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When Records Seethe: Folk Horror, Archival Studies, and *Madres* (2021)

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Horror is obsessed with archives. Their formal influence on the genre goes as far back as horror's roots in the nineteenth century—*Frankenstein* (1818), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), and *Dracula* (1897) are all written as found texts—and continues through to analogue and digital found footage films. While these kinds of texts have been considered in connection to the archive by scholars including Caryn Radick (2013), Kristopher Woofter (2016, 2023, and forthcoming), and Shellie McMurdo (2023), what has not been adequately considered is the way characters engage in archival research within the diegesis of horror texts, despite the inclusion of this trope since the genre's formation. Often, when characters in horror texts consult archives, they do so from a place of physical vulnerability. Fearing a threat from a supernatural or otherwise unusual presence, they turn to archival research as a (usually futile) method for understanding and asserting control over their situation. Indeed, Noël Carroll's foundational formulation of horror as a genre invested in "the processes of discovery, the play of proof, and the dramas of ratiocination" maps as well onto the research of many of its own searching protagonists as it does the relationship between text and audience (1990, 185). Discovery, proof, and ratiocination are key aspects of archival research as such and frequently become the means by which characters in horror narratives uncover knowledge of the threats that will spell their doom. Beyond merely advancing the plot or giving explanations to the audience, archives in folk horror, in particular, play a critical role in mediating the past. A close attention to the way archives function in folk horror narratives, as well as the characters who become intertwined with them, provides insight into the modality's investment in material culture and embedded epistemological reading practices.

In what follows, I look at the multitude of archives present in *Madres* (2021), a film directed by Ryan Zaragoza and co-written by Marcella Ochoa and Mario Miscione, which I argue can productively be considered a work of folk horror. As my brief introduction to some of the common aspects of archival research in folk horror will demonstrate, *Madres*'s focus on the archive grows out of a corpus of films invested in this subject. The film both integrates and departs from genre conventions regarding archival research—and the characters who engage in it—as it probes the overlapping gendered and racialized power

dynamics impacting Diana, the film's protagonist, both in her research and in the reception of her findings. Diana is a journalist who was recently fired for being pregnant and is marked as an outsider by the community because she cannot speak Spanish, is not religious, and does not work in the fields. She does not know Spanish because her grandparents were punished for speaking it, and her mother aimed to assimilate Diana and her sister into monolingualism. Through its intense focus on temporality, legibility, and mediation, *Madres* troubles Matthew Cheeseman's assertion that folk horror appeals to "the atemporal, illegible, and unmediated" (2023, 407). If early 20th century texts that form the emerging folk horror canon—like Eleanor Scott's 1921 story "Randalls Round," which I will discuss in the next section—viewed the archive as a place to satisfy the individual curiosities of the researcher, *Madres* suggests a model of archival research undertaken for the good of the community as a whole. Diana's searching, too, is not impelled by an "exoticizing' of the folk customs of her new neighbors, an approach Jamie Chambers (2022) has helpfully critiqued within folk horror, but rather to uncover the systematically erased histories of the violence perpetrated against them through an immersive, sensorial confrontation with the past.

Treating *Madres*—a relatively understudied film—as a work of folk horror enriches our conceptualization of the modality and opens up possibilities for considering it in a multidisciplinary context. In a very direct way, *Madres* incorporates all of the elements of Scovell's (2017, 17–18) Folk Horror Chain: a heightened attention to landscape in the form of the crops the workers labor to cultivate, a sense of social isolation as the community Diana enters is one set apart from her previous life in Los Angeles, a skewed belief system in the form of the racist ideologies that govern the town's medical system, and the ultimate summoning/happening. While standing apart from conceptualizations of folk horror that require the folk—themselves—to harbor monstrosity, *Madres* allows us to treat the modality with elasticity, unsettling assumptions and offering new pathways for analyzing texts already within the accepted canon of folk horror as well as those which sit on its fringes. Beyond connecting *Madres* to previously accepted definitions of folk horror, this study also seeks to introduce an investment in archival research itself, as a yet unrecognized defining characteristic of folk horror. I posit that while archival research is present in many works of horror, folk horror (in particular) relies heavily on a range of material archives as sites for mediating two key aspects of folk horror: the folk/outsider divide and the boundary between past and present. Paying attention to the porosity of these demarcations erodes their separation in productive and disorienting ways, especially as contemporary folk horror—

including *Madres*—makes stark departures from previous, more disparaging representations of the folk.

