lack of names establishes them as socially dead. "Especially Heinous" exemplifies the importance of names in the very first episode when the underage models are buried in the wrong graves. The lack of emphasis on race plays a strange role in the novella. It both serves to resist traditional markers of value; if neither the victims nor Benson have a race, then the logic of social death cannot devalue them, or have their value reified by their race. However, this approach also leaves whiteness unmarked and unchecked and can unintentionally replicate the trend in *Law and Order: SVU* that values and emphasizes white victimhood over that of victims of color. The racial ambivalence of the novella also casts Benson as a potential white savior of the potentially racialized girls-with-bells-for-eyes (if we assume that the unmarked race of

the majority of ghosts are victims of color). Although Benson is only a husk of the television character Olivia Benson, she is presumed white in the novella because of the absence of any racial signifier. The uneasy presence of race in the novella does not negate its categorization as oppositional horror; it demonstrates how social death functions both alongside and outside of race.

The novella positions the girls-with-bells-for-eyes as the victims of social death through the loss of their names. Discovering the girls' names is central to countering their erasure. Once Benson and Stabler begin to solve each of the girls-with-bells-for-eyes' cases, they also learn the ghosts' names. Once the girls-with-bells-for-eyes have their names, their personhood manifests. In the episode, "Name," the whole city stops, and they know, suddenly, the names of the victims, and the dead fill their heads to the point where they cannot remember their own names:

> In graves and ditches, in morgues and mortuaries, in rushes and bogs, dipping and rolling on the skins of rivers, names trace the bodies of the dead like flames along kindling, like electricity. For four minutes, the city becomes filled with the names, with their names, and though the man cannot tell the barista that Sam wants his latte, he can tell her that Samantha is not coming home but she is somewhere, though she in nowhere, and she knows nothing, and everything. (Machado 99)

By a random, unexplained fluke of the city, for four minutes, the entire city becomes the site of a haunting, each person possessed by the names of the dead. The haunting debilitates the people, forcing them to stop in the street, all of their sense of self obliterated. Instead, the haunting provokes a "shared structure of feeling, a shared possession, a specific type of sociality" that for four minutes forces the city to experience

the compounded trauma of history and the social order; the city confronts and comingles with the socially dead (Gordon 202). In “Especially Heinous,” names counter the logic of social death. The manifestation of the dead’s names forces the city to confront the violence, deaths, systems that enabled so many names to be forgotten and erased. Further, the novella goes beyond naming and signaling those victims of social death by putting an emphasis on their subjectivity. The girls-with-bells-for-eyes, their bells always tinkling, persistently attempt to communicate with Benson. The ghosts have their own language through the bells that Benson must meticulously learn. It is clear from their first appearance that the ghosts are not passive dead victims waiting for Benson to save them; they have desires and wants and demands. It takes time for Benson to teach herself to understand the tinkling of their bells and when she does, the first thing they communicate to her is “‘Give us voices. Give us voices. Give us voices. Find us. Find us. Find us. Please. Please. Please’” (Machado 78). They demand not only justice but also a recognition of their personhood.

The haunting of the girls-with-bells-for-eyes represent a seething presence manifested by a quotidian excess of cruelty, violence, and dehumanization. Although *Law and Order: SVU* also renders violence in the quotidian, it does so in a way that reinforces and justifies hegemonic valuing of personhood. The endless stream of victims makes the violence acceptable and normal in *SVU*. In the novella, the girls-with-bells-for-eyes, through their haunting, don’t deny the frequency of the violence; they deny its banality by making the violence linger, by making it horrific. Their ghostly presence meddles with “taken-for-granted-realities” (Gordon 8). They are excessive even just in

their presence. When Benson finally invites them into her head, they identify themselves as "legion," aligning themselves with demons wrought from histories and everyday trauma (Machado 106). Further, as a haunting, the girls-with-bells-for-eyes also provoke action: "the girls-with-bells-for-eyes are waiting for [Benson], draped over every surface like Dalí clocks. They crowd around her as she slowly brushes her teeth. She spits, rinses, and turns. "'All right,' she says. 'What do you want me to do?'" (Machado 72). As insistent and seething presences, the girls-with-bells-for-eyes refuse the normalization of their violent deaths and provoke resistance to the systems that would enforce their social death.

When in control of Benson, the girls-with-bells-for-eyes do not seek out revenge or violence. Instead, they embrace their own quotidian, living out what their everyday life would have been like had they not been killed and erased. "Lead," a season ten episode, reads, "When she is tired, Benson lets the girls take over. They run her body all over town, buying hard lemonades and shimmying her chest at bouncers and, once, before Benson can take control again, kissing a busboy sweetly in his mouth, a mouth that tastes like metal and spearmint" (Machado 114). By inviting them in, both Benson and the girls-with-bells-for-eyes embrace the joy of everyday life. However, their presence is also a constant reminder of the excess horror that accompanies the everyday. Even as Benson and Stabler begin to solve the cases and Benson's head slowly starts to clear, there is a constant reminder that the reason that the girls-with-bells-for-eyes exist is because of the horrors and the erasures of their deaths. As an example, in the episode "Torch," "a girl is raped, and lit on fire. She comes into Benson's head screaming, smoke curling off her

burned skin, not understanding. It is the longest night of Benson's life thus far" (Machado 119). In "Especially Heinous," the everyday is both teenagers wanting to drink and dance, and it is also, in its excess, horrific as demonstrated in violence against women.

The possession horror subgenre imperatives in mainstream horror typically feature a demonic, cruel entity forcing its way into, typically, a young white girl or woman, ravaging her body with pus and boils and bodily excretions, and turns her whiteness into the monstrous-feminine. The genre imperative of destroying the body reflects longstanding histories of invasion and colonialism. Possession narratives often mimic the colonial process: "there is a recognition of physical, psychological, and spiritual damage done to bodies that are possessed, whether by entities or by the colonial state" (Whetmore Jr. 888). The horror of the possession narratives arises from the threat to what should be safe and sacred (or valued), in this case, the white female body. The invader or colonizer is a dark and malignant force. The horror parallels the violence and domination of colonialism and incites fear that the process of colonization will be enacted on the colonizer, a permanent and violent possession (Whetmore Jr. 885). A possession disrupts the socially valued white body. An exorcism restores the girl's value, mends the social order, and removes the threat. The possession genre established the value of the possessed and the illegitimacy of the usurper. The restoration of the "natural" order restores the possessed to the status quo.

In "Especially Heinous," the possession of the girls-with-bells-for-eyes is oppositional; it reaffirms personhood and subjectivity as the ghosts claim agency via Benson's body, even though at first Benson rejects the possession. Initially, the girls-

with-bells-for-eyes disregard Benson's consent and take possession of her against her will. In the aptly named episode, "Intoxicated," "the girl-with-bells-for-eyes—the first one who had sought Benson's sour sleep breath and twitching eyelids all that time ago—comes into Benson's bedroom. She walks up to the bed. She presses her fingers into Benson's mouth. Benson does not wake up. The girl pushes herself in and in, and when Benson's eyes open, Benson is not opening them" (Machado 96). The moment reads almost like an episode from *Law and Order: SVU*; the lurking stranger over the bed taking advantage of the hapless woman. The episode goes on to describe Benson as "an unanimated golem," and although the girl-with-bells-for-eyes apologizes, the girl had betrayed Benson (Machado 96). However, after the doppelganger Henson steals the hammers from the bells and silences the ghosts, and Benson cannot fix the bells, she says, "'All right…come in.' And they do. They walk into her, one at a time, and once they are inside, she can feel them, hear them. They take turns with her vocal cords" (Machado 106). Benson has given the girls-with-bells-for-eyes their first demand: voices. The consent to possession displaces the value of Benson onto the girls-with-bells-for-eyes, reaffirming their personhood. In Benson giving up her autonomy, in becoming possessed, the legion of the girls-with-bells-for-eyes gain their own autonomy and unlike the genre imperatives of the mainstream possession film, this does not initiate the destruction of Benson's body by a malignant force. Rather, the possession is "framing the monstrous disruption as potentially redemptive" (Heidenreich 221). Legion doesn't destroy Benson. Instead, they bring her as much joy as they do hurt. Although at times her head is so

crowded that she cannot remember how to write her signature, other times the possession produces joy and revelry.

Near the end of the novella, the possession transforms more into a co-existence. She is no longer an unanimated golem, but an active participant in the sharing of her body. In the episode "Svengali," while all of the other characters are filled with rage, or fear, or mesmerized by seductive doppelgangers, "Benson takes herself and the girls inside her out on the town for dancing, for sweaty beer bottles, to show them a good time" (Machado 110). A possession that began so crudely, and so cruelly, culminates in dancing. Additionally, the possession becomes a way for Benson to solve the ghosts' cases. They communicate with her about their disappearance and where their bodies are. By the end of the novella, Benson is simultaneously possessed and a willing conduit through which the girls-with-bells-for-eyes can be active participants in solving their own cases and pursuing their own justice.

Hauntings are not always a horrific thing in "Especially Heinous," and their resolution does not mean banishing the unwanted. When Benson and Stabler solve the last case of the girls-with-bells-for eyes, the episode "Bully" reads, "The last girl clings to the inside of Bensons' skull. 'I don't want to be alone,' Benson says. 'I don't, either' Benson says, 'but you need to go.' Stabler comes into Benson's apartment. 'Her name is Allison Jones. She was twelve. She was raped by her father, and her mother didn't believe her. He killed her and buried her on Brighton Beach.' Inside, the girl shakes her head, as if to dislodge the sand in her hair. 'Go,' Benson says. 'Go.' The girl smiles and doesn't, her bells barely rocking. 'Thank you,' Benson says. 'You're welcome,' Benson

says. There is a sound—a new sound. A sigh. And then, she is gone” (Machado 122). The exorcism of the girls-with-bells-for-eyes is gentle, not one that leaves Benson’s body raw and ravaged and monstrous. Nor is it a return to the social order; exorcising the ghosts doesn’t drive them back into the shackles of social death. For Benson, even though the logic of social death and the mainstream horror genre imperatives should signal the girls-with-bells-for-eyes as evil and not wanted, Benson profoundly loves and profoundly values the girls, and she ardently feels their loss when they leave her body.

Conclusion: No. Yes. No. No? No. Oh.

“Especially Heinous: 272 Views of Law and Order” has a definitive ending, unlike the episodic, recurring plot structure of the television series. Benson and Stabler defeat the doppelgangers. Benson resolves the haunting of the girls-with-bells-for-eyes. Stabler reconciles with his wife and family, and they leave the city together. However, there is also another ending, one that is in process. The episode “Penetration,” one of the final episodes of the novella, only reads: “‘No.’ ‘Yes.’ ‘No.” “No?’ ‘No.’ ‘Oh.’” (Machado 121). The episode summary for “Penetration” speaks to a utopic impulse at the novella’s close. “Penetration” ends with the lack of consent being recognized and respected and the implication that city will have to find something else to feed off of than rape-homicides. The ending of “Especially Heinous” does not overhaul the justice system, nor does it upheave hegemony; it embraces the possibility of an existence not characterized by horror.

As a narrative genre, oppositional horror reveals what is horrific about systems of power and their material consequences. Both *SVU* and “Especially Heinous” engage with the logic of social death. *SVU* reproduces it and stages it for popular consumption. “Especially Heinous” disrupts social death by valuing victims and refusing to normalize violence. *Law and Order: SVU* protects the logic of social death when it sanitizes and sensationalizes trauma, repetitively featuring it for 20 years. The novella reverses this act of social cleansing by appropriating the genre mode of crimes and victims, pointing to the excessive and horrific extensions that the conventional detective narrative ignores. As oppositional horror, “Especially Heinous” offers more than just a recognition of the very real traumas and violence that have a material effect on the lives of marginalized populations; the novella reconfigures as horrific what *Law and Order: SVU* portrays as banal and normal.

Horror offers a means of moving beyond systems of oppression. “Especially Heinous” attempts to counter the violence of everyday systems through an appropriation of horror genre imperatives. Oppositional horror positions systems of oppression into the familiar trappings of a horror story. As such, the novella manifests ghosts (and demons and doppelgangers) from the material lives of marginalized populations. Oppositional horror intentionally resists and counters the prioritization of white fears and victimhood. As a genre that gazes back at hegemonic power systems that feed on the death and brutalization of brown and Black bodies, oppositional horror breaks the logics of those systems. Whereas mainstream popular horror reiterates and reaffirms the logic of social

death, “Especially Heinous” counters it with the affirmation of personhood to the de-
valued dead.

CHAPTER 2

EL CHUCHO SARNOSO: BORDER HORROR AESTHETICS AND RESISTANCE IN MIGRANT NARRATIVES

In 1976, in the border-town of Douglas, AZ, a family of American ranchers kidnapped three Mexican migrants and tortured them. The torture of these Mexican nationals, Manuel García Loya, Bernabe Herrera Mata, and Eleazar Rueles Zavala, reads like a horror film. The Hanigans kidnapped the three men, hog-tied them, had their clothes cut from their bodies, were tortured with hot pokers, and the American mutilated their genitals. The Hanigans, two brothers and their father, attempted to lynch Rueles Zavala. The Haingans then set each man free to run away and shot at them. The three Mexican nationals crossed back to Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico and were treated for their wounds (Marín 1997). Their gore-ridden experience would fit easily with such torture-porn horror films as *Saw* (2004) and *Hostel* (2005). Torture-porn is a genre known for its excessive and brutal violence, a violence whose only purpose is for the spectacle of violence. Unlike the films in this genre, where random violence can be perpetrated against any person at any time, the violence that the Hanigans perpetuated was targeted and specific. They tortured the three men because they were Mexican (Marín 1997).

Anti-immigrant and anti-Latina/o/x policies created by the state led to over a century of violence on the U.S./Mexico border. These policies, such as the Undesirable Aliens Act (1929), Proposition 187 (1994) in California, SB 1070 (2010) in Arizona, limited the human and civil rights of immigrants and served to further dehumanize them. It has also prompted the ability for individual citizens to enact state-sanctioned violence.

The Hanigans were initially acquitted after a 23-day trial, their actions found acceptable and justified by an all-white jury. The Hanigans may have been individual citizens, but they acted on the impunity of the state. Although the Hanigans did face further trials and were, after many years and the labor of migrant activist groups, convicted, the brutality that they inflicted was nonetheless violence that aligned itself with the racist border policies that positioned migrants as criminals who needed to be punished.

Nearly two decades later, in 1995, two Mexican migrants, Luz Lopez and Norma Contreras were brutally raped by a Border Patrol agent while his supervisor observed. They were first assaulted when found in the desert and later again while being held in detention. Due to policies of expedited removal, where low-level immigration officials are able to make quick deportations at their discretion, Lopez and Contreras were released in Ciudad Juárez. Lopez and Contreras attempted to seek justice but were met with intense resistance from the Border Patrol representative and attorney (Light). Both women were put in psychiatric care after their assault. Lopez attempted suicide as a result of the attack. The agents, despite the victims pursing legal actions, have never been punished or even named. An International Affairs Review from 2013 states, "the sexualized violence of migrant women perpetrated by the Border Patrol is a direct result of the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, normalized through the socialization and apparent legal impunity of the agents, and abetted by the organized silence of the survivors" (2). The rape of these two women is but one example of the decades of abuse perpetrated by the border patrol (International Affairs Review). These women's cases demonstrate how state agencies like the Border Patrol commit acts of violence with

impunity and without repercussion: “the existence of undocumented women causes national *in*security [sic] and are so criminalized that their bodily integrity does not matter to the state” (Falcón 121). In 1995, Human Rights Watch published a report on human rights abuses on the border which documented several cases of rape committed by Border Patrol agents that failed to result in any legal repercussions. The rapes of Lopez and Contreras bring into harsh relief the brutal consequences of a state that sanctions violent acts against people it does not value.

The U.S./Mexico border, its people, and its land has long been the site of state-sanctioned violence with a history of prejudice, war, and genocide. From the bloody killings and lynchings during *La Matanza/Hora de Sangre* (The Slaughter/Hour of Blood) in the early twentieth century to the 2009 murder of Raul Flores and his nine-year-old daughter Brisenia at the hands of a paramilitary group, the Minutemen American Defense (MAD), in Arizona, the U.S./Mexico border has been molded by conditions of horror. This horror is not the result of random violence, but rather the result of a regime of racist violence, nativist ideology, and the systematic murder or neglect of people deemed not-human by the state (both the Mexican government and that of the United States). There is a legacy of violence on the border, enacted both by the state and by individual agents acting as proxies for the state: “state violence manifests itself not only in clear cut state action but also through the impunity it provides to individual, private actions” (Rubio-Goldsmith 44). This legacy of violence is endemic to the conditions of horror on the border that this chapter will explore and account for.

State-sanctioned violence is a result of the “social machinery of oppression” (Farmer 307). State-sanctioned violence works as a mechanism to enable and perpetuate the continued oppression of marginalized individuals. State-sanctioned violence, as Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith accounts for, is the ability for state operators like the Border Patrol and military to commit acts of violence with impunity. Falcón writes, “due to disparaging levels of nation-state power, [the border] is a contentious region that has been militarized to violently enforce the territory of the United States” (119). The militarized border results in great acts of state-sanctioned violence. For example, scholars Carrigan and Web have estimated that between the years 1848 and 1928, “mobs lynched at least 597 Mexicans” (413). The history of lynching Mexicans on the border in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century is a direct example of state-sanctioned violence where individuals were able act with impunity in a manner that aligned itself with the state’s own killing of Mexicans (Muñoz Martinez 2018, Carrigan and Web 2003). It is important to understand that the intricate relationship between the state powers of Mexico and the United States that inform the specific manifestations of state-sanctioned violence on the border.

Although the United States’ culpability is undeniable and heinous, the Mexican state also enacts violence, both at the hands of citizens and state operatives. In the mid twentieth century, following the 1910 Mexican Revolution, the Mexican government and police agencies deployed guerilla tactics against insurgents and protestors, leading to the murders and disappearances of an untold count of people (Aviña 2014). These tactics were appropriated during the rise of narco cartels in Mexico, enabled by U.S. policies and

drug trade, and has increased the acceptability of murdering migrants without repercussion. In 2010, Los Zetas, an infamously violent cartel, massacred seventy-two migrants. The migrants hailed from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Brazil, Ecuador, and India. Los Zetas committed this massacre "as part of their efforts to control the country's burgeoning market in human trafficking, in collusion with local, state, and federal officials" (Pérez Bustillo and Hernández Mares, 81). This massacre is part of a growing legacy of mass death events in Mexico, such as the presumed killing of forty-two students in Guerrero committed by local police in 2014. Gary Moore refers to this drastic increase in mass death events as "Mexico's Massacre Era" (2012). Mass death events and mass graves are the result of disputes over power between state officials and the growing force of narcopolitics and cartels. Cartels are the emergent consequence of U.S. free trade agreements like NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) that displaced large Latin American populations, coupled with increased security measures on the border, and bolstered by increased drug criminalization and the intense policing of the border. Cartels are a response to the resultant human trafficking crisis and drug war. The massacre by Los Zetas is a stark example of the growing human rights violations for which they faced no repercussions. Beyond the mass death event was also the years of trauma and grief that the families of the victims endured. Many of the families had to pay exorbitant amounts to Mexican government agencies to have the remains of their loved ones sent home, and even then, several of the delivered coffins contained nothing more than blocks of clay (Pérez Bustillo and Hernández Mares, 2016). U.S. immigration and

trade policies, the negligence and complicity of Mexican officials, made space for horrific state-sanctioned violence against migrants.

These examples of violence demonstrate how horror is not simply endemic to the geographical area of the U.S./Mexico border. The desert may be hot and sweltering and more than capable of killing by itself, but there is nothing natural about the conditions of horror that lead to so much loss of human life. The borderlands are a curated space of violence. United States immigration policies, those like Operation Gatekeeper in 1994, have constructed the borderlands to be a space of danger not just for passing migrants but for Latinx and Indigenous populations who have lived there for centuries. It is not an accident that so much of the violence of the border has targeted migrants; the United States has worked very hard to criminalize migrants and to punish migrants for crossing by funneling them through the most dangerous parts of the desert and then allowing individual citizens to kill and torture with impunity. The desert, a natural killer, has been weaponized into an unnatural tool to act out state-approved, state-desired, and state-sanctioned violence against the peoples of the borderlands.

