



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**

Episode 14: Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present

****Please note: This is a rough transcription of this audio podcast. This transcript is not edited for spelling, grammar, or punctuation.****

Participants:

Trevor Parry-Giles

Robin Means Coleman

[Audio Length: 0:36:00]

RECORDING BEGINS

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Welcome to *Communication Matters*, the NCA podcast. I'm Trevor Parry-Giles, the Executive Director of the National Communication Association. The National Communication Association is the preeminent scholarly association devoted to the study and teaching of communication. Founded in 1914, NCA is a thriving group of thousands from across the nation and around the world who are committed to a collective mission to advance communication as an academic discipline. In keeping with NCA's mission to advance the discipline of communication, NCA has developed this podcast series to expand the reach of our member scholars' work and perspectives.

Introduction:

This is *Communication Matters*, the NCA podcast.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

A listener note, this episode quotes film titles from the early 1900's that contain racially offensive language. In this episode of *Communication Matters*, the NCA podcast, I'm speaking with Robin Means Coleman, professor of communication and the vice president and associate provost for diversity at Texas A&M University. Dr. Coleman is the author of *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to the Present*, a book that was made into an award-winning documentary film in 2019. And in today's episode, Dr. Coleman will be discussing how black people have been depicted in American horror films and what this says about race and the horror genre.

First a little bit of background about Dr. Robin Means Coleman. Dr. Coleman is the author of *African-American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* and the co-author of *Intercultural Communication for Everyday Life*. In addition, Dr. Coleman has edited two volumes: *Say It Loud: African-American Audiences, Media and Identity* and *Fight the Power: The Spike Lee Reader*. Hi and welcome to *Communication Matters*, Robin.



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**

Episode 14: Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present

Robin Means Coleman:

Thank you, Trevor. I'm thrilled to be here.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

So, the documentary moves chronologically through film history and I think it might be interesting to begin the discussion by talking about a film that many people may not consider a horror movie although if you've seen it, it certainly has horrific elements: DW Griffith's 1915 *Birth of a Nation*. For our listeners who might not be familiar with that film or didn't watch it in film school, could you provide a bit of background about why you consider this film to be a horror movie? Here's a clip from the documentary film, *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*.

Clip from the [Shudder Original documentary Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror](#):

Before we think about horror as we know it today, we can go back to films that perhaps wouldn't be on our radar as horror. There's a character Gus. Gus is a white actor in blackface who is depicted as being in pursuit of a young white girl. Gus is essentially lynched by the Klan.

Robin Means Coleman:

Sure. So, what *Birth* is is it's a pro-KKK movie. It depicts and sort of sets into motion particularly for—this is important for media scholars to understand—it sets into motion a real history of the kinds of stereotypes that people rely on in both the real and the imagined about black people and how they live and think and sort of interact with whites and whiteness. It is one of the more celebrated movies for its cinematography but one of the more sort of notorious and infamous films in part because it was co-signed by Woodrow Wilson and his White House and was described as being truthful and truth with a lightning bolt paraphrasing. And so, what *Birth* does is that it's one of the early films that picks such a stunning black deficiency, intellectual deficiency, moral deficiency and it is a deficiency that if, according to the narrative, if left untamed by whites must put down through deadly force. It doesn't appear in a vacuum. There are these sort of more horrific dealings of African-Americans. There's a Biograph film from the 1890s, I believe it's 1898 and it's called *Execution by Hanging* and it is one of those anthropological films where someone just sets up a camera. There's no context and we see a black man lynched. And then there are the sort of more comedic versions of these kinds of films. There's one that's called, and please pardon the language, *Nigger in a Wood Pile* from 1904 which is supposed to be a comedic treatment of the lynching of black folks.

And so, *Birth* comes in on the kind of in this context but because it is presented with such realism, it is what folks latch onto. It is not just our sort of historical past. It is often even today still reflected on, used as a recruitment tool in white supremacist organizations and the horrific part about it is that it plays on the fears now not just on white Americans but globally of what black citizens bring to our communities.



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**

Episode 14: Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Well, for any of us who have seen *Birth of a Nation*, it certainly reads that way to the contemporary. I and I know that those of us who study presidents and presidential rhetoric have always reflected on Wilson's fondness for that and what that told us about Woodrow Wilson, not very good things. But as we move film history wise into the 30s and 40s, those stereotypes shift somewhat as you describe and you begin a discussion of these jungle or voodoo themes that start to appear in films like King Kong famously from the 1930s. White actors were given serious roles during these times. What were the roles for African-American actors and black actors during this period? How did these types of films sort of reify and depict again different or shifting racial stereotypes? Here's a clip from the documentary film *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*.

