The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature

In his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. Du Bois coins the term “double consciousness.” He defines this state of living as a “veil” where Black people are “gifted with second-sight;” this second-sight being the ability to “see” themselves through the white gaze while simultaneously knowing how they are perceived by this gaze. He writes that this state of being is “a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, [it is] this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 8). In an environment dominated by whiteness, Black people are hyperaware of the way they are ‘looked’ at and can become trapped in this void of ‘watching’ themselves through the eyes of others. This known consciousness leads to a false sense of identity that blinds one from seeing themselves through an unfiltered and truthful Black gaze. For Black women, they constantly see their femininity, womanhood, and body through the eyes of the white gaze; this includes being fed stereotypes of hypermasculinization, hypersexualization, etc. In my essay, I will be exploring how Zakiya Dalila Harris’s “The Other Black Girl,” is an example of the evolution of the Horror Genre. In Harris’s novel, she distinguishes multiple Black female gazes through the characterization of her Black female characters, and the motif of hair in order to focus on the fears of Black women and to construct a fresh sense of Horror and representation. In comparison, the Black male gaze lacks the depth to create prevalent representations of Black women in Horror; this is demonstrated in Hulu’s *Bad Hair* where Black women still face being vilianized.
In bell hooks’s “Black Looks: Race and Representation,” she defines the oppositional gaze, which is in contrast to the ‘looking’ of the white dominated society. bell hooks specifically talks about the oppositional gaze in the context of Black women, explaining how a lack of representation causes us to rely on the satisfaction of living through the eyes of others. We become painfully aware of never having our own voices or perspective told in a truthful manner. In Patricia Hill Collins’s “Black Feminist Thought,” she also discusses the way in which, Black women use the media as a reflection of themselves. She writes: “African-American women encounter these controlling images, not as disembodied symbolic messages but as ideas designed to provide meaning in our daily lives (Scott 1985),” (97). When fed images of racist ideologies, it causes a disconnect in how one is able to value themselves. The representation that Black women see influences their social, physical, and emotional interactions. The Black gaze, through bell hooks definition is when one works to resist and rewrite the stereotypes placed upon them, consequently they are also working within the oppositional gaze. She writes: “When most black people in the United States first had the opportunity to look at film and television, they did so fully aware that mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy… It was the oppositional black gaze that responded to these looking relations by developing independent black cinema” (hooks 117). For Black creators, writing/creating their own stories was the most pivotal way to control how society interacted and understood Blackness. The oppositional Black gaze is choosing to counteract and work against the system put in place by creating and telling the lived realities of actual Black people.

The oppositional Black female gaze is recognizing the violence in invisibility that Black women constantly face; in implementing this gaze, both society and Black women are able to reconstruct the media. In this invisibility is the erasure of Black women, making it apparent that
society does not want to see Black women in the light that they represent themselves and how they viewed society. In Frantz Fanon’s “Black Skin, White Masks” he reveals the fear that shakes most Black people to the core. It is not the feeling of inferiority, “no, a feeling of nonexistence” that really worries Black folk (Fanon 139). It is this feeling of not being seen as human, but rather a commodity, it is the feeling of always being in this state of double consciousness that Black women combat by creating their own spaces. bell hooks defines the Black Female gaze as: “Looking and looking back, black women involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to to know the present and invent the future” (hooks 131). In other words, using what we experienced, and what those before us experienced, is how we function and reinvent the world around us. By working within the oppositional Black female gaze, Black women are able to reassure this sense of control, and this action of self-identification. They are choosing to place their truth in front of the eyes of themselves (and others) to fully dismantle this feeling of being “non-existent.” In Anne Friedberg’s essay “A denial of Difference: Theories of Cinematic Identification,” highlighted by hooks, Friedberg explains that “identification can only be made through recognition, and all recognition is itself an implicit confirmation of the ideology of the status quo” ”(Friedberg 119). Again without the Black female gaze, the recognition of Black women becomes a fixation of stereotypes that build upon racism, fetishization, dehumanization, etc. Therefore, it is necessary for the media to be constructed by the Black female gaze because what we see goes hand and hand with how Blackwomanhood is identified. Black girls need to have a outlet created by and for them. Our own lens calls attention to the way society views us, how we are taught to view ourselves, how we can change that view, and how we can further solidify our identity of Black womanhood. In Horror Literature, Black women are still deconstructing what many still recognize as a male, white dominated industry.
The Horror genre has always been coded in Blackness; the Black experience was key in building what we see as Horror today. The predecessor for all forms and distinctions of postmodern Horror was the Gothic. To some degree this Gothic Horror was created by Poe and those of his time, but most Horror enthusiasts would agree that this genre is rooted in the history of Blackness. In Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, he writes: “we do have in the Negro the embodiment of a past tragic enough to appease the spiritual hunger of even a James; and we do have in the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life dense and heavy enough to satisfy even the gloomy broodings of a Hawthorne. And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him” (Goddu 132). To Wright, and many other Black Americans, the daily life of a Black person is in itself an ongoing horror story. In this Blackness is the will, hunger, and fear to survive. One may even define Slave Narrativies as the origin and influence of both the Gothic and Horror because of the amount of inhumane brutality and sickenly terrifying detail alone. In Teresa Goddu’s “Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation,” she also traces back the original Horror to the lived experiences of Black Americans. She points out and uses Richard Wright’s work as the basis of her argument writing: “Wright unveils the gothic as a complex historical mode; history invents the gothic, and in turn the gothic events history” (132). That is to say, the Gothic just becomes the recorded history of one’s actual experience and memory; it is a truth turned fiction. Goddu continues to highlight that the scene of slavery “exceeds the representaion of art. By passing over what is too dreadful, fiction makes the unreadable readable, paradoxically unveiling slavery yet concealing its worst aspects” (142). Not only is the Gothic influenced by the events of slavery, it makes this very much *real* moment more digestable to its audience. With or without meaning to, Blackness has become a key factor in the
evolution of the Horror genre. The imagination of these white authors was only a portion of their thematic writing, the rest came from what they saw happening to the Black individuals around them. Black female Horror writers have always been using a significant portion of the Black gaze (with a historical lens) because Horror was in itself shaped by the Black, enslaved experience. Horror has just been presented through the white, male gaze and in this Blackness was villianzied.

