

The American Scream: Gender, Capitalism, and Power in Rural Haunted House  
Attractions

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts at George Mason University

by

Betty Aquino  
Bachelor of Arts  
Eastern Michigan University, 2012

Director: Dr. Benjamin Gatling, Associate Professor  
Department of English

Spring Semester 2023  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

Copyright 2022 Betty Aquino  
All Rights Reserved

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my younger self, you're a little weird and that's okay, you'll grow up to be a theatre nerd turned folklorist, and it's a perfect fit. I'd also like to dedicate this to the amazing educators I've had in my life that have inspired me to be curious, confident, and relentless. Lastly, I'd like to thank my family and my husband for his continued support, love, care, and for making a good cup of coffee, and always making dinner.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I wish to thank my advisor, Dr. Benjamin Gatling, for his guidance and support, throughout this process. I also want to thank the members of my committee for their invaluable input: Dr. Lisa Gilman and Dr. Lijun Zhang. Finally, I'd like to acknowledge and thank the ISCLR community for their encouragement and guidance.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of Figures .....	vii
Abstract .....	viii
Introduction .....	1
Halloween and Agritainment .....	3
Haunted House History .....	6
Agritainment and Capitalism .....	8
Research Methodology .....	15
Theoretical Background .....	21
Chapter One: Gender & the Haunted House Attraction .....	29
Haunts: White, Male, and Conservative.....	36
Extreme Haunts, Extreme Guy in Michigan .....	39
Haunted by Gender Based Discrimination .....	48
Gendered Patterns in Haunted House Attractions .....	51
Gendered Patterns & Popular Haunt Themes .....	56
A Deep Dive into Darkness.....	57
Chapter Three: Haunts as Caricatures of Capitalism .....	65
Narratives of Exploitative Labor Practices .....	67
Rural Pennsylvania.....	71
Horror Narratives and Rural Poverty .....	72
Conclusion.....	78
Chapter Four: The Spirit of Collaboration: Folk Drama, Actors and Audiences .....	78
Actors .....	81
Audiences .....	92
An Immersive Audience Experience.....	95
Audiences and Gender .....	98
Audiences: Collaboration .....	100
Conclusion.....	101
Conclusion .....	103
References.....	111



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
Figure 1: Screenshot of the first review and comments section described above. ....	42
Figure 2: Second Review with comments .....	43
Figure 3: This screenshot includes to comments from Figure 1 .....	44
Figure 4: Includes comments from Figure 2 .....	46

## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE AMERICAN SCREAM: GENDER, CAPITALISM, AND POWER IN RURAL HAUNTED HOUSE ATTRACTIONS**

Betty Aquino, M.A.

George Mason University, 2023

Thesis Director: Dr. Dr. Benjamin Gatling

In the wake of industrialization many rural American farms embraced agritainment and learned they could commodify nostalgia and romanticized ideas of rural life. They evolved into Fall festivals featuring family-friendly agricultural entertainment, called agritainment, and reinvented a “pure” rural space, where families could seek refuge, and temporarily escape urban life. Some of these farms expanded their business into the evening by adding haunted house attractions. These farms transform at dusk, and perform a hostile identity, owning the narrative of dangerous “hillbillies” who don’t take kindly to strangers, while also performing other popular horror themes, tropes, and contemporary legends. In the same ways they commodify romantic rurality, they also commodify narratives that describe a clash between affluence and rural poverty, gendered behaviors, and invite audiences to become immersed in the narratives of the haunt to perform an elaborate folk drama.



This thesis explores ten rural agritainment/haunted house attractions in Maryland, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Virginia through participant observation and auto-ethnography. I argue that the narratives performed at these rural haunts are both problematic and empowering and using the scholarship of performance, power, and narrative, I will demonstrate that this model of agritainment reflects community, contemporary culture, and their values. Whether it's the romantic idea of rurality, or performing familiar legend and folk horror narratives, I argue that the American agritainment is a place of evolving rural identity. A place where communities reckon with systems of power, positionality, and performance in a way to maintain cultural relevancy.

## INTRODUCTION

One very special Halloween season, my older sister was involved in a one-night-only haunted hayride event. On the big night, my parents and twin sister loaded up into a tractor-drawn wagon, I sat near the end of the wagon, and propped myself up on my knees to get the best view. The wagon rolled by dark, creepy trees where a man on stilts crept out of the shadows, clowns and masked characters like Jason and Freddy, terrorized the wagon, yet I was unfazed by this. They were unimportant, I was on the look-out for the real star of this show, my older sister. The wagon finally rolled into her scene, and I recognized her voice despite the poorly lit scene. Unable to contain my excitement, I yelled her name at the top of my lungs to get her attention. It was incredibly disruptive, and before my parents could attempt to calm me down, the actor in the scene jumped up onto the wagon and directly into my face. I remember his face so distinctly, his make-up was done like the title character in the film, *The Crow*. He menaced over me and asked if I wanted to join them. I didn't answer. Instead, I threw myself on the floor of the wagon, covered my head for the remainder of the ride. After leaving I was elated, I had survived a dance with darkness, and I knew in a few years I'd get a chance to be the one that jumps on the wagon.

As time passed, I came to learn that hayride was a one-time event, organized by military families, and they had since moved on. That was part of growing up in a military

town, you had to get new friends every four years. That didn't stop me from my Halloween dreams, I spent a good chunk of my youth playing pranks on friends and family with spooky masks and makeup or tormenting the neighborhood kids with a Ouija board and other ghost stories. Those experiences with Halloween shaped my youth and later, my career choices. As an adult, I spent many years working in theatre and entertainment, as a technician and designer, and that's how I landed a job in the haunted house industry.

