

Speculative Sankofarration:
Haunting Black Women in Contemporary Horror Fiction

Kinitra D. Brooks – Michigan State University

Alexis McGee – The University of Alabama

Stephanie Schoellman – University of Texas, San Antonio

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Speculative Sankofarration: Haunting Black Women in Contemporary Horror Fiction

In a powerfully short blog post celebrating Black women in horror, poet Linda Addison traces the origins of the very first appearance of horror in Black literature.¹ Addison encounters what she considers the origin of Black horror in the folktales found in *Every Tongue Got to Confess* (2001), a collection of stories painstakingly recorded—in early 20th-Century Southern Black dialect—by the then budding anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston: “Besides themes of religion, family and other social concepts I also found two sections named: “Devil Tales” and “Witch and Hant Tales” (Hant means “haunt” or “ghost”).”² Hurston’s work highlights Black interest in horror as a long-established reality in its communal literature—the rich oral folk culture and tales passed down through familial generations. For Bonnie Barthold insists that “[t]he teller of tales [is] no less than the contemporary novelist.”³ Hurston’s records, paired with the critical scholarship of Harry Benshoff, Kinitra Brooks, and most extensively, Robin R Means-Coleman as well as the creative works of contemporary authors such as Chesya Burke, Nalo Hopkinson, and Tananarive Due brings us to an important crossroads in which we can begin to assess and articulate a means to move forward in scaffolding a Black women’s horror discourse.

This piece is meant to set “methodological direction” for a racially gendered horror discourse.⁴ For we insist that—in the parlance of Mae G. Henderson’s work in Black cultural studies—we are both supplementing the perceived “lack” of Black women’s horror discourse while simultaneously displacing its perceived “absence.”⁵ It is necessary to note that we are not setting an oppositional discourse, but rather are choosing to shift and redefine boundaries by articulating a discourse that is centered on

sankofarration, incorporating a biorhetoric framework that renders Black women as constantly oscillating sites of rupture, and finally, the potentiality in the act of haunting as resistance.

Sankofarration, a conflation of Sankofa and narration, is a cosmological episteme that centers the act of claiming the future as well as the past.⁶ Sankofa eschews contemporary Westernity's assertion of the linearity of time and there is an intentional conflation of the past, the present, and the future. Sankofarration insists that the past is just as important and necessary to a healthy and whole progress towards the future.⁷ Within Sankofarration time is cyclical: "Metaphysically, being was equivalent to duration: each moment embodied a recurrence of a past moment, and implied was a potential future recurrence...[t]ime included, or perhaps "belonged to," the community as a whole."⁸ Grounding Black women's horror discourse in sankofarration effectively cleaves horror from the trauma of enslavement and moves the concept of horror towards a more creative and artistic construction. The privileging of sankofarration does not exclude enslavement as a topic for creative horror exploration it simply rejects the idea of enslavement as the primogenitor of Black horror. This action separates the horrific acts associated with chattel slavery (natural horror) and pushes the discourse closer to what Noël Carroll conceives of as "art-horror" but within a specifically Black feminist framework.⁹ Sankofarration clears a space to codify a Black women's horror discourse for it is by collapsing the fallacious linearity of time and reconnecting to preColonial West Africa that we can move from the problematic construction of The Middle Passage and the subsequent enslavement of African diasporic peoples as the point of origin for Black horror studies as a whole and a Black women's horror discourse in particular.