In both Gothic and Postmodern Horror, we constantly see Black women being painted as something to fear. Postmodern Horror is defined as the state in which “the Normality is threatened by The Monster… [or the Other]” according to film critic Robert Paul Wood (known as Robin Wood) and refined by Kinitra Brooks (8). In Kinitra Brooks’s “Searching for Sycorax: Black Women’s Hauntings of Contemporary Horror,” she goes in depth analyzing the work already done by Black women in Horror literature and Film. She specifically defines Horror literature in a broader context, explaining that it is the creation and fear of “The Other.” “The Other” being anything and everything that doesn’t fall under white ideologies and structures (male, cisgender, straight, white, etc) i.e. Black women. So, in reality, the “Other” or “Monster” to the white gaze would be Black women- (females if we are being even more specific)- because we actively blur eurocentric binaries by existing. Within Brooks’s analysis, she further points out that the error with Robin Wood’s horror formula is that it “centers on the normative experiences of white men; therefore, the anxiety examined in horror is continuously about the other sides of the white male binary.” (Brooks 8). This exact error correlates to why Blackness is villianized in Horror! Instead of Black women being the focus and what they fear as the “Other,” society pinpoints on what whiteness fears. However, when Black women write Horror Literature and become the focus of discussion, these stories are seen through the oppositional gaze.
Equally importantly, when Black women participate in Horror Literature, they are influencing the evolution of Horror. In Noel Carroll’s “The Philosophy of Horror Paradoxes of the Heart,” he makes a distinction between postmodern “natural-horror” and “art-horror,” which Brooks also highlights in her essay. Carroll defines natural-horror as the realities that one may actually face (12). On the other hand, art-horror is “to name a cross-art, cross-media genre whose existence is already recognized in ordinary language” (12). Art-horror is the emotion of fear created by the threat of the supernatural, something that may be formless and of the imagination. He continues saying: “‘Art-horror’ … is meant to refer to the product of a genre that crystallized… around the time of the publication of Frankenstein… and that has persisted” (13).

With this definition, Black women have been and continue to transcend lines of both art and natural-horror. In books like Kindred, Dawn (by Octavia E. Butler), Beloved, The Bluest Eye (by Toni Morrison), White for Witching (by Helen Oyeyemi), Skin Folk (by Nalo Hopkinson), and many more, Black women writers have used both natural-horror to create art-horror and used art-horror to further illustrate everyday natural-horror. Like these books, Harris’s “The Other Black Girl” intertwines both natural and art-horror.

Simultaneously, Harris’s novel transcends the lines of the Horror, Fantasy, Speculative Fiction, and Science Fiction. Kinitra Brooks coins this specific cross-section of genres as Fluid Fiction in her essay “Speculative Sankofaration: Haunting Black Women in Contemporary Horror Fiction.” Fluid Fiction is:

“a racially gendered framework that revises genre fiction in that it purposefully obfuscates the boundaries of science fiction/fantasy/horror writing just as black women confound the boundaries of race, gender, and class” (Brooks 71).
When Black women participate in Horror literature, they easily blend these intricacies and definitions to create an even more fresh sense of Horror. Every cross of the genre can be metaphorically interwoven with Black women having to cross the bounds of racism, sexism, colorism, texturism, etc. Horror Literature does not have to be confined to one box of normality faced with the “Other.” In Fluid Fiction there is no confinement, but rather expansion of this genre. For this reason, Horror becomes more than the simple villainization of Black women, instead it becomes a blur of definitions that paint Black women in a light of their own creations. This evolution of Horror is adjusted and solidified by the Black female gaze. Once more, having Horror Literature told through the Black female gaze creates more representation where Black women are able to self-categorize and self-define Black womanhood by their own means and not through the looking of others. “The Other Black Girl” is just another example of the Black female gaze manufacturing a contemporary Horror novel.