The professional world of haunted house attractions was like no other entertainment industry I had worked in before. Most people did not have a professional background or training in theatre, stage management, costume, or any professional entertainment training. It was very DIY, there were many men who worked in fabrication like construction or in auto factories who used their professional skills to help construct sets. At rural farms turned haunts, many employees were already handy, skilled in carpentry, mechanics, and similar skills. They merely needed a little bit of creative vision to repurpose an old barn. These haunters were self-taught in other areas like costumes and props. They'd read books and articles, find YouTube channels, and experiment on their own to create the best fake blood, corpses, and scary monsters. They'd bring in friends and family to assist with acting, makeup, and management, until one day, it was turning a profit.

Haunted house industry amateurs and professionals are Halloween-obsessed. They start planning for Halloween on November 1, thinking about how to make it bigger, better, and scarier than the year before. They know that come autumn they will be

competing for the attention of autumn obsessed Americans who are looking to fill their weekends with the rituals and traditions of football, pumpkin picking, and visiting haunted houses during the hallowed month. I know this from prior work experience. I was in those planning meetings on November 1, but I am merely a Halloween civilian now.

### **HALLOWEEN AND AGRITAINMENT**

While haunted houses can be found in urban spaces, and even in suburban neighborhoods, known as “home haunts,” it is the rural farm-haunt model, called agritainment,(Chesky 2009) that seem to hold an esteemed place in Americans hearts and wallets and has become a popular niche industry in rural America. They are family-friendly and provide activities like petting zoos, playgrounds, corn mazes, pumpkin patches, and often a daytime version of one of their haunted houses, where young children can experience their first haunted house. You’re also likely to find a store on their property filled with goodies like donuts, honey, and apple cider. There are many American farms that have become agritainment businesses over time, as opposed to working farms that produce fruit and vegetable crops or animal products. It is an easy model to adopt as farms can open their orchards and fields to guests and have them pick fruit for a fee, instead of paying a laborer to pick fruit. It becomes an opportunity for people who are so often excluded from the food supply chain to truly understand where it comes from.

Agritainment businesses are very DIY, with farmers combining their knowledge of sowing the seeds for fruits and vegetables and combine it with creativity to repurpose

their farm from private property to public space, for a fee of course. An easy and popular DIY is to repurpose a tractor, attach a wagon, and provide rides for visiting guests around the farm. Despite their DIY-nature, there are around 50,000 farms who make upwards of nearly \$1 billion, with a portion of that money coming from the agritainment (Kime 2013). As explained above, I will focus on the farm-haunt model for this thesis, and moving forward I will refer to them in shorthand as “haunts.”

There are many rural farms that choose to curate fall festivals, where families flock to and bring back relics to urban spaces, like ornamental pumpkins, and dried corn stalks to decorate their homes with, homes far from the rural life these relics once lived (Santino 1983, 14). These fall festivals are extended into the evenings, where they perform a dark folk drama, leaning into various performances of “hillbillies,” clowns, and other monsters. This not only creates an additional revenue stream for the farm, but also an additional attraction to give them a competitive edge against other agritainment-style farms, haunted houses, theme parks, and other Halloween events that offer similar experiences.

In agritainment, popular crops include apples and pumpkins. I’ve encountered similar u-pick experiences across the Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, and Northeast. In Michigan, at Blake’s, Schell Family Farm, and Wiard’s Orchards, I’ve taken a tractor ride through endless rows of orchards, heavy with apples, vast pumpkin patches with creeping vines, but also plenty of other vegetable crops for harvest as well. In Virginia at Carter Mountain Orchard, I’ve hiked up and down the mountainous region of Shenandoah to retrieve my own apples off trees. In the foothills of Shenandoah, I’ve wandered rows of

farm-fresh fruit Buckland Farm Market. In Pennsylvania, I've explored the pumpkin patches of Cheeseman Farms, stared in genuine wonder at the intricate display of pumpkins in Maryland, I've been to many of these kinds of places, all over, because I do enjoy them. I enjoy the rituals, the traditions, and the coziness of they create. In all these regions, I've watched cider-mill demonstrations, where an elderly man, almost always the patriarch of the family business, provides a demonstration on how the old and only-used-for-show-now equipment makes fresh apple cider.

In regions where apples are a popular u-pick agritainment experience, guests will often encounter a Johnny Appleseed character, who will educate them on the farms history, and the history and variety of apples. I've encountered two, one in Michigan and in Virginia. He's always a young man, who gives me a sense that he might be an aspiring actor from a nearby university theatre program. In all these locations, I've noticed they offer petting zoos and farm-themed playgrounds with John Deere branded swing sets, and mini-tractors for play.

Like any good attraction that sits somewhere between tourism, agricultural experiences, and fairs, they always have a small gift shop full of branded honey, jams, pies, donuts, small toys, and tchotchkes for sale. Honestly, they are all enjoyable. I love getting donuts, cider, and fall décor at these places, but I also understand how curated these experiences are from working in the industry. I understand how often these products are no longer made on site but outsourced to a larger company. However, it doesn't change the way I feel when I bite into a warm donut and wash it down with cider. It is a great way to spend a Saturday in the fall.

