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MATERNAL MELODRAMA AND MODERN HORROR:
GENRE HYBRIDITY IN SOUTHERN FILM

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

SARA MARCELLA WILLIAMS

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation establishes the groundwork for a new genre of Southern film – a hybrid genre that I call Southern maternal horror. By integrating key elements from the genres of maternal melodrama and modern horror into Southern narratives, Southern maternal horror uses the central ambivalence found in both genres – manifesting as a desire to both return to and escape from one’s maternal origins – to challenge Southern nostalgia. Specifically, within its distinctly Southern framework, this hybrid genre frequently disrupts the romanticized notions of the Old South typically found in classic Southern films such as *Gone With the Wind*: idealizations of the Southern lady, the plantation home, and the land itself. This dissertation examines these anti-nostalgic tendencies through the work of Julia Kristeva – particularly her concept of the (maternal) abject – alongside film genre scholars such as Carol Clover, Barbara Creed, Mary Ann Doane, David Greven, E. Ann Kaplan, and Linda Williams. I propose here that Southern maternal horror began in 1964 with Robert Aldrich’s *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* – just a few years after the birth of modern horror in 1960 – and not only is still prevalent throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century (in films such as *The Descent*, *Silent Hill*, and *The Skeleton Key*), but continues to gain momentum in other areas of contemporary popular culture as well, evident in television series such as *American Horror Story*.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation will examine the juncture between the genres of maternal melodrama and modern horror in Southern film, focusing on a number of films from the mid-1960s to the present. Specifically, I will show how certain elements of these two genres converge in film as a unique – and distinctly Southern – hybrid genre that I will call Southern maternal horror. I posit that films within the Southern maternal horror hybrid genre blend components of maternal melodrama and modern horror to disrupt romanticized notions of the Old South – the Southern ‘lady,’ the plantation (both the house and the land upon which it stands) as an idyllic home sweet home, and the idealization of the mammy figure – via abject maternal bodies. Thus, a central focus of this dissertation will be the analyses of these maternal bodies in various manifestations – whether in physiological form, a house (or small town), or even the earth itself – throughout these films. Through this examination of these complex representations of Southern, abject maternal bodies, this dissertation will also investigate the inherently conflicting tendencies within both genres manifesting as a strong ambivalence toward a return to maternal origins. Accordingly, focusing this study on (the return to) *Southern* maternal origins will culminate in an assessment of the extent to which the proverbial ghosts of the South’s past still haunt the present via nostalgia typically found in classic Southern film.

Though maternal melodrama and modern horror may appear entirely disparate at first glance, they share considerable common ground. For instance, neither genre garnered a great

deal of scholarly attention until the late twentieth century¹. Overall, it seems, the melodramatic genre was destined to receive little notice because of its “association with a mass and, above all, female audience” (Gledhill 6). As a subgenre of melodrama directed even more purposefully at a female audience, the woman’s film – a category encapsulating all films focusing on a female protagonist and dealing with “problems defined as ‘female’ ...domestic life, the family, children, self-sacrifice” (Doane 3) – was considered “one of the most despised and neglected genres” in popular culture for most of the twentieth century (Cook 248)². As E. Ann Kaplan points out in *Motherhood and Representation*, when she “first conceived of this book in 1982, it was still true to say that the Mother, as subject in her own right, had received relatively scant scholarly treatment. The Mother was in a sense everywhere...but always in the margins” (3).

Maternal Melodrama

Thus, the maternal melodrama, the “most exemplary subgroup” of the woman’s film, went largely ignored until the late 1980s and early 1990s; at that time, scholars such as Kaplan, Linda Williams, and Mary Ann Doane began analyzing the genre, its defining features, and evolution (Doane 5)³. Overall, the maternal melodrama emphasizes “the plight of the mother with respect to her child, the necessary separations, losses, and humiliations she must suffer” (Doane 90). In fact, suffering seems to be a key term in the genre’s definition; overall, the maternal melodrama relies upon the “ritual of maternal suffering” (Viviani 169). Accordingly,

¹ Thomas Elsaesser’s “‘Tales of Sound and Fury’: Observations on the Family Melodrama” (1972) is regarded as the first “account of film melodrama” as a whole (Gledhill 7).

² Doane (73), Williams (“‘Something Else’” 309), and Pam Cook also explore how “the women’s picture is differentiated from the rest of cinema by virtue of its construction of a ‘female point-of-view’ ...and its specific address to a female audience” (248).

³ See Marcia Landy’s *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama* (1991); Linda Williams’ work on the genre of melodrama (“Melodrama Revised”), racial melodramas (*Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J Simpson*), and maternal melodramas (“‘Something Else Besides a Mother’: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama”); also, “Mothering, Feminism and Representation: The Maternal in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film 1910-40,” by E. Ann Kaplan.

the three interconnected characteristics of the maternal melodrama that will receive the most attention in this dissertation are directly related to this duty to suffer: the theme of maternal sacrifice, Doane's scenarios of separation, and the three mother figure archetypes as outlined by E. Ann Kaplan: the "all-sacrificing 'angel in the house,' the over-indulgent mother, satisfying her own needs, and finally, the evil, possessive and destructive all-devouring" mother (*Motherhood* 48).

A brief sketch of maternal melodrama's birth and evolution illustrates the interrelated nature of these three features, as well as their fundamental links to the development of the modern horror – and, consequently, I posit, the Southern maternal horror – genre later in the 1960s. While D.W. Griffith shaped the future of Southern film through his 1915 epic, *The Birth of a Nation*, he also directed one of the first American maternal melodramas: *Way Down East* (1920) (Viviani 174)⁴. Essentially, Griffith's *East* set the mold for one of maternal melodrama's three mother archetypes: the 'angel of the house.' Kaplan explains that Griffith was the "director who establishe[d] par excellence" the idealized woman as "a self-sacrificing, pure, passive Mother figure" (*Motherhood* 125). Following its burgeoning success in the 1920s, the maternal melodrama was at its most popular (and most prolific) throughout the thirties and forties. During this period, Doane points out, maternal melodramas reflect that "motherhood, far from being the simple locus of comfort and nostalgic pleasure...is a site of multiple contradictions" (82).

One film in particular from this era of the genre's evolution, King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937), has received a great deal of attention over the last twenty years insofar as it encapsulates these contradictions. Gesturing at the final scene – in which Stella (Barbara Stanwyck) stands

⁴ Released that same year, Frank Lloyd's *Madame X* is generally regarded alongside Griffith's *East* as the first films of the American version of the maternal melodrama (Viviani 174).

outside in the rain, happily watching her daughter's wedding through a window, before walking away, smiling, (presumably) out of her daughter's life forever – Linda Williams points out that “it is as if the task of the narrative has been to find a ‘happy’ ending that will exalt an abstract ideal of motherhood even while stripping the actual mother of the human connection on which that ideal is based” (“‘Something Else’” 308)⁵. Consequently, the acts of maternal sacrifice so central to the maternal melodrama narrative typically manifest in what Doane describes as scenarios of separation. Doane explains that these circumstances include “scenarios of separation, of separation and return, or of threatened separation – dramas which play out all the permutations of the mother/child relation” (73). Accordingly, variations of each of these three scenarios will be examined throughout this dissertation; significantly, the insertion of modern horror into these narratives complicates these scenarios in distinctly abject ways.

Overall, though, the mother's status as an ‘angel,’ ‘over-indulgent,’ or downright destructive is determined in large part by her ability to separate herself from her child when that distance is deemed necessary by society. If the mother submits to these societal demands, Kaplan explains, then she is “represented as a basically ‘good’ figure” (“Mothering” 134). Consequently, the other two mother types – stemming from an unwillingness to break the bonds between mother and child, or initiate these scenarios of separation via an act of maternal sacrifice – began to gain traction in the final stages of the maternal melodrama's (supposed) lifespan. Throughout the 1940s, films such as *Now Voyager* (1942) and *Mildred Pierce* (1945) established narratives diverging from this ‘good mother’ paradigm and aligning closer with both the over-indulgent and destructive mother figures. Specifically, according to Kaplan, the works of both Fritz Lang and

⁵ In addition to Williams' “‘Something Else,’” other insightful analyses of *Stella Dallas* include Doane's *Desire to Desire*, Kaplan's “The Case of the Missing Mother,” and Whitney's “Race, Class, and the Pressure to Pass in American Maternal Melodrama,” which reads *Stella Dallas* as a passing narrative.

Alfred Hitchcock portray mothers as “blatantly monstrous, deliberately victimizing their children” (“Mothering” 134).

The Birth of Modern Horror & the Beginnings of Genre Hybridity

Appropriately, then, in terms of monstrous maternal figures, most horror genre scholars – including Clover, Wood, and Greven, among others⁶ – regard Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) as the origin of the modern horror era. Two basic factors distinguish horror’s classic era from the modern: the fundamental nature of the film’s primary antagonist, and the narrative’s resolution. For instance, the ‘villain’ in classic horror films was usually a monstrosity such as a vampire, werewolf, alien, radioactive mutant, or some other character easily identifiable as ‘abnormal.’ Furthermore, classic horror films generally ended in the obliteration of this threatening figure and the complete restoration of social order and stability.

Conversely, the modern horror film’s resolution typically “insists that the monster cannot be destroyed” (Wood 87). Also, beginning with *Psycho* and extending into the 1970s – noticeable in films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Carrie* (1976), and *Halloween* (1978) – the “narrative emphasis...turns inward, toward the home and interpersonal family dynamics”; the threat comes not from outside, but from within (Magistrale xiv). Overall, Wood argues that modern horror is “dominated by five recurrent motifs”: “a. The Monster as human psychotic (*Psycho*),” “b. The revenge of Nature (*The Birds*),” “c. Satanism, diabolic possession (*The Exorcist*),” “d. The Terrible Child,” such as *Carrie*, and “e. Cannibalism (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*)” (180-181). In fact, variations on each of these motifs appear throughout this dissertation, reaffirming Wood’s assertion that “these apparently heterogeneous motifs are

⁶ Clover refers to *Psycho* as the “appointed ancestor of the slasher film” (23). Also, Wood proclaims that, since *Psycho*, “the Hollywood cinema has implicitly recognized Horror as both American and familial” (87).

drawn deeper together by a single unifying master-figure: the Family” (181). I argue that Southern maternal horror films rely on these motifs to disrupt the idealization of the Southern family – and, more specifically, the Southern mother.

Still, the significance of maternal figures in modern horror – or, more precisely, the significance of female characters as more than merely victims in modern horror – is, like maternal melodrama, a topic that received a dearth of scholarly attention until the early 1990s; Carol Clover’s *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (1992) alongside Barbara Creed’s 1993 *The Monstrous-Feminine* corrected this oversight. As one of the first substantial critical examinations of women’s roles within the genre, Creed notes in *Monstrous-Feminine* that “no one has presented a sustained analysis of the different faces of the female monster or the ‘monstrous-feminine’ in horror film” (3). Still, since these two landmark texts, little progress has been made in addressing the remaining “unanswered questions about female monstrosity” that Creed initially posed (*Monstrous-Feminine* 6).

Thus, while the broad, comparative analysis of horror and melodrama in general is not a new phenomenon⁷, David Greven’s 2011 *Representations of Femininity in American Genre Cinema* – which analyzes the merging of the woman’s film into modern horror – provides the basic guidelines for this dissertation’s focus on genre hybridity as a whole. Here, Greven claims that, contrary to popular belief, the woman’s film does not become a “moribund genre” in the early 1960s as assumed by many of its scholars; in fact, he suggests, the woman’s film “goes underground and transforms into the female-centered form of modern horror” (2). Furthermore, Greven argues, the modern horror genre “inherits the woman’s film’s anxieties over and

⁷ See Linda Williams’ “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” (1991), in which she extends Clover’s “notion of low body genres” to “include the sensation of the overwhelming pathos in the ‘weepee’” alongside the “body spectacle” of “horror’s portrayal of violence and terror” (703), thus likening the “excess” of “emotion” in melodrama to the excess of violence in horror (711).

conflictual wishes for return to the mother” (13). With this declaration, Greven challenges a major aspect of Creed’s *Monstrous-Feminine* argument: while acknowledging Creed’s assertion that the “primary fear at the core of the horror film genre is that the subject will be reengulfed by the terrifying figure of the archaic mother,” Greven counters that although a “palpable panic over strong maternal figures does indeed characterize modern horror, *an equally urgent desire for return to the mother* also informs the genre” (13; my emphasis).

Outlining this trend in films such as *Carrie* and the *Alien* series, Greven claims that the modern horror era, as well as its concomitant ambivalence toward the mother figure, ended in 1991 with Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* (2). Subsequently, Greven suggests, horror films of the twenty-first century have been “resolutely masculinist in their gendered attitudes” and, in fact, have gone “far from...the female-narrative roots” of modern horror (3). Conversely, I posit that many of these female-centered fundamentals of modern horror – inherited from the maternal melodrama – are thriving in this “post-post-modern phase” of the horror genre’s evolution (Greven 3)⁸. In fact, the majority of the films analyzed in this dissertation were released well after the decade that Greven deems as the end of the modern horror era. Therefore, while Greven’s argument regarding the absorption of the woman’s film into modern horror provides the foundation for my analysis of genre hybridity, my argument diverges from his in two significant ways: chronology and setting. Neither Greven, nor, for that matter, any other scholar, has paid special attention to this type of genre hybridity within Southern film.

The Object Mother, The Object South

⁸ Greven elaborates that the “post-9/11 decade of American film horror has been practically shaped by three kinds of films...the emergent torture-porn genre...; Asian horror and its ever-increasing American remakes (*The Ring...The Grudge...Black Water*); and the reboot-remake of previous horror classics” (144).

While the concept of the American South as an ‘internal other’ is, by no means, unprecedented, this dissertation elaborates upon this notion by positioning Southern maternal horror at the intersection of film, gender, and regional studies. Similar to the manner by which Jennifer Greeson asserts that the South “lies simultaneously inside and outside the national imaginary constructed in U.S. literature,” the South holds an equally complex position in the ‘national imaginary’ of modern horror film, too (3). In the “Urbanoia” section of *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, Clover explains that “an enormous proportion of horror takes as its starting point the visit or move of (sub)urban people to the country” – and this premise certainly rings true for most of the films analyzed here (124). Clover elaborates that rural areas – and especially rural Southern areas – are “a place where the rules of civilization do not obtain. People from the city are like us. People from the country...are people not like us” (124)⁹. Gesturing at precedents established in such films as *Deliverance* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Clover explains that interactions between urban and rural folks tend to culminate in conflicts “between haves and have-nots...between exploiters and their victims” (126); specifically, though – and even more relevant to this dissertation’s focus on the Southern Other – is the “confrontation, cast in almost Darwinian terms, of the civilized with the primitive” (131).

In this regard, the stereotypical ‘redneck’ figure in such Southern horror films as Clover examines aligns with the Kristevian abject – a focal point of chapters one and three here – insofar as what causes abjection is “what disrupts identity, system, order” (4). Kristeva

⁹ Clover elaborates that, within the horror genre, the “‘redneck’” has “achieved the status of a kind of universal blame figure...anxieties no longer expressible in ethnic or racial terms have become projected onto a safe target – safe not only because it is (nominally) white, but because it is infinitely displaceable onto someone from the deeper South or the higher mountains” (135). More recently, Vera and Gordon reaffirm that the “hostile redneck is a...character on whom racism and sexism can be projected. The members of the audience can reassure themselves that they do not resemble this brute, so therefore they must not be racists. This ignores the fact that racism is not necessarily a factor of education or class but permeates all levels of white American society” (42). See also Graham’s analysis of the “‘cracker’” as “racial debris, white trash” (5).

elaborates upon this concept in her 1982 *Powers of Horror*, explaining that *maternal* abjection occurs as a “violent...breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling” when one first “attempts to release the hold of maternal entity” (13; my emphasis). Physiologically speaking, the process of childbirth is read as a “violent act” in which the “nascent body tears itself away from the matter of maternal insides” (Kristeva 101). Accordingly, Creed posits, it is “this aspect of the pregnant body – [the] loss of boundaries – that the horror film emphasizes in its representations of the monstrous” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 58). Aligning with the ‘possessive’ mother paradigm within the maternal melodrama genre, the maternal figure in modern horror is considered “monstrous-feminine” when “by refusing to relinquish her hold on her child, she prevents it from taking up its proper place in relation to the symbolic” (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 12). Thus, we must trace the overlap between maternal melodrama and modern horror via the intersection of maternal abjection and the ‘secure yet stifling power’ of distinctly Southern maternal bodies in this hybrid genre.

In this regard, the inherently abject nature of maternal bodies – manifesting in various forms, including those other than that of the female body – becomes a vital part of my analysis of the Southern maternal horror genre. One embodiment in particular that emerges throughout this dissertation is Clover’s “Terrible Place,” which is “most often a house or tunnel” (30). Clover explains that although the Terrible Place initially appears to be a “safe haven...the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become...the walls that hold the victim in” (31). Therefore, the Terrible Place – which is “decidedly ‘intrauterine’ in quality” – aligns all the more with the ‘secure yet stifling’ power of maternal origins (Clover 48). Overall, I propose that this ambivalent longing for/fear of a return to maternal origins – and its connections to these

numerous expressions of Southern, abject maternal bodies in the films analyzed throughout this dissertation – disrupts nostalgic idealizations of the white woman, the (plantation) home, and the land itself so highly valued in classic Southern film.

Classic Southern Film

Appropriately, then, a glimpse back at the idealization of the (white) mother in Southern film directly relates to the same director credited with exemplifying the ‘angel of the house’ figure in American maternal melodrama as a whole: D.W. Griffith. Though Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) has been written about extensively¹⁰, my focus here is narrowed (as much as possible) to the film’s romanticized concept of the purity of the Southern white woman, and the Southern home (sweet home) as an idyllic “space of innocence” (Williams, *Race Card* 189). Specifically, I focus here on whether these romanticized representations still appear in contemporary film, and to what extent those manifestations act to subvert these precedents established by *The Birth of a Nation* a century ago¹¹.

Classifiable as a domestic (though, by no means, maternal) melodrama, *Birth of a Nation* hints at certain elements of horror, too. McHugh explains that, throughout his filmography, Griffith “positions the home, the family, and most especially the young, beautiful white woman as never really safe”; furthermore, she claims, Griffith “frequently shapes his dramas around the

¹⁰ According to Cripps, Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* became the “bridge between nineteenth-century Southern melodramatic and literary tradition and the new art of the cinema” (29). Also, see Linda Williams’ analysis of *Nation* in *Playing the Race Card*; specifically, her assertion that Griffith “trumped” the “first mass-culture version of the race card” played by Harriet Beecher Stowe by “inverting its racial polarities to show white women threatened by emancipated black men” (5). Essentially, Williams explains, Griffith’s *Nation* “converted an Uncle Tom-style sympathy for the sufferings of a black man to an anti-Tom antipathy for the black male sexual threat to white women” (*Race Card* 98). See also: Riche Richardson’s *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South*, in which he argues that *Nation* “gave rise to national cinema in the United States. . . . Even the title announces the film as one whose narrative holds national significance” (56).

¹¹ According to Davenport, Jr., *Nation* provided “what Southerners needed. . . a myth to replace the one shattered by the Civil War and Reconstruction” (24).

sudden conversion of domestic spaces from places of happiness and safety to death traps assailed by murderous predators from whom there is no escape” (91). In *Birth of a Nation*, though, the threat of violence to the home – and, even more so, to the body of the white woman – comes from black men. Coleman affirms that “while the violence of the Civil War was terrifying, its true horror, according to the film, came after in the form of unchecked, free Black men” (21). Film scholars gesture at the sequence known as ‘The Grim Reaping’ in particular as the point in *Nation*’s narrative at which this racial paranoia is carried to its “white supremacist extreme” (Guerrero 16). In keeping with the precedent established by what Richard King identifies as the Southern Family Romance – centered on the belief that the “ultimate challenge to the family romance was the sexual relationship of black men and white women” (37)¹² – the depiction of Gus, a freed black man, in this sequence likens the character to a “predator about to pounce upon a harmless animal” (Cripps 48). Conversely, the innocent, young Flora – the ‘pet sister’ of the (white, Southern) Cameron family – jumps off a cliff “to preserve her purity, rather than submit to the amorous advances of Gus” (Guerrero 16).

Southern Maternal Bodies

If *The Birth of a Nation* shaped the idealization of the purity of the white woman’s body, alongside the sacredness of the Southern home – especially in opposition to the supposed ‘threat’ of black men to both – in Southern film, then Victor Fleming’s 1939 adaption of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* underscores the sanctity of the white woman by connecting her

¹² “More than any other director, Griffith gave future moviemakers a model...and a rich romantic tradition that would define an Afro-American stereotype” (Cripps 29). “As frank racial propaganda, [*Nation*] is an elaborate construction of stereotypes, ranging from the loyal slave, the mammy, and the dancing bucks in the slave quarters of pre-Civil War days to the insolent, criminal, and free ‘brute negroes’ of Reconstruction” (Guerrero 15). In his 1973 *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, Donald Bogle asserts that Griffith’s epic was “the motion picture to introduce...the brutal black buck” (10). As a result, *Nation* “constitutes the grammar book for Hollywood’s representation of Black manhood and womanhood, its obsession with miscegenation, and its fixing of Black people within certain spaces...and into certain supporting roles...on the screen” (Diawara 3).

not only to the plantation home, but also to the land upon which that home is built. Of course, Scarlett's mother, Ellen, represents the convergence of the maternal melodrama's 'angel of the house' and the Southern Family Romance's idealization of the Southern white woman as a "quasi-Virgin Mary" figure (King 35)¹³. Additionally, when Scarlett declares to Rhett, "I want my mother! I want to go home to Tara!" she combines her desire for a return to maternal origins with her desire for (a return to) a sacred space – both the home and the land itself. As McPherson points out in *Reconstructing Dixie*, Scarlett "loves the land intuitively, for it is like her mother" (50; my emphasis). Broadly speaking, McPherson (citing Roberts) claims that Southerners "'extended their imagery of the sacrosanct white lady...to the land itself.' And on the 'land itself' was, not surprisingly, none other than the plantation home, a place that continues to be as central to representations of the South as the lady herself"¹⁴ (39). McPherson's assertion that the "figure of the southern woman...remains a key image around which other discourses of the South congeal" still rings true today (20). However, I posit that the subversion of this figure – via the Southern maternal horror hybrid genre, along with its many manifestations of abject, Southern maternal bodies – deserves far more attention than has been given to either of these genres separately, due to their associations with 'low culture.'

Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte and the Birth of Southern Maternal Horror

Following the genesis of modern horror in 1960 with Hitchcock's *Psycho*, I propose that 1964 marks the birth of Southern maternal horror with the release of Robert Aldrich's

¹³ In *Reconstructing Dixie*, McPherson notes that, in *Steel Magnolias*, Shelby & M'Lynn "map fairly neatly across the mother-daughter model sketched in" *Gone With the Wind*, "emerging as a sort of latter-day Ellen and Scarlett" (163). Conversely, in "The Southern-Fried Chick Flick: Postfeminism goes to the movies," Deborah Barker asserts that "M'Lynn combines the roles of Ellen and Mammy," and that for "a movie that seems otherwise oblivious to racial issues, *Steel Magnolias* revises the white southern mother/lady, giving her more of a hands-on position in her own household...Rather than simply reinscribing the elements of *Gone With the Wind* in a contemporary setting, as McPherson suggests...*Steel Magnolias* reconnects the white mother and daughter, warts and all, without the black mammy as the intermediary who plays the heavy – literally and figuratively" (100).

¹⁴ Diane Roberts, *The Myth of Aunt Jemima: Representations of Race and Region* (67).

Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte. Similar to several other films analyzed in this dissertation, *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* has decidedly non-Southern origins: in this case, Aldrich's 1962 film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* According to Peter Shelley, *Baby Jane* marks the origins of Grande Dame Guignol horror (1). Shelley explains that this subgenre of modern horror is an "amalgamation of two...seemingly contradictory concepts": the "grande dame" – who, in these films, is an "older actress...no longer considered leading lady material" – and the tradition of Grande Guignol theatre which "specialized in macabre shockers" (2). While Shelley, for the most part, dismisses *Sweet Charlotte*, remarking that Aldrich merely "re-cycle[d] many of the same elements" of *Baby Jane* and added the "southern locale" for "florid exoticism," I posit that *Sweet Charlotte* is significant as much more than a southern-fried knock-off of *Baby Jane* (57). Through its use of the two primary features of Grande Dame Guignol horror to challenge the ideal of the young, pure Southern belle, *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* becomes the first Southern maternal horror hybrid film.

In stark contrast to the wistful reminiscence of *Gone with the Wind*, *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* frames nostalgia as a destructive dysfunction. If *Gone with the Wind* is an "epic, picture-book-pretty, operatic fiction of the white self" – and, especially, the Southern white woman – then *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* subverts this romanticized notion by portraying the Southern belle as an infantilized, aging woman, throwing (sometimes deadly) tantrums, unable to care for herself, and unwilling to leave the plantation mansion which has become a surrogate maternal body of sorts (Vera and Gordon 23). Diverging from the festivities in the early scenes of *Gone with the Wind*, the merriment of a Southern soiree is tainted by a grisly murder within the first ten minutes of *Sweet Charlotte*.

The opening scene of Aldrich's film – taking place in 1927 – focuses on Sam Hollis (Victor Buono), confronting John Mayhew (Bruce Dern), a married man who's having an affair (and intends to elope) with Sam's teenage daughter, Charlotte. Sam demands that John end the relationship at the dance occurring at the Hollis House the following night. Obeying these commands, John meets Charlotte in the Hollis' summerhouse and breaks up with her. After Charlotte runs out, sobbing, an unseen attacker enters the summerhouse and murders John with a meat cleaver. As John's neck is slashed, his blood spurts onto a nearby angel statue – a rather obvious gesture at purity being soiled. Extending this metaphor of tainted innocence, in the next scene, as young Charlotte walks into the dance hall, the jazz band and partygoers fall silent when they notice the blood stain on the front of her dress. Although this presumably occurred as Charlotte was “cradling John's severed head in her lap,” it also “suggests the deflowering of a virgin” (Shelley 58).

The narrative then jumps to 1964 – Sam has long since died, but Charlotte (Bette Davis) has remained in the home; her only companion is her maid, Velma (Agnes Moorehead). Conflating race with class – typical of the Southern ‘school of decay’ films of this time period, when “blackness all but disappeared from the screen” (Graham 13)¹⁵ – Velma's status as ‘white trash’ acts as a substitute for racial difference. In fact, *Sweet Charlotte* presents an almost exclusively white cast. African-American characters – the members of the jazz band playing at the party, a few members of the crew who come to demolish the Hollis House, and the “packing ladies” hired to help Charlotte move – are peripheral at best. In terms of its predecessor, then,

¹⁵ For more on the Southern school of decay, see Peter A. Soderbergh's “Hollywood and the South, 1930-1960” – *Mississippi Quarterly*. 19:1 (Winter 1965-66): 1-19. Furthermore, according to Graham, the Southern ‘school of decay’ films were “immensely popular” during the “early years of the postwar civil rights movement,” telling tales of “decadent whiteness...gaudily made up, its death throes enacted in near-camp performances” (21).

Shelley remarks that Moorehead's maid character is "the role clearly meant to parallel that of Elvira," the African-American maid portrayed by Maidie Norman in *Baby Jane* (58).

Accordingly, Velma acts not only as the 'help,' she also serves as a mammy/surrogate mother to Charlotte, attending to the infantilized aging woman's temper tantrums, preparing her meals, and offering companionship. For instance, as the demolition crew's bulldozer tears down the gazebo on the plantation mansion's lawn, Charlotte curses at the men and shoots at the bulldozer with a rifle. The crew's boss confronts Charlotte, telling her his men have "a bridge to build and roads to lay" – signs of progress – and that the state of Louisiana requisitioned the land and her house – both indicative of the past – six months ago. As the road crew leaves, Velma tries to get Charlotte to "quiet down." Knowing that the men have contacted law enforcement in light of Charlotte's attack, Velma tells Charlotte to get "dressed up real pretty" – as though the sheriff who will be arriving soon is a gentleman caller. This scene is the first of many indications that Charlotte "remains a helpless and pampered Southern belle" – but a Southern belle (presumably) in her fifties who is delusional, to say the least (Shelley 58).

Conversely, Velma's status as a socioeconomic 'other' is underscored through her quarrels with her boss/surrogate daughter. On at least one occasion, Charlotte refers to Velma as "white trash" during their arguments. However, these clashes have very little effect on Velma, who flippantly dismisses Charlotte's threats to fire her, claiming that Charlotte is "nothin' but a child." In turn, the most significant conflict in *Sweet Charlotte* occurs not between Charlotte and Velma, but between Velma and Charlotte's cousin, Miriam (Olivia De Havilland), who returns to the Hollis House from her life 'up North' when she hears of the difficulties Charlotte is experiencing; thus, the climactic clash in *Sweet Charlotte* occurs not between Southern whites of differing socioeconomic statuses, but between Southerners and Northerners. When Velma

realizes that cousin Miriam and family friend Dr. Drew Bayliss (Joseph Cotten) are conspiring to have Charlotte institutionalized – so Miriam (as Charlotte’s closest relative) can claim the Hollis fortune – Velma confronts Miriam. Gesturing at the tendency to align lower class (Southern) whites with animals – a trope that also appears in chapters one and three here – Miriam snidely remarks to Velma, “you just can’t keep hogs away from the trough, can you?” When Velma informs Miriam that she knows Miriam has been drugging Charlotte, and that she intends to go to the authorities with this information, Miriam pushes Velma to the edge of the staircase and smashes a chair over her head, causing Velma to lose her balance and fall down the staircase, killing her.

In this regard, Miriam represents an outside other, much like the Yankee soldier invading the sacred space of Tara in *Gone with the Wind*. Shortly after Miriam arrives at Hollis House, Charlotte, Drew, and Miriam have dinner together; during this scene, Charlotte throws yet another fit when she realizes that Miriam does not intend to help her fight to keep the house – Miriam is there to help her move out. Charlotte snarls, “when you first came here after your precious papa died...Papa took you downtown, bought you a whole new wardrobe.” Miriam replies, “Yes, I remember. He took your poor, up-north cousin downtown for a whole new wardrobe. Down to a sleazy store he wouldn’t even let you set foot in.” Charlotte retorts, “Well, maybe that’s what you came back here for, to get the rest of Papa’s money!” Though this dramatic declaration initially seems like another one of Charlotte’s paranoid ramblings, ultimately, Charlotte is correct.

Near the end of the film, then, after a bizarre chain of events (which Miriam has orchestrated) leads Charlotte to believe that she is responsible for another death, Miriam, the villainous Northerner, faces a similarly grim fate as *GWTW*’s invading Yankee soldier. Boasting

about her successful manipulations, Miriam reveals to Drew that she has been blackmailing Jewel Mayhew, John's widow, all these years "until her money ran out," because she saw Jewel "go out to the summerhouse that night." Thus, the audience realizes that neither Charlotte nor her domineering father Sam murdered John; instead, John's jealous wife is responsible for his death. Miriam claims that the murder was the "one good thing that ever happened to me in this house." Overhearing this conversation from her balcony, Charlotte also learns that the people from the state mental institution will be there in the morning to take her away. As Drew and Miriam brag about all the money they will share once Charlotte is committed, Charlotte shoves a massive stone flower pot from the balcony's ledge on top of them, killing them both instantly.