“The Other Black Girl” is divided into three parts, minus the Prologue. In these three parts we follow four different perspectives told from four different Black female characters, and two different timelines (it’s a headspin, but luckily Harris has each chapter named with the character whose perspective it is in). The four perspectives are the protagonist, Nella Rose, and three more characters Kendra Rae Phillips, Diana Gordon, and Shani. The basic storyline of the novel follows Nella as she is introduced to the antagonist, Hazel-May McCall, and falls victim to the schemes of “the other Black girls.” In this group of “other Black girls” (OBG), their goal is to influence Black women to join them in becoming compliant to the demands of the white working world in order for the process of success to become smoother. In the first part of Harris’s novel, we jump to 2018 and meet the protagonist, Nella Rose, and antagonist, Hazel-May McCall. They
soon become friends, and Nella tells Hazel about a racist Black character in a book she is editing called “Pins and Needles.” Hazel convinces Nella to talk to her boss, Vera, about the caricature, but Hazel’s advice backfires and Nella is left to deal with the consequences. In fear of losing her job, and seeing Hazel become more acquainted with her boss, Nella begins to distrust Hazel.

Through her characterization of the protagonist, antagonist, and mastermind or “villain”, Harris constructs the different Black female gaze(s) in the working world. In doing so, she shows the “otherness” and anxieties of some Black women; these anxieties include the constant questioning of one’s sense of self and whether their actions are enough. When introducing Nella to the reader, we see that there are some unsettled uncertainties about whether or not her Blackness is visual to others. For one, she is the only Black girl within this publishing company, while the other Black staff happens to be the cleaning staff. Nella even recognizes, from the beginning, that her white colleagues didn’t see her Blackness as part of her core identity. When recalling a conversation between Wagner employees, where they complain about having to hire non-white people, Nella

“sensed that neither would have said anything differently. Her colleagues, strangely, had made it clear very early on that they didn’t really see her as a young Black woman, but as a young woman who just happened to be Black—as though her college degree had washed all of the melanin away” (Harris 53).

To her white peers, Nella is seen as a ‘good’ or ‘qualified’ Black person, someone who is not like the other Black girls. This phase being ironic to the fact that Harris characterizes who she calls “the Other Black Girls” as amenable to their white coworkers whereas, in today’s society’s, “the other” would be painted as aggressive and ‘untameable’ women. Instead, they are a group of ambitious women who become compliant to their white peers, they become ‘manageable. To
Nella’s peers she is not a Black woman but rather a woman that happens to be Black. Because of this, Nella is able to pass-off as non-aggressive and her ideas always get swept under the rug, especially if it’s about calling out racism at the company. This is a natural-horror that Harris presents to the reader, because a lot of Black women face this problem of having their Blackness washed away in order to be deemed suitable for a job. They have to appear more passive than what is stereotypically perceived, especially when trying to provide financially for themselves and survive a social setting where Blackness is seen as too much or as a byproduct. Furthermore, Nella knew that growing up she wanted control of her image and how she wished the world would perceive her. Nella kept up:

“the facade that despite all of it, she was Good, and if you looked at her senior photo—all white teeth and makeup and shiny black straight hair that curled up just a little bit at her shoulders—you believed it” (87).

This reaffirmation of her identity becomes questioned when Hazel looks at her in confusion because Nella didn’t know how to do flat twists. She continues asking herself: “should she have tried harder in college” (87). At college “she went to a couple of Black sorority parties her freshman year and they just hadn’t been Nella’s thing.” When asking her question, she thinks of a bunch of hypotheticals of being more involved in the lives of Black women and for the Black community. For Nella, she simply was questioning what and who she stood for when Hazel is introduced to the company and gains the workplace ‘privilege’ one would think she already had. However, by using the word “Good” and emphasizing how anyone who would come across Nella would see her in this light, Harris is further illustrating that Nella is your ordinary Black woman. She is not from a high or low-income family, she went to college, and she is working at her dream job for the most part, yet she isn’t able to achieve all her goals and she doesn’t seem to
stand out for her work or even her Blackness at her job. When Harris creates this gaze and this personality for our main character, we see that Black women face more than just the obstacles of their background. They face erasure from their white colleagues and the fear of not doing enough for more than just themselves. There is a constant wariness of how she represents herself and her community. These worries are also due to the whiteness that is dominant in her everyday life. Nella is a normal Black girl, someone whose melanin can’t be casted away because by being Black she is active in her Blackness.

