

# Preface

Though mute throughout, she's [Grace Jones] a powerful presence as vampire queen Katrina.  
—Ian Berriman, SFX.com

I can say that I can't think of any one [black woman] that has ever been an author or illustrator in the genre whatsoever.... It'll happen eventually, I'm sure. It's just one of those things that hasn't surfaced yet.  
—William, attendee at the World Horror Convention 2013

I was a seven-year-old curled up in a movie theater seat watching Ms. Jones as Katrina in *Vamp* (1986). My fingers were curled in anticipation on either side of my head, ready to plug my ears in terror at any hint of surprise or film-constructed danger. I was ensconced between my beloved aunt Errolyn—whom I had convinced that I was old enough to handle horror—and my older cousin Lee—whom I believe had more fun snickering at my reactions to the film than actually watching the movie himself. My eyes were glued to the (then) gargantuan screen at the Joy Theatre in New Orleans, Louisiana—well, at least until a vampire appeared on screen—then they were glued to the recessed lighting in the floor. My imagination began to ponder the space behind those lights, calculating if it was big enough for a vampire's hand to fit through and grab my leg. I watched the film in a semicatatonic state of a terror I had never felt before, hoping, wishing, and praying that it would just END! I was so proud of myself and

I sighed with relief as the credits begin to roll—I had survived! And then my aunt Errollyn tore my world asunder as she announced that since she'd enjoyed the movie so much we were going to stick around for the next showing! I died a little inside as I collapsed into my seat ready to endure another round of torture, and Lee collapsed into another round of raucous laughter at my expense.

I now recognize the genius of my aunt Errollyn and appreciate the gift she gave me that day, the gift of an intellectual curiosity about horror. It was the second showing that gave me the bravery to truly *look* at the film, as I now had the ability to move beyond my terror and began to enjoy the movie and become enraptured by the dark beauty of Grace Jones.<sup>1</sup> And though I loved Katrina, my young mind had a strong sense that there was something wrong with Grace Jones's distinctive beauty ultimately being portrayed as a horrific vampire, that her features became exaggerated and monstrously ugly when she finally revealed her "true" self. I also began to wonder, why the heck didn't she talk?<sup>2</sup> Was her character mute? Even at seven years old I could see the need to communicate in those eerily colored eyes in the midst of her painted face and wondered, why didn't they let her *talk*? Why was she silenced? I would eventually learn that the word for which I was searching for Katrina's characterization was "problematic."

My active little mind began to wonder if there were there other central black female characters in horror movies that were not painted so scarily. And, even more important, were there cool black girl characters that kicked the monster's butt and got the cute guy in the end? As I grew older, my aunt Errollyn and aunt Linda introduced me to Jamie Lee Curtis's Laurie from *Halloween* (1978) and Kim from *Prom Night* (1980) and other cool girls who kicked butt and sometimes got a cute boyfriend in the end. Yet I began to realize that the girl was always white. And after a somewhat traumatic introduction to zombies revealed even more about my growing love for horror: we black girls were absent—we were never there!<sup>3</sup>

As I grew older, I gained a love of literature from my mother and a love of genre fiction from my father. My lived experience



FIG. 1. Grace Jones as Katrina, *Vamp* (1986).

as a young black woman continuously highlighted the erasure of black women in mainstream horror. I began to ask questions as my consumption of genre media increased in my late teens. Why were there never any black people in Sunnydale, California? And was I the only one who thought the Chinese slayer (Ming Qiu) and the Afroed blaxploitation slayer (April Weeden) from the season five episode of *A Fool for Love* were far more interesting in their fleeting minutes onscreen than Buffy Anne Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar) had been throughout seven seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003)? Did Jada Pinkett’s character, Maureen, and Elise Neal’s Hallie both have to die in *Scream 2* (1997)? And why, in my absolute favorite subgenre of horror—the zombie apocalypse—were there never any black women in the group of survivors? Hell, there weren’t ever *any* women of color—no Puerto Ricans, no Koreans, no Chicanas, no Pakistanis—none of the many different shades and incarnations of womanhood I encountered on a daily basis. It was a blatant erasure that began to seriously bother me, which then became an irritation and finally developed into a rash for which I needed to find a healing salve in order to save my love for horror.