This chapter focuses on three texts to further argue that conditions of horror on the border are man-made, brought on by decades of border enforcement policies, escalating anti-immigrant sentiment, and the growing crisis of cartel violence. First, Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* draws upon police reports, interviews, border patrol cases, and imagination to tell the story of a group of twenty-six migrants who attempted to cross the border into Arizona in 2001. Nearly half of them died. Urrea's text engages with aesthetics of horror—suspense, lurking inevitable death, haunting, body

horror—to demonstrate not just how the desert kills but how conditions of poverty and desperation, coupled with immigration policies, led to the death of so many. Jonás Cuarón's 2015 horror film *Desierto* is a fluid accompaniment to *The Devil's Highway*. *Desierto* pits the lone, white serial killer Sam against a group of migrants. In the great tradition of the slasher and road horror genres, a blood-thirsty killer hunts down his prey. Sam stands in as a metaphor for the racism and anti-immigrant sentiment that migrants are subjected to. Lastly, the 2018 Eisner-nominated graphic novel *Barrier* by Brian K. Vaughn, Marcos Martin, and Munsta Vicente thrusts a racist Texas rancher and Honduran undocumented migrant together where they must survive an alien kidnapping by working together. Like the other two texts, *Barrier* engages with horror tropes and aesthetics to tell a migration narrative that centers the humanity of the migrants against those who see migrants as less-than-human, relegating them social death. Each of three texts deploy horror conventions as a resistance to the state's insistence that some violence against some people is warranted, justified, and acceptable. Focusing attention to elements of horror within these texts destabilizes presumed notions of immigrants as lazy, or violent, or less-than, by situating them as victims of violence and terror.

Death-by-Policy: Contemporary Immigration Policies and Conditions of Horror

To understand horror on the border, we need to understand how the death of migrants becomes naturalized. Those acts of violence listed above were deliberate acts with deliberate consequences; the perpetrators meant to kill and harm, and they did. However, there is another, stranger, form of death on the border. Robin Reineke writes, "anthropological studies of state terror have tended to focus on direct, somatic violence,

where state or parastate forces act on the state's power to kill. Less attended to are settings where violence is manifested in the state's realization of the power to *let die*" (140). Immigration policies like Operation Gatekeeper and the advent of "prevention-through-deterrence" function to let migrants die as they attempt to cross into the United States through the harsh conditions of the desert. Prevention-through-deterrence, as described in the "Border Patrol Strategic Plan 1994" (1994), details the Border Patrol policy to blockade urban crossing points like El Paso, Tucson, and San Diego, with the intention of funneling migrants through the harshest stretches of land along the border. What this means, because rural areas go purposefully under-patrolled, is that "migrants crossing the border are allowed to enter the sovereign space of the United States" but "they are also allowed to die trying, marking them as disposable" (Reineke 145). Migrant deaths become a "natural" consequence of a strategic form of deterring undocumented immigration.

Migrant deaths become naturalized partially because of the impossibility of an accurate body count. Each year, countless migrants die while crossing the U.S./Mexico border due to policy initiatives like Operation Gatekeeper. I use the term "countless" here very deliberately. It is not that there are no numbers of reported deaths of migrants. Those numbers are very present. I say countless because for all of the known deaths, there are an uncountable more (Martinez 98). These uncounted deaths make up the disappeared along the border, those who have been allowed to die. The disappeared extend not just to those migrants who go into the desert and slip away, never heard from again, but also those whose bodies are found in such a state of desiccation that they cannot be identified.

As of 2016, thirty-four percent of bodies found in the Tucson sector of the U.S./Mexico border could not be identified (Martinez 2016 112), and the disappeared continue to be countless. The unidentified and the disappeared mark a tragedy purposefully produced by U.S. immigration policy.

The naturalization of death is due in part to the implementation of border policies. In 1994, the Border Patrol began its Operation Gatekeeper initiative at the border between San Diego, CA, and Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. Operation Gatekeeper, along with Operation Hold the Line in El Paso, Operation Safeguard in Tucson, AZ, and Operation Rio Grande in the McAllen sector of Texas, were part of a major Border Patrol overhaul that would transform urban crossing points into high security check points. The intent of these operations was to increase apprehension rates of migrants while also purposefully pushing migrants away from those urban areas to more rural routes where they would simply be allowed to die (Nevins 2002). Operation Gatekeeper arose from growing anti-immigrant sentiment in California where panic about the rising population of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans was growing to a fervor. Nevins states that in California, "increasingly, politicians and public officials began putting forth dire warnings of the security "threat" to the United States represented by unauthorized immigration, often employing metaphors of invasion" (63). Operation Gatekeeper was rationalized by fearmongering and sensationalism. Further, the initiative was a method of establishing control and sovereignty over the U.S./Mexico boundary area, an initiative that went well beyond its stated purpose of stemming the rising rate of immigration. The

fear-rhetorics of invasion paved the way for Operation Gatekeeper to make paths of death through the desert.

But the naturalization of Latinx, migrant death emerges from a logic of social death as much as state policy. As noted earlier, social death is state-created and state-enforced method of deeming some populations, like migrants, trans people, sex workers, prisoners, etc. as without value and without personhood. The effect of the logic of social death on migrants can be seen in how immigration policies encourage the death of migrants and how those deaths go underpublicized and ignored. If US citizens or white folk were being funneled into the Sonoran Desert, there would surely be dramatic news coverage and widespread concern. Indeed, while migrant deaths happen regularly and only make headlines when the numbers make it newsworthy, every year vacationing and often white hikers in Phoenix die while hiking the nearby mountains in unsafe temperatures. The deaths of these middle-class, white hikers often receive multiple days of news coverage with commentators noting how preventable such death is. The logic of social death marks the deaths of these white hikers as tragic aberrations that should have never happened. This is a stark and horrible contrast to immigration policies based in the state's power to "let die."

Oppositional horror has the potential to combat the logic of social death against migrants that result from border and immigration policies. Oppositional horror engages with the project of pain-making-human by portraying the suffering of the socially dead. The process of making pain visible goes alongside the process of finding and identifying the bodies of migrants. Some migrants are never found at all, their bodies undiscoverable

in the winding canyons of the desert. Those migrants whose bodies are found by destroyed beyond all recognition-factors are nonetheless methodically and carefully documented by organizations like the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office in Arizona. These bodies are heavily documented; pictures are taken and filed away and uploaded to databases with the hopes that in the future, maybe, their names can be found, and they can be returned to their families. The pictures of their bodies are difficult to face. They are evidence of systems of power that allow people to die. Caminero-Santangelo states, "if the body itself is removed from sight, its pain becomes unimaginable. There could have been no pain—or infinite pain" (62). The photos of the migrants' bodies, horrific and tragic, work to make the pain of others a visceral and intimate experience, either through vivid description or stark rendering. Oppositional horror uses strategic representations of pain to combat the logic of social death.

The Devil's Highway: Landscapes of Horror and the Destruction of the Body

Luis Alberto Urrea's 2002 *The Devil's Highway: A True Story* narrates and contextualizes the particular border crossing of twenty-six migrant men in the Sonoran Desert in 2001. Over half of the men died. These men, who were rescued or had their bodies found by agents from the Wellton Border Patrol station in Arizona, became known as the Wellton 26. The publication of *The Devil's Highway* occurred during the debate around HB 4437, the "Border Protection, Anti-terrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005," a bill that criminalized aiding and abetting undocumented migrants. The "Devil's Highway" refers to a specific stretch of the Sonoran Desert known for its grueling temperatures, its twisting landscape, and high death rate. After Operation

Gatekeeper and its fallout, the Devil's Highway became a popular route for migrants attempting to cross into the United States from Mexico. Urrea's book contextualizes why migrants choose to leave their home, the process of financial exploitation from coyotes, and the goals of the migrants in the United States. Additionally, Urrea explains how the Border Patrol operated in 2001, and how the Border Patrol scouts for migrants, while also emphasizing the dangerous terrain and temperatures of the land. The book then depicts a harrowing fictionalized account (based off of extensive research, case reports, and interviews) of how the men died of hyperthermia and dehydration in the desert. Urrea concludes the text with the public outcry at the deaths of these men, the attempts at border and immigration reform, and the ultimate difficulty of that reform in a post-9/11 era. *The Devil's Highway*, written for public consumption, aims to humanize the plight and journey of the migrants (as well as trying to humanize the Border Patrol at the same time) by first explaining the poverty of their homes, the exploitation of their economic desperation, and ultimately, the brutality of their deaths.

The Devil's Highway, through its deployment of haunting aesthetics and body horror, posits that border crossings are social and physical manifestations of horror. Urrea's text welcomes a horror reading; he establishes the stretch of the Devil's Highway as "Desolation" and takes the reader through the bloody history of the land and imbues the land with dark spirituality: "in many ancient religious texts, fallen angels were bound in chains and buried beneath a desert known only as Desolation. [The Devil's Highway] could be the place" (4). Urrea continues to reference the desert as Desolation and often calls back to sinister angels and demons. The references to the supernatural serve to place

the suffering that the migrants endure on an unnatural scale. Their deaths are not just random accidents of the weather or a wrong turn, but something massive and cruel. The descriptions of the desert are laden with litanies of all the different ways it can kill: the soaring temperatures, the wildlife that is “poisonous and alien,” the vast flatlands that make twenty miles look like ten miles and “ten miles can kill,” the lack of shade from mesquite trees and the ancient, dead black ironwood trees that look like “eldritch ones,” the winding labyrinth that twist through the Gila and Granite mountain ranges that confuse delirious migrants (Urrea 6, 4, 5). For migrants, the desert is a killing floor.

Urrea sets up the desert not as the villain of the narrative, but as the consequence of human error and human greed. The con men who ensnare the migrants and the coyotes who guide them are complicit in the deaths of the migrants, but it is the desert that does the actual killing. Urrea, when setting context for the migrant’s journey, frequently harkens back to the brutal land that is waiting for them. For each step of the journey, Urrea pairs it with a suspenseful statement about the desert; after listing all of the possible places where the migrants could find water wells in the desert, Urrea states, “and none of the coyotes knew where to find a drink” (87). The desert, underestimated by both the migrants and the coyotes, is the masked and lurking killer. Urrea establishes a route to salvation in the harsh world of the desert, only to snatch it away, further setting up the doom in store for the migrants. Urrea creates horror by setting up the desert as the unrelenting, unstoppable, force that hunts the migrants down one by one.

Urrea portrays the desert as a haunted place. Haunting, in Avery Gordon’s theorizing, signals a historical trauma that has gone ignored or been erased by the

historical narrative (2008). In the *Devil's Highway*, Urrea uses the concept of haunting to illuminate the border's long history of violence and how that violence will soon prey on the migrants. Urrea writes, "the whole way was a ghost road, haunted by tattered spirits left on the thirsty ground: drivers thrown out windows, revolutionaries hung from cottonwoods or shot before walls, murdered women tossed in the scrub" (94). Urrea's examples of the spirits haunting the desert specifically tie back to moments of historical violence—like Mexican revolutionaries being hanged—and also to the violent effects of modern border policy—murdered women tossed in the scrub. The haunting of the Devil's Highway manifested through the bloody history of the U.S./Mexico border and the laws and policies that shed that blood.

By the end of the text, the migrants themselves have become ghosts, marking their deaths as unfair, unjust, and violent. There are those who disappeared and were never found who join the haunted ranks of their brethren in the desert. And then there are those whose bodies were found, and those who were identified. Urrea ascribes these men as ghosts who still experience life. Upon the corpses being put in body bags, Urrea narrates the men's opinion of their situation: "It was relaxed. They got to lie on their backs the whole way. No sun hit them. The insides of the bags were fairly pleasant, since there were no major bloody wounds to make them slick or sticky. The smell was already getting nasty, but the heavy rubber kept it from escaping and being humiliating" (191). The men, victims of the desert, state policy, and human error, find peace in their spectral state. Avery Gordon theorizes ghosts as a marking of unresolved historical trauma. Urrea positions the migrants as ghosts both to demonstrate the continued subjectivity of the

dead, but also to emphasize that their deaths are the result of the history of anti-immigrant sentiment and policies.

Urrea's rendering of the Sonoran Desert as strange, savage, and supernatural emphasizes the horror the migrants endure, and underscores how the state powers of the Border Patrol and policies like Operation Gatekeeper contribute to migrant deaths in the desert. Although Urrea takes a decidedly positive approach to the Border Patrol and working hard to humanize the agents, he cannot out-write the undeniable undercurrent of viciousness to their actions, no matter how many funny and charming anecdotes he includes. Urrea writes of the Border Patrol that, "if it was [their] job to apprehend lawbreakers, it was equally their duty to save the lost and dying" (18). Framing the Border Patrol as saviors ignores the ways in which the Border Patrol also created the conditions from which migrants need to be saved. In Urrea's defense, he does acknowledge this paradox of the Border Patrol by quoting Isabel García of the migrant rights group Derechos Humanos, "the Border Patrol's lifesaving tactics are like 'like throwing a child in the ocean and then throwing in floaties afterwards'" (215). However, despite also placing blame on border policies like NAFTA, Urrea still places more blame on the coyote, Mendez, who first led the migrants into the desert and then, after becoming hopelessly lost, abandoned them, than on the Border Patrol and their practices.

Urrea situates Mendez's motivations in the context of poverty but, like the news stories surrounding the events and the Border Patrol, Urrea ultimately places the blame on Mendez. Mendez is a young kid, not even twenty. He has a floppy mohawk that makes him look like a rooster. He has a mother that he loves and is trying to survive in

the brutal border world of gangs, extortion, and poverty. All of these factors lead Mendez, and his flock, into the desert. Undergirding the culpability of Mendez is the system of poverty that creates the conditions that force migrants to leave their homes, and undergirding that is the systems of state apparatus that fuel that poverty and then turn the only path to salvation into a death trap. There is a particular moment of tension in Urrea's portrayal of the Border Patrol as salvific and Mendez as incompetent and villainous. The reason that the migrants find themselves lost on the desert is dedicated to a sudden barrage of lights in the desert that made the migrants flee into the darkness of the Sonoran Desert. The migrants believe that it was the Border Patrol scarring the migrants as a farce, which the Border Patrol denies. Although it cannot be confirmed, Urrea's insists that it could not have in fact been the Border Patrol. While it is possible that the lights were caused by ATV riders out for a late-night joyride, or Minute Men groups playing a prank, Urrea's insistence that it could not have been the Border Patrol is at odds with the Border Patrol's history of violence against migrants and their willingness to play viscous games on migrants, or just killing them outright.

Urrea's efforts to humanize Border Patrol agents erases the history of agents' killings of migrants. In 1992, just a few years before the Wellton 26, border patrol agent Michael Elmer murdered Mexican migrant, Darío Miranda Valenzuela. Elmer fired his weapon over twenty times at Miranda Valenzuela as he fled back towards the border. Elmer was only brought to trial after attempting convince his partner to help him hide Miranda Valenzuela's body. Despite physical evidence that contradicted Elmer's claim that Miranda Valenzuela was charging at him and so could claim self-defense, Elmer was

acquitted both by a state trial in Arizona and found not guilty in a federal civil rights trial (Ong Hing 1995, *Arizona Daily Star* archives). Miranda Valenzuela's murder is part of a long, bloody history of border agents using deadly force against migrants. Although the exact number of border patrol shootings cannot be counted, the *Arizona Daily Star* reported that fifty-seven people have been killed by border patrol agents since 2005 (2018). The reason for these deaths varies: migrants being shot for throwing rocks, agents accidentally discharging their weapons, physical altercations between migrants and agents, stopping robberies, and more (*Daily Star* 2018). What is clear, however, is that these border patrol agents rarely face consequences for these deaths. Even if the killing is reported, important information like even the name of the agent goes unreported. And given the Miranda Valenzuela case, it's impossible to take the Border Patrol's official narrative at their word. The agents are operating under the impunity of the state and carry out killings that go unpunished and underreported.

Although much of Urrea's portrayal of the Border Patrol is in a light-hearted, almost jovial tone, the stories that he relays about the Border Patrol have an undercurrent of cruelty. The mix of the joking tone combined with the anecdote of callousness, almost vindictiveness, makes for a strange read. In describing the Border Patrol station in Wellton, AZ, Urrea writes, "a framed picture of a human skull lying in the desert hangs on the wall. It has a neat hole in the forehead, above one eye socket. 'Don't get any cute ideas,' one of the boys says: 'We didn't shoot him'" (21-22). Urrea portrays the relationship between the Border Patrol and the migrants as one that is fearful on one side and potentially playful, if often violent, on the other: "Sometimes, you [a Border Patrol

agent] just beat them down with your baton, and sometimes everybody just laughed and drank your water" (14). For all that Urrea describes of the intense rescue mission that the Border Patrol agents embarked on to save the remaining Wellton 26, the text is haunted by the numerous ways that the Border Patrol institution dehumanizes migrants, and particularly Mexican migrants. Urrea reports that sometimes migrants are called "tonks," referring to the sound a flashlight makes when bashed against a migrant's head. Additionally, the Border Patrol reduces migrants to just "bodies:" "'Getting bodies' in Border Patrol slang, didn't necessarily mean collecting corpses. Bodies were living people. 'Bodies' was one of the many names for them. Illegal aliens, dying of thirst more often than not, are called 'wets' by agents" (Urrea 15). Wet bodies dying in the desert, meant to be saved by the very agents that dehumanize them, by the very institution responsible for their deaths.

To contrast the dehumanization of migrants at the hands of the Border Patrol and border policies, Urrea engages with vivid descriptions of body horror as a method of humanizing the migrants to readers. The book opens with the following intense description of the state the migrants were in when they were discovered:

> They were burned black, their lips huge and cracking, what paltry drool still available to them spuming from their mouths in a salty foam as they walked. Their eyes were cloudy with dust, almost too dry to blink up a tear. Their hair was hard and stiffened by old sweat, standing in crowns from their scalps, old sweat because their bodies were no longer sweating. They were drunk from having their brains baked in the pan, they were seeing God and devils, and they were dizzy from drinking their own urine, the poisons clogging their systems (3).

Urrea uses descriptions like these throughout the text, culminating in an overwhelming impression of the destruction of not just the body but also the mind that migrants endure when attempting to cross through the Devil's Highway. Urrea's rendering of the desert-as-death and raw descriptions of body horror establishes the genre conventions of oppositional border horror and argue that horror can be used to argue for the humane treatment of migrants and border reform.

The deaths that the migrants endure in the desert, painstakingly described by Urrea, are horrifying. The deaths are a brutal destruction of the body. Horror's fascination with the visceral and the graphic contains multitudes, violence for the sake of violence, violence as identity exploration, and violence as an art form. In the horror genres of torture porn, the New French Extremity movement, and splatter horror, body horror is used for a variety of purposes. In torture porn, "the intent is to lead the audience through horrifying experiences for the sake of those experiences" and an "exercise in shock and schlock" (Morris 43, McCann 30). In New French Extremity, body horror fragments identity, both personal and national, and the intense impact of violence on the lives of those who endure it (West 2016). The splatter horror film, often low budget and excessive in its effects, "reveals in the special effects of gore as an artform" and push aside plot and character in favor of spectacle (Arnzen 178). Urrea's deployment of body horror, although not a perfect correlation, relates most to how identity is explored through gore in New French Extremity. Descriptions like the blackened and bloody lips of the migrants, the whites of their eyes cooking in the head, and the loss of sense of self as they cook under the sun, are extreme and graphic demonstrations of violence that argues for

the humanity and personhood of the migrants. In this way, Urrea is using extreme depictions of the body to perform the project of making persons visible through pain. Caminero-Santagelo writes that migrant narratives like *The Devil's Highway*, "emphasize the dead migrant body as a focal point for the tragedy of the border…by focusing on the body's agonizing torment prior to death, writers shift the issue to human suffering rather than the legality or illegality of immigration, thus reconstructing the meaning of specific dead bodies" (62). Urrea participates in the traditions of body horror to establish the personhood of the migrants by making the pain of their bodies visible.

As in the tradition of New French Extremity, Urrea's fragmentation of the body as it suffers reflects the fragmentation of the migrants as they lose sense of themselves. Urrea begins *The Devil's Highway* with establishing the motives and personality of many of the migrants. He describes their level of poverty, the simple desire to make money so that they can expand their home, or have a home at all, or send their children to school. Reymundo Barreda "had resolved to go north to expand and reroof his small house as a gift for his wife. A summer of orange picking was all he had in mind" to provide for his wife and children (Urrea 51). He took his teenage son with him. Enrique Landeros García "didn't have the kind of money school required" (Urrea 52). Reyno Bartolo Hernandez and his wife wanted to adopt a daughter and needed funds (Urrea 53). Mario Castillo Fernandez thought, "perhaps he could build a better house. Add a room. Send the children to school in good pants, with new backpacks" (Urrea 53). Urrea spends a great deal of time establishing the demeanor of these men, their determination, and their

desires, before giving the grisly descriptions of their deaths. Urrea establishes the tragedy of their deaths through the breakdown of their selves and bodies.