In the film's final sequence, taking place the following morning, Charlotte emerges from the house and, under the watchful eyes of gossiping townfolks, climbs into the car sent to transport her to the state institution, looking back at her home as the car pulls away; appropriately, then, Hollis House is the first and one of the last 'characters' we see. Before the scene in which Sam confronts John about his affair with Charlotte, Sam's voiceover is heard as external establishing shots of the mansion begin the film's prelude. According to Linda Williams, "rural homes are the stereotypical icons of...innocence" (*Race Card* 28). Just as the violence at the party later in *Charlotte's* opening sequence undermines the 'innocence' associated with this place, so too does Hollis House itself. Although Hollis House is as much a central character to *Sweet Charlotte* as Tara (and, to a lesser extent, Twelve Oaks) is to *Gone with the Wind*, Charlotte's home provides more claustrophobic isolation than peaceful refuge. In *GWTW*, during a conversation occurring at Twelve Oaks, Melanie proclaims that she loves Twelve Oaks "as more than a house. It's a whole world that wants only to be graceful and beautiful," to which Ashley replies, "it's so unaware that it may not last forever." On the other

hand, Hollis House, as ‘more than a house’ in the sense that it has become of one of Charlotte’s two surrogate mothers, is an inversion of the ideals of both Tara and Twelve Oaks. Charlotte, forced to leave this (dysfunctional) surrogate maternal body behind, must face the reality of the present. Since Hollis House, presumably, will be torn down, Charlotte loses both surrogate mothers – the house itself and Velma. Thus, 1964’s *Sweet Charlotte* establishes the foundation for the Southern maternal horror genre’s subversion of Old South archetypes through its own amalgamation of Southern maternal bodies and Southern belles with Grande Dame Guignol.

***Beloved* and Persephonal Horror**

Just as *Hush...Hush*, *Sweet Charlotte* subverts the idealizations of the Southern belle and the (maternal) plantation home established in *Gone with the Wind*, Jonathan Demme’s *Beloved* (1998) upends the romanticized notion of the ‘happy’ slave through its powerful representation of the trauma of slavery. Specifically, *Beloved* directly clashes with *Gone with the Wind*’s “melodrama about the sufferings of the white race (we never see blacks suffering)” (Vera and Gordon 24). Whereas *Gone with the Wind* encouraged the nation to “adopt the southern plantation as its own ‘old Kentucky [in this case, Georgia] home,” *Beloved* poses that the Kentucky plantation Sweet Home, according to Paul D (Danny Glover), “wasn’t sweet, and it sure wasn’t home” (Williams, *Race Card* 189). Finally, in stark contrast to Tara as the setting for an “antiseptic slavery without whips, chains, or rape,” Sweet Home is the site where “Sethe’s maternal body is abused” and the “Black nuclear family is destroyed” (Vera and Gordon 23; E. Scott).

Though Demme’s adaptation of Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel has not received the considerable attention its Pulitzer Prize-winning predecessor earned, several scholars have

already mapped out *Beloved*'s place within the horror film genre, both in terms of its 'monster' and its subject matter. Pointing out its status as a "rare 'Black horror' film with a Black literary origin," Coleman asserts that *Beloved*'s "real contribution, given the history of the horror genre, is its poignant attention to the effects of slavery" (183, 186). Furthermore, *Beloved* simultaneously "complicates and alters the definition of horror's source," since it is "slavery, rather than a monster or a spirit, that is the central horror" of the film (E. Scott). Simultaneously, the title character's position, "precariously situated between the dead and the living, as apparition and physical being" also acts to "reinforce the movie's inclusion in the horror genre" (Wardi 526).

Similar to its more thoughtful, complex approach to the horror genre, scholars have also commented on *Beloved* as an atypical maternal melodrama, insofar as it challenges the ideal of the sacrificial mother. Mask asserts that, with Sethe (Oprah Winfrey), the "mother's personal sacrifice is the life of the child itself" (280). This concept of the inversion of maternal sacrifice – particularly the maternal figure killing her daughter – will also be examined in depth in this dissertation. Nevertheless, the film's narrative focus on the collaborative "efforts by Baby Suggs (Beah Richards), Denver (Kimberly Elise), and Sethe to transcend the trauma of the past" solidify the film's status as a "woman's film" and, specifically, an "African-American maternal melodrama" (Mask 280-1).

It is, after all, this focus on intergenerational trauma within the African-American family – especially the women within the family – that positions Demme's *Beloved* as an essential example of Southern maternal horror¹⁶. In this regard, Rody's observation regarding Morrison's novel also applies to Demme's adaptation: the narrative significance of *Beloved*'s death is

¹⁶ Conner asserts that the "film's triumph consists in its emphasis on matrilineal heritage" (214).

further emphasized by a “grief for lost mothers: Beloved's aching desire for Sethe; Sethe's mourning for Baby Suggs, the mother-in-law almost as present in memory after her death as is her ghostly granddaughter; and Sethe's loss of her own mother, remembered in excruciating fragments” (106). In fact, this “multiple mourning for mothers,” as Rody calls it, guides most of the flashbacks fragmenting *Beloved*'s filmic narrative (106). For instance, when Beloved asks Sethe about her “woman,” Denver interjects that “Mama don't talk about all those things,” yet as Sethe recollects one of the only memories she holds of her mother (in which her mother showed Sethe her ‘mark,’) Sethe simultaneously recalls witnessing her mother's hanging. Later in the film, once Sethe realizes who Beloved really is, she tells her daughter, “Beloved, I wasn't never gonna leave you. Never...See, my plan was to get us all over to the other side where my own mammy is.”

Accordingly, although Greven does not mention *Beloved*, Demme's adaptation would certainly fall into his category of persephonal horror. Greven claims that persephonal horror – as opposed to oedipal horror which centers on “problems between fathers and children” (83) – “focus[es] on problems between mothers and children, most often daughters” (83). Persephonal horror, which, of course, traces its origins back to Demeter and Persephone, explores the “tragic dissolution of the daughter-mother bond necessitated by the daughter's journey away from the mother...which the Greek myth of Persephone's abduction hauntingly symbolizes” (Greven 97). Just as the Demeter-Persephone myth intrinsically relates to scenarios of separation and maternal sacrifice, then, so too does it establish a “crucial precedent for these recurring themes of the return to origins” (Greven 14). The majority of the films I analyze and classify as Southern maternal horror in this dissertation focus predominantly on relationships between mothers and

daughters; therefore, Greven's concept is a crucial component of my study – especially when these narratives occur (literally) underground, as is the case in chapters one and three.

Of course, literary scholars have already noted the overlaps between Sethe/Beloved and Demeter/Persephone in Morrison's novel. For instance, Hirsch points out that Morrison's novel focuses on the "reunion between the mother and the daughter she lost," and therefore, like the myth, "*Beloved* is a ghost story about a child who returns to reestablish connection" with her mother ("Maternity" 97)¹⁷. Accordingly, Greven points out that "red...the color of trauma...and suffering, saturates the [Demeter-Persephone] myth through the symbol of the pomegranate Hades tricks Persephone into eating" (56). In "Reading Red: The Troping of Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," Florian Bast explains that "it is through the characters' interaction with the color [red] that the novel narrates their processing of trauma" (1070). Significantly, Bast asserts that the "scene in the woodshed, as the central trauma of slavery to which the novel keeps returning, is easily the one with the most intense red imagery" (1076). Since Bast does not focus on the film in this article, though, and Greven does not analyze *Beloved* in his study (since it falls outside the scope of his timeline), I must address the convergence of the novel's use of red imagery in Demme's adaptation as a prime example of persephonal horror here.

Though most of the flashbacks throughout Demme's *Beloved* are tinged with either a yellowish or bluish light, the sequence of Paul D entering 124 Bluestone Road near the beginning of the film is, I posit, the most dramatic use of red imagery in the film. Accepting Sethe's offer to spend the night, Paul D's figure becomes enveloped in red light as he walks through the front door of her home. Looking down the hallway (the camera shares his point of

¹⁷ In "Maternal Bonds as Devourers of Women's Individuation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," Demetrakopoulos also gestures at the Demeter/Persephone archetype in Morrison's work, linking Sethe with the "dark, devouring phase of the aging Demeter" (53).

view), Paul D sees that this red light shrouds everything within the house. The smile fading from his lips, Paul D steps backwards, out of the house and onto the front porch, asking Sethe, “Good God, girl. What kind of evil you got in there?” Sethe replies, “it ain’t evil. Just sad.” As Paul D steps back into the house, the natural outdoor lighting disappears from his face and, again, he is consumed in red light. Moving down the hallway, the kitchen disappears on the other side of the doorway, and appears to be replaced by the red-tinted image of the woodshed’s door swinging open upon – through abrupt cuts between Paul D’s face and the doorway – brief flashes of (a younger) Sethe holding the bloodied bodies of Denver and Beloved as infants. Closing his eyes as he crosses the threshold into the kitchen, the house returns to its natural lighting. This sequence visually connects Sethe’s past trauma of slavery (in Kentucky) and Beloved’s death (in Ohio) to the present day within Sethe’s current home. Despite the physical distance between 124 Bluestone and Sweet Home, Sethe could not (and still cannot) escape its trauma. Sethe acknowledges as much when she tells Paul D, “this ain’t no better life, just not that other one. What I do here – all I ever do – is keep Denver from that other one.”

In fact, the geographical distance and distinctly non-Southern setting for the majority of *Beloved*’s narrative is intrinsically connected to Sethe’s precarious position as a mother. As Hirsch notes, slavery “heightens and intensifies the experience of motherhood – of connection and separation...what it means to have a self, and to give that self away...If mothers cannot ‘own’ their children or themselves, they experience separation and loss all the more intensely” (“Cruel Enough” 428). Again, underscoring the juxtaposition of the southern ‘lady’ with the mammy – especially in, for instance, *Gone with the Wind* – Williams points out that the “painfully obvious double standard could only mean that white women were meant to be the sole property of white men, while black women could be the property of all” (*Race Card* 104-105).

This paradox shifts, though, when Sethe leaves the South; she claims, “looked like I loved ‘em more after we got here...they wasn’t really mine to love as long as we was in Kentucky with Schoolteacher.” Thus, Bluestone 124, as a distinctly non-Southern ‘space of innocence,’ becomes corrupted through the return of the traumatic experience and memory of slavery upon Schoolteacher’s arrival: “twenty-eight days of freedom. On the twenty-ninth day, it was over.”

Consequently, the trauma of Beloved’s death at the hands of her mother initially haunts 124 Bluestone through “Baby Ghost,” as Denver calls her. While numerous film critics and scholars have pointed out that Beloved’s corporeal characterization on screen is the most problematic aspect of the novel’s translatability¹⁸, nevertheless, this character represents the return of the repressed within Sethe’s home, despite her declaration that she “won’t let the past in my yard again”¹⁹. Underscoring the significance of Sethe’s recollections of both her mother’s and daughter’s deaths – and in keeping with the fragmented narrative structure of Morrison’s novel – these flashbacks disrupt the film’s ‘present day’ sporadically, emphasizing a similar disturbance in Sethe’s psyche. The flashbacks, in fact, suggest that the “central narrative of the story is itself repressed, surfacing only through abrupt and abbreviated automatic memory”; here, these disjointed sequences are even more significant – “rather than flashbacks...calling the past forward, these memories represent the past pulling Sethe back” (E. Scott).

¹⁸ Specifically, scholars point to the scene of Beloved’s (re)birth, juxtaposed with Sethe, Denver, and Paul D’s visit to a carnival, as an indicator of Beloved’s abject nature. Wardi notes that “while the camera lingers on Beloved, the sounds of the carnival are heard, a clear pairing between Beloved and the sideshow” (515). In fact, the parallel editing in this sequence “link the two scenes through their common fascination with spectacular or strange flesh...Beloved’s excesses...socially coded as ‘animal,’ uncivilized, and too close to nature” (E. Scott). As a result, the emotional impact of this titular character is, essentially, lost in translation. Wardi claims that, “on screen, Beloved, lacking her multiple identities, is reanimated merely as...a horrific spectacle” (523); consequently, the “true monstrosity that the novel lays bare—the debased trade of selling human flesh—is supplanted in Demme’s film by freak show grotesqueries” (524). According to Tibbetts, in fact, Beloved is “no longer a meaningful metaphor in a poignant ghost story but a freak on display in a sideshow” (76).

¹⁹ See Pamela E. Barnett’s “Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*”: “Beloved’s return to life corresponds to the return of many of Sethe’s painful repressed memories of her enslaved past” (419).

Southern Nostalgia

Thus, emphasizing the traumatic truth repressed behind the South's romanticized past, *Beloved* reflects one of the key characteristics of the Southern maternal horror hybrid genre: a critique of Southern nostalgia through the (Southern) mother figure. In this regard, *Beloved* – like most of the films analyzed in this dissertation – embodies both maternal melodrama's and modern horror's ambivalence toward maternal origins through the return of the repressed²⁰. For instance, Doane asserts that the “genre most frequently described as the site of this ‘return of the repressed’ is the melodrama” (44). Similarly, Linda Williams argues that melodrama's “search for something lost, inadmissible, or repressed ties it to the past” (“Melodrama” 68); paradoxically, though, Williams also claims that this tendency reflects “American culture's (often hypocritical) attempt to construct itself as the locus of innocence and virtue” (*Race Card* 17). Additionally, repression is considered to be the “dominant strategy” within the horror film genre, insofar as “what is repressed returns...to threaten and challenge and disrupt that which would deny its presence” (Sobchack 144). Appropriately enough, of course, since the “horror genre's underlying subject matter is closest to the core of the unspeakable...and the uncontainable” (E. Scott).

In this regard, then, the convergence of maternal melodrama and modern horror – compounded with each genre's representations of the (return of the) repressed – presents an ideal opportunity to confront these contradictions in the South (and Southern film), where, according to Rhett Butler, the “cause of living in the past is dying right in front of us.” Borrowing from Bassin, this dissertation argues that “nostalgia is an incomplete mourning – an attempt to reenact

²⁰ See Jesser: “Denver's fear, which is the fear she learned from her mother, is that the past will write itself into her future” (339). Also, Melanie Anderson: “This past must be remembered and passed on so that the generations can continue forward informed by the past, not stuck in it” (74-75).

reunion with the lost object,” and that this “pathology of mourning – manifested in wistful nostalgic sentiment – is an obstacle to growth beyond infantile wishes of mother” (168). Taking this notion as a starting point, then, the examination of representations of Southern abject maternal bodies becomes all the more crucial to this study, particularly if, as Kristeva claims, the “abject is the violence of mourning for an ‘object’ that has always already been lost” (15).

Chapter Summaries

In the first chapter, I examine Neil Marshall’s *The Descent* (2005) as a gendered revision of John Boorman’s 1972 film adaptation of James Dickey’s *Deliverance*; specifically, I analyze how the characters’ interactions with the natural world – and its threatening inhabitants – are divided along gender lines. In both films, nature is feminized: the men in *Deliverance* perceive nature as a virginal figure to be penetrated and tamed, whereas nature in *The Descent* represents a maternal figure that the women attempt to (re)claim. Accordingly, the concept of maternal origins is twofold in *The Descent*: the main character, a bereaved mother, seeks to return to a lost past; likewise, the Crawlers – whose home the women unintentionally invade – represent subversive monstrosities of Mother Nature.

This embodiment of Nature as a (sometimes Terrible) Mother has a twofold effect in *The Descent*. Specifically, in *The Descent*, we see a resistance to maternal figures in the characters’ interactions with each other, yet simultaneously, this urge for a return to a lost past and maternal origins. Ultimately, one of the most significant differences between *Deliverance* and *The Descent* is the outcome for each protagonist, intrinsically linked to their gender, their ability to leave the civilized world behind, the connection between these two factors, and, ultimately, their desire to return to the civilized world. Accordingly, while the abject Other is essentially

annihilated in *Deliverance* in every sense of the word, in *The Descent*, Sarah irrevocably *becomes* the abject Other.

The second chapter examines representations of racial passing in two Southern Gothic films: Bill Condon's 1995 *Candyman* sequel, *Farewell to the Flesh*, and Iain Softley's 2005 *The Skeleton Key*. Both films blend elements from the modern horror and maternal melodrama genres with racial passing narratives in order to challenge romanticized notions of the Old South frequently relied upon in classic Southern films – the romanticized notion of the pure white woman, the 'threat' of the 'brutal black buck,' and the idealization of the mammy as a "supremely sacrificial slave" (Delgaudio 25). Considering the significant roles of racial passing and the mammy figure to my analyses of each of these two films, I gesture at *Imitation of Life* – and, specifically, its 1959 adaptation by Douglas Sirk – throughout this chapter. While *Imitation of Life* maintains the traditional ending of racial passing narratives, I posit that the variations upon the standard conclusions to racial passing narratives that we see in both *Farewell to the Flesh* and *Skeleton Key* are the culminations of a new type of racial passing narrative that is unique to the Southern (Gothic) maternal horror hybrid genre.

Furthermore, each protagonist's place – or placelessness, as it were – in the home is emphasized by their familial links to the region, or complete lack thereof, once again underscoring the 'obsessive preoccupation' with blood, family, and home in the Southern Gothic genre. Consequently, the Devereaux House, similar to *Farewell's* Esplanade Avenue mansion, challenges the ideals of the Southern plantation home as a "space of innocence" (Williams, *Race Card* 200). Both Southern (Gothic) maternal horror hybrids examined here rely upon (maternal) melodrama's focus on the "maternal place of origins" to meld an examination of the South's traumatic (and traumatizing) past with the horror genre (Williams, "Melodrama 65).

In the third chapter, I examine another inversion of maternal sacrifice, manifesting here as maternal figures literally sacrificing their daughters as scapegoats in religious ceremonies for the greater good of the Southern communities in which they live. This chapter argues that outdated ideals of Southern feminine purity inherently clash with the ‘poor white trash’ stereotype as illustrated in *Jug Face* (2013), an independent American film written and directed by Chad Crawford Kinkle, as well as the representation of the small Southern town as a maternal body of sorts in *Silent Hill*, French filmmaker Christophe Gans’ 2006 film adaptation of the groundbreaking survival horror video game series. Both films show that romanticized notions of the Southern white woman as a “quasi-Virgin Mary” figure are as archaic as the religious practice of human sacrifice itself (King 35).

Furthermore, both films show that, in the Southern maternal horror hybrid genre, daughters – not just mothers – frequently make the ultimate sacrifice as part of a perpetual struggle to purify the South of the contamination of its traumatized past, a past which cannot be contained within the maternal melodrama genre alone. Thus, these two Southern maternal horror hybrids effectively challenge maternal melodrama’s defining tropes: no ‘scenario of separation’ or act of maternal sacrifice can completely ‘cleansed’ the Southern daughter of her mother’s influence, inasmuch as the South’s past will continue to contaminate the present through various manifestations of abject maternal bodies. Appropriately, then, the most powerful contaminants in these two hybrid films are the manifestations of the past polluting the present, via the abject mother in the form of these secluded, Southern settlements.

CHAPTER ONE:

“AS BURIED AS YOU CAN GET”: THE ABJECT MOTHER AND OTHERS IN JOHN BOORMAN’S *DELIVERANCE* AND NEIL MARSHALL’S *THE DESCENT*

In this chapter, I will examine Neil Marshall’s 2005 film *The Descent* as a gendered revision of John Boorman’s 1972 film adaptation of James Dickey’s *Deliverance*. Though both films take place in the same region of the southern United States – Appalachia – and contain similar narrative developments, the most noticeable discrepancy between them is the issue of gender: *Deliverance* tells the story of four men on a camping/canoeing excursion gone wrong, while *The Descent* follows a group of six women on a spelunking expedition that brings them face-to-face with predatory “Crawlers” living underground. Since gender is the most significant difference between these two films, it is crucial to explore how the characters’ interactions with the natural world – and its threatening inhabitants – are also divided along gender lines.

In both films, nature is feminized: the men in *Deliverance* perceive nature as a virginal figure to be penetrated and tamed, whereas nature in *The Descent* represents a maternal figure that the women attempt to (re)claim. This return to maternal origins aligns *The Descent* with the melodramatic mode. As Linda Williams points out, melodrama “begins and wants to end in a space of innocence” (“Melodrama” 65); specifically, this space is configured as “the maternal place of origins” (“Melodrama” 65). The concept of maternal origins is twofold in *The Descent*: the main character, a bereaved mother, seeks to return to a lost past; likewise, the Crawlers –

whose home the women unintentionally invade – represent subversive monstrosities of Mother Nature. Ultimately, the shift from horror/buddy movie in *Deliverance* in this gendered revision hinges upon *The Descent*'s reimagining of the abject Appalachian as a grotesque unborn infant. As a result, the reworking of *Deliverance* that we see in *The Descent* simultaneously rewrites two distinct film genres into a hybrid of both.

Thus, in keeping with this focus on the question of gender, my analysis of *The Descent* as a (gendered) revision of *Deliverance* will also explore the convergence of the two genres – horror and the “woman’s film,” or, more specifically, the maternal melodrama – that we see in Marshall’s film. Though David Greven briefly mentions *The Descent* in the introduction to his *Representations of Femininity in American Genre Cinema*, he does not give this film the attention it deserves²¹; nevertheless, his concept of persephonal horror provides an ideal framework for my analysis. *The Descent*'s reimagining of the abject Appalachian as a monstrous unborn infant – uncovered by a grieving mother on an underground expedition – relies upon both the stereotype of the Appalachian mountain dweller as a primitive Other and the concept of woman’s intrinsic connection with nature; both mother and “child” (i.e., monster) share a relationship with nature from which civilized (i.e., urban) man is excluded.

For my reading of the “monsters” in each of these films (*Deliverance*'s sadistic mountain men and the humanoid Crawlers from *The Descent*) as representations of abject, Appalachian Others, I will rely upon Kristeva’s concept of the abject, critical analyses of *Deliverance*, and the works of horror genre scholars such as Carroll, Clover, and Creed, to name a few. In her 1993

²¹ Greven claims that “horror films of the first decade of the twenty-first century, entering a post-post-modern phase...have not gone back to the female-narrative roots of horror – far from it” (2); specifically, Greven argues, the “torture porn” flicks of the *Saw* and *Hostel* varieties – along with numerous (and lucrative) “remakes of modern horror classics” – “have been resolutely masculinist in their gendered attitudes,” which “has meant more for an exploration of male psychosexual tensions than it has for femininity...even with the appearance of equal-opportunity female-mayhem works such as *The Descent* (2005)” (3).

book *The Monstrous-Feminine* – one of the first critical analyses to examine female characters in horror films as monsters (and not just victims) – Creed notes that “no one has presented a sustained analysis of the different faces of the female monster or the ‘monstrous-feminine’” in horror film (3). Since 1993, though, very little attention has been afforded to these “unanswered questions about female monstrosity” that Creed addresses in her work (*Monstrous-Feminine* 6). In fact, as recently as 2009, K. K. Seet points out that, within the horror genre, “contemporary criticism on filmic representations of women is as fractured and as lacking in unanimity as is the focus of its undertaking” (139). Thus, through this project, I hope to form a better understanding of genre hybridity and gender as they relate to Southern film. In fact, it is necessary to read *The Descent* in terms of this genre hybridity in order to grasp the relevance of its distinctly Southern setting.

There are several clues within the first ten minutes of *The Descent* that situate the film firmly in the American South. For instance, the SUV that the two British characters, Beth (Alex Reid) and Sarah (Shauna Macdonald), drive to the remote log cabin has a North Carolina license plate. Secondly, as they are traveling, the two women pass a sign, riddled with bullet holes, for Chattooga National Park – a reference to the Chattooga River, the primary filming location for *Deliverance*. Most significantly, though, is the exchange that occurs between Sarah and Beth while they are driving through the forest. Sarah attempts to find a suitable radio station, but Beth asks that she “turn that shite off” when the last radio station on the dial is playing bluegrass music.

This sampling of local color aligns *The Descent* with *Deliverance*, but also underscores a key difference between the two films: whereas the men in *Deliverance* react to the dueling banjos with good humor and, perhaps, some pity, Beth is altogether dismissive. During their first

interaction with the locals, the urbanites in *Deliverance* are more receptive to – albeit condescendingly patient with – the gas station attendant and his associates because they do not yet perceive them as a threat; Beth, on the other hand, is skeptical from the outset. As Sarah turns the radio off, Beth quips, “Well, it’s mud, blood and beer, or sweet Jesus. Great.” Beth’s sarcastic comment reflects a reliance upon negative stereotypes of Appalachia (and the South in general), and also indicates that Beth is ill at ease in this isolated rural locale. This scene also provides a glimpse of Beth’s maternalistic tendencies with Sarah. Though Beth is clearly ambivalent about the excursion, Sarah feels compelled to go along out of a sense of obligation to their friend, Juno (Natalie Mendoza). Beth suggests to Sarah that they abandon the caving trip altogether – “We don’t have to do this. We can head back and stay in town. Get wasted. Go to a barn dance,” she says smugly. Sarah retorts that Beth’s back-up plan is even more “frightening” than their original itinerary, suggesting that Sarah shares Beth’s snobbish attitude toward the denizens of their rural surroundings and their culture. Thus, within the first ten minutes of *The Descent* – as with *Deliverance* – the main characters are identified as tourists, alienated by both the natural landscape and its inhabitants.

As with its successor, the opening sequence of Boorman’s *Deliverance* also follows the protagonists on their journey into the wilderness. Two vehicles travel along steep, isolated roads as Lewis (Burt Reynolds) convinces his friends that they must canoe down the (fictitious) Cahulawassee River – “just about the last wild, untamed, unpolluted, un-fucked up river in the South” – before developers build a dam there. Even though Lewis envisions the weekend getaway as an opportunity to experience the “vanishing wilderness” before it is “buried” forever, the trip itself represents an attempt to revitalize their masculinities via nature. Therefore, one of the most important distinctions between *Deliverance* and *The Descent* is that the men travel to

the wilderness to reclaim their individual sense of self through a communion with nature, while the women undertake a similar journey to strengthen their bonds with each other.

In *The Descent*, the spelunking expedition is a reunion; the group is attempting to reconnect with each other in light of the tragic events that befell the main character, Sarah, the year before. In the film's opening scene, occurring approximately one year prior to the caving excursion constituting the majority of the film, Sarah, Juno, and Beth are whitewater rafting somewhere in Scotland. Sarah's husband, Paul, and young daughter, Jessie, are watching the women from the shore. When the women reach dry land, there is a brief (albeit silent) exchange between Paul and Juno. In the next scene, Paul is driving his family back to their hotel room, while Sarah and Jessie discuss plans for the girl's birthday party. Sarah then turns and asks Paul if he's okay, and says he seems "a bit distant." Paul claims that he's fine, but veers into oncoming traffic, causing an accident that kills both him and Jessie. A crane shot of the accident scene slowly fades into an image of Jessie sitting in front of a large birthday cake with five candles. As Jessie blows out the fifth candle, Sarah wakes up in a hospital.

The image of Jessie and her birthday cake appears – with a slight variation each time – a total of four times throughout the film; each time we see this image, it indicates another shift in Sarah's transformation. The first time Sarah dreams of Jessie and her birthday cake, she does not yet realize that her daughter is dead. When Sarah wakes up, she begins to strip off the sensors attached to her body which are measuring her vital signs; as a result, the monitor beside her hospital bed emits a long, sustained beep – detecting no perceptible signs of life. This scene indicates that, in a sense, Sarah died in the accident, too. Although Sarah goes along with Juno's plans to take part in the group's annual reunion, it is quite clear that Sarah is severely traumatized by these losses, and is on the verge of emotional collapse due to her grief. As she

travels further into the depths of the cave, Sarah's grief metamorphoses into rage, thus transforming her into an abject, animalistic Other.

In this respect, *The Descent* begins to rewrite both the horror genre and the genre of the maternal melodrama – and hybridize them – through Sarah's status as a bereaved mother. According to Mary Ann Doane's *The Desire to Desire*, maternal melodramas offer “scenarios of separation, of separation and return, or of threatened separation” between a mother and her child (5). In these terms, through its focus on a mother who has lost her only child – the ultimate scenario of separation – *The Descent* presents an altogether new and different type of maternal melodrama. Sarah's first dream of Jessie and her birthday cake is the manifestation of her desire for a past that is forever lost. As Vivian Sobchack notes in “Bringing It All Back Home,” the image of a child “evoke[s] nostalgia. What seems a looking forward toward the possibilities of the future is a longing backward toward the promise once possessed by the past” (149). These recurring dreams distance Sarah from the reality of the civilized world around her, while simultaneously reminding her of her loss and pain. Accordingly, in addition to the theme of separation, Doane asserts that the maternal melodrama “foregrounds sacrifice and suffering” (73). The focus upon suffering – particularly female suffering – also establishes a useful overlap between the genres of maternal melodrama and horror since, as previously mentioned and exhaustively discussed in critical analyses of the genre, horror films tend to focus on female characters as victims²².

Thus, in *The Descent*, the hybridization of maternal melodrama and horror occurs as a result of Sarah's increasingly abject connection to the natural world, which is exacerbated by her

²² As for the overlap between horror and maternal melodrama, Linda Williams' “‘Something Else Besides a Mother’” is also useful, particularly her assertion that the “device of devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood is typical of the ‘woman's film’ in general and the sub-genre of the maternal melodrama in particular” (308).

growing detachment from the civilized world. This underscores another important distinction between Sarah and her counterpart in *Deliverance*, Ed: both characters are initially ambivalent about their group's journey into the wilderness, but Ed eventually breaks free from the natural world – though he must temporarily become a part of it in order to survive – because of his gender. Though Ed's sense of ennui is explored in great detail during the first part of the novel, the most significant manifestation of his perceived masculine inadequacy in the film occurs on the second morning of the group's trip. Ed ventures into the woods alone, and loses his nerve and misses his target when he attempts to shoot a deer with his bow and arrow. Ed's incompetence as an archer contrasts greatly with Lewis's expert marksmanship. Specifically, the evening before, Lewis (using a bow and arrow) catches enough fish to provide dinner for all four men. Thus, Ed's admiration of Lewis's (hyper)masculinity is underscored by his own ineptitude with such primitive tools – more authentic, of course, because they are primitive – emphasizing his connection with the modern, technologized world. On the other hand, Lewis, convinced that “machines are gonna fail, the system's gonna fail,” is eager to embrace the survivalist lifestyle of the mountaineer – at least for the weekend. After the men successfully navigate through the first set of rapids they reach on the river, Bobby brags, “We beat it,” but Lewis corrects him, “You don't beat the river” – even though, in many ways, it appears that that is exactly what Lewis aims to do. More importantly, though, he wants to do this before other suburbanites like him have the opportunity to corrupt the natural world.