In comparison to Hazel’s characterization, her dialogue between Nella and other coworkers shows how she is able to become compliant and push aside her beliefs in order to be financially successful. For Hazel, her fear is not doing enough to maintain a sustainable life. She is introduced as the new Black girl, from Brooklyn, that is able to converse with everyone, white and Black. She is the perfect example of being able to code-switch so effortlessly, without worrying about the consequences to her mental state or her peers. In Vershawn Ashtani Young’s “‘Nah, We Straight’: An Argument Against Code-Switching,” he defines what code-switching is and why Black people find themselves using this tool as a survival tactic. He writes “In Cook’s view, black should develop a dual personality, acting and speaking one way with whites, another with blacks in recognition of ‘the twoness of the world [they’re] involved in’” (Young 56). In “Black Skin, White Masks,” Fanon claims this phenomenon as “two dimensions. One [being] with [the black man’s] fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro” (17). In his chapter, “The Negro and Language,” he specifically gets to the idea of code-switching through language. Code-switching is the embodiment of fitting oneself into a box that is acceptable to whiteness or the ‘dominant’ in society. It’s using this change in language and in body in order to get ahead and to do more than
just survive in society. As Fanon states, it stems from the desire that “requires a white approval” (51). Hazel believed code-switching was more efficient for her to climb up the social ladder. She believed that she had to move past her *radical* thinking in order to get other Black women to the same position she was in. While referring to Nella as “sis” within private, Hazel was still able to turn around and comply with the author of “Pins and Needles” to show that she was willing to go along with racism, in order to get her white coworkers in her favor. She tells Nella to fight against getting the book published while she takes the position of the agreeable Black girl to Nella’s boss. She plays both sides of the fence. When speaking at a meeting about Colin Franklin’s book, and addressing the racist character Shartricia, she quickly overlooks the racialized character and says “‘overall, Colin did a really good job of bringing it home in a way that I think will connect with all readers’” (Harris 184). Soon Nella confronts Hazel and she admits that the character is offensive and embarrassing to Black women but she didn't hate the book. She explains that white people have the luxury of not being hyper aware of their existence and actions. Sarcastically, she says that the whole department meeting was an act, “a kind of social phenomenon… called… Code-switching’ ”(219). To Hazel, changing her language and playing along wasn’t a problem for her. Her objection was not something she was interested in presenting because she was working on her project with CEO of the company, Richard Wagner, to get more Black women recruited in the office. In this dialogue, Hazel is being sarcastic, further illustrating that she does not truly see a problem in how her actions have affected Nella and her state of emotion, yet Nella doesn’t ever blame Hazel for doing it. She does become even more suspicious of Hazel and her plans, trying to get the upper hand, but she doesn’t explicitly go against code-switching. Hazel’s code-switching does cause detrimental effects on Nella’s place in the office, with her boss forcing her to apologize to the author of “Pins and Needles” once
calling out its racism. However, Hazel’s perspective is still one of the multiple faces of the Black female gaze. It is the belief that Black women should have it easier, and find relief in themselves by not worrying about being a sell-out and switching from one ‘personality’ to the next. Instead, Black women should want to live peacefully and be well-paid even if it means becoming agreeable as a means of survival and getting to the top. This is another natural-horror that is built through another lens of the Black female gaze. While Nella is worried about not being Black enough, Hazel has her Blackness weaponized as a means of encouraging other Black women to join Richard’s and Diana’s efforts. As a reader, one would empathize with both women and the positions they are in. In this novel, Black women are not villainized but rather two victims who play a part in their own oppression.

Another character that Harris creates is Diana who is the mastermind behind the horrors of the novel. Diana is another version of the Black female gaze, and shows how Black women may play a hand in their own oppression. Harris uses Diana’s chapters to illustrate the internalized racism that still plague Black women. Diana’s gaze is having apathy and almost a distaste for one’s own hair and it highlights how she is willing to push her Blackness to the side in order to achieve success. However, Harris does not make this a focus point of the novel completely. In this Diana chapter, she is getting ready for an interview in 1983. Harris begins the chapter by having Diana pick out the wig she wants to wear before the interview starts. She holds up an auburn wig thinking: “The last time I’d worn this particular wig-in Vancouver, I think-it had left my scalp itchy for days afterward” (156). Her husband tells her that they are running late and needs to hurry up, and they soon reminisce about Diana’s mother, who was very concerned about the way she was perceived by others. When choosing her wig, Diana remembers that her mother once said: “The hard things we do for easy hair” (158). Already, the reader is able to
make assumptions about who Diana is and what she cares about. Though she states to not be like her mother, she has the tendencies to act like her mother, including being concerned about her hair being presentable and ‘easy.’ Instead of dealing with her natural hair, she goes for a wig that would take less time and effort for her but creates discomfort. She is also the one to convince Kendra to take Richard’s deal and get him to publish their book. Though we don’t know much about Diana, at this point, other than she was the one to deem Kendra as insane, her actions towards her hair shows where she stands. Through the Black female gaze, Hazel illustrates Diana's distaste for her natural hair which further pushes how she was so ready to backstab Kendra for her own success. All in the whim of survival, and progressing past it, again this is a natural-horror. It is the horror of not being enough and just barely getting by that pushes Diana to be who she is and to take the actions that she does. Diana chooses Richard Wagner, the white CEO of Wagner Publishing, in order to gain success while singehandly pushing Kendra under the bus when she chooses to speak about the racism at Wagner during her interview. For this character, Harris uses hair to characterize that she is a woman of opportunity and doing anything to gain those opportunities. Diana is a character willing to make sacrifices even if it means losing someone important to her, yet Harris doesn’t paint her out to be a villain but someone blinded by the need to prove herself and to show she is not too Black or like those Black people. In fact, Harris does not paricipate in any villianizing of her Black female characters.

Through the motif of Black Natural hair, Harris aims to configure a Black female gaze that expands on both natural and art-horror. In doing so, she shows how Black women are
constantly under the pressure of being presentable and constantly worry about being under the
gaze of objectification.

