

Get It Right, Season 1, Episode 8: How Feminism and Women of Color Are Transforming Horror Movies featuring Ashlee Blackwell

Ashlee: In *Demon Knight* you kind of see that with Jerryline who could be just this young, black woman throwaway who's an ex-thief, who's on probation, and she's on this work release and CCH Pounder's character, this black woman named Irene, she takes her in. She didn't have to but she did it and you can't, I couldn't help but connect those two things, seeing these two black women support and rely on each other for survival. I thought that was really interesting and that's the kind of film theory I'm looking at.

Jamie: Welcome back to *Get It Right*, the podcast exploring the intersection of pop culture and social justice. I'm your host Jamie Broadnax, the managing editor of blackgirlnerds.com and host of the *Black Girl Nerds* podcast. The end of season one is upon us. I know, it's sad. But think of all the fun we've had talking about everything from *Game of Thrones* to *Ms. Marvel* to *Insecure* to underground trap music. I hope you've enjoyed it as much as I have and be sure to go back and listen to any episodes you may have missed.

We have a pretty exciting season finale, too. Joining us today is Ashlee Blackwell, founder of the website *Graveyard Shift Sisters*. She's a fan of and an expert on horror movies, a genre of film that isn't always known for getting it right on race, gender, and sex. There are definitely things that scary movies can do better, but sometimes they can also be misunderstood, and if you haven't checked out what's going on in horror lately you might be surprised by what women and people of color have been producing and how that's impacting the genre. Halloween may be over but horror never goes out of style, especially in a world with President Trump. Ugh. Okay. Let's dive in.

Thanks Ashlee for coming on the show.

Ashlee: Thank you for having me.

Jamie: You are the founder and managing of the website *Graveyard Shift Sisters*. Tell us what is the website all about and what lead you to create a space for black women in horror?

Ashlee: The website is about celebrating and highlighting and pointing out and talking to other black women and women of color, creators, in the horror community. Also actresses, performers, artists, and black women horror fans specifically. I guess I created it because I felt there was a lack of the black woman's voice in the horror community, especially being a horror fan my entire life and not really seeing someone who looked like me who was as, I guess, who had that kind of fervor for the horror genre. That's why I created it because I wanted to reach out and not come to this really dismissive conclusion that I was the only real black woman horror fan. I thought that was ridiculous so I wanted to create a space and open a forum and a discourse on black women horror fans. That was my base and then from there it blossomed into this thing where I'm talking to other artists and creators and performers who love the genre as much as I do.

Jamie: It's such a robust site. You're talking about everything in horror. Not only about the films themselves but the women behind it. I'm curious to know what made you become a fan

of horror?

Ashlee: I don't really know, really. Maybe just from being a weirdo my entire life and hopping onto, I liked how horror spoke to this subversive art that, showing the human condition in a way that's not so picture perfect. You know, growing up in the '80s it was all very, I grew up watching a lot of sitcoms and things that seemed to resolve themselves at the end and things like that. That just wasn't my world. My world was very, it was very balanced in a sense but I also understood the world at a very young age to be also a very scary place and a very uncertain place and I think horror helped me exorcise those fears and anxieties that I had and also seeing characters, in particular women, who were very complicated but also exuded this strength, supernatural or not, that I thought was really, that really appealed to someone like me who felt powerless in a way.

Jamie: You feature horror films, mostly written and directed by black women and women of color. What are some of your favorites?

Ashlee: Some of the most recent ones, I feel like. There's quite a few but I'm not going to take up too much time.

Jamie: Another podcast.

Ashlee: Yeah. Recently it's been Paralysis by R. Shanea Williams. These are all short films, too. I think that's another thing that's untapped as far as wide mainstream and wide recognition, I think horror film shorts are a really good ... I notice that they're really good practice for filmmakers and a lot of them do shorts before they move on to features because it's really good practice.

Jamie: And it's cheaper.