The desert kills with a particular aesthetic. It kills in burned and blackened skin, in split but dry wounds, cracked lips and crusty hair. The desert heat desiccates. It mummifies. It breaks down the body from the inside out. It cooks. Urrea, in the middle of his book, after establishing the motives of the migrants and the order of operations of the Border Patrol, pauses the narrative to lay out, in excruciating detail, the six stages of heat death. This break in the narrative comes just as the migrants have gotten lost in the Sonoran Desert and it serves as a harbinger; it heralds the doom of the walkers. Told in second person, this section of the text intentionally invokes the stages of heat death within the reader, making them confront, intimately, the pain and suffering that migrants are subjected to. The sixes stages of heat death are such: heat stress, heat fatigue, heat syncope, heat cramps, heat exhaustion, and heat stroke. Urrea carefully lays out what happens to *your* body, what happens to your mind, and what your chances of surviving are at each stage. The use of second person forces the reader to consider their own body in alignment with the migrants and their suffering. To do so, Urrea invokes aesthetics and descriptions of body horror to make the pain of migrants visceral and accessible to readers.

Each of the sections of the six stages of heat death demonstrate how Urrea engages with images of the destroyed body and mind in order to make the pain of the migrants visceral and unbearable. For each stage, Urrea singles out a part of the body and a function of the mind, he begins breaking "you" into parts. The use of second person

places the reader in the same torturous state as the migrants. The migrants' pain becomes situated in the readers' bodies. The first stage, heat stress, inflicts minimal damage: a headache, maybe a heat rash. The second stage, heat fatigue, is already an escalation: "your lips are not only burned by the sun, but by the wind; they become dehydrated, and they get rough and flakey, and you keep licking them to try to wet them, and they get sanded until they crack and bleed. Minor trouble" (Urrea 122). By the third stage, heat syncope, the mind begins to break down along with the body; "It gets a little hard to talk...words break; you speak in half-consonants, chunks of thought (Urrea 122). Heat cramps become the first truly deadly stage, "you've stepped onto the lip of the death spiral" (Urrea 124). Even at this stage, though, you can be saved. Urrea's slow mutilation of the body and mind drags like the stages of death itself. The careful rendering of pain, as well as the application of the second person, serves to transfer that experience of pain away from the abstract image of the migrant to the reader, making it a shared experience.

Urrea drags out the horrendous last two stages of heat death, heat exhaustion and heat stroke, as the brutal torture that they are. For heat exhaustion, Urrea portrays the desperate state of the migrants by laying out the state of destruction of their bodies. Urrea writes, "Headaches. You get nauseous, you want to vomit. If you vomit, you lose more fluids. You are not only clumsy, but enervated. Your body is weak, and your will is slipping...your heart pounds, loud in your ears. Your breathing is shallow and fast, and each breath dries your further. Eyelids scrape against eyeballs dry as pebbles…there's not enough fluid to fill the container of your body" (Urrea 124). Urrea focuses on the intense desperation for water, and the lengths that people will go to for even the remote

possibility of hydration, often resorting to drinking their own urine, again and again, until "it is orange. It smells bad. Then dark orange. Then pale brown. Then a darker and more poisonous brown…by the time your effluent in black, you're doomed—even if you wanted to, you probably couldn't drink it. It stinks of fish. Your body would retch. There is almost more bio-garbage in it than water" (127). The prolonged description of drinking urine, passing urine, only to drink it again and again, is grotesque, an intentional invocation that Urrea uses to impress the seriousness of the situation. By the last stage of heat death, the migrants, and you, are past desperation and past dehydration, you're almost a walking corpse.

The last stage, heat stroke, is the body pushed to its most extreme limits and the mind has begun to cook in the skull. Urrea's description of heat stroke reflects the fragmented state of the mind; he describes the body in chunks and bits. Urrea writes, "your eyes turn red: blood vessels burst, and later, the tissue of the whites literally cooks until it goes pink, then a well-done crimson" (128). He continues, "Your muscles, lacking water, feed on themselves. They break down and start to rot. Once rotting on your, they dump rafts of dying cells into your already sludgy bloodstream. Proteins are peeling off your dying muscles. Chunks of cooked meat are falling out of your organs, to clog your other organs" (129). After this total system failure, you die. Urrea, by this last stage, emphasizes the way that heat death obliterates personhood and identity from its victims. The migrants, and "you," are reduced to a failing biological system that is being cooked from the inside out. Elaine Scarry's foundational study of the purpose of pain in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* theorizes of physical pain is that

the pain creates a new reality where the only thing that exists is that pain. For the migrants and heat death, the physical pain created by the conditions of the desert have created a burning inferno of a reality. The heat and the pain are the only thing that exists.

Like his vivid descriptions of heat death, Urrea uses gore and body horror to describe the fate of the migrants. Of one of the migrants, unnamed, Urrea writes, "he managed to get the top half of his torso buried in the ground, where he either smothered or passed out. The relentless heat baked him, literally cooking him in the ground. His face bloated and came loose from the bones, tender as barbecued pork" (166). Of another one, Lorenzo Ortiz Hernandez, "[he] was on his back, his eyes open to the enemy, the sun. His brown slacks were empty looking: his abdomen had fallen in, his pelvis held up the material of the slacks as if his slacks were a circus tent coming lose from the poles" (Urrea 174). Urrea's language is grotesque, but not just for artistry of the language. Urrea makes the suffering and pain of the migrants an immediate reality for the reader. Their pain, so communicated, is unbearable and heart-wrenching. The men that Urrea introduced us to have become destroyed by the end of the book. Even those who lived had to undergo intense medical treatment. But Urrea is not engaging in torture porn—experiencing pain for the experience of the pain—but to make the personhood of the migrants, even those unnamed and disappeared, an immediate reality.

Although it does not seek out to scare its readers, *The Devil's Highway* is a book of horrors. It contains demons and ghosts, banal human evil, and the grotesque. As oppositional horror, *The Devil's Highway* deploys these elements of horror as a strategy to not just make readers aware of the plights of migrants, but to take migrants from the

state of social death that seeks to erase and annihilate them and put them, fully visible through their pain, in front of the reader. And it worked. It was a best-seller and won numerous prices. Although the book is over 15 years old, it is still taught in schools, it still gets written about, and it is still a go-to representative for arguments for border reform. Urrea brough the humanity of migrants to a wide and mainstream audience. His use of horror—the cruel desert and its demons, the banal evil of the border patrol, the striking body horror—work to enforce the humanity of the migrants.

Desierto and the Complexity of Pain

Desierto is a 2015 Mexican film that manifests the violence and horror of racism in a single white sniper that hunts down migrants attempting to cross the U.S./Mexico border. The film is directed by Jonás Cuarón and staring Gael García Bernal, Jeffrey Dean Morgan, and Alondra Hidalgo. The film begins with a truck baring a group of migrants breaks down in the middle of an unspecified desert. The migrants, forced to walk through the deadly terrain, are set upon by a lone white sniper named Sam (Jeffrey Dean Morgan). Sam massacres a large group of the migrants and the rest scatter, including protagonist Moises (Gael García Bernal) and a young woman named Adela (Alondra Hidaldo). Sam then hunts down the scattered migrants and kills them off one by one with the aid of his German Shepherd, Tracker. The film ends in a suspenseful showdown between Moises and Sam as they creep through the rolling desert mountains and hunt each other. The film uses the serial killer Sam as a stand-in for anti-immigrant and nativist sentiment, as well as emulating the real-life, para-military group, the Minute Men. *Desierto*, like the *Devil's Highway*, relies on the horror genre's unique

representation of suffering to resist the logic of social death that deems migrants as valueless and less-than-human.

Desierto criticizes the specific issues of anti-immigrant sentiment and policies that lead to the direct deaths of migrants. The film also explores and critiques the role of militant citizens on the border that carry out the state-sanctioned project of policing migrants. The Minutemen, a catch-all term for the several groups that carry the Minutemen moniker and carry out their surveillance project, are a group whose common goal is to monitor the U.S./Mexico border "in hopes of catching clandestine border crossers. However, this surveillance operation also [has] a larger objective: to produce a spectacle that would garner public media attention and influence federal immigration policies" (Chavez 135). The Minutemen, named after the historical group for the American Revolution, are armed citizens who communicate with the Border Patrol to report both signs of migrant crossings of migrants themselves. Although the Minutemen policy is to not engage with migrants, it is also common practice to carry sidearms and position themselves as violent threats to migrants (Molina 2012). *Desierto* uses the figure of the Minute Men—the lurking racist with a gun—to play out American anti-immigrant extremism and racism.

Sam, as a derivative of the Minutemen persona, represents contemporary racism and anti-immigrant sentiment. The Minutemen movement, a group with its roots in the Ku Klux Klan (Belew 2018), was strengthened by the growing anti-immigrant sentiment in the post-9/11 political landscape and War on Terror and were enabled by immigration policies like Operation Gatekeeper and SB 1070 in Arizona. Although policies like

NAFTA and Operation Gatekeeper had been in effect for years, the events of 9/11 and the resultant xenophobia and War on Terror spurred anti-immigrant sentiment and fueled the creation of Minutemen organizations (Shapira 2013). Many members of the various Minutemen organizations, although not all, are ex-military, often having served for several years. Shapira writes that many members see their patrolling of the U.S./Mexico border as an extension of their military service (24). Although not official actors of the state like the Border Patrol, the Minutemen see themselves as a paramilitary group that enforces border policies with nationalistic fervor. And like the Border Patrol, the groups dedicate have dedicated themselves to stemming what they see as a flood of undocumented migrants that the border patrol either neglects or is overwhelmed by. Sam has this exact motivation. He sees the undocumented migrants as a threat to his safety, the security of his nation, and it is his duty to enforce border policies.

Desierto's use of the Minuteman image is rooted in the long, personal histories of real Minutemen members. The Minutemen movement has a history of violence, with many of its key members committing and being convicted of crimes. The first founder of the Minutemen Civil Defense Corps, Chris Simcox, was convicted of three count of child molestation, including his own daughter. The second leader, J.T. Ready committed a murder-suicide, killing his wife, his daughter, his daughter's fiancé, and his granddaughter, before killing himself. A further splinter group of the Minutemen, the Minutemen American Defense (MAD), was founded by Shawna Forde in 2007 and resulted in horrible violence. Like other Minutemen organization members, Forde took it upon herself to police the border and deal with "fugitives." On May 30th, 2009, Forde and

two others, Jason Eugene Bush, and Albert Gaxiola, invaded the home of Raul Flores Jr., Gina Gonzales, and their young child, Brisenia Flores. Raul and Brisenia were fatally shot, and Gina was wounded. In a rare act of justice, all three murderers were brought to trial and convicted. In instances as extreme as this, with the murder of a child, it can serve the state to distance themselves from the very violence that it itself enforces and perpetuates. A crucial element of the logic of social death is that state violence remains invisible and unacknowledged. These brutal murders exposed state hypocrisy and so had to be punished. Forde and Bush received the death penalty and Gaxiola received a life sentence with an additional 54 years. One juror's description of Brisenia's body is haunting: "a little girl, with bright red fingernails; she's wearing a white T-shirt and turquoise-colored pajama bottoms. She's on a love seat. It's a perfect, innocent picture until you realize that half of her face has been blown off" (Medrano 2011). Brisenia's innocence exposed the brutality of the logic of social that allowed MAD to see Brisenia and her family and their lives as disposable in pursuit of their own interests.

The murders of Brisenia Flores and her father are direct results of how anti-immigrant sentiment positions Latinxs as valueless, worthless, and socially dead. The depravity of these murders is emphasized by the fact that MAD believed the family to have drugs that MAD could sell to local drug traffickers to support the fledgling organization. What MAD believed Mexicans could be killed for—dealing drugs—became acceptable when they chose to do it, in particular because the image of drug smuggling Mexicans is so demonized and is part of the logic of social death. A man and a child were killed because they fit the idea of what Forde and the others saw as criminals

and drug dealers. Even after discovering there were no drugs, a man and a child were killed because to MAD, they may as well have been criminals just for being Mexican, just for being on the “wrong” side of the border. MAD and its members, although prosected, nonetheless performed actions in line with the state projected of marginalizing migrants and brown citizens.

In *Desierto*, Sam, like MAD, feels entitled to enact capital punishment on the migrants due to their perceived illegality. This narrative of presumed illegality is what Leo Chavez calls the “Latino threat,” wherein Latinxs are instilled with criminality simply because they are Latinx. This narrative was bolstered by the positioning of clandestine border crossers as illegal political subjects; migrants became themselves illegal, rather than their actions (Chavez 2013). Sam’s view of the migrants reflects the narrative of the Latino Threat; the migrants deserve to die because, simply, they are migrants. The positioning of people as “illegal” made the policing of their bodies either by the Border Patrol or individual agents acceptable under the terms of the logic social death. Their lives were stripped of value because of their perceived criminality. In *Desierto*, the migrants are hunted because they, to Sam, are a crime embodied, and one that should be prosecuted. Latin American migrants, and in particular Mexicans, are subjected to a presumed criminality that increases anti-immigrant sentiment and enables anti-immigrant policies (Chavez 27).

The presumed criminality of migrants is mitigated by conceptions of what is a “good” immigrant and what is a “bad” immigrant. These narratives of “good” immigrants and “bad” immigrants arises from perceived criminality of a migrant versus the economic

potential of the migrant, and how well they assimilated into American values and morality. The "good" undocumented migrant is innocent of all crimes except for their clandestine crossing, is a hard (and silent) worker, and has bought into the traditional nuclear family and other American values. In contrast, the "bad" migrant are those that have a criminal history, or don't work hard, or have no interest in assimilating into American values. Importantly, all of these elements are subjective and insubstantial, and "socially, culturally, and politically constructed," and are as rigid as the inflatable tube men outside of used car dealership (Chavez 27). Nonetheless, migrants are held to this impossible standard and the consequence of being "bad" is intense criminalization, violence (either physical or epistemic), and marginalization.

Horror films like Desierto—where protagonists are being hunted—often need a steady supply of victims in order to build suspense and to put off the protagonist dying, forcing the film turn to conceptions of good and bad migrants. In *Desierto,* the victims are undocumented migrants and their reduction to killing fodder, essentially target practice for Sam, unintentionally enforces their positioning as socially dead. The moments of characterization that the migrants do get in *Desierto* play into the stereotypes of the "good" and "bad" migrant, so that only the most virtuous of the migrants survives. Moises and Adela represent the ideal immigrant. Moises is family and work oriented. Adela is young and virginal. In contrast, the other named migrants in the film are sexually threatening to Adela, or greedy coyotes, or cowardly. *Desierto*, although still oppositional horror in its intent to use horror as resistance to anti-immigrant sentiment and racism, is an imperfect project.

Despite portraying the pain and suffering of the migrants, *Desierto* falls prey to a series of dehumanizing moments that complicate the use of pain as a humanizing tool. Whereas *The Devil's Highway* spends almost half of its pages introducing many of the migrant men and their motives for crossing before their deaths begin, *Desierto* jumps almost immediately into the violence. When Sam slaughters many of the migrants in a killing spree at the beginning of the film, they are nameless and faceless and just there to be killed. Despite these pitfalls, the execution of horror conventions and tropes in *Desierto*, like the use of the desert as a killing floor and the serial killer and gore, make for an interesting analysis in how pain, and representations of pain, are not a clean and straightforward project that works equally to humanize its victims.

Desierto muddles the purpose of pain and horror by treating the migrants as cheap battle fodder. Susan Sontag, in her essay *Regarding the Pain of Others*, explains how depicting pain and suffering needs to be given direction because pain in and of itself does not have a universal meaning. War photography—graphic depictions of death, gore, and violence in war—can be used and deployed in a variety of ways by a variety of agents. The same image could be used to condemn war that could be used to valorize the sacrifice of soldiers. *Desierto*'s use of pain and suffering, because of the lack of characterization of the migrants and their disposable nature in the film, convolutes the racial humanizing project of the film. This slaughter dismisses the very people that the film aims to humanize.

Horror is a tricky genre for humanizing and arguing for the value of its subjects. This is in no large part because horror often requires that people die, and those deaths are

often gruesome and for the spectacle. It is a genre of excess, excessive and unrealistic plots, excessive and extreme violence, and more often than not, excessively dumb characters. Even though, as Scarry argues, there can be a purpose to portraying pain and suffering, the horror genre is a complicated genre to do so. *Desierto* falls into many of the pitfalls of horror and the exploitative possibilities of the genre. Its characters are one-note and shallow (with the unfortunate exception of Sam, the killer), it favors violence over substance, and this film relies on violence and violence alone to argue for the humanity and worth of the migrants. This is most clear in the film's decision of which migrants live and which ones die. The first to die are the coyotes, betrayers, and exploiters, and then the nameless migrants, before the film slowly makes its way through Moises and the small group he is left with. One man dies because he sexually harasses the young and innocent Adela, another dies because he is a cowardly coyote, Ulises dies because he is overweight and unable to traverse the desert, and finally we are left with just Moises and Adela, both of whom fit into the mold of the good and acceptable immigrants. Moises is a father attempting to return his son and a stable job, and Adela is innocent and in search of a safer life. Rather than affording each of the migrants the humanity that would lead to compassion for them, as in *The Devil's Highway*, the film uses all the migrants besides Moises and Adela as fodder until the final showdown between Sam and Moises. The intent of the film is at odds with the genre conventions of horror that the film relishes in.

Desierto's project of humanization through suffering is further complicated by the characterization of Sam, his representation of whiteness, and his contrast with Moises. Moises, in the brief scenes where his character is allowed to do anything but be scared,

discusses being a father and wanting to return to the United States after being deported so that he can see his son. Although Sam does not get backstory (in a deleted scene he does call his wife), he is nonetheless the emotional driver of the film. The plot of the film *happens* to Moises, while Sam drives the action and is afforded multiple moments where he emotionally reacts to his own actions. While this admittedly makes the film and Sam more compelling, it makes Sam the emotional backbone of the film, contributing the blank state of the migrants. At one point, Sam is allowed to break down, cry, and show conflicting emotions over his murders, while Moises remains stagnant in his fear. The contrast between Sam and Moises and the rest of the migrants leads to an unfortunate prioritization of whiteness and white subjects. The film doesn't paint Sam's murder spree as justified, but it goes to lengths to make Sam a complex character. Compared to the flat nature of the migrant's characters, and their exploitative deaths, *Desierto* incidentally places more value on Sam than on the subjects that the film purports to be about.

Like anti-immigrant sentiment, like racism, like social death, in border horror, the desert always kills. In *The Devil's Highway*, the Sonoran Desert becomes an almost-sentient, supernatural force that bares down on the migrants. In *Desierto*, which is in an unnamed desert but has foliage similar to that of the Sonoran Desert, the desert is an omnipresent threat to both the migrants and the killer. The desert can be weaponized by either side but ultimately, it will kill indiscriminately. *Desierto*'s desert is a wicked place filled with crevices and canyons that trap the migrants, it is a place of blistering heat, at sometimes a wide expanse impossible to hide in and at others a salvation from the hunt. After Sam sends his dog to kill Moises, the desert presents a thicket of spinney cactus

that Moises must crawl through on his belly. What was initially a trap of doom for Moises becomes his weapon as it snares the dog and Moises is able to shoot it with a flare gun. The desert can be manipulated by the characters, but it will always kill.

The border horror genre manifests the desert as a place of danger and an omnipresent threat of death. As in *The Devil's Highway*, *Desierto* places the migrants in the desert because of its capacity to kill. The use of the desert as the backdrop for horror is unique because it is at its most dangerous during the day. Typically, in the horror genre, night is the province of horror: it hides the killer, it entraps the victims, it's sinister, and it turns the ordinary strange and unrecognizable. Although all of this is true of the desert at night, the danger of the desert is compounded during the day by the heat and the sun. The night is salvific in border horror.

Further, in border horror, the desert functions as both literal killer and a metaphoric stand-in for the consequences of anti-immigrant sentiment, immigration policies, and racism. The desert stands in for the overwhelming force that migrants face from border policies and racism. *Desierto* takes this metaphor a step further by making Sam, the serial killer, a naturalized citizen of the desert land. The use of Sam in *Desierto* does the work to remove the idea of "natural" death from the fate of the migrants (Caminero-Santangelo 2016). Rather than heat death being framed as the natural consequence of attempting to cross the U.S./Mexico border, *Desierto* uses Sam as the manifestation of U.S. border policies that funneled migrants through the most dangerous stretches of the desert. Although the desert is still a constant source of danger, it is magnified and exaggerated by the presence of Sam. When one of the migrants dies by

attempting to jump across a crevice, he doesn't die because he slipped, he dies because as he dangled from the ledge, Sam shoots him. The desert may have been the obstacle that Ulises had to overcome, but it was Sam that killed him.

