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Witchcraft, 'Racecraft,' and the Demonic: Folk Horror in Mariama Diallo's *Master*

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Released in 2022, *Master* was written and directed by Mariama Diallo and follows three Black women at the elite New England college of Ancaster. Jasmine Moore (Zoe Renee) is a first-year student; Gail Bishop (Regina Hall) is the new "Master" (and the first Black Master) of the college; and Liv Beckman (Amber Gray) is an English professor coming up for tenure. All three women face an escalating series of racist encounters in their virtually all-white environment, and their terrifying experiences seem to locate *Master* as a "social thriller"—a narrative in which the "monsters" are mere humans, along with the oppressive systems they create and perpetuate. Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) seems an inspiration for *Master* as social thriller and, indeed, Peele has done much to define the subgenre in ways that map onto Diallo's film.[1] *Master* is not just social thriller, though. It is also about witchcraft, folklore, and uncanny artifacts. Specifically, with its imbricated themes of racism's ubiquity and witchcraft's "survival" into the present, *Master* stands, I argue, at the intersection of social thriller and a specifically US folk horror formation that is inevitably about race.

In the typical folk horror plot, "modern" and often urban protagonists find themselves in an isolated and archaic rural community that appears displaced in time, that holds "ancient" beliefs, and that is structured by the

[1] For Jordan Peele's definition of a social thriller, see Guerrasio (2017). I discuss *Get Out* and the social thriller tradition in "Get Out: Political Horror" (2020, 2-6). For *Master* as social thriller, see Parham (2022). I would just add here that, if *Master* is a folk horror film with elements of the social thriller (inspired by *Get Out*), *Get Out* is itself a social thriller with elements of folk horror, as the two genres intersect around the persistence of racism, cast—in the language of folk horror—as the persistence of "old gods." In *Get Out*, this appears most directly in a speech by Dean Armitage (Bradley Whitford) that is more fully developed in the screenplay than in the theatrical release. "It is us who are the divine ones. We are the Gods who are trapped in cocoons," Dean Armitage says to Chris (in the film). In the screenplay (not in the film), Dean continues by asserting that of course Chris will want to "take the baptism," to "shed [his] skin to awake renewed and perfect," and that the "requirement" for Dean's own (and his family's and community's) "spiritual transmutation is the will of a new vessel." "Must sacrifice," he ends (Peele 2019, 127-8). *Get Out* thus locates the 'old gods' of folk horror as white people, demanding the "baptism" and ultimately "sacrifice" of Black people in archaic rituals that serve to enact what is presented as the timeless subordination of Black bodies to white spiritual renewal. I would argue that the very much wrongly underappreciated *Spiral* (2019) directed by Kurtis David Harder along with the perhaps more justifiably unappreciated *Red Pill* (Tonya Pinkins, 2021) also blend social thriller and folk horror.

"survival" of "primitive" rites. Paganism and witchcraft are central to a narrative that often culminates in sacrifice—what Adam Scovell has called the "horrific fallout" of the "happening/summoning" (2017, 18). Atypically, *Master* plays out this plot at a contemporary and seemingly enlightened US college, albeit one that is certainly in a remote location. Despite its progressive façade, however, Ancaster in fact represents *precisely* the kind of community that usually lies at the heart of the folk horror plot. Not only is it isolated, but as the film unfolds, we find out that it is structured entirely by regressive beliefs. Scovell has argued that "The halting of social progress can have a number of names but, for the sake of simplicity within the main [folk horror] chain, it is best to refer to it as skewed: that is, of skewed belief systems and morality" (2017, 18). In *Master*, these "skewed" beliefs seem at first to concern only local witch lore, but they turn out to include persistent and pervasive racist thinking.

Ancaster's status as folk horror's regressive isolated community (despite its progressive appearance) is amplified by the literally archaic and seemingly all-white rural community that lies adjacent to it, still apparently pursuing seventeenth-century dress, practices, and beliefs; in a brief clip of an Ancaster College tour, we hear the student guide say that the community is "descended from the town's original settlers." The film never—otherwise—offers any direct information about this community, but it remains as a source of unease just beyond the borders of Ancaster itself. In one telling scene, Gail and Liv are jogging beyond those confines when they see two women in dark cloaks and hoods heading down from the road into the woods; one of them glances back, the stark whiteness of her face heightened by her black cloak. Gail and Liv immediately stop, and Gail says nervously, "I've never seen them so close to town." Liv replies, "Let's go. We shouldn't be here," and both women evince a strange unease at the proximity of the women. Their dread is curious—seemingly unfounded unless we recognize that the cloaked women embody the indelible whiteness and archaic racial beliefs *at the heart of Ancaster itself*—not (just) outside it. At the school, these beliefs are masked by liberal platitudes, but they are rendered visible in their projection onto the proximate, literally-archaic community, one whose nightmarish function—its embodiment of the archaic, regressive community of folk horror that is also at the core of Ancaster—is signaled by its only ever being seen in fleeting glimpses, often at night. What that regressive community represents, however—specifically its connection to Ancaster—will come increasingly to the fore in the stories of *Master*'s three protagonists. In the process, *Master* makes clear what has not yet been a significant part of the critical conversation about folk horror: at least in the US,

folk horror is thoroughly saturated with race, its tropes and structures forged by racialized formations.[2]

Witch lore and folklore

Almost the first thing new student Jasmine learns about Ancaster as she arrives in the quad is that the school has a witch, the film's most obvious intersection with folk horror—inspired, Diallo has explained, by her longstanding fascination with the Salem witch trials (Sandwell 2022). In her welcome speech to first-year students as the new Master, Gail mentions the many legends of Ancaster, including that of "Margaret Millett, a woman hanged for practicing witchcraft not too far from where this building stands." Margaret Millett is not (only) a legend, however, as we see a tangible trace of her historical presence in another scene in which Gail is jogging outside of Ancaster and the camera pans down to a gravestone in the woods: "Margaret Millett – Died December 3 1694" is etched on it—proof of her life and death, if not her witchcraft. Again, the proximate archaic community, that "still lives and dresses like it's the seventeenth century" literalizes what lurks beneath Ancaster's progressive, modern surface.