I questioned if it was possible for mainstream horror to construct complicated black women characters. In my early twenties I began

to see flashes of hope with the release of films such as *Supernova* (2002), *AVP: Alien vs. Predator* (2004), and *28 Days Later* (2002) and found joy in horror films' recognition that the black girl can survive in the end—and if she's lucky, she gets to hang out with The Predator along the way!<sup>4</sup> It was as a graduate student that I fell hard for Michonne, a kick-ass black female character in Robert Kirkman's ongoing comic zombie opus *The Walking Dead* (2003–), and Selena, who righteously slayed the infected with her handy machete from Danny Boyle's kinetic homage to the zombie apocalypse, *28 Days Later*.<sup>5</sup> Both characters were capable black women who actively contributed to their own survival. They were often portrayed as protectors of the group without being a piously perfect caretaker as many black female characters in mainstream movies are wont to be. Had mainstream horror begun to construct complicated black women characters?

And then I watched/read both texts for a second time—and that word, “problematic,” popped up again. The characters started out as capable, but then often became a workhorse of the group. The white female characters were vulnerable, protected, and even rescued in heroic feats of grandeur by the men in the group. Why didn't anyone ever rescue the black woman? Why did she always have to rescue herself? Didn't anyone care if she survived? And then I came upon the rape of Michonne and got angry.<sup>6</sup> Tears of anger began to flow as I read each panel while Michonne was brutally beaten and gang-raped by a rival faction of survivors. My eyes froze on one particular panel in which Michonne is framed against a stone wall dressed in nothing but a ripped T-shirt. Her bruised and swollen face bespoke the sexual and physical violence she had just endured in her nudity. The only thing that prevents her from collapsing in a heap of trauma is that she is chained to the wall by a pair of slave shackles trapping her wrists. That panel represented so much pain, horror, and trauma experienced by the black women I studied as a student of black feminist literature—my sense of self demanded I do something.

I became transfixed on finding more complex characterizations of black women in horror *created* by black women. I began by

diving into Tananarive Due's African Immortals series and reveling in complex black characters as she Africanized the European vampire. I began rooting for the survival of the supernatural power couple Damali Richards and Carlos Riviera as LA Banks reworked, reimagined, and significantly improved upon the legend of the young girl chosen to protect the world by slaying vampires.<sup>7</sup> I still hungered for more than black women's interpretation of vampires; I wanted to read our takes on zombies, ghosts, and the supernatural in religion.

The inclusion of black women in critical horror studies is paramount because of the unique positionality of black women, most specifically manifested in the simultaneity of oppressions that aids in defining black women's identities. Postmodern horror studies' problematic focus on questions of monstrosity regarding white women and black men has proven detrimental to its own saliency and relevance—the critical study of black women within the genre is a volley against mainstream horror's willful ignorance of the intersections of identity that composes its audience and, more important, its expanding pool of creators. It is important that black women be complexly presented as both characters and creators of the horror genre.

This project is a search and rescue mission. I aim to find the black women in contemporary horror and critique the complex ways in which they manifest as characters, as creators, and as rebels to the conventions of both horror theory and black feminist theory. This text openly defies the mistaken notion—as articulated by William in the epigraph—that black women horror creators do not exist or are so miniscule as to be rendered insignificant to the genre. I make visible the black woman's significance, relevance, and subversion to conventional horror theories and narratives.

I end my investigation with the black woman creators' challenge that horror adapts or dies—as they are examples of the growing demographic changes that the horror genre must pursue and develop to continue its deep cultural influences.