Ashlee: Yeah, it's cheaper and it really gets the ball rolling as far as people understanding a filmmaker's voice who's a newcomer, kind of giving them a resume to build upon. Also, Wake by Bree Newsome which I really wish was still available on YouTube. Unfortunately it is not. Also, this movie called Altschmerz by Somica Spratley.. I always want to call her Somonica, but it's Somica. Also there's a UK filmmaker by the name of Simret Cheema-Innis and she did a short film called Newborn and also there's this fun horror-comedy that plays a lot on '90s comedy called Afterbirth by Eboni Boykin. It was her senior thesis. I forget, I think she went to Columbia if I'm correct, and that is available on YouTube. Those are a few recently that I've noticed and I've tried to help put on the map as far as, everybody should check these movies and these filmmakers out because they're really interesting.

Jamie: Are there any unique perspectives that you think women of color bring to the horror genre as directors?

Ashlee: I feel like black women specifically, certain films really tend to focus on the particular struggles that black women face, as far as beauty standards, as far as being in the workplace, as far as black motherhood, as far as even our own personal desires for a

mate. Also, a lot of, especially R. Shanea Williams, she creates these either physical or psychological monsters out of issues that affect the black community disproportionately and in particular she deals with mental health, which I thought was really interesting.

Also, a big one is including elements of African or black spirituality that is this creole of European influence and West Indian influence ... Sorry. Caribbean influence as well as African influence and how, especially black people in America have created these non-Christian spiritual practices and how that balance between good and evil, showing the darker side of that and showing that through the lens of black female characters. Which I think is pretty interesting as well.

Jamie: I know that I've gotten some feedback from black female horror fans that they feel like that the horror genre boxes up many people of color when it speaks to the voodoo themes that you see in a lot of horror films. I was just curious to know what your take on that, because you don't really see other kinds of religions practice in horror that are by people of color other than voodoo. You don't see things like Wiccan or anything of that nature so I'm just curious to know what your thoughts about that. Is that a stereotype in the horror genre? Seeing voodoo practices being done in horror movies?

Ashlee: I guess I would ... I don't know necessarily if it's a stereotype. I think the problem is you don't see other, you don't see the multitude of spiritual practices, unfortunately. I think that one of the problems is that it's not being told by the people who actually practice these customs and rituals. I think that's a big part of the issue. Especially, obviously, especially earlier films like *Ouanga* or *King of the Zombies* and all of these, and *The Devil's Daughter* and all these other movies that are being written and really, mostly written and produce by white people.

That's the biggest problem, I think. I think with a lot of different cultural aspects that are being brought in mainstream or independent films, it would really be nice if the people who are actually participants of it were actually writing these stories and directing them as well. That's the biggest issue, I think.

Jamie: There's a film you featured on your site called *Street Tales of Terror*. Can you tell us a little bit about that film, its themes, and whether it gets them right?

Ashlee: Okay. First thing first. I've never seen it. I've only seen clips. I got this information from Dr. Robin Means Coleman's book. It's called *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890's to Present*. This book is pretty much the Bible for *Graveyard Shift Sisters* because she's probably the first scholar who's written an academic book on African-Americans and American horror films. It's really detailed and extensive. She kind of goes from the beginning of film itself to the 2000's. She even mentions Obama in here, I think, a couple times.

The book is really used as a context for what I'm trying to, what I try to do. Again, when I said *Graveyard Shift Sisters* blossomed, it blossomed because I was able to find all of these scholars and other actresses and definitely a slew of filmmakers who, I don't know, not that they wouldn't have gotten the recognitions from other horror websites,

but I'm going to argue they really wouldn't have gotten the recognition I think that they deserve. That was a part of the frustration as to why I started this. Because I didn't want to just be frustrated, I actually wanted to do something.

Jamie: Right.

