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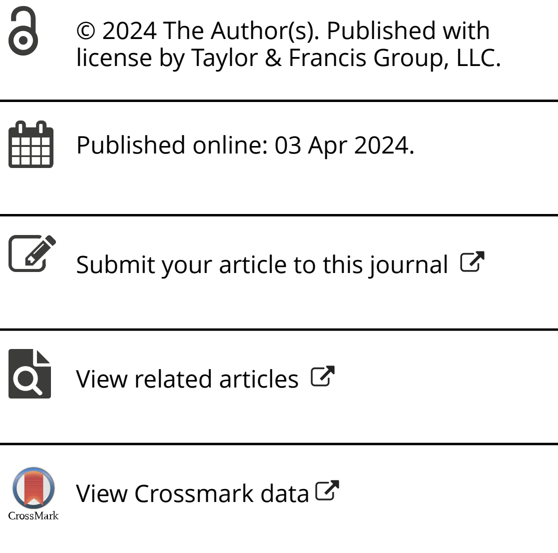

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Remembering Redlining: Trauma, Anti-Blackness, and Afro-Pessimistic Affect in *Them*

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ABSTRACT
Scholars of public memory have long recognized the importance of popular culture as a site in America's memory infrastructure. In this paper we seek to contribute to this bourgeoning scholarship by advancing an analysis of the way the Amazon Prime series *Them* strategically remembers the traumatic violence of America's racial past. Through its skillful use of allegory and the Black horror genre, *Them* offers an Afro-pessimistic rebuke of America's post-racial fantasy. Ultimately, we argue that popular culture remains a crucial site for the politics of memory, especially given the growing threat of censorship of America's racial history in education as evidenced by Florida's 2022 Stop W.O.K.E. Act.

KEYWORDS
Afro-pessimism; memory

On February 9, 2023, more than 200 students organized a walkout at Hillcrest High School in Tuscaloosa, AL to protest censorship of a Black History Month program that students had been planning for months. The Hillcrest students had prepared to use dance, music, and spoken word performance to present a timeline of Black history in the United States that featured slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and the Civil Rights activism of the mid twentieth century up until the present. They planned for each chronological period covered in the program to include performers reenacting the Black struggle in America, from picking cotton, to "Colored Only" segregated water fountains, to the Black Panther movement, rap music protesting police brutality and poverty, and the founding of Black fraternities and sororities. But Hillcrest administrators intervened to curtail the program on the grounds that the topic of slavery "made people uncomfortable" and that the planned segment on the Black Panthers was "traumatizing." Hillcrest administrators instructed the students to instead perform "happy songs" by Beyoncé and the Jackson 5. "Why am I being censored about my culture, something that is rooted in me?" Hillcrest senior Jada Holt asked in a statement to the Associated Press (2023; Sonnenberg, 2023).

The Hillcrest episode is indicative of a trend that has crept across the United States since 2021. If the summer of 2020 was marked by the historic Black Lives Matter protests that swept across the nation in the wake of George Floyd's murder at the hands of Minneapolis police, the state of American race relations since 2021 has erupted into feverish moral panics over the 1619 Project, Critical Race Theory, and

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the purported indoctrination of children by so-called "wokeness" in American schools (Craig & Rozsa, 2022). The sweeping, yet predictable, change in public attitudes and sentiments toward Blackness between 2020 and 2021 illuminates the structural predicament of anti-Blackness in the United States.

In this paper we will offer an analysis of Little Marvin's and Lena Waithe's horror series *Them*, which appeared during the spring of 2021 at the height of the moral panics over how American schools should teach the racial history of the United States. Drawing on memory studies and horror scholarship that traces the relationship between the genre's rhetorical conventions and cultural trauma, as well as theorists of Afro-pessimism, we advance an Afro-pessimistic interpretation of *Them*. We understand Marvin's and Waithe's series as a response to current post-racial ideologies that allegorically critiques the legacy of slavery, the failures of Reconstruction, and the race trauma hidden in the foundations of American society by the spatial and racial violence of American capitalism. Ultimately, we argue that *Them* offers a timely and compelling example of how popular culture helps constitute the memory infrastructure of American politics. The series is particularly important since it can be read as a popular culture artifact consciously responding to the way mainstream American culture, and now increasingly conservative state legislatures and governors, attempt to whitewash the violent history of structural racism in the United States.

Public memory of racial injustice: a field of contestation

In its broadest sense, the key word "public memory" refers to the dissemination and flow of recollections about the past within a given community. Such memories and recollections are hardly perfect records of the past, for they are often uncertain and malleable, and entail what aspects of the past are remembered, forgotten, and framed through the affective conventions of narrative. Public memory thus orbits around the social and symbolic processes through which the recollections of individuals culturally congeal to become a shared web of meaning through which a people articulate and embody a collective "we." Shared memories, however, are not neutral and are rarely uniform, thus making the past a site of conflict where different and divergent groups discursively engage over the present meaning of a shared past. "Memory" in this regard can be understood as socially negotiated meanings about the past, be they of people, ideas, artifacts, or historical events, or be they documented facts or even popular fictions that are broadly shared about these matters (Halbwachs, 1992; Zelizer, 1998).

The study of public memory is interdisciplinary, but its uptake in Communication Studies and Rhetorical Studies has cultivated a plethora of critical and theoretical approaches that continues to inform the field. Public memory has been a particularly salient topic of interest due to its focus on the role symbols and other public meaning-making practices play in discursive contests over the past. As Barbie Zelizer (1995) notes, "This recognition of conflicting renditions of the past by definition necessitates a consideration of the tensions and contestations through which one rendition wipes out many of the others" (p. 217).