Despite the lack of characterization of the migrants, despite the unintentional prioritization of whiteness, and despite the gratuitous deaths of so many migrants, *Desierto* is not without its positives. In the world of Latinx horror, *Desierto* is one of the few pieces of media that is both intentionally in the horror genre (unlike *The Devil's Highway* and films with elements of horror like *El Norte*) and has a budget and big-name actors (Gael García Bernal as Moises and Jeffrey Dean Morgan as Sam). *Desierto*, fraught as it may be, is nonetheless engaging with the political project of immigration reform and the human treatment of migrants. The film's engagement with the horror genre serves, through metaphor, to relate how the everyday plight of migrants is horrific. The use of a serial killer stands in for the racism and bigotry, and violence, that migrants face. Horror has the potential to make realities of suffering known through the explicit deployment of violence and terror. *Desierto*, for all of its flaws, succeeds in this metaphor. The migrants in the film are beset on all sides by the manifestation of racism and immigration policy. Their deaths are representatives of the effects of policies like Operation Gatekeeper and the violent history of the Minute Men militia, like the group that killed Raul and Brisenia Flores. *Desierto* demonstrates both the potential of the horror genre to be a political tool of resistance and also fall prey to the systems of oppression that it works to counter.

Barrier: The Border Goes Cosmic

Barrier is a 2017 five-issue comic book run that mingles cosmic horror with border horror to explore prejudice and racism against Latinx migrants. The comic is written by Brian K. Vaughn and Marcos Martin and illustrated by Munsta Vicente. A widely acclaimed comic and Eisner nominee, *Barrier* is a contemporary migration narrative about a Honduran immigrant, Oscar, trying to cross into the United States, and Liddy, the owner of the ranch in Texas that he attempts to cross through. In what seems like it will be a classic "two opposing views coming together" story, the first issue ends with Oscar and Liddy being abducted by aliens. The aliens are monstrous, organic, and almost incomprehensible in form. They are Lovecraftian and horrific. Liddy and Oscar then must work together to escape the aliens. The real aliens (a cheeky parallel to the term "illegal aliens" to refer to migrants), and their unfathomable shape work as a metaphor for the inability of Liddy to comprehend Oscar, and Oscar's attempts to be understood.

Barrier advances the genre of border horror by first placing it firmly in the realm of the speculative, but also by dismantling, or at least complicating, the narrative of who is a "good" and who is a "bad" migrant. Although *Barrier* still very much participates in prejudiced representations of Latinxs and Central America (tattooed gang members, hyperviolent, and crime-ridden), Oscar's character and character design are a notable departure from Moises in *Desierto* or any of the migrants in *The Devil's Highway*. True, Oscar is migrating to the United States for a better life and job. True, Oscar does have a son that he clearly loves. But what sets Oscar apart from the typical narrative of the

"good" migrant, is his full sleeve of tattoos (skulls and flowers and scratchy black symbols), his past participation in crime, and finally, his complete willingness to kill and threaten. In his initial introduction, Oscar seems like he will be a sort of "white knight" character; two coyotes are harassing a transwoman who is hoping to leave Honduras and Oscar walks in and defends her. Although Oscar is undoubtedly a good man, he strays from the perfect innocence that is demanded from migrants if they are to be deemed sympathetic by the logic of social death. After refusing to join one of the gangs in his city in Honduras, that gang kills Oscar's son and wife. In a maddened rage, Oscar brutally kills the three gang members who committed the murder. While this can be painted as "acceptable" violence that doesn't taint his morality, there are other instances where it is made clear that violence, or the threat of violence, is something that Oscar is more than willing to engage with. In a series of panels without dialogue, Oscar is shown being threatened with a gun, and the next panel has Oscar with that stolen gun holding a man at point blank range as that man rows them across a stretch of water. Oscar willingly participates in the dangers of the journey to cross the border. Most importantly, *Barrier* never strays from the insistence that Oscar is a good, and caring man, entirely worthy of sympathy and empathy from both the reader and Liddy. *Barrier* refuses to make Oscar into an unwitting victim of circumstance, where terrible events only happen to him, and his suffering alone is what makes him "worthy" to live in United States. *Barrier* actively works against the narratives of the "good" and "bad" immigrant to argue that migrants need not be naïve hard workers to be worthy of humanity.

Barrier is a unique border migration narrative not in its mission—to humanize migrants and explore and resist anti-immigrant sentiment—but in its engagement with the genre of cosmic horror to demonstrate that humanity. Although there are a variety of Latinx science fiction stories that explore race and identity (*The Assimilated Cuban's Guide to Quantum Santeria* (2016), *Zero Bar* (2012), *High Aztech* (1992) *Lunar Braceros* (2009)), and some of them immigration, almost none have strayed in the strange and wonderous realm of cosmic horror. Cosmic horror, most often applied to the works of H.P. Lovecraft, is a genre that combines the themes of exploration and discovery of science fiction with the terror and uncanny of horror (Stableford 2006). Lovecraft, in his collection *The Outsider and Others* speaks to this quality of cosmic horror: "that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguards against the assaults and chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space" (1939). Insanity, monstrosity, the uncanny, and the human inability to comprehend beings and forms completely different from their own are staples of the genre of cosmic horror. *Barrier* demonstrates the inter play between science fiction and horror that is intrinsic to cosmic horror. The use of actual aliens and the vast expanse of space is coupled with not just how those aliens have a tendency to flay their victims, but also in the overwhelming violence and danger that migration entrails for people like Oscar.

Additionally, *Barrier* plays with the cosmic horror staple of unknowability by Oscar and Liddy's inability to comprehend not just the aliens but also each other. Staples of the genre of cosmic horror include insanity, monstrosity, the uncanny, and the human

inability to comprehend beings and forms completely different from their own. When Liddy first sees Oscar, covered in tattoos, scraggly, and undeniably Latinx, she immediately assumes that he is in some way responsible for her abduction, and she tries to attack him. Oscar and Liddy are forced to confront and overcome their unknowability in order to survive their alien abduction. In doing so, Liddy must reject her racism and Oscar must open himself to trusting someone. The theme of transformation is also a running theme in cosmic horror; protagonists and other characters, after their encounters with something so alien, become different than they were. This can mean entirely losing their sanity, as in *At the Mountains of Madness*, or even become alien themselves as in the 2018 film *Annihilation*. In *Barrier*, Oscar and Liddy's transformation is ideological and their previous incomprehension recedes. Cosmic horror concerns the utterly incomprehensible, and the ability for such an unknowability to wreak havoc on identity, perception, and the self.

Barrier combines the genre conventions of border migration narratives with the genre conventions of cosmic horror in pursuit of humanizing migrants against the logic of social death. The comic features some of the more common elements of migration narratives—the desert, migrants in search of a better life, anti-immigrant sentiment, and racist white people—but complicate them by having Oscar and Liddy kidnapped not just by aliens, but aliens that embody the very concept of foreign and other. Once kidnapped, Oscar and Liddy encounter strange biomes within the spacecraft, they encounter parasitic insects, the corpses of other humans, and aliens whose language results in agony and their ears bleeding, all of this rendered in striking colors and bold illustrations. Cosmic horror

is a visually visceral genre. Although Lovecraft's descriptions of his horrible creatures tend to be vague and more focused on the viewer's terrible reaction to what they're seeing, cosmic horror has a rich visual history in film and art, and comics like *Barrier*. In the film *Arrival* (2016), the aliens are huge, with limbs like trunks, and a language that they paint in the air like a squid might eject ink. In the film *Mandy* (2018), the realm the titular character finds himself in is painted in deep reds and purples and the beings of that dimension are slick and scaled and deformed. In *Annihilation*, people grow flowers out of their skin and the being that crash-landed on Earth is a bulbous, whirring, heaving mass of *stuff* that floats in the air until it slowly morphs into a doppelganger of the protagonist. In the slew of Lovecraft-based films in the 1980s, films like *From Beyond* (1986), *Re-animator* (1985), and even *The Thing* (1982), create their monstrosities out of sinewy and slick special effects that deform, transform, and ultimately destroy any humans or animals that it encounters. Each of these films depend on the visual to convey the foreignness and strangeness of its aliens. *Barrier*, as a comic book, falls into this vivid tradition in order to communicate the "otherness" that the aliens have, and that Oscar and Liddy have towards each other.

Language in *Barrier* performs a unique function in the comic's pursuit of humanizing migrants. Once abducted, Oscar and Liddy are forced to work together to survive. More accurately put, Liddy must overcome her racism as she is forced to work with Oscar to escape. However, there is one other crucial barrier to their working together. Oscar does not speak any English. Liddy does not speak any Spanish. *Barrier*, written for a presumed English-speaking American audience, makes the distinct choice to

have all of Oscar’s dialogue and narration in Spanish without translations, and all of Liddy’s English without translation. This approach reinforces the alien nature that the two have with each other. They are no more capable of understanding each other than they are in understanding their alien captors. The use of different languages also plays with the meaning of the comic’s name. There is the physical barrier of the border, there is the barrier of understanding, and lastly, the language barrier. The strategic use of language adds to the sense of the uncanny in the comic because the characters are forced into long stretches of silence, creating large blank spaces in the art. Oscar and Liddy must resort to body language and brief snatches of language as they attempt to navigate the spacecraft and their predicament. The art style relishes in the expanse left behind by the lack of language; there are large vistas of purple and black space matter, a spattering of white stars on luminescent backgrounds, sickly yellows surround the characters, who are blocked in by the squares of the panels and the forced silence.

The lack of translation in *Barrier* also serves to alienate monolingual speakers who read the comic. Monolingual readers must choose whether to be confused and miss parts of the story or turn to translation services like Google Translate or a Spanish-English dictionary. Either method serves to distance the monolingual reader from the text, making the experience of alienation an integral part of reading the comic. The comic privileges English over Spanish, although there is still a significant amount of Spanish, thus also privileging English-speaking readers. This places the reader in the same position as Liddy, where the reader must overcome the language barrier to access Oscar’s story, and humanity. Likewise, in order for Oscar to be understood by both Liddy and the

reader, he must employ a variety of methods of being understood. In one crucial moment where the two must use fire to survive, Liddy wants to burn the notebook that Oscar has clung to desperately during his journey. A drawing by Oscar's dead son is in the notebook. Oscar cannot communicate to Liddy, or the monolingual reader, the significance of the notebook through language. Instead, he opens the page with the drawing to Liddy, and the reader, displaying his love for his son and the importance of the notebook without the need for language. This moment in the comic aligns the monolingual English reader with Liddy and it is a moment of connection that supersedes the language barrier.

Figure 1: Oscar with Journal

Barrier approaches the concept of alienhood and t he unknowing nature of alienhood, on multiple levels. It is a barrier to overcome. In *Barrier*, to be marked as "alien" is to be denied personhood and understanding. There is the alienhood of two foreigners meeting, the tongue-in-cheek references to "illegal aliens," the literal use of aliens, and even the extreme otherness of the aliens as being completely and totally

different and strange. The comic does not so much displace what it means to be "alien" as it does explore the potential of the word. The aliens in *Barrier* are vivid and organic and huge, no bug-eyed little green men to be found. The aliens are bulbous at the top, textured almost like a muscle, with multiple tentacles and fronds protruding from the form. The outside of the aliens are textured with what appears to be their vascular system, thin in some places and bulging in others. Their bodies fold open and shut, like the expansion of lungs (Figure 2). This alien design homes in on the horror of the unknown and the incomprehensible that is a running theme throughout the comic. In the face of such horror, Liddy's prejudice is subsumed by true unknowability, by true in-humanity. Confronted with these utterly alien forms, the differences between Oscar and Liddy close.

Figure 2: Alien Forms in Barrier

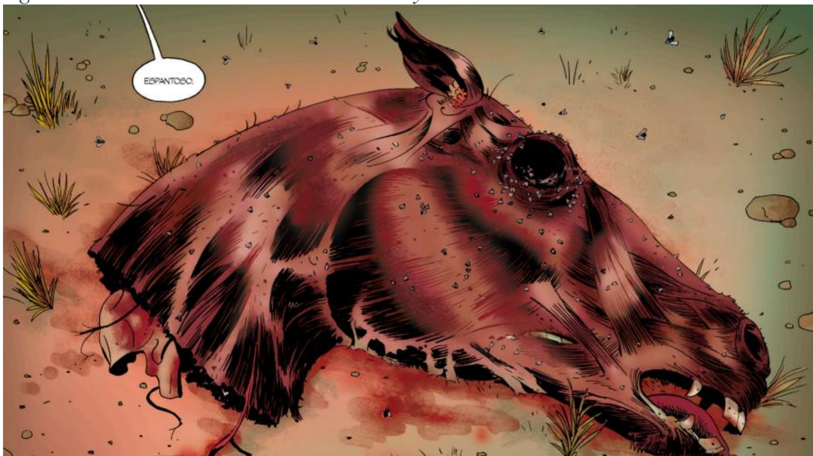
Alienhood is further paralleled to migration and human struggles because of the reasons that the aliens have arrived at Earth and begun abducting people. After performing a sort of information transferal by inserting their tentacles in the facial orifices of Oscar and Liddy, the aliens discuss in Spanish how they were driven from

their home planet after its desolation and are now in search of a better life and a world that can house them. This draws an unmistakable parallel to Oscar's reason for leaving Honduras; after the murder of his wife and son at the hands of a local cartel, Oscar must flee and is in search of a better life as a gardener in the United States. Liddy is also in a situation where she is facing the potential loss of her home. After being served an eviction notice for their ranch, Liddy's husband, Wyatt, kills himself. Although the life insurance enables Liddy to keep the ranch, her home has also faced desolation. *Barrier* explores how home becomes foreign through violence and desolation through her grief. In a last act of making the idea of home strange and dangerous, the comic does end with Liddy and Oscar forcing their return to Earth, to "home." However, the aliens transport the two of them to neither Honduras nor the United States. Although the first thing Liddy sees is a KFC billboard, it becomes quickly apparent from the war-torn streets and the people around them speaking Arabic that they have landed in an unnamed country in the Middle East. By the end of the comic, Oscar and Liddy have becomes aliens themselves.

In conjunction with the genre imperatives of cosmic horror, *Barrier* engages with border horror to further confront alienhood and humanizing migrants. Whereas the previously discussed examples of border horror rely heavily on the desert in conjunction with gore and body horror, *Barrier* is notably light on depictions of the desert, but the content there is used to paint the desert, and the United States, as hostile and dangerous. The comic begins in the desert of Southwestern Texas, with frames of a snake and then a tire racing through the dust, and finally a sign that says, "trespassers will be shot, *se disapararà a los intrusos*." These panels are followed up by Liddy's Mexican farmhand

discovering the severed and rotted head of one of Liddy's horses. The horse, Sprinkles, has been violently killed, its eyes gauged out, and its musculature laid bare, resting upon the red rough dirt of the desert (Figure 3). The grotesque head is rendered in a full-page panel, its image inescapable. The farmhand calls it "*espantosoa,*" hideous. Liddy concludes that this head was left as a warning by a local cartel, although it is later revealed to be the works of the aliens hovering above. Liddy seeks out the local border patrol to help in this matter, and the art of this sequence is used to paint the desert with the looming presence of surveillance through blimps used by the Border Patrol, and the shadow of that blimp cast of the desiccated body of an armadillo. All of this happens before Oscar is introduced, and it serves to contradict the narrative of bounty and wealth that migrants expect to find in the United States. By depicting the desert as a place of human-made (or alien-caused) danger, *Barrier* established the United States' complicity in the dangers of being a migrant. In contrast to both *Desierto* and *The Devil's Highway*, the desert is not a central element of Oscar's migration journey; the desert is the horrifying destination, not the trial to be endured.

Figure 3: Skinned Horse Head on Liddy's Ranch



Much of Oscar's migration journey, with the looming destination of the United States, is characterized by human-made horror. Oscar's journey to the United States is represented in time-compressed panels; a short sequence on la bestia, Oscar lurking through dark streets, enduring a torrential storm as he hides from a cartel, and then holding a man at gun point as he crosses a body of water, until we find him in a ditch on Liddy's desert ranch in Texas. The comic communicates Oscar's exhaustion through the brief use of panels that build and build his tribulations. The obstacles that he must endure are characterized by criminals, by desperately lonely people, and he is hunted down by cartels and police alike. In the absence of the physical and environmental trials of the desert, the comic turns to how human violence and chicanery is just as dangerous as the environment.

The comic, despite Oscar's complication of how a "good" migrant behaves and looks like, does fall into the trap of stereotypical representations of Latinx "criminals," especially during his journey. Most egregious of these is the portrayal of the coyotes that herd the migrants into a shipping crate on a truck. The main coyote, unnamed, has a huge tribal tattoo on his face, pinched features, a gold chain, a cigarette hanging from his mouth. The coyote harasses a transwoman while at the same time preaching, "*Nos llaman coyotes. Pero eso es solo porque los Americanos creen que son ustedes perros. Creen que sólo un Chucho sarnoso podría conducir a una manda de violadores y asesinos rabiosos como ustedes*" and goes on to say that to the migrants, he is nothing more than a guide bringing them to a better life (Vaughn et. all). This translates to, "They call us coyotes. But this is only because American believe that we are dogs. They believe only a

dirty dog could lead a gang of rapists and murderers like you." The conflation of immigrants with animals, like dogs, and other beasts is rooted in American anti-immigrant sentiment (Santa Ana 2002). The imagery of the rabid, dirty dog contributes to Liddy's racism, as well as Sam's from *Desierto,* and the Border Patrol's in *The Devil's Highway.* The coyote is used here to demonstrate the danger that is imposed on the migrants by a sort of wolf in sheep's clothing; the coyote's sympathy and speech is a veneer for his greed and hypocrisy. The comic divides the Central American characters into two categories: the violent and the desperate. The coyotes and the gang members are violent, dirty, and tattooed. The desperate are the migrants like the transwoman and the old man who helps Oscar board la bestia. Oscar bridges the two. He is violent and tattooed, but desperate in his journey for a better life and escaping gang violence.

Figure 4: Coyote in Barrier

Barrier, although it may be light on using the desert as the backdrop of horror (here, it’s the extreme expanse of outer space and the existential dread of the unknown), makes sparse, strategic use of body horror. There are three main instances of body horror: one is the rotted horse head described above, and the second is the corpse of a woman that Oscar and Liddy stumble across on the spaceship, and the third is the reveal that the children Oscar sees playing soccer in Honduras are using a severed human head for the ball. Oscar and Liddy find the body of the woman in a sort of arboretum, the grass blue, and the foliage a slew of bright colors. The woman is a fellow immigrant, one whose story and name cannot be known, and her mutilated body is horrifying. The color pallet of the comic is vivid and colorful, with harsh and vibrant jewel tones. Pinks, yellows, and greens abound, with intense reds and striking panels of bright, empty white. The blue grass is a lurid backdrop for the woman’s corpse, laid out on a green table. Streams of her red blood drip into the blue grass. Insects flit around the body. Her torso, arms, and face have been flayed. In a comic where colors are bold and loud, her musculature, and the gelatinous fat of her breasts, are dark and harsh. Her pubic area and legs have their skin and throw the horrific state of the body into sharp relief. It is a scene of the utter grotesque. Oscar and Liddy’s discovery of this body mirrors the hundreds of migrants whose bodies may have been recovered in the desert but are so desiccated or mutilated that their identity cannot be discovered. Although the woman is discovered, she is a further example of horrific unknowability in the comic.

Figure 5: Woman's Skinned Body in Barrier

Although the use of gore is sparse, its appearances are visceral and effective and serve to jar the reader out of any state of comfort. The sudden horrific images of the woman and the horse ground the more spectacular elements of cosmic horror. The mutilated bodies are a tangible, accessible representation of horror and the danger that Liddy and Oscar are in. However, much like in *Desierto*, the use of gore and horror for the sake of shock places the subjects of that mutilation in a state of disregard. The woman's body is just a body, removed of any of its humanity or personhood. The extreme mutilation even takes away her face, making recognition completely impossible. Stumbling upon bodies and gore is a common trope in horror, precisely because it emphasizes the danger the characters are in and that there are horrors that they have yet to encounter. However, when the intent of the horror is a political project like that of *Barrier* (resisting anti-immigrant sentiment and humanizing the struggle of migrants), the use of disposable but horrific bodies become complicated. Here, the implication that the mutilated woman was a fellow migrant both shows the vulnerability that migrants face when making the journey to the United States, but also reinforces the lack of concern over the disappearance of migrants.