Ashlee: Horror Noire basically has helped me talk about the unspoken or forgotten history of blacks in American Horror films and the whole quote, "Hood horror" is a big part of that. I think they're not good in quality. The acting is sometimes terrible, but it's still an important part of black contributions in this history.

Street Tales of Terror, it kind of is a film that's basically about black female vengeance and it's about, there's a segment called, "The Clinic" and it talks about ... The problem with it is I don't know if it gets it right because it's very black and white. It's not as nuanced as I feel like, you know, I think we are smarter as audience members and I think a more nuanced approach to abortion and rape and all these things, I think are very important. But it does play with genre elements where it does have that kind of, this clean cut, a woman gets sexually assaulted, becomes pregnant, has to leave school because of it, and she commits suicide and then she kind of comes back to life to take vengeance on the men who assaulted her and/or did nothing to help her.

That's kind of what it is. I even say it about even black victims in horror films. I don't care if they die, I just want them to have, I want their characters to have meatier roles. I want them to be fully realized human characters and I think that's the biggest problem. I think from what I've seen of Street Tales of Terror, that's a big part of the issue.

Also, I want to just note that Street Tales of Terror is also an extremely, extremely hard film to find. Shout out to Mark. He runs blackhorrormovies.com. He does the Lord's work with finding all of these obscure black horror films and watches them and reviews them on his site. God bless him. He's very honest and he will tell you whether he thinks it's worth your time or not. I probably should ask him how he finds these movies because I cannot find them to save my life. They're very, very difficult to track down.

Jamie: Wow. How can horror films tackle sexual and reproductive issues like abortion and rape responsibly, without just exploiting them for shock value?

Ashlee: Sure. I think a part of it is staying in touch with the roots of what horror does, sometimes, and it takes a lot of these sensitive issues and just makes them allegories. I think that's the way horror is best expressed sometimes. Recently, what's interesting, I am a big part of the Ax Wound Film Festival that takes place in Vermont every fall. We recently had one selection. I was part of the selection committee and one of them we picked is a movie called I Should Have Run. It's, again, a horror short and I was talking to my colleague when we were going over these films again and seeing them again for the dozenth time after the event and we were talking about I Should Have Run and we both love it so much.

It's this black and white film that's about this woman who has this ... The narrative

sounds very Shakespearean and she's talking about walking home alone at night and some invisible entity luring her into this dark space. My colleague said, "That film is about rape." I was like, "Oh my God, you're totally right." It's exactly what it is because when you're watching this film you're not thinking about the ideas of sexual assault or rape. You're really thinking about this woman just being, "Oh, is she being attacked by a monster we can't see?" But that's basically kind of what it is. It's a really good assessment of this really beautiful but really terrifying short film.

The idea of that powerlessness of sexual assault, it's cloaked in these genre tropes of this invisible force attacking. This monster, this demon or whatever, and I thought that was really, really interesting. I think that's one of the best ways that horror films approach abortion and rape responsibly, if that answers your question. I hope it does. That was one of the best examples I could think of that's just so fresh in my head.

Jamie: Oh yeah. A lot of the work that you do is in feminist horror film theory. I'm curious to know about that. How do you apply feminism and academic theory in your own horror movie critiques?

Ashlee: It's really about just what films speak to you, which films speak to you. Again, because I can watch a dozen movies and really not be inspired to write but then there'll be that one movie and immediately after I have to write about it, or I'm watching it and I'm really thinking about ... I'm not going to say what everyone else has said before. Just regurgitated. I want to bring something new and fresh to a perspective. That's what I hope I do. I think I do.

For me, especially just talking about *Demon Knight* for example, I see a lot of black feminist elements to it. I see, for example, just as a little taster, the idea of how black women have to kind of support each other and have that history of having safe houses for each other. You see it in *Son of Ingagi*, is another good example that ties in where you see this black woman doctor who takes in this young black couple who just got married and it's that thing, it connects to the discrimination that young black people face when trying to buy a home or trying to get some kind of boarding or things like that. It's about the familial black network that we welcome people into our homes because those are the kind of people that we are, if that makes any sense.