Rhetorical and communication theorists have traditionally approached the question of public memory in terms of specific spaces and sites subject to memorialization.

However, in recent decades scholars have increasingly recognized public memory's salience in popular culture (Haskins, 2015; Jordan, 2008; King, 2008; Phillips, 2015). As Hasian and Carlson (2000) observe, "Nowhere is [the] struggle between competing memories more evident than in the boundaries between collective memory and popular culture" (p. 43). As popular media occupy and inform social and political perceptions of the world, film and television have become a prominent means by which popular memories attain widespread appeal and cultural circulation. Indeed, popular culture is a crucial site within the larger memory infrastructure of late modern American life.

Popular culture's role in America's memory infrastructure is of acute importance in our current era since the topic of the memory of America's racial past has become a focal point of public political dispute and controversy. Scholars of public memory have long understood that conflicts over the past are not merely disputes about the historical record, for they in fact can entail fundamental questions about the legitimacy of social and political institutions. Across the United States, activists and legislators on the political Right have coordinated the banning of books and the passage of laws that intend to restrict how matters of race and gender can be taught in American schools. Under the guise of protecting (White) children from feeling shame and discomfort about structural racism or the history of slavery, the works of Toni Morrison, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and countless other writers and artists have been banned from classroom instruction and libraries (Meehan & Friedman, 2023; Natanson, 2023). In some cases, the teaching of episodes of anti-Black racial violence, such as the Tulsa Race Massacre, is not sanctioned for classroom instruction unless the question of the role race itself played in the event is muted and unacknowledged (Otten, 2023).

Perhaps the most noteworthy of such memory laws to this point has been Florida's H.B. 7, popularly known as the "Stop W.O.K.E. Act." Signed into law in July of 2022, the Act rewrites much of Florida's educational curriculum from kindergarten through post-secondary education. H.B. 7 aggressively identifies and restricts the teaching of specific concepts related to the history and legacy of structural racism in the United States. H.B. 7 (2022) explicitly stipulates that under the Act that educational instruction or job-related training constitutes discrimination if it "espouses, promotes, advances, inculcates, or compels such student or employee to believe any of the following concepts," which includes:

> A person's moral character or status as either privileged or oppressed is necessarily determined by his or her race, color, national origin, or sex.
>
> A person, by virtue of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, bears personal responsibility for and must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress because of actions, in which the person played no part, committed in the past by other members of the same race, color, national origin or sex. (H.B. 7, 2022).

Upon listing these specified prohibitions, the Act then offers an ambiguous proviso regarding them: "[It] may not be construed to prohibit discussion of the concepts listed therein as part of a larger course of training or instruction, provided such training or instruction is given in an objective manner without endorsement of the concepts" (H.B. 7, 2022). What exactly constitutes "an objective manner without endorsement of the concepts" is left exceptionally vague and unclear, which has led several legal scholars to believe that the law's ambiguity is intentional so as to

discourage teachers from teaching about race at all, much less in structural and critical terms (Russell-Brown, 2022).

Indeed, there are a wide range of punishments for violations of H.B. 7 that are quite harsh. The law empowers the state Attorney General to initiate a civil action (for injunctive relief, damages, or civil penalties) for costs up to $10,000 per violation if there is reasonable cause to believe that an individual or group has either engaged in discrimination or suffered discrimination as stipulated under H.B. 7 (Russell-Brown, 2023, pp. 21–22).

The language of H.B. 7 is heavily informed and influenced by the popular discourse of "post-racialism." A post-Civil Rights era discourse that metastasized after the 2008 election of Barack Obama to the US presidency, the notion of the "post-racial" posits that the United States has achieved racial equality to the point where race should no longer serve as a central organizing category in American life. Indeed, it proposes that we disavow racism by abandoning all language that refers to race itself for the purpose of preventing further discrimination or stigmatization on the basis of race, as in so called "reverse racism." Ideologically, "post-race" reposits "colorblindness" as a normative standard for twenty first century politics and evokes a glamorous image of harmonious racial assimilation that celebrates the triumph of diversity and difference. Mythically, it presents a narrative of American democracy that vindicates the nation's violent and exploitative racial past in a manner that both affirms unquestionable transcendence and progress while simultaneously repudiating calls for further social and political activism to achieve equal opportunity for all races and ethnicities. Finally, it denies the existence of, much less the historical legacy of, structural and institutional inequities on the basis of race, and blames the continuation of racial inequality in American life on dysfunctional family dynamics, poor values, and poor individual choices or lifestyles (Mukherjee et al., 2019; Squires, 2014).

H.B. 7 includes language that attempts to restrict critical thought itself, for it prohibits the use of the words "privileged" and "oppressed" to describe or name one's social status on the basis of race, and explicitly prohibits the judgment that "such virtues" as "racial colorblindness" are racist in and of themselves or "were created by members of a particular race, color, national origin, or sex to oppress members of another race, color, national origin, or sex" (H.B. 7, 2022). One wonders how anyone could teach an intellectual history or genealogy of these concepts without violating the law. By mandating that "a person by virtue of his or her race" cannot be said to "bear responsibility for, or should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment because of actions committed in the past by other members of the same race," the law explicitly seeks to prohibit discussions of the historical role of the American legal system in engendering structural inequalities and wealth disparities on the basis of race, including remedial policies such as reparations that one presumes the law would consider "discriminatory" or a form of "adverse treatment" (H.B. 7, 2022). The law seeks to prohibit discussions of ethics on the basis of the legacy of racial violence or lost property and capital due to discrimination since it would be a violation if a student feels that he or she must "bear personal responsibility for and must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress because of actions, in which the person played no part, committed in the past by other members of the same race" (H.B. 7, 2022). One wonders if showing the

film series *Roots* for pedagogical purposes, as was popular in the 1980s and 1990s, would be in violation of the law.

