

“I’ll Be a Teacher, Just Like Mama”: Miss Vera and the Politics of Racist Education in Little Marvin’s *Them*



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Abstract: Little Marvin’s *Them: Covenant* (Amazon Prime Video, 2021), the first installment of the anthology series *Them*, mobilizes supernatural horror to expose the enduring legacies of racism, segregation, and intergenerational trauma in the United States. This paper examines how *Them: Covenant* uses horror conventions, such as haunted-houses and supernatural monsters as allegories for the structural violence confronting African Americans, and more specifically explores how the series exposes the racialized mechanisms embedded within educational institutions in post-war America. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, this paper situates *Them: Covenant* within the broader tradition of Black horror, a genre that reclaims horror conventions to expose racial oppression and the persistence of systemic inequality while bringing historically marginalized experiences into mainstream cultural narratives. The paper focuses on the character of Miss Vera, a narrative device through which the series explores how White supremacist ideology shapes the educational experiences of Black children and restricts their access to social mobility through exclusion, surveillance, and psychological violence. Alongside Miss Vera, the paper examines other forms of supernatural “hauntings” in the series to highlight the connections between educational exclusion and broader histories of racial trauma and displacement, challenging narratives of colorblindness and meritocracy that continue to underpin American institutions.

Keywords: Black Horror; Critical Race Theory; *Them*; Little Marvin; Education; American television

Résumé : *Them: Conventant* (Amazon Prime Video, 2021), premier volet de la série anthologique *Them* créée par Little Marvin, mobilise les codes de l’horreur surnaturelle pour mettre en lumière les héritages persistants du racisme, de la ségrégation et des traumatismes transgénérationnels aux Etats-Unis. Cet article analyse la manière dont la série recourt à des motifs classiques du genre horrifique, tels que la maison

hantée ou les créatures surnaturelles, comme métaphores des violences structurelles auxquelles sont confrontées les populations afro-américaines. Il s'intéresse plus particulièrement à la façon dont *Them: Covenant* dévoile les mécanismes de racialisation à l'œuvre dans les institutions éducatives de l'Amérique de l'après-guerre.

En s'appuyant sur la théorie critique de la race (*Critical Race Theory*), cette étude inscrit *Them: Covenant* dans la tradition plus large de l'horreur noire (*Black Horror*), un courant qui réinvestit les conventions du genre pour dénoncer les formes d'oppression raciale et la persistance des inégalités systémiques, tout en donnant une place centrale à des expériences longtemps marginalisées dans les récits culturels dominants. L'analyse se concentre sur le personnage de Miss Vera, utilisé comme un ressort narratif permettant d'explorer la manière dont l'idéologie suprémaciste blanche façonne l'expérience scolaire des enfants noirs et entrave leur mobilité sociale par des mécanismes d'exclusion, de contrôle et de violence psychologique. Au-delà du personnage de Miss Vera, l'article s'intéresse également aux différentes formes de « hantise » qui traversent la série afin de mettre en évidence les liens entre l'exclusion scolaire et les histoires plus larges de traumatisme racial, de déplacement forcé et de dépossession. Il montre ainsi comment la série remet en question les discours de neutralité raciale et de méritocratie qui continuent de structurer les institutions américaines.

Mots-clés : Black Horror ; Critical Race Theory ; Them ; Little Marvin ; éducation ; télévision américaine

Introduction

Little Marvin's anthology series *Them* (Amazon Prime Video, 2021–2024) is a psychological horror drama that mobilizes supernatural horror to interrogate deeply rooted historical traumas in the United States, particularly racism, segregation, and intergenerational trauma. The first season of the series, *Them: Covenant* (2021), the subject of this study, follows a Black family who relocates from North Carolina to an all-White neighborhood in 1950s Los Angeles during the Great Migration. On the surface, *Them: Covenant* adopts the conventions of the haunted-house narrative, but beneath this framework, the narrative unfolds around a host of supernatural forces that prey upon the family's fear, grief, and social isolation, transforming racial hostility into a form of psychological and spectral terror.