Through the actions of Kendra Rae, Harris creates discomfort and anxiety within the
reader. She uses the Black female gaze to show how our hair can be an indicator of our state of
being. In the Prologue of the novel, Harris anonymously starts with a first person perspective of
Kendra Rae. We later find out that she was on the run—in the Prologue—after editing best-seller
“Burning Heart” and then being denounced as insane by both her best friend, Diana (writer of
“Burning Heart”), and publisher, Richard Wagner, in 1983. The story begins:

“Stop fussing at it, now. Leave it alone. But my nails found my scalp
anyway, running from front to back to front again. My reward was a
moment of sweet relief, followed by a familiar flood of dry, searing
pain” (Harris 1).

By describing the pain afterwards as “dry, searing” it creates a feeling of uneasiness in the reader.
It is a moment of cringe, but not disgust. To have that type of pain following after scratching
one’s head, we are able to infer that the narrator was either scratching too hard or has been
repeating the action in the same spot, or even both. Having Kendra interact with her hair in such
a manner emphasizes her stress and irritation with the occurrences around her. Later down the
chapter, when sitting on the train for a little while longer, she continues the action and then
finally becomes aware of her surroundings. Harris writes: “Still, I continued to scrape at the itch
incessantly, my attention shifting to another startling concern: We weren’t moving yet” (1). The
narrator becomes alert because she is not moving further away from wherever she is running
from (at this time, she is running from the publishing company and the news). This also
intensifies this fear of being chased. The stop in her actions towards her hair, makes the reader
wonder “what is taking so long,” “who is she running from,” and why is her hair so itchy. Harris uses her hair as an indication that something is unnatural and different from the normality of one taking the train and even scratching their hair. This first introduction of hair being used as a motif for suspicion and uneasiness is the most prominent way Harris portrays the Horror aspect of her novel. Hair becomes the indicator that something is a foot.

By having her two main characters be natural, Harris’s default for art-horror is not good vs bad hair but rather the connection between these two women that they establish. Both Harris’s protagonist and antagonist are adorned with natural hairstyles. Nella Rose is described as having a “thick” afro “she’d been proudly growing…over the last three years” but still landed between her nose and cheek (Harris 10). The antagonist, Hazel, has “locs-every one as thick as a bubble-tea straw and longer than her arms-[starting] out as a deep brown, then [turning] honey-blonde as they [continue] past her ears” (15). Because of the hair product that Hazel uses, Nella immediately recognizes Hazel as a Black girl and unapologetically Black. Hazel’s hair product would have a lingering smell that would entice Nella. Their natural hair are indicators of sisterhood, recognizing one another and embracing their Blackness. Through the gaze of Nella, we see how she feels at ease with the presence of another Black girl. Though she can not believe it at first, she is excited and chooses to pursue a friendship with Hazel, hoping to bond with her over microaggressions from her coworkers. This created a safety net, as Black natural hair has always been a reflection of the whole. Instead of focusing on natural vs straight hair, or good hair vs bad hair, Harris has both characters bond over natural hair products and take notice of each other's hair. Through this gaze, Harris shows that Black women find connection through hair and recognizing one another because of the hairstyle they choose. Whereas Black hair is stated as ‘unprofessional’ in the white working world, both Nella and Hazel go against the norm by being
Black women who do not conform to Eurocentric beauty standards, outwardly and physically, to say the least. Nevertheless, Harris does not provide an explicit white focus on their hair, there was only one scene in which a white co-worker is not able to differentiate between the two Black girls despite them having two very distinguishable hairstyles and lengths. Harris uses the Black female gaze, which is not to be exoticized or criticized, but to find reassurance and a mutual understanding through hair. Yet this view becomes skewed, again, when Black hair is used as a symbol of suspicion and unrest by Harris. It is not the actual hair being villainized, but rather the connection between two women.

In the third section of her novel, Harris merges both natural- and art-horror by highlighting familial relations through hair. When Nella becomes wary of Hazel, seeing her as a threat to her job rather than a friend to confide in, hair becomes a signal of the horrors Black women face when competing in the world of publishing. The build-up within the plot thriving off the fact that Nella is receiving notes saying: “Leave Wagner Now” (97). Without knowing who these notes are coming from, Nella is left to speculate who is trying to force her to leave, and question whether or not it is Hazel. With her best friend—Malaika—by her side, they go into Hazel’s home looking for information that will put Nella’s nerves at ease. In this scene, we see Nella meet new Black girls who are friends of Hazel and soon they offer each other advice on moving up on the social ladder and hair products. Hazel offers to tie a scarf on Nella’s head, and moisturize it with the cream called smooth’d out, not knowing the ingredients or effects, just knowing that it locks in moisture. Once between Hazel’s legs, Nella becomes nostalgic remembering the times where her mother would do her hair and how she hated getting her hair done but felt power in doing her own. In between Hazel’s legs, “she leaned into it, welcomed it, as though the substance had been a part of her body all along” (Harris 311-312). In the first light,
one can see how Nella was drawn in due to the safety and comfort of natural hair and sharing that bond with other Black women. This scene can also be described as an almost fantastical element in Harris’s book because all of Nella’s worries about the microaggressions, the sly and backhanded character traits of Hazel, or the Black girl (Shani) going missing in front of her eyes became a moment of only the past. This scene is not fantastical in the sense that there are mythical creatures or superpowers, but magical in the sense that Black women sharing and doing each other’s hair can relieve one of so much stress. Yet, this is very real to Black women when getting their hair done. It is a bonding moment, it highlights the process of trust that Nella did have when she first met Hazel. As stated by Harris, when a mother braids their daughters hair it is a cherished moment because it is a form of protection. It provides a motherly touch and shows the nurturing nature of Black women. In many Horror stories, there is always a false sense of security that the protagonist allows themselves to find relief in. Harris uses this moment to show that through the Black female gaze, natural hair is a sense of security for Black women alike. It is a shared experience that Black women can always bond over.