Indeed, H.B. 7 explicitly legislates post-racial doxa into educational curricula, and weaponizes the punitive powers of the state to punish educators who understand and teach American race relations from perspectives and experiences (both historical and present) that either challenge or refuse post-racial ideologies and narratives.

Black horror as racial trauma and Afro-Pessimism in popular memory

In an era marked by punitive attacks on educators and librarians, by the explicit weaponization of public education and public libraries into an ideological state apparatus on behalf of National Conservative and White nationalist cultural wars, the role of Black artists working within popular culture becomes even more important as a site for what Houston Baker (2001) has called "critical memory." Critical memory represents an active form of remembrance that intentionally recalls the injustices of the past to combat their legacy and continuation in the present. This then raises an important question: what genres, modes, or forms of cultural (re)production are ideal for a project of *Black* critical memory capable of critiquing the (post) racial order? In this regard, we propose two strands of theory that synchronize well as a mode of cultural memory for the purpose of critique: Black horror and Afro-pessimism.

Let's begin with Afro-pessimism

Afro-pessimism is one of the most important and imaginative intellectual projects across the Theoretical Humanities today. Lead by the pioneering work of Hartman (2007), Wilderson (2010, 2020), Sexton (2010), and Sharpe (2016), Afro-pessimism posits that the modern world is fundamentally a product of Black slavery and its afterglow. "The imaginary of the state and civil society is parasitic on the Middle Passage," writes Wilderson (2010), such that the genocidal violence foundational to the invention of "Black" "remains constant, paradigmatically, despite changes in its 'performance' over time—slave ship, Middle Passage, Slave estate, Jim Crow, the ghetto, and the prison-industrial complex (p. 75)." Out of this structural positionality, Blackness in modernity is rendered in the image of slave, which relegates it within the modern political imaginary to a metaphysical void against which all other non-subject "things" and subjects alike (be they workers, queer, trans, immigrant, feminist, or post-colonial in orientation) categorially become defined. Blackness comes to thus be constitutively and performatively bound to the terms of this fundamental antagonism in ways that can be traced through the history of Western and global discourse, as well as their accompanying social, economic, and legal institutions. It is through these institutions and discourses that Europeans and their White (i.e., North American, Australian, South African, etc.) descendants enacted predatory practices of dispossession that paradigmatically divides Blackness from all other sentient beings in the modern age. Black suffering is distinct from that of all other claims to suffering since its orientation and agency is fundamentally shaped not by "freedom" or self-determination as much as by the afterlife of slavery itself. According, Afro-pessimists reject narratives of racial

progress in the face of ongoing suffering and anti-Black violence, and actively anticipate the destruction of the structures that enable them.

The modes and conditions that give rise to cultural production in modernity are of great interest to Afro-pessimists, who on the topic of esthetics maintain a slew of theoretical conditions for judging the question of abstraction and representation. Afro-pessimistic esthetics seek to critique the structural positionality of Blackness by defying the hegemonic conventions of Hollywood's cultural forms, such as the "happy ending." Indeed, Afro-pessimism seeks narrative strategies of popular esthetic representations that signify Blackness in terms of its ontological negation without offering any hope for national redemption or progress (Wilderson, 2020, p. 15). Rather than progress, an Afro-pessimistic esthetic outlines in rhetorical (i.e., visual, sonic, and narrative) terms the grammar of suffering that underlies Blackness' constitutive antagonistic relation to the modern world. On esthetic terms, Afro-pessimistic cultural production seeks to leverage artistic and dramatistic resources to both critically observe and esthetically mediate Blackness's dispossession, condition of gratuitous violence, and ultimate "un/survival" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 14). As Wilderson (2010) puts it: "Can film tell the story of a sentient being whose story can be neither recognized nor incorporated into Human civil society (p. 96)?"

Black horror is an ideal genre for advancing an Afro-pessimistic critique of our (post)racial order. The multi-decade cultural tradition of Black horror leverages the rhetorical conventions of the horror genre to affectively craft monstrosity, fear, and shock in a way that follows and develops themes of Black identity, history, experiences, and politics. The esthetics of Black horror, moreover, are grounded in the intellectual and artistic movements constitutive of ancillary Black cultural traditions in music, literature, painting, comedy, photography, oratory, theater, performance, and, of course, film.

Black *horror* films are creatively led by Black directors, producers, writers, and performers who examine the *topoi* of horror through the lens of Black culture, and who can address the "specific fantasy needs of the Black social imaginary" (Benshoff, 2000, p. 31). In political terms the tradition of Black horror holds a special place in the Black imaginary, especially since (White) America has proven time and again to be stubbornly reluctant to reckon with its history of racial violence against Blackness. "Because of the volatile nature of race," notes Carol E. Henderson (2007), "African Americans have had to represent the brutality of their historical experiences in ways that amplify the literary, social, and oral replications of these themes expressed in America's collective memory (p. 66)." Indeed, the horror genre has offered Black artists a range of rhetorical conventions for "flipping the script" as it were on not only the White norms that have informed the history of American cinema and television, but also on the very White power structure that underlies American liberal democracy (Means Coleman, 2011).