If Sarah is Ed's counterpart, then Juno is, undeniably, Lewis's double. While they are driving to the caves, Juno echoes Lewis's claim (word for word, as a matter of fact) that “I've never been lost in my life!” – revealing an arrogance and sense of superiority over nature similar to Lewis's survivalist mentality. In fact, the same attribute that is instrumental in trapping Sarah

in the natural world – whereas Ed escapes (at least physically) – enhances Juno’s survivalist skills to the point that they are superior to Lewis’s. In *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Creed explains – via Kristeva – that “woman’s maternal function is constructed as abject,” and “*her ability to give birth links her directly to the animal world and to the great cycle of birth, decay and death*” (47; my emphasis). Essentially, then, both Sarah and Juno are more closely connected to the natural world than either Ed or Lewis will ever be because of their gender. For instance, Lewis initially gets lost and misses the road leading to the Cahulawassee River; conversely, Juno locates the river her group seeks by instinct. As the women begin their trek through the forest, Sam asks, “How does Juno know that there’s a river up ahead? I can’t hear a thing,” to which Beth replies, “She can probably smell it.” On the other hand, Lewis eventually hears the river before he sees it, and when he finally finds it, he announces, “there *she* is.” Accordingly, in “Nature and Gender in James Dickey’s *Deliverance*,” Theda Wrede points out that “early male settlers...revealed an urge to domesticate the land by constructing it as feminine. The feminization helped settlers to overcome a fear of what they otherwise experienced as threatening” (179). In Boorman’s adaptation, Lewis likens himself and his three companions to these settlers, explaining that “the first explorers saw this country. Saw it just like us, in a canoe.” By both feminizing the river and emphasizing its purity, Lewis embodies the natural world as a virginal woman to be tamed in the name of reaffirming his own masculinity.

In *The Descent*, Juno also seeks a return to pure nature, opting to take the group (without their knowledge) to an uncharted system of caves, rather than the tourist-friendly Boreham Caverns upon which the women had originally agreed. In this sense, Juno also shares Lewis’s reckless sense of adventure, reflected in his response to Bobby’s line of work: “Insurance? Shit! I never been insured in my life! I don’t believe in insurance. There’s no risk.” Ultimately, though,

Juno's impulsiveness puts the entire group in danger – even before the Crawlers are introduced. After the women have entered the cave and a rock collapse has sealed off the only known exit route, everyone in the group encourages Juno to turn to the guidebook for a plan B. This forces Juno to confess that she intentionally left the guidebook in the car because, “this is exactly what we believe in. We always said, if there's no risk, what's the point?” Juno then tells the group that she has not taken them to Boreham Caverns; instead, she has led them to a network of caves that “hasn't got a name...I wanted us all to discover it...No one's ever been down here before.” In this respect, both Juno and Lewis strive to be “first” in their return to pure nature. Although, like Lewis, Juno perceives her group's outing as an effort to conquer and claim an uncharted realm, her motivation for doing so is quite different from that of her *Deliverance* doppelganger.

Whereas Lewis seeks a (temporary) return to pure nature on this weekend vacation, Juno seeks a return to the past altogether. In *The Descent*, then, both Sarah and Juno cling to the past: Sarah because of her grief, Juno because of her guilt. In keeping with this examination of *The Descent* as an amalgamation of horror and maternal melodrama, it is important to examine not only, as previously mentioned, melodrama's tendency towards the “maternal place of origins” (Williams, “Melodrama” 65), but the overarching trope of melodrama as “an expression of feeling toward a time that passes too fast” (Williams, *Race Card* 35). In *Playing the Race Card*, Linda Williams explains that, overall, melodrama “moves to restore some semblance of a lost past” (36). When Sarah confronts Juno about her decision to leave the guidebook behind and take the group to an uncharted cave system, she asks “was this about you or me?” to which Juno responds, “it's about us. Getting back to what we used to be. I wanted us to claim this place. Name it. I thought maybe your name.” Additionally, during a brief but tense argument with Beth, Juno reminds Beth that “we all lost something in that crash,” indicating that the accident

which shattered Sarah's sense of self stands as the dividing line between the present and past for Juno as well²³. For these three women, this sense of nostalgia manifests in a photograph that Juno has brought along on the trip. In the cabin on the night before their trek, Sarah studies the photograph and says, "Love each day. Used to be something Paul used to say." Younger versions of Juno, Beth, and Sarah are smiling in the photo, taken during one of the group's past reunions – a rock climbing excursion. As we learn much later on in the narrative, though, the photograph is not the only reminder of the past – or of Paul, for that matter – that Juno has brought along on the trip.

By similar means, then, the group leader in each film emphasizes the importance of a return to pure nature; ultimately, though, both Juno and Lewis are (quite literally) in over their heads when faced with the harsh realities of the unadulterated natural world. Overall, the characters in both films depend upon misguided frameworks of the meaning and relevance of nature (which were constructed within the confined safety of the city and/or suburbia); predictably, then, these frameworks crumble when the characters come face to face with the reality of the "wild" natural landscape and its inhabitants.

In examining the role of nature in each of these films, it is crucial to note how and why the natural realm is feminized. Borrowing the "metaphor of nature-as-woman" from Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (1975), Wrede asserts that this framework "structures the land along two opposite female archetypes, the 'Mother' and the 'Virgin'" (180). Wrede uses the metaphor of the Virgin – insofar as "'Virginal' wilderness appears to promise an escape into the sexually tempting unknown" which "invites subjugation and penetration" (180) – to interpret the scene in Dickey's *Deliverance* in which Ed climbs (and is transformed by a communion akin to sexual intercourse with) the mountain. Ed's transformation in the film is far more ambiguous,

²³ It also hints at Juno's affair with Paul, of course, but this is not verified until the end of the film.

yet he still abandons his ties to the outside (civilized) world during his climb. While Ed is precariously perched atop a ridge, he fumbles and almost drops his bow over the ledge; immediately thereafter, he pulls out his wallet and looks at a photograph of his wife and son. As Ed is examining the photograph, he fumbles again and accidentally drops his wallet into the gorge. By holding on to the bow and arrows, but dropping his wallet – and, as a result, all pieces of tangible proof of his (civilized) identity – Ed fully embraces the natural world, at least temporarily. Specifically, as Lowenstein points out, within *Deliverance*'s “emphatically male world...where women function only as abstract symbols of the civilization left behind,” Ed “must ‘lose’ his wife by dropping her photograph before he can accomplish the task of killing his mountain man foe” (134)²⁴.

In fact, the absence of the opposite gender for the majority of the narrative of both films also underscores another key component in reading *The Descent* as a gendered revision of *Deliverance*. In Boorman's film, female characters appear only at the beginning and end of the men's journey. For instance, when Ed and Lewis go to Griner's garage, Ed glances into the house there and sees an old woman sitting with a physically deformed little girl. The little girl is a striking example of the “pitiful” “genetic deficiencies” which Bobby associates with the hillbillies – the outcome, presumably, of generations of inbreeding. At the opposite end of the spectrum, then, near the end of the film, Ed returns to the lodging house where he and Bobby are staying while Lewis is hospitalized. Mrs. Biddleton, the proprietor, has just begun serving dinner. She tells Ed, “we saved you a seat,” and Ed joins her, Bobby, three other women and two other men for a family style dinner. Ed is seated between two women, and they both pass food and milk to him. As he prepares his plate, Ed breaks down and begins to cry as he eats.

²⁴ “Well, I said to the black stone at my face, when I get to the top the first thing I'll do will be not to think of Martha and Dean again, until I see them” (Dickey 174).

Bobby pauses, but then starts the conversation again and another older woman at the table shares a tall tale about vegetables in her garden. The warm, nurturing environment created by these maternal hillbilly figures creates a sharp contrast with the frightening locals that the urban men have encountered thus far. Mrs. Biddleton and the other, older women at the dinner table aid Bobby and Ed in their return to civilization via a close-knit world where everyone is kin and takes care of each other.

Conversely, in *The Descent*, the fact that men are excluded from the group's thrill-seeking adventures emphasizes that the women are actively distancing themselves from the societally prescribed roles of wife and mother when they are in the natural realm. Though the men in *Deliverance* temporarily abandon these roles, the primary difference here is that the men are able to return to them later, while the women's aforementioned "direct link to the animal world" ultimately traps them in Mother Nature. Therefore, just as *Deliverance* embodies nature as a Virgin, *The Descent* embodies nature as a (sometimes Terrible) Mother. This aligns the natural world in *The Descent* with Wrede's assertion that the "'Mother' means a return to safety, pleasure, and sometimes a more frightening regression to a prior state of dependence" (180).

This embodiment of Nature as a (sometimes Terrible) Mother has a twofold effect in *The Descent*. As Greven points out, a focal point of Creed's argument in *Monstrous-Feminine* is that the "primary fear at the core of the horror film genre is that the subject will be reengulfed by the terrifying figure of the archaic mother" (13); Greven goes on to assert that "while a palpable panic over strong maternal figures does indeed characterize modern horror, an equally urgent desire for *return* to the mother also informs the genre" (13). Furthermore, Greven posits, the horror film has "inherit[ed] these "anxieties over and conflictual wishes for return to the mother" from the genre of the woman's film (13). Specifically, in *The Descent*, we see a resistance to

maternal figures in the characters' interactions with each other, yet simultaneously, this urge for a return to a lost past and maternal origins. The six women in *The Descent* comprise three pairs of surrogate mother-daughter relationships: Becca and Sam (older and younger sisters), Juno and Holly, and Beth and Sarah. Because they are siblings, the interactions between Becca and Sam are literally familial. During the group's hike to the cave, Becca lists the rules for such a trip: first, "file a flight plan and stick to it"; next, "don't go wandering off." Sam responds with "blah blah blah," mocking Becca. Soon after, when Becca tries to help Sam secure her climbing harness, the younger sister claims, "I've done this before, you know," to which Becca responds, "I'm only looking after you;" Sam retorts, "and I appreciate it, in small doses."

Similarly, even though Juno's utter lack of maternal instinct is addressed when Holly is introduced to the group as Juno's "protégé" – Beth quips, "I always thought Juno would eat her young" – Juno acts (abnormally) maternalistic toward Holly. Before they climb down into the cave, Juno warns Holly, "Safety first. I don't want any stunts this time." Shortly thereafter, Juno scolds Holly for not following her orders: "You do this safely, in order, following my lead." Later, despite Juno's advice to slow down and be careful, Holly falls down a hole and breaks her leg – a compound fracture, quite similar to Lewis's debilitating leg injury. Overall, Sam's and Holly's resistance to Becca's and Juno's maternalistic guidance reflects this aforementioned anxiety associated with the return to the mother. Specifically, Juno – who is, by far, the most masculine woman in the group – is an altogether unnatural mother figure; consequently, despite Juno's efforts to protect her "protégé," Holly becomes the first member of the group to fall victim to the Crawlers. This loss triggers an animalistic regression in Juno, but her transformation is dwarfed by Sarah's metamorphosis which is, in turn, elicited by Beth's death.

The relationship between Beth and Sarah is the central example of surrogate mother-daughter bonds in *The Descent*. It is Beth, after all, who breaks the news to Sarah when she wakes up in the hospital that Jessie is “gone.” Later, when the group is in the cave, taking their first break, Sarah informs the group that she feels like walking around a bit; Beth replies, “don’t go too far.” Most importantly, though, it is Beth who crawls back into a narrow passage to calm Sarah down after she gets stuck. Beth reminds her that “the worst thing that could’ve happened to you has already happened. Okay? And you’re still here. And there’s nothing left to be afraid of. I promise.” In the end, of course, Beth’s promise is broken. Nevertheless, the bonds between these three pairs of women – and the group as a whole – underscore the fact that their relationships with each other are more important to them than the societally prescribed roles of wife and mother. None of these women have husbands or children and, perhaps more importantly, none of them appear to be in any rush to change that – though Holly acknowledges, “when I’m older, I want to have lots of babies.” The conversation circulating amongst the women the night before their caving expedition begins focuses on the complications in their (very casual) relationships with men and their sex lives – Juno and Holly tease each other about their promiscuous lifestyles – or, for a few of the women, the complete lack thereof. While the scene – aptly titled “Girl Talk” on the DVD – succeeds in emphasizing the sense of camaraderie in the group, it also seems more like dialogue from a “chick flick” than a horror movie.

In this respect, it is useful to trace genre hybridity in *The Descent* through a framework proposed in Greven’s *Representations of Femininity in American Genre Cinema*. Greven claims that, contrary to popular belief, the woman’s film did not become a “moribund genre” in the early 1960s (2); instead, the genre “goes underground and transforms into the female-centered form of modern horror, in which the trope of female transformation not only persists but really

flourishes” (2). Specifically, Greven suggests that these aforementioned “anxieties over and conflictual wishes for return to the mother” which the horror genre “inherits” from the woman’s film manifest in what he refers to as *persephonal horror* (83). According to Greven’s theory, “modern horror can be roughly divided into two categories: *oedipal horror*, focusing on problems between fathers and children...and *persephonal horror*, focusing on problems between mothers and children, most often daughters” (83)²⁵.

In taking its name from a Greek myth in which a mother must travel to the underworld to save her daughter, Greven’s concept of *persephonal horror* provides an ideal framework for an examination of *The Descent*. Sarah acts as a contemporary stand-in of sorts for the goddess Demeter, as *The Descent* documents a strikingly similar narrative centered on “a mother’s grief, tinged with loneliness and rage, over the loss of her daughter” (Greven 48). Greven asserts that “three major trends in the woman’s film recur and are reimagined in *persephonal horror*: mother daughter relationships; transformation;” and the “avenging, retributive woman” (84). Both Sarah’s transformation and her rebirth as an “avenging, retributive woman” are caused by her group’s encounter with the Crawlers. Though the figure of the villainous redneck or mountain dweller is, by no means, a novel concept in modern film²⁶, the specific framework of Appalachian Others is an integral component in an examination of both *The Descent* and *Deliverance*²⁷. In this sense, the mountain men in *Deliverance* can be classified as monstrous

²⁵ Greven adds that even though the myth of Demeter and Persephone is “not the only one that informs modern horror, it is matched only by the myth of Oedipus – influentially reimagined by Freud as a traumatic blueprint for the modern family – as a horror touchstone” (14). Furthermore, he points to films such as *The Exorcist*, *Carrie*, and the *Alien* series as other examples of *persephonal horror*.

²⁶ See Anthony Harkins’ *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*, David Bell’s “Anti-Idyll: Rural Horror” in *Contested Countryside Cultures*, and “Getting Even” in Clover’s *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*.

²⁷ For more on the Othering of Appalachia(ns), see Allen Batteau’s *Appalachia and America*, Rebecca Scott’s “The Sociology of Coal Hollow,” and Carissa Massey’s “Appalachian Stereotypes”; furthermore, Rodger Cunningham’s essay, “Writing on the Cusp,” in *The Future of Southern Letters*, is extremely helpful. Here, Cunningham asserts that Appalachia “exists in a blank created by a double otherness – a doubly double otherness. For the region is not

figures in the horror genre – alongside *The Descent*'s Crawlers – since both represent a frightening amalgamation of contradictory terms²⁸.

Most significantly, the monsters in *Deliverance* represent a blurring of the boundary between human/inhuman via the fusion of man and beast. We see this quite clearly in the film's most well-known scene. Harkins points out that by adding the now notorious line "Squeal like a pig," the film adaptation of *Deliverance* "transformed the scene's meaning from homosexual rape into a substitute for bestiality" (208)²⁹. Additionally, Lowenstein argues that the "exclusion of women from the world of *Deliverance* results in a narrative logic whereby the worst crime imaginable in the film is to be forcibly feminized" as Bobby is through the rape (134). During his assault on Bobby, the Mountain Man says, "looks like we got us a sow here instead of a boar." Therefore, just as the urban men's privileged social status denies them access to a sense of authentic masculinity, it also embodies them with weakness (i.e., femininity), at least as far as these mountain men are concerned.

Simultaneously, then, Bobby's rape in *Deliverance* acknowledges both the "rape" of the natural landscape by urban men (to which Lewis referred in the film's opening scene), and an act of revenge by Nature, via its bestial inhabitants. Similar to the way in which the filling station owner assumed that Lewis was "from the power company," Bobby and Ed serve as "representatives of the urbanizing, profiteering, and technologizing forces responsible for the

only an internal Other to the South as the South is the internal Other of America, but it is also the occupier of a simultaneous gap and overlap between North and South" (45). Specifically, this idea of a "simultaneous gap and overlap" is helpful to an examination of *The Descent* as a gendered revision of *Deliverance*.

²⁸ This construction is in keeping with the *fusion figures* of the horror genre defined by Noel Carroll in *The Philosophy of Horror*: they are "creatures that transgress categorical distinctions...composite[s] that unite attributes held to be categorically distinct and/or at odds in the cultural scheme of things in *unambiguously* one, spatio-temporally discrete entity" (43).

²⁹ In "The Buggering Hillbilly and the Buddy Movie: Male Sexuality in *Deliverance*," Ed Madden also points to this, claiming that that the "hillbillies...are actually represented not as homosexual but as bestial" (198).

impending destruction of their environment” for these mountain men (Barnett 35). In this respect, the rape scene is the most important scene in the film for several reasons: it acts as the manifestation not only of the urban men’s confrontation with nature and its inhabitants and leads to Ed’s transformation, but it also confirms the protagonists’ fears about these “hillbillies.” Accordingly, Wrede claims that the “hillbillies” in *Deliverance* are “more like creatures of the woods than human beings” (185)³⁰.

In Neil Marshall’s *The Descent*, however, the Crawlers are monstrous because they are, quite literally, creatures of the earth. Whereas the monstrous hillbillies in *Deliverance* are part of a population that is being uprooted in the name of progress, the Crawlers represent an even more anachronistic – and previously undisturbed – way of life, dwelling and thriving within the body of Mother Nature. As Creed asserts in *Phallic Panic*, the “monstrous human/animal beast is inherently uncanny and points to a relationship that should have remained hidden, not brought into the light...because the animal has always functioned as a signifier of the non-human” (24). Furthermore, Creed claims, man “becomes monstrous...when he is aligned with the world...that the symbolic order has so strongly repudiated” (*Phallic Panic* 17). In this regard, the mountain men as they are embodied in *The Descent* enact a hyperbolic reimagining of the notion of the primitive Appalachian that is all the more disruptive because they are more closely aligned with femininity via the maternal body of Nature.

Both the Crawlers’ cannibalism and the mountain men’s bestiality emphasize the blurring of the boundary between human and inhuman. Though, as previously mentioned, the monsters from each film fit with Carroll’s criteria for *fusion* figures in *The Philosophy of Horror*, in terms of registering the monstrous figures from both films in a broader framework, it is helpful to draw

³⁰ As John Hartigan points out in “Reading Trash: *Deliverance* and the Poetics of White Trash,” Boorman’s *Deliverance* “dramatizes the way ‘white trash’ operates as an internalized figure of the ‘primitive’” (9).

on Kristeva's concept of the abject from *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Kristeva notes that the abject "confronts us...with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*" (12); furthermore, she asserts that what causes abjection is "what disturbs identity, system, order...The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4).

Just as the mountain men in *Deliverance* represent a fusion of man/beast – and much in the same way that Lewis is unable to distinguish whether he heard "something or someone" during the group's first night camping – so too do the Crawlers in *The Descent* represent a fusion of human/inhuman. For instance, Marshall states that the Crawlers appear "slightly vampiric" because "making them more human makes them more scary" (Cast Commentary). This comparison to vampires³¹ relies mostly on the fact that, though the Crawlers frequently walk upright and "look human," their teeth and ears resemble those of bats. When one of the women (Sam, a medical student) takes the opportunity to get a closer look at the body of a dead Crawler, she notes that they have "evolved perfectly to live down here in the dark," because they are "totally blind, and use sound to hunt." Though the audience only catches glimpses of these monstrous humanoids during the first attack, and Marshall intentionally leaves the origins of the Crawlers ambiguous throughout most of the film, in "*The Descent: Beneath the Scenes*," Marshall reveals that he envisioned the Crawlers as "cavemen who didn't leave the cave. They've evolved in this environment over thousands of years. There's a community of them, families. They thrive in this environment."

The notion of "cavemen who didn't leave the cave" is especially useful in an analysis of *The Descent's* Crawlers both in terms of their representations as abject creatures – less evolved, or perhaps devolved – and an interpretation of these monsters as exaggerations of the

³¹ "Count Dracula...who on the full moon rises from his grave deep in Mother Earth in order to sate himself with the blood of women...is not unlike a monstrous unborn infant, dependent on a blood cycle for his existence" (Creed, *Phallic Panic* xiii).

stereotypical “primitive” Appalachian. Specifically, drawing from Clover’s analysis of the “intrauterine” qualities of the Terrible Place in horror film (48), and Creed’s assertion that these settings act as the “symbolization of the womb” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 55), then the Crawlers are paradigmatic figures of horror because they represent the monstrous unborn: fetuses that never left the womb. Reading the Crawlers and the maternal body of the earth in this manner leads to several possible interpretations. The Crawlers may represent stillborn, aborted, or live fetuses. For instance, the Crawlers’ inability to function and thrive in the civilized world closely aligns them with aborted or stillborn fetuses. Symbolically, then, the Crawlers are humans that did not (individually) develop or (collectively) become part of a “normal” society. In this respect, they can be read as a hyperbolic representation of the persistent negative stereotypes of Appalachians: their resistance to “leave the cave” is similar to a resistance to abandon a more primitive way of life (i.e., one that is inextricably linked to a dependence upon nature).

Even more unsettling, though, is the notion of Crawlers as parasitic, monstrous infants thriving within – and unwilling to permanently leave – the body of the mother. The fact that they are able to leave the (proverbial) womb³² is underscored by the amount and types of bones in their lair; these remnants suggest that the Crawlers venture above ground regularly for sustenance, but always return to the womb. Essentially, then, the Crawlers’ refusal to leave the womb undermines the “prohibition placed on the maternal body” by the “symbolic function” and, consequently, severely disrupts the symbolic order (Kristeva 14). In that respect, both the Crawlers and the women in *The Descent* undermine the symbolic order, since the women enact a reversal of the birthing process by returning to the womb as they climb further into the cave. This disavowal of the symbolic order – underscored by the women’s resistance to their societally prescribed roles as wives and mothers and their return to the (archaic) mother from the civilized

³² In fact, it is this same passage to the world above that the surviving women must find in order to escape.

realm – is a punishable offense in the world of *The Descent*. In fact, only one of the six women survives this birth reversal and, in the process, becomes reborn as an abject creature.

Though Sarah's detachment from the civilized world is caused primarily by the loss of her daughter, her transformation and rebirth are caused by her group's encounter with the Crawlers. In *Phallic Panic*, Creed asserts that, within the horror genre, "transformation is represented as a regressive process in which the natural animal world takes over from the civilized, human domain" (xiii). Specifically, Sarah transforms because her ties to and connections with this "civilized, human domain" become completely cut off as a result of her return to maternal origins. Each time she becomes more closed off from the civilized world – and drawn more into the "natural animal" world which, of course, her gender binds her to already – we see the image of Jessie and her birthday cake. Noting that the first time we see this image is in the aftermath of the crash that kills Jessie and Paul, the second appearance of this image occurs immediately after the cave collapse (which almost crushes Sarah) completely shuts off the group's only known exit route. Sarah is briefly knocked unconscious during the collapse, and the image of Jessie and the cake dissolves into Sarah waking up.

Marshall underscores the claustrophobic anxiety the women experience in the aftermath of the cave collapse through lighting in the following scenes. Each woman has a handheld flashlight, as well as a headlamp attached to their caving helmets. Since the cave collapse claimed one of their supply bags, the women have no backup batteries for these implements, and only a limited number of flares. As a result, light – and the ability to see – becomes a precious commodity within the group. This explains why Holly dashes toward what she thinks is light at the end of the proverbial tunnel and, not heeding Juno's warning to be careful, falls into a hole and breaks her leg. Consequently, Sarah is put in charge of carrying Holly's video camera; in

fact, we are sharing Sarah's point of view (through the handheld camera) when the Crawlers first attack. Since the other women's flashlights and headlamps are practically useless in the large chamber, Juno lights a single flare. The women freeze when they hear the creatures circling them, and the image presents a striking *tableau vivant* of the last time we see the six women together.

The attack and escapes that follow are presented in a series of parallel scenes which underscore the ways in which the group becomes fractured as a result of Juno leading them into dangerous, uncharted territory. Before the attack, parallel scenes focused primarily upon Sarah's physical (and symbolic) distance from the group, such as Sarah wandering off during the group's first break and, later, when the remainder of the group helps Sam temporarily mend Holly's broken leg. These separations contrast with *Deliverance* where, despite their arguments, the surviving men in the group work together. Once the Crawlers attack, though, Becca and Sam escape together, Beth and Sarah split up, and Juno stays in the lair in a futile attempt to rescue Holly.

Specifically, the parallel scenes focusing on Juno and Sarah illustrate how both women begin to act more abject after their first encounter with the Crawlers. As Juno is fighting off the Crawlers, Sarah runs, trips and falls, striking her helmet on a rock which not only knocks her unconscious, but also breaks the headlamp on her helmet. Hearing Juno's screams (and assuming that they are coming from Sarah), Beth crawls out of the water she has fallen into and returns to the lair. Juno continues to fight for her life against the Crawlers with the only weapon she has – an ice ax. Juno hears what she believes is another Crawler approaching to attack her from behind; she pivots and blindly stabs the figure, only to realize that she has fatally injured Beth by mistake. Beth begs her not to leave, but Juno abandons her dying friend in the Crawlers'

lair. Though Juno's direct link to nature – i.e., her gender – helped her guide the group toward their destination at the beginning of the narrative, her (un)natural instinct severely and irreparably fractures the group in this scene.

Simultaneously, as with Sarah's first two dreams of Jessie and her birthday cake, the third recurrence of this image signals Sarah's increasing detachment from the civilized world; however, the differences here also indicate that Sarah is beginning to lose her grip on reality. As the blurry image sharpens into focus, it appears to be Jessie and the birthday cake from behind. When the child turns around to face the camera, though, the figure quickly transforms into a screeching Crawler. That Sarah's dream transposes her deceased daughter with a Crawler underscores the notion of the abject creatures as monstrous infants. Furthermore, much in the same way that the women's spelunking expedition has uncovered a "relationship [between man and beast] that should have remained hidden," the "act of revelation" taking place when Sarah first encounters a Crawler face to face also "bring[s] something horrific into view" (Creed, *Phallic Panic* 24; 28).

The initial encounter with the Crawlers is an altogether uncanny experience for everyone in the group, but especially for Sarah. Until the Crawlers' first attack, Sarah was the only member of the group who believed that the women were not alone underground; the other women simply assumed that Sarah was being paranoid. According to Catherine Silver in "Womb Envy: Loss and Grief of the Maternal Body," "an uncanny effect is produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is blurred," or "when things that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appear before us in reality" (409). Contrary to Juno's efforts to convince Sarah that she only "saw what [she] wanted to see" in one of the narrow passages, the creatures

that the women encounter underground are just as uncanny as the cave/womb itself³³. This third dream jolts Sarah awake, and she realizes that her headlamp is broken. Sarah picks up the camera and uses the infrared function to slowly make her way through the cavern.

Sarah's use of the video camera emphasizes both her lingering reliance on the modern, technologized world (in some form), and her current inability to function as the Crawlers do underground. As Sarah stumbles through the Crawlers' lair, she hears something approaching and hides in a corner. Seconds later, Holly's body is dropped directly in front of her, and a group of Crawlers gather around and begin to feed on the corpse. Unable to comprehend what she is seeing, Sarah watches the feast through the video camera, momentarily looks away, and then looks back. The sight of this horror makes Sarah retch, and this sound draws the attention of a (male) Crawler, who appears to stare right into the camera Sarah is holding and shriek loudly³⁴.

The sequence of parallel scenes that follow symbolically – and temporarily – link the women once more; significantly, though, the women are linked by the same (male) Crawler that corners Sarah. Hearing Juno's cries for Sarah and Becca, the Crawler that has cornered Sarah scampers away in Juno's direction. Becca and Sam, who can also hear Juno, huddle together on the floor of one of the passages; the same Crawler clammers right over both of them. As Juno continues to yell, Becca comments that “the noise she's making, she'll bring every one of those things down on her head,” to which Sam replies, “As long as it's not on mine.” This brief

³³ Of course, the uncanny has been thoroughly analyzed by scholars of the horror genre. See Carroll 174-5; Clover 18, 48; Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 54-55; Twitchell 77-8. Additionally, on the uncanny in the woman's film: Doane 139-41.

³⁴ In “When The Woman Looks,” Linda Williams asserts that although the male monster's gaze “safely masters the potential threat of the (female) body it views, the woman's look of horror paralyzes her in such a way that distance is overcome; the monster's or the freak's own spectacular appearance holds her originally active, curious look in a trancelike passivity that allows him to master her through *her* look” (18). This interaction between Sarah and the male Crawler subverts the traditional (male) monster / (female) victim gaze exchange in two important aspects: first, the gaze itself is mediated by the video camera; second, all Crawlers are blind, so the idea of ‘mastering’ the victim through her own look is called into question – and doubly so when Sarah closes her eyes and refuses to peer through the viewfinder at the Crawler's face.

exchange underscores the manner in which the group is now permanently fractured; neither Becca nor Sam seems to care at all if Juno dies, since she is responsible for their being trapped in the cave. Now Sarah, alone again in the Crawlers' lair, uses the video camera to examine Holly's corpse. Specifically, she notices both the ice ax used as a makeshift splint for Holly's leg, and a small gas can nearby. Repulsed, and apologizing to Holly as she does it, she cuts the ice ax off, and uses it, the gas can, and some cloth from Holly's tattered pants to make a torch.

Significantly, Sarah abandons the video camera in favor of her newly fashioned torch; this suggests that she is gradually severing all ties with civilized world as she travels further into the cave/womb – primitive tools are replacing technology. The initial Crawler attack and watching the Crawlers feed upon Holly have led up to this point in Sarah's transformation; the next step in her metamorphosis, though, takes a far more unsettling turn. As Sarah tries to make her way out of the Crawlers' lair, she finds Beth there (presumably, one of the Crawlers dragged her there, like Holly, after Juno stabbed her). Though Sarah is initially reluctant to believe that Juno would betray Beth in such a way, Beth shows Sarah irrefutable proof of Juno's crime: as Beth collapsed at Juno's feet after Juno stabbed her, Beth clasped onto Juno's necklace (a golden feather on a chain), broke the chain, and clutched it in her hand as she lost consciousness. When Beth gives the necklace to Sarah, she turns it over and, wiping Beth's blood off of an engraving on the back of the pendant, sees the phrase "Love Each Day." Beth explains, "It's Juno's. It's from Paul." Significantly, the necklace provides evidence of Juno's crimes from both the past and the present. Once more, Juno's ties to the past appear – not only in the photo which prompts Sarah to quote Paul's favored saying, but in the physical manifestation of this sentiment which Juno carried with her until the Crawlers attacked and divided the group. Now, of course, Sarah is doubly betrayed: Juno fatally injured Beth – as Marshall describes her, "the one good thing

remaining in Sarah's life...now beyond hope" – and carried on an illicit relationship with Sarah's (now deceased) husband (Cast Commentary). Both Beth and Sarah realize that Beth is dying and, though she initially refuses to do so, Sarah euthanizes Beth to end her suffering.

Thus, Beth's euthanasia triggers the final phase of Sarah's transformation, in which Sarah becomes the "avenging woman" to which Greven refers – avenging not only Juno's betrayal within the cave, but also her past transgressions. Immediately after her mercy-killing of Beth, Sarah destroys a family of Crawlers in a gruesome battle. While Sarah is still reeling from putting Beth out of her misery, a juvenile Crawler jumps on her from behind and tries to bite her. Sarah responds by grabbing the tiny monster, throwing it down, and stomping it to death. As she retreats, she notices a female Crawler – distinguishable from male Crawlers only by their long hair and breasts – approaching the body of the juvenile Crawler. The mother Crawler smells the tiny body and realizes that it is her child. Rather than attacking a grieving mother, Sarah attempts to elude the Crawler, but the mother pursues her and they both fall into a pool of blood. Sarah kills the female Crawler in the fight that follows, plunging an antler into the monster's eye. Similar to the manner in which Ed uses "primitive" weapons (a bow and arrow, a knife) in *Deliverance*, Sarah uses weapons that are even more primitive (rocks, bones, antlers, etc.) in this scene, as well as the final fight scene in *The Descent*.