In the realm of archival studies, increased attention to folk horror can complicate existing studies of popular culture's relationship to the archive. As *Madres* demonstrates in its protagonist's confrontation with buried histories, folk horror has a unique capacity for dramatizing the recent critical turn in archival studies, a development against which the profession has pushed back, demonstrating—as Mario H. Ramirez notes—"an inability [in the field] to think critically about race, whiteness, and sociocultural positionality" (2015, 339). Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand (2022) have developed an expanded definition of critical archival studies. Of particular relevance to this study is the authors' suggestion that critical archival studies "broadens the scope beyond an inward, practice-centered orientation and builds a critical stance regarding the role of archives in the production of knowledge and *different types of narratives*, as well as identity construction" (2022, 2; emphasis added). As I will demonstrate, folk horror is an especially productive "type of narrative" to consider in concert with critical archival studies. Paying attention to films depicting individuals navigating these archival systems in revelatory ways provides an opportunity for reflection on the relationship between archives, the public, and narrative imaginations, as well as on the limitations of analyzing any of these pillars in isolation.

Folk Horror and the Archive

Folk horror is steeped in representations of archival research. In early folk horror, this manifests as an academic investigator descending upon a "folk" community, a group of people who are depicted in stark contrast to the outsider protagonist. Often, the archival researchers are portrayed as detached from the working class and rural folk horror communities, as they are engaged in academic forms of labor that mark them as seemingly more cerebral and less embodied, a distinction that is repeatedly eroded throughout the narratives themselves. In Scott's story "Randalls Round," for instance, a student named Heyling travels from Oxford to Randalls village, a "little place in the Cotswolds somewhere" (Scott 1929, 22). Once confronted with some of the unusual customs of the inhabitants of Randalls, Heyling goes to the town's "Record Room" where he first reads a textbook related to the area; yet, as the narrator remarks, "the whole chapter was very brief and skimpy, and Heyling had soon exhausted his interest" (28). Not dissimilar to Mr. Clarke in Arthur Machen's

"Great God Pan" who "had a fine contempt for published literature" (1894, 9), Heyling remarks that "the town records … were more amusing" than the published textbook (Scott 1929, 28). It is in these archives that Heyling discovers the records of a witchcraft court case, which serves to intensify his interest in the occult practices surrounding him: "this business was getting a stronger hold of him than he would have thought possible" (29). Across folk horror narratives, found documents "get a stronger hold" of the protagonists than seems possible at the outset, as the signifiers surrounding these characters that mark them as separate and therefore invulnerable to the superstitions of the folk fall away, showing how archival research is far from a safe, intellectualized exercise.

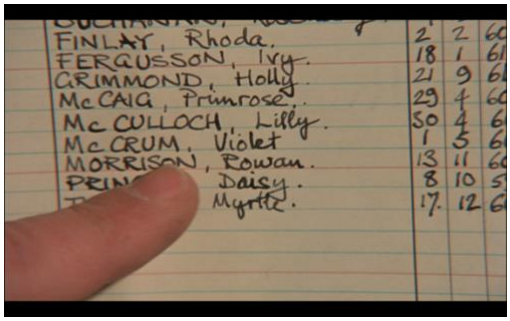
Madres builds on a tendency—from first wave British folk horror films in the 1970s to the present—to complicate, or overtly reject, the clean disconnection between an exoticized folk community and a modern academic researcher, even as the film charts a unique way of moving within the archive. In particular, the folk horror of the 1970s demonstrates how archival records can be leveraged by manipulative community members seeking to remain illegible. Take, for instance, the cult community Sergeant Howie encounters in *The Wicker Man* (Hardy 1973). Largely considered a foundational folk horror film—one of the three films categorized by Scovell as the "unholy trinity" (2017, 8)—*The Wicker Man* displays the means by which folk communities can use

Figure 1: Archival absence: a missing image on the wall of the tavern in *The Wicker Man* (Hardy 1974).

archival manipulation and evasion to facilitate the deaths of outsiders and maintain their own survival.