## **HAUNTED HOUSE HISTORY**

David Skal argues that popularity in haunted house attractions is often credited with the opening of the Haunted Mansion ride at Disneyland (Skal 2003, 87). Around the same time, the United States Junior Chamber, better known as the Jaycees, also began creating their own haunted house attractions as fundraisers for community scholarships, holiday meals, or other charitable causes. The Jaycees are credited with creating a model for operating a successful haunted house attraction and a “How-To,” guide that explained the processes of building, designing, and marketing a haunt that was shared within the organizations’ many chapters around the country (Skal 2003, 103). American theme parks began to seriously participate in the Halloween season in the 1980s, and since then, the model for haunts has spread to theme parks, cul-de-sacs, urban spaces, and rural former farmhouses where they have become elaborate and immersive experiences. According to a 2013 study, the haunted house attraction industry is worth an estimated \$300 million (Alton 2016).

According to the National Retail Federation, over \$8 billion was spent during the 2020 Halloween season on costumes, candy, décor, *and* tickets to haunts, *despite* the COVID-19 pandemic (“Consumers Anticipate New Ways to Celebrate Halloween, Despite COVID-19” 2020). Even in the wake of a global pandemic, Americans enjoy being scared. The website AmericaHaunts.com notes that during any given Halloween season, one can find upwards of 1,200 professional haunts, 300 theme-parks, 3,000 charity haunts, and countless home and yard haunts that pop up during the fall, all sharing horror-themed narrative, performing local urban legends, or even creating their own

stories (“Facts” n.d.). Sociologist, Dr. Margee Kerr was quoted in an article for *The Atlantic*, and explained for many people “the natural high from the fight or flight response can feel great,”(Ringo 2013). It’s clear that Americans want to visit haunts and are willing to spend money to experience fear. The joyful and frightened screams from audiences permeate the walls of these haunts, existing in a liminal space.

Autumn is a liminal space that celebrates a transitional time, and these attractions create that liminal space, a pathway to the death of the summer season, leading into the dark, winter months. These are spaces created only to be closed off, screams echoing within as they lie dormant from November until the next September. American haunted house attractions are a unique and specific form of immersive entertainment that resemble a theatrical production, while pulling from and performing elements of contemporary legends to create an experience in which the audience is asked to participate in the narrative.

Farms have an abundance of land, large tractors, old buildings, and old farm equipment that can be easily repurposed and transformed into an immersive performance space. Take for example, the corn maze, this is an easy crop to grow, and many farms may have been producing corn long before transitioning to agritainment. The corn maze creates double the income: during the daytime, it’s merely a maze for people to explore, at night, it is filled with actors wearing costumes. The corn maze is a literal cash crop in warmer parts of the country, where outdoor activities can continue through the fall, like in Fauquier County, VA, where an old farmers market has let their corn crop grow wild, and once inside, it is filled with props and sets for scary scenes.



In Maryland, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, I've seen what could best be described as trash heaps full of old farm equipment, home appliances, cars, and other detritus woven in as set and props, a very respectable DIY set-up. I've even worked at a haunted attraction that used an old industrial, vinegar distilling vat as part of an old, abandoned mine shaft for the audience to traverse through in hopes of avoiding the ghosts of tommy-knockers, the name for ghosts of perished miners who remain in the depths of the earth.

There is a certain iconography among Americans when they think about haunted houses and its looming place in pop culture:(Heller, n.d.) the crumbling Victorian mansion, with boarded up windows, and ghosts peeking out from the attic window(Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007, 147). This infamous and favorite look is the result of what folklorists call ostensive practices. Ostension is the result of reality paralleling the world of legend, which creates opportunities for communities to recreate, build upon, and rework legend narratives, thus creating legend cycles within the industry (Degh and Vdzsonyi 2023).

#### **AGRITAINMENT AND CAPITALISM**

While some choose to joyfully follow this path into agritainment, there are some that end up on this path and feel left to scavenge, afraid to lose the family farms, such as Clay Boyette of Clayton, North Carolina. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* (Needleman 2010), he talked about the history of the business, a once thriving livestock and produce farm. He took over the farm from an uncle, but struggled to make ends meet in the 1980s against corporate farms and slaughterhouses. It was then that he expanded

into agritainment, starting out with simple hayrides and petting zoos, then adding haunted houses, and even a Christmas Light Show, saying in that same interview, “People love to be entertained more than they love to eat (Needleman 2010).”

In the same article, a farmer in Pennsylvania described increasing their annual revenue from \$50,000 per year into more than \$1 million by expanding into agritainment and haunted houses, this shear increase in revenue is what saved their family farm (Needleman 2010). Rituals define the values in many of these communities, and these rituals are often no longer part of the small community ecosystem that put food on local families’ tables, but are now entrenched in laissez-faire capitalism, where some family farms continue to grow bigger, with more attractions, seasonal entertainment, and perhaps more like the corporate farms that almost erased them from existence. For some people who adapt to agritainment, there is a sense of resentment, for others, the money that can be made from this transition is worth it.

Agritainment trade shows host educational seminars full of buzz words and phrases from Silicon Valley like “hack your company’s growth,” and “measure and maximize profitability,” and lengthy educational sessions on how to retain employees (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 371). With the conversation always shifting away from paying people more because that is “not really the full answer. Every day there are people who work low paying jobs that they love, and there are people who leave high paying jobs that they hate. So, the answer is a little more complicated,” a direct quote from a session hosted by NAFDMA Agritourism Convention & EXPO (“EDUCATIONAL SESSIONS” n.d.). Even though recent data that paying people more

money and four-day work weeks are usually a great way to retain employees (Denis 2022).