Clip from the [Shudder Original documentary Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror](#):

So, here I am, this 10 year old in a drive-in theater with my mom. But even then I knew that there was something that horror was saying to me about blackness, about race. I knew that King Kong was a metaphor for blackness.

Robin Means Coleman:

So, this is an interesting time and if I also want to reflect on what's happening currently, we're talking and doing this interview in the context of the protests that are going on just outside of all of our doors around the police murder of George Floyd.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Absolutely.

Robin Means Coleman:

The police murder of Brianna Taylor, the extra legal sort of lynching murder of Ahmaud Arbery. And so, you might want to think well, what does horror have to do with this? How can it reflect on and teach us something about not only our American past but our American present? In the documentary film, one of the co-executive producers Tananarive Due powerfully states, "Black history is black horror." And so, when we're talking about *Birth of a Nation*, these 1930 what I call jungle films, the films of the 40s that cast again blacks as being comedic fodder but at the same time are doing the kinds of things that we see in real life today which is all of these horror films are celebrating in fact the lynching of African-Americans, we can ask the question what does horror teach us. What does horror teach us about American violence, the way that we talk about and think about and see black people, people of color in America? And I think the power of horror across time has been that it not only sort of reflects and plays on our fears but it exposes us. It turns the lens on us and says you know what? If you are someone who is hateful or sociopathic or narcissistic or who fails to be anti-racist, you need to see yourself in these monsters. So, I think most powerfully what horror does is it's kind of a syllabus about who we



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**

Episode 14: Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present

are in America, how we in fact are the monsters and I think horror invites us to look at these monsters across decades and really say are we that different.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's really a wonderful sort of linkage I think of your work with *Horror Noire* and everything going on in the world. I appreciate that a great deal in terms especially of the role that film history can play in telling us about our own history. And so often, we neglect the next big horror movie that you discuss, 1940s *Son of Ingagi* I think it's pronounced.

Robin Means Coleman:

That's right.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Which was written by Spencer Williams and in it, we have a black woman scientist who is the main protagonist and I'm curious as to why this film rose up in—aside from its historical relevance, could you discuss maybe how this film helped to significantly shape the black horror sub-genre and continued that story that you alluded to about the sort of history of ourselves via horror movies and the horror genre?

Robin Means Coleman:

So, there are two films I'd like to kind of talk about in context and it's the 1930s film *Chloe, Love is Calling You* and then this film *Son of Ingagi* and what's interesting, there's a lot interesting about both of these films but one of the things I will call out is that they both in a lot of ways center on black women. And so, *Chloe, Love is Calling You* is particularly relevant today because what *Chloe* is about in great part and it doesn't mean to be because it's the 30s, right? What we're supposed to do is feel repulsed by this one African-American lead. Her name is Mandy and Mandy in *Chloe, Love is Calling You* is really out for revenge. Her husband, Sam, they work on a turpentine plantation and he has been lynched by the overseer. And so, Mandy is out for revenge. We're supposed to hate Mandy and that she's out for revenge. But what's interesting about how she is played in this film and reading it from a lens today is that she's really speaking back to exactly what we're dealing with, these kind of extra legal murders but it also reveals the long-term effects of violence on black families. And so, there's a real, the film shows kind of years and years of destruction when black families are impacted by violence. Now contrast that with *Son of Ingagi* which has its own truly interesting history. There's a movie that's called *Ingagi* that is written by non-blacks. It's a white-produced film that claims that black folks and apes have mated to produce these half-black, half-ape babies.

Now Spencer Williams does this film *Son of Ingagi* sort of reclaiming that film in history. So, he's erasing that original narrative, takes the title, puts a black woman, interestingly enough played the same actress who's in *Chloe, Love is Calling* but she is now the star of this film. She's a



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**

Episode 14: Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present

brilliant scientist, somebody who I really kind of enjoy because it reveals this kind of women in STEM, early women in STEM and she's a black woman. So, it's *Hidden Figures* but 1940 and she has this ape creature in her lab that in some ways she's working to kind of civilize and protect. But what's most interesting about *Son of Ingagi* is that you really see what a black writer and director can do with black life. You see a black middle-class. You see a vibrant, deeply wedded black community of friends and colleagues and co-workers. And it's just black life as we've not seen it before in film.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

It was certainly unusual in the 1940s I suspect.