Figure 1 shows the first physical archive Howie confronts after arriving in Summerisle: the wall of harvest photographs in the tavern. His attention is caught not by the collection itself but the glaring suggestion of archival absence, the lightened spot on the wall where the 1972 photograph should be placed. He sees this while simultaneously passing around the small photograph of Rowan Morrison he brought with him, tying the absence and the new photograph together in the audience's mind even if not yet in Howie's. When Sergeant Howie asks about the missing harvest photo of Summerisle's annual May festival, the photographer insists he doesn't "keep copies." In addition to being partially untrue—as Howie learns when he breaks into the darkroom and finds copies of the negative, if not the photograph itself—this line gestures toward the islanders' wider strategy to entrap Howie through archival manipulation. Indeed, the all the residents' tricks on Howie revolves around the selective withholding and revealing of records and artifacts at pivotal moments in the narrative in order to puppeteer his responses. Aware of the avenues a police officer will take to locate Rowan—from the schoolhouse registry to the office issuing death certificates—the people of Summerisle construct a labyrinth of truths and half-truths verifiable not only by the spoken word (the will of the folk) but external, physical sources as well. This paper trail leads Howie to the most embodied archive of all, the graveyard. Instead of offering direct access to the "truth" of Summerisle, however, Rowan's casket reveals another place of subterfuge as the body is missing and has been replaced with a hare. In the end, Howie himself becomes the archival absence he has been searching for since his arrival on Summerisle when his own body is burned.

Sergeant Howie's experience in *The Wicker Man* is just one example of archival research in folk horror that demonstrates the vulnerabilities of the "modern researcher" to manipulation of the historical narrative. Another notable instance of this in 1970s folk horror is the guest log in the BBC production *A Warning to the Curious* (1972). Based on a 1925 M.R. James story of the same name, *A Warning to the Curious* follows Paxton—an antiquarian and archeologist—as he searches for a legendary buried crown said to protect the East Anglian seaside town from invasion. Like Howie, Paxton faces archival manipulation as the folk attempt to throw him off.



Figures 2–3: Parallel images from *A Warning to the Curious* (Clark 1972) and *The Wicker Man* (Hardy 1974), showing the guest log and the student records in Summerisle, respectively.

Figures 2 and 3 show two moments that serve as echoes between *A Warning* and *The Wicker Man*. They are documented proof that two people—William Ager in *A Warning* and Rowan Morrison in *The Wicker Man,* whom the protagonists have been told do not exist, actually do. They are on record and therefore they are real. In both instances, the protagonists believe in these archival documents more than they do the oral testimony of the folk, highlighting the extent to which "modern" epistemologies—as represented through folk horror—place a heightened emphasis on material culture over oral traditions as a means of accessing reality, a reading practice which reflects the vulnerability of the modern outsider to archival manipulation more so than it reveals any knowledge about the groups under study. While *Madres*'s protagonist also engages in intellectual labor and is guided through archival research, her path does not prove to be a string of deceptions leading to ultimate absence, but a reckoning with the gaps of history that culminates in a reparative encounter with the embodied archive that blends both oral testimony and material records. Ultimately, Diana does not face nefarious folk seeking to entrap her. Instead, the role of obscuration and misrepresentation of history is much more realistic (and more insidious). It is the state and medical archives holding untold stories of eugenics that threaten the safety of Diana and her unborn child. Recasting archival manipulation in this way opens up new avenues for considering folk horror as a case study in disrupting the power dynamics of archival research.

If the first-wave folk horror films lay the groundwork for conceptualizing folk horror's archives as epistemologically fraught sites where competing narratives vie for legibility, later works continue to probe this dynamic while expanding it in new directions. This is seen particularly clearly in Bernard Rose's *Candyman* (1992), a film which considers the white academic

researcher as an implicated party in constructing violent narratives and collecting archival evidence of the supernatural. Helen, a white researcher, discovering—near the end of the film—her own likeness in the Candyman mural she finds in an abandoned postindustrial urban space demonstrates the impossibility of empirical separation from the mythology she seeks to uncover, troubling the conception of whiteness as a neutral and distanced vantage point from which to encounter the archive (Figure 4).

Figure 4: The mural of Helen's likeness alongside the Candyman figure constitutes a kind of alternative archive in *Candyman* (Rose 1992).