While supernatural horror in the series takes the form of a hostile entity that “possesses” its victims through various manifestations, this paper focuses specifically on one of these incarnations called Miss Vera, who takes the shape of a schoolteacher and attaches itself to the family's youngest daughter, Gracie Jean, or Gracie. The paper analyzes Miss Vera as the embodiment of the complicity of the American school system in the devaluation and marginalization of African American children and

how it ultimately obstructs their access to social mobility. Through this figure, the series exposes the power mechanisms through which mainstream institutions police belonging and restrict access to the promises of the American Dream. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, the paper argues that Miss Vera symbolizes a White supremacist educational structure that reinforces racial hierarchies and sustains systemic inequality by keeping Black students in a state of stasis and paralysis.

The analysis begins with an overview of the horror genre's growing engagement with racial issues, particularly through the lens of "Black horror," a sub-genre that uses horror tropes to articulate the ongoing failure to achieve racial and social justice in America. Special attention will be paid to the emergence of Black horror as a mode of cinematic expression that has moved from the margins of film and television production into mainstream popular culture, by placing Black experiences at the center of a genre traditionally dominated by White protagonists and perspectives.

Race, Representation, and Horror Conventions

Black horror provides a particularly productive framework for examining how racial power operates through everyday institutions and social practices. In *Them: Covenant*, the use of this genre not only serves to depict the aspects with racial terror but also reveals the quieter, more insidious ways in which racism is reproduced through spaces conventionally associated with safety, belonging, and social advancement, including the family home and the school. In an interview with *Collider*, Marvin explains that in order to write a narrative packed with such complexity, horror provided a useful narrative framework, thanks to its "tremendous capability of couching really complex and nuanced social conversations in a package that is palatable" (Radish, 2021). In this sense, the series incorporates multiple supernatural entities that prey upon the characters' insecurities and traumatic histories, drawing on the Black horror tradition of mobilizing the supernatural to allegorize the racial grievances of African Americans and the enduring legacies of slavery and segregation.

"Black horror," a term coined by Robin R. Means Coleman in her book *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* (2011), refers to a genre that uses traditional horror conventions to explore Black culture and experiences, particularly the question of race. Means Coleman distinguishes between this term and "Blacks in horror" films, that is, films that merely feature Black characters. This genre challenges the longstanding marginalization and stereotyping of Black

individuals within horror cinema, a genre that often functions as a microcosm of broader systemic racial dynamics (Means Coleman, 2011).

Kevin Wynter (Wynter, 2022), who observes that American horror films “have historically been unkind” to Black characters, argues that the relegation of Black individuals to secondary roles reflects a longstanding tendency within the genre, whereby Black characters serve merely as auxiliaries to White protagonists, are reduced to sources of comic relief, or are sacrificed early in the narrative (2022: 4). In very similar terms, Catherine Zimmer (2023: 314) notes that horror has historically been “unkind to racial Others,” a tendency rooted in the Gothic tradition, where racial alterity is often coded as monstrous. In her book *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (1997), Isabel Cristina Pinedo argues that race functions as a “structuring absence” in most mainstream horror films, which feature predominantly White characters, while racial minorities are either excluded or positioned as disposable victims. This absence reflects both the dominance of Whiteness as an “unmarked” category and the theoretical frameworks that have prioritized gender over race (29).

Means Coleman (2011) delineates a spectrum of archetypes in the history of the representation of Black characters in the horror genre, some of which closely echo the racial typologies outlined in Donald Bogle’s *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks* (2003), where Blackness is historically confined to marginal cinematic roles. These include representing Blacks as objects of ridicule and associating them with violence and zoomorphic imagery in works like D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack’s *King Kong* (1933). This representational marginalization also took the shape of relegating Black characters to secondary roles or defining them through their loyalty to White protagonists (Means Coleman, 2011).

While Black Horror benefited from the expansion of the home video market and offered more significant roles for Black actors in the 1990s, it was especially the late 2010s and early 2020s that Black horror saw an increased preoccupation with contemporary systemic racism, such as the mass incarceration of Black males under “the New Jim Crow” (Alexander, 2010). This cinematic shift was precipitated by the increased visibility of state-sanctioned violence and heightened racial tensions through social media, but it also took advantage of the increasing dialogue between film and Critical Race Theory, which, taken together, offers a useful framework for fostering dialogue on race and representation (Wynter, 2022:4).

Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019), and *Nope* (2022), along with *Bad Hair* (Simien, 2020), *Black Box* (Osei-Kuffour Jr., 2020), *His*

House (Weekes, 2020), *Antebellum* (Bush & Renz, 2020), and *Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021), are part of this wave, which Allison Landsberg (2018) identifies as a distinct subgenre and terms “horror vérité”. Landsberg posits that unlike traditional horror, which operates through escapism, “horror vérité” reveals everyday realities as the true horrors and exposes “the very real, but often masked, racial landscape of a professedly liberal post-racial America” (2018: 629). She further notes that the cinematic conventions of horror vérité use “a specific set of formal and narrative strategies” that are “uniquely suited to render everyday, endemic and chronic horror – a horror that many in U.S. society do not, or perhaps more accurately refuse, to see” (2018: 630). Alexandra Hauke’s term “critical race horror” (2021) is instrumental in enabling a reading of Black horror films “through the intersectional lens of critical race horror,” as this definition looks into the subgenre’s exploration of “emerging discourses around the intersecting categories of Black history and Black horror” (Hauke, 2021:36).

Schooling Whiteness: Education and Racial Formation

The proliferation of Black horror in cinema has increasingly permeated the medium of television, although at a slower rate than film. Series such as *Lovecraft Country* (Misha Green, HBO, 2020), *Them: Covenant* (Little Marvin, Amazon Prime Video, 2021), *Them: The Scare* (Little Marvin, Amazon Prime Video, 2024), and *The Underground Railroad* (Barry Jenkins, Amazon Prime Video, 2021) have contributed to the expansion of Black horror and racialized storytelling on television.

Little Marvin’s *Them: Covenant*, the focus of this analysis, follows a nuclear family of four as they migrate from the Jim Crow South to suburban Compton in Los Angeles in 1953. Their move becomes possible through the legal dismantling of discriminatory housing restrictions known as racial covenants, clauses historically designed to prevent Black families from purchasing property in White neighborhoods. The Emory family consists of Henry (played by Ashley Thomas), a military veteran and civil engineer; Livia, or Luck (played by Deborah Ayorinde), his wife and a former teacher; and their daughters, Ruby Lee, or Ruby, (played by Shahadi Wright Joseph) and Gracie Jean, or Gracie, (played by Melody Hurd) who are in high school and kindergarten respectively. Prior to their relocation to California, the family suffered the traumatic lynching of their infant son Chester at the hands of White Supremacists in North Carolina, an event that the show revisits in its fifth episode through flashback. The family’s westward migration can be read as part of their search for healing and renewal, marked by the deliberate creation of both physical

and psychological distance from the traumas of the Jim Crow South. At the same time, the move reflects their desire to align themselves with the promises of the postwar conceptualization of the “American Dream,” associated with prosperity, homeownership, and social mobility, as evidenced by their conversation about the future during the trip, in which they discuss the prospect of purchasing a new car (“Day 1,” 00:04:51).

As the camera follows the family’s car and trailer along the road westward, an on-screen text situates the narrative within its broader historical context, linking the Emorys’ journey to the larger movement of the Great Migration:

Between 1916 and 1970, roughly 6 million African Americans relocated from the rural southern United States to the Northeast, Midwest and West. Widely known as the Great Migration, many Black families were drawn to California by the promise of industrial jobs and a chance to leave the Jim Crow South behind. On September 14, 1953, Henry and Livia ‘Lucky’ Emory moved their family from Chatham County, North Carolina to Compton, California. The following occurred over 10 days in the family’s new home at 3011 Palmer Drive (“Day 1” 00:05:47).