Appropriately, then, when Sarah emerges from the pool of blood after slaughtering the female Crawler, her transformation into an abject, avenging Other is complete. Relying more on her ears than her eyes – very much like the monsters themselves – Sarah senses that another Crawler is approaching. She lies motionless on a rock, and – because she has now become a part of the cave – the male Crawler climbs over Sarah without noticing her presence. After he moves away, she clubs him with a large bone; then, with that weapon in one hand and her torch in the

other, Sarah releases a primal scream, which echoes through the caves. Juno, Becca, and Sam hear the scream; Becca assumes that Sarah is being killed and doesn't want to go back for her. In a sense, of course, Becca is correct: much in the same way that Sarah "died" in the hospital following the accident that killed her husband and child, whatever was left of Sarah's humanity has died in the cave, and she has been reborn as an abject creature.

Thus, one of the most significant differences between *Deliverance* and *The Descent* is the outcome for each protagonist. As previously mentioned, this is intrinsically linked to their gender, their ability to leave the civilized world behind, the connection between these two factors, and, ultimately, their desire to return to the civilized world. Whereas Ed is also transformed by his interaction with (Virgin) Nature to the extent that he is able to escape from the natural realm – at least physically, though the memory of the experience lingers and haunts his dreams – Sarah's transformation is ultimately destructive and permanently links her to (and traps her in) Mother Nature. For Ed, this transformation begins with his group's encounter with the mountain men that assault Bobby and later (presumably) murder Drew. Specifically, as Schechter points out, the "process of accepting his inherent animality," which leads to his transformation, begins when Ed "approves Lewis's plan to bury the corpse in the woods" (186). This incident is abject in two ways: first, Ed's (and the group's) encounter with the corpse of the first mountain man³⁵, and second, the crime itself – "any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge, are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility" (Kristeva 4).

³⁵ Another integral element in Kristeva's concept of the abject is, of course, the corpse. Kristeva explains that a corpse is "the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything" (3); above all, though, a corpse is "the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (4).

Later, both Ed and Bobby have trouble determining whether the Toothless Man that Ed killed is, in fact, the same man that assaulted them in the woods. Much in the same way that these “city boys” acted as indistinguishable stand-ins for urbanites infringing on the mountain men’s homeland during the rape, the Toothless Man may not have been the same person involved in that attack. Consequently, Ed commits an abject crime – just as the mountain men did – when he murders the unidentifiable mountain man to settle the score. In the rural, Southern locales depicted in *Deliverance* and *The Descent*, social (i.e., legal) systems are just as abject as the hillbillies and humanoid monsters that defy them.

The abject nature that is engendered in both Sarah and Ed as a result of their transformations must serve its (temporary) purpose and help them to survive in the wild – by becoming the wild; however, in order for each character to return to civilization, it must also be disavowed and displaced. Though Ed successfully navigates this transition, Sarah does not. Within the last ten minutes of *The Descent*, Sarah and Juno join forces in order to fight their way through a group of Crawlers; however, shortly thereafter, Sarah confronts Juno about Beth’s death. Juno neglects to mention *how* Beth was fatally injured, yet lies and tells Sarah that she saw Beth die. In turn, Sarah (now holding the only ice ax the two women have between them) lets Juno’s necklace fall from her hand. Upon seeing this, Juno realizes that Sarah not only knows the truth about Beth, but she also knows about Juno’s relationship with Paul. Covered in blood and with a wide-eyed stare intentionally reminiscent of Sissy Spacek’s Carrie³⁶, Sarah swings the ice ax down and plunges it into Juno’s leg, then walks away. Juno is forced to remove the ax – the same one she killed Beth with – from her own leg and use it in a futile attempt to

³⁶ Greven points out that “when Carrie accesses the full, terrifying range of her powers at the climax and unleashes them upon the promgoers who have mocked her, she not only acts as a moral agent of retribution but also forfeits any last shred of her own humanity” (4). We see a similar loss of humanity in Sarah’s actions here.

fight off the onslaught of Crawlers swarming her on all sides; essentially, Sarah leaves Juno to die.

In *The Descent*'s American ending, Sarah finds a route up to the earth's surface (presumably the same one the Crawlers use to go above ground to hunt), climbs through a narrow passage – a dramatic scene of rebirth *from* Mother Nature – and escapes the cave. She returns to the car and, after driving a safe distance away from the cave, pulls the vehicle over and begins to cry. In a 'shock ending' (typical of contemporary horror films), Sarah realizes that Juno is sitting beside her in the car. Similar to Ed's dream of the bloated hillbilly hand breaking the surface of the water at the end of *Deliverance*, Juno's presence in the car suggests that Sarah will never break free from her abject crime. In the original – and Marshall's preferred – 'UK' ending, however, Sarah does not escape. Instead, Sarah is knocked unconscious when she falls into a pit after abandoning Juno; the escape sequence, it is revealed, is only a dream. She awakes to the sound of a child whispering "Mummy?" and looks up to find Jessie sitting in front of her, along with her birthday cake and *six* candles. As the camera pans back, the audience sees that the fire from the birthday candles is nothing more than Sarah's torch (which she dropped during the fall), and Sarah is staring (and smiling) at absolutely nothing. This final, haunting image of *The Descent* evokes the myth of Demeter and Persephone, "an image of union and loss at once" (Greven 93).

The abject Other is essentially annihilated in *Deliverance* in every sense of the word: the forest, valleys, small towns, and even the river itself are flooded by the dam project; consequently, the corpses of both mountain men (and for that matter, Drew) are all submerged underwater – "just about as buried as you can get," according to Lewis. Though, as the last scene from the film indicates, Ed is haunted by nightmarish memories of his experiences in the

wild, he has returned to his civilized life – and his prescribed roles as husband and father – before the end credits roll. Conversely, in *The Descent*, Sarah irrevocably *becomes* the abject Other. Sarah’s ability to function in the outside world has been destroyed by the death of her child, and exacerbated beyond all repair by her encounter with the Crawlers. The birthday cake now holds six candles, not five; the image is not a memory, but a projection. Sarah’s final hallucination (brought about because she has gone insane) presents an environment preferable to anything the outside world could offer her: what was once past and lost, is now an attainable present and future.

Ultimately, *The Descent* interrogates the maternal melodrama’s tendency toward nostalgia through the self-destructive fulfillment of Sarah’s – and, for that matter, Juno’s – desire to return to the past. Simultaneously, Marshall’s film hybridizes the maternal melodrama and horror through its construction of the Crawlers as the predatory, monstrous offspring of Mother Nature. The metaphor of the fetus as a parasitic monster has been explored in many horror films – most notably, perhaps, the *Alien* series – but the Crawlers act as a literal manifestation of this concept. Specifically, the connection between these Crawlers and the hyperbolic representations of “primitive” Appalachians is especially useful in an examination of *The Descent* as a Southern horror film. In that same vein, then, it is important to point out that *The Descent* was written and directed by a British filmmaker, and filmed entirely in Scotland and England. The fact that Marshall set his film in Appalachia suggests that this particular region – and the American South in general – is still a frightening realm for American and international audiences alike, even three decades after moviegoers first heard those dueling banjos. Consequently, by framing itself within the context of *Deliverance*’s well-known story, *The Descent*’s gendered revision of

Dickey's narrative provides an opportunity for much-needed exploration into the representation of gender in the contemporary Southern horror film.

CHAPTER TWO:

“THAT HOUSE HAS BEEN NOTHING BUT BLOOD AND TEARS”:

RACIAL PASSING AND SOUTHERN GOTHIC MONSTROSITY IN *CANDYMAN*:

FAREWELL TO THE FLESH AND THE SKELETON KEY

In this chapter, I will examine representations of racial passing in two Southern Gothic films: Bill Condon’s 1995 *Candyman* sequel, *Farewell to the Flesh*, and Iain Softley’s 2005 *The Skeleton Key*. Both films blend elements from the modern horror and maternal melodrama genres with racial passing narratives in order to challenge romanticized notions of the Old South frequently relied upon in classic Southern films. Condon’s *Candyman* sequel targets Southern anxieties about miscegenation – simultaneously interrogating the stereotype of the ‘brutal black buck’ alongside the “panic regarding white female contamination” (and concomitant idealization of white women as the “primary gatekeepers of whiteness”) – as well as the sentimental notion that Southern white men are “heroes who defended the purity of the white woman” (Richardson 67; Williams, *Race Card* 189). Conversely, Softley’s *Skeleton Key* undermines the ideal of the mammy figure – responsible for ensuring the well-being of wealthy white children and maintaining the home – as “not only the faithful soul, but also the *supremely sacrificial slave*”; in doing so, *Skeleton Key* subverts a central trope within the maternal melodrama genre and the

Southern romance: the act of black maternal sacrifice for the white child (Delgaudio 25; my emphasis).

The presence or lack of (and consequent desire for) maternal/familial ties plays a critical role in categorizing both of these films as Southern maternal horror films— and, more specifically, as examples of a Southern Gothic subset within this hybrid genre. For instance, since the “Southern Gothic is fueled by the need to explain and/or understand foundational trauma, the violation or loss of that which is essential to identity and survival but often irretrievable,” texts within this genre frequently display “obsessive preoccupations—with blood, family, and inheritance; racial, gender, and/or class identities...and home” (Bailey 271). Thus, Annie (Kelly Rowan) is situated as the veritable (white) lady of the house in *Farewell to the Flesh*, a position intrinsically linked to her inheritance of her family’s deep roots in New Orleans – albeit intertwined with a legacy of racial passing for at least three generations. Conversely, *Skeleton Key*’s Caroline (Kate Hudson), who has no family of her own, is relegated to the status of the ‘help’ within the Devereaux House. Consequently, Caroline – the orphaned, non-Southerner – becomes the victim of the hoodoo practitioners residing there, while Annie manages to break the cycle of secrets and lies and begin a family of her own.

In contrast to these younger protagonists – both victims of deception in their own right – the two older women in each film, *Farewell*’s Octavia (Veronica Cartwright) and *Key*’s Violet/Mama Cecile (Gena Rowlands) represent, through different forms of racial passing, the ‘foundational trauma’ of the South’s violent past that continues to haunt the present. Though Octavia, Annie’s mother, is not portrayed as a monstrous maternal figure, per se – at least, not in comparison with Violet/Cecile – the lengths Octavia goes to in order to bury the secret of miscegenation at the root of her family tree reveal an ‘obsessive preoccupation’ with denying her

family's true racial identity. If, as I point out in my first chapter, *The Descent* interrogates the maternal melodrama's tendency toward nostalgia through the self-destructive fulfillment of Sarah's desire to return to the past, Octavia's actions reflect an outright denial not only of the (South's) past, but of her family's complex connection to it.

As a result, the lady of each house, typically idealized as the epitome of sacred, Southern white womanhood herself – *Farewell to the Flesh*'s Annie Tarrant and *The Skeleton Key*'s Violet Devereaux – is 'tainted' by racial 'contamination,' albeit in very different ways. Initially, the manifestations of racial passing in both of these hybrid films follow traditional trajectories of passing narratives, insofar as the "desire to pass is the desire to make less visible a stigmatized identity" (Rooney, "Passing"). In *Farewell*, this 'stigmatized identity' is that of a daughter of the South with mixed racial origins – therefore, passing creates a scenario in which "the previously illegitimate body may become legitimate" (Rooney, "Passing"). Likewise, the form of supernatural passing (for lack of a better term) occurring in *Skeleton Key* – that of a mammy possessing the body of a white woman – enables the "socially and culturally determined body" to become "an abstract, free body" – or, at the very least, a body with more freedom than its previous incarnation as an African-American woman in the South (Rooney, "Passing"). (Although ironically by passing she loses the "freedom" (thus far) to be with a "black" man.)

Considering the significant roles of racial passing and the mammy figure to my analyses of each of these two films, I will gesture at an exemplar of the maternal melodrama genre, *Imitation of Life* – and, specifically, its 1959 adaptation by Douglas Sirk – throughout this chapter in order to discern the uniquely Southern (Gothic) variation upon this trope within the hybrid genre examined here. In keeping with the narrative of Fannie Hurst's 1933 novel (and its original adaptation in 1934), Sirk's adaptation of *Imitation of Life* focuses on an ambitious single

white mother, Lora (Doris Day), who hires a single African-American mother, Annie (Juanita Moore), who moves in with her to help her maintain her home and raise her daughter, Susie (Sandra Dee). That Annie represents a more ‘modern’, but still stereotypical, mammy figure has already been established by several critics³⁷. While Annie appears content in her lowly position as ‘the help,’ her fair-skinned daughter, Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner), becomes disillusioned with her mother’s servility during her teenage years and passes as a white woman, an act made possible by the rather vague explanation that her father was “practically white.” Later, Annie learns of Sarah Jane’s façade and, in true maternal melodrama fashion, agrees to Sarah Jane’s request to sever all ties to her, rather than risk humiliating her daughter. Of course, this outright rejection leads to Annie falling ill, and, essentially, dying of a broken heart. The loss of her mother forces Sarah Jane to realize the error of her ways all too late: during their final conversation, Sarah Jane insists that “if, by accident, we should pass on the street, please don’t recognize me.” At the film’s tear-jerking conclusion, though, Sarah Jane proclaims on a crowded street, “that’s my mother!” as she sees Annie’s coffin loaded into a hearse. Grasping the side of the coffin, a devastated Sarah Jane insists, “I didn’t mean it. I’m sorry. I did love you,” and finally realizes that her actions, essentially, “killed my mother.”

In this regard, *Imitation of Life* maintains the traditional ending of racial passing narratives. Overall, the “conservative...nature of passing-for-white stories” dictates that the “mixed-race character’s transgressive desire to escape her origins typically ends in the death of her ‘false’ (because passing) identity” (Rooney, “*Imitation*” 55). Furthermore, Rooney points

³⁷ Heung claims Annie “fulfills the archetypal image of the southern mammy” (27). Whitney points out that, as a mammy, Annie is “nothing else besides a mother,” existing “in an ideal state of total devotion to the white family” (7). Butler concedes that although “the cinema’s attitude toward blacks had shifted considerably” in the time between Stahl’s and Sirk’s adaptations, Annie is “still recognizable as a mammy/aunt jemima figure,” and that even though Annie is “much less conventionally ‘black’ than Delilah (gone is the dialect, for example)...She remains the woman who must sell her special nurturing talents in order to survive” (27). Likewise, Delgaudio claims that “two of the most striking images of the domestic mammy, supposedly removed from the restrictions of slave society, yet clearly reduplicating its conditions, are those presented by” Stahl’s and Sirk’s productions of *Imitation* (25).

out, “in such stories, the passer either returns to her authentic identity (her pre-passing life) or is killed off in a melodramatic story that ultimately upholds social or ideological conventions” (“*Imitation*” 55). I posit that the variations upon the standard conclusions to racial passing narratives that we see in both *Farewell to the Flesh* and *Skeleton Key* are the culminations of a new type of racial passing narrative that is unique to the Southern (Gothic) maternal horror genre. Accordingly, even though *Skeleton Key* has already received a fair amount of (mostly negative) scholarly attention³⁸ – particularly in light of its ‘twist’ ending and the implications thereof – I will provide new insight into its undeniably misguided message by placing it within this hybrid genre. Similarly, Bernard Rose’s original *Candyman* (1992) also garnered a considerable amount of critical attention throughout the nineties and into the 2000’s³⁹. Conversely, though, Condon’s sequel remains almost entirely ignored by scholars, perhaps with the exception of Kim D. Hester-Williams’ “NeoSlaves” article – one of the only publications addressing *Farewell to the Flesh* as more than a footnote.

I posit that *Farewell to the Flesh* has been (perhaps intentionally) overlooked not only because of its lowly cultural status as a slasher sequel, but because it challenges the harshest criticisms leveled at its predecessor, Rose’s *Candyman* (1992). The strongest critique of Rose’s film appears in Judith Halberstam’s *Skin Shows* (1995); here, Halberstam argues that although *Candyman* attempts to offer a social commentary on race and class, “ultimately the horror stabilizes in the ghastly body of the black man whose monstrosity turns upon his desire for the

³⁸ See James A. Crank’s “An Aesthetic of Play: A Contemporary Cinema of South-Sploitation,” Maria Hebert-Leiter’s “Reel Horror: Louisiana’s Vanishing Wetlands and the Threat of Hollywood (Mis)Representation,” and Adam M. McGee’s “Haitian Vodou and Voodoo: Imagined Religion and Popular Culture.”

³⁹ Most notably, “‘How much did you pay for this place?’ Fear, Entitlement, and Urban Space in Bernard Rose’s *Candyman*” (Aviva Briefel and Sianne Ngai), “Mixed Blood Couples: Monsters and Miscegenation in U.S. Horror Cinema,” (Steven Jay Schneider); “‘The Suffering Black Male Body and the Threatened White Female Body’: Ambiguous Bodies in *Candyman*,” (Lucy Donaldson); and “Strange Fruit: *Candyman* and Supernatural Dread,” the third chapter of Kirsten Moana Thompson’s *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium*.

white woman,” thereby positioning Helen (Virginia Madsen) as the “victim” (5). Similarly, in her more recent assessment of Rose’s film, Robin R. Means Coleman claims that although *Candyman* is intended to be “viewed as a tragic, wounded monster,” the film inevitably “strays from the monster-with-a-heart-of-gold theme by playing on fears of the big Black boogeyman coming in and taking away a White woman” (189).

For the most part, then, *Candyman*’s manifestation in the original 1992 film is regarded by many film scholars as little more than a reincarnation of the stock figure introduced in D.W. Griffith’s 1915 epic *The Birth of a Nation*: the “brutal black buck” (Bogle 10)⁴⁰. In creating these character types, Griffith “articulated the great white fear that every black man longs for a white woman,” a figure idealized as “the ultimate in female desirability, herself a symbol of white pride, power, and beauty” (Bogle 13-14). However, a central component of Condon’s sequel entirely undermines the notion that *Candyman* merely represents the typical ‘brutal black buck.’ Elaborating on *Candyman*’s origin story from Rose’s film, *Farewell to the Flesh* shows that Daniel Robitaille – an educated, artistically talented son of a former slave in the Reconstruction South – meets Caroline Sullivan, a wealthy young white woman, when her father hires Robitaille to paint her portrait; as a result, the two fall in love and conceive a child together. The relationship between Caroline and Robitaille is portrayed as one of mutual love and respect – a far cry from Griffith’s ‘renegade’ Gus chasing the frightened Flora. Rather than simply replicating racial anxieties present in its predecessor, Condon’s sequel challenges these assumptions altogether, aligning instead with what a few film scholars pointed out in Rose’s

⁴⁰ According to Bogle, this “brutal black buck” character type can be “divided into two categories: the black brutes and the black bucks” (13). Specifically, the “black brute was a barbaric black out to raise havoc”; for instance, in *Birth*, the “black brutes, subhuman and feral, are the nameless characters setting out on a rampage full of black rage... These characters figured prominently in the Black Congress sequence” (Bogle 13). Conversely, the “pure black bucks” are “Griffith’s really great archetypal figures. Bucks are...oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh...Both Lynch, the mulatto, and Gus, the renegade, fall into this category” (Bogle 13).

original – “more than just black male desire for white women is at stake here; the inverse also seems to be in place” (Schneider 73)⁴¹.

Ironically, while Halberstam’s *Skin Shows* offers up the harshest criticism of the Candyman figure as he manifests in Rose’s 1992 film, it also provides a helpful framework for examining the distinctly Southern Gothic representations of racial passing in Condon’s sequel. *Skin* – and, more specifically, skin color – is a central focus of *Farewell to the Flesh*; appropriately, then, Halberstam’s assertion that “splatter” films (such as those found in the Candyman series as a whole) reflect a “preoccupation in the twentieth century with not simply the external monstrosities of the body but the increasingly voyeuristic quest to show what lies below the skin” (139). Thus, Condon’s *Farewell* shifts the narrative focus from the corporeal monstrosity of the stereotypical ‘brutal black buck’ in order to reveal the truth beneath a wealthy white family’s façade of racial passing, connecting the South’s historical trauma to the foundation of the Candyman mythos.

Overall, in stark contrast to Rose’s villainous monster – whose origin story serves as dinner party banter amongst elite intellectuals at a university in Chicago⁴² – Condon’s incarnation of Candyman poses the mythical murderer as a victim of the South’s racialized violence via the lynching of Daniel Robitaille. Accordingly, Halberstam elaborates that “shots

⁴¹ In “Mixed Blood Couples: Monsters and Miscegenation in U.S. Horror Cinema,” Steven Jay Schneider points out that “considering how much Candyman suffered as a result of sleeping with a white woman in the first place, it comes as something of a surprise to discover that...Candyman hunts his prey not out of hatred or revenge, but out of a desire to (re-)unite” (85). Additionally, Donaldson posits, “while there is an undeniable erotic charge to their interaction, to characterise this as merely dramatising and perpetuating fears of miscegenation is to ignore the ways in which Candyman and Helen are visually, physically and ideologically linked, rather than opposed” (Donaldson).

⁴² In Rose’s *Candyman*, Helen (Virginia Madsen) and her colleague Bernadette (Kasi Lemmons) are graduate students collaborating on a thesis focusing on urban legends. The pair stumble upon the stories of Candyman as they conduct interviews with students and staff at a university in Chicago. Significantly, their advisor, Professor Philip Purcell (Michael Cukin), tells (and retells) Candyman’s origin story both to Helen and Bernadette in the 1992 film, and to a rapt audience in a French Quarter bookstore in the opening scene of Condon’s sequel.

of skin in horror film...the cut, the torn or flayed hide – these are metonymy for the uncovering of a psychic wound that cannot always be sutured” (157). Though there is certainly no shortage of these ‘skin shots’ (typical of ‘splatter’ films, of course) in *Farewell*, the most graphic depiction of violence focuses not on the deaths of any of Candyman’s white (and, with one exception, male) victims, or his abduction/seduction of any white female victims (such as the case in Rose’s 1992 film), but an extended flashback sequence to Robitaille’s lynching itself.

In the film’s final act, taking place – appropriately enough – in the slave quarters of the Tarrant family’s abandoned plantation mansion, Candyman explains to Annie that this revelation of the truth is “why I brought you here...I was not always this way. This is who I’ve become.” Beginning with Candyman’s first appearance in her home, Annie has been bombarded with flashes of Robitaille’s lynching throughout the film; in this climactic scene, though, these fragmented images fuse together into an extended flashback sequence tracing the lynch mob’s brutal attack. As Linda Williams remarks, “stag[ing] a recognition of virtue through the visible suffering of the endangered white woman” is, quite simply, “what melodrama does” (*Race Card* 100). *Farewell to the Flesh* complicates this formula by focusing not only on Annie’s visible, emotional suffering via the deaths of her family members throughout the narrative – Coleman (her father), Paul (her husband), Ethan (her brother), and Octavia (her mother) – but even more so on the excruciating death suffered by Daniel Robitaille (her great-great-grandfather).

Furthermore, as the flashback lynching sequence continues, Candyman asks Annie to “be my witness.” This dialogue underscores another notable change in Candyman’s interactions with the protagonist of each film: in Rose’s original film, Candyman repeatedly demands that Helen “be my *victim*” – significantly, this has shifted to a request, directed at Annie, to “be my witness.” Then, returning to the lynching flashback, Candyman tells Annie to “see what it means

to call me by that name.” The flashback sequence reveals that the name ‘Candyman’ came about after the lynch mob has severed Robitaille’s hand and is covering his upper body in honey to attract a massive swarm of bees, taunting him with the name as the swarm approaches, filling the sky. The bees descend on Robitaille, stinging him all over his body. After the cloud disburses, the lynch mob crowds back in on Robitaille; then, Caroline arrives, sees what has happened to her lover, and begins sobbing and screaming at her father. Two men restrain her as her father kneels down to Robitaille, taunting him, “you defiled my daughter!” as Robitaille dies. Reborn as Candyman after his death at the hands of the lynch mob, Robitaille has become “a reflection of their hatred, their evil.”

I posit that this sympathetic portrayal of Candyman’s beginnings, the loving relationship depicted between Robitaille and Caroline, and Candyman’s familial link to (not seduction of) Annie, the film’s protagonist, are the defining changes in *Farewell to the Flesh*. The origin of Candyman’s name itself was never given in Rose’s original film; instead, the act of calling his name is reduced to an urban legend scare tactic a la Bloody Mary. Conversely, in *Farewell*, when Candyman tells Annie to “see what it means to call me by that name,” he suggests that this repetition essentially forces Robitaille to relive the trauma of his own lynching. As both Annie and Octavia learn firsthand over the course of the film’s narrative, for others – but especially Robitaille’s own flesh and blood – to insist that Candyman does not exist reflects not only a denial of his suffering, but also a denial of the South’s violent past and their connection to it.

Therefore, by delving into Candyman’s origins and connecting him to the protagonist by blood, Condon’s sequel brings Candyman’s mythology into the Southern home. In stark contrast to, for instance, *Gone With the Wind*’s Tara – the “site of home and of family, of origin, and thus of Scarlett’s very identity” which simultaneously reflects Scarlett’s “longing for the old ways”

(McPherson 50; 49) – *Farewell's* Esplanade Avenue mansion in New Orleans subverts this idealization of the Southern 'home sweet home' by positioning the house as a structure haunted by those violent 'psychic wounds' of the South's past. In this case, the Tarrant family home also manifests the Southern Gothic's 'obsessive preoccupations' – particularly with 'blood, family, and inheritance' – when that inheritance is perceived as the curse of racial 'contamination'; a curse which, like the family home itself, is passed down through generations.

In fact, the narrative action in both *Farewell to the Flesh* and *The Skeleton Key* focuses on old, once regal and now dilapidated plantation mansions in Louisiana. In keeping with the criteria mapped in Lisa Hopkins' *Screening the Gothic* (2005), these Southern maternal horror films center on "mansions haunted by the real or apparent threat of a supernatural presence" (xi). Whereas the supposed threat in *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte's* Hollis House turns out to be nothing more than the machinations of Charlotte's manipulative cousin Miriam and her co-conspirator, Drew Bayliss, the mansion on Esplanade Avenue in *Farewell* is, in fact, haunted by Candyman, just as *The Skeleton Key's* Devereaux House is possessed (in every sense of the word) by a daunting paranormal force.

Although Annie's search for the truth behind her family's secret takes her to various locations throughout New Orleans in *Farewell*, significantly, her journey begins and ends at the Tarrant family's abandoned plantation mansion. That the secrets of miscegenation and racial passing that have occurred for generations within the Tarrant family are physically manifested in the home itself gestures at the distinctly Southern Gothic nature of this hybrid narrative. For instance, in reference to the maternal melodrama, Doane asserts that the home "connotes not only the familiar but also what is secret, concealed, hidden from sight. When what is 'of or like the home' is synonymous with its opposite, we are quite close to the signifying field of the gothic

narrative” (139). Accordingly, the night before her first trip back to the house in over a decade, Annie gazes at an old photo of the home and asks her husband, Paul (Timothy Carhart), if he thinks “a family can be cursed.” Though Annie is referring to the tragedies that have recently plagued her family – her father’s murder, her mother’s terminal cancer diagnosis, and her brother’s run-in with the law – the pairing of this question with the photograph implies that Annie suspects a connection between these hardships and the house itself. Much in the same way that *Imitation*’s Annie “becomes a symbol of the blackness that” her daughter “considers her curse” in Sirk’s adaptation, *Farewell*’s Annie soon realizes that the Esplanade Avenue mansion exemplifies a physical link to the perceived ‘curse’ of racial contamination within her well-to-do white family (Heung 30).

Furthermore, the Tarrant family home also represents a reversal of the idealized patrilineal succession of white Southern families: the home itself – as well as the genealogical trace of miscegenation – is passed down through Annie’s mother’s family. As Linda Williams points out, Dixon’s *The Clansman* and Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* both focus on the home as the primary “space of innocence” as a means to “idealize the white masculine heroes who defended the purity of the white woman and a ‘pure’ line of succession from white father to white son” (*Race Card* 189). Significantly, though, Annie’s familial link to Candyman is also inextricably connected through the house itself as, literally, a place of (maternal) origins. Following Robitaille’s death at the hands of her father’s lynch mob, Caroline bought the house in order to raise their daughter there. Annie later learns that Caroline did this because, in January of 1865, Robitaille was born in the house; therefore, raising their daughter there provided Caroline with a physical link to the father of her child. Additionally, approximately one hundred years

later, Annie was born in the house, too, underscoring the significance of the house itself as a maternal body of sorts for Annie's family.

Conversely, though, *Farewell* positions the peripheral white male characters in the film as weak and inept, undermining the ideal of the white Southern man as the protector of home and family. Annie and Paul's journey to the old Tarrant family home emphasizes Annie's status as the lady of the house, but undermines Paul's status as "master." Annie's position is underscored by Paul's general lack of masculinity and cowardly actions within the house. As Annie and Paul make their way through the upstairs hallway, they stumble upon three vagrants squatting in the house. When Annie tries to explain to these men that she means them no harm and is only revisiting her childhood home, Paul stands *behind* his wife and tells the vagrants "I'm with her" – he is clearly uncomfortable with, and ill-equipped for, this potential confrontation. Soon after, when the couple enter another room, Paul clumsily trips over a piece of debris and injures his foot – a move typically seen when female characters attempt to flee from a monstrous killer in horror films. Annie tells him to stay put while she goes up to the attic. Thus, Annie ventures up to the attic (the room where her father, Coleman Tarrant, was murdered) by herself, indicative of the fact that Annie's journey – culminating in her discovery of the truth behind her identity – is a journey that she must make alone.

In contrast to Sarah Jane's passing in *Imitation of Life*, then, Annie's racial identity is a truth to be uncovered, not concealed. Accordingly, despite her talents as an artist – perhaps inherited from her great-great-grandfather – Annie "just can't seem to finish" her self-portrait, indicating that the painting represents a visual manifestation of Annie's emotional (and psychological) disconnect with her sense of self, implicitly associated with her family's legacy. The sequence of Annie struggling to paint her self-portrait also marks the first of numerous

scenes throughout the film focusing on Annie gazing at her own reflection in a mirror. Considering the folklore surrounding Candyman – in true Bloody Mary fashion, someone must stand in front of a mirror and repeat Candyman’s name five times to invoke the monster – the scenes centering on Annie’s introspection also provide the opportunity for the supernatural monster to appear to his descendant while underscoring Annie’s sense of confusion regarding her own identity.

In fact, Candyman first appears to Annie in her bedroom mirror immediately after (what Annie later realizes is) the conception of her daughter with Paul. That Candyman chooses this particular moment to reveal himself to Annie highlights the importance he places on ensuring that the knowledge of his trauma – symptomatic of the South’s violent history as a whole – is passed down to future generations, specifically through women. Candyman tells Annie that “we have a journey to make, you and I,” as the first images of Robitaille’s lynching flash before her eyes. Furthermore, since Candyman brutally murders Paul immediately after this exchange, Candyman’s statement gestures at the fact that Paul must be excluded from this ‘journey’ – a journey linked to Annie’s and Robitaille’s genealogical bond that does not include Paul, who fails, one last time, to ‘protect’ his wife.