Robin Means Coleman:

It was. I mean, right? So, Spencer is operating though within the context of an Oscar Micheaux. So, Oscar Micheaux has paved the way and opened the door for a Spencer Williams in sort of the same way that Williams has paved the way and opened the door for more recent directors like a Spike Lee or even a Tyler Perry.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Now apparently you have and we're jumping ahead now in this history to the 60s and the connections and significances of *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Living Dead* and the American Civil Rights Movement, all of which had some impact on the film's reception and the like. Apparently, you have a personal connection to George Romero's films *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead*. Could you tell us a little bit about why these films are particularly important to you and especially in the context of these contemporary protests and the burgeoning moves that are happening all around us, what these tell us about a previous civil rights movement era of the late 1960s?

Robin Means Coleman:

Of course. So, I will give you a little bit of context before I reveal my not so powerful secret. And what happens after the 1940s is we start to see the rise as you talk about of the Civil Rights Movement. Very robustly, we're starting to see it play out on the small screen. And so, in the same way that television doesn't do a really good job, entertainment television doesn't do a great job of presenting images in this context. Film doesn't either particularly non-black filmmakers. And so, black people are essentially erased from the big screen in this genre. Part of the reason is the rise of the Civil Rights Movement. The other part is that we are starting to see horror and sci-fi kind of blend and what we're seeing a lot of in horror in the 1950s is horror being played out in space or a connection through meteorites and in solving these kinds of horrific problems, one needs to be a scientist. Well, except for the likes of Spencer Williams who created these women in STEM images, others were not depicting blacks as scientists, as



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**

Episode 14: Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present

holding PhDs, as being chemists and biologists and this kind of thing. So, there's this moment of science and an invisibility that emerges in the 50s.

So, that sets us up for the 1960s with George Romero with *Night of the Living Dead*. Not only is he putting a black lead back on the screen, this is a really kind of human whole and full human humane complex, sometimes heroic, sometimes conflicted black lead character. Now *Night of the Living Dead* has to be one of my favorite horror films in great part because I'm from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. So, for true horror heads, I don't need to say anything else. They know. But for those who don't, Romero filmed *Night of the Living Dead* in and around Pittsburgh. He lived in Pittsburgh for a good part of his career. So, *Night/Dawn of the Dead*, those are scenes from my hometown. That's where I grew up. And so, there's a real connection. I had an opportunity to meet Romero. And so, it just holds a special place in my heart because of that. At the same time, watching *Night of the Living Dead* sometimes is painful because the scenes that he depicts about white militia, police officers who have gone sort of full tilt road killing zombies that looks a whole lot like what's happening in Pittsburgh with police who during the Civil Rights Movement are also attacking African-Americans. It hits too close to home. The people who he cast as police are real-life police and sheriffs from our community. And so, there's a difficult tension as well in watching those films because while it's a bit of fiction, there's a lot of realism in that film as well.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

So, into the 70s, we progress into blaxploitation films like *Shaft* and I'm old enough to remember many of these films. One of the films that you discuss in Horror Noire is *Blacula*, a blaxploitation film produced by American International Pictures which was an independent studio and of course, by the 70s, we're seeing an erosion of the studio system somewhat. And I'm curious as to what you think AIP hope to accomplish with the film *Blacula* and what did they actually accomplish with *Blacula*?

Robin Means Coleman:

So, AIP is an interesting production company if for no other reason than as I talk about in the documentary *Horror Noire*, they really were after targeting a black audience, making a quick buck often with low-budget productions where they don't invest a lot of money. They are not innovators in film. They kind of look out across the landscape and see what the trends are and then do kind of the cheap version of it. So, you'll see a lot of quote-unquote black horror films at this time that are ripoffs of other popular horror films. So, Dracula became *Blacula*, Frankenstein became *Blackenstein*, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde became *Dr. Black and Mr. Hyde*. So, that was what's happening in during this period. However, with *Blacula*, you see what can happen when even under these conditions a narrative is put into the hands of a talented African-American director and that's certainly the case with William Crain who is the director. So, what's really



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**

Episode 14: Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present

interesting about *Blacula* is that it evidences even under these circumstances of tight budgets, lack of investment what a black director can do with these kinds of films.