This focus on archival research is picked up again in Nia Dacosta's *Candyman* (2021), as Anthony, a Black artist researching the Candyman myth, travels to the university archives where Helen did her research and ends up uncovering records of her and Bernadette performing the summoning ritual. Notably, the audio he listens to is not from the original film but still serves as a sort of remediation of Helen's narrative. After listening to this recording, Anthony's own experience with Candyman is heightened when Anthony sees him for the first time in the elevator leaving the archive. In this way, the archive functions in a very similar way to prior oral traditions as it works to keep alive the folkloric monsters represented in it. As in previous texts I have mentioned, Anthony and Helen's exposure to their respective archives expediates their

progressions into the supernatural and reveals their vulnerability to the forces stored there, eroding the distinction between past and present—as well as empirical fact and conjured myth. Both Anthony and Helen will eventually incorporate the Candyman myth into their own identities (in different ways) and will find in this transformation a source of power. Likewise, Diana—though retaining her own separate personhood—gains strength through the process of allowing the ghost of victim Teresa Flores to attune her to layered meaning within multiple types of archives. The reading practices these haunted documents require from her, though frightening at first, are revealed to be protective in nature.

The ghost Diana summons forces the issue of legibility as an activating process, requiring her not only to see the information she needs but to fully understand it on the correct terms, to manifest the intangible in material, emotionally driven ways. The presence that guides this film is a ghost in the vein of Avery Gordon's sociological haunting, wherein there is a requirement of "something to be done" spurred on by "sensuous knowledge." As Gordon writes: "Sensuous knowledge is commanding: it can spiral you out of your bounds, it can hollow out, with an x-ray vision, the seemingly innocuous artifacts of the master. To experience a profane illumination is to experience the sensate quality of a knowledge meaningfully affecting you. [...] Everything rests on not being afraid of what is happening to you" (1997, 205). It is only when Diana stops fearing Teresa's presence that she is able to fully understand the knowledge being presented to her and use Teresa's power in her fight to overthrow an unjust medical authority figure. This process is facilitated by a repeated return to a wide range of archival materials: a jewelry box, a handwritten journal, manipulated consent forms. These different archives function in specific ways in the film, complementing—even as they contradict—one another. It is the dramatization of her sensorial reckoning with the past (which I will examine in greater detail in the next section) that underscores both *Madres*'s importance to folk horror studies and the productivity of bringing folk horror to bear upon critical archival studies.

Horror, and folk horror in particular, is a rich entry point for public comprehension of the living, breathing, and bloody stakes of the archive—and one which has, thus far, gone under-utilized in this capacity. In her overview of representations of the archive in popular culture, Karen Buckley cites historical fiction, suspense, and science fiction as the genres that most frequently include representations of archives and archivists. Across these, she highlights four consistent features: "[1] protection of the record is equated to protection of the truth; [2] archives are closed spaces and the archival experience is an interior

one for characters; [3] records are lost and buried in archives; and [4] the information sought in the records invariably centres around the search for self or truth" (2008, 95). Horror films featuring archives offer helpful counterpoints to these observations. For instance, in horror films, characters who visit formal archives often walk away with the (sometimes rather antiquated, originary, and therefore valuable) materials they are reading as if they were library books. Rather than being closed/contained spaces, horror's archives are unrealistically open and borderless, suggesting that part of the horror of these engagements is the refusal of the past to stay in its proper boxes, both through forms of haunting and protagonists stealing documents from these sealed archives.

In addition, horror films—and especially folk horror films—trouble Buckley's critique of "lost archives" in productive ways. Buckley, a professional archivist, expresses exasperation at the trope of the "lost archive" since "archival mandates involve the arrangement and description of records specifically for the purpose of making them accessible to the general public" (109). Regularly, horror films deploy engagement with unconventional archives, archival materials before they have become processed and institutionalized, or archives that are technically accessible to the public but have been overlooked or ignored for myriad reasons. As such, the resurrection of "lost archives" in folk horror films becomes a gesture toward the incompleteness of institutional records which regularly fail to represent systemic violence as documents are stolen, omitted, or obscured through miscategorization. Even when records have been described and arranged, horror reminds us, that does not mean they have been understood on their own terms. And, as critical archival studies teaches us, there is a significant gap between what can be captured and indexed on a finding aid and the history that finding aid represents. In horror, hauntings fill this gap. When other forces—the law, educational structures, and, indeed, the archival professional—fail to acknowledge these realities, they come back blood-drenched and requiring witness. As I will show in the following section, *Madres* narrates the process of understanding an archive, if not completely on its own terms, then at least in the totality of the ways it has been scattered and misrepresented.