The introductory scene immediately grounds the series in the realities of racial displacement and segregation, but also establishes the deep entanglement between the family’s trauma and their pursuit of a better future. It is on this tension that Marvin establishes the foundation of the narrative, as the Emory family’s search for happiness is immediately ensnared within a network of systemic, racialized barriers. This is later embodied in the hostility of White neighbors, the discrimination Henry faces in the workplace, the predatory real estate structures that lure Black families into segregated and hostile neighborhoods with the expectation of eventual displacement, and the bullying and racialized violence the daughters experience in their predominantly White school environments. These antagonistic elements merge with supernatural forces that the family encounter upon moving to Compton, triggered by the specific emotional vulnerabilities and psychological fractures of each member of the family. In the case of Gracie, the Emorys’ youngest daughter, the figure of Miss Vera embodies the classic “possessing entity” of horror conventions.

Miss Vera’s first appearance occurs during the family’s trip to California in the opening episode, during which Gracie and Ruby occupy themselves by leafing through various publications. Ruby reads a women’s magazine filled with images of White celebrities and models, while Gracie turns to a book entitled *Miss Vera Says*, an illustrated didactic text that prescribes proper behavior for young girls through the authoritative voice

of the fictional schoolteacher called Miss Vera. In one of the book's illustrations, Miss Vera is depicted as a tall, austere though benevolent-looking figure, dressed in a prim high-collared gown and wearing a tightly pulled-back hairstyle ("Day 1" 00:05:47). Both the book and magazine appear to function as vehicles of ideological conditioning structured around Whiteness. *Miss Vera Says* encodes Eurocentric pedagogical norms and presents them as universal standards of conduct, while the women's magazine constructs and circulates ideals of feminine beauty from which Black femininity is systematically excluded. In this sense, both texts participate in a broader cultural apparatus that naturalizes Whiteness as the implicit benchmark of propriety, desirability, and social legitimacy.

Gracie's second encounter with Miss Vera occurs the following day, when Livia discovers her youngest daughter staging an imaginary classroom in which she assumes the role of teacher to her dolls and repeats directives she attributes to Miss Vera. These include: "Miss Vera says to be a good little girl, always mind our teachers too," and "Miss Vera says good little girls should mind their teacher," before she expresses her desire to attend a "real school" ("Day 1" 00:29:00). Several elements in this scene underscore the series' nuanced critique of schooling and education. Although Gracie is about to begin pre-school, her imaginative play positions her in a dual role: she is simultaneously a student of Miss Vera and a teacher to her dolls. This doubling signals a more complex relationship with education than simple anticipation or excitement about school. Her make-believe activity reveals how her early understanding of school operates across three interconnected registers: the real (her imminent entry into formal schooling), the imaginary (her interaction with Miss Vera and her role as a teacher within play), and the hypothetical (her desire to become a teacher like her mother that she had expressed the day before). Taken together, these layers suggest that school functions at once as a space of aspiration, imagination, and ideological formation.

Moreover, the Black dolls that Gracie uses as pretend students underscore the reciprocal relationship between teacher and learner. They may be considered as a counterpoint to the images of blonde, White celebrities on the magazine cover Ruby reads in the car the day before, since Gracie up to this point, is still largely unexposed to racialized forms of social conditioning through school compared to her sister Ruby. The dolls and the images in the magazines therefore appear to occupy opposing ends of the representational spectrum. The magazine plays a central role in shaping Ruby's persistent desire to align herself with White beauty standards throughout the series, which is later reflected in the construction of her imaginary White friend, Doris. By contrast, the dolls reflect Gracie's comparatively less mediated relationship with her Black identity, since they offer a space for imaginative play that does not yet fracture her sense of self.