In Jasmine's first encounter with her roommate's friends, they repeat the stories of the school's witch: "Some chick died here in the '50s or whatever." Someone else elaborates: "The whole school's cursed. By the witch." She "shows herself to a freshman," he continues, "and then one night, at 3:33 on the dot, she takes them with her … to hell." This witch, who haunts all of Jasmine's early encounters, emerges on the surface at least, and as Diallo has said in an interview with *Bloody Disgusting*, from a space "of lore and urban legend" (Miska 2022).

Ancaster's residual adherence to "archaic" beliefs is not only about "lore and urban legend," however. *Master* weaves together local witch lore and what Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields have called "racecraft," highlighting, as Fields and Fields do, the uncanny similarity of these systems of thought. Fields and Fields characterize both witchcraft and racecraft as equally "weird" systems of thought that involve, they write, "the ability of pre- or non-scientific modes of thought to hijack the minds of the scientifically literate" (2012, 5-6). In an

[2] Scholarship on folk horror has been slow to integrate race. Scovell mentions it only in a footnote, for instance (2017, 186). For criticism that does recognize the history of race and slavery in US folk horror, see Brooks (2017), especially chapter 4, "Folkloric Horror," and Hauke (2020) – and then two essays specifically on *Candyman* as folk horror by Marshall (2023) and Thomson (2023).

interview with Diallo in *Fangoria*, Lea Anderson (2022) echoes Fields and Fields' analogy: in *Master*, she says, "racism essentially functions as a form of spellcraft. Your characters … are haunted by the phantasmagoria of the racist imagination." This understanding of "racecraft" as analogous to witchcraft—and of both as a kind of "spellcraft"—aligns intransigently racialized thinking with the folkloric project at the heart of folk horror and mobilizes the generic characteristics of folk horror in order to emphasize that for Black characters in US folk horror, Scovell's "skewed belief systems and morality" (2017, 18) and the obeisance to "old gods" are often intractably about race.

Indeed, Jasmine's encounters with the "witch" are, crucially and in every instance, layered with the white students' and staff's barely concealed, routine racism. What will become her "friend" group (actually her white roommate's friend group and not really Jasmine's "friends" at all) tells her the story of the witch after they take over her dorm room, lie on her bed, call her Beyoncé, and otherwise subject her to persistent microaggressions. Then, Jasmine sees the portrait of an old white man on the wall change, or decay, immediately after a Black cafeteria worker's attitude shifts from a subservient friendliness as she serves a white student to a cold hostility when she serves Jasmine. And later, Jasmine sees the portrait of Margaret Millett, the purported witch, in the library as the at-first friendly librarian (who reiterates Ancaster's witch lore to Jasmine) does not hesitate to accuse Jasmine of trying to steal books when the security alarm goes off as she leaves. The persistent racism directed toward Jasmine is, then, always in the presence of the witch.

In Jasmine's persistent marginalization, there is the suggestion that she is not only the next "victim" of the Ancaster witch but may also be the "witch" herself. In the scene in the library, Jasmine mirrors the posture of the witch in the portrait, including the placement of her arms and hands; in one shot, in particular, the portrait is just behind Jasmine, serving as a kind of uncanny reflection—suggesting that Jasmine is doomed to be perhaps not (only) the witch's victim but her "survival" into the present, both of them frozen in place. Lurking beneath Ancaster's harmless "legend" of a vengeful witch, this scene invokes a real history of witchcraft in which the targets of accusations were often ostracized and powerless women *and* it traps Jasmine within this history (Figure 1).

Figure 1: On the left, the portrait of the "witch" Margaret Millett; on the right, Jasmine as she talks to the librarian, her hands mirroring those of the "witch" in the portrait.

The inextricable entanglement of Ancaster's folk legends about the witch and the school's persistent racism—its interwoven witchcraft and racecraft—is perhaps best exemplified when Jasmine, intent on discovering more about Ancaster's history, finds a newspaper article from 1965 about the suicide of undergraduate student Louisa Weeks. Louisa was found by her roommate hanging in their room (the legendary fate of the witch and her victims). The freshman was, according to the article, the "first black woman admitted to the university"—a fact, the article reports (undoubtedly in understated fashion), that caused "considerable controversy." The article continues that Weeks was believed to have been "mentally unstable," without in any way linking her supposed "mental instability" to the "controversy" upon her admission. Jasmine will later find Louisa Weeks' diary, in which the scared freshman wrote about her sense that she was haunted by the school's witch, by a shadowy dark and hooded figure, who comes "dragging her rope," writing that "she will take me with her." The article that Jasmine finds, even in its many silences, suggests racism as an alternative reason (rather than persecution by the school's witch) for Louisa's death. In this moment, *Master* harkens back to a similar narrative dynamic in Bernard Rose's *Candyman* (1992), when the supernatural and folkloric—the hook man and Candyman—vie with racist social and economic structures ("life in the projects") as explanations for Black women's deaths (Figure 2). It is in the wake of Jasmine's having read this article with its glaringly absent explanation of Louisa Weeks' supposed "mental instability"—as well as the hum of the hostility of everyone around her—that Jasmine begins to experience, herself, the haunting presence of the "witch," and will finally, like Louisa Weeks, hang herself.