Haunted house attractions across the country have similar themes, and the audience experiences narratives made up of broad metaphors that engage with themes that feel familiar and mirror our folk stories and traditions. Many haunts model themselves on local legend, an abandoned space, or other horror narratives, something that feels familiar. Many haunts may try to lean into local legend and lore, like in Michigan, where the story of Eloise Asylum is a popular story among local teens, and many Michigan haunts imply that their haunt *is* that very asylum that once stood in Westland, Michigan. Even in Fairfax County, Virginia, a haunt in Centerville, seems to pull from the local legend of the Bunnyman, who once resided in an unnamed asylum in the region and escaped alongside three fellow inmates. The Bunnyman then murdered his fellow escapees and stayed alive in the woods by consuming rabbits and eventually, escalated to killing teenagers who dared seek him out.

The use of a former barn space, that looks like every other barn that sits along a country road, transforms from the peaceful and pastoral, to a space filled with murderous “redneck” characters. In Michigan, where I encountered at least two haunts that shared stories of “rednecks,” attempting to steal barn property, only to meet their untimely deaths and be forced to haunt the barn for all eternity. In Maryland, where I wandered a haunted trail that featured two “redneck” themed barns, with menacing men in ragged overalls, screamed about moonshine, and brandished chainsaws. The terms “redneck,” and “hillbilly,” are terms that are indeed classist, yet remain a popular theme in

mainstream and indie horror alike, and that popularity extends to the haunt industry as well. Regardless of how this trope is performed, be it live like in haunts or on the screen, they continue to lack the nuance around poverty, race, gender, political ideology, and other complex identities of rural communities.

A trail lined with towering pine trees, suddenly resembles an abandoned town, full of angry ghosts, leering from the skeletons of once thriving businesses, I've seen this narrative play out in Michigan, a narrative that feels all too real for its residents who've faced employment upheavals thanks to shuttering auto-factories. A similar narrative plays out in Pennsylvania, a state that has also struggled with industry like coal-mining that often proved to be dangerous to the workforce it relied on.

In almost every single haunt I've visited, I've stumbled upon an old circus tent, once filled with the laughter and joy of clown shows, acrobatics, and calliope music is now fallen, and emaciated clowns with smeared make-up now terrorize, and chase away the audiences they once so willingly performed for. Clowns are a popular scare-tactic, but the sad, empty circus tent also feels like a metaphor for a community that has lost so many job opportunities, as they are outsourced to other places. These familiar narratives lead audiences to believe that they are participating in a more historically rooted, and haunted narrative.

This dual nature of rural spaces serving both pastoral and horror narratives is seen in folk horror films as well, and this form of media helps popularize these narratives about rural spaces. In an article by Dr. Madelon Hoedt on the film *The Houses October Built*, a "found-footage," style mock-documentary that follows a group of friends in

search of the scariest haunted house attraction they can find. In the film, the friends often comment that “the backwoods is the scariest.” Reiterating this point, Hoedt also states “rural horror frames its spaces and their inhabitants as a hostile and dangerous place for those who do not know it, and do not know what they are getting themselves in to (Pascuzzi and Waters 2020, 204).” Hollywood has framed white, conservative, rural America as a den for grounds criminal activity and incest, while perpetuating the concept of “hillbilly horror.”

The rural spaces of America are sometimes perceived as forgotten spaces by coastal and urban culture alike, likening the rural countryside of America as relics of a time gone by and opposite to contemporary lifestyles of urban and suburban regions. This isolation is part of the aesthetic of many haunts. When out in rural areas where city lights are far away and cellphone service is spotty, the dark backroads can seem to lead down uncertain paths. Hoedt quotes *The Houses October Built* director, Bobby Roe, who summarizes a common feeling around rural horror:

The more ma and pa you go, [you get] at the least the feel that you would get from say, West Texas Texas Chainsaw Massacre, house in the middle of nowhere, where the cops aren't coming, and if they are, it's going to be twenty minutes, they're in the middle of nowhere... Nothing strange is going to go on [in the more commercialized Haunts], but some of these other spots, they gotta get creative (Pascuzzi and Waters 2020, 207)

The haunt is a site of tradition, ritual, and initiation, meaning this is a yearly event, where communities come together and participate. It also acts as a ritual, performed in honor of the Halloween season, and an initiation for many. At haunts, there are distinct groups present, actors and employees. Each group serves a purpose to make sure the haunt operates smoothly, and they perform for the audience. The audience has its own group identity as consumers of this ritual and initiation is key to their experience. The initiation involves attending and making it through a haunted house attraction, playing with a certain kind of darkness that is allowed on Halloween. The performances seen at haunt are places where farms share their narrative of near failure in a capitalist economy, farmers “personal experience gradually acquires the traditional trappings of darkness, solitude, and liminality, and begins to resemble a conventional ghost story,” and thus, they begin their eternal haunting (Bennett and Bennett 1999, 45). There is power in these performances, power displayed by the farm as they have evolved in the face of capitalism. The power the actors have over their audience members as they stalk and frighten these paying customers. In the tradition of Samhain, people offered tribute to the gods by providing offerings of food and drink to appease the wandering spirits. Many Americans now parallel that tradition by offering treats to demanding trick-or-treaters, but the haunt demands tribute as well; the haunt demands screams as tribute (Santino 1983, 5).