Annie’s meandering journey through New Orleans culminates in her visit to one of the city’s cemeteries near the film’s conclusion. Still confused as to her connection to Candyman at this point in the narrative, Annie finally comprehends her familial link to Robitaille after uncovering his and Caroline’s gravestones; Robitaille’s marker reads, “my beloved, may you suffer no more,” and Caroline’s, beside it, reads “beloved mother of Isabel.” Recognizing the names Caroline and Isabel from her mother’s collection of family photos, Annie finally grasps

that she is a direct descendant of Robitaille's and Caroline's daughter⁴³. This realization prompts Annie to return to Octavia's townhome, where she goes to her mother's bedroom, unlocks the vanity drawer where the family photos are hidden, and thumbs through them until she finds an old photograph of a mother and daughter. Unaware of their identities until that night, the handwriting on the back of the photo – "Caroline and Isabel, age 8" – confirms this last piece of the puzzle for Annie.

In the following scene, in a striking example of Annie as Candyman's double, Annie walks up behind her mother as Octavia stands, facing the mirror in her living room and pouring herself a drink; thus, in the moments leading up to their final confrontation – and Octavia's death – Annie initially appears to Octavia as a mirrored reflection behind her, much in the same way that Candyman first appeared to Annie within her own home. Annie confronts her mother, telling Octavia, "you lied to us from the beginning. I've seen the birth certificate. I've been to the cemetery...Caroline bought the house because that's where he was born. She raised their daughter in that house. Your grandmother. She was raised a white girl and no one suspected the truth." Thus, the house itself is finally named as the physical manifestation of the inheritance of racial 'contamination,' as it were, in *Farewell to the Flesh*. Though Annie cannot understand why Octavia "just kept on lying," Octavia defends her manipulation as an act of maternal love, insisting that "I did it to protect you," and imploring Annie to "just wait until you have children of your own. You'll understand." Octavia maintains that, despite all evidence to the contrary, "I am not a part of him!" Then, Octavia makes the grave mistake of denying Candyman's existence

⁴³ As Bunnell claims, the Gothic "is concerned with two worlds co-existing in the genre's portrayal of reality: a diurnal world and a nocturnal one" (Grant 81). Bunnell goes on to explain that the diurnal world is "the external one – cultural and institutional; it is 'light' because it is familiar and common. The other world is the internal one – primitive and intuitive; it is dark, not because it necessarily signifies evil (although it may), but because it is unfamiliar and unknown" (Grant 81). In this regard, the truth behind Annie's family history manifests in this darker, internal, nocturnal world – represented by the fact that most of Annie's journey (and, for that matter, Candyman's appearances) – occurs at nighttime.

altogether – “There is no Candyman! He does not exist!” – despite Annie’s assertion that “we’re his family! We’re his blood!”

This emotional, climactic clash between mother and daughter blends elements from the maternal melodrama and modern horror genres with a standard plot point for racial passing narratives, thus creating a key moment in *Farewell* as a prime example of the Southern (Gothic) subset of the Southern maternal horror hybrid genre. For instance, frequently in maternal melodramas, the final ‘scenario of separation’ or act of maternal sacrifice plays out in such a way that the “child often stands for some sort of social ‘progress,’ in contradistinction to the mother,” culminating in the “negation of [the mother’s] identity” as the “price to be paid” for the child’s – and, more specifically, the daughter’s – self-actualization (Doane 74). Of course, within the ‘splatter’ horror film genre, this negation culminates in a (sometimes gruesome) death. Concurrently, in accordance with Rooney’s outline of racial passing narratives – that the “mixed-race character’s transgressive desire to escape her origins typically ends in the death of her ‘false’ (because passing) identity” (“*Imitation*” 55) – Octavia becomes Candyman’s final victim in *Farewell to the Flesh*. Immediately after Octavia declares Candyman does not exist, he appears behind her, wrapping one arm around her as he scolds her: “My child. You doubted me. Your own flesh and blood.” Then, a small pool of blood appears on the front of Octavia’s white blouse and slowly begins to spread. Octavia collapses to the floor, muttering “I’m so sorry” to Annie with her last breath, as Candyman disappears. Octavia’s death not only signals the figurative death of her ‘false’ (passing) identity, it also complicates one of the standard resolutions for racial passing narratives: the passer “is killed off in a melodramatic story that *ultimately upholds social or ideological conventions*” (Rooney, “*Imitation*” 55; my emphasis).

Inarguably, Octavia's death scene itself is 'melodramatic,' but I question the extent to which it upholds (Southern) social conventions. Curiously, Hester-Williams claims that Octavia's death is "one of the bloodiest and gruesome murders in the film." Furthermore, she asserts, Octavia's death scene reflects that the "brutality suffered by Candyman is not the problem"; instead, it is "Candyman's insistence on memory, that is the real source of terror in the film." Conversely, in contrast to all other on-screen present-day deaths during the film – including five white men – Octavia's death is downright tame. Most significantly, though, none of the death scenes centering on white victims throughout *Farewell* is anywhere near as brutal or graphic as the scene of Robitaille's lynching. If anything, Condon suggests that the lynch mob who created Candyman in the first place is the 'real source of terror' here. Candyman's 'insistence on memory' requires those in the South's present day – and especially his descendants – to be a 'witness' to his trauma. It is, after all, Octavia's insistence that Candyman does not exist – blatantly denying the events surrounding Robitaille's lynching and Octavia's own maternal origins via Robitaille's lover, Caroline – which brings the 'monster' into her home.

Following Octavia's death, though, the narrative focus shifts from Annie as a daughter to Annie as a mother. Though Candyman informs Annie that she is pregnant with her first child in the midst of her journey, Annie's maternal tendencies are evident quite early on in the film. Immediately after her trip to the old family home, Annie returns to her job as an art teacher at one of New Orleans' inner-city schools. Her interactions with her students illustrate that she serves as a surrogate mother to many of them – especially Matthew, whose mother is deceased. For instance, as soon as she arrives back at her classroom, Annie intervenes in a fight between Matthew and Drew, another student. Matthew, a gifted artist, has drawn a sketch of Daniel Robitaille being chased by a lynch mob of white men. The artwork has disturbed Matthew's

classmates, provoking the fight with Drew, which the substitute teacher has been unable to contain, although Annie calms the situation almost immediately upon her arrival. Later in the scene, several students call her Annie, not Mrs. Tarrant, indicative of a close, personal bond between them.

Accordingly, then, when Annie initially addresses her students' fears about Candyman, she tries to comfort her 'kids' in the same way Octavia first attempted to approach the issue with her – by pretending that Candyman simply does not exist – in an act of maternal protection. When Drew persists, claiming that the murders in New Orleans attributed to Candyman prove his existence, Annie assures him (and the rest of her students) that Candyman is just “an imaginary monster.” Annie even performs the mirror invocation in her classroom, surrounded by her surrogate children, and proves, or so she believes, that “nothing happened.” Through this (initial) denial, Annie enacts a form of “mother-daughter mirroring” typical of the maternal melodrama (Whitney 11). As Whitney explains, this behavior stands as a “threat” to the daughter's autonomy that is “remedied only by the eventual disappearance of the mother,” insofar as “maternal melodramas tend to present mother-daughter proximity as dangerous to the daughter's future” (Whitney 11). Thus, Annie's journey of discovery in uncovering the truth behind her family's past begins with an act of mirroring, leading up to a dramatic confrontation with her mother in the moments before Octavia's death and, finally, culminating in Annie becoming a mother intent upon revealing the truth to her daughter, rather than concealing it.

Appropriately, *Farewell to the Flesh's* final sequence flashes forward several years to Annie's life with her young daughter. The scene fades in on the interior of a child's bedroom, and as the camera pans across the room, we see Annie and her daughter, Caroline, who appears to be about four or five years old, looking through a family photo album – much in the same way

Annie looked through family photographs at the beginning of the film. Caroline points to a picture of Octavia, identifying her as Annie's mother. Then Annie asks Caroline to identify the mother and daughter in the next picture; Caroline says, "that little girl is your great-grandma, Isabel, and that's her mommy, Caroline. That's my name, too." That Annie has named her daughter after her 'tainted' great-great-grandmother represents an acknowledgment of the past, and of this woman's legacy. Next, Annie turns the page, revealing a picture of Daniel Robitaille. When Caroline asks who he is, Annie tells her "That's Isabel's daddy, and when you get a little older, I'll tell you a story about him." Caroline asks Annie to tell her his story now, but Annie insists that it is time for Caroline's nap.

Annie's inclusion of Robitaille's photograph in her family album signals that Annie intends to follow through on her final declaration to Octavia that "I'd never lie to my child." As Annie walks out, closing the door behind her, the mobile hanging above Caroline's bed – including a heart-shaped mirror amongst several other reflective pieces – begins to spin slightly. Then the camera moves from a distant corner of the room to a close angle on Caroline lying awake, then sitting up in bed, grabbing the mobile's heart-shaped mirror, and beginning to call Candyman. Caroline completes four repetitions of Candyman's name by the time Annie reenters the room, puts her hand over Caroline's mouth, and tells her to go back to sleep. The film ends with Annie looking down at her daughter, sighing, as the mobile's mirror pieces dangle beside her. Though Condon remarks that the film ends with "a sense of some kind of hope," this rather clichéd 'final scare' ending suggests that Annie's daughter will begin the cycle again when she is older – which is, in fact, the premise of the third movie (Director Commentary).

Overall, *Farewell to the Flesh's* final scene gestures at the inevitability of Candyman's return not because he is a typical horror movie monster who simply will not die – along the lines

of Jason, Freddy, or Michael Myers – but because he represents a chapter from the South’s history that many prefer to ignore or deny. Conversely, though, Hester-Williams claims that, with Annie’s attempt to protect Caroline from the fifth repetition of Candyman’s name, “we are free to see slavery fixed in the past and imagine a reconciled and harmonious future. Candyman would kill us all if we let him, so it is he—and his-story of slavery—that must perish” (Hester-Williams). If anything, this final scene points to the fact that neither Candyman nor the broader, collective trauma he represents, either can or should be forgotten.

Similar to the Tarrant family home in *Farewell to the Flesh*, *The Skeleton Key*’s Devereaux House in rural Louisiana is haunted by the historical trauma of a lynching, which is also revealed in a flashback sequence. Whereas the lynch mob in *Farewell* target Daniel Robitaille for his relationship with a wealthy young white woman sometime in the 1890’s, *Key*’s hanging occurs in the 1920’s. At that time, the Thorpe family is residing in the plantation home. As the current owner of home (who is actually possessed by the former slave) explains, the patriarch of the family, a banker who “made his fortune cheating the poor,” throws an extravagant soiree for the bank’s anniversary. As the celebration comes to a close, the adults realize they have not seen the Thorpe children, Martin and Grace, for quite some time. A search ensues, and the partygoers find the children in the attic room where the Thorpes’ servants, Mama Cecile and Papa Justify, live. The wealthy white folks are shocked to see that the two servants are “trying to teach [the children] how to conjure hoodoo.” Upon this realization, “Thorpe went about insane, and so did the rest of the guests. I mean, how long had this blasphemy been going on?” Thorpe and the others drag Cecile and Justify into the front yard, throw nooses over the limbs of a large oak tree, and beginning pulling the two servants’ bodies into the air while dousing them in alcohol and setting them on fire. The Thorpe children (or so it seems) watch the

spectacle from the attic window. Later, of course, *Key*'s twist ending reveals that, under the guise of teaching the children hoodoo, Cecile and Justify were actually using their Conjure of Sacrifice spell – allowing them to possess the bodies of other people – for the first time. Though the pair have been ‘sacrificing’ white bodies ever since, this cycle began with Martin and Grace Thorpe, the original inheritors of the house itself.

Thus, *The Skeleton Key*'s Mama Cecile upends the ideal of the mammy as the ultimate embodiment of Southern maternal sacrifice by literally sacrificing the children placed in her care for her own benefit. In the Gothic South, of course, that benefit is the ability to possess their bodies, and live within their (white) skin. Specifically, as Halberstam points out in *Skin Shows*, “skin houses the body and it is figured in Gothic as the ultimate boundary” (7); in the South of the early twentieth century, this ‘boundary’ also distinguishes between exploiters and the exploited – particularly between wealthy white landowners and lower-class blacks acting as ‘live-in’ servants. As the mammy of the Thorpe family and, thus, the primary caregiver for Martin and Grace, Mama Cecile “is dangerous to the power structure, for though she is marginalized, she remains a powerful presence in the white family” (Whitney 8). Furthermore, Whitney suggests, this danger stems from the fact that “if white children should come to identify with black caregivers, they might transgress lines of racial segregation” (8). Considering the form of supernatural passing that occurs here, though – specifically, the elaborate (Southern) Gothic skin show that Cecile performs – the transgressions of racial boundaries occurring in *Skeleton Key* frame the narrative as a unique form of Southern maternal horror, as Cecile betrays a supposedly sacred bond with her white charges.

Therefore, I argue that, in stark contrast with the idealized mammies in classic Southern films such as *Gone with the Wind* and *The Birth of a Nation* – and even the non-Southern

mammy figure seen in Sirk's *Imitation of Life* – Mama Cecile represents a monstrous manifestation that combines Trudier Harris' 'moderate mammy' with a Southern spin on Halberstam's Gothic 'skin show.' Borrowing from Harris' 1982 manuscript – which outlines the "three stages" in the "progression from mammies to militants" (4) – I suggest that *Key*'s Mama Cecile represents a monstrous, Southern Gothic embodiment of the transitional, middle category. On one end of the spectrum, the "true southern maids" – i.e., "those who generally acquiesce in the paternalistic and place-defined relationship between mistress and maid" – and, on the other, the "militants" who "confront exploitation directly" (Harris 4). Between these two opposites, then, the moderate mammies would "readily adopt *masks*, rebelling covertly like Brer Rabbit against the world which would dehumanize them" (Harris 23; my emphasis). We learn from Violet Devereaux – who, of course, is actually Cecile – that Thorpe was "a cruel man" who, unaware that Cecile and Justify were "famous all through the bayous" for their hoodoo expertise, "just saw them as help. And he worked them to the bone. He abused them." This representation of Thorpe (and, by association, the entire Thorpe family) aligns the wealthy family with the (white) world that 'dehumanizes' their servants, prompting both Cecile and Justify to 'rebel covertly' via their powers of hoodoo.

In *The Skeleton Key*, then, the 'mask' that Mama Cecile adopts is, quite literally, the skin of white women. Consequently, if, as Whitney claims, the mammy is "white culture's ideal fantasy mother," then Mama Cecile is their worst nightmare (7). According to Micki McElya, the ideal of the mammy figure "lingers because so many white Americans have wished to live in a world in which African Americans are not angry over past and present injustices, a world in which white people were and are not complicit," and, quite simply, the "mammy figure affirmed

their wishes” (3)⁴⁴. In cinematic form, especially, these wishes have been fulfilled via “two, essential, garden-variety Mammy images. One was of slave society’s historical Mammy,” such as *GWTW*, and the “other was her ‘liberated,’ domesticated sister...the maid, servant, cook and faithful soul” – such as *Imitation*’s Annie (Delgaudio 25). Conversely, Cecile’s charade successfully lulls her “larger, more powerful adversaries” – in this case, the Thorpe family – “into a false sense of...harmlessness” before she takes “destructive advantage of their trust” (Harris 29). Unlike Scarlett’s Mammy or even *Imitation*’s Annie – both of whom characterize the ideal insofar as they appear “satisfied, even pleased, with this inequitable arrangement” (Butler 26) – Cecile seeks to claim the Devereaux House as her own. Along the way, though, in accordance with another key characteristic of Harris’ moderate maids, Cecile acts to “turn stereotypes to [her] advantage” – and then destroys them altogether (30).

In this regard, it is useful to examine a significant overlap between Sarah Jane’s attempt to pass in *Imitation of Life*, and Mama Cecile’s ‘skin show’ in *Skeleton Key* as they apply to the mammy figure. For instance, in *Imitation*, when her mother, Annie, asks Sarah Jane to take a tray of food to the living room for “Miss Lora,” who is entertaining guests, Sarah Jane saunters into the room carrying the tray atop her head, proclaiming she has “fetched y’all a mess of crawdads, Miss Lora, for you and your friends” in an exaggerated Southern accent. Not amused by her act, Lora asks Sarah Jane where she learned this “trick,” to which Sarah Jane replies, “I learned it from my mammy, and she learned it from ole massa ‘fore she belonged to you.” This scene illustrates that Sarah Jane’s attempt to pass is an effort to “escape this interpellation of identity, the linkage between blackness and servitude” which her mother fully embraces (DeRosa 155).

⁴⁴ Hernan Vera and Andrew M. Gordon point out in “Scarlett and Mammy Revisited: White Women and Black Women in Hollywood Films,” that “just as a major prototype for the relationship between white and black men in American society is found in the novel *Huckleberry Finn* and the films based on it, the prototype for the relationship between white and black women can be found in the novel *Gone With the Wind* and its 1939 film adaptation” (100).

Specifically, DeRosa asserts, Sarah Jane's passing, "her rejection of her second-class status, is the vehicle for destroying, symbolically, not her mother but *mammy*" (159). While Cecile successfully topples the romanticized notion of the mammy, though, she and Sarah Jane reach two completely disparate outcomes: Sarah Jane is "return[ed] to her authentic identity (her pre-passing life)" in light of her mother's tragic death, while Cecile's façade continues unfettered (Rooney, "*Imitation*" 55).

Therefore, *Key* diverges sharply from the standard racial passing narrative, especially the intersection of racial passing and mammy figures as previously established by *Imitation* as a paradigm of the maternal melodrama genre. Cecile – passing within the body of the aging Violet Devereaux – hires Caroline as a live-in hospice caretaker for her bedridden husband, Ben (John Hurt). According to the Devereauxs' attorney, Luke Marshall (Peter Saarsgard), Ben has survived a stroke but is almost completely paralyzed, incapable of speaking, is "pretty far gone," and only has "a month maybe" to live. Ultimately, of course, Cecile possesses Caroline's (younger, white) body; along the way, though, Cecile positions Caroline as the (displaced) 'help' within the Devereaux House, and the manner by which Caroline is targeted because of her own lack of both familial ties to (and knowledge about) this rural region eventually determines her status as the (white lady) victim of this hoodoo trickster. Furthermore, *Skeleton Key* poses Caroline as the only real victim in (and of) the Devereaux House. As McGee explains, "although Justify and Cecile were victims in their own right, the audience is primed to be on the side of Caroline from the moment she appears" (248); specifically, McGee points out that as an "affable, young white girl who...wishes the best for her patient, Caroline does not deserve what happens to her" (248).

Caroline's concern for her patients, in fact, is established in the film's opening scene. Here, Caroline reads aloud to Mr. Talcott, an elderly African-American man, lying in a hospital bed in a New Orleans nursing home. Caroline soon realizes that Mr. Talcott has died while she was reading to him. Disillusioned by the indifference to his death from the doctors and nurses at the nursing home – Caroline is a volunteer there, accruing hours to attend nursing school – Caroline later vents her frustration to her roommate, Jill, claiming that "it's just a business to them. It's supposed to be a business about caring. They couldn't care less." Caroline's investment in becoming a healthcare provider, then, is just as much a reflection of her compassionate, emotional bond to her patients as it is a profession; simultaneously, it reveals her desire for familial ties – or, at the very least, a chance to atone for her own feelings of guilt and inadequacy as a daughter.

Eventually, though, Caroline's desire for a surrogate family leads to her downfall. Caroline's status as a displaced orphan is the main reason she chooses to stay at the Devereaux House; whereas "historically speaking," the 'help' faced the "quintessential struggle" of having to "choose between taking care of her employer's family or her own," Caroline has no other family to care for (Heung 28). Simultaneously, though, this positions Caroline as an ideal victim for Violet/Cecile. On her first day on the job, Caroline tells her new boss, when Violet asks about her family, that "my mom left when I was little. My dad raised me and he died last year." Later, Caroline explains to Luke that, due to an argument regarding Caroline's decision to quit college as a young adult, she had not spoken to her father for quite some time, and "he was gone before I even knew he was sick." Caroline then tells Luke that "no one should have to die alone." In this regard, then, Ben represents, if not a surrogate father figure, per se, then at least a chance for Caroline to make up for her absence during her own father's terminal illness and death.

Though Caroline carries very few personal items with her to the Devereaux House, one keepsake prominently displayed in her room is a framed picture of a young Caroline and her father. After a particularly unsettling night at the Devereaux House, when Caroline has clearly had her fill of both the house and its owner, Violet, and packs her belongings to leave for good, Caroline glances out her window and sees Ben, who is sitting in his wheelchair on the porch, clasping his hands, staring blankly into the distance. Caroline then looks down at the picture of herself and her father. The parallel here is unmistakable, and Caroline abandons her plans to quit the job because of her attachment to Ben. If not for this emotional bond to Ben – and her ultimately futile efforts to save him – Caroline would not fall prey to the house itself and, more importantly, Mama Cecile.

In stark contrast to the close bonds between (mammy figure) Annie and her white ‘family’ in *Imitation*, though, Mama Cecile experienced no such union with the Thorpes – emphasized by Violet/Cecile’s assertion that Thorpe “just saw them as help”; consequently, Violet/Cecile treats Caroline in the same way. For instance, during Caroline’s first walkthrough of the Devereaux House during her first day on the job, Violet makes it abundantly clear that Caroline is an outsider within its walls. Violet tells Caroline that she intends to “live here as though you’re not in residence.” This statement aligns with “the requisite of invisibility,” considered to be a “peculiar and most degrading aspect of domestic service”: “the ideal servant... would be invisible and silent... attentive to the needs of the mistress and master but blind to their faults” (Katzman 188).

This image of the invisible, blind, silent servant aligns with a rather bizarre nightmare sequence occurring, appropriately enough, just after Caroline learns of the lynching that took place at the Devereaux House. During a stereotypically dark and stormy night, the camera drifts

through the main hallway of the Devereaux House, and then passes through the keyhole of the door to Caroline's room as she tosses and turns, asleep in her bed. These color shots then cut to a black and white close-up of Papa Justify's ring – which Caroline first saw in the hoodoo room – followed by another black and white shot of Papa Justify standing in the hallway of the Devereaux House. The sequencing here indicates that these are the images haunting Caroline's dream, emphasized by another cut to a color shot of Caroline muttering and, again, tossing and turning in bed.

These abrupt transitions between black and white and color images appear throughout the film in scenes melding the past with the present – most notably, of course, the flashback sequence of Cecile's and Justify's lynching. That Softley uses these cuts between black and white and color to construct Caroline's nightmare sequence suggests that her sense of placelessness and unease here – both in the secluded, rural area and within the Devereaux House itself – is heightened by the supernatural presence from the South's past currently haunting the house. Accordingly, the color shot of Caroline in distress cuts back to black and white, and this time Mama Cecile is standing in the hallway of the Devereaux House, smoking a cigarette. After another abrupt cut back to Caroline, the scene cuts to the face of one of the masks that Caroline first saw in the hoodoo room: an otherwise blank face, with the eyes and mouth sewn shut. A return shot to Caroline zooms out to reveal a circle of fire around her bed, identical to the circle of fire around Martin and Grace in the hoodoo room during the flashback sequence. In what is intended to be the shocking twist of this sequence, Caroline then sits up in bed – a dream within a dream, as it were – and her eyes and lips are sewn shut, identical to the face of the mask. Then, Caroline wakes up from the nightmare.

Clearly, the image of Caroline's eyes and mouth sewn shut in her nightmare is intended to reflect her sense of powerlessness in the Devereaux House: as an 'ideal servant,' Caroline should be both blind to and silent about what is actually occurring in the house. Furthermore, the fact that she recalls the mask from the hoodoo room in her dream, and is then 'wearing' the mask on her own skin, indicates that hoodoo is beginning to take its toll on her. That she dreams of herself inside the circle of flames – just like Martin and Grace are shown in the flashback sequence – implies that she too is 'learning' about hoodoo by becoming a victim of it and the current owners of the haunted house – much like the Thorpe children did some ninety years prior. In this respect, Caroline's status as an outsider – in practically every sense of the word – within the Devereaux House (and the South as a whole) becomes all the more significant.

Accordingly, during the same spiel in which Violet tells Caroline she intends to, essentially, live in the house as though Caroline does not exist, she confirms, "after all, we're not kin." Again, this declaration serves to reinforce the divide between Violet as the owner of the house and Caroline as the 'help'; furthermore, it challenges the notion of the 'help' as part of the family. Specifically, in Sirk's *Imitation*, Annie's relationship with both Lora and Susie "reaches back to an image of domestic servitude derived...from the southern plantation" in which the bond between homeowner and 'help' was perceived as "a quasi-familial, fluidly defined relationship between employer and employee...bound by a loose verbal agreement to exchange labor for a home" (Heung 28). When Caroline and Violet first meet, Luke tries to smooth over Violet's icy demeanor toward Caroline by telling the young woman that "the idea of a stranger living" in the house is hard for her. This statement is among the first of several contradictory clues hidden in both Violet's and Luke's – but, really, Cecile's and Justify's – attempts to keep

up appearances. Overall, Caroline naively dismisses Violet's resistance since the older woman's most significant concern seems to be that Caroline is not from the South.

Thus, while *Farewell's* Esplanade Avenue mansion underscores Annie's deep-rooted connections to the South, the Devereaux House acts as a constant reminder that Caroline is completely out of her element in the Louisiana bayous. Each protagonist's place – or placelessness, as it were – in the home is emphasized by their familial links to the region, or complete lack thereof, once again underscoring the 'obsessive preoccupation' with blood, family, and home in the Southern Gothic genre. The fact that Caroline is "not from around here. She's not gonna understand my house" – a point which Violet repeatedly points out to her – is directly related to her dismal fate in the film's twist ending, whereas Annie's genealogical connections to the house itself, as well as the region, aids in her survival. Consequently, the Devereaux House, similar to *Farewell's* Esplanade Avenue mansion, challenges the ideals of the Southern plantation home as a "space of innocence" (Williams, *Race Card* 200). Annie's family home in *Farewell* is, perhaps, a far cry from a place of refuge for her – she and her daughter, Caroline, remain in New Orleans, but do not live in the family home – but she, at the least, understands its power. Conversely, in contrast to the bond between, for example, Tara and Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind*, the plantation mansion as a space of refuge is denied to Caroline, a non-Southerner, in *Skeleton Key*; instead, it acts as an isolated haven for a system of exploitation controlled by its former servants.

Paradoxically, then, even though Caroline learns of the mansion's violent history directly from Violet/Cecile, she receives the most helpful information about the house (as well as its violent past and current inhabitants) from African-American women while either in New Orleans – Jill, Mama Cynthia, and Hallie – or during her interactions with the Bayou Woman at the gas

station⁴⁵. In stark contrast to the absence of white mothers throughout *Skeleton Key* – Mrs. Thorpe appears only briefly in the flashback sequence, and Caroline’s mother abandoned her as a small child – several close familial relationships between African-American women are emphasized throughout the film. These characters and their relationships, in turn, emphasize the anomalous characterization of Mama Cecile – who has no children or extended family.

For instance, Jill informs Caroline that New Orleans is the “home” of hoodoo and that, despite the misconceptions and frequent connotations with voodoo, hoodoo is “pretty harmless” – significantly, Jill insists that “it can’t hurt you if you don’t believe”; thus, Jill becomes the first of several conduits (via African-American women) for Caroline to access to knowledge about hoodoo that is otherwise inaccessible to her due to her race and non-Southern origins. Later, Caroline visits the hoodoo shop Jill points out to her in the Algiers community in New Orleans – Jill’s aunt is a loyal customer there. Similar to her first visit to the rural gas station, Caroline notices a line of brick dust along the bottom of the shop’s doorway, which she also notices at the Devereaux House. Mama Cynthia explains that once “you lay a line [of brick dust] down, nobody that means you harm can cross it.” Next, Caroline tracks down Hallie, Ben’s most recent caretaker, who tells Caroline that when she “told my mama where I was working,” her mother replied that “that house has been nothing but blood and tears.” Hallie tells Caroline that the

⁴⁵ Whereas *Farewell*’s Annie moves through New Orleans with relative ease, Caroline’s journey between urban and rural spaces is far more complicated. Specifically, the fringe rural area between New Orleans and the Devereaux House – the isolated gas station where her interactions with the Bayou Woman occur – emphasize Caroline’s sense of unease in the area. Although Softley makes no mention in his commentary of any influence of the gas station scene in Boorman’s *Deliverance* upon the scene detailing Caroline’s first stop at the gas station in *Key*, it is practically impossible to overlook the similarities. Though I have already discussed the *Deliverance* filling station scene in my previous chapter, it is important to note how each scene in both films underscore the protagonists’ status as urbane, educated individuals in stark contrast to the poor, presumably uneducated inhabitants of the station and its attached dwelling. As Hebert-Leiter notes, the gas station scene represents the pivotal moment in *Key* when “the audience is well aware that Caroline is no longer in familiar territory,” concurring that this scene marks Caroline’s “entrance into a strange world” (194-5). Notably, as I explain in my next chapter, a scene taking place at a gas station also signals the ‘contact zone’ between two different worlds in *Silent Hill* as well.

house's previous owners, Martin and Grace Thorpe, "died of strokes right after they sold the place. Maybe they found something they shouldn't. Maybe now Ben did, too." Assuming that Hallie is referring to the hoodoo room, Caroline replies, "I heard it can't hurt you. I mean, it can't hurt you if you don't believe," to which Hallie retorts, "then I suggest you leave that house before you do."

Notably, Hallie's access to knowledge about the history of the Devereaux House – passed down to her from her mother, no less, just as Jill knows about the hoodoo shop through her aunt – leads to her decision to leave her job there; conversely, Caroline's status as a white woman, coupled with her status as an outsider with no familial ties to the South, later leads to her falling prey to Cecile's schemes. Caroline's downfall occurs despite her conversation with the Bayou Woman during her second visit to the rural gas station where the old woman lives. When Caroline tells the Bayou Woman that she has Justify's Conjure of Sacrifice record, the Bayou Woman explains to Caroline that it is the "strongest conjuration of all," that "it keeps you from dying. Not forever, but for a while...you have to sacrifice somebody and take the years that they have left." Overall *Key*'s secondary African-American female characters help out Caroline a great deal; inevitably, though, their guidance is not enough to outsmart the trickster of the Devereaux House – the monstrous mammy, Mama Cecile, wins in the end.

The significance of Mama Cecile's act of supernatural passing as a Southern Gothic 'skin show' manifests in the film's final moments. After the climactic Conjure of Sacrifice scene, Caroline is trapped within Violet's body and, by the time the paramedics arrive, Cecile (now possessing Caroline's body) has given Caroline/Violet a paralytic of some sort – presumably the same "remedies" she's been administering to Ben throughout the film, to keep him practically catatonic. Jill arrives just as the paramedics are wheeling Violet out to the ambulance.

Caroline/Cecile tells Jill that the Devereauxs can no longer stay in the home, and will soon be sent away to a nursing home, meaning that Caroline will spend the rest of her life confined to the type of living conditions that she found most deplorable. Additionally, Luke tells Jill that the Devereauxs “really loved” Caroline, so much so that “they left her the house.” Thus, the film concludes with Violet and Ben – but, really, Caroline and Luke – riding away from the home in the back of the ambulance. After Jill and the paramedics have left the house, Cecile points out to Luke – who is actually Justify – that “I told you I wanted a black one this time”; in turn, Luke replies, “You know the black ones never stay.” The final shot of the film – an aerial view of the Devereaux House, pulling away to reveal the swamps surrounding it – underscores the fact that Cecile’s and Justify’s manipulations have been succeeded once again, gesturing at the beginning of yet another cycle of supernatural passing.