Black Women's Bodies as Sites of Ruptures

Acknowledging sankofarration as an alternative cosmological episteme in Black women's horror discourse means understanding the Black woman's body inherently ruptures linear time by way of expressing or standing in for the potentiality of Black pasts, presents, and futures. Biorhetorics, albeit from our non-traditional form, provides a space for acknowledging Black women's bodies as the very disruptions they agitate in their most organic and most speculative form. Joy DeGruy asserts: "We rarely look to our history to understand how African Americans adapted their behavior over centuries in order to survive the stifling effects of chattel slavery, effects which are evident today" (13). The generational horrors and hauntings stemming from slavery, even preslavery, manifest physiologically in the present and in representations of possible futures. She continues: "I believe that the behaviors...[are] in large part related to trans-generational adaptations associated with the past traumas of slavery and on-going oppression. (13). Since Black Americans "are repeatedly asked to reveal proof of the realities of racism to skeptical white people" on a daily basis, Black women's bodies continually symbolize past, present, recurrent, and future traumas both physically and psychologically as the hauntings, horror, and trauma are continually exposed (DeGury 25). Sankofarration acknowledges these multidimensional acts occurring on multiple planes of time coalescing into the representation of Black women's bodies at a particular space and place. Using this cosmological episteme within a biorhetoric framework pushes Black women's horror discourse to move past marking Black women's hauntings of just slavery, but to see Black women's bodies as pushing boundaries of horror toward little explored depths by being non-linear.

Henceforth, by marking hauntings as more than slavery but as multiple sites of oppression that stem from many origins—because “the overarching problem of this millennium continues to be the problem of the color line”—the very being of Black women bodies continually work to rupture sites of oppression (DeGruy 24). The body and haunting then, we argue, should be read with biorhetorics in mind.

Biorhetorics combines “biology” and “rhetoric” as lexical terminology, academic discourse and theory of practical application. Stephen Pain asserts, “Biorhetorics is an applied form of rhetoric for actual usage in the life sciences” (755). Kristie Fleckenstein, on the other hand, argues that biorhetorics is “a discourse of bodysigns” (761). For Fleckenstein, biorhetorics “offers the possibility of effecting change by positioning us within the ambiguous interplay of materiality and semiosis” (761). Using biorhetorics as a framework to explicate Black women’s bodies provides some insight to the potentiality of this work and crossroad. Using the body, being careful to include all its differences genetically and superficially, as a rhetorical tool allows us to deconstruct language that is “mutually entangled in a nonlinear weave of cause and effect. We can know them [body, language, and sign(s)] and live them only at a point where they blur” (Fleckenstein 762). Black women’s body and the discourse of horror are physically and inherently linked regardless if it is verbally expounded.

Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix recall Sojourner Truth’s speech in 1863 asking “Ain’t I a Woman” by arguing that Truth “deconstruct[ed] every single major truth-claim about gender in a patriarchal slave social formation.” Truth’s speech also gives “a devastating critique of socio-political, economic and cultural process of ‘othering’ whilst drawing attention to the simultaneous importance of subjectivity—of subjective pain and

violence that the inflictors do not often wish to hear about or acknowledge” (77). Black women bodies have not only historically marked traumas and inequalities with the presence of their bodies but also called attention to American raced and gendered injustices with their words. Black women today continue to argue against what Barbara Walters calls the Cult of True Womanhood (CTW) which was and is based on the white, male supremacist and patriarchal notion of a Republican Motherhood with four derived characteristics: 1) piety, 2) purity, 3) submissiveness, and 4) domesticity¹⁰. Black women’s bodies still disrupt this nineteenth-century ideal of womanhood by resisting and reacting against its exclusivity. This nineteenth-century idea of female is unsettled by Black women’s hauntings and voicing against the negative stereotypes like “sexual promiscuity,”¹¹ “deviant,” or the “crack whores” implicitly labeled Black and woman at the onset of the 80s¹² with which were created to uphold CTW and white male ideology. Black women’s bodies continue to be a reminder of that cyclical oppressions manifested in various forms.

Furthermore, bodies as identity markers (i.e. race and gender) have socially, politically, and historically been noted as negative especially if they are marked as Black and woman. Audre Lorde states “As a Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, poet, mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself part of some group in which the majority defines me as deviant, difficult, inferior, or just plain ‘wrong’” (219). Black women’s bodies at the intersectional crossroad continues to be marked as “other” or “deviant” both publically and in academia. However, Kimberlé Crenshaw notes “our liberatory objective should be to empty such categories of any social significance” (1242). America should be long removed from ideas of “deviant” as

genetic mutations and “others.” But, by being marked as “other”—genetically or not—the body can actively resist some normative discourses.