Barrier is a complicated and beautiful comic that deploys border horror and cosmic horror to comment on contemporary immigration politics, migration patterns, and to argue for the humanity of migrants and those that seem alien. It attempts to radicalize what a "good" migrant can be and argue for the human treatment of migrants. At the same time, it falls into the trap of "proving" Oscar is good by comparing him to criminals and coyotes. *Barrier* uses the genre conventions of cosmic horror, and its utter unknowability, to bridge the gap between Oscar and Liddy. The use of cosmic horror also leads to the grotesque image of the flayed migrant woman, unintentionally falling in line with the decades of murdered and disappeared migrant women. The comic is ambitious in its goal and its deployment of cosmic horror makes it a unique addition to the catalogue of border migration narratives. It breaks down concepts of alienhood, belonging, and humanity. The medium of the comic allows for white spaces and the absence of language that breaks down the barriers between Oscar and Liddy, enabling them to work past their differences and survive in an actually alien world.

Conclusion: Where Must We Go, We Who Wander this Wasteland?

Border horror migration narratives are bound together both by a set of common aesthetics and an ethics of migrant personhood and a resistance to anti-immigrant sentiment and rhetorics. Border horror across different media work to argue for the humanity of migrants while also depicting the harrowing trials that they face on their migration journey. From creative non-fiction to cosmic horror, border horror dedicates itself to this political project by evoking aesthetics of the dangerous desert, elements of human evil and error, and strategic deployment of body horror and violence.

Border horror and its political project are informed by the ethics of presenting and representing pain. Horror is a complicated genre because there is the almost inevitable need to exploit the body in some state of suffering. Suffering, however, can serve a purpose when directed and witnessed, as in *The Devil's Highway*, *Desierto*, and *Barrier*. Border crossings are plagued with suffering—the harsh conditions, the threat of the Border Patrol and the violence of drug cartels, the imminent possibility of just disappearing, the tragedy of leaving loved ones behind—suffering does not have to be just physical pain. Border horror represents the suffering of migrants in a myriad of ways, but physical pain and body horror serve a specific purpose in humanizing the migrants. Social death and systems of oppression work to make the suffering of marginalized peoples invisible or inconsequential. Their suffering is purposefully undermined and perpetuated by systems of power that thrive off of their oppression. Representing the suffering and pain of migrants in horror makes their plight not just visible, but unavoidable.

The Devil's Highway, *Desierto*, and *Barrier* each engage in the ethics of witnessing pain and suffering. Although they are working towards the same end, their application of pain and suffering address different, but connected, issues of violence and racism along the U.S./Mexico border. The history of extreme violence along the border makes for a variety of fodder for border horror to explore. *The Devil's Highway* is simultaneously an account of a historical event while also exploring and explaining the phenomena of migration and the threat of the desert and border policy. Additionally, *The Devil's Highway* delves into the specific tragic horror of those migrants who disappear,

either entirely, with their bodies lost somewhere in the vast wasteland of the desert, or their bodies are discovered, but cannot be identified. *Desierto*, although it could have easily highlighted the horror of disappeared given its body count, deploys the white killer to stand in for both the violence of Minute Men militias and manifests racism through physical violence. *Barrier* tackles the gap of understanding between racists and migrants and the bad faith that those racists hold. *Barrier* uses horror and pain as a way of bridging alienhood and unknowability. Pain and suffering for Liddy and Oscar acts as the great equalizer. Witnessing pain in oppositional horror counters how the logic of social death creates distance from state-sanctioned violence and provokes connection with the subjects in pain.

The U.S./Mexico border is a site of real and horrible violence. Murder flecks its history and racism colors its policies. Anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies perpetuate the horror that migrants endure. Border horror, as a genre, seeks to represent the multifaceted violent reality of the border. Further, border horror deploys pain and suffering as a tool to argue for the personhood of migrants. Border horror as a set of aesthetics—the desert, haunting, body horror—that it uses to advance its political project of humanizing migrants and arguing against racism, against agencies like the Border Patrol, and oppressive policies like Operation Gatekeeper and NAFTA. Although much of border horror is grounded in the real world like *The Devil's Highway* and *Desierto*, border horror can turn to the supernatural and science fiction like in *Barrier*. Border horror is a versatile genre brought together in the ethics of pain and its intent of radicalizing border politics and asserting the personhood of migrants.

Issues of social death are pervasive across a myriad of populations. Like the dismissal of victims of rape homicide explored previously, and similar to hyper-militancy of the Border Patrol that police migrants, issues of over-policing and police brutality are the intense consequence of the logic of social death that effects Black populations. Oppositional horror transcends any one population because horror is an indiscriminate reality.

CHAPTER 3

SPECTERS OF BLACK DEATH: POLICE BRUTALITY, STATE VIOLENCE, AND THE POLOTICS OF FEAR

Officer Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. A nearby teenage girl filmed his brutal suffocation and posted it online. His dying words were, “I can’t breathe.” Twice, he called out for his dead mother. George Floyd was Black. Derek Chauvin is white. The murder of George Floyd was not unique; it is part of a long, horrid, and racist history of police killings against Black people in the United States. The murder sparked nationwide and international protests and riots. Thousands of protestors filled the streets of Minneapolis, even as the city’s police swarmed those same streets with riot gear. Rioters burned down a police precinct. They looted stores, broke windows, set fires. The police shot rubber bullets and tear gas. Protestors marched. Police marched. The local government instituted a curfew. If you walk the streets of Minneapolis today, in 2022, the outpouring of pain, and rage, and grief are still present in the graffiti and street art, and in the buildings that still have plywood for windows, the murals, and the flowered memorial constructed in George Floyd Square. “I can’t breathe,” spray painted on buildings and seen on signs on store windows and lawn signs, is the specter of George Floyd that haunts the cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

I didn’t watch the video of George Floyd dying. I made that choice because I didn’t want to watch a person die, but, as a white-passing Chicana, it was also a choice,

intentional or not, to turn away from the brutal injustice done to George Floyd, and choice to turn away from the reality of systemic racism. I did watch the countless hours of livestreamed protests and riots posted on Twitter, both by individuals and by small media outlets like Unicorn Riot. I watched the 3rd precinct burn. I watched masked people dart through a smoky, burning, bankrupt K-Mart. I watched police shoot into crowds. I watched one officer unintentionally shoot tear gas into his own unit and the police scatter like flies being shood from rotting meat. But again, for all that I watched, I didn't join the protests in Phoenix, Arizona where I was living. I was traveling soon, and COVID-19 was raging. Was my choice because I wanted to be safe for myself and others on the plane? Or was it because I knew that my life and my identities were not what was at stake? I was choosing to witness and not to partake. Even in this choice, though, horror surrounded me and mine. On June 1st, my friend texted our group chat and told us that they had nearly been killed at a protest because a tanker truck had driven into the crowd on the highway. I watched the video of that tanker truck. I watched the protestors swarm away from it, their fear palpable even through the small screen of my phone. I followed the livestreams and watched the police march closer and closer to the places where my loved ones lived. I watched all of this from my bedroom in Arizona. Minneapolis is my home, and I watched my home burn. I sat in my room, uneasy with how my choices had aligned with the state powers, and felt fear, and rage, and grief at the horror come alive in my laptop screen.

Fear played a pertinent role in George Floyd's death and the riots and protests that followed, Floyd's fear of dying, of suffocating, Officer Chauvin's fear of the Black body,

and the white fear labeling protestors, especially Black protestors, as hyper-violent and dangerous. A study conducted by Peay and Camarillo, and published in Social Science Quarterly in 2021, found that white test subjects perceived protests made up of majority Black subjects as far more likely to turn violent. In contrast, those same test subjected deemed violence improbable at majority-white protests (Peay and Camarillo 203). Peay and Camarillo attribute their findings to the minority threat theory—that whites will view the presence of groups of minorities as threats. The minority threat theory parallels the logic of social death. The act of white majority groups wholesale labeling minority groups as always-on-the-verge of violence is intensely dehumanizing, but also serves to align themselves with state power. The logic of social death validates white fear and acts as a justification for Black death. Far from being just an emotional investment in white supremacy, the effects of white fear also result in economic benefits and the continuation of state power. George Floyd's death was the result of stereotypes of Black men being criminal and prone to violence. It was also the result of how state powers maintain control of marginalized groups through dehumanization. Floyd was murdered over an alleged counterfeit 20-dollar bill that he used to buy cigarettes. He was killed over this. He was killed because he was Black and, by being black, was assumed to be committing a crime. He was killed because his life was not, in accordance with the state, worth more than a pack of cigarettes. Social death prescribes more value on the 20-dollar bill than George Floyd's life, and the resulting protests served, for many, to justify their fear of minorities.

Social media discourse about the protests demonstrated the disregard for Black lives and provides a lens into how social death is enforced. Although social media was a way for Black Lives Matter advocates to show support and plan, it is also a space where state doctrines of power and value are reinforced. Peay and Camarillo argue in their study that media coverage of protests if often paradoxical: it is more exciting to have dynamic coverage of protests, which reinforces minority threat, but responsible reporting is essential to the success of social movements (206). In a study of social media posts in the immediate aftermath of George Floyd's death, Dixon and Dundes found that there was an extreme racial divide in how George Floyd and the protests were discussed (11). Posts made by white men were far more like to frame protestors as vandals or thugs (Dixon and Dundes 11). These narratives, a product of social death, are reinforced on both a state and individual level. State violence, and the enforcement of white supremacy, is often perpetuated by invoking fear in the mere presence of a person of color and their presumed criminality. Racism, in part, functions on fear. Chauvin's fear was not only a personal, individual bias, nor was the fear felt by white people about the protestors. It was founded in the long, horrid history of persecution against Black people by that state that marks them as savage, criminal, and less-than-human.

There are tangible rewards to racism and to generating fear around the Black body. Paula Ioanide, in *The Emotional Politics of Racism*, states that "although they may seem fleeting and incalculable, emotions attached to race, and sexuality have their own unique logics of gain and loss. Thus, emotions function much like economies; they have mechanisms of circulation, accumulation, expression, and exchange that give them social

currency, cultural legitimacy, and political power" (2). The gain to generating fear around the Black body is the continued justification of white supremacy. To Derek Chauvin, George Floyd was threatening, and scary and so Chauvin was "in his right" to restrain him and ultimately kill him. Chauvin's actions and emotions were in accordance with, and a consequence of, white supremacy. Framing the protests and riots as scary or criminal discourages activism and the framing of protestors as vandals or unruly serves to justify police presence and violence against Black bodies continues to be an "acceptable" consequence of "keeping the peace." The history of violence against Black bodies reflects these emotional rewards of justification and perpetuated social death. In the postbellum (or post-Reconstruction) South, white women leveraged the fear of being raped by Black men to achieve political power (Feimster 145). White men used lynching as a means of maintaining control over Black people and stymie the political power that was being gained post-Civil War (Finnegan 189). Lynching and Black death were a sort of solution to the "problem of black political participation in the South" (Finnegan 190). Framing Black people as criminal and dangerous created justification for their violent deaths, which covered the political and power-driven motivations of the state and state-actors.

Fear is the fertilizer of white supremacy, the rotten meat that the maggots of state power gorges itself on. Fear, especially the fear that provides economic and political gain to state power through systematic oppression, results in the dehumanization, criminalization, and, often, death of marginalized peoples. Cacho, in *Social Death*, states that the "process of criminalization regulates and regualizes targeted populations, not

only disciplining and dehumanizing those ineligible for personhood, but also presenting them as ineligible for sympathy and compassion" (30). The fear generated from imposed dehumanization and criminalization justifies death. However, while it is crucial to examine the ways that social death interacts with white (or state-aligned) fear, it is just as imperative to analyze the ways that marginalized communities respond to the stereotypes of danger and criminality that are forced upon them. In response to the unjust killing of George Floyd, protestors responded with anger, an insistence that George Floyd and other victims of police brutality were innocent, and a rightful fear of police and state retaliation. These three reactions—anger, assertion of innocence, and fear—are each a response to the logic of social death. The anger stems from the repeated killings of marginalized people at the hand of state powers. The assertion of innocence counters the logic of social death that insists that marginalized people are, at any age, capable of violence and crime. Where the fear generated by the state is based on egregious stereotypes of marginalized communities, the fear felt by those communities is based on the centuries of racialized and sexualized violence that they have endured at the hands and will of the state. The logic of social deaths generates concomitant fears: one is the fear generated by state powers that portrays marginalized groups as dangerous, and one that puts marginalized groups in danger of violence from state powers.

Fear plays a crucial role in the horror genre. How scary a horror movie is often serves as a metric for the quality of the film. The internet is full of lists of the "top ten most terrifying horror movies" or "scariest movies of all time!" These lists and the popularity of the movies on them demonstrate the value of fear in the horror genre. Fear

is sought after and lauded. Horror theorist Katerina Bantinaki states that fear in horror fiction elicits, "an experience…that is potentially beneficial and rewarding, unlike in real-life occurrences…the experience is enjoyable" (383). For Batinaki and other horror scholars like Susan Feagin, fear and disgust become enjoyable experiences in the horror genre and these emotions cyclically reinforce the enjoyment of the horror genre. Batinaki, much like Ioanide, identifies the rewards and benefits to certain emotional experiences. In consuming horror fiction, Batinaki argues that it is possible to confront and become comfortable with fearful and disgusting subjects and ideas and either overcome or become accustomed to those fearful things. Horror is a way of experiencing fear "on the cheap" so that that fear can become accustomed to (Bantinaki 391). What happens, however, when what is "fearful" is a real-life, marginalized subject or group? What sort of emotional rewards are experienced when the horror fiction confirms the logic of social death and justifies violent stereotypes and oppressive narratives? What does it mean to experience pleasurable fear at the expense of marginalized communities?

The vilification of marginalized groups in the horror genre problematizes the concept of enjoyable fear because it reinforces the logic of social death and how the state defines personhood. Where Bantinaki sees the rewards of fear as a way of becoming desensitized to fearful subjects, Ioanide's framework places the emotional rewards of fear as a way of maintaining power over marginalized communities. Take, for example, the character Zelda in Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* (1983). Zelda has Spinal Meningitis, and this illness leaves her bedridden and deformed. In the 1989 film adaptation, Zelda's skin is almost mummified, her lips nonexistent, her body a twisted and decrepit thing. She

shrieks and cackles and torments her younger sister with her deformity. Disability and illness are made monstrous through Zelda, marking her as less-than-human, even evil. Zelda's depiction, often lauded as one of the most terrifying moments in horror, comes from a long and ugly tradition of making disability monstrous in horror (Smith 2011). When enjoyable, fear is predicated on the oppression of marginalized groups like the disabled, that fear is aligned with social death. The enjoyable fear viewers experience while viewing Zelda's grotesque body reinforces ableist perceptions of disability that dehumanize people with disabilities. To return to Ioanide's posit that there are rewards to racism and prejudice, enjoyable fear, like that of seeing Zelda, serves to justify the denial of rights and personhood of people with disabilities.

Figure 6: Zelda in Pet Sematary (1989)

Horror is a genre of spectacle, and anyone can be the spectacle, the monster. It asks the viewer to enjoy fear, and disgust, and anxiety. This fear could come from a thousand-tentacled creature (*From Beyond* 1986) just as equally as it can come from a person with a disability (*Pet Sematary* 1989), or a mentally ill queer person (*Cruising* 1980), or chainsaw-wielding cannibals (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre* 1974), or a person

with schizophrenia (*Split* 2016), or Neo Nazis (*Green Room* 2015), or killer clowns from outer space (*Killer Klowns from Outer Space* 1988). Horror puts every subject and identity through the fear machine, but it doesn't do so in a vacuum. What, or who, the horror fiction asks its consumers to be afraid of can have severe real-world implications and consequences. After *Jaws* (1975) premiered, thousands of sharks were hunted down and killed. *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a film rife with racist depictions of Black people and horrific valorizations of the Klu Klux Klan, helped galvanize the Ku Klux Klan in the early twentieth century, leading to a more uniform image of the Klan and an increase in Klan activity (Lennard 2015 and Ang 2020). Horror can reinforce certain subjects as fearful and dangerous, and although it can be a horde or zombies or the vilification of the Great White Shark, the genre is capable of reinforcing the most pernicious prejudices. Decades of racist, ableist, and bigoted portrayals of monstrosity, and the enjoyment of these depictions, reinforces the state's dehumanization of marginalized communities.

White fear is accompanied with another kind of fear; that of the persecuted and oppressed who face the violent consequences of systems of power. Brent Staples in his essay "Just Walk on By" explains that he whistles Vivaldi when walking the streets at night in order to signify to white passersby that he poses no threat to him (1987). Staples compares his strategy of mitigating white violence to hikers wearing cowbells to fend off bears. Both Staples' whistling and the hiker's cowbell are born of fear of pain and death. The bear and white violence pose the same threat. The fear generated by systemic racism is matched, like Newton's third law, by the fear of white violence that is a very real threat to Black people. Oppositional horror makes those racist and prejudiced systems the

monsters of horror. In films like *Get Out* (2017) and *Candyman* (1992), racism is positioned as the monster of the film. In *La Llorona* (2019), the ghost of a woman haunts a retired general who led the genocide of Indigenous Guatemalans. Fear in these films and others works against state prescriptions of monstrosity and makes state apparatuses of systemic oppression evident. Oppositional horror draws on the spectacle of the horror genre to explore the ways that fear is engendered and ingrained in systems of power that strategically marks certain populations as less-than and inhuman.

This chapter deploys oppositional horror as a lens for two pieces of fiction that frame the unjust death of Black children as the result of fear prejudice, and white supremacy. The first is a 2018 comic series titled *Destroyer*, written by Victor LaValle, and illustrated by Dietrich Smith and Joana Lafuente. *Destroyer* contemporizes the Frankenstein story, with Dr. Josephine Baker, a Black scientist, in the role of Victor Frankenstein, and her son, Akai, who was killed by a police officer, as her resurrected creature. The second piece of fiction is a 2018 short story by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah titled "The Finkelstein 5," from his collection *Friday Black*. "The Finkelstein 5" is a brutal story about a Black man reeling in the wake of the massacre of five Black children who were beheaded by a white man with a chainsaw outside of a local library. As examples of oppositional horror, both pieces of fiction demonstrate the interplay between social death, the devaluation of Black lives (and Black children in particular), and how the Black body is constructed as dangerous and fearful by the state. Both pieces emphasize Black personhood, the role of fear and prejudice in perpetuating oppression, and the quotidian horror of living as a Black person in a white world.

Both *Destroyer* and “Finkelstein 5” engage with the politics of fear and the consequences of racist emotions and state power. Both stories view racism as a consequence of systemic oppression and explore how those systems work themselves out on the lives of the oppressed. This chapter looks at the nuance of racist affect and its role in inciting and normalizing violence against Black people and bodies. *Destroyer* uses horror to explore personhood and humanity as defined by the state and racism. “Finkelstein 5” simultaneously satirizes racist violence and the justice system while showing its horrible effects on the lives and psyche of Black subjects. Both stories pose the question of “what can be done about systemic violence? Where can society go? Although the stories engage with similar topics and themes, “Fineklstein 5” and *Destroyer* have vastly different answers. *Destroyer* has a resounding message of hope and an overall faith that society can be saved. “Finkelstein 5,” a far more brutal and intense story, gives the radical answer of, “I don’t know.” Compassion doesn’t work, anger doesn’t work, protests don’t work. Almost two years have passed since George Floyd was cruelly murdered at the hands of a police officer. I have seen hope, and compassion, and anger, protests and riots, and nothing has changed. Where can we go from here when horror is all around us?

Hardwiring Humanity: Destroyer and the Complexity of Personhood in Horror

Destroyer modernizes the “modern Prometheus.” Like Mary Shelley’s 1818 *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, *Destroyer* is concerned with concepts of humanity, the potential of science, the morality of invention, and the folly of man. There is a steep hierarchy of personhood in *Frankenstein* that is heavily rooted in white

supremacy. The racial tensions in *Frankenstein*, according to P.J. Brendese, stem from "the era's racialized fears augured by colonialism, debates over slavery in general, and the epic slave revolt of the Haitian revolution" (87-88). The relationship between the creature and Victor, his creator, reflect a master/slave dynamic, although who is the master and who is the slave is constantly in flux: when the creature strives for mastership, it is to achieve whiteness and power (Brendese 93). Where *Frankenstein* largely leaves discussions of race in the subtext, *Destroyer* is keenly aware of how white supremacy and state powers define and regulate personhood and further, how those powers position marginalized groups as less-than-human and how that positioning results in violence and dehumanization. Over the course of six issues, *Destroyer* builds an argument against the logic of social death by insisting on the innocence and personhood of the murdered Black child, Akai in the face of a society (or covert government institution) that fears his existence. The comic also posits that the only way out of these oppressive systems of power is to not give in to rage and vengeance and to imagine a future of compassion and equity.