Overall, the ‘twist’ ending of *Skeleton Key* subverts the traditional resolution of the racial passing narrative through its simultaneous disruption of the maternal melodrama’s typically tear-jerking finale – especially *Imitation of Life*. Rooney claims that “the passing story might be said to fail as a revolutionary or subversive plot in that it ultimately eliminates he or she whose crossing threatens the status quo,” and, therefore, “eliminates transgression with a ‘happy’ (ideologically safe or predictable) ending” (“*Imitation*” 60). On the other hand, Softley’s *Key* ends with Mama Cecile successfully possessing another white, female body and, presumably, extending her claim on the Devereaux House for the foreseeable future. Disturbingly, then, the idea of Mama Cecile ‘contaminating’ the young, white body of Caroline is intended to both horrify the audience and challenge the traditionally ‘happy’ (safe) ending of the passing narrative. Furthermore, as Heung points out, a primary focus of *Imitation* through the narrative is the close, ‘quasi-familial’ bond “between black and white women”; to the contrary, of course,

Annie's funeral scene ends the film with an "image of final separation between its two protagonists" (39). Conversely, *Skeleton Key* ends its narrative with an unsettling inversion of this image, a supernatural (and presumably irreversible) union of the two women in the film's ultimate example of a Southern Gothic skin show.

Thus, whereas *The Descent* melds maternal melodrama with a Southern horror classic through its gendered revision of *Deliverance*'s original narrative – as explored in Chapter One – the two films at the center of this chapter blend Southern Gothic horror with a racial passing narrative similar to that first seen within the maternal melodrama film genre in both screen adaptations of *Imitation of Life*; however, the Southern maternal horror genre also brings new, and sometimes problematic, elements with this hybridity. For instance, discussing the overall message of his adaptation of *Imitation* in an interview, Douglas Sirk remarked that "you can't escape what you are" – in reference, of course, to Sarah Jane, the "racial passer" (Rooney, "Imitation" 55). Condon's *Farewell* maintains this general concept – through Octavia's unsuccessful attempt to deny her family's racially 'contaminated' past (and her own maternal origins), and culminating in Annie's realization of the inevitability of its return. On the other hand, *Skeleton Key* implies that, even though it may be possible to 'escape' what you are, you will eventually *want* to return to it – via Cecile's unfulfilled desire to possess a black body next time around in her never-ending 'skin show,' a crucial component of this particular (Southern) Gothic text.

Thus, through its inversion of maternal sacrifice, *Skeleton Key* also challenges the Old South's idealizations regarding the mammy figure, racial purity and, more specifically, the body of the wealthy, white Southern woman. In this regard, both Southern (Gothic) maternal horror hybrids examined here rely upon (maternal) melodrama's focus on the "maternal place of

origins” to meld an examination of the South’s traumatic (and traumatizing) past with the horror genre (Williams, “Melodrama” 65). Appropriately, then, since the “‘main thrust’ of melodramatic narrative” is, essentially, “to get back to what feels like the beginning,” the conclusions of both films gesture at a cycle of sorts (Williams, *Race Card* 35).

The subtitle of Condon’s *Candyman* sequel, *Farewell to the Flesh*, appears at first glance to be little more than an alliterative marker of the movie’s gore factor; in fact, the phrase directly relates to a crucial component of the film’s Southern Gothic setting: New Orleans during Mardi Gras. Throughout the film, a local radio DJ named Kingfish provides information to the audience via voiceovers. In his first voiceover, heard over the opening credits as Annie drives to the school where she teaches, the Kingfish announces that there are “just three more days until Lent...So let’s have it. The merriment before the penance, and the feast before the fast.” The Kingfish goes on to ask his audience if they know “what ‘carnival’ means in Latin? Well, the Kingfish went to the good schools, so he can tell you all about it. Carnival – ‘farewell to the flesh,’ that’s what it means.”

Accordingly, Annie’s journey into her family’s history, intertwined as it is with the cycle of the South’s past haunting its present, coincides with the cycle of ‘merriment’ and ‘penance’ associated with Mardi Gras in New Orleans. In this regard, the film’s subtitle gestures at another interpretation: not merely an acknowledgment of the gore typically associated with ‘slasher’ horror, or even the etymological root of ‘carnival,’ but also a ‘skin show’ of a different sort which draws a provocative parallel between the Tarrant family’s history of racial passing and the tradition of Mardi Gras masks (prevalent imagery throughout the film as a whole). Appropriately, just before the final scene focusing on Annie and her daughter, Caroline, we hear Kingfish’s last voiceover: “Yeah, it’s Lent... We made it through another one, New Orleans, and

the Kingfish hopes you got plenty to atone for. I hope y'all said a fond farewell to the flesh. It's the cycle, Crescent City, and we are starting it again." In this regard, the cyclical endings of both *Farewell to the Flesh* and *The Skeleton Key* suggest that the South's traumatized (and traumatic) history – whether in the form of recently unearthed family secrets, or monstrous mammies – will continue to haunt the Southern white female body for generations to come.

CHAPTER THREE:

“MOTHER IS GOD IN THE EYES OF A CHILD”: MATERNAL SACRIFICE AS RELIGIOUS SACRIFICE IN *JUG FACE* AND *SILENT HILL*

In this chapter, I will examine another inversion of maternal sacrifice, manifesting here as maternal figures literally sacrificing their daughters as scapegoats in religious ceremonies for the greater good of the Southern communities in which they live. Whereas racial purity and the ‘contamination’ of the wealthy, white Southern family by miscegenation (and ‘supernatural passing’) traced through the white woman’s skin was the focal point of the previous chapter, this chapter will argue that outdated ideals of Southern feminine purity inherently clash with the ‘poor white trash’ stereotype as illustrated in *Jug Face* (2013), an independent American film written and directed by Chad Crawford Kinkle, as well as the representation of the small Southern town as a maternal body of sorts in *Silent Hill*, French filmmaker Christophe Gans’ 2006 film adaptation of the groundbreaking survival horror video game series. Both *Jug Face*’s Ada (Lauren Ashley Carter) and *Silent Hill*’s Alessa (Jodelle Ferland) are deemed impure – a status inextricably linked to their roles as abject daughters of the South – and sacrificed by their own maternal figures in a futile attempt to cleanse the girls of their supposed contamination. As a result, both films simultaneously complicate the “ritual of maternal suffering” – a central component of the maternal melodrama genre since its early days (Viviani 169) – and show that

romanticized notions of the Southern white woman as a “quasi-Virgin Mary” figure are as archaic as the religious practice of human sacrifice itself (King 35).

In fact, *Jug Face* and *Silent Hill* both show that, in the Southern maternal horror hybrid genre, daughters – not just mothers – frequently make the ultimate sacrifice as part of a perpetual struggle to purify the South of the contamination of its traumatized past, a past which cannot be contained within the maternal melodrama genre alone. Thus, this chapter argues that by posing maternal sacrifice as religious sacrifice within abject regions known for their “backwardsness,” these two Southern maternal horror hybrids effectively challenge maternal melodrama’s defining tropes: no ‘scenario of separation’ or act of maternal sacrifice can completely ‘cleansed’ the Southern daughter of her mother’s influence, inasmuch as the South’s past will continue to contaminate the present through various manifestations of abject maternal bodies (Greenson 1).

Accordingly, both of these communities – the secluded village of ‘trailer trash’ in *Jug Face* and the small town of Silent Hill – are not just isolated from the surrounding Southern world, they are practically quarantined from it. As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, the tendency to depict the South as an “internal other...differentiated and held apart from the whole” is, by no means, unique to the Southern maternal horror hybrid film genre (Greenson 1). Conversely, the paradoxical cycles of contamination and cleansing taking place within these small Southern settlements culminate in the gradual (but inevitable) destruction of mothers, daughters, and the communities themselves. By focusing on both this dynamic in mother-daughter interactions in each film, as well as their settings within secluded regions of the abject South – communities still relying upon antiquated customs well into the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries – this chapter also argues that the dependency upon tradition in both *Jug Face* and *Silent Hill* simultaneously serves as a critique of two aspects of “the plantation legend”

and its slightly more modern manifestation, the Southern Family Romance (King 35). In addition to the impossible standard of purity for Southern white women – an inherently ‘polluted’ populace – the plantation legend’s idealization of the land itself is undermined by the abject contamination found within *Jug Face*’s Pit and *Silent Hill*’s Otherworld. The village in *Jug Face* circles The Pit, a deep hole in the ground which the members of the village have worshipped for generations. In turn, much in the same way that Sustin’s clan in *Jug Face* has depended upon The Pit “since we first survived the pox,” *Silent Hill*’s history of sacrificing scapegoats for the greater good reaches back for centuries, too. In stark contrast to the (mother) earth worship in *Jug Face*, though, the remote town of *Silent Hill* represents a far more complex type of maternal body – its Otherworld representing a toxic maternal entity which undermines the “clean and proper body” in an altogether different way (Kristeva 101). As a result, these daughters – also mothers in their own right, as will be explained later – become doubly abject: the (maternal) abject of an already abject realm.

Appropriately, then, the most powerful contaminants in these two hybrid films are the manifestations of the past polluting the present, via the abject mother in the form of these secluded, Southern settlements. In *Jug Face*, the past guides the present: Ada’s family – including her mother, Loriss (Sean Young), her father, Sustin (Larry Fessenden), and her brother, Jessaby (Daniel Manche) – live in a trailer deep in the Tennessee woods, where Sustin leads a small, clandestine group of stereotypically ‘white trash’ characters whose lives revolve around The Pit, the earth deity which occasionally demands a human sacrifice. All sacrifices are selected from within this community: The Pit ‘speaks’ to the village “idiot” (as he is frequently called), Dawai (Sean Bridgers), ‘guiding his hand’ to carve the likeness of the chosen sacrifice into a face jug. Early in the film, Ada discovers Dawai’s most recent carving and, seeing her own face

on the jug, realizes that she will be the next sacrifice. Here, the community's blind obedience to an archaic religious system rooted in earth worship leads it toward its own decimation. The village's numbers are dwindling – there appears to be just over twenty people in the community – yet The Pit selects one of the few remaining young women of childbearing years as its sacrifice.

Similar to the citizens of the neighboring town of Brahams in *Silent Hill*, even the other, rural locals want nothing to do with this trailer park village, or, for that matter, the people residing within it in *Jug Face*. Rather than urbanites invading the long-claimed territory of 'hillbillies' – the driving force of Boorman's *Deliverance* – in *Jug Face*, we see a reversal of this trope: contaminated country comes to (small, Southern) town. In the first of two such scenes, Ada rides along with her father, Sustin, on a trip into town. In stereotypical redneck fashion, Sustin swerves and intentionally hits a possum in the road, gets out of the truck, picks the possum up by its tail, and places it in the bed of the truck alongside numerous jars of moonshine.

Much like the slovenly features of *Deliverance*'s hillbillies hint at their bestial nature and foreshadow their violent attacks upon Ed's group, the brutal chain of events that unfolds in *Jug Face* is all the more horrifying because it confirms rather than contradicts the characters' unseemly appearance. Since their "marked physical appearance" is "laden with connotations of backwardness, degeneration and sloth" – manifesting here in their greasy hair, stained clothes, and what looks like a permanent layer of sweat upon their skin – Kinkle's characters merely "reaffirm the existence of basic hierarchical difference" between hillbillies and 'normal' folks (R. Scott 13). In *Jug Face*, though, this hierarchal difference is directly linked to the villagers' worship of an (abject mother) earth deity. Since this link to (Mother) nature acts as a contaminant, then, the villagers carry this pollution with them – especially into the neighboring

small town. Furthermore, according to Douglas, “bringing pollution...is a capacity which men share with animals” (114). Therefore, their worship of the abject earth mother deity – both symbolically and physically staining their skin and clothes with its ‘blood’ (a mixture of red clay and the actual blood of previous sacrifices) – underscores the blurred lines between man and beast amongst these ‘hillbillies,’ first established in Boorman’s film as analyzed in Chapter One⁴⁶.

As Sustin’s dirty, old truck putters into the small town, the models of automobiles parked along the street indicate that *Jug Face* takes place in the present day, despite the outdated means by which Sustin’s clan survives. Sustin parks his truck in the alley behind the drug store, removes a pistol from the glove compartment, tucks it into his waistband, and tells Ada, “Don’t speak to nobody. Just get what you need and that’s it.” Ada enters the drug store and, under the pretense of buying a pack of underwear, pockets a pregnancy test just before the cashier, the owner’s daughter, suspiciously asks her if she needs help. Meanwhile, Sustin and the store owner carry out their business transaction in the alley, concealed from the view of the townspeople. The store owner brags that the various flavors of Sustin’s moonshine have been “hot sellers,” pauses when he sees the bloodied carcass next to the jars and, with a smirk, says, “I can’t help you with that possum, though”; Sustin fixes the store owner with a glare and replies, “it ain’t for sale.” Later, near the end of the film, Ada and Dawai return to the same store in a desperate attempt to sell stolen jugs of Sustin’s moonshine for money in order to escape the village. Though the owner’s daughter is sympathetic and wants to help them, the owner warns her, “You can’t get in the middle of these people. There’s some weird shit going on in those woods out there, and we don’t want any part of it. You understand?”

⁴⁶ These depictions confirm that, over forty years later, *Deliverance* is still “indisputably the most influential film of the modern era in shaping national perceptions of southern mountaineers and rural life in general” (Harkins 206).

The store owner's remark emphasizes that the villagers' anachronistic activities – specifically, the worship of (and sacrificing for) an (abject mother) earth deity – are aberrant, even by Southern, small town standards. While the citizens of the nameless, neighboring small town in *Jug Face* know better than to disturb the activities of secluded village, these two scenes underscore how Sustin's clan is perceived as a contaminant because their behavior links them to a less civilized past. In *Jug Face*, the divide between small town and rural settlement – not city and country – underscores the rupture between contamination and purity. Accordingly, Clover points out that this “collision” of cultural norms is one of a split between civilization and “statelessness... Much of the ambient horror of these films resides in the fact that statelessness – our collective past – is not dead and buried but is just a car ride away” (132). While the small town folk in *Jug Face* are not urbanites, they still want no association whatsoever with the ‘weird shit going on in those woods’ – inextricably linked to this backwards way of life. As the opening title sequence of *Jug Face* shows, though, the feeling of distrust is quite mutual: their religion, handed down for generations, is the only support system Sustin's clan needs.

Gesturing at the folk art origins of face jugs, the opening credits sequence of *Jug Face* consists of chalk sketches illustrating the selection process for the villagers' sacrifice to The Pit. The first shot of the film fades in on a close-up of a chalk drawing of The Pit; it is difficult to discern if the reddish brown coloring within The Pit is the red clay of the earth, or blood from the most recent sacrifice. Zooming out, the next drawing shows a small gathering of people praying around The Pit. Subsequent sketches confirm that the villagers are praying for the health of a sick young girl, as a reverend leads prayer circles both around The Pit and within the home of the girl's family. Overcome by a message from The Pit – indicated by blank, white eyes (replicated later in the film when Ada is overcome with her own visions from The Pit) – the prophet collects

(blood) red earth from The Pit, and uses the clay to carve a face jug. Next, a procession of the faithful follows the prophet from the church to The Pit. The prophet pulls a cloth from atop the face jug, revealing the likeness of the chosen sacrifice. In this case, the chosen is none other than the reverend himself. The reverend is positioned on all fours at the edge of the pit, and his throat is slashed. Next, the young girl and her parents get into the pit, splashing its contents – including the blood of the sacrificed reverend – onto the girl. As the opening sequence began with a zoom out of The Pit, it closes with another zoom out: the faithful followers – including the young girl and her parents – kneeled in prayer around the bloody pit, the reverend’s lifeless body nearby.

The opening credits sequence of *Jug Face* then fades to a common occurrence in horror film: a young woman running through the woods, attempting to hide from something (or someone) behind a tree. We soon learn that the young woman, Ada, is trying to evade a young man who is pursuing her and attempting to persuade her to have sex. Though initially reluctant, Ada acquiesces after warning the young man “not here,” since the two are within several feet of The Pit. After their rendezvous – which is intercut with shots of red clay upon a potter’s wheel being molded into a face jug, and close-ups of The Pit – Ada returns to her family’s trailer, where her parents, Sustin and Loriss, and another young man, Bodey, and his parents are waiting for her. Sustin says that Bodey has something to tell Ada, then Bodey informs her, “we’re gonna be joined.” Sustin confirms, “next full moon, it’ll happen.” Bodey’s mother, Pyer, interjects, “if she’s been true.” Then Corber, Bodey’s father, hands the necessary papers over to Sustin, who slices his thumb and ‘signs’ the paper with his bloody thumbprint. Ada asks to be excused, so she can go to the pit because, she claims, “I’d like to pray on this.” The scene encapsulates many archaic practices typically associated with an outdated way of life – arranged marriages (scheduled according to moon cycles, no less) and blood oaths – or, at the least, an old-fashioned

attitude toward feminine purity (virginity until marriage), while gesturing at Ada's complicated relationship with her mother, Loriss, who remains silent during the arrangement of her daughter's marriage.

Thus, by combining these rituals of arranged marriages, blood oaths, and earth worship in a Southern setting, Kinkle creates 'white trash' characters that are, from an evolutionary standpoint, somewhere between Marshall's Crawlers in *The Descent* and Boorman's mountain men in *Deliverance*. For instance, Hartigan points out that the setting of *Deliverance* reveals a "narrative landscape in the zone *between* Nature and Culture," in which Nature is "inhabited by strange 'natives,' poor whites who live in a *contaminated zone* of junked yards," culminating in the representation of "'white trash'" as an "internalized figure of the '*primitive*'" (9; my emphasis). In fact, the villagers in *Jug Face*, contaminated by their savage means of existence, make the men Lewis' group meet at the filling station early on in *Deliverance* – and, certainly, the residents of the boarding house with whom Ed and Bobby dine near the end of the film – appear downright civilized by comparison.

Through *Jug Face*'s hyperbolic (and frequently offensive) rendering of the "redneck" as an "American primitive," though, we also find useful examples for this study through Kinkle's unique focus on Ada and her status as an abject, 'white trash' Southern daughter and mother (Vera and Gordon 42). If 'white trash' individuals are closer to beasts than humans – and, as I mentioned in Chapter One, a woman's "ability to give birth links her directly to the animal world" (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 47) – then 'white trash' women are even closer to nature: they are doubly abject. Consequently, Ada is in a double-bind: she will become an (abject) mother to Bodey's children after they are wed, or be "shunned" (abject) from the community for rebelling against The Pit's will.

It is, in turn, the confirmation of Ada's pregnancy that solidifies her bond with the abject mother/womb of the community itself: The Pit. This, in turn, relates back to Creed's assessment of the archaic mother figure in horror film in *The Monstrous-Feminine*. Here, Creed explains that the figure of the archaic mother is "clearly present in two distinct ways in the horror film"; first, in her "generative" form, the archaic mother represents "the primeval 'black hole,' the originating womb which gives birth to all life" (*Monstrous-Feminine* 27). In *Jug Face*, The Pit's embodiment as this generative archaic mother is highlighted in the opening credits sequence and further illustrated throughout the film as a whole; while the villagers do not believe The Pit literally births new beings, they entrust it with determining their fertility and ensuring their overall health – if they keep it sufficiently appeased. During the first sacrificial ceremony in the film, just before the slaughter, Sustin explains to the gathered group that "without the blood, the waters of The Pit would heal no one. And so we do what we must." Later, still, as Sustin prepares to take Jessaby to the pit for a healing ceremony, he reminds Ada that "we give it a life when it wants it, and it heals us when we need it."

Just as The Pit symbolizes the generative archaic mother to Sustin's group through its healing powers, then, it also represents its own opposite both to the group and to the outside world. The "all-devouring" archaic mother – a destructive, rather than generative, force – produces "horrific offspring as well as threatening to incorporate everything in its path" (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 27). Accordingly, the scenes of Sustin's – and, later, Ada and Dawai's – trips into town illustrate how outsiders view members of Sustin's clan themselves as 'horrific offspring' via their contaminative properties. Perhaps more significantly, The Pit literally consumes members of Sustin's group if not appeased with its selected sacrificial victim. Ada sets

this chain of events into motion when she hides her face jug, the sign that she has been chosen as the next sacrifice.

I posit that Ada is selected by The Pit as punishment for her willful behavior and aberrant sexuality, as both undermine the outdated ideals of feminine obedience and purity in the South. Ada's tendency to question and rebel against the status quo of the clan's patriarchy is noticeable in several scenes following her decision to hide her face jug. When Loriss informs Ada that she will not spend time with Dawai, a close friend, after marrying Bodey, Ada resists, stating that she will do whatever she wants to do. Loriss corrects her, "You will do whatever Bodey tells you to! Now that's the way it is. You best get used to it." Later, during the drive to town, Ada asks her father if anyone has ever refused an arranged marriage before. Sustin bluntly explains to Ada, "It's a woman's job to have babies. You got to be joined to do that." Conversely, though, in this Southern setting in which the citizens are still directly linked to the earth in more ways than one, Ada's pregnancy exacerbates her already abject status.

Consequently, Ada is stricken with the ability to 'see' The Pit claiming the lives of those closest to her as substitute victims in light of her refusal to accept her selection as sacrificial scapegoat. Ada's first spell occurs as she and her soon-to-be sister-in-law, Eilen, are doing laundry at the riverside. Eilen asks Ada how many children she intends to have with Bodey, interjecting that they should probably have five or six "to keep things going real good." Ada answers, "we'll have as many as The Pit wants, I reckon." In addition to confirming that The Pit controls the overall health (and fertility) of the villagers, the dialogue here also underscores that, in *Jug Face*, propagation is directly linked to maintaining the ways of the past – 'to keep things going real good' – in accordance with their backwards (Southern) way of life.

As Ada steps away to hang their laundry to dry, she receives a vision from The Pit. First, Ada sees herself finding and then hiding her face jug – a clear indication of the source of The Pit’s wrath – and then images of Eilen struggling and, finally, floating in bloody river water where the pair were doing laundry. When Ada returns to the spot where she left Eilen, there is nothing but blood and gore remaining. As Creed suggests, “we can see abjection at work in the horror text where the child struggles to break away from the mother, representative of the archaic maternal figure” (12). Accordingly, The Pit – as the symbolic archaic mother (both in its generative and destructive forms) of *Jug Face*’s ‘white trash’ characters – punishes Ada for attempting to ‘break away’ by showing her the attacks as they happen. As a result, Ada can “see through its eyes” at least four times throughout the film – each time, another villager is being claimed by The Pit in Ada’s place. Despite Dawai’s status as the prophet, even he does not have this connection with The Pit; it belongs solely to Ada, and is intrinsically linked to the fact that she is doubly abject, both because of her gender and her ‘white trash’ status.

In fact, from the opening scenes of *Jug Face*, in which Loriss’ fixation upon her daughter’s menstrual cycle is made painfully clear, to the final moments of the film documenting Ada’s sacrifice at The Pit – blood oozing from the fatal neck wound as her body, on all fours, leans against the bloodied tree stump by The Pit’s edge – Ada is represented as an abject animal. Immediately after learning of her arranged marriage to Bodey, Ada goes to Dawai’s shack – not to The Pit to “pray on” the decision, as she indicates to her parents. Finding the shack in which Dawai crafts the face jugs empty, Ada uses a brush and red paint to stain her underwear so it looks as though she is menstruating. While this seems odd at first, we soon learn why Ada takes these measures. In the first indication of Loriss’ preoccupation with Ada’s menses – particularly as a sign of her daughter’s virginity – Loriss approaches Ada soon after she returns to her

family's trailer. Meanwhile, Sustin is in the yard, preparing for the celebratory dinner to honor Ada and Bodey's engagement. Noticing Ada's tense mood, Loriss asks Ada if she's "dripping." Loriss does not believe Ada's declaration that she is, and wants to see for herself. When Ada resists, declaring it "gross," Loriss insists and makes Ada stand in front of her so she can check her daughter's underwear for blood stains.

The scene then abruptly cuts to a shot angled down into a metal tub, collecting blood draining from a dead deer hanging above it as Sustin butchers the animal in the yard. Much like the climactic scene in Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976) – the "inverted shower scene...equating pig's blood with Carrie's menstrual blood" which "associates female sexuality with violence, contagion, and death" (Lindsey 290) – this shocking sequence establishes Ada's ambiguously abject/animalistic status by equating her blood with that of a slaughtered deer. Furthermore, emphasizing Ada's pivotal role in the 'violence, contagion, and death' that sweeps through her cloistered community as a consequence of her actions, this shot is immediately followed by another example of stereotypically Southern savagery. As Sustin continues to butcher the deer, the young man with whom Ada rendezvoused earlier in the film approaches Sustin and asks him what is going on; Sustin turns and informs him, "Bodey asked to be joined to your sister." Coupling Ada's already established status as a Southern, 'white trash' woman with the bestial associations of incest blurs the boundary between human and inhuman here, much like Boorman's mountain men.

Appropriately, then, as unsettling as Loriss' initial inquiry and assessment of Ada's "dripping" may be, it pales in comparison to the inspection she performs later in the film once she begins to have doubts about her daughter's virginity. After Ada returns home from visiting Dawai late one night, Loriss orders her to go into the bathroom because she wants "to see if

you've been fooling around, before you shame all of us." Much in the same way that the mountain man commands Bobby to "drop them pants" before the infamous rape scene in *Deliverance*, Loriss orders her daughter to "drop your drawers." Resisting her mother's commands to "open up," Ada is punished by Loriss sticking a lit cigarette to her thigh, exclaiming "Now, you do as I say, I ain't kidding around here." Though the camera angles in this scene thankfully reveal very little, it is clear enough that Loriss is manually examining her daughter for indications that Ada has been sexually active. I posit that this sequence, in many ways, parallels *Deliverance*'s notorious 'squeal like a pig' scene, insofar as it adds (for lack of a better phrase) maternal rape to the list of taboos here, alongside incest. Loriss continues to beat and berate her daughter throughout the scene, convinced that Ada has been "fooling around" with Dawai. Ada, in turn, swears "on The Pit" that "I was just playing with myself" to hide the truth of her incestuous relationship with Jessaby from their mother.

Later in the film, the theme of Ada as an abject animal-mother culminates in still another brutal sequence of scenes. After Ada and Dawai's unsuccessful attempt to escape the village – Sustin's business partner, the drug store owner, contacts him when the pair arrive at his store to sell the stolen moonshine – Sustin and Corber bring the two back to the village. As punishment for their attempt to leave the fold, Ada and Dawai are brutally whipped: Corber beats Dawai, while Sustin lashes his own daughter. As further proof of Ada as a stand-in for an animal, though, she and Dawai are both tied up to the same hoist Sustin used earlier to skin and butcher the deer. In the next scene, Ada sits naked in the bathtub as Loriss tends to the wounds on her back. Loriss continues to scold Ada for her behavior, but her words are cut short when Ada cries out in pain as a cloud of blood appears in the bathwater between her legs. Ada tells her mother she's pregnant.

This scene then abruptly cuts to Sustin and Loriss staring down at the miscarried fetus in their drained bathtub. Sustin declares, “it ain’t much of nothin’,” then Loriss notes that “she was only two months in,” and attempts to comfort Sustin when he claims he should not have beaten Ada so badly: “You did what was right. We don’t need another Dawai walking around no way.” At this, Ada finally reveals to her parents that her brother, Jessaby – who has since been killed by The Pit – was the father, remarking “Why else do you think we took all them walks together?” Loriss starts flailing at her daughter, disgusted by Ada’s confession, and Sustin barely manages to restrain his wife from beating Ada once again.

Overall, the interstitiality of Ada’s offspring – “it ain’t much of nothin’” – underscores her Southern maternal abjection in distinctive ways that, I argue, align with *Silent Hill*’s Alessa. For instance, in *Purity and Danger*, Douglas points out that “the unborn child” exists in a “marginal state,” as its present and future are “equally ambiguous” and it, as a result, is “often treated as both vulnerable and dangerous” (96). Thus, if, as I argue in my first chapter, *The Descent*’s Crawlers represent a hyperbolic reimagining of abject Appalachians through their status as monstrous unborn fetuses that *refuse* to leave the womb, then Ada’s miscarriage – a two-month-old fetus *unable* to survive outside the womb – suggests that Sustin and his clan, also ‘marginal’ and ‘ambiguous,’ are equally incapable of functioning outside the realm of The Pit’s own maternal abjection. Similarly, the monstrous creatures within *Silent Hill*’s Otherworld – offspring of Alessa in a different way – are equally difficult to categorize because the realm “disturbingly transgresses the boundary between inside and outside” (Kirkland 108)⁴⁷.

⁴⁷ Furthermore, invoking Carroll’s criteria for fusion figures in *The Philosophy of Horror*, Kirkland reminds us that “‘an object or being is impure if it is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless’ (Carroll 32)” (Kirkland 107). Also, Perron explains that the creatures within the Otherworld “transgress categorical distinctions...between the unborn and the dead. As much as they might look like they are already dead” (43). Though Perron is referring only to the game series, not its film adaptation, we can still trace examples of these interstitial creatures in the film.

Furthermore, in Gans' *Silent Hill*, boundaries between inside/outside, past/present, and contamination/purity align with gender divides. This rift is effectively established in the film's opening scene. Sharon (Jodelle Ferland), the adopted daughter of Rose (Radha Mitchell) and Christopher (Sean Bean) Da Silva, has wandered out of their home in what we are led to believe is the culmination of the girl's increasingly dangerous sleepwalking episodes. Sharon has wandered through the woods, and stands at the edge of a massive waterfall. Rose runs frantically behind the girl, screaming for Sharon, passing through a tunnel as cars drive by overhead (a subtle hint at her underground journey to follow), then catches up to and grabs Sharon just as the young girl is about to step off into the chasm. What Rose does not see, though, is that the water below Sharon fades away and, in her trancelike state, the girl sees metal walkways and staircases leading down into a fiery pit. This vision is both a sign of the Otherworld which Rose later encounters in *Silent Hill*, and also implies that Sharon's sleepwalking episodes are induced by her 'real' mother calling her home. The subterranean fire – indeed, the Otherworld itself – is a result of Alessa's sacrificial death and monstrous rebirth as an abject mother not only to Sharon, but to the supernatural dimensions of the quaint Southern town of *Silent Hill*⁴⁸.