In *Demon Knight* you kind of see that with Jeryline who could be just this young, black woman throwaway who's an ex-thief, who's on probation, and she's on this work release and CCH Pounder's character, this black woman named Irene, she takes her in. She didn't have to but she did it and I couldn't help but connect those two things, seeing these two black women support and rely on each other for survival. I thought that was really interesting and that's the kind of film theory I'm looking at.

When I was an undergrad, of course I broke down Carol Clover's theory and I read a lot of Barbara Creed and it was people who talk about the monstrous femme and all those kinds of things. Writing papers about that theory helped inform, give me a better idea of what I could use and later work, the work that I'm doing right now. Bell Hooks, of course, is a really big part of that along with Barbara Jordan. Because they, you know,

connecting race, class, and gender and again that network of black women and how we have to support each other in order to thrive I think is very important.

Jamie: Absolutely. Speaking of race and gender, what are some of the most common mistakes of mainstream horror films when it comes to race, gender, as well as sexuality?

Ashlee: I think like any genre it's the combination of underrepresentation. Not getting an opportunity to be seen and to be a part of certain texts, as well as a lack of, again, well-rounded characters. I want to see not just someone who's just so one note or just there to be a victim. I want to see someone who's a part of this cast, an important and integral part.

Also, more nuanced stories that address the anxieties of these particular minority groups. Again, it's very punk and DIY but Audre's Revenge Film Collective. She wants to speak to this untapped, these untapped stories about queer women of color in particular, and about what are the anxieties or the fears unique to them and how is that played out on screen? I just saw her short film *Flesh* and it deals very, very in particular about a black female serial killer. What does a black female serial killer look like and how do we make here a real actualized person? How do you empathize with a serial killer? She does that really, really well and especially she expresses it verbally and on paper, you really understand, "Okay, this is a really interesting topic that we should discuss."

You see it on Twitter all the time and we talk about all of these, we talk about the microaggressions that we have to deal with and that could very easily create this big ball of just energy and so yeah, you want to kill someone. You want to kill. You want to ...

Jamie: Do not touch my hair. I will kill you.

Ashlee: Yeah, exactly. You want to kill the patriarchy. You want to kill racism. You want to kill sexism. You want to kill all of these things and sometimes they manifest into these people and these ideologies and this is how ... These stories, they need to be told and I would love to, obviously for me, I would love to see them in these genre narratives.

Jamie: Oh God. I mean, you're just telling me right now a black female serial killer. That is something you have never seen. You never read in a book, and I would love to see more projects like that. That's really cool.

Ashlee: Absolutely.

Jamie: Why is it important that spaces like *Graveyard Shift Sisters* are created and what kind of feedback have you gotten from readers and fans?

Ashlee: The feedback has been really nice. I'm going to fully admit and I don't say this a lot, I don't think I've said this to anyone, but I was really nervous when I started this. Because I knew it was important that it was created. I mean, obviously you start with yourself. You're doing this because you're passionate about it and I was really wondering if

anyone else who looked like me was passionate about it as well. Luckily, I'm glad those people came out in droves, especially people like you of course, and other people as well and I was just really excited because I'm like, "Yay we're kind of creating kind of a network and people love horror as much as I do and we're all learning this together."

That was the good feedback. That was the feedback I guess I expected but I will say feedback from non-black people has been amazing. I cannot, I did not imagine ...

Jamie: You didn't expect that at all?

[00:22:04]

Ashlee: I didn't.

Jamie: That's how it is with Black Girl Nerds. I never expected to have so many non-black people and men, like there's more men statistically that download our podcast, that visit our website, more than women. It's very interesting to see who gets drawn to your content.