So, William Crain is the director of *Blacula*. It stars William Marshall who also is just a really not only talented performer but together these are two absolutely brilliant men who come together and create this film working with a production company that doesn't want smart or talented really. And so, William Crain tells the story of how initially Mamuwalde, the character, the lead character in the film *Blacula* is to be named Andy Brown and if we know anything about that, if it sounds familiar, that's from *Amos and Andy*. So, when you have talent in the room, smart people in the room who say you know what? No, we're not going to do that. What we're going to do is provide, this is going to be a little pedagogical. We're going to provide a history lesson as well about the slave trade. And essentially what happens is Mamuwalde who is this really impressive brilliant African prince, he's infected by Dracula and is really enslaved, is locked away for centuries in the basement of Dracula's castle and makes the belated trip through the Middle Passage to the U.S. centuries later and emerges in LA during this 1970s period. And so, there's a lot to reflect on. There's a lot to learn about blackness and black history in this film even as it is also scary and entertaining.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

You make the argument that as we move into the 80s, black people are largely absent from films that many of us are familiar with and associated with the horror genre like *Halloween* or a *Nightmare on Elm Street* and that sort of thing or in what becomes kind of a trope, they die really early in the plot. You say that trope is particularly complicated. Why is that? What were the roles for our black actors like during this era and why should we rethink maybe how we understand their early death in all of these horror films? Here's a clip from the documentary film *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*.

Clip from the [Shudder Original documentary Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror](#):

So, let's talk about black people always die first in horror movies. It's not entirely true. Sometimes they do die first but I want to kind of dispel a little bit of that myth. It often happens but then at the same time, it can't always happen because black people play a particular role in horror films. For example, if you have a really horrible big kind of badass monster, how do you evidence that that creature is as bad as it can get? You need a black guy.

Robin Means Coleman:

So, that is indeed really interesting. So, you do have this trend of essentially white flight. Whites move out to the suburbs and filmmakers sort of think that the monsters move with them and that is dealt with in two ways. Either whites themselves are monstrous like a *Friday the 13th* or a *Halloween* or they are monstrous but it's totally not their fault like with *Poltergeist*. You know? Where find out later that the house is built on a cemetery and the cemetery is built on an Indian



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**

Episode 14: Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present

burial site. It's that kind of thing. So, then evil radiates up and infects whites. So, that's what's happening. What that means and then again in this context of where we're talking about protests and movements around Black Lives Matter, what that means is that as whites flee the urban centers in these movies, blacks are left and if you look at these representations from the 80s forward, fairly consistently if there's a sort of a character that pops up, there may even be an interaction with a white police officer that speaks to or gestures towards police brutality. So, *People Under the Stairs*, *Candyman*, all of these films from this period going forward all the way through to *Get Out* show what whites have done when they've left kind of the diversity behind which is to leave people to contend with kind of the worst part of what society inflicts on us. So, that's the first part of the 80s.

The second is dispelling a little bit of myth. So, we have often said black people will die first in a horror movie and as I've often said, yes, that tends to be true but it can't always be true. Consistently throughout history, popular culture has set up the black guy as the big black boogeyman. So, if you get a monster who can defeat him, then you know you've got something. So, typically black people serve a purpose. The monster might show up, it might step on a few people like if it's Godzilla or something, a big lizard or an animal but eventually it needs to go head to head with a black person. Now they will die but sometimes it's not in the first two minutes.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

For all of our listeners and especially students out there interested in critical thinking, that is what film criticism is all about because now none of us will ever watch those films again and see the demise of the black characters in the same way again and I love that because that's exactly what I always try to tell my students. This is what we're looking for, a criticism that has us see things differently and maybe that's a great segue to where we are in contemporary film especially with some of the newer movies, mostly Jordan Peele's *Get Out* which won an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay in 2017. I know that Peele's movie came out after your book published and it was released before the documentary was made. Do you have any insights or thoughts about what makes Peele's storytelling and particularly the ending of that film so compelling and interesting?

Robin Means Coleman:

Yes. So, it's amazing and Jordan Peele was a great partner with us on *Horror Noire* because it's really in *Horror Noire* where you get kind of an in-depth sneak peek into *Us* which came out after *Get Out*. So, there's a lot there and people have talked about all of the metaphors, right? Jordan is so good at that. The metaphors that are just packed into *Get Out*. And so, *Get Out* is about a lot but in part it is about how white culture, this moment of fleeing the urban and into the suburban and leaving black culture behind but still how whiteness fetishizes blackness even as it abandons all of the other kinds of things that raw blackness of its livelihood. So, there's no