In fact, this (maternally) abject, underground Southern setting in *Silent Hill* – much like the cave/womb in *The Descent* – is invaded and confronted by a mother who, while far removed from both civilization and men, represents the outside world. Notably, *Silent Hill* maintains the gender divide evident in *The Descent*. Returning to the opening sequence here, Christopher Da Silva, Rose's husband, has trouble keeping up with her during their frantic search for Sharon –

⁴⁸ While the town of *Silent Hill* has connections to regional mining industries in the video game world, there is no mention whatsoever of mines beneath the town itself or mine fires there. Screenwriter Roger Avery based the film version of the town of *Silent Hill* on Centralia, Pennsylvania – an actual town which is, by all accounts, virtually a ghost town today, due to the still-burning fires beneath the earth's surface as a result of a coal seam fire first ignited in 1962. Considering the mythology and distinctly Northern setting of the *Silent Hill* video game series, alongside the Northern location of the real-life town serving as the screenwriter's inspiration, the decision to transplant the adaptation's setting to West Virginia is noteworthy.

the first of many gestures at the disconnect between husband and wife. Sharon, still asleep, continues to scream for “Home! Home! Silent Hill! Silent Hill!” as Rose attempts to comfort her, assuring Sharon that they are “going home.” Finally catching up with Rose, Christopher assumes that she means that the three of them will return to their house; we later realize, though, that Rose intends to take Sharon back ‘home’ to Silent Hill. Essentially, as Rose later reminds Christopher, the name of the town is the only piece of information the couple have about their adopted daughter’s origins⁴⁹: “the adoption people said Sharon came from West Virginia, and Silent Hill is in West Virginia.” In fact, the final shot of the film’s opening sequence – the trio huddled and hugging on the grass beside the precipice, a gigantic electric cross illuminated far behind them, glaring against the night sky – is the first and last shot of this nuclear family together throughout the entire film. Overall, the opening sequence gestures at Rose’s literal descent underground to save her adopted daughter, the cause of Sharon’s affliction, the looming, ominous presence of fundamentalist Christianity in the small town of Silent Hill, and the disconnect between Rose and Christopher.

The ruptures between reality (the present) and the two alternate dimensions within Silent Hill – the Fog World and the Otherworld (both haunted by and haunting manifestations of the past) – align with these gender divisions throughout the film. Again, similar to *The Descent*, *Silent Hill* is very much a female-centered horror film: Rose, Cybil Bennett (Laurie Holden), a deputy from the neighboring town of Brahams and an unlikely ally to Rose, Sharon/Alessa, Alessa’s biological mother, Dahlia Gillespie (Deborah Kara Unger), and the eerily fanatical

⁴⁹ Speaking of origins (maternal and otherwise), it is crucial to note that Gans’ adaptation of *Silent Hill* transplants the setting from a Northeastern state (Maine) to a Southern state (West Virginia), replaces a male protagonist with a female protagonist, and shifts the responsibility of a young girl’s brutal death, monstrous rebirth, and an entire town’s destruction – the result of a fiery sacrificial ceremony gone horribly awry – from her biological mother to a surrogate maternal figure. Though the multilayered mythology of Silent Hill that evolves throughout the game series as a whole is too convoluted to be explored here – nine installments of the game series have been released thus far – these fundamental changes in setting and characterization in Gans’ adaptation shape a reading of the film as an exemplar of the Southern maternal horror hybrid genre.

Christabella (Alice Krige) are all important figures throughout the narrative. Gans' original plan for the film dictated that Christopher "appeared only in the beginning and in the end of the film"; the numerous scenes following Christopher's search for his wife and daughter were added only to appease studio executives wary of releasing a film "without a masculine element" (Kaklamanidou and Katsaridou 269).

While the scenes focusing on Christopher, and his frequently antagonistic interactions with Brahm's detective Thomas Gucci (Kim Coates), disrupt the narrative of the female-centered action occurring simultaneously in the two other realms within Silent Hill, they also underscore the gender divide between the accessibility of Silent Hill's supernatural dimensions. The scenes focusing on Christopher provide vital information to the audience through both his search for Rose and Sharon in the 'real' (i.e., present day) town of Silent Hill, and grainy flashbacks to the events leading up to Alessa's sacrifice – resulting in the "great fire" of 1974. Ultimately, Christopher's quest leads him to the discovery of the truth behind Silent Hill's shameful history, though he never fully grasps the significance of his adopted daughter's connection to the town. On the other hand, Rose learns the whole truth – although she could not have accomplished this feat without assistance from a local woman, Deputy Cybil Bennett – but, as a result, is unable to return to the safety of her family's home in reality/the present, whereas Christopher returns unscathed.

Throughout the film, Gans underscores the separation between Christopher and Rose – that is to say, the divide between the (supposedly) 'clean and proper' present and the maternally abject past – by way of parallel editing. The first example of this crucial component of the film, first gestured at in the film's opening sequence, occurs immediately after the opening title. Significantly, this is also the only time the audience sees Rose and Sharon in the daytime – in

reality, at least. The vibrant colors and bright sunshine of this idyllic scene – mother and daughter sitting under a tree in the middle of a lush field, Rose looking on as Sharon talks about the crayon drawing she has created – stands in stark contrast to the subsequent nightmarish scenes following Rose’s journey into Silent Hill in search of her daughter. Their peaceful moment is interrupted by the sound of Rose’s cell phone ringing; seeing that the call is from Christopher, Rose silences the phone. Though Sharon is initially confused when she realizes “Daddy” is not included in the trip, Rose comforts her daughter and assures her that they are taking a “special trip” and that “it’s gonna be just you and me.” As the pair walk back to Rose’s Jeep to continue their journey, a billboard comes into view in the foreground – “Do you not know that we will judge angels? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?” (Corinthians 6:2-3) – which, like the cross in the opening sequence, gestures at the influence of fundamentalist Christianity in the realm which Rose and Sharon are entering.

Simultaneously, back at the Da Silvas’ beautiful, modern home, Christopher paces around the room, frustrated by his wife’s refusal to accept his phone call, notices the computer has been left on, and begins a journey of his own. Finding Rose’s Google search for “Silent Hill, West Virginia,” Christopher scrolls through webpages with titles such as “Silent Hill, Ghost Towns of America,” “Silent Hill: Great Fires – Disasters of Our Time,” “Silent Hill Mine Fire,” “Coverage of the horrific mine fires of 1974.” After clicking the “Ghost Towns” link, Christopher sees an article titled “Silent Hill: The Tainted Town”; the subheadline reads “Underground fires still burning today.” As the narrative progresses, of course, we realize that the town of Silent Hill is “tainted” in more ways than one, as those in the neighboring town of Brahams know all too well.

Accordingly, as with *Deliverance* and *The Skeleton Key*, in *Silent Hill*, the unmistakable divide between civilized (for both Southerners and non-Southerners) and rural locales is underscored at a gas station – a contact zone, of sorts. Rose is an outsider – the Ohio license plate on her Jeep indicates as much – and her placelessness in the rural region is also evident in her interactions with the clerk at Smitty’s station in Brahams. As she attempts to pay the clerk, Rose casually asks about “the best way to get to Silent Hill. I can’t seem to find it on the map.” The clerk suspiciously replies that the “road don’t go through no more.” The next day, Christopher stops at this same gas station as he begins his search for Rose and Sharon. Knowing that Rose intended to go to Silent Hill, Christopher asks the mechanic on duty how to get there, to which the mechanic replies, “You don’t. Town’s closed down because of the coal fire still burning underground, you know? Breathe enough of them fumes, oh, bound to kill you.” Thus, not only is the town ‘tainted,’ as the online article indicated, it is also, quite literally, fatally toxic.

Already the by-product of the symbolic order’s attempt to purge it from society, then, the small town of Silent Hill – much like the village in *Jug Face* – repeats the process within itself. Kristeva argues, for instance, that “it is as if dividing lines were built up between society and a certain nature...on the basis of the simple logic of excluding filth” (65). Excluded from the larger societal structure, then, these backwards, religious settlements reenact that structure – even so far as to recreate the ‘purification rite’ which, inevitably, leads to the destruction of their own communities – as ordered by these maternal figures. Notably, the concept of the doubly abject also manifests in Silent Hill through the alternate dimensions of the small town which are, in turn, the offspring of its own sacrificial scapegoat.

In *Silent Hill*, this scapegoat is selected by the narrative's central 'terrible mother' figure, Christabella, Alessa's surrogate mother and matriarch of The Brethren, the fanatical cult that has controlled the small town since its founding. Conversely, then, if Rose is the 'good mother' figure, Dahlia, Alessa's biological mother, is somewhere in between. Dahlia's liminal status here is linked to her indecisive if not altogether incompetent parenting. Contrary to Creed's destructive mother – who refuses to “relinquish her hold” upon her child (*Monstrous-Feminine* 12) – Dahlia surrenders Alessa into Christabella's care in order to help her child, naïve to the fact that Christabella's idea of purification will culminate in the girl's death. Similar to Ada's abject paradox in *Jug Face*, Dahlia is also in a double-bind typical of the maternal melodrama genre: she either loses her child altogether, or contaminates Alessa's future beyond repair due to her own carnal sin. Since, as Kristeva points out, “defilement is what is jettisoned from the ‘symbolic system,’” the products of these already abject communities manifest as doubly abject sacrificial scapegoats in the bodies of these young women (65).

Therefore, framing the 'savage' ways of life documented in both films as a contradictory contagion leads us to the most striking common bond between them: the significance of purity and obedience in the ideals of femininity in Southern families/communities ruled by religious fundamentalism dependent upon the act of human sacrifice. Douglas points out that “certain moral values are upheld and certain rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion” (3); accordingly, The Brethren's moral code of purity is exacted upon Alessa's body as it represents Dahlia's sin which, in turn, risks contaminating The Brethren. Since, as Kristeva asserts, “filth” “represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin,” Dahlia is exiled after Alessa's sacrifice (69); now, according to Anna (one of Christabella's followers), “not even the darkness wants her.” Thus, Dahlia is caught between two extremes. Furthermore, since the

geographical/temporal boundaries separating Silent Hill's other dimensions from the real world are far more permeable for women than men, women – and in this case in particular, Rose and Sharon – threaten to contaminate the secular order of the outside world should they leave Silent Hill.

Though Rose is, by no means, representative of the maternal abject at the beginning of *Silent Hill*, she is – like *The Descent*'s Sarah – the embodiment of it by the end of the film. Like Sarah, Rose's transformation is brought about during her journey into a contaminating, abject realm akin to a womb. Rose's own descent into Silent Hill's two alternate dimensions – the Fog World and the Otherworld – is signaled by blackouts, whiteouts, and the sound of air raid sirens. Notably, the first blackout occurs shortly after Rose's final phone conversation with Christopher – occurring while Rose is at the gas station in Brahams – emphasizing the rupture between the present and the past that only a woman can cross. Desperate to evade being detained by the ever-suspicious Deputy Cybil Bennett, Rose speeds along a narrow mountainous road at night, driving through the gate separating the bridge to Silent Hill from the main highway, and crashing the Jeep after she swerves to avoid hitting what looks like a young girl stepping into the road. The cacophony of Sharon's screams, the squealing tires, and the radio (inexplicably transmitting loud static as the car approaches the small town) are abruptly cut short after Rose's head hits the steering wheel immediately after the impact. The screen goes black, and everything is completely silent, for almost ten full seconds. For a film so dependent upon – and so adept at – creating overwhelming visual aesthetics⁵⁰, segments revealing nothing but a black screen are especially remarkable.

⁵⁰ “Cinematographer Dan Lauscsen and production designer Carol Spier created such a menacing and puzzling world of darkness and fog, it was appreciated and commented on by even the negative reviews. Roger Ebert wrote that the ‘visuals are terrific,’ while Paul Arendt notes that ‘*Silent Hill* is almost worth the trouble for the outstanding production design’” (Kaklamanidou & Katsaridou 268).

Similar to Sarah's transformation in *The Descent* – indicated by the ever-changing birthday cake hallucinations – Rose's blackouts mark her progress first toward and then through the maternally abject realm of Silent Hill's Otherworld. After the car crash, the first blackout fades back in on Rose regaining consciousness, lifting her head up from the steering wheel, and looking up through the windshield. As she comes to her senses, Rose notices that it is gray and extremely foggy outside, and sees what looks like snow falling from the fog. Rose, looking over and realizing that the front passenger door is ajar and Sharon is gone, gets out of the car, searching and screaming for Sharon. As she stands in the middle of the road, Rose wipes one of the flakes from her face, realizing that it is not snow, but ashes. The ash falling from the sky in Silent Hill's Fog World is a sign not only of the still-burning coal mine fires beneath the 'real' town of Silent Hill in the present day, but also the originating sacrificial fire which led Alessa to become an abject mother herself, creating these alternate dimensions of the tiny town. This, too, is a noteworthy change from the original text – the video game series includes snow, not ash, falling from the sky – in that it gestures again at the significance of the abject maternal origins below the town's surface and its impending return. Guided more by maternal instinct than concern for her own safety – also indicated in the film's opening sequence and Rose's rescue of Sharon at the edge of the waterfall – Rose abandons her car and enters the deserted town of Silent Hill to search for her daughter. Seeing the figure of a young girl running down the street ahead of her and believing that it is Sharon, Rose pursues the figure into an alley, then follows it down a stairway in the alley.

Overall, there are a total of four blackouts and two whiteouts in the film: the first two blackouts indicate Rose's initial descent through each of Silent Hill dimensions – first, from reality to Alessa's Fog World, then from the Fog World to the Otherworld. Rose is about

halfway down the stairs when the eerie sound of an air raid siren begins echoing overhead. We later learn, when Rose and Cybil are caught in a stampede of Christabella's followers as the group run for the safety of the church, that the air raid siren sits atop the church of the Brethren, and that those within the sanctuary of its walls sound the alarm to warn the surviving citizens of Silent Hill's Fog World that a transition to the Otherworld will soon occur. Generally speaking, air raid sirens – or even tornado sirens, which the din slightly resembles – indicate some type of threat from an outside or foreign source. Near the end of her journey, though, when Rose learns the truth surrounding Alessa's death/rebirth, it becomes clear that the abjection threatening to destroy Silent Hill comes from within – and more specifically, from underneath. Stumbling down into this supernatural realm for the first time, though, Rose is completely overwhelmed. Descending further down the staircase as the air raid siren echoes above, the second blackout (again, almost ten seconds long) along with the siren marks Rose's first total descent into the Otherworld.

What follows is a nightmarish sequence in which Rose briefly encounters a few of the monstrous creatures populating Silent Hill's Otherworld dimension – creatures which, I argue, are also examples of Alessa's abject offspring. Rose attempts to navigate the labyrinthine nether region before encountering one of Christabella's 'soldiers,' crucified upon a tall chain-link fence, and glaring down at Rose through the mask of his mining suit. Horrified by her discovery, Rose fails to notice the Grey Children – supernatural embodiments of the classmates who once ridiculed Alessa – until they are directly behind her, shrieking and reaching for her as embers burn just beneath their smoldering skin. Rose tries to escape from the group of Grey Children, but becomes overrun by them and collapses as they surround her in a small storeroom. Still shrieking, the tiny figures begin to fade away – or, actually, melt away, along with the walls and

floors – just before an abrupt cut to Rose waking up in an abandoned building back in Silent Hill’s Fog World indicates that the sporadic cycle of Fog World to Otherworld metamorphoses has begun again.

Essentially, the Otherworld represents the toxic, contaminating presence of Silent Hill’s abject past – rooted in the town’s history of witch hunting, trials, and executions; Alessa’s twentieth-century sacrifice renews this trauma. Thus, the Otherworld is, in many ways, Alessa’s prolonged punishment of the townspeople for this transgression. As Kirkland explains in his analyses of the game series, the Otherworld is the manifestation of Alessa “transmit[ing] grotesque expressions of her torment” onto the remaining citizens – all of whom, in the film adaptation at least, belong to the ‘family’ of the Brethren – still trapped in this “parallel universe” (113). Of particular importance here, in addition to the monstrous creatures Rose encounters, is the physical makeup of the Otherworld. Taking over the Fog World at random, the Otherworld gradually reveals itself as layers of the Fog World slough off like decaying organic matter. This process becomes evident immediately after the second air raid siren. Here, Rose has made her way to Midwich Elementary School and, attempting to escape the detection of more ‘soldiers’ there, hides in the girls’ bathroom. Hearing the siren and realizing that “it’s happening again,” Rose uses her flashlight to illuminate the room around her in the growing darkness of the Otherworld’s transition.

The paint and tiles covering the walls within the room begin to droop and fall away, revealing what looks like skin and blood beneath them, as though the buildings within Silent Hill are abject bodies themselves. During this transition, the grayish-blue tinges of the walls’ surfaces in the Fog World take on the reddish brown hue of infected and dying flesh of the Otherworld. To make matters worse, the corpse Rose discovered in the corner stall just before the siren

sounded, reanimates, dragging itself towards her, transforming every surface it touches to bubbling, oozing filth. Kristeva asserts that a corpse blurs the distinction “between the inanimate and the inorganic” (103); accordingly, the transition of not only buildings but ‘real’ bodies in Silent Hill’s alternate dimensions underscores the Otherworld as the embodiment of “fundamental pollution” (109). Similarly, much in the same way that Kristeva claims a corpse represents “death infecting life,” the decaying matter of Silent Hill’s Otherworld represents the past haunting the present– the border of which is unsettlingly permeable for women, but especially so for mothers (4).

In fact, there are a total of six mother-child relationships in *Silent Hill*, all of which involve Alessa in one manifestation or another: Alessa and (biological mother) Dahlia, Alessa and (surrogate mother) Christabella, Alessa and Sharon, Alessa and the alternate dimensions of Silent Hill (including its supernatural inhabitants), Rose and Sharon (Alessa’s offspring), and, briefly, Rose and (Dark) Alessa. Thus, while Betty Kaklamanidou and Maria Katsaridou focus primarily upon Rose and Sharon’s mother-daughter relationship in their comparison of Gans’ film to such maternal melodrama standards as *Mildred Pierce* and *Stella Dallas* (270), for the purposes of my study – and its emphasis on the film’s Southern setting – it is crucial to position Alessa as the central (object) Southern mother in *Silent Hill*.

After her horrifying encounters with these supernatural inhabitants of Silent Hill’s parallel dimension, Rose’s final encounter with Alessa’s monstrous offspring in the Otherworld occurs when she runs into one of the trademark villains of the video game franchise: the Nurses. In keeping with the characterization of these figures in the game, the Nurses are all in (dirty) nursing uniforms, but their heads are entirely covered in soiled gauze bandages and there are only black, ragged holes where their facial features should be. Similar to the Grey Children who

rush upon Rose as she first enters the Otherworld – their ghastly, contorted faces and elongated limbs indicative of the “various malformations and deformities” plaguing the Otherworld’s inhabitants (Perron 43-44) – the Nurses, like Marshall’s Crawlers, rely on preternatural senses to detect Rose’s movement without actually ‘seeing’ her. Whereas the Crawlers choose to return to the cave/womb of their own accord, though, Alessa uses the Nurses as guards, blocking the hallway in the hospital basement which leads to her room. Rose outsmarts the Nurses – all women, of course – by using their powers of detection against them in such a way that the entire group turn on themselves and begin killing each other. Taking advantage of this distraction, Rose runs down the hall toward Alessa’s room – the abject maternal origins of the Otherworld.

Appropriately, then, it is Rose (an outsider to this Southern setting) whose descent into the monstrous womb of Silent Hill, where Alessa still exists in a liminal state, brings about the final purification of the town’s abject past. After making her way through the hallway blocked by the Nurses, Rose runs through a door, into a bright white light. In contrast to the four blackouts occurring throughout the film, the two whiteouts in this sequence act as bookends for the flashback which reveals the truth of Silent Hill’s history and Alessa’s sacrifice. The first whiteout fades in from Rose running through the door separating Alessa’s room from the Nurses in the hallway, to Rose covering her eyes with her hands as a young girl speaks to her:

“Congratulations, Rose. You’re here. You did it. Your reward is the truth.”

The young girl tells Alessa’s story to Rose as grainy, scratched flashback footage accompanies her narration. She explains that schoolmates – manifesting as screeching, smoldering Grey Children during the first Otherworld transition – bullied and ridiculed Alessa because their parents told them she was “bad” because “she didn’t have a father like they did.” The young girl explains that Alessa was “alone in the world. You know what can happen to girls

when they're left alone." This remark gestures at Alessa's sexual assault at the hands of the janitor in the same girls' room where Rose hid during the Otherworld's second transition. The abject corpse Rose first discovered there in the Fog World, which comes back to life in the Otherworld, is this same man who, like the Grey Children, is trapped in a perpetual cycle of death and rebirth as part of Alessa's revenge upon them. The flashback then cuts to a much younger Dahlia attempting to coax Alessa out of one of the bathroom stalls after the implied assault. The girl explains, "even her mother couldn't help. Even though she loved her baby. But the rest of the family didn't love Alessa." Clearly, Christabella is the matriarch of this 'family' – the Brethren – as is implied by a cut to Christabella scolding Dahlia, much as a mother would her child, despite their age proximity: "We know. Even the children know it. Why won't you just name the father? You've brought sin amongst us." Thus, Christabella sacrifices Alessa to "restore innocence" her 'family' lost not when Alessa was molested – suggesting, perhaps, a failure on the 'family's' part to protect the girl – but when Alessa was conceived out of wedlock.

Essentially, Alessa's execution is intended to punish both the young girl and her mother for failing to uphold an unrealistic standard of purity. The flashback sequence then centers on the sacrificial ceremony going awry – the fire meant to destroy Alessa grows out of control and engulfs the entire chamber, burning through the floor and spreading into the mines below. The young girl narrates, "now you see why Dahlia is broken. She tried to help, but she went too late," as the flashback sequence shows Dahlia returning to the chamber, finding Alessa, charred beyond recognition but still clinging to life. In an effort to conceal the botched sacrifice attempt, the Brethren confine Alessa to a room in the hospital basement after the town's destruction. The young girl explains that, as time passes, "when you're hurt and scared for so long, your fear and pain turn to hate, and the hate starts to change the world. Alessa's hate grew and grew, burning

inside her. That's when I came." In an eerie sequence, we see the silhouette of a small, dark figure walk up to the curtain surrounding Alessa's hospital bed. The young girl continues, "I told her it was their turn. I promised they would all fall into her darkest dream." Alessa, barely able to move, lifts her hand up to the curtain, and when the dark figure outside aligns her hand with Alessa's, the curtain begins to rot and decay. The decay spreads from the curtain, to the rest of the room, and so forth, signaling the origin of Alessa's Otherworld. The flashback sequence then fades to white.

This second whiteout fades in on Rose and, significantly, her shirt is dark red in color now; throughout the film, gradual changes to the color of Rose's top indicate her transformation from pure to abject. For instance, in the film's opening scene, as she chases after Sharon, Rose is wearing a solid white top. In the idyllic scene of Rose and Sharon sitting in a field, Rose's top is light gray – gesturing at the proximity of Silent Hill's close (but still hidden) contamination. Rose's shirt grows gradually darker through the first and second Otherworld transitions. Later, her top becomes irreversibly stained with blood as she stands at the doorway of the Brethren's church during the third Otherworld transition and watches helplessly as one of Alessa's creations murders Anna, one of Christabella's followers.

While blood, sweat, and grime continue to stain Rose's clothes the deeper she goes into the abject Otherworld, the noticeable shift to a deep, dark red as the scene fades in from this second whiteout suggests that the truth, now revealed, has irreversibly contaminated her. Uncovering her eyes, Rose realizes that the young girl she has been listening to is not Alessa – Alessa is still in the hospital bed, cordoned off by a sagging, stained curtain. Rose asks the young girl who she is, and the girl replies, "I have many names. Right now, I'm the dark part of Alessa." Rose then asks, "Where's my child?" Dark Alessa corrects her, "she's *not* your child,"

points to the hospital bed and states, “She’s hers. The little girl is what’s left of her goodness. We hid her in safety, in the world outside this hell.” Thus, both the Otherworld and Sharon are conceived by Alessa and Dark Alessa as manifestations of the irreconcilable opposites of their abject mother’s nature; consequently, the figurative womb within the basement of Brookhaven Hospital represents a similarly paradoxical (and unholy) union within the abject maternal body of Silent Hill itself.

Dark Alessa then informs Rose that Christabella plans to “purify” Sharon much in the same way she purified Alessa; thus the two resolve to work together to break the cycle of the town’s violent history from repeating once again. Earlier, as Rose, Cybil, and Anna search through Silent Hill’s Grand Hotel for Sharon, Rose notices a painting of “the first burning” – a woman, accused of witchcraft, being burned at the stake. Anna explains that “before the town had a name, the elders of my elders kept us pure.” Rose realizes that the “founders of this town were witch-hunters.” Appropriately, the painting conceals the doorway to the sacrificial chamber where Alessa was burned by Christabella, similar to the manner by which the ‘normal’ (albeit abandoned) appearance of Silent Hill in the present day conceals its violent past from outsiders.

Accordingly, while both Christabella and Rose act as surrogate mothers to Alessa/Sharon, Rose’s status as an outsider initially undermines the legitimacy of her link to the girl. Similar to Dark Alessa’s reminder to Rose that, at least biologically speaking, Sharon is not hers, the authenticity of Rose’s bond with Sharon is questioned early in the film. Rose tries to convince Deputy Bennett, who initially suspects Rose of harming Sharon when she cannot be found after the car crash, that she had nothing to do with Sharon’s disappearance because “there is no way I would ever harm my own daughter.” Cybil caustically (but pragmatically) replies, “How do I even know she *is* your daughter?” Later in the film, though, after Cybil and Rose have

both risked their lives for each other and stand at the doorway of the Brethren's church, waiting for Christabella and her soldiers to escort them to the hospital, Rose tells Cybil, "If you don't want to do this, I'll understand. Sharon's adopted, but I'm her mother. I knew that from the moment I first laid eyes on her." Cybil replies, "She's lucky to have you. Mother is God in the eyes of a child."

In terms of godly maternal figures, Christabella represents not only Alessa's surrogate mother; because of her leadership role within the church of the Brethren, she is the matriarch of the entire town of Silent Hill as well. The Brethren's symbol is visible in every building in the town that Rose enters: the school, the hotel, and the hospital. The pervasiveness of fundamentalist Christianity – evident in quotes from Scripture upon billboards on the outskirts of Silent Hill, on banners within the town's buildings, and, of course, inside the church itself – emphasizes the persistent influence of religion in the small Southern town. Significantly, during Rose's journey through Midwich Elementary School, she sees, along with one of these banners – "The foes of the righteous shall be condemned" – several religious paintings, one of which reveals that the Brethren's "God" is a woman.

Appropriately, then, Christabella's status as native Southerner and devout Christian stands in sharp contrast to Rose's status as outsider and an agnostic (perhaps even an atheist). As an outsider, Rose challenges Christabella's power much like Alessa did, and eventually Christabella handles Rose precisely as she did Alessa: by deeming her a witch and ordering that she be burned. This occurs when Rose returns to the Brethren's church just after they have burned Cybil to death and are preparing to burn Sharon. Unbeknownst to Christabella, Rose has allowed Dark Alessa to possess her. Just before Rose leaves the hospital, in a strange inversion of the birthing process, Rose embraces Dark Alessa, absorbing the young girl into her body.

Rose enters the church, and confronts Christabella, exclaiming “Your faith brings death!” At this, Christabella stabs Rose in the heart, and Rose collapses; however, as Rose’s blood – mingled with (Dark) Alessa’s blood via her possession of Rose’s body – falls to the floor, the floor of the church begins to cave in, revealing the coal mines beneath the structure. As the floor continues to rot and deteriorate, spreading like the Otherworld’s decay, the metal walkways and coal fires far beneath come into view – similar to Sharon’s sleepwalking vision in the film’s opening scene.

Much like Sarah emerging from the pool of blood within the Crawlers’ lair represented the final phase of her transformation into an abject other in *The Descent*, Rose’s ‘rebirth’ in the church of the Brethren signals a similar shift in *Silent Hill*. Rose rises from where she collapsed – her top now a dark blood red, of course – and turns and stands in front of the mural in such a way that she has replaced the figure at the center of the painting: Rose is a witch now, too. Alessa, still confined to her hospital bed, rises from the massive, gaping hole in the church floor, out of the flames of the mine fires, and wreaks vengeance upon the members of the Brethren, saving the most brutal punishment of all for her surrogate mother, Christabella. Despite Christabella’s pleading last words (“Oh, Lord, give me the strength to stay pure,”) Alessa uses her supernatural powers to suspend the matriarch’s body in the air with lengths of barbed wire, before Christabella’s body is penetrated and then torn to pieces – a crucifixion of sorts. Simultaneously, Rose scrambles up to the balcony to Sharon, and mother and daughter are reunited at last. As chaos ensues around them, Dahlia walks stunned amongst the dead and dying Brethren, gazing up at her daughter, horrified, muttering “Alessa, what have you become?”

In many ways, Alessa’s transformation ultimately challenges the melodramatic ideal of maternal sacrifice in its original sense. Dahlia sacrifices her bond with Alessa in a misguided

effort to save the girl from her sinful contamination. Likewise, Alessa enacts a similar separation by leaving Sharon at the county orphanage to be adopted by outsiders. Both of these noble attempts at maternal sacrifice fail miserably because of each mother's ties to the Southern abject. Significantly, only Rose – assisted by Cybil, not Christopher – can return Sharon to her maternal origins in such a way that both disrupts the cycle of violence associated with the region and enacts the ultimate purification.

Fading back in from the fourth and final blackout, Rose and Sharon regain consciousness and realize that the church – in fact, the entire Fog World realm of Silent Hill – has been cleansed of Christabella and her Brethren followers. The only survivor is Dahlia who, pitifully, asks Rose “why did she not take me with the others?” Rose replies, “Because you're her mother. Mother is God in the eyes of the child”; then, hand in hand with Sharon, Rose walks out of the church. Rose and Sharon leave the Brethren's church and return to the Jeep as ashes continue to fall from the sky in the Fog World. Rose calls her husband, leaving a message for him on the answering machine – “we're coming home” – but Christopher hears nothing but static on his end. When the Jeep passes by the same gas station which Rose and Christopher both stopped at earlier in the film, we see that the clouds and haze of the Fog World have overtaken this area now. Even as Rose's Jeep pulls into the driveway of the Da Silvas' home, the fog remains thick and Christopher is nowhere to be found. In reality, though, it is bright and raining, and Christopher is sitting in the same room that Rose and Sharon have just entered, but their paths do not cross.

The final scene of *Silent Hill* suggests that, by rescuing Sharon, Rose irreversibly submerged herself in the contaminating, abject realm of her adopted daughter's Southern maternal origins. Though Rose returns to the same physical space she shares with her husband,

they exist in two different realms now – much like the alternate dimensions within *Silent Hill* – never to see each other again. In this regard, Rose enacts a maternal sacrifice of a different kind; Rose’s sacrifice, in fact, is closer to Sarah’s exchange of a grim reality for a fantasy-fulfilling hallucination in the final scene of *The Descent* than Dahlia or Alessa’s own sacrifices earlier in Gans’ film. Thus, while *Silent Hill* explores each of the “permutations of the mother/child relation” that Doane addresses in her definition of the maternal melodrama – “scenarios of separation, separation and return, or threatened separation” (73) – it also, like Marshall’s *Descent*, ends with the ultimate act of maternal sacrifice: a maternal figure relinquishing her connection to reality for her child.

Ultimately, of course, what cements Ada’s and Alessa’s shared status as abject mothers is their inextricable connections to these Southern, maternally abject spaces. Because of the intrinsic contamination of the past in the present within these spaces, the pollutions associated with both death and birth are practically interchangeable here. Again, Kristeva argues that a corpse is “the utmost of abjection,” that it is “death infecting life” (4). Conversely, though, Creed posits that the “utmost of abjection” is, in fact, “the womb,” insofar as “it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination” (49). If, as Kristeva claims, “the abject confronts us...with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal,” then the source of contamination in Ada’s (miscarried) child stems from its impure, incestuous (read: bestial) conception, thereby linked to its abject mother’s distinctly Southern savagery (12). Just as Ada’s child represents abjection – “abjection is above all ambiguity” (Kristeva 9) – so too does Alessa’s offspring who populate *Silent Hill*’s Otherworld.