Ashlee: It really is. I think that's absolutely incredible and I will say because maybe it is because the horror community, for people like me who go to conventions, who go to these crazy genre film festivals like Fantastic Fest, if you are not white you are definitely in the minority. Period.

I think it's really interesting that non-black people have really latched onto it because I think that they are very, they're more open. I think horror fans in particular are more kind of open-minded than I first imagined and so it was great to see a lot of people, a lot of white men, like you said, really be just floored with the untapped history and market that Graveyard Shift Sisters, that Dr. Coleman, that Kristina Leath-Malin, that Dr. Kinitra Brooks, all of these other black women, creators, and curators and documentarians and history preservers are creating with work of black people, especially black women in the horror genre. They're excited and they're happy that this exists because they're seeing some, a lot of, you know, think, "I'm the horror master. I know everything." You know, like, "Wait. I don't know everything. This is really interesting. This is really cool."

Just recently with the essay that I wrote about Rachel True and The Craft. I got a Tweet, I got a feedback Tweet that pretty much said, "As a white guy I never considered this." That is really, really great to hear and awesome to hear, but of course at the core of this I'm really glad that a lot of women of color have been able to network and find each other and talk about what it means to have black women in the horror genre. What does that look like and how does it evolve? Yeah.

Jamie: Well, I'm just very grateful for the work that you do on Graveyard Shift Sisters. I learn stuff everyday from reading your website. The blog posts about different films as well as the filmmakers that are producing these movies. It's really great to stumble upon some content that is obscure and then even the mainstream stuff and learn a really cool, new, and unique perspective from you. So keep doing what you're doing.

For those that are listening to this that are not familiar with Graveyard Shift Sisters and want to find out more about your work where can they find you on the internet? Give us your Twitter handle, your social media shout outs. I know you do other stuff aside from the website, so tell us about that as well.

Ashlee: Sure, but first, I really quickly I just want to say I don't think this site would exist without Black Girl Nerds because Black Girl Nerds helped me in this very indirect way find my voice and bring me back to why horror was so important to me and also helped me exercise my writing, how I wanted to express what it was like being a black female horror fan. So thank you Jamie for the platform. Thank you for your inclusiveness because that's really important. Just saying yes when you weren't sure, when I wasn't sure if I could do it. I had to say that so thank you.

Jamie: Aww.

Ashlee: It's true. Basically you can find me on Twitter @graveyardsister. The website is graveyardshiftsisters.com. You can find the library of black women in horror films and television at graveyardshiftsisters.tumblr.com and also the Facebook page is just great for your news feed. It's facebook.com/graveyardshiftsisters. I sometimes write for Birth Movies Death. I sometimes write for Belladonna Magazine. I also have just a fun, informal podcast that's called Girls Will be Ghouls with Zeena Sade Dixon who is at the realqueenofhorror.com. She is a blogger and filmmaker.

Jamie: Excellent. Thank you so much. This was great. I love chatting with you.

Ashlee: Oh, thank you. I always love chatting with you. I appreciate it. Thank you for asking me on.

Jamie: Thanks once again to Ashlee for joining us and remember to check out her writing at graveyardshiftsisters.com and also her podcast Girls Will be Ghouls and check out some of the exciting short films she writes about on her site, too.

That's a wrap on season one. Thanks so much to all of you for adding us to your podcast rotation and please leave us a rating and review. What did you like most and what would you like to see in the future? In the meantime you can still hear plenty from me at Black Girl Nerds. Our website is blackgirlnerds.com and currently we are on hiatus for the holiday break for the Black Girl Nerds podcast, but you can also catch up on older episodes, through Itunes, Stitcher, Soundcloud, Spreaker, and Spotify.

Get it Right is hosted by me, Jamie Broadnax. The show is produced by Marc Faletti, Rewire's director of multimedia. Editorial input is provided by Senior Reporter Jenn Stanley and oversight by Jodi Jacobson Rewire's president and editor in chief.

See you next season.