Furthermore, by using this nurturing moment, Harris builds suspense and further pushes this art-horror. When Hazel reveals that she’s been using a social lubricant on Nella’s hair without her complete consent, Harris illustrates how our hair is used as subjectivity, but also how Black women play a part in their own objectification. Hair products were the initial reason for Hazel inviting Nella to her home, but it was all under false alliance and devious acts on both parties. Nella wanted to search for an answer in Hazel’s home, no longer trusting her and Hazel wanted to have control and dominance. Once leaving the living room, Nella goes up into Hazel’s bedroom and discovers that Hazel had information on her, and all the other Black women in her home. She realizes Hazel had been keeping tabs on her and stalking her, while working together
with their CEO, Richard (323-327). In this scene, the false safety net is broken and Nella uncovers the truth of how sinister Hazel may be. We know that Hazel is not who she says she is, and this information is bigger than just two Black girls working in the company and one being afraid of being replaced. Between pages 338-340, Hazel reveals her true identity and her plan to take Nella’s place at her publishing company. Like any other horror novel, the plan is nefarious and it is truly disturbing how far the rabbit hole goes. Hazel tells Nella:

“‘[Smooth’d Out and Kink Free] make you more amenable when it comes to working for and with white folks. But the best part is that they’ll preclude any guilt you may feel from doing so. You won’t feel like you’re comprising anything. No ‘selling out.’ No ‘public versus private’ disposition. It’s gonna numb your ventromedial prefrontal cortex. But it’ll also help you do more with your time than you’ve ever been able to do before. Don’t stress! You won't feel the numbing too much. Could be worse, too- I heard the original formula itched like a motherfucker and turned you into a babbling idiot’” (Harris 340-341).

In order to control how Black women function, the key is the hair products. Hazel explains that this product can change one’s brain chemicals and function to the extent that compliance with whiteness is not a fear, is not a stressor, it never again becomes a thought in one’s mind when competing with another Black woman for a job! This is a part of the horrors that Black women face today, which is to conform and to adapt to whiteness by silencing and passively going along with what their white coworkers demand from them even when being microaggressed in the process. A part of Black hair history is the perming, cutting off, and changing the pattern of one’s hair. “In many cases, altering kinkier hair textures is the result of social and economic obligation. Historically, African
American women adopted certain white cultural ideals such as the "groomed image of docility" as a survival tactic in order to convey a non-threatening image to White society" (Hervey, Doss, Nicks, Araiza 874). Throughout history, Black women had to view themselves and their hair through the white gaze, and in doing so they made their hair compliant. So in this book, to have Harris’s characters become compliant by only moisturizing their hair is truly terrifying. Hazel truly believes that using the hair cream is the best way to gain money and to move swiftly amongst power hungry white individuals. She believes that it is best for the Black community if every other Black woman would join alongside her, if not it was their loss. In this novel, Harris uses Natural Hair as a medium to brainwash and dictate the actions of Black women. Natural Hair in “The Other Black Girl” presents the horrors of internalized racism and exemplifies how far a Black woman may go in order to be accepted and to survive in society. This natural-horror is pushed by the art-horror. The art-horror being a hair product having the power to lock-in moisture and numbing the ventromedial prefrontal cortex. Hazel is the horror that many Black women do not want to allow themselves to become.

Harris also uses the concept of Fluid Fiction in her writing. Not only does Harris touch horror, she crosses over into science fiction with a hair product that can change the literal brain functions of an individual. Hazel tells Nella that Smooth’d Out gets rid of guilt, and refers to it as a “social lubricant” that makes codeswitching a breeze and painless. Smooth’d Out and its companion, Kink Free, is a type of science that can not be made in our present time so it also gives the book an almost futuristic feel. Hazel even indicates that this is the future for Black women, this is the future of working in the white world and whoever stands in their way will be
gotten rid of (340). This art-horror becomes drastically intensified. Like constantly having to be in a state of double consciousness, one would not be able to define themselves when constantly being willing to undermine microaggressions and racism. Intentionally, Harris is playing a role in the growth of the Horror genre. By crossing the bonds of genres and the definitions of postmodern Horror, Harris is not only creating representation, she pushes at the complex nature of what Horror can really be.