Destroyer falls squarely into the genre of Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism, hallmarked with science fiction aesthetics and tropes, centralizes the futurity of Black people and oppression that has defined their lives. The term Afrofuturism was first coined by scholar Mark Dery in a 1993 essay, "Black to the Future," and was largely expanded on by Alondra Nelson. In her 2000 article, "AfroFuturism: Past-Future Vision," Nelson defines AfroFuturism as, "a critical perspective that opens up inquiry into the many overlaps between technoculture and Black diasporic histories. AfroFuturism…find[s] models of

expression that transform spaces of alienation into novel forms of creative potential. In the process, it reclaims theorizing about the future" (36). *Destroyer* posits the future as where the death of Black children can be mitigated through the creation of the cyborg, but that this will lead to a different, morphed fear of the Black body.

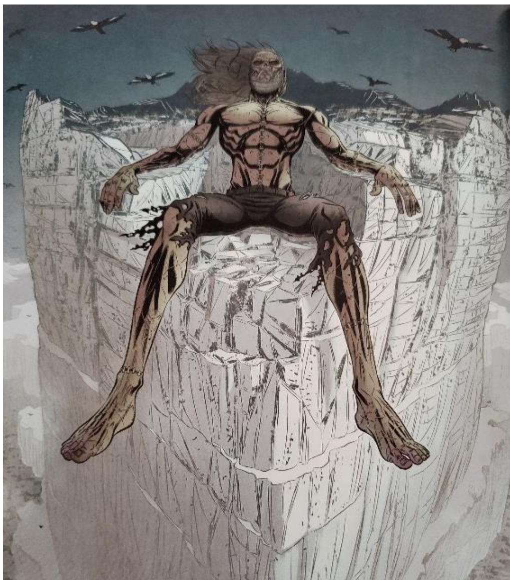
Destroyer's positioning of the symbolic Black child as the path towards the future works against the way that social death has devalued and criminalized children of color. Lee Edelman's theorizing of reproductive futurity (found in his 2004 text *No Future*) dictates that the Child symbolizes the future and ensures the future for heteronormative and supremacist politic*s*. Put into the context of social death, the Child, in its life or in its death, can be used to either ensure or eradicate the future of diverse groups. Although Edelman is working on the symbolic level, the Child has long been weaponized against marginalized communities in the United States, especially Black, Indigenous, and Latinx groups. The state dictates who can have children, and which children will be valued. The United States has long used a variety of methods of population control to exert power of marginalized communities: forced sterilization during the eugenics movement in the early twentieth century (Kluchin 2009), Indigenous children being forced from their families and communities into white families or Christian-based boarding schools (Jacobs 2014), and the child detention centers that span the U.S./Mexico border where the policy is to separate migrant children from the families, either by splitting up families that crossed together or preventing unaccompanied minors to contact their family in the United States (Licona and Luibhéid 2018). Both children, and the symbolic Child, have been used as a means of reinforcing the logic of social death and the power of white supremacy.

Destroyer uses the image of the Child, and the Child's resurrection, as the motivation for building a better, more equitable future. When Dr. Josephine Baker resurrects her son, it is an act of defiance against the white supremacist state that enforces the logic of social death.

Destroyer opens with a lean, mean, fighting machine of a Frankenstein creature manspreading on top of an iceberg in Antarctica. The creature is lanky and muscle-ridden. He has long white hair and a beard to match. A thick band of stitches descends from his throat to groin and other ropey stitches cover his face and body. The creature cuts an imposing figure, distinctly masculine and distinctly undead. The creature's first actions in the comic are to avenge the death of a whale calf by massacring a boat of Japanese whalers and the environmental activists following the whalers. The creature in *Destroyer* is a marked departure from its namesake in *Frankenstein*. Mary Shelley's original creature is deformed, hideous, and heavily racialized through the "noble savage" archetype—articulate, well-read, logical, and Christian, but can never be white—and elements make his plight sympathetic but his turn to murder and violence expected (Drislane 39). Where the original creature is literate, eloquent, and gives verbose monologues about the violence that he will commit, the creature in *Destroyer* chooses not to speak as he goes on a killing spree across two continents in his quest to find Dr. Josephine Baker and kill her. Victor Frankenstein's fear of his own creation is accompanied by his disgust and terror at the thought of the creature reproducing—and thus reproducing a future of more savages, noble or not. The white-coded creature in *Destroyer* similarly seeks to end Baker's life and power to reproduce more cyborgs like

her son. The creature is horrified at the prospect of someone else recreating Victor's work and seeks to stop her while blindly ignoring who he kills on his quest. The creature's action parallel to the fear of Black women reproducing in real life and the numerous ways that state powers have attempted to prevent Black women from giving birth. By attempting to kill both Josephine and Akai, the creature is participating in the same fear of reproduction as his creature. The creature in *Destroyer* flips the racialization of the original character in a way that maintains at its core a fear of the futurity of the Other, even when that Other is a murdered child.

Figure 7: The Creature Manspreading



Dr. Josephine Baker, a not-so-subtle reference to the American actress and Civil Rights activist of the same name, is an unparalleled scientific genius. Although reviving her dead son as a cyborg is by far her most complex invention, her other works include invisible Kevlar, a self-driving and hyper-efficient electric car, a sophisticated AI that

runs her home, and the robotic shell, called The Bride, that her estranged husband has had grafted over his entire body. Josephine's technological prowess and her interest in the secrets of "life" align her with Victor Frankenstein, the 1800s scientist who created the creature. Where Frankenstein made his creature in a fervent desire to master life and God's domain, Josephine sought to remedy not just a great injustice, but a way to survive the loss of her son, Akai, who was shot by a police officer when he was twelve years old. Josephine's anger at the injustice of the world mirrors that of the creature. Both have a strong drive for vengeance and retribution.

Destroyer condemns the several systems of power that led to Akai's death. Racism and capitalist greed are at the center of *Destroyer*. Josephine worked for a vague governmental organization known simply as the Lab. The United States government founded the Lab in order to pursue Frankenstein's creature, capture him, and ultimately recreate the formula for immortality. The Lab hired Josephine for her technical prowess and her own interest in the secrets of life and life unending. The Lab represents the power of the state in *Destroyer*. It is a sinister organization driven primarily by greed and the desire for power. Despite the goal of immortality, there is little regard for human life. The Director, a middle-aged white woman in power suits and curled hair, runs the Lab on a hellbent desire for power, both over others and over death itself. The Director represents how state institutions are driven by power and a need to dominate over those seen as less-than-human and less-than-alive.

Akai's death, as a Black child is viewed as less-than-human and less-than-alive by state powers both in the comic and real life, exemplifies the racist fear of Black bodies

perpetuated by white supremacy and social death. Akai was twelve when he was killed. He was walking home from a Little League baseball game, holding hit bat up on his shoulder. In the comic, a half-page panel shows a line of brownstone apartments at night and a silhouetted woman calling the police, reporting that a Black man is walking through the neighborhood with a gun. Akai, purposefully drawn as small and unimposing, walks carefree down the sidewalk. Akai's childhood innocence underscores the white fear of the Black body that led to his death. Akai's character design, both when he is alive and his resurrected form, very intentionally emphasizes his youth and innocence. Alive, he has plump cheeks, a round jaw, and the lean, un-muscled body of a child. Resurrected, he may be covered in stitches with exposed musculature, but his goofy smile and large, round, kind eyes are at odds with the body horror of his new form. Although Akai's resurrected design does not shy away from body horror and the grotesque, it serves to emphasize that Akai is very much a child, filled with wonder and innocence—a wonder and innocence that was cut short by his murder.

Figure 8: Akai Enjoying a Baseball Game

Figure 9: Akai After Being Resurrected

Akai embodies the socially dead. They are both literally dead but also representative of how systems of power relegate some people to being "worthless" and less-than-human. For Akai, this was true both in death and in life. Alive as a young Black boy, Akai faced systemic racism that viewed his child's body as a threat and a source of terror (Vargas and James, 2012). In death, Akai is not only still Black, but also a conglomeration of stitches and robotic parts. He is marked as other by his state of undeath and his deformity, but also by his unrelenting humanity and compassion. Akai, despite the violence in his death and new life, is full of compassion and life. This attitude sets him apart from the creature's murderous anger, the Director's unabashed greed, and Josephine's grief and rage. Akai embodies Vargas and James' theorizing of the Black cyborg: "part divine, part mechanical, part biological, black rebel cyborgs demand not

democracy but freedom" (Vargas and James 201). Social death dictates that Akai is, at the very least, disposable, and at the very most, an active threat. As a Black rebel cyborg, Akai retains his innocence—although that itself is a complicated topic—while also becoming superhuman and invulnerable to the threats posed by white supremacy and the deathly outcome of the logic of social death.

Destroyer carefully positions Akai as innocent—he won't even hurt an earth worm, tearing up when Josephine prompts him to do so in a garden—even angelic, and while this makes him a sympathetic character, it also simplifies his character almost to the point of infantilization. Avery Gordon, in her text *Ghostly Matters*, critiques how people need to be simplified in order to be sympathized with in her theorizing of complex personhood. Gordon defines complex personhood as the immutable fact that all people "remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves" (4). Diminishing a person's complexity is to deny them their humanity. She continues that, "at the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormous subtle meaning" (4-5). Although the depiction of Akai as angelic and innocent works to emphasize his kindness and humanity, it also reinforces the idea that in order for a Black person or child's death to be an injustice, they must be infallible. Akai is denied complex personhood because it runs the risk of making him less sympathetic. The logic of social death creates a contradiction in Akai; either he is so simplified that his death in unjust, or he is complex and runs the risk of "deserving" the fear that his Black body provokes.

Black people and other marginalized communities are frequently denied complex personhood in the pursuit of social justice, just as they are denied that personhood through the logic of social death.[3] Vargas and James expound on necessity of perceived Black innocence in their 2012 article, "Pursuing Treyvon Martin: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Race Dynamics." The death and trial of Trayvon Martin, for Vargas and James, demonstrates how Black Lives Matter activists used pictures of Martin holding a baby and smiling to argue for his innocence and his death as murder. Those defending the perpetrator George Zimmerman spread countering photos of Trayvon Martin bruised, holding up his middle finger, and showing off gold teeth. The first set of photos portrayed Martin as innocent and angelic. The second portrayed him as criminal, threatening, and used them to argue that Zimmerman was right to be afraid. Innocence was held up against prejudiced vilification, muddying who Trayvon Martin was and the resounding notion that no matter who he was, he did not deserve to die. Akai's angelic demeanor unfortunately falls into the rhetoric of the "angelic Black…a youth worthy of the right to life" (Vargas and James, 194). Vargas and James expand, "to be angelical is to be supernatural or infantile; to not grow up, to not have autonomous agency, to never rebel against authority" (196). In arguing for Akai's "right" to live, *Destroyer* mimics rhetorics of value and innocence. If he was angry, even about his own death, if he wanted revenge, if he hurt the earth worm, would Akai still be seen as an innocent youth whose life was taken too soon? The Black cyborg, or the "black rebel

[3] Similar discourse about the innocence of children can be seen in the rhetoric used to talk about "Dreamers," the children brought into the United States by their parents when they were infants. The discourse positions Dreamers as worthy of citizenship and education, but only if they are faultless children.

cyborg" as Vargas and James dub them, describes a hybrid being that both exists in the world and is outcast from it, "part divine, part mechanical, part biological, black rebel cyborgs demand not democracy but freedom" (201). Akai status as cyborg—both monstrous and human—is a sort of AfroFuturity; too strong to be killed, too feared to live.

Destroyer uses the brutality of the creature—and the perpetual empathy that the creature is shown—to underscore how Akai's life was undervalued and his humanity ignored. The creature leaves a bloody path behind him as he migrates from Antarctica to Montana. In a series of brief panels, the creature is found by a group of migrants in the Mexican desert who believe him to be a miracle and a savior. He kills indiscriminately kills both the migrants and the Minute Men waiting for them. These deaths demonstrate the creature's complete lack of care for human life. He cares neither for the almost comically innocent migrants nor the racists who hate them. The creature shows no concern for life until he accidentally kills the pigs on a factory farm, which leaves him horrified. Several characters, from the covert agents of the Lab to the environmental activists that he slaughters, extend sympathy to the creature, citing the lack of love from his father-creator and the fear he faces due to his appearance. *Destroyer* depicts the creature as a ruthless killer, and Akai as a gentle boy who literally would not hurt an earthworm, but it is Akai that is killed out of fear and the creature who is met with compassion. The comic emphasizes how the white characters chose to empathize with the white-coded creature, despite his proven monstrosity. Akai, the young Black child, is more feared by white characters—from the Minute Men who see the creature to the

Director herself—than the murderous creature that eventually kills them. Throughout the comic, the creature's complex personhood is recognized by various characters. He may be violent, but it is because he was unloved by his father. He may be angry, but it is because society has rejected him and made him other. The comic doesn't allow Akai to feel a similar rage at his lot in life; it is too important that he remain an innocent foil to the creature's thirst for vengeance.

Although *Destroyer* denies Akai's complex personhood, the comic is deeply committed to the complexity of Josephine. Josephine, our Victor-Frankenstein-come-again, responds to the death of her son and the system that caused it with tremendous grief and tremendous rage. *Destroyer* paints Josephine as a righteous mad scientist. She crusades against racism with a furious anger and thirst for revenge. The comic, and Josephine, go into extensive commentary on Josephine's anger and the stereotype of the angry Black woman. The stereotype of the angry Black woman combines some of the most pernicious societal constructions of Black women. Trina Jones and Kimberly Jade Norwood, in their 2017 article "Deconstructing the Trope of the Angry Black Woman," identify the following elements as the components of the angry Black woman trope: "out of control, disagreeable, overly aggressive, physically threatening, loud (even when she speaks softly), and to be feared" (2049). In *Destroyer*, Josephine comments on her own rage and the perception of the angry Black woman. In the final showdown between Josephine, Akai, and the creature, Josephine rails against the world that killed her son and how her quest for vengeance would be venerated if she was a man. She states, "it would be the stuff of legends. They'd paint portraits of me. They'd make movies about the size

of my…courage [sic]" (LaValle, Issue 6). Josephine is more than aware that her rage and quest for vengeance place her squarely in the stereotype of the angry Black woman, and this only adds to her rage.

Black women in horror complicate gender representations in the genre because while women characters are praised for character arcs that turn them from fragile ivory to hard steel, Black women are already perceived as too strong, too angry, too aggressive. Kinitra Brookes, in her book *Searching for Sycorax*, explores the myriad of both good and bad representations of Black women in horror. In particular, she analyzes how much gender scholars, when analyzing horror, have discounted, or ignored how race interacts with the genre. For instance, Carol Clover famously argued that the trope of the "final girl" functioned on audiences being able to identify with the masculine violence that (white) women in horror must adopt to defeat the monster (1987). In response, Brookes argues that those same masculine traits that make the white woman admirable are the same ones that are criticized and used to dehumanize Black women. The trope of the Black superwoman—unfailingly strong—makes Black women "monstrous…this trope actively dehumanizes Black women, contributing to their Otherness" (Brookes 25-26). Josephine, prone to anger and prone to violence, embodies this trope. Both the character and the comic are aware of this, and *Destroyer* attempts to walk the uneasy line between allowing Josephine her anger and falling into the all-too-present stereotypes of aggressive and angry Black women.

The trope of the angry Black woman, generated from centuries of racism and subjugation, leads to extensive policing, violence, and death (Jones and Norwood, 2017).

Black women's attempts to push back on this trope often result in the unfortunate reinforcement of the trope, "Black women know that to push back—to exercise voice—inevitably means that the positive stereotypes to which they may be subject (however slim they may be) will immediately elide into the negative" (Jones and Norwood, 2050). Although *Destroyer* ultimately sympathizes with Josephine and her rage, it doesn't allow her to lay waste to the systems that killed her son. The creature kills her before she can become, in her own words, the Destroyer. The comic validates her rage—her innocent son was killed, her husband betrayed her for the Lab, and she has no recourse for justice except for her scientific prowess—but not her desire to raze the systems that caused it. When Josephine explains her plans to destroy the U.S. government and its agencies, her husband and son are horrified. She becomes a villain and a parallel to the creature that kills so indiscriminately. Her need to avenge her son's death is boiled down to the creature's need to avenge the whale calf from the beginning of the comic. While Josephine advocates a scorched earth policy, Akai and *Destroyer* preach a message of non-violence and compassion as a way of changing and countering oppressive systems.

Akai, and *Destroyer*, illustrate that the answer to violence is compassion because violence only begets more violence. Akai's anti-violence stance is directly compared to the creature's murderous rampage to find Josephine and destroy the Lab, and Josephine's quest for vengeance against the Lab and the systems that led to the death of her son. Where the creature's first action was to slaughter an entire boat of whalers, Akai's is to dissolve the gun and bullets of the men from the Lab sent to capture Josephine. Of compassion, Ioanide writes, "fighting oppression requires enormous amounts of

understanding and compassion for those who remain unmoved by oppressed people's suffering and demands for justice" (218). Ioanide advocates for compassion because holding on to anger and hate are exhausting and ultimately unproductive for oppressed people and social justice movements. So much oppression stems from emotions like fear, both of the othered body but also at being associated with marginalized groups. Understanding this fear, for Ioanide, also means understanding that there are emotional stakes to maintaining systems of oppression and that those systems cannot be dismantled through logic, or rage, or hate. Akai's unwillingness to respond to the creature or the systems that feared him with anger acknowledges both the "risk of becoming spiritually ill" and perpetuating more violence that rage and hate can generate (Ioanide 218).

Destroyer criticizes systems of oppression, racism, and police brutality. The death of a child is always horrific, but Akai's patchwork body and puppy dog eyes emphasize how racist violence destroys innocent lives. *Destroyer* makes a spectacle of some violence, such as the creature ripping people limb from limb, or the glee with which Josephine holds aloft the severed head of the Director. However, Akai's death is never shown, only his happy smile right before his death, and his resurrection. The message is clear; Akai's death is not something the reader will be allowed to experience either pleasurable fear or exult in its violence. *Destroyer* imagines a future where the lives of children like Akai matter. The comic may take a softball approach to how systems of oppression can be rallied against, but its deployment of horror and violence intentionally centers on the dehumanizing and lethal consequences of racism and oppression.

Humor and Horror in "The Finkelstein 5"

Brutal, harrowing, heartbreaking, and darkly funny, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's short story "The Finkelstein 5" both satirizes and laments white violence and Black death. The short story responds to the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager, by George Zimmerman, a Latinx white-passing man.[4] In "The Finkelstein 5," white man George Wilson Dunn used a chainsaw to behead five Black children who were hanging out outside of a public library. Like *Destroyer*, "The Finkelstein 5" intentionally positions the five children as innocent beyond reproach. The setting of the library, a specifically safe space for children, reinforces their innocence. Further, one of the victims, a little girl named Fela St. John who was decapitated, is wearing a pretty yellow dress with barrettes in her hair. She presents the picturesque image of a child. Adjei-Brenyah leaves no room for doubt that the children killed were innocent. They were just five children, hanging out, that a white man saw as a threat and a threat that needed to be killed. Similar to Akai, these children have no complex personhood. However, they are playing a different role in the story than Akai. While Akai is a main character who is capable of agency and makes decisions, the children in "The Finkelstein 5" are representatives of how the state will deny the value of Black children and ignore their deaths. The short story emphasizes over and over how innocent these children were, and that their deaths, brutal and gory, were the greatest injustice.

[4] Importantly, George Zimmerman's race is a topic of endless debate and contention. He has been identified as white, white Hispanic, mixed race, and Hispanic. The complexity of this topic will be further explored in the following section.

The short story interweaves the narratives of the protagonist Emmanuel preparing for a job interview, George Wilson Dunn's trial, and the Black characters who participate in the "Naming" ritual. Emmanuel gets rejected for the job because he is Black. George Wilson Dunn is found innocent because he is white. Full of anger at the verdict, Black people take to the streets to assault or even kill white people while shouting the names of the five Black children. After being rejected for the job, Emmanuel joins his friend for a Naming ritual. He brings his baseball bat. Each member of his group keens from the loss of the children, and their pain drives them to attack a white couple in a car. Although at first Emmanuel participates, he is wracked with indecision, hurt, and cannot commit to killing the couple, or even hurting them. He just begs them again and again to scream the name Fela St. John. Before the others in his group can complete the Naming ritual, the police arrive. The story ends with Emmanuel, hands in the air, being shot by the police. "The Finkelstein 5" follows Emmanuel joining in on a Naming, being unable to follow through on the murder, and ends with him being killed by the police. The short story mixes bleak social horror with a wicked sense of humor to lambast racist violence and a corrupt justice system.