While the classroom setting and the dolls carry seemingly positive associations with learning, they are also fraught with symbols of power dynamics. The stick Gracie uses while “teaching” her dolls—and which we see Miss Vera carrying in Gracie’s book—reproduces the authority structure typical of formal schooling, where control is visually and symbolically concentrated in the figure of the teacher. Her performance thus reveals an early internalization of normative frameworks rooted in White disciplinary authority. In addition, even if the dolls reflect Gracie’s unproblematic relationship with her identity, they carry ambivalent symbolism within the broader visual economy of the series. In Episode 4, they turn into instruments of oppression, when the Emorys’ White neighbors reenact a lynching by hanging Black dolls in their porch (“Day 4” 00:00:45). When Henry leaves the house the following morning, he notices White children silently observing him (“Day 4” 00:01:27). The act transforms the dolls into a disturbing signifier of racial terror and suggests that racist ideologies are reproduced through generational transmission. Within this framework, the dolls acquire an ambivalent status: on the one hand, they enable Gracie to imagine herself following in her mother’s professional footsteps; on the other, they become ominous symbols of the racial violence and structural oppression she is likely to encounter if the White children follow in their parents’ footsteps.

In light of this, Livia’s presence in this scene lends Gracie’s experience to a more affirmative dimension. She is not only a mother but also a role model, since she had previously worked as a teacher. When Gracie asks whether she misses school, Livia responds, “I miss my students every day” (00:29:28). Her statement underscores her emotional and ethical investment in education, which echoes bell hooks’s argument in *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000) regarding the central role of female African American teachers within their communities, particularly in guiding children through complex social realities while combining academic instruction with emotional and moral support. This nurturing and reciprocal bond between mother and daughter mirrors the teacher–student relationship and highlights both the importance of schooling for Black girls and the figure of the “good” teacher as a stabilizing presence.

Racial Trauma as Absence

Although Livia’s teaching is never directly shown on screen, it is evoked through fragmented references. The first of these moments occurs in the opening episode during the family’s trip to Compton, when Gracie declares, “one day, I’ll be a teacher, just like Mama,” shortly after Livia awakens from a disturbing dream in which she relives the flashback of

her son’s murder (00:05:20). A similar moment appears in a flashback in Episode 2 involving Ruby Lee before the family leaves North Carolina, when Livia encourages her to aim for A’s rather than B’s (“Day 2” 00:02:00). These sporadic references to Livia’s work as a teacher are not incidental. The narrative repeatedly implies that the daughters’ education is inseparable from Livia’s profession, which blurs the boundary between Livia’s role as a mother and her profession.

These references also point to a significant absence at the core of the narrative, which can be read as a deliberate structural gap. Because Livia’s professional identity is repeatedly invoked but never fully developed, the narrative produces a sense of “incompleteness.” Although the narrative remains deliberately vague about why Livia quit her job, this absence may be linked to her inability to continue her profession following the murder of her son, Chester. The residual traces of her work therefore function less as biographical detail than as narrative fragments, with the references signaling a suspension of Livia’s professional identity. The absence ends up creating a conceptual and emotional void that Miss Vera ultimately comes to occupy within Gracie’s world. In this sense, it parallels the emergence of other supernatural figures that begin to haunt the Emory family as soon as they settle into their new home, each of them embodying psychological and affective aspects of trauma, displacement, and loss.¹ At a semantic level, the figure of Miss Vera itself encodes this tension: the title “Miss” signals absence, distance, and a disrupted form of presence, while “Vera”—derived from the Latin *veritas*, meaning “truth”—ironically destabilizes its own claim to authenticity, as the character functions precisely through deception and illusion. The word “miss” equally echoes Livia’s loss of her professional identity, which she explicitly articulates when she states to Gracie that she “misses” her students.

This breakdown at the heart of Livia’s identity is reinforced through the theme of mental instability. Early signs of this deterioration appear in Episode 1, during the scene where Livia interacts with Gracie as she plays teacher with her dolls. When Gracie begins singing “Old Black Joe” to her mother and claims that Miss Vera had taught her the song, Livia experiences a flashback to the day her son was murdered, as the song was sung to her by one of the perpetrators. The song also carries a broader racial significance, since plantation nostalgia is a dominant theme in this song, and since it was written by Stephen C. Foster, who is famous for writing famous plantation songs that became associated with minstrel performances such

1. These hauntings are contextualized through the revelation of a curse rooted in Compton’s foundational history, disclosed in Episode 9, “Covenant II,” when Dutch settlers violently lynch a Black couple that sought refuge in their community. From that point onward, the curse manifests in multiple forms that target Black residents who move into Compton, through mental destabilization, paranoia, and, ultimately, the forced abandonment of their homes.