Therefore, Pain’s conception of biorhetorics is applied in stages for universal life as a rhetorical framework. If we strip-down definitions of life to molecular levels, according to Pain, all universal life is capable of carrying out biorhetorics by way of the presence of these three stages: (1) rhetoric with a purpose; (2) symbolic rhetoric; and (3) rhetoric designed for one time, one space, one organism (760-65). For instance, all organisms go through a process in which essential coding structures for developing and continuing life becomes replicated or transcribed. During that process, a number of different structures have various roles (some related to copying and some not). However, during this process a number of things could also change—even minutely—those coding structures thus causing natural genetic mutations resulting in differing biological genotypes and phenotypes like having curly instead of straight hair, brown eyes instead of blue, or an under-developed arm resulting from DDT (a pesticide) exposure, tumors, or cancer (Frum, Deb, and Deb). Mutations can result from genetic conditions or environmental factors like UV rays, which, coincidentally, lead to a spectrum of melanin concentration from person to person. Organisms, down to their genetic coding, have a specific fingerprint at one point during its continual cyclical evolution.

Moreover, a universal biorhetoric is possible because, at the most basic form, organisms maintain similar purposes: life. Pain’s description of an innate “language” enabling communication between cells during genetic coding inevitably effecting the outcome of one’s life and resulting experience, reproduction, denial, rememory, etc. Biorhetoric then occurs on a number of levels: genetic, subconscious, conscious, or outer-

body. Black women's bodies directly impact her experiences because genes effect one's development, and one's environment affects genes.

Expanding Biorhetorics as a Framework of Potentiality

Exploring the potentiality of biorhetorics allows us to open another avenue of discussion for Black women horror discourse. We see Black women bodies as a disruption in normative writing, thinking, and being by way *of being* in a biological and rhetorical sense. Understanding that biological ruptures create disjunctures in time and space allows the possibility of multi-leveled configurations within already dynamic and different bodies—physical bodies and bodies of works. This framework enables us to push against boundaries and resist traditional notions of Black women in horror. Kinitra Brooks notes how she “address[es] the problem of how patriarchal and Eurocentric notions perpetuate multiracial representations of men juxtaposed against monoracial representations of women” when scholars critique Black women bodies work. She continues, “I speak of this tendency as a tradition, for the problematic lack of representation of women of color in popular Western texts has been systematically analyzed and decried in the latter half of the twentieth century.”¹³

Furthermore, in 2016 Black women's bodies continue to be under attack as they rupture and disrupt hegemonic spaces. In *Writing Beyond Race*, bell hooks asserts, “it should be evident that the fundamental concerns of the academy in general are at odds with any efforts to affirm black self-determination” (167). By inhabiting spaces in the academy, Black women's bodies create disjunctures, mutations, and ruptures of “safe,” traditional, oppressive ideologies, texts, and practices that have continue to reoccur in classes, semesters, and student papers or perceptions. Since the horror genre is a

discourse of cultural anxieties, Black women horror writers reveal residual anxieties of mainstream horror—a discourse of cultural anxieties and of black feminist literature and film exploring how cultural anxieties act as interlocking oppressions upon black women. We are asking: what residual anxieties are they really revealing?

This applicable and rhetorical framework now speaks to a larger, more general level of bodies yet remains specific enough to highlight particular genetic modifications communicating meaning between nonverbal signifiers. The importance or the role of “*bio-*” or *life* quickly becomes the emphasis. But what is to be considered as life? How do we address life? In what context does life form? What qualities deem life acceptable? While constructing the parameters holding these questions within a boundary with which so many scholars try to contain Black speculative works, we return to the cosmological episteme of sankoforation and the body. Pain argues (and we agree to some extent) there is an added dimension of a rhetorical framework to experiences of life; one in which we also have to ask at what point is rhetoric consuming or creating mode(s) of participation (by way of communication) for life, particularly for Black women’s life. When do rhetoric and life collide? And what happens during those collisions or thresholds? Continuing to push questions (and scholarship) of how life is conceived through horror, terror and trauma and in what manner are they manifested in Black women’s bodies and Black speculative works with the understanding that the organismal level itself is working to creating rhetorical resistance by way of replication and mutation in time and space.