Figure 2: On the left, the article Jasmine finds about Louisa Weeks suicide; on the right, the article about the murder of Ruthie Jean by "Candyman."

Like Louisa Weeks and Margaret Millett before her, Jasmine dies at Ancaster, unable to escape. Like them, Jasmine becomes "stuck"—fixed in place as signaled by the gravestone, the newspaper article, and the portrait of the "witch," all of which portend Jasmine's inevitable fate. Gravestone, newspaper, and portrait are not just artifacts archived in (and archives of) the past but archives that survive into and determine the present. In Jasmine's story we see the intersection of folk horror and naturalism, as both generic forms trade in characters bound to inexorable fates. Jennifer Fleissner has insightfully articulated the primary structure of literary naturalism, which shows protagonists "getting stuck along the way to completing [their] personal story." She argues that this "individual stuckness … is tied to a stuckness at the broader level of history as well," and it is a stuckness that becomes articulated in form. Naturalism's "antinarrative forms of temporality … problematize linear historical time" (2004, 31-2). The dead-end and inexorable repetition of Jasmine's story (repeating both Margaret Millett and Louisa Weeks) instantiates a circular reiterative notion of time in *Master* and ties it to the ways in which the fate of women and people of color experience a history, a trajectory, that is strangled by the "stuckness" of persistent and persistently oppressive intersecting structures of race and gender.

Nooses in particular signal the reiterative and non-linear history of *Master*, along with the imbricated histories of witchcraft and "racecraft" that finally trap Jasmine. In one scene that turns out to be a dream, Jasmine walks across the quad and sees, in her dorm room window, a dark figure slowly raised up by a rope around her neck. After she wakes up, she finds "Leave" scratched on her door and a noose hanging from the doorknob. The noose obviously signals the history of the lynching of Black people in the US, but, before that, it also signals the hanging of witches: in Salem, nineteen of the twenty people, almost all women, who were executed for witchcraft were hanged (Breslaw

1996, n.p.). The woman "dragging her rope" that Jasmine reads about in Louisa's diary is an image, then, that crystallizes an intersectional raced and gendered history, expressly conflating the fates of the lynching of Black people and the execution of women for witchcraft.

Experiencing her own pursuing "witch" figure, Jasmine falls from her dorm room window attempting to get away. Gail comes to visit Jasmine in the hospital and tells her that what ails her is "not supernatural. It's America." It's racism, in short. Gail concludes, "You can't get away from it, Jasmine. It'll follow you."[3] Gail's words reinforce everything Jasmine has experienced, and Jasmine will later tell Liv, just before she kills herself: "It doesn't matter where I go. It's everywhere." Paralyzed by what seems to be the inevitability of her fate, Jasmine follows Margaret Millett and Louisa Meeks and hangs herself with a rope.

The representation of Jasmine and Louisa Weeks as, potentially, both the witch's victim and the witch herself evokes not only witchcraft more generally but, specifically, the woman of color at the center of the Salem witch trials: Tituba. Like Tituba, Jasmine and Louisa are dark women in a virtually all-white community located in New England—and Diallo has talked not only about her longstanding interest in the Salem witch trials but particularly in the enigmatic figure of Tituba:

> When I was growing up, my mum had, just lying around the home, the Maryse Condé book *I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem*. It's this fictionalised telling of Tituba whose [sic] a woman of colour who is at the core of the witch trials. Thinking of that interplay between non-white women and white women as both victims of misogyny, but then obviously very differing degrees of power themselves with racism that Tituba experienced as well, it felt so rich and powerful. (Sandwell 2022)

With their dark skin amplified by the exaggerated whiteness of Margaret Millett's portrait (Figure 1), and with the Salem witch trials evoked diegetically (not least by the date, 1694, on Millett's gravestone), both Jasmine and Louisa echo the dark-skinned and "foreign" woman at the heart of the hysteria. Tituba got swept up in the witchcraft accusations simply because she was (like Louisa Weeks and Jasmine in *Master*) an outsider—"looking and sounding different

[3] *Master* here taps into the inexorable logic of the indestructible killer at the heart of the slasher subgenre, epitomized in the aptly named *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), although *Master*, more so than most slashers, embeds its discussion of an implacable "killer" in the racialized history of the US.

from the white Massachusetts villagers," as historian Marion Gibson writes (2023, 115). She was also unable to join the "inner sect" of Christians in the village, not least because she was enslaved (115). Tituba has been, as Bernard Rosenthal puts it, "collectively imagined as the dark outsider, the intruder who could be blamed for the community's troubles" (1998, 2002). She was in the wrong place at the wrong time—in the household of Samuel Parris where the first accusations erupted in 1692 (Gibson 2023, 106). However, unlike the subsequent "dark outsiders" (Margaret Millett, Louisa Weeks, and Jasmine Moore), Tituba survived. She was tried after she proffered a coerced "confession" (121-2) and escaped the gallows. The last archival trace of her is in a request that her food, and that of other accused witches held in the Salem prison during the trials, be reimbursed. This was on May 9, 1693, and Tituba then vanishes from the historical record. As Gibson writes, "She survived her witch trial and was freed from prison, but we can only hope that she eventually gained her freedom" (126-7).