The haunt industry has its own culture, rituals, and traditions, and the industry reflects the community, contemporary culture, values, and commodified rural culture and is valuable regardless of its practice of monetization of those rituals (Goldstein, Grider,

and Thomas 2007, 171). I want to bring an academic and critical analysis to an often-overlooked aspect of American culture that is a rich folk ecosystem. The ecosystem is built on generations of families, droughts, economic downturns, and upturns. The ecosystem is propped up narratives are passed down through the generations, through the communities, through ordinary people, they become the stuff of legends.

### **ARGUMENTS**

In this thesis, I argue, based on the observations I made at ten rural agritainment-haunted house attractions across Maryland, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Virginia is that the haunt is gendered in certain ways that relates directly to performances of capitalism's waste. That capitalism defines gender and how we engage with gendered behavior and the gendered patterns at haunt attractions are both agentive and destructive problematic for those performing and consuming the production of the haunt. I argue that these ten businesses often perform caricatures of capitalism in their haunts by using themes like ghost towns, "rednecks" and mental hospitals. The narratives they share are rooted in their histories as a small family farm, and their evolution into agritainment businesses. These narratives are dualistic in nature, they are both pastoral and industrial; quaint and horrific. I argue that rural agritainment haunt venues use this dual identity in their performances, both as idealized pasts as quaint family farms and the American Dream gone awry in their haunted houses. They overcame, adapted, and have found a way to thrive despite industrialization and urbanization of their communities. In their adaptation in the face of industrialization, they lean into these metaphors and other capitalistic practices to make money. Lastly, these haunts are collaborative folk dramas that lean into

local histories and broad metaphors for their performances. These performances act as a community ritual for both actors, audiences, and employees. Through the performances, all parties are given access to a new kind of power in themselves by completing the ritual. Power for the actors is a sense of control, confidence, a place to act on darkness. For the audience it is a place to dance with darkness and come out on the other side knowing they've conquered it.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In this thesis, I examine ten rural agritainment-haunt businesses across Maryland, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. I want to point out that there are many kinds of rural communities in America, including Black, Indigenous and Latinx, however, research suggests that the haunt industry is overwhelmingly white, male, and conservative (Kerr 2017, 58) and I would agree with this research from my experience visiting haunts and their professional trade shows. This is not to say that there are no haunts operated by BIPOC communities, there are, but the ones I visited for this thesis were not owned and operated by BIPOC peoples. BIPOC communities have been historically excluded from many opportunities and industries in America because of structural racism, and the intersection between haunts and whiteness is likely the result of that same structural racism. That said, the haunts appeared to be owned and operated by mostly white or at least white passing men, with a majority of their workforce also being white or at least, white passing.

I have chosen to anonymize these businesses because they are still in operation, and they have certainly suffered another round of economic hardship over the last few



years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I will also anonymize the actors and employees I interviewed as informants because I wanted them to speak as freely as possible about their experience in their haunt and the larger industry. My methods include participant observation, interviews, and autoethnography. Much of my thesis relies on participant observation through my attendance at these ten agritainment-haunt attractions. Despite the popularity of agritainment and haunted house attractions, I have found that many of these industry professionals are rather secretive. I attribute this culture of secrecy to the economic upheavals they have experienced in their lifetime that has brought them into this niche industry. I made efforts to contact every haunt I planned to visit but was not surprised when my emails and phone calls often went overlooked, save for one attraction. The one attraction I was I was able to have an insider opportunity with was one that I was employed at many years ago.

Despite not being able to have insider access to almost all these haunts, I was still able to complete in-depth participant observation at these haunts located in Maryland, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. The haunts I visited were chosen for a few reasons, the main one being that they are multi-purpose. Many of these haunts began as traditional fruit, vegetable, or livestock farms, with histories dating back decades, or even centuries, and evolved over the years into agritainment, or a combination of agritainment and traditional farming. Therefore, my work began on-line, researching these businesses for their history and owners.

For example, two haunts in Fauquier County, Virginia were chosen because their families have been farming for decades, even though their business locations had only

existed since the 1960s and 1980s, both having been affected by the expansion of the federal government which led to an increase in the creation of suburban enclaves in former farmlands. Overtime, both farms migrated around Northern Virginia and adapted their models adapted to include agritainment. In rural Virginia Beach, a business had roots on their land as far back as the 1700s, eventually settling on the agritainment model in the 1980s. In York County, Pennsylvania, I visited a haunt that had history dating to the 1700s, another in Carbon County, Pennsylvania in operation since the 1930s, again both evolved over time and landed in the agritainment industry. In Maryland, a younger farm had roots dating back to the 1980s, but has grown its model into agritainment, outdoor education, farming, and haunting. In Livingston County, Macomb County, and Washtenaw County, Michigan, many of the haunts had been in the families for generations, moving the farms around the county as industrialization forced them off their original plots. With one Livingston County family returning to farming in the last few years, by opening a brand-new farm for the sole purpose of agritainment. In Michigan, all the sites I visited shared a common thread, one where the industrialization of their community initially brought good change, provided good jobs, but displaced these farming families. Then, all too quickly, these factories would close, leaving more destruction in their wake.

While I was often not able to secure facetime with most of the owners, something that I expected based on my past work in the industry, I also imagined it would be even harder in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. I knew that the owners would be very preoccupied trying to run the most normal season they'd had in years, and pay their

staff and bills. However, I could supplement facetime with research, and I often came across local newspapers discussing the business, the family that runs it, and promoting them for the Halloween season. The articles also highlighted how they adapted in the face of change to keep the family business alive and well in their community. These places were chosen for their histories, their place in the community, and their generational practices. However, I also found that employees were friendly and talkative if I was able to strike up a conversation with them.