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**

Episode 14: Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present

responsibility. There there's just fetishization. You see that in the depiction of the father who embodies black males bodies so he can run fast because he's upset that Jesse Owens was an Olympian and these kinds of moments in the film. It's really smart and gets everyone to reflect. What I love about this movie is that in some ways it doesn't let us off the hook. It is not so fantastic that we can't even see ourselves in it. It's fantastic enough but there is a way that we're all drawn in and implicated in talking about what race means in America today. The ending, well, which part of the ending? Is it when the movie theater cheers when Rod shows up and saves him which also speaks to what we're seeing outside of our doors today when for once, when you see a police vehicle show up and it's approaching a black person, your heart stops and you go no, he's either going to die or he's going to end up in prison and thankfully Peele, he saves us from that. He in this one instance says well, we're not going to have Ben, we're not going to have Ben from *Night of the Living Dead* who is this is essentially lynched in front of our eyes and then after he's killed, Ben is speared with ice picks, his body lifted by this white militia and thrown into a fire to burn. Peele said not this time and I think that's part of an amazing ending. For others, the ending might be that Rose is revealed to be evil. That always strikes me as interesting because for some, for many African-Americans, you're like okay, Rose is evil and it was like the first two scenes when she's visiting his apartment in Brooklyn and she knocks on the door with her face. You're like okay, something's wrong with her, like something's up. She's going to be a bad person. We just don't know what. So, there's multiple endings and I think it is what we call an open text, really great opportunity for interpretation. For me, the thing that is most interesting about *Get Out* is this notion of home, right? Whitetopia versus home and the ways that we think about place and space and where for once, Jordan Peele was saying a black community, a black neighborhood, the urban is the safe place. It is home versus the suburbs or being a part or being separate may not be the thing to strive for.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's fascinating and it's a nice way to conclude everything in terms of taking us from *Birth of a Nation* to *Get Out* and all of the different changes and shifts that have happened over those many, many decades of film history. So, thank you so much for joining me today, Robin. This was really a fascinating discussion. And listeners, if you're interested *Horror Noire*, the documentary is on Shudder and Amazon. So, check out *Horror Noire* for a fascinating glimpse at the history of the horror genre and it's a great documentary. And thanks again, Robin, for joining me today.

Robin Means Coleman:

Thank you. Thank you for having me, Trevor.



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**

Episode 14: Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Listeners, we feature in this episode today some audio clips from the Shudder original documentary *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*. Again, you can watch this documentary film on Shudder.com. That's Shudder.com.

In NCA news, the NCA Executive Committee has deliberated over the past several weeks to develop plans for the upcoming annual convention in Indianapolis that are flexible enough to allow all members to participate safely and collaboratively in this important NCA event. Under the theme "Communication at the Crossroads", this year's reimagined convention will allow presenters and other attendees to select whether they will attend in person or to participate virtually. And in recognition of the COVID-19 pandemic, the NCA Executive Committee has approved two important initiatives. First, NCA is suspending all 2020 convention registration fees for NCA members. Second, 50% membership discounts have been implemented for all members who make less than \$100,000 annually and who join NCA or renew their membership in 2020. For more information, please visit the NCA convention and membership pages at natcom.org/Convention and natcom.org/Membership. That's natcom.org/Convention and natcom.org/Membership.

Also in NCA news, in response to national conversations about systemic racism, NCA has developed a resource bank that provides information about racism in America and offers guidance for allies and people of color in the anti-racist movement. These resources include information on organizations committed to anti-racism work, mass media and both academic and professional articles covering topics such as identifying and addressing racism, advocacy work and dialoguing about racism and anti-racism in the classroom. This is a living resource and will be updated as additional materials are identified. Visit natcom.org/Anti-racism-Resources to view the NCA Anti-Racism Resource Bank. That's natcom.org/Anti-racism-Resources for the NCA Anti-Racism Resource Bank.

And listeners, I hope you'll tune in for a special bonus episode of *Communication Matters* that will drop on July 20th. It features Vanessa Beasley, an associate professor of communication studies and associate provost and dean of residential faculty at Vanderbilt University, Marnel Niles Goins, professor of communication and the interim dean of academic affairs and the associate dean in the school of design arts and humanities at Marymount University and Shawn Wahl, professor of communication and dean of the College of Arts and Letters at Missouri State University. Professors Beasley, Niles Goins and Wahl will discuss lessons learned for higher education from the COVID-19 pandemic and we'll also consider what's ahead for all of us coming in the Fall.

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Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**

Episode 14: Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present

your podcasts to listen in as we discuss emerging scholarship, establish theory and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities and in our world. See you next time.

Conclusion:

Communication Matters is hosted by NCA Executive Director Trevor Parry-Giles and is recorded in our national office in downtown Washington DC. The podcast is recorded and produced by Assistant Director for Digital Strategies Chelsea Bowes with writing support from Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.

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