It follows that the next important question is: What cultural and rhetorical resources do the conventions of Black horror arm artists with to critique America's historical legacy of anti-Black violence in an era when race is said to no longer matter? We shall argue that Black horror utilizes the figure of allegory toward great critical effect.

Scholars of horror have long understood that allegory is an apt esthetic strategy for representing trauma, especially in cinematic terms. Etymologically, "allegory" derives

from the Greek *allos* ("other") and *-agorein* ("to speak publicly") to mean "other speaking" or "speaks otherwise" (Lowenstein, 2005, p. 4). Quintilian (1922) described allegory as a device that "presents one thing in words and another in meaning" (at 8.6.44), which Robert Hariman (2002) argues is a rhetorical sleight of hand of "saying one thing and meaning another" (p. 268). As a mode of figural presentation and composition, allegory paratactically organizes an assemblage of signs that, in their totality, direct an audience toward a common theme, meaning, or interpretation. Allegory offers a rich repertoire of rhetorical resources for critiquing anti-Blackness, particularly in a late-modern mediascape marked by the fragmentation of historical narrative, meaning, and replete with an endless stream of signs.

Allegory is well suited for the horror genre since it can do the figural work of representing the traumatic horrors of our historical past (King, 2011; Lowenstein, 2005; Lutz, 2010; Phillips, 2018). "To speak of history's horrors, or historical trauma," notes Adam Lowenstein (2005), "is to recognize events as… wounds in the fabric of culture and history that bleed through conventional confines of time and space (p. 1)." For Lowenstein, allegory culturally functions as a critique of trauma through what he calls an allegorical moment. He describes this moment as "a shocking collision of film, spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined" (p. 12). The combination of the horror genre's stock of images, sounds, music, and narrative with the audience's emotional experience of terror, disgust, sympathy, and sadness makes emotional space for identifying and empathizing with historical trauma diegetically through the discursive strategies of the text. "The allegorical moment exists as a mode of confrontation," Lowenstein writes, "where representation's location between past and present, as well as between film, spectator, and history, demands to be recalibrated" (p. 12).

Through allegory and other rhetorical conventions, the esthetics of Black horror are well suited to represent the trauma that has come to mark the horrors of the Black experience in America. *Black* trauma, as George Yancy (2018) describes, exists "within the context of a shared *symbolic* world, a world whose meanings are both explicit and implicit, whose meanings can impact us and undo us in violent and harrowing ways," and "one predicated upon a constitutive anti-Black ethos (p. 143)." "Black bodies," Yancy continues, "share the trauma of trying *to be* in a world in which their existence is already negated, nullified; perhaps they are already dead, where existing within a White racist anti-Black world is like *waiting* one's turn to die, where the bell tolls for Black bodies in ways that leave White bodies unscathed, where Black bodies constitute a kind of 'unreality' from the incipiency of Black life" (p. 150). But the horrors of the Black experience are not confined to space and time; indeed, the pain of Black trauma echoes from history to haunt the present. The tradition of Black horror is even more culturally and politically significant now in our purportedly "post-racial" era. Indeed, Black horror can serve a rhetorical and esthetic strategy for, as Sharpe (2016) eloquently puts it, "encountering a past that is not past" (p. 13).

For our purposes, we submit that Black horror offers an important archive that to this point rhetorical theorists concerned with popular memory have largely ignored (Baker, 2001; Ehrenhaus, 2001; Haskins, 2015; Jordan, 2008; King 2008; Phillips, 2015). In this paper, we seek to correct this trend by offering an analysis of the series *Them*. Set in 1953, *Them* follows a Black family, the Emory's, who moves from North Carolina

into an all-white neighborhood in Compton, CA. The series unfolds as the Emory's home becomes the epicenter of a series of evil forces emanating from the history of structural racism in the United States that dramatizes the horrors of segregation stemming from redlining. Each character is confronted by elements of American racism in the workplace, the school, the household, and the subdivision. In an era when teachers are under threat for teaching the unsavory history underlying America's racial wealth gap, *Them* combines historical realism with an allegorical critique of the past that leverages the tradition of Black horror to remind contemporary audiences how the violence of capitalism echoes to this day.

Them and the nightmare of history

Them (2021) is an American horror anthology series developed by Little Marvin and produced by Lena Waithe for Amazon Prime's streaming platform. The series follows the Emory's, a Black family who has recently relocated from North Carolina to an all-white neighborhood in 1950s Compton, California, and takes place over the first ten days in their new home. Over the course of these ten days, the family—Henry, his wife Lucky, and their two daughters Ruby Lee and Gracie—encounter not only the horrors of the supernatural, but, more pointedly, the all-too-human horrors of Whiteness and American capitalism. Released in the wake of the George Floyd protests, the series can be understood as a commentary on the historical lineage from Trump's racial politics to the failures of Reconstruction in a way that disrupts (White) America's affective investment in the fantasy that race either never mattered or no longer structures everyday life.

Throughout its ten episodes, *Them* depicts a panoply of racial horrors that comprise the historical Black experience in America, including White mob violence, torture, kidnapings, Tuskegee-inspired medical experiments, and murder. As the Black protagonists encounter these violent events, the series offers an all-too-rare example of narrative empathy for the victims of racialized violence, and thus reveals the very real fears and trauma African Americans have historically experienced. While the series has been critiqued as "pure degradation porn" or as unnecessarily re-traumatizing, we argue that the series can be understood as a partly allegorical critique of the racial trauma that stems from the culture of segregation and redlining (Bastién, 2021). Indeed, *Them's* depiction of racial violence and trauma does not esthetically fetishize it; instead, the series allows its audience to contextualize the complex manifestations of structural racial inequality, and the lived traumatic pain of anti-Blackness generated by it.