My research was supplemented by participant observation at every single haunt. So, after extensive online research I made it a habit to follow a pattern of observation at each site. This included getting familiar with the larger community, and asking questions like: was it rural, how rural? How far was the closest city, what was the political makeup of the city or county the haunt was in? When traveling to these haunts, I'd take note of what I drove by, like billboard advertisements, fields, crops, industrial areas, or other businesses nearby. I made a point to examine what kinds of land surrounds the space.

While my process for observation at all the haunts began in their communities, I also felt it was important to observe parking lots, I have heard many anecdotes from haunted house fans about travelling out of state to make pilgrimages to popular haunts. I'd make a note of what kinds of cars were there, noticing how many plates were in-state versus out of state, what kinds of bumper stickers did they display. Every single haunt offered daytime activities, so I would attend their daytime events, take stock of what those activities included and who was visiting. I paid full price for my experiences, making a conscious choice to not pay for specialty tickets, as this would allow me more

time to observe, as opposed to skipping to the front of the line for the events. I observed the nighttime haunt activities, watching guests in communal spaces, watching them in lines, watching them as they walked through the haunts.

When possible, I'd sit close to the front of haunted hayride wagons to strike up a conversation with a tractor driver, this only worked in Macomb County, Michigan, where a tractor driver lived up to their "Midwest Nice" standards and shared his deep love of his job with me, while another driver in Pennsylvania seemed more suspicious of my queries. In Maryland, I was able to have unstructured conversation with an employee as they grabbed a cup of late-night coffee at a concession stand, while they were very hospitable to my questions, it was clear they were in a rush to get back to work.

I observed actors as they performed, watched them as they wandered through crowds on busy nights, I made it a point to be the last person in the group of guests that walked through the haunt so that I could see the actors perform for their audience, and see how the audience reacted. If an actor ever attempted to engage me in conversation, I always obliged their requests. The actors generally asked questions about what scares me, or tried to get the names of the people in the group I was with. Haunters love to get a name when possible, if they know a guest's name, an employee can pass on a description of the guest and their name to the other actors in the haunt. It's a trick that many haunts use to this day and makes the guests feel both special, and frightened.

When possible, I'd have unstructured and informal interviews with guests about their experiences, this was very possible at a few sites in Michigan that offered community spaces to enjoy bonfires and food after exploring the haunts. I watched guests

in shared hayride wagons, and I included unstructured interviews with other guests about their experiences at each haunt. I observed all the parts and moments that make up an entire day at this type of haunt.

I was able to complete deeper field work in a Washtenaw County haunt, having been previously employed by them. In the afternoon, I wandered their fair grounds, watching families, couples, and groups of friends enjoy the fall-themed activities like u-pick apples and pumpkins, hayrides, and even a very tame version of one of their haunts was open to the guests. I then used semi-structured and unstructured interviews with the current patriarch and owner of the business, and then his son, the current creative director for the haunt. I also completed additional interviews with several employees, including multiple actors, make-up artists, and haunt managers.

I was able to observe the transitional period between day and night at this haunt, and all the challenges that happen during this transition between activities. Farm hands move throughout the space shutting down daytime activities, driving up and down in trucks and golf carts, ensuring animals are put away in pens for the night, closing daytime activities like bounce houses, turning on outside ambient and directional lighting, making sure the correct parking lots are opened and ready for guests for the evening. During this time, there are managers for each haunt on site and they gather their actors lists for the night, take attendance like a teacher, let the creative director know about their absences and what sort of actors support they may need for the night. The managers, most of them having worked a daytime shift too, then head into their respective haunts and begin

working with all their tech, turning on lights, sounds, and making sure those all work properly.

While the managers are preparing their haunts, the actors are in costume and makeup, and during this space, I interviewed the entire seven-person makeup team, some who also served as performers in the haunt. I interviewed actors while they waited for their turn in the make-up chair, or while they waited for their costumes to be given to them. Lastly, using auto-ethnography, I reflect on nearly ten years that I spent working as a designer, marketing manager, artist, and a few times as an actor in the agritainment-haunt industry.

#### **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Capitalism defines gender, it defines it in the clothes we wear, activities we engage in, the food we consume, and it defines the roles we play in the workplace. Many aspects of our daily lives are gendered, and even the more gender-neutral options are products of capitalism, companies trying to appeal to a broader audience to earn a higher profit. The way capitalism shapes our lives is also how we engage with gendered behavior, these gendered patterns are popular in the horror genre and that extends to haunts as well, and these patterns in haunts are both problematic and empowering. Re-iterating an earlier point, that research suggests the haunt industry is largely white, male, and conservative (Kerr 2017, 58) and perhaps, this homogenous demographic and their rural locations laid the groundwork for “hillbilly” and rural horror as one of the basic structures in these haunts. Emily Satterwhite describes “hillbilly” horror as something that “likely appeal[s] in particular to white males who feel themselves entitled to power

but marginalized by class and geography.” I use Satterwhite’s work to guide my examination of how these factors create an environment that is again, of a dual nature of empowering and problematic.