The emotions that run through "The Finkelstein 5", the rage and hurt, reflect the outpouring of pain and anger that came in the wake of the murder of Trayvon Martin in February 2012 and George Zimmerman's acquittal in July 2013. Martin's murder sparked a national conversation over "how our criminal justice system operates, and [raises] important questions about whether justice is administered fairly and effectively" and "the intersection of race, ethnicity, crime, and justice" (Johnson, Warren, and Farrell 2).

Martin was perceived by Zimmerman as dangerous because of his Blackness. This perception played a significant role in Zimmerman's acquittal, if indirectly (Drakulich and Siller 24). While the dominant discussions of race centered on Blackness, George Zimmerman's race, or perceived race, was also a highly contested topic. Where "The Finkelstein 5" simplifies this issue by making George Wilson Dunn white, George Zimmerman is Latinx. His mother is a Peruvian immigrant, and his father is American of German descent. Zimmerman's race both complicated the discussions of racism and prejudice, but also demonstrated how people of color like Zimmerman can align themselves with whiteness and the state and find safety in that association. Zimmerman's mixed-race status was further utilized to argue that Martin's murder could not be racially motivated because Zimmerman was also a person of color (Like, Sexton, and Porter 95). Zimmerman's race and ethnicity became flexible during the trial and debates. This both made it easier to pretend that the crime was not racially motivated but also, inadvertently, demonstrated intangibility of race and how the state can weaponize it to justify prejudice and racism to maintain power.

"The Finkelstein 5" is deeply concerned with questions of justice, vengeance, and the limits of social activism to make actual change in a system that so greatly devalues the lives of Black people and Black children. The story, written a few years after the murder of Trayvon Martin and published in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, bleakly examines how little has changed in the lived reality of Black people. They are still murdered by the police at exponential rates, they are heavily criminalized, and the significance of their deaths, like that of George Floyd, have to be screamed out in

protests and online to even get the state and the public to care—or pretend to care. Where *Destroyer* committed itself to imaging a future beyond the injustice of the state, "The Finkelstein 5" refuses to give any answer, let alone an optimistic one, about the future for Black and other marginalized communities. The state has spent centuries creating a system that allows for the deaths of marginalized people. Those deaths help keep the state powerful, and as far as "The Finkelstein 5" sees it, that isn't going to change any time soon. The dying words of the short story's protagonist is an anguished cry of, "I don't know," and that is the only answer to the topic of futurity that "The Finkelstein 5" offers.

As in the tradition of satire, "The Finkelstein 5" uses humor and ridicule to render racist violence in all of its grotesque horror. George Wilson Dunn's trial plays out like a late-night comedy sketch. Dunn's lawyer rambles on about the importance of freedom, the right of an American to "defend" his children against the perceived threat of the Black children outside of the library. In his closing speech, the defense lawyer states, "[this case is] about an American man's right to love and protect his own life and the life of his beautiful baby girl and his handsome young son. So I ask you, what do you love more, the supposed 'law' or your children?" (Adjei-Brenyah 5). The Dunn trial demonstrates the social value of the different children in the story. Dunn's white children, Tiffany, and Rodman are deemed by the state to be worth at least five Black children, maybe even more. Although the position that Dunn's defense attorney takes focuses on Dunn's "right" to protect his children, this position is founded in the unjustified fear of the Black body. The perceived threat of the mere presence of Black children fueled Dunn to mutilate them, and it was that same fear that justified their deaths for the jury. Cacho

writes, “We are all recruited often unwittingly and/or unwillingly to devalue lives, life choices, and lifestyles because valuing them would destabilize our own precious claims to and uneasy desire for social value” (27). In order for the all-white jury to maintain the illusion that these murders were justified, and that they themselves along with Dunn are not acting out of racism, then they must devalue the Finkelstein 5.

In her book *The Alchemy of Race and Riots*, attorney Patricia Williams uses a counternarrative of a race-based attack to demonstrate how white lives are valued over Black children. Williams reframes the Bernhard Goetz case in 1984 where Goetz shot four teen African American boys on the New York subway, supposedly in self-defense. Goetz was lauded as a hero and vigilante and the case generated intense debates on race and justice. Rather than get bogged down in the political discourse of the case, Williams makes a simple rhetorical move; a Black man is approached by a group of white teenage boys who ask him how he is and then ask him for five dollars, and the man shoots them for this. Williams’ counternarrative positions the white teenagers as the subjects of presumed criminality who come with an ever-present threat. The Black man’s killing of these teens becomes the justified murders that are acceptable because those white teens are automatically dangerous. The script of social value has been flipped. Both Williams and “The Finkelstein 5” peel back the logic of social death by countering the narratives of presumed criminality and the justification of Black death. They both make the blatant racial motivations of these crimes, both real and fictional, clear. The public’s fawning over Goetz, and the weeping of the fictional jury over George Wilson Dunn’s account of

self-defense, demonstrate how crimes committed by white people are met with sympathy, understanding, and approval.

"The Finkelstein 5" portrays George Wilson Dunn as comically stupid and childish and in doing so further emphasizes the absurdity of his acquittal in the face of such blatant racism. When George Wilson Dunn is on the stand, he is blithe and horrifically nonchalant, and it reads like the darkest comedy. George Wilson Dunn speaks in circles, makes "vroom" sounds with his mouth to describe the sound of his chainsaw, and he dismisses any statement by the prosecutor out of hand. When the prosecutor pushes George Wilson Dunn to describe what he did when he felt threatened by the Finkelstein 5, the following exchange takes place:

> Prosecutor: "What happened next?"
>
> George Wilson Dunn: "*Vroom*, I had my young children, Tiffany and Rodman, behind me so I could, *vroom, vroom*, protect them."
>
> Prosecutor: 'What does that mean?"
>
> George Wilson Dunn: "That I revved my saw and got to cutting" (Adjei-Brenyah 18).

This segment of the trial demonstrates both the cartoonish nature of George Wilson Dunn and how even in the face of brutal murders, the jury will sympathize with a white man protecting his children. Williams explains the phenomenon of white acquittal as such, "whites do not expect whites (as compared to blacks" to rape, rob or kill [whites]…they are surprised when it happens" (75). Because the jury doesn't expect a white father to brutally kill children, it becomes more logical that he beheaded five children with a chainsaw in self-defense than admit that white people can also commit crimes. Even

George Wilson Dunn's full, simple confession of "vroom" cannot convince the jury otherwise.

The satirical humor in "The Finkelstein 5" underscores the brutality of the murders of the Black children. The dark comedy of the story in no way alleviates the reader from the hyperviolence of the murders. The 2017 film *Get Out* uses a similar approach to horror and comedy. *Get Out* follows a Black man, Chris, as he discovers that his white girlfriend's family and their wealthy neighbors are kidnapping Black people to use for brain transplants so that the elderly white people can be in healthy bodies. The film is both horrific and at times, hilarious. Of this comingling of comedy and horror, David Gilotta writes, "The juxtaposition of humor and horror creates a uniquely unnerving viewing experience in which viewers never feel safe, even in their laughter. This dual register reflects the feelings of uneasiness and dread that many Black Americans have long felt, as moments of apparent levity or peace may suddenly be disrupted by forces of racist violence or oppression" (1032). Comedy plays a similar role in "The Finkelstein 5." Snippets of the trial are interspersed with Emmanuel going to the mall to buy a shirt for a job interview and security guards tailing him. More scenes from the trial take place while Emmanuel prepares for and carries out the Naming ritual. Descriptions of the mutilated children are juxtaposed to the comically stupid George Wilson Dunn and prosecutor. The use of comedy, even satire, in "The Finkelstein 5" in no way makes the story more digestible or supplies relief. Instead, it emphasizes the complete disregard that the court, the murderer, and the state view the deaths of Black children.

For all that it is satirical, “The Finkelstein 5” deploys unrelenting descriptions of hyper-violence and gore. The opening paragraph of the story prepares the reader for the horror that they are about to encounter: “Fela, the headless girl, walked toward Emmanuel. Her neck jagged with red savagery. She was silent, but he could feel her waiting for him to do something, anything” (Adjei-Brenyah 1). And when Emmanuel wakes up, Fela St. John, the youngest of the Finkelstein 5 at seven, haunts Emmanuel, not as a ghost, but as a specter of injustice. Avery Gordon’s definition of a haunting is as a remnant of unresolved violence that demands action (2008). Although “The Finkelstein 5” never describes the murders of the children, the violence of their death lingers like a foul order in Emmanuel’s daily life. Every action he takes, whether its waiting for a bus or shopping for a shirt, is haunted by the brutality of the murders of the Finkelstein 5. An air of helplessness permeates Emmanuel’s life; what can he do besides live his life, what could ever be a good enough response to the mutilation of children?

Where *Destroyer* offers messages of love, compassion, and attempts at understanding for racist and murderous systems of oppression and persons, “The Finkelstein 5” offers none of that. It is wholly unforgiving of the society and systems of oppression that allowed not just the murder of these five children but also their murderer to not face any consequences. What “The Finkelstein 5” does offer is the Naming ritual. The Black people in the short story who murder white people aren’t acting in an impulse for justice, they aren’t attempting to right the wrongs of the criminal justice system. It’s not activism, it’s not even vengeance, and it’s not an answer. The Naming is simply the only thing left to do. When the police arrest the most famous Namer, Mary “Mistress”

Redding, they interrogate her for her reasons for murdering a white child. To each of the police's questions, Mary Redding just repeats the name of the one of the murdered children: "*Why did you do it?* J.D. Heroy. *He was just a child. How could you?* J.D. Heroy. *Who are you working with? Who is your leader?* J.D. Heroy. *Do you feel any remorse for what you've done?* J.D. Heroy. *What is it you people want?* J.D. Heroy" (Adjei-Brenyah 9). After several hours of this, Mary Redding offered one statement in response to their questions: "If I had words left in me, I would not be here" (Adjei-Brenyah 9). She says all this while her arm drips blood from the number five that she had carved into herself; her body was covered in fives. "The Finkelstein 5" does not offer a justification of Namings, the story has no interest in justifications, only that, eventually, after so much fear, there is nothing left but rage, hurt, and haunting, that necessitates action, even if that action won't lead to change

Emmanuel participates in a Naming both because of the drive he feels from Fela St. John and because he can no longer repress the anger and hurt that he has carried for years. Emmanuel lives his life with his Blackness in constant negation so that he can keep himself safe from the threat of white violence and vitriol. The characters in "The Finkelstein 5" exists on a "Blackness scale." When Emmanuel speaks on the phone he can "set the Blackness in his voice down to a 1.5 on a 10-point scale." Being a 1.5 enables Emmanuel to get a job interview. The story continues, "That morning, like every morning, the first decision [Emmanuel] made regarded his Blackness…In public, when people could actually see him, it was impossible to get his Blackness down to anywhere near a 1.5. If he wore a tie, wing-tipped shoes, smiled constantly, used his indoor voice,

and kept his hands strapped and calm at his side, he could get his Blackness as low as 4.0" (Adjei-Brenyah 1). Emmanuel constantly negotiates his Blackness, torn between being seen as threat when his Blackness scale is higher, but being stifled and repressed when the scale is lower. As the story progresses, Emmanuel lets his Blackness grow. He chooses to wear baggy pants and a backwards hat on the bus, rocketing his scale to 7.6. He lowers it when approached by a security guard in a mall by smiling. During the Naming, his Blackness rises to a complete 10.0. The 10.0 doesn't happen because Emmanuel is being violent, but because he finally fully allows himself to feel all of the anger and rage that he has been holding in: "he wondered if his rage would end; he imagined it leaking out of him" (Adjei-Brenyah 24).

Emmanuel negotiates his Blackness as a survival tactic in a racist and white supremist world. Because the logic of social death marks him as dangerous, Emmanuel, out of fear for his life, is forced to negotiate his Blackness. At a bus stop, Emmanuel can feel the fear of a white woman who is looking at him. Emmanuel knows that her fear can easily lead to his death, and so he smiles kindly at her. This smile serves to protect Emmanuel and is an action born of his own fear. When, as a child, Emmanuel is accused of shoplifting from a zoo's gift store, he responds by burning his baggy pants. When he speaks on the phone to a hiring manager, he pitches his voice to a "white" octave. When he is shopping for a shirt for the job interview, he maintains and easy smile, has unassuming body language, and makes sure that he gets a receipt. These instances allow Emmanuel to move through the world with a measure of safety from white fear and police violence. The Blackness scale in "The Finkelstein 5" recalls Brent Staples' essay,

"Just Walk on By: Black Men and Public Space." In this essay, Staples discusses the constant negotiation of Blackness in a world that presents a constant threat to his safety. Like Emmanuel, Staples knows that he is seen as a threat and must adjust his Blackness accordingly. They both also know, however, that the real threat in the world is to themselves at it comes at the hand of a white person calling the police, or the hand of a white person reaching for their gun when feeling threatened, or, even, in the roar of a chainsaw as a white man beheads five Black children for nothing more than existing. As the story progress, Emmanuel refuses more and more to stifle his Blackness. Each moment where his Blackness rises on the scale, he feels both fear of his life and liberation. By just existing in his Blackness, he can feel the white people around him become afraid, but he also feels a sort of relief within himself. Stifling himself and his Blackness was its own way of harm, showing that there is no way to reconcile Blackness in a system where to be Black is always considered a threat, no matter how low the score on the scale is.

Despite the release that Emmanuel feels during the Naming, "The Finkelstein 5" resists giving such a simple example as violence of the answer to racism and white violence. In fact, Emmanuel can't bring himself to finish the Naming. He and a group of other Black people have targeted a young white couple making out in their car to attack. Emmanuel breaks the car windows with a bat and helps his friend, Boogie, drag them out of the car. With tears in his eyes and the screams of the couple in his ears, Emmanuel begs the white couple to say Fela St. John's name over and over. He howls, "SAY IT FOR ME. I BEG OF YOU [sic]" (Adjei-Brenyah 23). As the couple chants "Fela St.

John," Emmanuel continues to yell: "tell me you love her…tell me I'm crazy. I'm begging you. Say her name" (Adjei-Brenyah 24). The couple's compliance, however, can't quell the rage inside of Emmanuel nor heal the wounds of his soul. Rather than taking his bat to the couple, he bangs it against the ground and screams. At one point, he meets the eyes of the white woman as she whispers, "Fela St. John," and while this doesn't spark doubt into Emmanuel, it does further his confusion. Boogie asks Emmanuel for the bat, but he refuses to hand it over, confusion and rage roiling inside of him. When Boogie steps towards the couple with a box cutter, Emmanuel screams, "I don't know what to do!" (Adjei-Brenyah 25) and swings the bat into Boogie's flank. This declaration serves as a thesis for "The Finkelstein 5." The Naming doesn't heal anything, it doesn't bring justice, it doesn't fix any systems or racism, but nothing else works either.

"The Finkelstein 5" ends with Emmanuel being killed by the police during the Naming, emphasizing that there can be no satisfactory resolution to systems of oppression, there isn't any justice. The police yell at him to drop the bat. He does. He puts his hands up. And with a half-finished utterance of "Fela St. John," the police shoot him. In the moment before his death, Emmanuel feels his Blackness rise to an "almighty 10.0" (Adjei-Brenyah 26). Emmanuel's death happens in slow motion:

> He heard a boom like the child of thunder. He saw his own brain burst ahead of him. Hardy red confetti. His blood splashed all over the pavement and the couple. He saw the Finkelstein Five around him: Tyler Mboya, Akua Harris, J.D. Heroy, Marcus Harris, Fela St. John. They told him they loved him, still, forever. In that moment, with his final thoughts, his last feelings as a member of the world, Emmanuel felt his Blackness slide and plummet to an absolutely nothing point nothing" (Adjei-Brenyah 26).

At the end, the specters of the Finkelstein Five absolve Emmanuel; he has done something, anything. Although Emmanuel couldn't bring them justice, and in fact never sought to, the blessing and the love of the Finkelstein five carry him through his violent death.

"The Finkelstein 5" comments on and confronts social justice efforts, despite not offering any sort of answer. Rhetorics of the Black Lives Matter movement are spattered throughout the story. The prosecutor even says of the "Finkelstein 5" to the jury, "please show us that they mattered" (Adjei-Brenyah 22). Emmanuel's repeated plea for the white couple to "say her name" is a direct reference to the social media movement of the same name that calls on individuals and systems to remember the names of Black women and girls who have been killed. These movements "[respond] to the social reality of state-sanctioned violence and punishment" against Black people (Battle 111). Where normally during the Naming ritual it is the Black instigators saying the name of one of the Finkelstein 5, Emmanuel puts the naming of Fela St. John on the white couple. He transposes his haunting onto the white couple and forces them to recognize the little girl's humanity.

The Say Her Name movement acts similarly. This movement brings the death of Black women and girls to the forefront of activist efforts because their lives have routinely been undervalued not just by white supremacy but also by racial justice advocates and movements. For the Black characters in "The Finkelstein 5," however, the rhetorics of Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name, no longer mean anything. The characters protested during the Dunn trial, and it didn't lead to anything. Speeches and

hashtags didn't do anything. "The Finkelstein 5" is about what happens when symbolic protest and words fail. The Naming ritual is what is left, and even that, as the character Mary Redding knows, won't change anything. Saying Fela St. John's name will not bring her back to life. Even as Emmanuel demands that the white couple say her name, it is abundantly clear that this is not enough to ease any pain that Emmanuel feels, or that the white couple will walk away from their attack recognizing the humanity of a little girl. "The Finkelstein 5" uses all the calling cards of the Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name movements, but it expresses disillusionment with these movements because after years and decades of radical activism, there may be, on paper, more liberation, but Black people are still killed, and their deaths are still minimalized. For "The Finkelstein 5" there is a limit to the effects of activism, especially just protests and social media posts. In the short story, the only recourse left for the characters is the naming rituals, and while the story ends before the reader can see the effects of the Namings on systemic racism, there isn't much hope for change.

"The Finkelstein 5" hurts to read. The humor is jagged and sharp. The body horror is visceral and gut-wrenching. Emmanuel's howls of rage and anguish is a catharsis that kills. The phantasmal Finkelstein 5 haunt each page. This short story stands apart from so much other racial justice fiction, and even oppositional horror, because it doesn't offer a respite or an answer to any of the social horror that it presents. Instead, "The Finkelstein 5" offers an acknowledgement and a space to embrace the absolute rage and pain that comes after decades and centuries of racialized killings. It does not ask the

reader to forgive, only to feel, the death of these children. The short story demands that the reader live in Emmanuel's pain, if only for a few pages.

Conclusion: Healing, Hope, and Horror

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, the Black community surrounding the intersection where he was killed erected a memorial that features flowers, public art, and spontaneous altars. The community occupied the space by putting up barricades that blocked traffic and would not allow police to enter. It is considered by many to be a sacred space and a space where George Floyd's value is never in question. But the logic of social death, and white fear, wormed its way in all the same. The intersection of 38th St and Chicago has been painted as a place of crime and danger in the years since Floyd's death. There have been fatal shootings, and muggings, and while these crimes did occur, they have become the overarching narrative surrounding the memorial. Articles, and even Wikipedia, frequently point out the juxtaposition of a "sacred space" and a place of high crime. The Star Tribune covered how local business suffered from continued violence and damages from the riots (Williams 2022), the New York Times framed the tension between citizens and police at the Square as a "war" (Eligon and Arango 2021), and the Minnesota Reformer positioned activists in the Square as "bullies" (Winter 2021). Although it is still very much a place where people live, there are warnings to tourists who want to visit the space to keep their bags close and hide all valuables. White fear has wormed its way into a sacred space. The George Floyd Memorial demonstrates how no

matter the size of the protests or the outpouring of pain, the state continues to paint Black people and their communities as dangerous. Even a place of mourning isn't immune.

Destroyer and "The Finkelstein 5" demonstrate how the state can justify the deaths of Black youths, and the pain and rage that follows in the wake of those deaths. The children in these pieces of fiction are both representatives of the future, or the potential for a future. In *Destroyer*¸ the child lives, in a sense. In "The Finkelstein 5," the children are a haunting. All of them are deeply mourned and, like the murder of Trayvon Martin and the teenagers that Bernhard Goetz shot, all of them were seen as threats and figured as the monsters of white fear. Where *Destroyer* engages with Afrofuturism and imagines life outside racialized killings, "The Finkelstein 5" confronts the possibility that maybe there isn't a future, at least not within the systems that currently exist. Although *Destroyer* and "The Finkelstein 5" offer completely different approaches to Black death, they both emphasize the open wounds that such deaths leave in their wake. Grief, rage, and fear permeate both stories and make the horror of the murder of Black children impossible to ignore or to diminish.