as “My Old Kentucky Home” (Lynch, 2024). Livia reacts by grabbing Gracie by her shoulders and shaking her to stop her from singing, but the outburst frightens the child, who then asks, “You’re not crazy anymore, right, Mama?” (“Day 1” 00:30:00)

Through Gracie’s question, the narrative shifts its focus more explicitly toward Livia’s trauma and psychological deterioration. As the series progresses, Livia begins to behave unpredictably and experiences intrusive thoughts, including fantasies of harming her children. Her instability becomes so pronounced that Ruby starts to think that their mother may have killed her infant brother. Livia is eventually institutionalized after it is revealed in Episode 8 (“Day 9”) that she had exhumed Chester’s remains and placed them in a box, which she brings to Compton. The motif of insanity thus becomes central to the series’ portrayal of Black womanhood, since it draws attention to how Black women’s mental health is frequently pathologized without adequate recognition of the structural violence and racial trauma underlying their suffering. This pattern is further reflected through other characters, notably through the story of Arnette Beaumont (played by Latarsha Rose), another Black resident of Compton who murders both her husband and child after being “possessed” by the supernatural force tied to the town’s curse in Episode 6.

By linking psychological collapse to histories of racial terror and displacement, the series reframes “madness” not as an individual pathology, but as a response to systemic oppression and inherited trauma. Livia’s institutionalization can also be interpreted within the long history of controlling Black women’s bodies through medical and institutional practices that discipline, regulate, and punish Black womanhood, as evidenced by her interactions with the psychiatrist assigned to her case, Dr. Moynihan in Episode 8. Although Dr. Frances Moynihan (played by Kate McNeil) tells Henry that she specializes in treating Black women with conditions similar to Livia’s (“Day 9”), her treatment centers on mutual surveillance, and electroshock therapy, and sequestering patients from their families, all designed to render her patients more docile.

Such tactics operate as forms of emotional control rooted in isolation and psychological coercion. Dr. Moynihan’s assertion that she understands “the pressures facing [Livia] are different from those of a normal woman” also exposes the failure of medical practice to address the violence that pushes Black women to psychological breaking points. Instead of confronting the conditions producing trauma, institutional frameworks frequently redirect blame onto Black mothers themselves, by portraying them as emotionally unstable or inherently inadequate. This dynamic echoes bell hooks’s discussion of the psychological toll of racism and sexism on Black women:

I believe that on some deeper level, black women are used to tragedy. We expect it. Death is not a stranger to our lives, to our worlds. We've lost our fathers to hypertension and heart attacks, our brothers to frontline battles in American wars, our husbands and lovers to black-on-black crime or police brutality, and our sons to drug-laced streets or upstate prisons. All this while grappling with the stress and burden of all that is black life in America: Babies born to babies, dehumanizing ghettos, inferior schools, low wages, on-the-job racism...the slow but steady death of our people. We are just used to pain (hooks, 2015: 115).

Hooks also underscores the emotional labor involved in concealing pain and donning a “mask of ‘normalcy’ even when we know we are suffering life-threatening “blues” (2015: 117). Likewise, Livia’s mental breakdown reflects the gradual disintegration of her identity to her increasing inability to maintain the normalcy of “performing” her dual role as mother and teacher.

Within this context, Miss Vera comes to embody the void produced by Livia’s collapse, leaving Gracie emotionally defenseless and vulnerable. This fragility becomes more prominent as Gracie’s encounters with Miss Vera increase in frequency. In Episode 6, while reciting the Pledge of Allegiance at school, Gracie suddenly catches a glimpse of Miss Vera staring at her through the classroom window, which causes her to forget the words of the pledge and to start acting frantically (“Day 7” 00:23:13). Her teacher then summons Livia and insists that Gracie be removed from the classroom, claiming that she is “not ready for this level of education” and that her presence disrupts “the ones here to learn” (“Day 7” 00:27:20). The visual and sonic aesthetics of this scene—combining the alphabet, the American flag, and the recitation of patriotic discourse—are reintroduced in a later Episode 10 (“Day 10” 00:24:55) during Gracie’s final confrontation with Miss Vera, who threatens her with a stick as the patriotic song “My Country, ’Tis of Thee” plays in the background. Placed side by side, the two scenes, one set in an actual classroom and the other in a distorted, spectral version of it, indicate that ideals associated with American democracy, citizenship, and equality are but empty rhetoric.