Provided our introduction to a contemporary view of biorhetorics, we push against customary outlooks silencing the racialized and gendered body. In this work, we

put forth an alternative mutation of biorhetorics to frame our argument of Black women hauntings. Black women's bodies testify to resistive movements of oppressive ideologies. By this we mean a purposeful use of the body in its multi-faceted forms (colors, shapes, sizes, representations, sounds, maskings, etc.), rather than written words—with the exception of text placed on the body—limited by the Middle Passage, to convey particular meanings in specific spaces and times while reflecting past and future. Part of developing this representation of the body can only be conveyed through generating a meaning of life, a specific life of the body the rhetor is representing.

Conclusion: The Timely Need for Black Women's Horror Discourse

Writing horror is risky business if one seeks accolades from literary critics and scholars. If one is also and female, further stigmatization is engendered due to staunch social and historical reproach. If one writes academic articles about Black female horror writers and argues that these women deploy a unique horror discourse, more peril is imminent, but the risk is necessary and timely—now more than ever—because studying, theorizing, reading, teaching, and recognizing Black women horror writers as a vital voice in literature is part and parcel with acknowledging Black women's complex humanity and, likewise, their propensity for creating intricate literary works well deserved of philosophical schemas with which to analyze them. We are taking that risk—constructing theoretical frameworks with which to interpret Black women horror writers' works—because we recognize the inherent need to articulate the disruptions and expansions being made to horror discourse for several pertinent reasons: 1) to disrupt and expand academia's literary canon, 2) to disrupt and expand concepts of horror discourse and the dichotomies traditionally expounded in that discourse, and 3) to disrupt and

expand the limits (placed by publishers, scholars, and readers alike) of Black women's literature.

We move to push conversations of haunting as resistance forward in Black speculative women's literature. This work acknowledges the foundations laid by our literary foremothers like Toni Morrison and Gale Jones, but we also recognize the potential to move past traditional triangles of Black speculative women's literary criticism, that being mimetic/neo-slave/realism. There is more to these works. Therefore, while trauma, terror, haunting, and its manifestations in realistic fiction has been extensively covered elsewhere, in this work we examined how haunted Black women and Black women hauntings disrupt and expand concepts of haunting and disruption, namely working within a biorhetoric framework, to build a multidimensional representation of horror and terror. We advocate now for a body- and textual-based approach to discerning Black women horror writer's discourse which disrupts and expands traditional notions of horror and terror; thus, we end with rhetorical questions for consideration with which to use when examining a text, specifically how Black women writers are "bristling" and "mutating" the smoothed down tropes and themes or "turning on end" the accepted rhetorical practices. This methodology ensures that Black women's horror discourse remains dynamic not flattened with blanketed assertions

Frameworks for Black Women's Horror Discourse

Foundational philosophies on terror and horror by Ann Radcliffe and Noël Carroll are insufficient for describing and extrapolating Black women's horror discourse because Radcliffe, Carroll and many of their protégés describe the technology of terror and horror with the Eurocentric language of dichotomies. Radcliffe's essay, "On the Supernatural in

Poetry,” defined the difference between terror and horror, explaining that “terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them” (5). Horror is associated with the uncanny, confusion, and chaos “in which the mind can find nothing to be magnificent, nothing to nourish its fears or doubts, or to act upon in any way” (6); while terror is associated with the sublime as well as the obscure, the obscure “leav[ing] something for the imagination to exaggerate” (6), which is instrumental in launching the mind and emotions it conjures into a transcendent state. Radcliffe’s formational text argues for oppositional relationship between these two aesthetics and their corresponding emotions.