While Tituba may have vanished, possibly escaped, Jasmine does not escape—becoming, in death, "stuck," like *Master*'s other "witches," and their victims. The deterministic necessity of Jasmine's death is evident in Diallo's recounting how she tried to imagine it otherwise (not least, at the urging of her producers), but, in the end, she realized, "it's got to happen" (Sandwell 2022). Jasmine's shocking death could represent what Nicholas Whittaker has called the "embrace" of "gratuitous spectacle," which he claims is "precisely what makes black horror film radical" (2022, 35). Gratuitous horror aligns with the project of Afropessimism, Whittaker argues, in that it refuses the "humanistic story about blackness that ensures its violence *makes sense*." The humanistic story is "precisely," Whittaker continues, "what has kept cinema from seeing the ontological character of blackness as that position wherein violence *does not make sense*"—does not make sense because blackness introduces "conceptual incoherence" and a violent and inexplicable uncanny (2022, 35).[4] The unseen and indeterminate force that drives Jasmine to her violent death—the "it" ("It's everywhere") that could be a witch but is also irreducible to a witch and means so many other things—represents the core of "incoherence" at the heart of Ancaster and the contemporary US, intersecting with, amplifying, and inevitably racializing folk horror's "skewed belief systems and morality" (Scovell 2017, 18).

[4] Whittaker draws on Frank B. Wilderson's theory of Afropessimism (and, before him, the writing of Frantz Fanon) and argues, generally, that "black horror vividly stages the inhabitance of the ontological … category Frantz Fanon calls the 'zone of nonbeing,' a mode of existence that black thinkers of various stripes, but most recently and clearly in the Afropessimist camp, have named the special purview of the Negro" (2022, 24).

While Bernard Rose's 1992 *Candyman* is evoked earlier in *Master*, the dark pessimism of Jasmine's ending is much more akin to the vision of racialized history driving Nia DaCosta's 2021 *Candyman*. DaCosta's interpretation of the Candyman folklore is that it expresses the reiterated lynchings of Black men by whites, from the original late nineteenth-century lynching of Daniel Robitaille to the latest Black man shot and killed by police—what Mikal Gaines has described as "not just a single Black man's suffering but a whole legacy of Black pain and dispossession" (2022, 259). One of the protagonists of the film, William Burke (Colman Domingo), who is explaining to another protagonist, Brianna Cartwright (Teyonah Parris), that there never was just one Candyman but reiterated incarnations, declaims in words that also describe the persistent legacies of Margaret Millett, Louisa Weeks, and Jasmine Moore: "When something leaves a stain, even if you wash it out, it's still there. You can feel it. A thinning, deep in the fabric. This neighborhood got caught in a loop. The shit got stained in the exact same spot, over and over, until it finally rotted from the inside out." Thus is Ancaster. *Master* portrays a place and people who are "caught in a loop," stuck in a place indelibly "stained" by racism. The multiple "outsider" victims of *Master*'s racialized community—from Tituba to Margaret Millett to Louisa Weeks to Jasmine Moore—are trapped in a place structured by the past and within a reiterated lore of witchcraft that is not only inevitably racialized but also, just like race in the US, fundamentally "skewed" and irrational.

Unburying racecraft

Gail's story in *Master* is similar to Jasmine's in that it too expresses a cyclical and ineradicably racialized folk horror: Gail also finds herself trapped in a way that is firmly tied, as Fleissner puts it, "to a stuckness at the broader level of history as well," serving to "problematize linear historical time" (2004, 31-2). In other words, Gail finds herself, to repeat *Candyman*'s William Burke, "caught in a loop." If Jasmine's story develops as folk horror as a representation of the persistence of an inevitably gendered and racialized witch lore, Gail's story centers on "unburials," on the unearthing of physical traces of the past right under your feet, which foreclose any sense that time has moved forward, that "modernity" has progressed beyond "primitive" beliefs. Scovell has argued that folk horror presents reality as "a rich source of genuine brutality, oddness and horror—ready to be tapped or, more aptly, unearthed from the thin layer of furrow. Unearthing," he continues, "whether diegetically or non-diegetically, is

uniquely one of Folk Horror's key themes after all" (2017, 30). Similarly, Jamie Chambers has articulated that the act of "unburying" what is buried shapes a primary "sense" within folk horror "of temporal vertiginousness: a dizzying sense of the history 'beneath' one's feet and the presence of the past within the present"—or, the "excavatory sense of looking both backwards and downwards through multiple layered temporalities towards a deep history" (2022, 18, 20). Gail might progress in her career by moving up in Ancaster's hierarchy (as the new Master), and then she moves repeatedly "up" to the attic of the Master's house, but what she finds, always, are the traces of a past that is just underneath the surface—a past that drags at her until it pulls her under.

Unlike Jasmine, Gail survives her story, but her trajectory in the film takes her from confidently stepping into her new role as Master of Ancaster to a bitter departure from the college. Before Gail leaves, she calls out her colleagues for their racism: "I was never a Master," she says to them. "I was the maid. You brought me here to clean up." Alone in the Master's house, Gail repeatedly hears the servant's bell and is drawn to the attic. The first time she goes up, she finds a box containing a photograph of the white family who presumably once lived in the house. To the side of the photograph is the maid—a Black woman, and a figure who represents all that Gail thinks she's left behind and all that in fact survives at Ancaster. Gail will later be drawn up to the attic again, finding not a photo of a maid this time but the incarnation of an enslaved woman herself, weeping, as the past creeps ever closer to Gail.[5] In between these scenes, Gail discovers "buried" in a kitchen cupboard an Aunt Jemima jar, an "artefact" of the past that haunts her after it becomes "unburied," a residue of an "archaic" belief system that is in fact not archaic at all. This moment maps onto Chambers' "ancient MacGuffin that comes to exert a destructive influence upon the present" (2022, 20) and what Rob Young has described as the "sudden unearthing of a long-buried object, and the disquiet and havoc it inflicts on its surroundings" (2010)—a moment that is central to folk horror. Or, as Scovell writes, "The object that was already there begins the horror" (2012, 31). Indeed, Gail's excavation of the Aunt Jemima jar in her kitchen echoes the twinned shots and the narrative function of the pot lodged in the earth and the demonic skull ploughed up from the earth in the opening scene of Piers Haggard's canonical folk horror film, *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971). As in other folk