Temporality, Legibility, and Mediation

Set in Southern California in the 1970s, *Madres* follows couple Diana and Beto after they relocate from Los Angeles to a small farming community where Beto has recently been hired as a manager. Diana is pregnant, and—it is implied by

her sister over the phone—was fired from her position as a journalist because of this. Shortly after their arrival, Diana starts experiencing alarming visions and unexplained symptoms, all of which fall in line with *la maldición*, the curse rumored to plague pregnant women in the area. Rejecting this religious explanation for her illness, Diana spends the majority of the film engaged in an archival research process, following in the footsteps of her new home's former occupant, a woman named Teresa Flores. In exploring her new home, Diana discovers that Teresa collected documentation about dangerous pesticides being used on their farm. In the end, this explanation is proven incorrect, as she discovers that Tomas—the man who hired Beto—has been conspiring with a racist local doctor to directly poison the women through a "special recipe" of *agua fresca* in order to lure them to the hospital where the doctor performs forced sterilizations. Even though the illness plaguing the women in the community is not supernatural, the film is not completely rooted in realism. Diana *does* summon Teresa's ghost, first when looking through her belongings, and then again when she is under attack, a move which ultimately saves Diana's life. The conjuring of this ghost throughout the film animates the relational components of the archive, adding an embodied layer to the narrative also told through other kinds of documents.

In addition to the ghost—who serves as an archived entity guiding Diana's research—there are five distinct archives in *Madres*: the boxes in Diana and Beto's house (a domestic archive); the records at the county clerk's office (a state archive); the records she finds in the doctor's office (a medical archive); the layered, embodied record that includes oral testimony from earlier in the film alongside the documents (an intratextual archive); and the real-life found footage from news stations that runs post-credits and connects to an opening quotation from Joseph Conrad (a paratextual archive). The very multitude of these archival forms serves to undermine the power of any individual documenting body to control and categorize history. As Achille Mbembe writes in his seminal article "The Power of the Archive and its Limits,"

> There will always remain traces of the deceased, elements that testify that a life did exist, that deeds were enacted, and struggles engaged in or evaded. Archives are born from a desire to reassemble these traces rather than destroy them. The function of the archive is to thwart the dispersion of these traces and the possibility, always there, that left to themselves, they might eventually acquire a life of their own. Fundamentally, the dead should be formally prohibited from stirring up disorder in the present. (2002, 22)

It can be said that the dispersal of Teresa's archives across the multiple sites listed above is what ends up animating her ghost, allowing the past to "stir up disorder in the present." Indeed, at each stage of the narrative, it is Diana's probing of the archival materials available to her that spurs Teresa's materialization as a vengeful, feminist presence. The damning information about the medical malpractice and eugenics project taking place in the community would be kept safe in the county archive were it not for the dispersed fragments of information held in alternative archives that fall outside the state's control. These linked archives constitute a novel way for thinking about folk horror's processes of documentation and research. The archives in *Madres* expressly work against the grain of Cheeseman's conception of folk horror as "atemporal, illegible, and unmediated" (2023, 407). The ghosts animating the archives in *Madres* insist on a clear sense of temporality and a restoration of the narrative of injustices they've faced, including specific names and dates. By including archival footage from real reports and facts about the resurrection of the Eugenics Movement in ICE detainment facilities in its opening and ending sequences, *Madres* pushes this sense of temporality further, connecting narratives of the past to present systems of oppression and further situating the archival aspects of the film within a wider discourse of power. This creates a schema where the horror of the film is not *un*mediated, as Cheeseman describes, but *hyper*-mediated, as the paratextual documents—both here at the end of the film and at the beginning, during which the film displays a quote from Joseph Conrad—call attention to the situatedness of all narrative forms, including *Madres* itself.