There is a relationship between gender, horror, and rural haunted house attractions. The target market for haunted house attractions is women, first because women often take on roles in both the home and the workplace as the person(s) who organize social outings, but also because there is an enjoyment of the horror genre (A. Miller 2021; Williams 2014). While women certainly enjoy this genre, it doesn’t seem the genre loves them back as many haunts craft their stories around women as victims, and many haunts appear to have more male actors than female actors, and the gender-based discrimination that can result from this lack of balance. This thesis will draw comparisons between the gendered patterns found in contemporary ghost legend from Jeannie Banks Thomas to the narratives found in haunts. I will share an auto-ethnographic experience I had as an actor one night in the haunt and lean into those different gendered patterns and how I performed them in the haunt.

The rural haunt is a symbol of Americana, nestled in the countryside, left to rot but reborn, guided by “personal merit and material wealth – the “rags-to-riches” story,” (Lindquist 2006, 457). Through the haunts’ local and industry participation, they become connected to the community, a space where people can engage with a darker part of their identity and thrive in the darkness (Lindquist 2006, 466). These haunts perform broad metaphors that *feel* like the contemporary legends that we encounter frequently, mixed in with horror tropes du jour, but the metaphor also lies in their business. The metaphor

describes a transformation from a farm that provided sustenance for their community, to a zombie consuming the flesh (by spending money on every trend, by cutting costs that will save them money, and finding ways to exploit every penny), of others to stay alive. These farms engage in the same capitalist practices that almost closed them down. Performances in these rural haunts are influenced by their own experiences in a capitalist society, and many haunts use themes like ghost towns and “hillbillies,” victims of capitalism to create a caricature of capitalism, one where the haves, and have-nots are put on display (Lindquist 2006). Farms became corporations, a version of what they once were by selling themselves as an experience.

The Agritainment trade shows and conventions that have cropped up to guide this growing industry work to help these business owners monetize every aspect through to add “value-adds,” examples including fresh donuts, ambient music throughout the farm using expensive sound systems, and spend a great amount of detail covering what actionable steps a family-farm turned entertainment venue must take to turn a profit. They offer sessions to these farmers turned entrepreneurs on how to manage the “Great Resignation,” and offer advice on how to build a better culture and keep employees (“EDUCATIONAL SESSIONS” n.d.).

I noticed that all the agritainment-haunt businesses I visited were staffed with teenagers, and it’s not merely the daytime activities, it is also the nighttime haunted house activities. I’ve even encountered children, possibly as young as 10, in haunts in Pennsylvania, and in Virginia Beach, Fauquier County, Virginia, and in Macomb County, Michigan. Research suggests that hiring teenagers for these seasonal activities is



beneficial to the business. For one, while this is not openly discussed in any of the agritainment trade shows or publications it appears that U.S Labor law states that employees under 20 years of age can be paid a lower wage for 90 calendar days when they are first employed (“Fact Sheet #32: Youth Minimum Wage - Fair Labor Standards Act” n.d.). As for the very young children, it appears that there are many loopholes in state and federal labor law regarding young children and their family-owned business (“Fact Sheet #43: Child Labor Provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) for Nonagricultural Occupations” n.d.). I again, refer back to Kerr’s research that argues that this industry is largely conservative leaning (Kerr 2017, 56). It appears that many of these agritainment business owners align their beliefs on paying teenagers lower than minimum wage, the way the Employment Policies Institute encourages (“Minimum Wage: Teen Unemployment” n.d.), as a way of encouraging bootstraps economics. Arguably bootstraps economics is the root of suppressed wages, late-stage capitalism, and certainly a dark side of this industry. The narratives of these haunts help create ghost stories and legends to fill their haunts with. The stories are made up of their own familial, business, community, and personal triumphs and tragedies. Each generation of story taking on a little more grief and pain, only to be passed on to the next, until the stories become a faintly haunted memory, electrified by the performance of an actor, an actor whose performance may also be violating U.S Labor Law.

At haunts, performance and narrative are not limited to the audience and actors, but also the scenery, props, and design tell a story. These elements combined help craft a folk drama, however, unlike most plays, haunts are not always a linear show. They are

often vignettes of phobias that are loosely connected to one another. In many of the haunts I visited for this thesis, I found myself wandering through a clown room, a spider room, a room full of strobe lights and fog, a room with a famous horror movie villain, and other horror tropes to help build a folk drama narrative.

For this thesis, I will lean into Montana Miller's definition of folk drama that states: "folk drama or play in which participants are continually shifting frames (that is, their actions are interpreted – by themselves and by others – in constantly changing ways.)" (M. Miller 2012, 3). This interpretation translates to the ways in which employees, actors, and audience members engage with one another while in a haunted house attraction. In this folk drama, there is a requirement of collaboration between the actors and audience, and while there are some folklorists that argue that a folk drama does not require participants to believe in message of the drama, the spirit of collaboration is key to the success of haunted house attractions version of this drama (M. Miller 2012, 5). The folk drama is created out of necessity, to make money, to keep their family farms name relevant in the community. These folk dramas play out on crisp October evenings throughout the country. I'll use the work of Richard Schechner's dark play theory, that argues that dark play is a method which is subversive, but both overt and subtle form of play designed to be chaotic, deconstructive, expositional, but ultimately self-gratifying, a type of play where at least one participant is involved, possibly more, but not everyone involved *knows* they are playing (Caines and Heble 2015, 386–95). And how dark play is engaged by both actor and audience in haunted house attractions.