[5] *Master* most directly intersects here with the Afropessimist concept of the survival into the present of slavery in particular. As Ryan Poll puts it, writing about *Get Out*: Peele's film "narrates how American slavery is not an institution confined to the past, not one locatable in a particular region (such as the South), but a national institution, practice, and affect that continues to shape and structure the present" (2017, 72).

horrors, the past in *Master*, incarnate in uncanny artefacts, will not stay buried, is not even "past" at all, and arises with a "supernatural" force.

Drawn repeatedly by the ringing of the bell, Gail unearths something else in the attic that is buried even deeper than the photo of the maid, even deeper than the Aunt Jemima jar in the kitchen cupboard. At the bottom of a box, she finds "scientific" drawings of Black people designed to illustrate their closer proximity to animals, exemplars of the racist science that dominated nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America (Figure 3). This scene expressly imbricates the undead racial history that is haunting Gail with Fields and Fields' "racecraft," a concept they explicitly use to describe racial "science" in the US in ways that tease out the alignment of racial "science" with folklore and thus articulate its centrality to US folk horror. Racecraft, they write, occupies that "middle ground between science and *superstition*, an invisible realm of collective understanding" (2012, 23, emphasis mine). Racecraft, they argue, purveys "folk thought," "folk classification," "old" ways of thinking, and "pre- or non-scientific modes of thought" (2012, 5-6). Racecraft beliefs involve "uses of yore," "strange maneuvering," and "weird incompleteness" (2012, 10; 16; 21). Indeed, like "traditional spirit beliefs," equally tenacious "traditional race beliefs," Fields and Fields write, "have resisted the better part of a century's worth of disconfirming scientific demonstrations" (2012, 194). In a place openly infused with legendary "witchcraft," Gail excavates a further part of Ancaster's history—the racial belief system that scaffolded its founding—that, in its weird and "strange maneuvering," is as much a persistent "folk thought" still surviving at Ancaster as its witch lore.

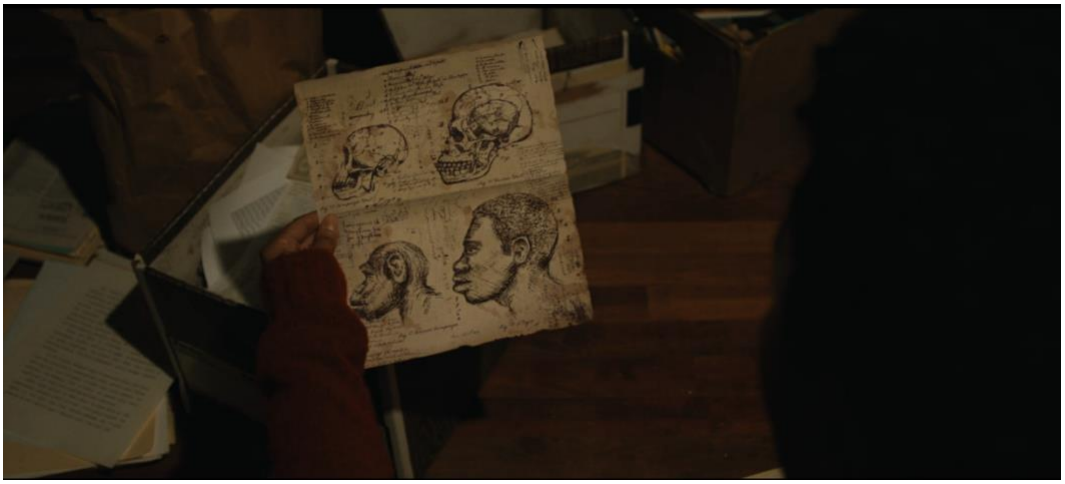

Figure 3: The "artifact" of a racist science that Gail excavates from a box in the attic.

What Gail's narrative arc demonstrates is the logic of "survivals" that is so central to folk horror. It is the "doctrine of survivals" (drawn from nineteenth-century anthropologist E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* [1871]) that, as Roger Luckhurst notes, "provides the basis for the classic folk horror plot of ill-starred urban moderns who enter remote spaces that prove also to be sumps of deep time, arrested in pagan, pre-modern or—in Tylor's term 'savage'—customs and beliefs" (2025, 48). Luckhurst continues that to "cross the threshold of space into the village, the forest or the island is to effectively travel in time from civilisation back into either the 'primitive culture' or the even earlier stage of human barbarism" (48). What Diallo's *Master* makes clear through trading in this concept of "survivals" is that while Gail indeed travels back in time, finding herself in a "sump" of "arrested" pre-modern beliefs, the space in question is neither especially remote nor disconnected from "civilisation." It is, rather, the same as that of the present: the "arrested" *is* the "civilized; the "pre-modern" *is* the modern. Gail *is* the maid, *is* the enslaved woman, in the surviving racial ideology that structures Ancaster. Again, we see that US folk horror is stamped by this simultaneity of racialized past and present.