Notably, Diana's inciting glimpse into the dispersed archives that will summon Teresa's spirit takes place in the domestic sphere, an arena that is routinely feminized and placed outside of recognizable research methods. Unlike many folk horror protagonists, Diana does not go out searching for information to "explain" the folk customs she is witnessing. Instead, she unpacks the boxes left behind for her by her predecessor as a new resident, rather than a visitor. When going through the house, Diana finds belongings from Teresa Flores, including her own personal memorabilia and research materials regarding the area's mysterious illness, which is attributed—in the newspaper clippings Diana finds—to pesticides used in farming. These boxes constitute a kind of domestic archive documenting public health, hinting at a scarcely buried racism that will come increasingly to the fore. They also facilitate Diana's experiences of both the supernatural forces within the film and the sources of medical control over women's bodies. Two processes are set into

motion by this discovery. The first is that Diana intentionally turns all of her attention to uncovering everything she can about the pesticides. This process will lead her to the county clerk's office and will also require getting in touch with local towns that had previously experienced similar problems and somehow overcame them. The second process happens on a supernatural register. By turning the crank on a musical jewelry box, Diana sets in motion a ghostly intervention that will continue to play an important role throughout the film. Anita, the community's spiritual guide and the person many in the community trust for medical advice, seems to understand the potential for the house's archives to transfer influences; when Diana mentions them to her—asking if she should mail Teresa's things anywhere—she responds abruptly, instructing Diana to "leave it." The archive, however, won't be left alone. The conscious influence of the archive combines with its supernatural force to pull Diana further into the mystery. It is both the story she uncovers about pesticides—which ends up being a misdirection away from the real cause of the women's illness—and her falling backwards out of her chair after seeing Teresa that sends Diana further into the community's corrupt medical system.

Once she's learned what she can from the domestic archive in her home, Diana moves to institutional records. During the scene at the county clerk's office, the film switches to a technique it uses at no other point. The screen splits into different segments, separating Diana's hands from her body at certain moments and portraying multiple distances from the boxes at the same time (Figure 5). This serves a couple of functions. In one sense, it indicates the passage of time, as we are to understand that Diana is pulling multiple boxes and engaging in research for hours. In another, it highlights the strict compartmentalization of the institutional archive. In opposition to the domestic archive, which included personal photographs and other of Teresa's belongings—all things which conveyed a sense of her as an individual—the institutional archive is cold, atomized, and structured. Though this archive is available to the public, the process Diana goes through in researching there is more arduous and depersonalized. While she finds most of what she is looking for by leaning—it seems—on her professional credentials as a journalist and researcher, one of the most important discoveries comes from another supernatural intervention. Diana is about to leave the archive when she hears the lullaby from Teresa's jewelry box playing in the distance. She follows this impossible noise to a separate section of the archive where she discovers Teresa's death records. This discovery demonstrates that Diana's research process is guided by two distinct methodologies that reveal different types of information: the scope of the problem—on a level that affects the larger

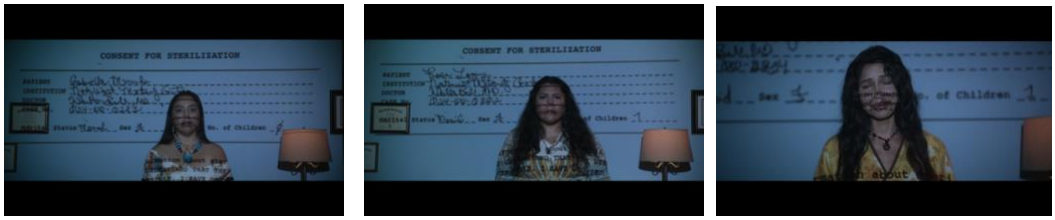
population—is uncovered through her conventional research methods, while Teresa's individual narrative demands its own attention through supernatural intervention. The supernatural intervention adds a sensorial, emotional history that calls on the current generation to remedy an injustice through sensing the pain and lived experiences of the people represented in the archive. This melding of two epistemological investments—practical and sensorial—will return as a key requirement for Diana to uncover the full truth of the problem plaguing the community.

Figure 5: This image captures the split-screen technique used during the scene in the film where Diana pursues research in a state archive (Zaragoza 2021).