Remembering the economic violence of racial capitalism in America

Them presents us with an all too rare dramatization of the violent history of American capitalism that has been inflicted on Black families. Through its depiction of redlining and blockbusting, *Them* illustrates the historical role of White supremacy and structural racism in the exploitation, dispossession, and extraction that underlies the history of capital accumulation and the persistence of America's racial wealth gap. Through the allegorical codes of the horror genre, the series displays in explicit terms the links

between the history of American capitalism and the history of race. Indeed, we are presented with a story ostensibly about the paranormal but are given an allegory about the hidden brutality of American institutions and how their participation in the nightmare of history continues to cast its shadow over our current political crisis in the present.

The critical potency of *Them* rests in the series' representation of racial trauma in both literal and allegorical terms. America's past is registered not only in literal historical references to the institutional sites of Jim Crow segregation, but also through supernatural figures that allegorically correspond to the trauma that has been historically produced by these institutions. To be sure, the supernatural agents featured in *Them* allegorically represent the historical weight of racial trauma that is neither dormant nor past but rather a tangible material force that persistently threatens to emerge in the present. The supernatural agents—the "Black Hat Man," the "Tap Dance Man," and Doris—invite audiences to explore how the economic and psychological traces of past racial injustices, violence, and oppression continue to haunt American society. As we shall demonstrate, *Them* maps the racial horrors of some of American capitalism's most important institutional and social matrixes, including the subdivision, workplace, and school, as well as restrictive racial covenants, redlining, and blockbusting in real estate markets.

Restrictive racial covenants and the failure of reconstruction

From its first episode titled "Day 1," *Them* establishes how the role of property segregation contributed to the country's failure to achieve multiracial democracy after Reconstruction. The key legal instrument for this was the restrictive covenant. Restrictive covenants were documents that could outline the parameters of what could and could not be done with property and included mandatory obligations such as restrictions on the colors of paint owners could use on the outside of their homes or what types of plants or trees they could plant. But in the first half of the twentieth century, restrictive covenants often included clauses prohibiting property owners from selling or renting to an African American person or family.

Restrictive covenants were leveraged by builders and property owners as a preferred means for segregating residential neighborhoods along racial lines. Segregated property was blessed by government at all levels, which played a crucial role in the promotion and enforcement of restrictive covenants. Courts, for example, could order the eviction of African Americans from the homes they had purchased since they held that covenants were private agreements that did not violate the Constitution. This occurred all over the United States, but in Los Angeles alone between 1937 and 1948 there were over one hundred cases where African Americans were evicted from their homes on the basis of restrictive covenants forbidding their presence. By 1953, however, the Supreme Court ruled that restrictive covenants violated the Fourteenth Amendment, and thus became non-binding (Rothstein, 2017).

Them begins in 1953 in the aftermath of the Court's ruling. Upon their arrival in East Compton, we witness the Emory's as they meet with a real estate agent, Helen Koistra, to sign their mortgage. As Lucky examines the deed the camera zooms in on the words "no negro blood," a chilling example of the language of racially restrictive

covenants. Recognizing the Emory's horror, Koistra quickly reassures Lucky and Henry that the restrictive covenant is no longer legally enforceable.

Just as the covenant was a primary vehicle for Jim Crow era housing segregation, in *Them* the covenant becomes a central diegetic device that propels the allegorical narrative of the nightmare of history throughout the series. For example, in the first episode we are also introduced to a supernatural evil known as the "Black Hat Man." This supernatural character allegorically represents the traumatic legacy of racial covenants that continue to haunt Black America and stymie the emergence of a multiracial democracy after 1953. The "Black Hat Man" dwells in the Emory's basement and throughout the series orchestrates supernatural terrors upon each character in a way that illustrates the range of anti-Blackness that permeates American society as a result of Jim Crow era structural inequality and segregation.

It is not until episode nine, titled "Covenant II," that we learn that this figure is the ghost of a Protestant preacher, Hiram Epps, who once led a racist Dutch settlement called Eidolon, which preexists present day Compton. Epps succumbs to the temptations of a demon that takes the form of a lost child, Miles, whom Epps welcomes into the settlement. But when an itinerant Black couple arrive at Eidolon, Miles convinces Epps that the book of Leviticus sanctions racial slavery even in the aftermath of the Civil War. The settlement exploits their Black labor and after a series of controversies decides to murder them by burning them alive. But while they burn, the beams of the church catch fire, killing all members of Eidolon and encompassing the entire settlement. Miles and Hiram Epps are the lone survivors. Miles then leads Hiram into a passageway below the building and there transforms himself into his true demonic form. Miles offers Epps everlasting life if he promises to torment Black families for eternity and enforce racially restrictive covenants. Epps accepts and is then buried under the rubble of the burning church only to take his new form as the phantom "Black Hat Man."

The economic violence of redlining and blockbusting

Them makes the discriminatory and predatory practice of redlining an explicit plot development that stretches across the series. In episode five titled "Covenant I," we witness Los Angeles land speculators and investors discussing strategies of redlining and blockbusting with the real estate agent Helen Koistra. She is tasked with selling the properties in their portfolio, properties we can assume they have purchased through blockbusting efforts, to unknowing Black families at higher interest rates to help grow their plans for dominating the Los Angeles real estate market. In doing so, they are not only swindling Black families financially, but also creating the connection between systemic racism and capitalistic greed at the expense of Black migrant families escaping racism in the American south.