The view of racist "survivals" that *Master* represents through both Jasmine's and Gail's twinned uncanny narratives (the persistence of witchcraft and of ancient artifacts—and the racial meanings that both inevitably bear) culminates in Gail's recognition that her current colleagues mirror Ancaster's dead—that the past literally lives in the present. After Gail, at the film's concluding party, has angrily called out her colleagues for hiring her to be their "maid," she sits in a chair to the side of the room in despair. She looks at an elderly white waiter passing by with a tray, and, as he passes, a painting becomes visible on the wall behind him that appears to depict his double. The camera then captures three men eating, subsequently cutting to Gail's look at a photograph of three men from a discernibly earlier time that nonetheless mirrors the three men in the present (Figure 4). And, finally, one of Gail's colleagues (an older white man) stands up, saying to her (perhaps intending to sound reassuring but sounding only ominous), "Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere." Behind him As he moves, the camera picks up a photograph of a man—again, from a visibly earlier era—who looks just like him. As Lauren McLeod Cramer and Catherine Zimmer write, *Master* depicts a "haunting at an elite college that isn't really a haunting: it's the past living on inexorably within the structure of the academic institution" (2023, 332). These paintings and photographs form "the cruxes of the whole narrative" in that Gail only leaves after realizing "that her colleagues are indistinguishable from the photos and paintings on the walls that document the university's history" (Cramer and

Zimmer 2023, 336).[6] In this scene, white men from the past are replicated in the present—and the past, with its "invisible realm of collective understanding" that is inexorably racialized, presses unbearably on Gail.

Figure 4: The present moment of the party at Ancaster (left) replicates its past (right).

Amy K. King marks the racialization of the temporal confusion that so often features in horror, writing, "The past is always bleeding into the present … [and] threatening the present with its violent whiteness" (2017, 564). In the particular way in which it collapses past and present—past *into* present—the ending of *Master* clearly echoes *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980); indeed, Diallo has said that she "spent a lot of time with" the film as she was working on *Master* (Dry 2022; Miska 2022). Marking in particular the emphasis on the "violent whiteness" of the past, *Master* orients us not only to the uncanny existence of Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) in both past and present of *The Shining* (as represented not least in the iconic zoom-in to the photograph from 1921 that ends the film and that eerily shows Jack at its center), but to the violent death and erasure, in Kubrick's film, of Dick Hallorann (Scatman Crothers). Like *The Shining*, *Master* does not only represent a past that is so weighty it bears always on the present, seeping into it, but a past inextricable from an often casual but nonetheless "gratuitous" violence directed at Black bodies. Dick Hallorann travels a great distance with great difficulty only to get to the Overlook Hotel and immediately become the lone victim of Jack's violence—the death that proves, to repeat Whittaker, that blackness is "that position wherein violence *does not make sense*" (2022, 35; italics in original). Gail's expulsion from the "isolated community" of Ancaster is less explicitly violent than Halloran's from the Overlook—or than Jasmine's from Ancaster. Like Tituba, she survives the conflagration, but she has discovered, nonetheless, that Ancaster represents a world antithetical to her—that it is what Whittaker has

[6] Wright also points out the significance of the photographs and portraits in *Master* as representing the persistence of the past (2024, 22).

called (following Fanon), "the 'zone of nonbeing,'" where "cartography, intelligibility, is no longer tenable" and which "houses gratuitous violence, violence without intelligible explanation" (2022, 31).

Liv's 'demonic' witchcraft

Master adds another "turn of the screw" to its narrative of witchcraft, however. Both Jasmine and Gail despair because they experience a kind of "stuckness" (Fleissner 2004, 31-2), an enmeshment in a reiterated past that is integral to folk horror. They come to recognize that their present and their future are *a residual survival of the past*. This "stuckness," the powerful survival of an entrapping racialized past into the present, is one way in which the central structuring dynamic of US folk horror intersects with Afropessimism. What Ryan Poll writes of *Get Out*, for instance (a film that, as I suggested earlier, has its own folk horror impulses), is true of Jasmine's and Gail's narratives in *Master*: "The world of White Masters and Black Slaves is the world we have inherited and the world we live in today." To be Black is "to be fundamentally, ontologically, marked as a slave" (Poll 2018, 70-71). Pulling against this drive, however, the narrative of the third protagonist of *Master* suggests another paradigm.

Liv Beckman, an English professor at Ancaster, represents the countering pull of *mobility*—a drive that is also integral to US folk horror. (Indeed, I would argue that one of the defining structures of folk horror is precisely the tension between stuckness and mobility.) Liv's mobility inheres in her embodiment of a different kind of witchcraft, what might be called the indeterminate terrain of the "demonic," and is linked with an equally indeterminate racial identity. Unlike Jasmine and Gail, Liv's race becomes more ambiguous, not more fixed, through the course of the film. When we first see her, she is living as Black, but in a crucial scene late in the film, Gail meets Liv's mother, Esther Bickert, who is a visibly white member of the all-white religious community adjacent to Ancaster College. Liv's mother tells Gail that Liv is not Black and that the "devil" has prompted her to pass as Black. When Gail subsequently calls Liv out for being white, though, Liv denies it, claiming that her father is actually Black, a fact that her mother denies because she believes that her daughter will "go to hell for being the bastard child of a Black man." It is important to any interpretation of *Master* that both claims—that Liv is white and that she is Black—seem equally plausible (and Liv is, not insignificantly, played by a biracial actress). But how do we actually read Liv's race? The film suggests that Liv could be aligned with a destructive whiteness and that she is

adopting an identity as Black simply to advance her career. *Master* also suggests, however, that Liv could be mobilizing a racially indeterminate identity to free her from "racecraft," from the survival of those archaic racial beliefs that entrap Jasmine and Gail to such devastating effect.