The next archive Diana confronts is the doctor's office where she finds medical records documenting "consent for sterilization." As a previous scene made clear, these forms represent anything but consent, as the women who signed them were forced into the agreements for no medical reason and only for the purpose of pursuing a racist, eugenicist project. This flattened archive of injustice is immediately animated, however, by a stylistic innovation. Scenes from earlier in the film—in which women answered, in small-talk settings, questions about their children or lack thereof—are replayed to different effect. Moments where women had seemingly casually expressed their desire to have more children are repeated—with the same dialogue—in a more sombre tone,

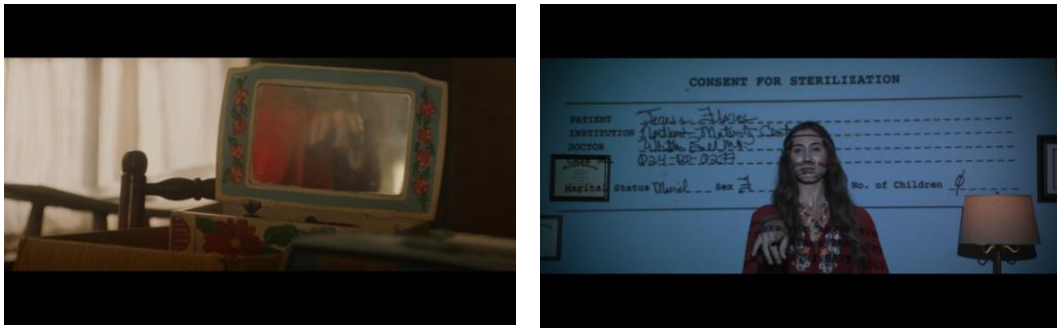
allowing new meaning to take shape in the same words. Rather than making seemingly off-hand comments, the women deliver these pieces of dialogue now as heart-wrenching evidence of the eugenics project that has victimized them. Introducing this archival form that layers oral testimony from previous scenes in the film together with the sterilization forms helps the audience to comprehend *Madres* itself as a material artifact of hidden histories in its own right, and therefore open to being manipulated and called upon later to serve a new narrative.

In this sequence, the two types of archival processes that have been playing different, but linked roles throughout Diana's quest for information—the quest for verifiable, empirical evidence and the supernatural intrusion of a haunting Diana does not want to accept as real—collapse into one as the documents are projected onto the wall with the women whose lives they represent standing in front of them. In these moments, it is unclear whether the women are ghost-like manifestations or a vision happening only within Diana's head. Whether happening in the physical world or only psychologically, the text transposed across the women's faces reinforces the connection between embodied experience and archival capture, as well as the incomplete nature of skewed and unethical archival representations. This is made all the more striking by the visual entwinement of the women's bodies with the archival text (Figures 6-8). The projected words appear on the women's faces and bodies at a mismatched angle to the document, so there is an interruption between the outline of their bodies and the text on the archival records. This both connects their bodies with the documents—some things appear to line up—and also insists on their separation and misalignment. The documents in the medical office are shown to be fragmented, distorted, and out of kilter with the fullness of the women's experiences and resistance.



Figures 6–8: These frames show the unique layering archival process at play in *Madres,* as the women Diana has encountered return as embodied presences in order that the documents in the archive are unable to depict a distorted perception of reality. (Zaragoza 2021)

Without the inclusion of previous scenes in which the women tell their stories in their own voices, the forms would tell a story of medical "consent," a grotesque inversion of the reality of the doctor's practices. An archival researcher confined to the realm of realism would only find this paper trail. The papers, however, are not allowed to speak for themselves. Instead, the women speak, as Diana repeats her conversations with each of the three women. These are exact repetitions of dialogue that took place earlier in the film, only this time the women's faces convey the true sorrow of what their off-hand comments about fertility and plans for parenthood actually meant. Including Diana in these conversations highlights the role she has played thus far in the story, implicating the researcher in the other realities that surround her that she has—thus far—struggled to understand.



Figures 9-10: Teresa's hand gesture from the first, domestic-based archive is mirrored in the film's climactic archival reveal (Zaragoza 2021)

When her search brings her to the archival records on Teresa Flores, Teresa's hand reappears, echoing an earlier scene when she appeared in the music box (Figures 9-10). This time, when Diana follows the gesture of Teresa's ghost, she finds the record that explains how Teresa died—"complications from tubal ligation." The message Teresa has been trying to convey to Diana is now received in its full scope, a story of personal loss, structural and historical indictment, *and* irreconcilable grief that is continuing on into the present.