The spectral classroom in which Gracie finds herself after she is excluded from the “real” classroom mirrors a movement from the “mainstream” learning space to the ramshackle and historically under-resourced learning spaces imposed on Black children, and which function as tools of degradation, containment, and racialized exclusion. As Miss Vera leaks from the pages of a children’s book into Gracie’s lived reality, Gracie’s first school experience becomes “contaminated,” forcing her to internalize the psychological burden of navigating a racist educational system, much as

her sister has already begun to do (Ruby has a similar experience, when her teacher decides to send her to timeout after her White classmates begin harassing her by imitating ape noises in Episode 2 “Day 3”). In this process, Miss Vera is no longer a fictional figure that imitates “real” teachers; instead, it is “real” teachers who begin to mirror her, and it is precisely this reversal that epitomizes true horror in Gracie’s experience.

The series thus establishes a direct relationship between racist educational environments and the psychological fragmentation of Black children and suggests that schools can turn into sites that reproduce and recycle racial trauma. While the open ending in which the Emorys confront the police and their neighbors (Episode 10 “Day 10” 00:46:43) provides no clear resolution to the family’s trial, this moment illustrates how the white-washing of the American Dream in postwar America happens in concert with racial trauma. The focus on this theme gains further prominence in Season 2, *Them: The Scare* (2024), where the curse of Compton continues to haunt the descendants of the Emory family in 1990s Los Angeles, illustrating how trauma is transferred across generations in a way that profoundly shapes Black experience. This cumulative process illustrates Joy DeGruy’s conceptualization of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), a term she uses to refer to the results of multigenerational trauma from centuries of slavery, compounded with ongoing oppression, institutionalized racism, and the belief that society’s benefits are inaccessible (2005). Within this framework, the classroom itself becomes one of the key institutional spaces where PTSS is reproduced, because of the repeated exposure to exclusion, discipline, and racialized invalidation that young Black learners are subjected to.

Another aspect of this trauma is the state of psychological stasis in which the family is trapped, visible not only in the way Compton’s red-lined neighborhoods continue to reproduce the Jim Crow South despite the family’s relocation, but also in the way historical trauma halts their forward momentum, symbolized most powerfully by the son’s exhumed remains that Livia kept in her closet. Hauke weaves her analysis of critical race horror with the history of Black physical restriction, which she reads through what sociologist Mimi Sheller calls “mobility regimes,” to refer to systems that historically and currently safeguard White power by defining who can move freely and who is forcibly immobilized or policed (Sheller, 2018).

The family’s migration in *Them: Covenant* shows that geographical movement for Black Americans is a highly policed and politically charged battleground over who has the right to move and where they can settle. The show deconstructs the romanticized illusion of the open road by delineating the redlining policies that permeate every communal, institutional

and emotional facet of Black experience, including schooling. This emotional and geographical immobility is mapped onto the education of the two Emory daughters, whose presence in all-White schools triggers the defense mechanisms of White mobility regimes. In this sense, Miss Vera's spectral presence is a reminder of a racist antebellum school system, as she functions as a gatekeeper who denies Black children access to equitable education and inflicts terror upon Gracie for harboring aspirations that exceed the boundaries imposed by these regimes.

Gloria Ladson-Billings's research about the racialized organization of educational spaces equally offers insight into the ways in which schools often reproduce systemic inequities (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). A foundational premise of her argument is that U.S. society is built on property rights rather than human rights, and that school quality and access are deeply linked to property ownership. Whiteness itself functions as a form of "property," conferring the right to exclusion, to clean neighborhoods, and to alleged safety, and when Black families enter historically White spaces, White communities perceive it as an infringement on their property value and structural privilege. As such, the Emory family's move to East Compton is a literal attempt to claim property in a "higher quality" neighborhood, but the disproportionate reaction of the White neighbors defines the family as a threat to their exclusive property value. By extension, when both Gracie and Ruby go to their new schools, they enter a space guarded as "White property," which triggers the school system to act as an arm of the neighborhood's gatekeeping and to treat them as trespassers that violate their pristine, suburban educational ecosystem.