On the one hand, then, Liv could be seen to embody (underneath her meretricious pretense of being Black) a violent whiteness; as such, she becomes aligned with the (white) witch of Ancaster lore—the witch who persecutes (especially Black) students. At the end of the film, Liv puts on a black cloak before she leaves, in what feels like the film's big "reveal" (Figure 5). The cloak—which certainly has overdetermined meanings within *Master*'s diegesis—perhaps most obviously aligns Liv with the adjacent archaic community, and specifically with the white woman who says she is Liv's mother and who wore the same cloak and hood when she met Gail. That Liv has such a cloak also suggests that *she* may have been the one terrorizing Jasmine—pretending to be the witch. One scene shows a figure in the same black, hooded cloak apparently following Jasmine across the quad and then trying to get in her room, causing Jasmine to jump from her window. Was Liv gaslighting and stalking Jasmine? The film certainly leaves open that possibility, not least because Jasmine had filed a grade dispute against Liv that was proving an obstacle to Liv's tenure. Jasmine herself tells Gail that she thinks Liv is "targeting" her.

Figure 5: Liv puts on the overdetermined black cloak at the end of the film.

A significant portion of Liv's interaction with Jasmine, moreover, involves Liv trying to unsettle Jasmine's sense of what is real, especially when it comes to race. The source of the grade dispute is a paper Jasmine wrote about Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* that failed to perform, as Liv had asked, a critical race analysis of the novel. Jasmine says the novel is not about race, and

Liv tells her: "*Just because you're not seeing something, doesn't mean it isn't there*. Whiteness doesn't have to be the default, Jasmine." This conversation constitutes Liv's effort to make Jasmine see that reality is not how she "sees" it, which is directly related to Jasmine's subsequent experience of being pursued by a "witch." It also encapsulates Liv's very flexible—perhaps too flexible—view of race. Liv's preferred reading of *The Scarlet Letter*'s Hester Prynne in the classroom scene, for instance, is that Hawthorne's white character is actually "Black" in some way. Indeed, Liv's character persistently raises the question: Do you have to be "white" if you don't want to be?

Not surprisingly, then, *Master* also suggests that a white Liv is adopting an identity as Black because she thinks it will advance her career—and this is certainly what Gail comes to believe.[7] Wondering aloud why Liv would pretend to be Black, Gail does not finish her own question, and the film cuts to a microfilm image of an article with the headline, "Beckman Tenure a Win for Diversity." *Master* thus gives some support for Gail's belief that Liv is claiming an identity as Black for her own advancement. Indeed, both Liv and Gail are shown making videos that promote the success of "diversity" at Ancaster, and it is evident that, regardless of Gail's or Liv's motives, the institution's motives are certainly cynically self-serving: it is willing to "promote" (in both senses of the word) Black faculty because doing so promotes Ancaster's own image as "diverse."

Liv also, though, potentially mobilizes an entirely different and indeterminate conception of race, one that intersects with the "demonic" and thus has implications for a more complicated racialized US folk horror. Drawing on Sylvia Wynter's work, Katherine McKittrick has argued for the usefulness of an understanding of the "demonic" at play in the sciences, where it denotes "*uncertainty* and *indeterminacy*." More specifically, McKittrick writes that in mathematics, physics, and computer science, "the demonic connotes a working system that cannot have a determined, or knowable, outcome." "The demonic," she continues, "is a non-deterministic schema; it is a process that is hinged on

[7] The most famous of the "racial impersonators" (and a figure quite similar to one reading of Liv's character) is Rachel Dolezal, who was living as Black but was revealed to be white in 2015 and consequently forced to step down as president of the Spokane N.A.A.C.P. chapter and dismissed from her position as instructor in Africana Studies at Eastern Washington University. Dolezal admitted that she was born white to white parents, but she maintained the legitimacy of her identification as Black. Asked by an interviewer for the *New York Times* when she decided to "start deceiving people," Dolezal replied, "I do take exception to that because it's a little more complex than me identifying as black, or answering a question of, 'Are you black or white?' she said. Over the course of the day, she also described herself as 'transracial' and said: 'Well, I definitely am not white. Nothing about being white describes who I am.'" See Johnson, Pérez-Peña, and Eligon (2015).

uncertainty and non-linearity because the organizing principle cannot predict the future" (2006, xxiv). Liv's indeterminacy seems to embody this form of the "demonic," existing beyond racial structures limned by the weight of history and forging a future that *is* knowable, but only because it is a reiteration of the past. Liv represents what Wynter describes as "*demonic models* of cognition" (and ways of thinking about race) that are "*outside* … the always non-arbitrary pre-prescribed, 'designs of the measuring rod'" (1990, 365; italics in original). In the film's last shot of Liv, she stands up and puts on a black cloak, raising the hood over her head as she moves out of the frame—her fate and her future uncertain.[8]

Liv's particular form of an indeterminate "demonic," which may or may not involve her masquerading as a witch, intriguingly echoes a moment in Peele's screenplay for *Get Out* (a moment not in the film itself). When Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) first discovers that his girlfriend Rose (Allison Williams) is not who she seems, by discovering a box of incriminating photographs in her closet, he sees, on top of the pile, a "frightening" picture—Rose as "one of the witches in a high school production of Macbeth" (Peele 2019, 124). Rose, of course, is a consummate shape-shifter, and the photographs Chris finds of her depict precisely this ability to transform herself at will. Liv, too, is such a "witch," such a "demonic" figure, although whether her mutability maps onto Rose's sinister purpose is only one possibility offered by the film. Diallo has refused to answer whether Liv is "evil," saying only that she "is a very mysterious character" (Sandwell 2022).