Oppositional horror calls upon horror fiction to put away old and tarnished prejudiced tropes that have permeated the genre for so long. Oppositional horror denies the Zelda's of *Pet Sematary* who are feared because of a disability. Oppositional horror denies the twist that the protagonist is actually a violent schizophrenic and was the killer all along (*High Tension* 2003). Instead, Oppositional Horror insists that horror is generated from the world that we already live in, a world that already sees whole populations as less than human, as monstrous, as a walking, talking doomsday-clock

threat. Where state power promotes the fear of marginalized populations like the Black people so that it can maintain economic and social control over those populations, oppositional horror emphasizes that the true fear is for those systems that would rather commit horrendous violence that acknowledge the personhood of marginalized populations. Sometimes oppositional horror offers bright futures and conceptions of new worlds and ways of existing, such as in *Destroyer*, and sometimes oppositional horror dwells on the festering sore of the world that exists and the irreparable harm that comes from centuries of dehumanization and discrimination as in "The Finkelstein 5." But nonetheless, oppositional horror refuses to perpetuate social death and the state machinations that have caused so much real, lived horror.

CONCLUSION

EXPOSING THE ARTIFICE OF WHITE SUPREMACY WITH CAMP, DRAG, AND FILTH

It's embarrassing to be solemn and treatise-like about Camp. One runs the risk of having, oneself, produced a very inferior piece of Camp.

-*Susan Sontag*, Notes on Camp

The pages of this dissertation have been dedicated to the nuances of the horror genre and how horror is a facet of the everyday lives of marginalized communities. Much attention has been paid to the emotional payout of body horror, terror, and relentless death. However, it cannot go without saying that a large swath of the horror genre provokes laughter, or a chuckle, or a mirthy smile by coupling the grotesque with the absurd. Just like the lives of the marginalized, oppositional horror isn't limited to only the most depressing elements of horror. So much of the horror genre deploys aesthetics of Camp and kitsch, or, for some Latinx works, *rasquachismo*, in order to both disgust and entertain. More than that, Camp horror (not to be confused with horror that takes place at camp) often challenges cliches, stereotypes, and expectations by demonstrating their inherent artificiality. Oppositional horror deploys camp much as it does hauntings or body horror; to resist those power structures that oppress the marginalized.

Camp, not a subgenre but a sensibility, takes form upon the congruence of sincerity and exaggeration. The resulting artifice births a Camp aesthetic. Susan Sontag, in her *Notes on Camp* (1964), attempts to nail the jello that is Camp to the metaphoric telephone post. Camp resists definition because Camp, as a sensibility and not a genre or art style with expectations or norms, is something ascribed, not done. As Justice Potter Stewart once said about hardcore pornography, you know it when you see it. Despite this nature, Sontag dares to offer these claims: "Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the 'off' of things being what they are not" and "the whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious" (3, 10). Camp as a political tool (although Sontag would disagree that this is possible) then draws attention to the fact that white supremacy and the logic of social death are completely artificial. They are based on nothing but a false history, the arbitrary creation of race (and racism), and self-serving narratives of savagery and violence. Camp exaggerates and makes white supremacy and social death into darkly humorous topics that destabilize their power.

Oppositional Camp horror exposes the artifice of systems of power by making the horror of them absurd. Whereas preceding chapters of this project demonstrated that making oppression into something truly terrifying and grotesque reveals the true face of social death, oppositional Camp horror flips the script. What social death prescribes as monstrous is actually just full of hot air. What white supremacy deems is dangerous or less-than is actually no more than a fart in the wind. Horror already relies on artifice to be effective. The blood is "blood," the guts are "guts," and the fear is "fear." All elements of

fictional horror are manufactured based on what is perceived to be horrifying to its consumers. When the logic of social death fails to be scary—when that artifice fails—then the fear that it is attempting to embody becomes comical and exaggerated in that failure. In the 1983 film *Sleepaway Camp*, it is revealed that our quiet protagonist, Angela, was born male and her aunt forced her to dress and act like a "girl." The film blames Angela's homicide streak on forced transgenderism, but the film is so over the top, so exaggerated, and so ridiculous, that the reveal of Angela's genitals while she holds a severed head aloft, fails to reinforce the narrative of the dangerous transgender person. The film proposes Angela's murderousness in complete sincerity, and in that failed sincerity, becomes Camp. Oppositional Camp horror reveals the falsehood of the narratives propagated by systems of power that are used to bolster white supremacy and social death.

The interplay of Camp and horror, the gross and the humors, challenge prescriptive gender roles and racist caricatures by exposing the white supremacy for the artifice that it is. This conclusion analyzes the political performances of two alternative drag performances as a final demonstration of oppositional horror as a tool of resistance. Alternative drag performers[5], self-labeled monsters, embody oppositional Camp horror because they reveal the artifice of the taboo, the disgusting, and the horrifying. Further, they often imbue sensuality or playfulness into the grotesque, resulting in a simultaneous desire for the monstrous while rejecting it (Shildrick). Or, just as often, they make what is

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[5] Adam Reedy defines alternative drag: "alternative drag aesthetics may be described broadly as those which exist outside of traditional aesthetics…alternative drag styles are those where risk taking and experimentation with aesthetic are emphasized over a stereotypical feminine presentation" (11)

mundane or normative into something weird and off-putting. These monsters imbue Camp aesthetics of the exaggerated, the extravagant, and the odd and strange into their performances. They chose to intentionally other their bodies, to place themselves in abjection, in order to destabilize what white supremacy makes seem normal, especially along gendered, and racialized topics. The monsters of this conclusion, Landon Cider and HoSo Terra Toma, deploy the grotesque and the sensual to expose how racist and gendered narratives are products of oppressive power systems.

Drag displaces the normative body through exaggerated gender expression and often an embrace of glitz, glamor, and extravagance that further marks their bodies as "done up," and performed. Monsters like Landon and HoSo further displace the notion of a normative body by positioning their monstrosity as desirable or at least impossible to ignore--no monster left in the closet. Monstrosity has long been prescribed onto persons and populations through colonialism and racism in service of white supremacy. The construction of the monstrous works as a mechanism of control for dominant power structures (Shildrick 169). The monsters of alternative drag imbue their performances with critiques of the dominant, heteronormative culture. José Esteban Muñoz characterizes these critiques as terrorist acts: "performing the nation's internal terrors around race, gender, and sexuality" (108). Drag monsters place themselves in abjection in an attempt to resist the dehumanization of their identities at the hands of white supremacy.

Drag, as an art form made of exaggeration and artifice, possesses an endemic Camp sensibility in a way that most other art must almost stumble into. *The Boulet*

Brothers' Dragula, like the more mainstream *RuPaul's Drag Race*, is a drag competition show dedicated to elevating the voices of drag performers, providing a platform for their artistic expression, and creating exposure for artists. *Dragula* in particular offers a venue for the monsters of drag who may struggle to perform their challenging art in more traditional venues. As the opening theme of the show states, the core tenets of *Dragula* are, "drag, filth, horror, glamor." The contestants must uphold these tenets while performing a variety of challenges. Of the show, scholar Adam Reedy states, "these self-identified monsters utilize their subjective experiences and bodies to interpret and evolve new meanings of who and what monsters may be, constructing a platform together to elevate their voices and showcase monsters as embodied and praised queer peoples" (1-2). Monstrosity has long been leveraged against marginalized peoples (see Angela in *Sleepaway Camp* (1983), or the exaggerated deformity of Zelda in *Pet Sematary* (1989), or the cannibal depictions of Indigenous peoples in *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980)). The monsters on *Dragula* are not only reclaiming their identities, but proving that even monsters are not just human, but desirable and worthy of praise. Landon and HoSo both embrace monstrosity as an act of resistance against the monstrosity that was prescribed to their identities by systems of power.

Landon's performance on the second episode of season three of *Dragula* begins like this: a low, heavy beat rips through the darkness, mist curling around the strong legs of a mariachi singer. Slowly, we ascend over his body; his broad chest, his musculature, the defined veins of his neck, the blood (shiny and plastic) pouring from a gaping slash. Finally, we see his face. It is beautiful. It is terrifying. From a pale and cruel grin

protrudes two dripping fangs. The vampire mariachi beholds you, his gaze unnerving and relentlessly erotic. Landon Cider, a drag king in all of his glory, stands upon the stage with all the power and stature of a bull. He drinks blood from a bottle, it drips down his face and neck. The label reads, "f*ck your wall." Slowly, he strips down, peeling away the white and gold filigree of his *traje de charro* to reveal a leather harness and codpiece. The painted body suit outlines every hard muscle. Landon reaches into the bulging codpiece, pleasure coursing through his face, and pulls out a burrito wrapped in tinfoil. He eats it, holding your gaze.

Figure 10: Frijole Fellatio

Figure 11: Landon Cider's Mariachi

Landon's performance as a Mariachi vampire both functions as a sensual burlesque show and an act of resistance against anti-Mexican and anti-immigrant sentiment. He first performed this character on *Dragula* in 2019 and then again in a Youtube video titled, "Landon performs his Mariachi Burlesque Mix," uploaded in 2020

on his Youtube channel. Both performances emphasize Landon's sensuality, pride in his Mexican-American identity, and his firm stance against President Donald Trump's proposed wall along the U.S./Mexico border. Landon combines the exaggerated performance of drag and burlesque with his sincere and furious anger against anti-immigrant sentiment. Melding these with the playfulness of the burrito-eating and his fan painted with a trumpet on it and the horror of the vampire results in a Camp sensibility that acts as both a bold declaration of self-identity and a firm "fuck you" to white supremacy.

Landon Cider's "Mariachi Mix" performance embodies the grotesque elements of horror as well as the humor and artifice of drag. He uses both to create resistance to racism and gender expectations. The hyper-masculine bodysuit that Landon strips down to draws attention to the farce of the masculine body while at the same time evoking the perceived strength and power of masculinity. Jae Basiliere states that, "by engaging explicitly in hegemonic masculinity—that is, the form of masculine expression that is most valued within an American cultural context—...drag kings are reclaiming a space to separate masculinity from sexist oppression" (981). Landon's performance presents the hegemonic masculine body as a sensual subject, one that strips and performs symbolic frijole-filled fellatio. Masculinity becomes a category that can be performed, rather than an intrinsic truth to a certain gender.

More than that, though, Landon is performing the specific masculinity of the mariachi performer, a distinctly Mexican and Mexican-American profession and performers of the *ranchero* music genre. Originating in the state of Jalisco, Mexico,

mariachi performers represent a masculine ideal that centers strength, bravery, and a loyalty to Mexican nationalism (Mulholland 361). Mariachera (women Mariachi performers) similarly replicate Mexican nationalism and colonial ideals because of their reputation of having light skin, piety, and cleanliness (Mulholland 2016). At the same time, mariachera exist in a state of subversion, even as they replicate traditional feminine *mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness). Mulholland writes, "these women slip into the in-between spaces of normative identity constructs, sometimes overtly but most often subtly, to challenge and undermine the reproduction of stable mutable categories of gender and sexuality" (360). As a drag king, Landon Cider embodies both the mariachero and the mariachera while existing as neither. The hyper-masculine bodysuit exposes the artifice of the macho mariachero, but it also defies the femininity of the mariachera.

Landon's performance of the Mariachi Vampire does not just queer Mexican nationalism and the mariachi figures, but also queers the white heteronormativity of drag culture. While early drag and ball culture was started by Black, Latinx, and transpeoples, the mainstream representation of drag has become white, cis, and even heteronormative (Prins 2021). Although Landon still emulates the glamor and beauty of traditional mariachi *traje de charro* (the clean white or black uniform with gold filigree), his distinctly Latinx monstrosity challenges the white homonormativity of mainstream drag. Latinxs and Mexican men are already made monstrous through the logic of social death. Donald Trump's labeling of Mexican men as "bad hombres" and rapists summarizes the demonization of Latinx men. Landon's monstrosity, and more specifically the Camp aesthetics of that monstrosity, expose the falseness of the narrative of the violent

Mexican. He does this through both the eroticism of the burlesque performance but also notably through the humor of his act. He exalts in the drinking of blood, but it comes from a prop beer bottle that reads “f*ck your wall.” This calls to the narrative of the drunk Mexican, but that is turned on its head by the vampirism. And then, the culmination of the act, the consumption of his own “big burrito,” both plays again with the stereotype of a Mexican but, by making it erotic, makes it into nonsense. Landon’s Mariachi Vampire challenges gendered representations of Mexican nationalism while embracing that same image of the quintessential Mexican in order to resist the whiteness of drag and the insidious narrative of the dangerous Mexican man--and looks gorgeous doing it.

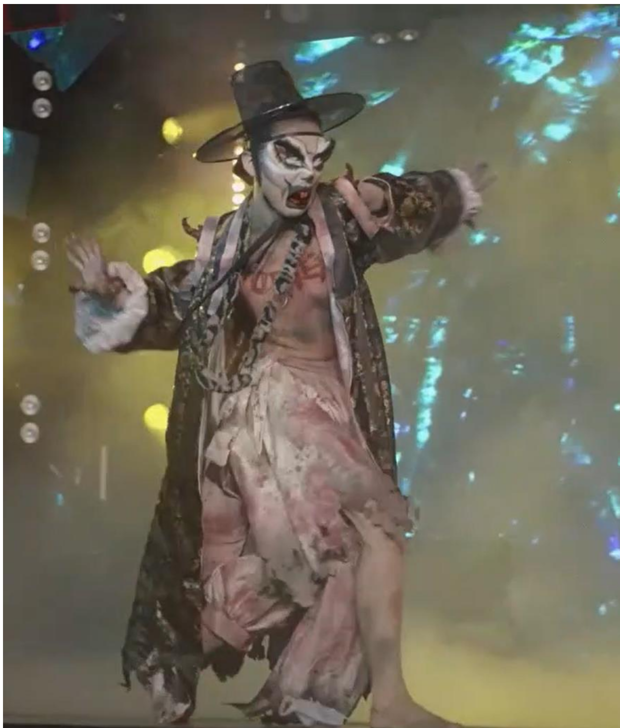
HoSo Terra Toma’s performance calls on monstrosity for a similarly subversive purpose but is focused almost entirely on race and the perpetuated beliefs that Asians and Asian-Americans are nefarious, devious, dog-eaters who caused COVID-19. While Landon’s performance evoked sensuality and eroticism, HoSo’s embodiment of filth intentionally provoked the audience to confront the grotesque caricature of Asians (and in HoSo’s case, Koreans) that white supremacy created. Where Landon challenged masculinity and the image of the sexually deviant Mexican man by making it an enticing figure, HoSo’s use of horror and Camp lambasts the systems of power that enforce pernicious stereotypes. Even more, they force the audience to be participants in white supremacist imagery. We, the audience, must confront something that is deeply uncomfortable, not just because of gore and guts, but because we immediately recognize

the stereotypes in front of us and must attempt to answer HoSo's most damning question: "what else do you know about me?"

First, we the audience see mist coiling around a dark figure. Light spreads out across the stage and a twirling paper parasol, the traditional Korean *jiusan*, comes into view. HoSo's face emerges, and their mouth is covered by the all-too-familiar blue medical facemask that has become a symbol for the COVID-19 pandemic. HoSo begins an exaggerated dance, jumping and shaking their arms. They are barefoot and wearing the robes of a *mudang*, a Korean shaman, but the robe is ripped and covered in blood. The word "oriental" runs across their chest, written in blood. They gnash their rat-prosthetic-teeth at the camera and pull a chain taut against their neck. They flick their tongue. Last, HoSo reveals a silver platter with the gutted body of a stuffed toy dog. Its intestines dangle out. Exalting in each bite, HoSo shoves the jiggling slabs of *something* into their mouth. The fake intestines look far too real. The performance reaches its crescendo when HoSo lets the intestines dribble from their mouth and they keep their gaze firm, unrelenting, on the camera.

Figure 12: HoSo Eating the Stuffed Dog

Figure 13: HoSo's Filth Performance



HoSo performed this act for the season four finale of *Dragula*, specifically in the "filth" category, as opposed to the glamor or horror category, making his performance a bold claim that racism and prejudice are the products of filth. Reedy describes the filth portion of *Dragula* as, "gut-wrenching, a mixture of unexpected abject horrors and uncomfortable textures and fluids, evoking the sights, activities, and embodiments we typically chose to turn our eyes from" (3). Where in the past *Dragula* contests have used the filth category to get absolutely disgusting (Biqtch Puddin' drinking mop water from a janitor's bucket), deviant (Victoria Black pantomiming necrophilia), and nauseating (Saint gorging on fake cat litter and feces), HoSo's performance stands apart from previous contestants' performance because it positions racism at the core of filth. The performance makes racism exist on the same level as the disgust of eating real wet hair and fake cat feces.

HoSo's filth performance flows between temporalities: the blue face mask harkens the immediate presence of Covid-19 in the year 2020 when the performance was filmed, and their clothing mimics the traditional religious attire of the Korean shamans, *mudang,* calling upon the past. The caricature that HoSo embodies roots itself in the past while also being only possible in the fallout of the global pandemic. Li and Nicholson, authors of "When "Model Minorities" Become "Yellow Peril,"" contend that while some scholarship has argued that Asians and Asian Americans have been able to more easily assimilate into dominant White American culture, the intense racialization of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that Asians and Asian-Americans are instead "forever foreigners" and forever othered (2021). Further, they state, "Asian immigrants have long

been associated with disease and filth and threat to Whites" (4). HoSo embodies the racialization of COVID-19 and the longstanding racism against Asians and Asian-Americans. By removing their facemask early in the performance to reveal their pointed rat teeth, they mirror the reveal that orientalism and racism against Asians and Asian-Americans never went away and was only lurking behind the facade of the model minority.

Exaggeration bolster's HoSo's performance: the exaggeration of their movements, the exaggerated face makeup, the exaggeration of racist imagery. Rather than the exaggeration diminishing the performance, it instead emphasizes the ridiculousness of the racist caricature and the artifice that it relies upon. The exaggeration and the artifice come to a head when HoSo eats from the stuffed dog and gnaws on what is clearly a bone meant as a chew toy for dogs. HoSo references the widespread villainizing of Asians eating dogs as well as the "images and videos of Chinese or other Asians eating insects, snakes, or mice, which are uncommon in China and irrelevant to the current outbreak" (Li and Nicholson 6). These videos and related anecdotes were used to "prove" that the Chinese started COVID-19 by eating what Western culture considers taboo or unsanitary. The use of the stuffed dog is jarring against the full caricature that HoSo presents in their performance. The ripped *mudang* robes and the rat teeth fit better with the racist caricature of Asians perpetuated by the logic of social death that dehumanizes them. HoSo's appearance inserts itself neatly into the white gaze of Asians, but the stuffed dog disrupts the image of the diseased and demonic Asian; it pokes a hole in the racism while also poking fun at it.

Rather than using a realistic dog or bone, HoSo's choice to use what is clearly a stuffed toy adds a dark, humorous stain to the performance. Where other filth performances on *Dragula* intentionally go for the gross-out (the image of Biqtch Puddin' eating wet matted hair still churns my gut), HoSo refuses the audience access to the disgust that white supremacy already inflicts on Asians and Asian-Americans. The silly little stuffed animal means that the disgust doesn't come from the act of a Korean person consuming a dog, but rather it comes from the audience knowing that we have been told that Koreans eat dogs and being confronted with the bigotry of that belief. The humor of the stuffed dog and the severity of the stereotype undercut each other and become Camp. Although the subject matter of HoSo's performance could not be more serious, the Camp aesthetics of their performance turn the white supremacist gaze back on itself. HoSo challenges white supremacy to see the filth of itself.

Landon Cider and HoSo Terra Toma, through their drag, expose white supremacy for its artifice. Both artists embody race as a performative category. They reveal the rickety structure holding up the stereotypes of sexually deviant Mexicans and infected Asians. Both performances challenge audiences to confront their understanding of race and of gender. Horror plays as integral a part in that challenge as the exaggeration of humor of their drag. One of the core guiding principles of oppositional horror is that it exposes the logic of social death by making it strange, unnatural, and grotesque. Camp operates in much a similar way by destabilizing what white supremacy purports as real or true—in fact, it is nothing more than "real" and "true," completely and utterly false. Camp horror asserts the value and importance of marginalized communities, just as body

horror, haunting, and monstrosity. Oppositional horror, be it the Camp of a mariachi vampire or the struggle for survival under the Arizona sun, proclaims that the lives of the marginalized are not only important, but deeply, earnestly, and tenderly valued.

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