In the 1930s, the Federal Housing Authority Administration (FHA) and the Homeowners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) began work that would become the impetus for redlining. The FHA and the HOLC provided lenders with color coded maps that measured and ranked a lender's risk depending on the area of the neighborhood. The system graded on a scale from first to fourth using a color-coded system where the first grade was colored as green and designated a desirable area for banks to provide

loans, while the fourth grade was colored with red. The fourth-grade zone was identified as 'hazardous' and a 'significant risk' to mortgage lenders. Typically, the HOLC identified areas in red that were comprised of African American, ethnic, or older populations. Areas marked in red were deemed too risky to loan to, which had the long-term effect of limited their ability to access capital for capital accumulation. The effects of redlining were profound and still could be felt long into the 1980s and beyond although it was officially ended in the late 1960s (Mandel, 2022).

Los Angeles real estate and financial organizations relied on the HOLC maps beginning in 1939. The maps in Los Angeles used the same color-coding system it had established in 1933. Areas west of the Los Angeles River, including Watts, the Central Avenue section, and areas south of Washington Boulevard, would be assigned a fourth or "low red," grade meaning it was an unfavorable area and that even the smallest population of color meant a downgrading of the community and that banks could set higher loan requirements to those choosing to live in these areas. Conversely, it meant that wealthy Whites were able to purchase property largely wherever they preferred. The differential values between White and nonwhite neighborhoods became a basis for structural property value differences that stratified American society along racial and class lines (Gibbons, 2018).

In the episode, Waithe and Marvin include several maps that illustrate how real estate redlining and predatory lending operated in Los Angeles. The opening scene of this episode offers the viewer a realistic look at redlining and how banking institutions adjusted mortgage rates by creating maps that used the grading system to validate their buying properties from White homeowners and reselling at a higher interest rate to Black families. For Black families like the Emory's, there is no concern for their safety or humanity, just a concern to capitalize at their expense.

Whites became intensely protective of their property values and perceived loss in value that would accompany the racial diversification of their neighborhoods. *Them* portrays the ways in which White fear is constituted through the practice of blockbusting. Blockbusting is a series of practices used by realtors that were meant to create panic selling and the sale of white-owned properties to African Americans and other ethnicities. The turnovers of property provided profits for real estate companies and banks as the commission fees were made on the mass buying and selling of these homes (Mandel, 2022, pp. 195–205).

The policy was popularized in the 1950s as real estate agents and land speculators across the country sought to make a profit and "hasten re-segregation by putting fear in White residents of what many viewed as what they called a 'Black invasion'" (Mandel, 2022, p. 162). Thus, this 'Black invasion' instituted a fear that not only property values would decrease, but that their areas would decline esthetically as well. Blockbusting tactics were used to convince Whites to move by stroking the racist anxieties about minorities. These tactics included going door to door, circulating flyers, and sometimes, by making phone calls that warned White families about the imminent dangers of living in a neighborhood with Black families. We see much of this depicted in *Them*. Often, realtors would hire African Americans to simply walk or drive around White neighborhoods to create White fear to make it easier to get them to sell their property. Through these tactics, realtors urged White homeowners to move before their property values went down. By selling a few homes to Black families, the exodus of White

families to outer margin neighborhoods made it much easier for lending institutions to charge higher rates to incoming Black home buyers.

At the same time, when White families moved out of their homes, realtors and lenders could re-sell the same property at a much higher rate and with higher lending terms to African American families who hoped to purchase property in better areas. This process, referred to as the "Black tax," became a common practice across the United States. Banks could purchase the homes from White homeowners and resell at much higher prices to Black families wanting a better life for their children. Consequently, once a few Black families moved into these neighborhoods, White families moved out because of a fear of the value of the community quickly plummeting, a decline in the school system, services, and an increase in crime.

The symbolic violence of anti-blackness as cultural redlining

Besides its focus on the racially motivated economic violence of redlining and blockbusting that was inflicted on Black families by capitalists working in real estate and finance, *Them* also dramatizes the racist and segregationist culture of anti-Blackness that was spawned by redlining, which Richard Jean So has called "cultural redlining" (So, 2021, p. 2). Across the ten episodes, each member of the Emory family must confront White cruelty in a multitude of forms as well as the haunting of supernatural demons that allegorically dramatize their trauma. The series can be understood as esthetically embodying an Afro-pessimistic tone and style as it follows each character through the spaces of a segregated American society defined by the paradigmatic dehumanization of Blackness that the very category of "White" requires.

The subdivision as a site of cultural redlining

Them is a cultural artifact that makes the memory of America's violent racial past a priority for current debates over the question of (post)race, and it makes use of the diegetic memory of each character to do so. Much of the counter story strategy of *Them* is told through the narrative device of flashbacks, which reveal the painful legacy of anti-Black violence and cultural trauma on the Black psyche. As the characters encounter the scope and scale of anti-Blackness in Compton, character flashbacks help us learn the burden of past events that lies beneath the surface. Just as *Them* dramatizes the economic violence of redlining practices that lies beneath the surface of America's racial wealth gap and inequality, the series also reveals how trauma taxes each character's psychological resilience, which comes with simply being Black in America.