Like the other folk horror protagonists discussed above, Diana's process through the narrative has been spurred by archival investigations and a sense of vulnerability. Unlike Sergeant Howie, however, Diana is not destroyed by this process but kept alive; Teresa needs Diana to tell the story of what happened to her as she works to end the ongoing practice of forced sterilization. Archives and counter-archives come together in pursuit of this goal, as Diana pieces together information from Teresa's boxes, the county clerk's office, and Dr.

Bell's own files to get a clearer picture of *la maldición*. *Madres,* then, privileges neither the epistemologies of the folk nor of the outside researcher but develops a method by which the two come together so that one can fill the gaps inevitably left behind by the other. Anita's methods provide help to the community, Beto is able to prove the presence of a supernatural malady with his egg test, and the striking appearance of Teresa's ghost saves Diana's life. At the same time, Diana's research—though sometimes dismissive of folk knowledge—brings to light the full scope of the medical conspiracy against the women in the community in a way that had not happened before her arrival.

If the conversations between Diana and the other women highlight the relationship between the researcher and the researched, then the paratextual segments at the end of *Madres* expand this to include the film audience, as well. Lest the viewer assume eugenics is an ugly history consigned to the past, Zaragoza provides information not only about the history of such violence, but also contemporary iterations of the same crisis, underscoring the lack of accountability and justice for those who have been victims of forced sterilization. *Madres* stands apart from folk horror's tendencies to draw a stark distinction between the past and present as the contemporary archival clips draw attention to the role of creative narrative in making visible the injustices dominant structures of history refuse to acknowledge.

These paratextual elements bookend the opening quotation from Joseph Conrad, which reads: "The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary; men alone are quite capable of every wickedness." Including this quote—which originates from Conrad's 1911 novel *Under Western Eyes*—complicates the use of paratextual artifacts at the end of the film. Taken together, the combined paratextual references continue the film's interest in a multifaceted archival presentation which incorporates a range of narratives, both literary and journalistic. The perspective voiced in the quote—that believing in supernatural evil is superfluous given the extent of violence committed by human beings—aligns with Diana's view throughout the film, as she focuses her research on the secular causes for the illness plaguing the community. This perspective—though not necessarily contradicted by the film since it is a secular, human-driven evil that is plaguing the community—is complicated by the inclusion of supernatural forces of resistance. While a belief in a "supernatural source of evil" may not be necessary, *Madres* seems to suggest that extraphysical goodness is vital for survival.

As I have shown, including *Madres* within the lineage of folk horror highlights the centrality of archival research both to the modality's roots and its contemporary iterations. Catalogued, classified, and housed in locations

detached from their points of origin, material archives are inherently sites of mediation, between past and present, catalogued and cataloguer, researcher and document. While this is explicit within *Madres,* linking the film back to earlier works of folk horror allows us to see those narratives as themselves mediated by material culture, documentation practices, and the exchange between "insider" and "outsider" accounts of history. As Dawn Keetley has argued, since most folk horror scholarship concentrates on a British canon of texts, attention beyond this tradition will likely lead to the emergence of "different chronologies and definitions" (2020, 3). By linking the importance of archives in canonical British folk horror to their employment in U.S. films, I hope to have contributed to the much larger project of knitting together a networked definition of folk horror that is responsive to an ever-expanding web of texts engaging with localized mythologies, histories, and counternarratives from their respective corners of the world.

Ultimately, much of the fear deriving from familiar folk horror touchpoints in *Madres*—social anxiety surrounding the new community, revulsion at Anita's tactics for dispelling *la maldición*—are revealed, by the end of the film, to be misplaced. One could argue, then, that the film is not folk horror but a decoy of that modality. I would suggest, however, that it is this bait-and-switch approach to the trappings of folk horror that makes *Madres* especially productive for our understanding of the term. Self-conscious folk horror, like *Madres*, requires a new cataloguing of the assumptions and epistemologies that shape narrative expectations, build canons, and process fear. This type of folk horror turns the researcher's flashlight in every direction: illuminating the folk community as it traces the historical path that led to its current position, revealing the shadows of the "modern" world while obliterating any illusion of separation from its agricultural laborers, and shining straight into the eyes of the researcher themselves and the film audience for which they are a proxy.

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