In the seminal text *The Philosophy of Horror*, Carroll asserts “tales of terror [...] achieve their frightening effects by exploring psychology phenomena that are all too human” (15). The horror genre, on the other hand, is noted for its “capacity to raise a certain *affect*” (15), one of “visceral revulsion” (19) in the characters, readers, and viewers with the presence of monsters. However, the monster’s mere presence is not enough to make a text or film part of the horror genre; rather, it is the “attitude of characters in the story to the monsters they encounter” (16). This element is key because “the emotive responses of the audience, ideally, run parallel to the motions of characters. [...] [which] then, provide a set of instructions or, rather, examples about the way in which the audience is to response to the monsters in the fiction” (17). The horror felt by the reader or viewer as a result of the text is what Carroll terms an occult emotional state, possessing “both physical and cognitive dimensions” (24).

Carroll's "Cognitive/evaluative theory" of the "occurrent emotional state" is useful in our conversation here because he describes it as a "physically abnormal state of felt agitation [that] has been caused by the subject's cognitive construal and evaluation of his/her situation" (27). Black women horror writers' situation is wrought with more intersectional trauma, trauma being "an injury [physical, emotional, psychological, and/or spiritual] caused by an outside, usually violent, force, event or experience" (DeGruy 13), thus their construal and evaluation through horror discourse is not linear or one dimensional, simply horror or terror. With their narratives' characters, they guide readers to different possibilities for interpreting monstrosity and trauma—using both terror and horror—forging new epistemologies and, in the process, resisting and disrupting hegemonic ones. We argue that Black women writers incarnate speculative sankofarration, the simultaneous claiming of pasts, presents, and futures in their ways of being, characters, and narratives, an Afro-centric disruption of linear timelines, chronological hierarchies, and delineations of haunting.

Furthermore, trauma experienced by Black women in the U.S. is ongoing and pervasive; therefore, the resistance to oppressions must also be continual, dynamic, and multi-dimensional rather than a single, static end. Experiencing trauma and enacting resistance, like the occurrent emotional state, are physiological; hence, one reason why biorhetoric is a well-suited theoretical framework by which to analyze horror text by black women.

Haunting and Cultural Haunting Definitions

Avery F. Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* defines *haunting* as the re-visitation and reclaiming of "something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there [...] makes itself

known or apparent to us” (Gordon 8). *Haunting*, according to Gordon, is a psychosociopolitical state “in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impact felt in everyday life” (xvi). The ghosts are agents of haunting, representing a legion of trauma, composites of the systems of power. Haunting is not a static state, but rather, an “animated state,” “distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done” (xvi). “The ghost registers and it incites” and has “real presence and demands its due, your attention,” (207, xvi). Thus, specters and their hauntings are framed as active and productive events as well as transformative. As she asserts, “Following the ghosts is about making a contract that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located” (22).

Gordon’s concept of haunting works well with our use of Sankofarration because “The ghost always registers the actual ‘degraded present’ in which we are inextricably and historically entangled *and* the longing for the arrival of a future, entangled certainly, but ripe in the plenitude of nonsacrificial freedoms and exuberant unforeseen pleasures” (207). Hauntings conflate and confuse linear timelines, disrupting and opening a space in which to exist simultaneously with one’s past, present, and future. Brogan also notes that ghosts are a “go-between, an enigmatic transitional figure moving between past and present, death and life, one culture and another” (6), “agents of cultural memory and cultural renewal” (12).

Kathleen Brogan labels this notion a cultural hauntings, stressing that “ghosts in recent African-American literature [...] signal an attempt to recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially erased cultural history” and that “through the agency of ghosts, group histories [...] are recuperated and revised” (2). Thus, ghosts are a way to

transform the literary imaginary through haunting, specifically by “re-creat[ing] ethnic identity through an imaginative recuperation of the past and to press this new version of the past into the service of the present” (4).