Of all the characters in *Them,* Lucky Emory bears the most weight of violent trauma. From the opening scene we observe her dreaming of an unsettling episode involving a White mob back in North Carolina that we later learn brutally raped her and murdered the Emory's infant child, Chester. The violence of this episode echoes throughout the series, for she frequently suffers stifling flashbacks that cause tension within Lucky's and Henry's marriage and cast doubt upon her mental faculties for her daughters. Indeed, the "Black Hat Man" uses the memory of Chester's murder to torment her and thus force her to relive the trauma of her sexual violence and the loss of her

child. In stark and uncompromising terms, this plot line signifies *Them's* Afro-pessimism, for it draws attention to the universal disposability of Blackness such that it is never granted the status of full subjectivity and humanity. The plot line reflects Wilderson's (2020) observation that "the Black is needed to mark the border of human subjectivity" that Whiteness itself colonizes at the "expense of the Other" (p. 164).

Through Lucky's struggles, *Them* reminds its audience of not only the predatory role White mobs have played in Black dispossession by manipulating property values and even outright property theft, but the cultural role they play in inflicting stress and terror upon even the most mundane routines of everyday life. A good example of this involves many scenes throughout the series where the Emory's White neighbors deploy tactics of intimidation in hope of prompting them to leave their all-White neighborhood. Upon waking up the first morning in their new home, Lucky, Ruby Lee, and Gracie find the first White mob sitting outside their home in lawn chairs and with loud music playing. Lucky gets the girls ready for school, taking them to the bus stop through their back door. The mob of White women persist in their encampment in the street, blasting their music as Lucky works on unpacking and preparing their home. On another occasion, the Emory's awake to black dolls hanging from the roof in a chilling way that mimics a lynching. The series is keen to illustrate the direct historical thread that connects contemporary White mobs across contemporary America, especially as in Charlottesville, to the depths of American history.

The workplace as a site of cultural redlining

Henry Emory, who works as an engineer, represents the careerist aspirations of the Black bourgeoise. If *Them's* depiction of redlining and restrictive covenants illustrates the material and legal machinations of racial capitalism, Henry's character illustrates how Black aspirations for upward mobility are stymied by the cultural redlining of the corporate enterprise through the actions both of human and supernatural agents.

Throughout the series we witness the shame and anger he burdens from frequent micro-aggressions at work. For example, we watch a White female receptionist mistake him for a Black manual laborer, while his fellow White colleagues intentionally ignore him as if he were invisible. We also witness how his supervisors systematically marginalize him and deliberately refuse to recognize his work for promotion. We see his White colleagues take credit for his ideas and contributions to major company projects who are promoted at his expense. In one scene, for instance, Henry is intentionally uninvited to an afternoon reception to celebrate the firm's successful bid on a lucrative Pentagon contract. Henry attends anyway but is warned by his supervisor not to mingle with his coworkers or the director of the company. Henry disobeys his supervisor's order and begins sharing war stories with the director. His supervisor retaliates by demoting him and removing him from the lucrative Pentagon project.

Henry's anger and dismay comes to be represented through a supernatural blackface apparition called the Tap Dance Man, who simultaneously befriends and torments him throughout the series. The Tap Dance Man sympathizes with his plight only to use it to tempt him to act on his rage through acts of violence. Henry's apparition allegorically links the trauma of his psychological struggles with the pervasive anti-Blackness he navigates both in the workplace and American society. Through Henry's character,

Them reminds its audience of the role structural discrimination plays in not only suffocating Black aspirations for social mobility, but also directly restricting Black capital accumulation and generational wealth. In an era when even modest diversity, equity, and inclusion trainings are under threat from state censorship (as in Florida), Henry's character reminds the audience of the ways race has always structured American economic opportunity in the workplace of the past and continues to do so in the present even when race is said to no longer matter.

The school as a site for cultural redlining

The Emory's daughters are also not immune to the horrors of anti-Black epistemic violence from human and supernatural agents. We witness both the elder, Ruby Lee, and the younger, Gracie, suffer humiliation and ridicule at the hands of their White classmates and teachers. Gracie, for example, is frequently belittled and mocked by her White Kindergarten teacher, while Ruby Lee's classmates routinely dehumanize her by addressing her as if she were an ape. Indeed, *Them* is keenly observant of the symbolic violence waged by the legacy of tropes of anti-Blackness, as in the figure of the unevolved ape, and the psychological damage and suffering they inflict. The series also navigates the psychic trauma of popular racialized standards of beauty, which is most evident through the struggles of Ruby Lee.

From the very beginning of the series, Ruby Lee, is taken by the looks of White Hollywood actresses such as Marilyn Monroe and Doris Day. Rather than read popular Black teen magazines such as *Ebony* or *Jet*, we witness her reading from an issue of a magazine called *Teen Wave*. Ruby Lee studies the articles closely, clearly entranced by what she sees on the pages. We see her reading a full-page feature of Doris Day that includes an article that shares her beauty tips. At the time the series takes place, Doris Day was the standard for beauty and innocence in popular culture. Her coiffed blonde hair, her classic red lipstick, and blue eyes were what most White women aspired to fashion themselves after. As the series unfolds, we learn that Ruby Lee struggles with the dark pigmentation of her skin and that she secretly desires to be White.

Like Henry, her cultural marginalization among her peers haunts her, which takes the symbolic form of an apparition named Doris who simultaneously befriends and harms her. Ignored by her White classmates and without any friends, Ruby Lee takes comfort in Doris' companionship. Doris represents the popular racialized ideal of beauty Ruby Lee desires: blonde, blue-eyed, and White. Doris also claims to be a cheerleader, which Ruby Lee aspires to. Strangely, Ruby Lee comes to spend time with Doris usually in closets and basements at the school. In a pivotal scene, Doris draws Ruby Lee away from where the actual cheerleader tryouts are being held and draws her down to the basement of the school.