Even more so, by the fourth section of her novel, Harris calls forth that Diana is the true reason why Nella is being faced with the obstacle she is in now. Diana becomes the embodiment of the horrors within oneself that causes us to play a part in the oppression we wholeheartedly recognize. This cream that both Hazel and Nella use was made by Diana’s childhood friend, Imani. All together the plan to recruit the “Other Black Girls” is run by Diana, Imani, and Richard. In part 4 of the book, Diana’s perspective recounts how everything came to be. When Imani came to comfort Diana after the Kendra scandal, where Kendra exposed Wagner Publishing for its racism, Imani told Diana about “a project that could make the lives of Black women all over the country just a little bit easier” (282). At first Richard, Diana’s secret lover, didn’t know why Black women would want to use this hair cream because of “Black Pride is still in.” To his confusion, Diana answered saying: “Imani’s creation isn't going to change any ounce of [Black Pride]. It’s just supposed to… help keep that pride intact. Help us Black women wade a little easier through the waves of racism without feeling like we have to swim so hard” (282). This is the ultimate twist of the novel. One would believe that Richard was the mastermind behind the plan, but it is truly Diana who is running the whole show. Diana is the founder of “the Other Black girls.” Richard is only a shadow that lurks behind everyone else, helping the plan to recruit Black women go more smoothly because of the power he has. Even worse, it is a Black
woman who makes the product, yet Harris does not villianize either Imani or Diana. Of course, Diana does play the role of a villain by betraying Kendra, and only having Hazel explain to Nella what the product is after Nella is using it, but by giving her perspective we as readers know that she genuinely believes that her actions are to help. Each Black woman becomes a focus in her horror novel, though the white gaze is definitely lurking in the background.

In contrast to the Black female gaze, the Black male gaze doesn’t fully represent the lives of Black women. In Hulu’s Bad Hair, by Justin Simien, it follows the themes of natural hair being the source of possession over a Black woman but still plays a part in the vilification of Black women.

Bad Hair is a Hulu original horror movie that follows protagonist, Anna Bludso, in 1989. While working as an assistant at Culture, a television station for African-American music, Anna does everything she can so that she can move up from her position. Sadly, her mentor is replaced with antagonist, Zora (who is a famously racially ambiguous character). Once impressing Zora with her ideas of remodeling the show, Zora takes Anna under her wing and encourages her to get a weave. Throughout the movie, we see that this new weave does help Anna achieve goals that she always wanted but then the hair starts to have a mind of its own. Her new weave basically goes on a murdering spree. Anna recalls an old African America Folklore called “The Moss-Haired Girl,” which explains that a young slave used the hair of a dead witch to fashion a straight weave like her master’s. The story ends by showing that this legend is true and that white people have been selling dead witches' hair as weaves to Black women…
From the beginning of his film, Black hair is depicted as the “other.” In the opening scene, we see the young protagonist, Anna, getting her hair relaxed by her older sister. Her hair has a horrible reaction to the chemicals, and Anna is left in tears and with a permanent scar in the back of her head that serves as a traumatic reminder (Simien 0:00-10:00). From the jump, the watcher is introduced to the horrific pain and fears of Black women and their natural hair. Many Black women can relate to this scene, remembering the burning sensation that always occurs from a bad perm. However, in this scene, the hair is presented as grotesque. In this moment, hair becomes the “other.” The Black male gaze starts the movie by illustrating Black hair as something painful and unmanageable. As a watcher, we cringe at this scar and feel pity but also anguish toward her natural hair (it’s been permanently ruined). Following this theme, we see that having straight and silky hair in this world means upward mobility. Adult Anna is told multiple times by her boss, Zora, that she needs to change her hair from an Afro to a weave because that is the new direction the television station is going. In his movie, Simien aims to show the difficulty and the erasure in assimilating to Eurocentric beauty by having Anna clash with her boss. While Anna is a dark skinned Black woman, Zora is a light skinned, racially ambiguous Black woman who has more power over her and has the favor of their white boss of their company. The Black male gaze immediately focuses on good hair vs bad hair rather than showing the many different styles of natural hair. Unlike “The Other Black Girl,” which highlights the objectification of Black women through the way they want to have their natural hair, this movie focuses on what it means to be influenced to change one’s hairstyle because they are told their natural hair isn’t deemed beautiful.

The director also uses Black women’s hair as a means of violence between the two main characters. The end of the movie is the ultimate battle between Zora and Anna, where the only
solution is to add water to the weave in order to weaken it. In this scene, we see two Black women attacking each other with their hair, (Bad Hair 1:10:00-end). At one point Zora’s hair chokes Anna, and it becomes very odd to watch these long, stringy whips of hair flying throughout the screen. By adding this violence, it further highlights how the Black male gaze sees Black women as attackers. As much as whiteness is violent to them, Black women are violent to each other. This is where the movie falters completely. Black men don’t have the same ability to represent Black womanhood because they don’t live that experience. Instead, views of sexism and stereotypes of Black women may blind them or they may not touch subjects that a Black woman can. There is a limit to their gaze. This movie played into the trope of Black women wanting to have the same benefits of white womanhood, without recognizing and building the actual wants and goals of the Black female characters. It does show the horrors of what Black women have faced, but does not show the Black gaze of the horrors that are more prevalent today. This film is unable to truly get at the complexity of Black women's hair because it appeals to only one layer of it.