Liv's racial indeterminacy is amplified in the scene in which she leads students in a "critical race analysis" of *The Scarlet Letter*. Liv praises a student's comment that Hester Prynne represents "all nonconforming women" and that she is persecuted by her daughter, Pearl, who stands as the incarnation of whiteness. Although the student, importantly, does not explicitly say that Hester is "Black," she does counterpose Hawthorne's protagonist to her expressly

[8] Liv does forge an interesting parallel to Tituba here, who vanished from the record when she vanished from prison—and whose race has infamously been a source of confusion and contestation. Significantly, given the importance of both fixed and fluid conceptions of race in *Master* (and, in particular, the critical importance of Liv's indeterminate identity), there has been a long-standing ambiguity surrounding attributions of Tituba's race. As Gibson puts it, Tituba's purported "Blackness" was an invention of the nineteenth century; specifically, her "African origin" and corollary identity as "Black" was "created for her in the nineteenth century" simply because she was an enslaved person in the household of the white Samuel Parish. In the nineteenth century, enslaved person equated to Black (2023, 107). But, as Gibson points out, Tituba was, in the paperwork from her trial, always identified as "Indian," and archival work has most reliably suggested that she was—before her capture and enslavement—a part of the Arawak people living in the Orinoco-Amacuro Delta (in what is now northeastern Venezuela) (Gibson 2023, 108). See also Rosenthal on Tituba's "racial malleability" (1998, 194), along with Breslaw (1996) and Schiff (2015).

"white" daughter and calls her "non-conforming," both of which invoke extra-diegetic critical readings of Hester's racial ambiguity. Leland S. Person, for example, has argued that Hester shares similarities with infanticidal enslaved mothers and that she has "ambiguous racial markings" that illuminate the "whiteness of her blackness" (2005, 660; 662). Jean Fagin Yellin has also pointed out the subtextual alignment of Hester with enslaved women, not least in her "transformation from woman to thing" in the novel's first scaffold scene, which enacts "the negation central to the institution of slavery" (1989, 140). And Mara L. Dukats has noted both the "blackness of [Hester's] physical traits" and, generally, the way that the "Africanist presence," which, Toni Morrison has argued, pervades US literature, serves as an ""invisible mediating force' behind Hester" (1995, 56-7). Like Hester—and, specifically, like Hester in the particular reading of *The Scarlet Letter* that Liv endorses in the film's diegesis—Liv herself is racially indeterminate, a potentially powerful resistant force (a "non-conforming" woman opposed to whiteness), and a challenge to rigid social institutions because of that indeterminacy.

Liv embraces the view of Hester's ambiguous race, then, which is connected, also, to the way in which Hawthorne associates Hester, through her transgressions in the forest, with witchcraft and with the devil, whom Hawthorne repeatedly calls the "Black man." In her testimony at her trial for witchcraft, Tituba described her meetings with the devil as with a man dressed all in black (Salem Witchcraft Papers). And Timothy J. McMillan has pointed out that the spectral evidence admitted in New England courts repeatedly conjured "the devil's image in the shape of a Black man" (1994, 107), ending his essay with the claim that "Satan remained a Black man" (114). Like Hester Prynne and Tituba, Liv is associated with a "Black man" (her purported father), who, in Diallo's film, is a liminal figure who lies somewhere between racial and demonic Blackness. While Liv's claim that her father is Black is on the one hand a clear claim about his race, she also articulates blackness as the demonic when she voices her mother's view—one embedded in archaic, seventh-century religious beliefs—that her daughter will "go to hell for being the bastard child of a Black man," and Esther herself tells Gail that "the devil" led Liv to claim a Black man for a father. This "Black man" is mysteriously absent from the film, and, in being mentioned in relation to "hell" and the "devil," he clearly partakes in New England Puritan beliefs in the satanic as incarnate in a "Black man." Indeed, while refuting her daughter's claims of racial blackness, Esther tells Gail that the "devil's inside" her daughter, asserting Liv's own demonic "blackness." As notions of racial and demonic blackness collide in *Master*, mingling in the ambiguous figure of the "Black man," Esther undercuts her own claims about

Liv's absolute whiteness and affirms that Liv partakes of some form of "blackness," even if it is demonic rather than racial. Either way, Liv exists on some racially liminal, demonic ground.

Conclusion

Both Jasmine and Gail despair because they experience an implacable force that entraps them in both time and space, an imbricated witchcraft and "racecraft" that wrests away their agency. The "demonic" form of witchcraft that Liv potentially embodies is, on the other hand, "non-deterministic," defined by "uncertainty and non-linearity" (McKittrick 2006, xxiv). And, indeed, Liv's story is nothing if not uncertain, articulating one powerful form of the "demonic." Folk horror is typically structured around the polarities of dichotomy and conflict—of insider and outsider—and much of *Master* does indeed move along this trajectory: Jasmine and Gail are isolated within a white community that increasingly seems alien and hostile to them, a community with archaic beliefs (about the "witch," about race) and with malevolent artefacts surfacing from the past to haunt the present. This paradigm is undone to a certain degree by Liv, however, who embodies the dichotomies in play rather than inhabiting only one pole: she is part of Ancaster; her origins lie in the archaic community beyond Ancaster's boundaries; she is white and she is Black—ambiguous and indecipherable. And she doesn't fear the witch or succumb to the past, escaping from a model of victimization and oppression to embody, instead, a witch who is powerful and (self)creative. In this way, I think, Mariama Diallo's *Master* not only enacts US folk horror's inextricability from race but also the structure of US folk horror's racial formations as around *both* "stuckness" and mobility, with each of those drives bound to different forms of witchcraft and the demonic.

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