In the basement, a ghostly squad awaits her as they invite her to cheer with them with open arms. In one of the most surreal scenes of the series, the White cheerleaders' bodies twist, turn, and gyrate in disturbing ways only to suddenly disappear. At this point Doris invites Ruby Lee to fantasize about being White. Ruby Lee, seduced by this fantasy, soon discovers a can of white paint which she uses to paint her hand

white. The shot cuts and immediately takes us to a student bonfire where Ruby Lee appears with her face and hands painted white. She begins to cheer before she notices the White students staring at her uncomfortably.

The Afro-Pessimistic memory of Them

Them ends with each of the Emory's confronting their supernatural apparitions and their violent White neighbors. In the final scene we witness a confrontation between the Emory's and their neighbors organized into a menacing mob outside their home. After a week of tormenting and intimidating the Black family, the White neighbors intensify their efforts by setting the Emory's lawn on fire. Meanwhile, in the basement we witness Lucky confront the ghost of Hiram Epps, who in a thick German accent explains that he was compelled to torment the Emory's because they had disrupted "the order of things" as outlined in the deed's original covenant, and that God had intended for the White and Black races to be segregated for the sake of White purity. Epps tells her that the horrors of Black suffering at the hands of White violence and cruelty will not end and that he was ultimately responsible for the senseless murder of her infant son Chester. He offers Lucky a chance to be reunited with Chester in a ploy meant to kill her, but Lucky rejects the offer and in doing so confronts the source of her trauma. Epps then bursts into flames, having been exorcized by Lucky.

The shot then moves to show us the Emory's walking out to the front of their yard to confront their White neighbors. Only the flames stand between them and their neighbors as Nina Simone's "Young, Gifted, and Black" plays in the background, a song she wrote to comfort and encourage Black children to face the menace of a White culture that pathologically hates them for simply being Black. But while the series ends with a shot of the Emory's staring defiantly at their White neighbors and joined by two police officers with guns, this is far from a happy ending. Indeed, though now perished by flames, Epps' warning that White cruelty will never stop lingers on, and there is no sign of a resolution to the racial animus. The scene represents the fundamental antagonism that Afro-pessimists claim structures modernity: Whiteness and its monopolization of state violence against Blackness.

Indeed, in *Them*, Black subjects such as the Emory's are *not actually subjects*, because they are stripped of their personhood. The horrors they confront—both human and supernatural—stem from their desire for subjectivity and the fulfillment of the legal and political discourses of modern human rights, only to discover that this was never in fact possible. Their plight illustrates the persistence of Black disappointment in the face of America's unfulfilled promise of multiracial democracy, a sentiment Du Bois (1903/1999) poignantly summarized in *The Souls of Black Folk* when he writes "At last it came,—suddenly, fearfully, like a dream….[but]….The freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land" (p. 12). In this way, *Them* can be understood as an explicit response to current post-racial ideologies that allegorically critiques the legacy of slavery and race trauma hidden in the foundations of American society. By symbolizing the structural positionality of Blackness in the afterlife of slavery, *Them* advances not only an allegorical rebuke of the hubris of the post-racial but raises skepticism about the prospect and possibility of racial progress for Black Americans

since the series refuses to posit a narrative redress of the violence of American structural racism.

Them's Afro-pessimistic storytelling invites the audience to witness the legacy of trauma from material and symbolic violence of American capitalism and its culture of segregation. *Them* dramatizes Black victimization comprehensively to critique the forms of systemic violence inflicted by American institutions upon people of African descent. The world perceived by the characters undergoes an allegorical transposition to the nightmarish brutality lying hidden in the foundations of American liberal democracy. The past is in fact never past since it is always a material force threatening to emerge in the present. To be sure, the traumatic violence depicted in this series allegorically illustrates, by the generic means of horror, the various material and rhetorical performances that form what Ersula J. Ore (2019) has astutely called the "constitutive relationship between democracy and antiblack violence" (Ore, 2019, p, 26).

Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to contribute to the rhetorical critique of America's memory infrastructure by advancing an analysis of the Amazon Prime series *Them*. Our contribution has highlighted the importance of the genre of Black horror, which offers scholars of public memory an archive for memory critique that skillfully utilizes the figure of allegory to dramatize the monstrosity that lays beneath the surface of American life that, to this point, rhetorical theorists concerned with popular memory have overlooked.

Historically informed dramas such as *Them*, *Lovecraft Country,* or Barry Jenkins' *Underground Railroad* (2021), are important cultural artifacts that evoke memories of America's racial past by through a strategic political esthetic that targets the heart of current post-racial ideologies. They are not trauma porn that fetishize violence for its own sake since they tell an uncomfortable truth about the trauma that constitutes the American experiment. As Yancy (2018) eloquently elaborates,

> Yet these stories much be told. For it is in the telling that we gain a sense of coherence if only in the moment of the telling. Remembrance can be painful, it has the potential to re-traumatize. However, to narrate the truth about one's life under white supremacy, to begin to see that one is *not* insane, that one's story is vital, is honest, that one's pain is real has the power to *re-member*, to put the shattered pieces back together yet again. Telling such narratives is linked to countering epistemic violence (p. 159).

To be sure, to confront the state censorship of America's racial history, which laws such as H.B. 7 aspire to do, we must tell stories of America that simply, as James Baldwin (1965) pleaded, "accept our history." In these dangerously illiberal and anti-democratic times, popular culture offers a representational forum that can open possibilities for engaging our racial past in ways that may be threatened, if not foreclosed, by state censorship.

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