Brogan notes that ghosts or the “belief in ancestor spirits” have a long history in African lore as “one of the key elements of African religious thought to survive in syncretic forms of new-world religious practice and in slave folklore” (2). The ghosts have a “communal nature,” exploring “a people’s historical consciousness” (5).

The rhetorical questions. . .

Art-horror

SANKOFFORATION

- 1) Sankofarration – collapse time - that is unleashed from the trauma of enslavement
- Slavery is not the primogenitor—horror has a longer history
- 2) Black women’s bodies as rupture
- 3) Bodies of work Haunting

Redefines boundaries, shifts, shakes

“fruitful and necessary methodological direction for the Black Studies project” (62)

We are arguing for the clearing of a space to articulate black women’s horror aesthetics—
We clear a space through the collapsing of the fallacious linearity of time—moves from
the initial trauma of enslavement (as the INITIAL trauma)---goes preColonial as a place
of beginning (we reach beyond)

Must tease it out from slavery.

Are we making an **“oppositional discourse”** here? No. We are expanding and “shifting
the center” of a discourse that has long existed – bring in Linda Addison and ZNH

*Our purpose is not to articulate what individual and sociocultural healing looks like—but
to contemplate the myriad of ways in which black women’s speculative fictions proposes
to reaching that goal. The use of what Okorafor refers to as “organic fantasy” DOES
WHAT?*

*And push forward the notion that hauntings play a significant role in this forward
movement/progress.*

“To examine Black Studies in its ethno-historical dimension is necessary and proper; yet
to describe it as simply nationalist is both reductive and ahistorical” (64)

“...as an intervention in the academy, Black Studies—in its formative stages –had to be
insistent upon its integrity and distinctiveness. To criticize it, then, for promoting a naïve
and essentialist nationalism is to deny the historical and political contingencies of its very
inception.” (64)

Teasing it out from trauma theory -- Haunting clears a space for horror--

“[we] must introduce a **comparative and historical dimension** to its methodologies” (65)

What does black women’s horror look like? What are its aesthetics?
What are the “**residual anxieties**” (65)

We must reach back to past technologies to provide context and foundation for future technologies. We must meditate in a manner that reflects “an ordered reconstruction of history” (Henderson 632)

Reflects black women as walking sites of rupture—bioethics [pushing past Wall’s ideal of worrying the lines?”] Both a conflation and a collapsing of boundaries at the same time.

“The Body Politic: Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth-Century Euro-American Imagination,” Beverly Guy-Sheftall insists that historically, black women were defined by their inability to have agency over their own bodies, “it was the exploitation of the black woman’s body—her vagina, her uterus, her breasts, and also her muscle—that set her apart from white women and was the mark of her vulnerability” (Guy-Sheftall 30).

“resistance narrative [that] portrays their courageous quest for the integrity of [blackwomen’s] bodies which have historically been displayed, beaten, stripped, bruised, penetrated, overworked, raped and even lynched” (Guy-Sheftall 31).

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¹ <https://horroraddicts.wordpress.com/2016/02/10/genesis-the-first-black-horror-writersstorytellers-by-linda-addison/>

² Ibid.

³ Barthold, 3

⁴ Henderson, 62

⁵ Henderson, 64

⁶ Sankofarration is a working theory constructed by John Jennings of University of Buffalo discussed at the Planet Deep South Conference on February 24, 2016.

⁷ The concept of “Sankofa” is derived from King Adinkera of the Akan people of West Africa. “Sankofa” is expressed in the Akan language as “se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki.” Literally translated, this means “it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot.”

<http://www.uis.edu/africanamericanstudies/students/sankofa/>

⁸ Barthold, 10

⁹ Carroll distinguishes between art-horror and natural horrors, saying that art-horror is a "relevant sort of horror found in fine art [...] cross-art, cross-media genre" where as natural horror is the colloquial term used to express being horrified over an event, such as ecological disasters (12).

¹⁰ Welter, Barbara (151-174)

¹¹ Jones and Kumea Gooden-Shorter *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* (11-12)

¹² Alexander, Michelle (5)

¹³ Kinitra Brooks (462)