Again Blackness is the victim as Blackness is the villain. The Black male makes Black women the aggressors to their own victimization. Zora wanted to get rid of Anna but instead she dies and is perceived as a villain who conforms to white beauty standards. To contrast, “The Other Black Girl” is a contemporary horror with, Black female author Zakiya Dalila Harris using the Black female gaze and Black female readership in order to portray that Black women are not the villians to each other but more so activators of their own oppression. Harris achieves this through her character Diana and her relationship to Richard.

Unlike Bad Hair, where Black women are painted as villians, Harris paints all of her Black female characters as victims. She uses their hair to show how innocent but also how
malleable these women become when they allow themselves to use this hair product without a label. Even Diana and Imani, who help to make and push out the products are not villainized, they are seen as antagonists but not aggressors. Diana never once goes out to attack any of the Black female characters, and she regrets failing Kendra by not using a good batch of Smooth’d Out.

On the other hand, there is a similarity between both Simien’s and Harris’s work, where they categorize the white CEO as a villain. In *Bad Hair*, it is revealed that the plantation masters found out about this ability of the hair possession and passed the information on from generation to generation, selling weaves that help them to control Black women. In Nella's first interaction with Richard Wagner, we are brought into his office and Harris uses more of the horror element to show that something is afoot with this character. During her interview, she asks about Kendra Rae wondering what happened to her and Richard again paints Kendra to be a crazy Black woman who couldn’t handle the spotlight. Afterwards, Nella looks towards his “Wall of Fame,” which consists of “body-less pairs of eyes staring down at her,” “it was all unnerving.” The wall is described to have “faces [filling] every frame, some in black-and-white, others in color. Some were silly—a young woman in an evening gown putting bunny ears behind a young man in a tux; four smart-looking men in polos smiling in the middle of a lush, green forest” (143). Having Nella in her boss’s office and feeling like the photos on his wall are watching her creates a nerve wracking feeling for both the protagonist and the reader. Though his room is not explicitly called ‘scary’ it is definitely not a safe or welcoming place, it creates a hair-raising feeling that proves that Richard’s nice demeanor is more than what it seems. All our interactions with him are through the eyes of someone else, so again the reader is left suspicious by his presence. There is another scene where Nella overhears Richard’s conversation with another woman unsure who he
was talking to and why he was saying why this person needed to deal with Kenny Bridges (an author that she remembered was giving the publicity team some trouble). In this scene, Harris creates tension by having Nella eavesdrop on Richard. Harris writes, “something about the way he’d spat out the words ‘deal with’ turned Nella’s blood cold” (148). She wanted more information on Hazel and how she could move up in the company, yet she hears him speak in a demanding manner that puts her on edge before telling herself he was dealing with a difficult client. As a reader, this is one of the few scenes where we are skeptical of Richard and what he may be up to, especially when we get the perspective of Kendra Rae (the woman at the beginning of the novel). Harris never gives him a perspective in the book, but he is always lurking in the shadows because his name is constantly mentioned. As a reader, one is more likely to fear him than Hazel or any other character. The fear created behind Richard is Harris’s way of showing that the “other” is able to take control of the information that we do have. Like whiteness always has a lingering effect on Blackness, Richard has a lingering effect on Nella though they only talk twice in the book, (Nella only having a total of three interactions with him since working at Wagner).

“The Other Black Girl” also explores the intricacies of afropessissim. By the end of the book Nella becomes recruited as well, as she has moved to Portland, Oregon and starts to work at Scope Magazine. Harris reintroduces us to another Black girl in the last chapter of her book, named Shani (who also has been working to uncover the secrets of Wagner industries with Kendra Rae). Nella starts to work with Shani under the name of “Delilah Henson” and her last line of the novel is “Now, Shani, tell me… What’s it really like here? You can be real with me, sis” (354). Presumably, Harris is alluding to the fact that Nella has become the new Hazel of
Scope Magazine, this dialogue also being used by Hazel when she is first introduced to Nella. Both of these Black women, through the health and choice of their natural hair, have become a pawn to the Other Black Girls’ game. The cycle also continues and pinpoints at the idea of Black women becoming more and more like “the other Black girls.” The readers are left with the questions: when will this cycle end and are Black women trapped in this period of despair and compliance? Could the present we see today continue to be a reality for Black women?

As stated by Brooks, there is “healing through horror.” Throughout her novel, Harris is able to build a complex view on Black womanhood, their relationship to hair, and the way her characters view themselves. When doing so, she illustrates the fear of Black women through the Black female gaze. She is able to show how Black women view themselves through their gaze and highlights what Black women fear. The “Other” for Black women is objectification, subjectivity, and constantly having to filter themselves for the white gaze. It is to become subservient to a gaze that is not within their control. Through the Horror genre, she is able to explore how and why Black women take certain actions in reaction to their environment. By having more representation in Horror Literature that fully encapsulates the multifaceted looking of Black women, we create the space for ourselves.
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