Ultimately, by framing these structural dynamics through the lens of critical race horror (Hauke, 2021), *Them* pulls these academic concepts into mainstream cultural discourse, and forces audiences to confront the reality that institutions designed to nurture and educate have historically functioned as extensions of racial exclusion. If mainstream ideology relies on the premise of meritocracy, by assuming that educational institutions naturally reward hard work regardless of race, the school narrative in *Them* directly challenges assumptions of race neutrality, meritocracy, and colorblindness in social and institutional contexts by exposing how racism is ordinarily embedded within social structures as Kevin Wynter argues (2022: 14). Being an allegory for the "hidden curriculum" of racialized policing presented in the shape of a recognizable horror trope, Miss Vera therefore serves as a tool to bridge the gap between abstract academic concepts that Critical Race Theory and mainstream horror entertainment.

Conclusion

In an interview with *Script Magazine* (Dean, 2021), Little Marvin explains in an that through *Them: Covenant*, he sought to mobilize horror as a lens through which to examine the terror experienced by Black Americans within their most intimate space: the home. The series also extends this logic to another taken-for-granted intimate institution, the school, by exposing how it too can become a site where racialized fear, discipline and psychological violence are reproduced. This idea is most clearly embodied in the figure of Miss Vera, a character who, though shaped according to conventional horror tropes of supernatural monsters, breaches conventional beliefs about the safety and fairness of educational spaces. The character not only reveals how the American school system is embedded in the racialized dimensions of Black experience but also raises broader questions about how institutional structures across education, employment, and housing work together to sustain and reproduce racial hierarchies, as evidenced by the Emory family's unresolved fate.

Moving beyond its narrative strategies, the series must also be situated within broader debates surrounding Black horror as a genre, particularly the tensions that arise as it shifts from the margins of cinematic production to increased visibility within mainstream cultural and critical discourse. In parallel with this shift, the genre has generated competing interpretations of its significance. As Gabrielle Bellot (2021) argues, it has become "America's most powerful cinematic genre," while Hannah Giorgis (2021) notes a growing fatigue surrounding narratives that risk transforming Black trauma into consumable entertainment. Yet whether understood as a critical intervention or as a contested cultural form, Black horror has undeniably reshaped contemporary discussions of race, memory, and representation. *Them: Covenant* exemplifies this dynamic by using horror to engage with emerging paradigms of racial terror, whether in the home, at work, or at school. In doing so, it drags the anxieties of Black experience from the margins of institutional critique into the mainstream cultural spotlight and sheds light on the ongoing transmission of historical trauma.

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- Bad Hair*. Directed by Justin Simien, Hulu, 2020.
- Black Box*. Directed by Emmanuel Osei-Kuffour Jr., Amazon Prime Video, 2020.
- Candyman*. Directed by Nia DaCosta, Universal Pictures, 2021.
- Get Out*. Directed by Jordan Peele, Universal Pictures, 2017.
- His House*. Directed by Remi Weekes, Netflix, 2020.
- King Kong*. Directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, RKO Radio Pictures, 1933.
- The Birth of a Nation*. Directed by D. W. Griffith, Epoch Producing Corporation, 1915.
- Us*. Directed by Jordan Peele, Universal Pictures, 2019.

Television Series

- Lovecraft Country*. Created by Misha Green, Season 1, HBO, 2020.
- The Underground Railroad*. Created by Barry Jenkins, Season 1, Amazon Prime Video, 2021.
- Them: Covenant*. Created by Little Marvin, Season 1, Amazon Prime Video, 2021.
- Them: The Scare*. Created by Little Marvin, Season 2, Amazon Prime Video, 2024.