Thus, Rose’s status as an outsider allows her to disrupt this cycle in *Silent Hill* while the villagers in *Jug Face* are unable to stop it; appropriately, the conclusions of these two films stand

in stark contrast to each other. The final scenes of *Jug Face* return to a sacrificial ceremony similar to the one illustrated in the opening credits sequence – a procession of The Pit’s followers gathers around it to witness the sacrifice of the chosen. Since Sustin was among the five victims The Pit claimed in Ada’s place (along with Bodey, Jessaby, Pyer, and Eilen), Loriss oversees this ceremony and Corber acts as executioner. Loriss explains, “The Pit gives, and The Pit takes away,” before choking up as she mutters, “we understand that The Pit wants what it wants.” Asked for her last words, Ada says that she is “sorry for those who died ‘cause of what I done. And I’m sorry to those left behind.” Loriss then hands the blade to Corber, who slashes Ada’s throat. After Ada is sacrificed, Dawai returns to his shack, places Ada’s face jug upon a shelf alongside the face jugs of all the previous sacrifices, lights a candle, and sits in silence. Similar to Ada’s miscarriage, the lives of those dependent upon The Pit are not viable outside its abject realm, and it appears that they will continue to languish in this limbo of their own making until the community eventually destroys itself.

Overall, both *Jug Face*’s Ada and *Silent Hill*’s Alessa represent – via their femininity and abjection – a specific subset of the monstrous-feminine: the figure of the witch. Creed explains that the witch is the “one incontestably monstrous role in horror film that belongs to woman” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 73). Specifically, Creed asserts, the supernatural powers attributed to the witch are interwoven with the “female reproductive system – particularly menstruation. It is interesting to note that, despite the range of subjects covered in the maternal melodrama... menstruation is not one. It is to the horror film that we must turn for any direct reference to woman’s monthly cycle” (*Monstrous-Feminine* 77).

Thus, in terms of horror films centering on femininity, menstruation, and the supernatural, it is important to note, once again, the significant overlaps between these two

Southern maternal horror hybrids and Brian De Palma's 1976 adaptation of Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974). Alessa is, quite literally, a witch; her supernatural powers connecting her even more directly with Carrie. Much in the same way that Carrie White's body "becomes the site upon which monster and victim converge" in De Palma's film – and, as a result, Lindsey claims, "we are encouraged to postulate that a monster resides within her" (284) – so too does Alessa reside below the surface of Silent Hill as both victim and monster. Like Carrie, Alessa inflicts "apocalyptic destruction" upon the town of Silent Hill and, similar to Carrie's wrath, Alessa's revenge is "as justified as it is frightening" (Sobchack 151). Alessa's return to Silent Hill – breaching the floor of the Brethren's church through the mine shafts below the town's surface to wreak havoc upon Christabella's congregation – is eerily reminiscent of Carrie's revenge on her fellow prom attendees in that film's finale. Furthermore, similar to the ways in which Carrie's mother, Margaret White, relies upon a "language of cleansing and purification," so too does Christabella (Lindsey 291).

Jug Face's Ada also becomes a witch of sorts, as her aberrant (even by 'white trash' standards) sexuality creates a close link to Nature, via The Pit. As Lindsey points, the "'curse' of supernatural power" – indeed, "monstrosity" itself – is inextricably linked to "menstruation and female sexuality" in De Palma's film (Lindsey 284). Similarly, Ada's menstruation and sexuality is the source of much speculation and consternation for her mother, Loriss, akin to Carrie's mother, Margaret White. While Margaret White associates Carrie's period with "'Eve's curse'" – thereby inextricably linking "female sexuality with sin" (Lindsey 291) – the extent of Ada's sin shocks and disgusts even her 'white trash' parents, blurring the distinction between beast and human all the more.

In light of the unsettling conclusions to both films, though, Rose's parting words to Dahlia near the end of *Silent Hill* – "Mother is God in the eyes of a child" – gesture at the inherent contradiction within the maternal melodrama as a whole, and, more specifically, the trope of maternal sacrifice. For instance, Williams explains that, within the maternal melodrama subgenre, the "device of devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood is typical" ("Something Else" 308). Within the realms of *Jug Face* and *Silent Hill*, the double-binds confining both Ada and Dahlia illustrate the manner by which the 'actual' mother is degraded, while the 'institution of motherhood' – be it in the form of a life-giving earth (goddess) deity or a more organized, matriarchal religion like that of the Brethren – is idealized. Likewise, the complex connections between these abject mothers and their religions reenact a pattern of behavior typical to the mother-child relationship. McAfee explains that the "child is in a double-bind" since its "longing for narcissistic union with its first love" – in this case, God/religion, not just the mother – clashes with its "need to renounce this union" since the child "must draw a line between itself" and its mother "in order to become a subject" (48). This complicated interaction, in turn, manifests in horror films, too, of course. As Greven points out – via Creed's argument in *Monstrous-Feminine* – the "primary fear at the core of the horror film genre is that the subject will be reengulfed by the terrifying figure of the archaic mother" (13); conversely, though, "an equally urgent desire for *return* to the mother also informs the genre" (13). While *The Pit* represents both the generative and destructive embodiments of the archaic mother figure, Christabella and Dahlia signify opposing embodiments of 'good'/godly and 'bad'/witch maternal figures in such a way that undermines religion's final word on this relationship.

This complex categorization – the saintly Christabella, for instance, is actually more of an ‘evil’ or ‘all-devouring’ maternal figure than the exiled Dahlia – is further complicated within these Southern settings. Here, women – both mothers *and* daughters – who do not live up to the standard of the “quasi-Virgin Mary” figure of the Southern Family Romance are, essentially, classified as witches (King 35). As previously established, the tendency of characters within melodramatic narratives to cling to the past represents an effort to return to the “maternal place of origins” (Williams, “Melodrama” 65). In these two particular hybrid films, though, both ‘terrible mother’ figures – *Silent Hill*’s Christabella and *Jug Face*’s Loriss – more concerned with preserving the supposed ‘purity’ of the ways of the past than assuring their own survival in the future, are bringing about the destruction of their own communities. As a result, their futile efforts to cleanse their cloistered “families” of this contamination from the outside world reinvent the phrase ‘maternal sacrifice’ in distinctly Southern maternal horror terms along the way.

CONCLUSION: “SHE HAD A MONSTER FOR A MOTHER”:

SOUTHERN MOTHERS AND THE UNCANNY IN *AMERICAN HORROR STORY*

Throughout this dissertation, I have examined the intersection of maternal melodrama and modern horror in Southern film in order to establish the parameters for a new hybrid genre that I call Southern maternal horror. Analyzing the convergence of characteristics from both genres – and guided by works from established scholars such as Carol Clover, Barbara Creed, Mary Ann Doane, E. Ann Kaplan, and Linda Williams – I have shown how Southern maternal horror disrupts the mythology of the Old South, specifically the idealizations of the ‘pure’ white woman, the sanctity of the plantation home, and the sacredness of the land itself. Through detailed studies of representations of Southern maternal figures and abject maternal bodies (particularly my investigation of the ambivalent tendencies within maternal melodrama and modern horror to seek both to return to and to escape from one’s maternal origins), I have shown that, while the South’s past still haunts the present, Southern maternal horror’s manifestations of these hauntings typically challenge the nostalgia of Southern film and, thus, have much to say in terms of gender, regional, and film studies.

Accordingly, to prove that this hybrid genre is not only alive and well in film, but is gaining momentum in other media, I will briefly explore two examples of Southern maternal horror in television in the conclusion of this dissertation, focusing on the first and third seasons of the FX anthology series *American Horror Story*. Using the same elements that have guided my examinations thus far – various manifestations of maternal bodies, Doane’s scenarios of

separation, and Kaplan's three mother figures – I will show how *American Horror Story* represents the epitome of Southern maternal horror in contemporary television, particularly through its depictions of the past haunting the present.

Both seasons of *American Horror Story (AHS)* analyzed here illustrate what I consider to be the ultimate scenarios of separation in Southern maternal horror insofar as they are prime examples of the union of these two genres. For instance, if Doane's scenario of separation (in which the mother must break her bond with her child for their benefit) belongs to the maternal melodrama, then separation caused by the death of the child crosses into the territory of horror. Similarly, the scenario of separation and return – borrowed from the maternal melodrama as a whole, but made horrifying when the 'return' constitutes a deceased child coming back to their mother from the grave – also exemplifies the genre hybridity examined here. While we have already seen examples of these hybrid forms of Doane's scenarios – Sarah's loss of her daughter, Jessie, in *The Descent*, Beloved's return to Sethe, and Alessa's return in *Silent Hill* – a brief examination of the recurrence of this trope in two separate seasons of *AHS* provides another chance to consider the implications of Southern maternal horror's subversion of nostalgia.

Since each season of *American Horror Story (AHS)* covers decades – and, in *Coven's* case, centuries – at a time, though, for the purpose of narrowing my focus of the sprawling narratives within each season, I will limit my analysis here to the Halloween episodes from *Murder House* and *Coven*. In keeping with a trend prevalent through most of *AHS's* five seasons so far, both *Murder House* and *Coven* explicitly remind their audiences of the history of Halloween as an occasion upon which the dead can move amongst the living. In this regard, *AHS's* incarnations of All Hallows' Eve present ideal opportunities for both the analysis of the

present colliding with the past, as well as an investigation of these hybrid scenarios of separation (and return) between mother and daughter.

Overall, the mother-daughter interactions occurring on Halloween in both *Murder House* and *Coven* invoke the Freudian uncanny. As a whole, of course, Halloween lends itself to the exploration of the uncanny since, according to Freud, it relates to “anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts” (148). More specifically, the uncanny is “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (Freud 124). This facet is of particular importance to my study, of course, since the “notion common to all aspects of the uncanny is that of origins” (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 54). Furthermore, Creed gestures at Freud’s suggestion that the womb is “particularly uncanny,” insofar as it “is our first home, the memory of which haunts our unconscious” (*Phallic Panic* 46, 47). In this regard, the uncanny manifests in Southern maternal horror not only in terms of the conflicting desires to escape from and return to these Southern mother figures, but also through these abject Southern maternal bodies.

Accordingly, *Murder House*’s two Halloween episodes follow a tumultuous turn of events involving Constance Langdon (Jessica Lange) and her daughter, Adelaide (Addy), portrayed by Jamie Brewer. The complex nature of their relationship – as well as Constance’s status as a displaced Southerner who, I argue, transplants the Southern Gothic into *Murder House*’s Los Angeles setting – is introduced in the season’s first episode. During the course of a rather awkward conversation – Constance and Addy unexpectedly drop by Murder House as their new neighbor, Vivien Harmon (Connie Britton), unpacks her family’s belongings – Vivien asks Constance if she’s Southern. Constance replies, “Proud Virginian. The Old Dominion, born and bred. Thank you for noticing.” Constance goes on to explain that she moved out to Los

Angeles many years ago “to be a movie star. Did the screen tests and everything,” but, she continues, “soon after came the mongoloid” – referring to Addy, who has Down syndrome – “and, of course, I couldn’t work after that” (“Pilot”). In the next episode, after learning that Vivien is pregnant, the conversation turns once again to Constance’s children: “every one,” she claims, “was pure love.” Constance states that she has four children⁵¹, though she adds that she “should’ve stopped after the first” – again, gesturing at Addy – because “my womb is cursed.” When Vivien asks if all four children had Down syndrome, Constance vaguely replies, “or some such malady” (“Home Invasion”).

Although Constance’s complicated relationships with her other children – particularly her son, Tate (Evan Peters) – are explored throughout the rest of the season, *Murder House*’s Halloween episodes underscore Constance’s opposition to initiating a scenario of separation with her daughter since, as a young woman with a developmental disability, Addy is unable to go out into the world on her own. Addy’s age is never specified, but the chronology of *Murder House* suggests that she must be in her (early) thirties. When Addy tells her mother she wants to dress up as a “pretty girl,” like those she sees in fashion magazines, for Halloween, Constance resists, declaring “you’ll go as Snoopy or not at all.” Discouraged by her mother’s ultimatum, Addy goes next door to Murder House, and asks Vivien’s daughter, Violet (Taissa Farmiga), to help her become a “pretty girl for Halloween.” Unaware of the argument Addy has had with Constance, Violet gives Addy a makeover, much to Addy’s delight. Returning home next door, Constance chases Addy around their kitchen table, insisting that her daughter “wash that smut off your face!” Infuriated by Addy’s disobedience, Constance brutally chastises her daughter

⁵¹ According to executive producer/director Ryan Murphy, the storyline of Constance’s fourth child was cut because it was “one too many creatures” (“*Murder House* Pilot: Director Commentary”).

when, once again, Addy insists she wants to be a ‘pretty girl,’ exclaiming, “Well, you’re not a pretty girl! And you know it!” (“Halloween: Part I”).

This clash between mother and daughter begins to reveal Constance’s complex characterization, torn between the maternal expectations placed upon her via her Southern upbringing and her conflicted feelings toward her own daughter as a burden. Constance continues, “Oh, put her in a home, they said. Even Daddy. But, no, I couldn’t do that” – revealing that, despite referring to Addy as a ‘mongoloid’ and a ‘monster,’ Constance cannot bear to let go of her only daughter. Later in the episode, Constance goes to Addy’s room to make amends with her. Though Addy declares that she will not go trick or treating at all this year, Constance has procured a ‘pretty girl’ mask for her daughter to wear. The two reconcile, embrace, and Addy prepares to go out trick or treating.

Essentially, though, by loosening her grip on her daughter – and giving Addy what she wants – Constance loses Addy altogether. Wearing the mask her mother gave her, Addy ventures out into the neighborhood to trick or treat. Intending to show Violet her mask and costume, Addy encounters a group of trick or treating adolescent girls at the front door of Murder House. Despite one girl cruelly scoffing “short bus” at her, Addy tries to tag along with the group, asking them to wait for her, and running after them as they cross the street. As she runs into the street, Addy is struck by a speeding car – we can only presume that perhaps the mask Constance gave her daughter obstructed her vision. When Constance realizes what has happened, she asks the paramedics responding to the scene to help her get Addy to Murder House’s front yard, then attempts to drag Addy there herself, explaining, “we gotta get her to the lawn over there while she’s still with us,” but Addy has already died. In contrast to the ‘good’ mother figure in maternal melodramas – the “self-sacrificing mother” who “must make her sacrifice that of the

connection to her children...either for her or their own good” (Williams, ““Something Else”” 308) – Constance’s efforts to get Addy to Murder House show that she is unwilling to sever her ties to her child.

Later that night, as the reality of this ultimate scenario of separation begins to set in, Constance talks to Violet about Addy. Constance recalls, “she wanted to be a pretty girl. Of course, she didn’t look so pretty lying on that table, under those harsh, energy-efficient lights” (“Halloween: Part II”). This voiceover occurs as the scene cuts to Constance at the morgue, asking the technician for a moment alone with her daughter’s body. Constance applies lipstick and eye shadow to Addy’s face as the voiceover continues, “one of the many comforts of having children is knowing one’s youth has not fled, but merely been passed down to a new generation.” Constance begins to cry as she finishes putting on Addy’s makeup, and her voiceover concludes: “They say when a parent dies a child feels his own mortality. But when a child dies, it’s immortality that a parent loses.” Violet apologizes, and Constance replies, “well, you did encourage her...But you were just trying to be kind, weren’t you? *I* was the one who sent her out into the world tonight. And it did what it will do.” Thus, while Constance is, in some regards, a ‘bad’ mother, she is, in terms of Kaplan’s categorizations, an “over-indulgent” mother (*Motherhood* 48). In one of the most prominent examples of genre hybridity in *Murder House*, Constance is “satisfying her own needs” by living next door to Murder House in order to remain close to her dead children; despite her futile attempt to get Addy there, too, Constance already has two deceased sons trapped within the house (Kaplan, *Motherhood* 48).

In *Murder House*, then, two non-Southern ‘mothers’ exist at opposite ends of the spectrum of Kaplan’s mother figure archetypes, while Constance fits somewhere in between. Vivien Harmon, having just moved from Boston into Murder House in Los Angeles with her

husband, Ben (Dylan McDermott), and daughter Violet represents the “all-sacrificing ‘angel in the house’”; conversely, Murder House itself represents an abject, “possessive and destructive, all-devouring” mother (Kaplan, *Motherhood* 48). In the season’s first episode, Vivien, clearly traumatized by a recent miscarriage, visits her doctor, who tells her “your body is like a house. You can fix the tiles in the bathroom and the kitchen, but if the foundation is decaying, well, you’re wasting your time.” Later in the episode, we learn that Vivien’s miscarriage occurred when she was seven months pregnant and, due to complications, she had to carry the baby to term and deliver it. In this regard, Vivien’s physical trauma of carrying a deceased child within her body mirrors Murder House itself, as a malevolent maternal body of sorts, holding its abject offspring within its walls – despite Vivien’s declaration to her doctor, “I’m not a house” (“Pilot”).

Crimes similar to (or outright depictions of) the kidnapping and murder of Charles Lindbergh’s baby in 1932, the Black Dahlia murder in 1947, Richard Speck’s murder spree in 1966, and the Columbine massacre of 1999 are all linked to Murder House’s history, and many of the victims (and perpetrators) of these crimes remain trapped in the house itself, particularly within the basement/womb⁵². Conversely, Keetley argues that *Murder House*’s focus upon Vivien and Constance reflects “early twenty-first century anxieties surrounding the aging mother” (94); specifically, she claims, Constance’s “string of ‘monstrous births’” implies that “some women are too old to have a baby. When Constance says ‘my womb is cursed’ (ep. 2), she links the Gothic supernatural evil of the house with her womb – and, inevitably, with her

⁵² In keeping with Savoy’s assertion that prosopopoeia is the “master trope of gothic’s allegorical turn” insofar as the “act of personifying . . . an abstract, disembodied Other . . . disturbs . . . the common reality of things,” the Halloween episodes of *Murder House* emphasize the structure’s personification (10). Specifically, this happens when Vivien and Ben are confronted by Chad, one of the many ghosts trapped within the house. Chad tells them to leave the house altogether. When Vivien replies, “you think we should just leave our own house?” Chad retorts, “It’s not your house. We know it, you know it, and the house knows it” (“Halloween: Part I”).

age” (95). I argue, on the other hand, that Keetley’s interpretation not only overlooks the ‘oldest’ and most ‘monstrous’ mother in the narrative as a whole – Murder House itself – but also incorrectly identifies Constance’s age as a contributing factor here. In fact, the truly ‘grotesque Gothic body’ in *Murder House* is not that of the ‘aging’ mother – whether Vivien or Constance, as Keetley claims; instead, it is the body of Murder House itself – an even older mother, and one even more disruptive in its transgressions. Furthermore, I argue that Constance’s importation of the Southern Gothic into a non-Southern (but, nevertheless, Gothic) setting exacerbates the already monstrous nature of Murder House. As an abject maternal body, Murder House produces a cyclical and unstoppable repetition of history. Spirits trapped within the house are allowed to leave on Halloween, but must return at dawn, and their numbers increase each year⁵³. Though Murder House’s status as a ‘terrible mother’ was cemented long before Constance even moved from the South to the West Coast, her transplantation of the Southern Gothic intensifies the house’s destructive forces. Consequently, Constance is inextricably linked to the house as much as the souls confined within its walls – because she is unwilling to break her connections to her children, still trapped there.

Significantly, then, while *Murder House*’s Halloween episodes focus on, among other things, a mother losing her daughter, *Coven*’s Halloween episodes – “Fearful Pranks Ensur” and “Burn, Witch. Burn!” – center on daughters returning to their mother from the dead. Considering its New Orleans setting, of course, this act of reanimation is linked to the supernatural powers of voodoo queen Marie Laveau (Angela Bassett). Seeking vengeance against Supreme witch Fiona Goode (Jessica Lange) and Madame Delphine LaLaurie (Kathy Bates), both residing at the Robichaux Academy – a boarding school, of sorts, for young witches – Marie summons an army

⁵³ “In many films, the house is initially depicted as a place of refuge...Inevitably, the situation is reversed and the house that offered a solace ultimately becomes a trap” (Creed 56).

of the dead to rise from their graves and surround the Academy house on Halloween night.

Significantly, Delphine's three daughters, who Marie murdered many years ago, lead the army of revenants to the Academy's front door.

Similar to *Murder House*'s implication that history repeating itself inevitably creates a self-destructive cycle, this climactic moment at the end of *Coven*'s "Fearful Pranks Ensur" also underscores the distinctly anti-nostalgic tendencies of Southern maternal horror. The first scene of "Burn, Witch. Burn!" – before picking up where the conclusion of "Fearful" left off – invokes the opening sequence of *Coven*'s first episode, "Bitchcraft," in which Delphine attempts to introduce her daughters to potential suitors during a soiree at her house in 1834 New Orleans. Thus, "Burn, Witch. Burn!" also begins at a party in Delphine's New Orleans mansion – this time on All Hallows' Eve, 1833. Once again, Delphine presents her eldest daughter, Borquita, to Jacques, the governor's son; however, this attempt at matchmaking falls flat when the young man flees the 'chamber of horrors' Delphine has prepared for the Halloween ball. Rather than the old parlor trick of passing off peeled grapes, cooked pasta, and other harmless objects as human organs, Delphine has harvested actual body parts from her slaves. Later that night, Borquita and her two sisters discuss how they will never find husbands because their mother is so "horrible. To us and the slaves." Delphine overhears her daughters conspiring to kill her and, subsequently, punishes all three of them by locking them in her attic torture chamber, where she intends to keep them for a year, and release them just before next year's All Hallows' Eve.

This flashback then abruptly cuts to *Coven*'s present day: as Marie Laveau's massive army of zombies continue to move in on the Robichaux Academy, Delphine sees her daughter Borquita outside and opens the door. In the sequence that follows, Borquita attempts to kill her mother, and then attacks Queenie (Gabourey Sidibe), one of the girls living at the Academy. In

order to save Queenie, Delphine impales Borquita with a fire poker. Reflecting on what she has done, Delphine declares, “she had a monster for a mother. This last act was the only kindness I ever did for her,” before breaking down into tears. Similar in some regards, then, to Constance’s complicated status as Addy’s ‘loving’ mother, Delphine insists, “I loved my girls in my own way. Even the ugly one. The moment she came out of my belly, she was a shame to me...But I loved her just the same. Hell is real. I seen it down in that box...The only thing that’s left is what’s in your mind’s eye. And all mine saw were the faces of my girls” (“Boy Parts”). As it turns out, Delphine was ‘down in that box’ for almost two hundred years. Marie Laveau’s beloved, Bastien, was one of the many slaves that Delphine abused and tortured. To punish her for these acts, Marie murdered Delphine’s family, and then cast a spell on Delphine, burying her alive beneath the courtyard of her own home.

In this regard, Delphine is the (Southern maternal) embodiment of the Freudian uncanny in *Coven*. Freud explains that “a severed head, a hand detached from the arm...all of these have something highly uncanny about them” (150); accordingly, both of these things happen to Delphine over the course of the season. Specifically, Freud claims that “being buried alive” attains “the crown of the uncanny” as it is “a variant of...living in the womb” (150). Thus, Delphine returns to the ‘womb,’ so to speak, when Marie condemns her to being buried alive. Subsequently, Delphine is (re)born into the twenty-first century, manifesting the “idea of history suspended...the past restored in the present” (Vidler 47). Vidler suggests that the “impossible desire to return to the womb” is, in fact, the “ultimate goal represented by nostalgia” (55); in turn, Delphine’s birth subverts this nostalgia altogether: her treatment of her daughters – and, even more significantly, her slaves – represents the worst aspects of the antebellum South. The next day, in the aftermath of the revenants’ attack on the Academy house, Delphine approaches

Fiona as she supervises Nan and Zoe, two of the other Academy girls, burn the remains of the zombies in the back yard. Delphine bemoans, “those were my daughters. The day they were born, I sent such hopes and dreams to heaven. This is how it ends, in flames and decay. They deserved a better mother than I could ever hope to be”; Fiona, in turn, replies, “yes. I know the feeling” (“Burn, Witch. Burn!”).

Accordingly, whereas the sole Southern mother in *Murder House* complicates the categories within Kaplan’s model, all Southern, biological mothers in *Coven* are inarguably ‘terrible’ mothers. Supreme witch Fiona Goode and voodoo queen Marie Laveau either sacrifice or offer to sacrifice the lives of their daughters to Papa Legba for immortality; likewise, Delphine torments her daughters in her attic chamber where she also tortures her slaves. In contrast, both surrogate mothers in *Coven* – Myrtle Snow (Frances Conroy) and Cordelia (Sarah Paulson) – go to great lengths to protect their surrogate daughters. Myrtle is burned at the stake for her surrogate daughter, Cordelia, who, in turn, as surrogate mother to the girls at the Robichaux Academy, blinds herself in an attempt to regain second sight in order to protect the coven. Significantly, both surrogate mothers subject their bodies – bodies unable to produce children (it is made abundantly clear that this is not a choice, but a biological fact for both women)⁵⁴ – to excruciating pain (that they have each already experienced once before) for the good of their surrogate daughters.

Conversely, mothers who have endured the pain of childbirth are willing to jeopardize the lives of their daughters for their own benefit. In contrast, then, to Constance’s failed attempt to live up to the (impossible) standard of the Southern mother as a ‘quasi-Virgin Mary’ in *Murder*

⁵⁴ It is confirmed that Cordelia is unable to bear children during her visit to a fertility specialist in *Coven*’s second episode, “Boy Parts”; additionally, Fiona confronts Myrtle in “Burn, Witch. Burn!” claiming, “you latched onto my daughter the minute I passed her into your care because you could never have one.”

House, *Coven*'s Cordelia embodies this 'angel of the house' figure. Likewise, in accordance with Kaplan's argument that, "to be healthy, the daughter must turn away from the Mother," Cordelia also accomplishes this feat as a daughter by the end of the season ("Mothering" 133). Whereas Constance was unable to attain the status of being a "basically 'good' figure" due to her unwillingness to let go of Addy in *Murder House*, though, Fiona is all too willing to sever ties with her only daughter in *Coven* (Kaplan, "Mothering" 134).

In fact, Fiona's shortcomings as a mother are underscored through her interactions with her rival, Myrtle Snow, during *Coven*'s Halloween episodes. Myrtle compares Fiona's selfishness as a mother to her ineptitude as Supreme of their coven: "you don't run things, you run off" – a gesture at Fiona practically abandoning Cordelia at the Academy with Myrtle when Cordelia was young ("Fearful Pranks Ensue"). A flashback sequence in a later episode reveals that, according to Myrtle, when Fiona left Cordelia at the Academy, the young girl was "like a baby bird pushed too soon from the nest," as a young Cordelia asks Myrtle, "will you be my mother now?" ("Head")⁵⁵. Despite Fiona's insistence that "my big mistake with [Cordelia] was waiting so long before sending you away," Myrtle asserts, "I've been more of a mother to that girl than you have ever been" ("Bitchcraft"; "Fearful Pranks Ensue"). According to Doane, at least, Myrtle is right: "above and beyond all other specifications, the true mother is defined in terms of pure presence: she is the one who is *there*" (84).

Thus, the uncanny manifests in *Murder House* through the abject maternal body of the house itself – holding, among many other souls, Constance's children (and, therefore, claiming Constance in its grasp, too). Furthermore, Delphine's prolonged (but deserved) punishment at the

⁵⁵ In "Head," *Coven*'s ninth episode, Myrtle tells Cordelia, "I've always loved you like a daughter"; in fact, Myrtle proves this when she murders her two fellow Council members – "to help out the coven, to help out my beloved Cordelia" – in order to give her surrogate daughter, blinded with acid, a new pair of eyes.

hands of Marie Laveau – being buried alive as a sadistic sort of time capsule representing the antithesis of antebellum nostalgia – is perhaps the most prominent example of the Freudian uncanny in *Coven*. For the purposes of concluding this study as a whole, though, I turn to another vital example of the uncanny which occurs in the final moments of *Coven*'s season finale. Shortly before Fiona succumbs to cancer, she returns to the Robichaux Academy after learning that Cordelia has proven herself as Fiona's successor and will become the next Supreme of their coven. Although Fiona suspected that Madison (Emma Roberts), one of the girls attending the Academy, was her biggest threat as a replacement – and Madison was, in several ways, Fiona's doppelganger – appropriately enough, it is Fiona's own daughter who is her double all along. Freud explains that the “most prominent of those motifs that produce an uncanny effect...involve the idea of the ‘double’ (the Doppelganger)” (141); specifically, Freud claims, the double is “originally an insurance against the extinction of the self,” but eventually “becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” (142).

This duality of the uncanny double mirrors Fiona's and Cordelia's final conversation which, in turn, gestures at the inherent contradictions in these mother-daughter relationships that Southern maternal horror aims to apprehend. Cordelia asks her mother, “is that why you were always so awful to me? Because you knew I was going to take your power some day?” Fiona replies, “you took my power the minute I gave birth to you. A woman becomes a mother, she can't help but see her mortality in that cherubic little face. Every time I looked at you, I saw my own death.” This statement draws a provocative parallel with Constance's reflection on her daughter Addy's death. Constance claims that “when a parent dies, a child feels his own mortality. But when a child dies, it's immortality that a parent loses” (“Halloween: Part II”); this, in turn, aligns with the child (and, more specifically, the daughter) as an uncanny double who

acts as “an insurance against the extinction of the self” (142) – an insurance lost with the daughter’s death. Conversely, Fiona’s declaration that a mother “can’t help but see her mortality in that cherubic little face” of her newborn child aligns with Freud’s interpretation of the double as “an uncanny harbinger of death” (142).

These conflicting perspectives from two different – yet extremely complicated – Southern mothers reveals a great deal about the mother’s point of view, especially when paired with the ambivalence felt by the child (daughter) regarding the equally strong urges both to return to and get away from one’s mother. Appropriately, then, Cordelia’s final words also reflect this ambivalence. Seeing Cordelia upset, Fiona assumes that her daughter is crying for her, but Cordelia corrects her: “I’m not crying over you. I’m crying for me. You were the monster in every one of my closets. A lifetime spent either trying to prove myself to you, get close to you, or get away from you. I’m crying for the girl in me who dies when you die” (“The Seven Wonders”).

Essentially, the cycle will start again, when Fiona dies and Cordelia takes her place as Supreme of the coven; simultaneously, though, the cycle is disrupted – a ‘good’ Southern mother is replacing the bad. Overall, then, Southern maternal horror works to disrupt these nostalgic tendencies, which manifest in what McPherson identifies as “our cultural schizophrenia about the South” (3). Specifically, McPherson claims, the South “remains at once the site of the trauma of slavery and also the mythic location of a vast nostalgia industry” (3). In this regard, the uncanny in Southern maternal horror – acting as a “dominant constituent of modern nostalgia” and intrinsically connected to this “impossible desire to return to the womb” (Vidler x) – turns this nostalgia on itself through its depictions of abject Southern mothers. Furthermore, McPherson claims, “the white southern lady – as mythologized image of innocence and purity –

floats free from the violence for which she was the cover story” (3). Embodying the South – whether through the female form, a plantation home, or the land itself – as a mother whose daughters both seek return to and refuge from, Southern maternal horror fleshes out the inherent impossibility of this proverbial return to the womb, simultaneously working to ensure that the white Southern lady no longer ‘floats free from the violence’ associated with her homeland.

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