In combination with dark play, I will rely on Beverly J. Stoeltje's model for power in the ritual genres (Stoeltje 1993, 139) and applying that to the performances found in haunts. This model identifies three sources of power: form, production, and discourse. The form is created from the power of the performance, and allows the audience to recognize it as such (1993, 141), the production is the organization of people, and materials that actually create the event (1993, 141), and the discourse is the language of the production and the performance, and how it is perceived in a wider audience, who then shares their experience about the event (Stoeltje 1993, 143). The "ritual event is, then, the culmination of these forms in which participants, both audience and performers, come together to achieve the purpose of event," (1993, 136). This model is relevant to agritainment haunt attractions because it is a performance situated within ritual genres. These attractions are open for a few months out of the year to mark the autumn season, haunts are often rite of passage rituals. Within this model, the production describes the methods that create the event, where a manipulation of power occurs, form describes the evolution through repeated performance, and the discourse is made through the organization of production.

With this model, we can understand how actors manipulate power through their performance and can engage with dark play, we understand how actors create a sense of agency for themselves through dark play and performance, a sense of agency that they may not have during their daytime lives. This model helps us understand how a commodified experience can convince consumers to be harassed for a few hours a night, breaking the norms of customer service, this is not an experience that American

consumers generally pay for. Within this model, there is also a call for collaboration. Stoltje's model calls for the performers and audience to come together to complete this ritual performance. There are other elements that are not directly collaborative but are utilized by both parties for the purpose of this event.

In all the haunts I visited for this thesis, the audience would begin their journey through the haunt as strangers but complete the haunt having made brief connections with one another. These groups of strangers performed an anxiety inducing initiation ritual that was rewarding. Watching them traverse the haunt in front of me, I'd observe them bump into one another when scared, which would always lead to some laughter. They'd grab onto a person, perhaps thinking it was the person they had come to the haunt with, only to realize it was a stranger. I'd watch shock light up their faces, followed by relief as both parties realized they were humans and not monsters. In dark, claustrophobic spaces, they'd reach out to the people in front of them, while alerting them they were safe, and not an actor messing with them.

While the audience, who pays for this experience, seems to have access to a lack of power and control within the haunt, they allow themselves the spirit of collaboration. They allow themselves to be scared, to laugh, to be uncomfortable, and when they complete the haunt, they have completed their initiation. They too, can engage in dark play, creating a persona for themselves as they complete haunts, and upon completion of the initiation of the haunt, it grants them access to a new kind of power, one where they faced darkness, and survived.

## **ORGANIZATION OF THESIS**

This thesis will be organized in three chapters. The first chapter will examine the intersection of gendered patterns, specifically cis-gender patterns and haunted house attractions. In this chapter, I will focus on the pattern of toxic masculinity that is performed by both actors, their audience, and consumers of this type of performance. I will explore the gendered patterns are often found in the contemporary legend genre and are mirrored in the industry, through ethnography and auto-ethnography.

In the second chapter, I will examine the haunts performances of capitalism as a narrative where they are both a victim and a victor of capitalism. In all ten haunts I visited, there were many popular narratives that sit at the intersection of rurality and poverty and these narratives caricatures of capitalism, poverty, and white rural communities. In all ten haunts, I could see a reflection of these agritainment business owners' own experiences in the narratives they performed. In the final chapter, I will focus on ways in which these haunts create folk dramas through dark play and the spirit of collaboration that happens between audiences and actors. I will conclude by discussing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on haunts, and how it is another chapter of hardship for their family's history, and question how haunts might move forward from this experience.

## CHAPTER ONE: GENDER & THE HAUNTED HOUSE ATTRACTION

In the fall of 2022, I returned to the haunt I was previously employed at in Washtenaw County, Michigan to do field work and conduct interviews. As dusk fell that evening, the haunt opened for the night and walking up to the mental-hospital themed haunted, we encounter a vintage Victorian-era hearse. It's ornate, painted all black, and lit up in eerie reds, the name of the haunt painted on the window. It's a spooky prop and certainly one that any goth kid would love, a couple of teenagers stop to take a quick photo in front of it, but instead of heading to the line, they walk further into the property. The outside of this haunt is covered in a faux stone façade, a tall, rusty wrought-iron fence creates an enclosure around overgrown grass with a dilapidated fountain in the middle of it. On top of the building is a yellow, spinning light, and razor wire, a narrative is already being constructed between the fence, the façade, and the lights, and my husband and I are only taken out of the narrative when we are greeted by an employee taking tickets, another couple is already waiting at the entrance.

He is a young man, and he recognizes me from my days of previous employment, and we chat for a moment. While we chat, he is looking beyond me at the main lot of the haunt, I recognize this look. He is trying to gauge if he wants to wait for more guests to queue up or send the four of us through. After a few more moments, it's clear he has made his decision, and he calls the small group of us together. He welcomes us to the haunt for the evening and begins to rattle off some rules for entering the haunt, "For the safety of our guests and monsters please: no running, no smoking, no vaping, and don't

touch anything inside. Please do not film when you are inside the house. Please be advised there are strobe lights and fog on the inside of the haunt and lastly, do not touch the monsters and they will not touch you.” The list of rules is behind him on two signs, and they are found throughout the property, as a precaution. A door, about 10 feet behind him, opens and a woman in a nurse’s outfit and unsettling makeup, oozes out from the doorframe and beckons us inside.

Crossing the threshold, we find ourselves in a waiting room that feels like it is stuck between a few decades, there are two benches against the walls, facing one another, some diplomas on the water-stained walls, old, dusty light fixtures with flickering bulbs, threatening to extinguish themselves at any moment. There are charts all over the walls too, anatomy, an eyechart, an old cabinet filled with jars of what could be medicinal treatments, and there is a distorted, sort of rag-time music echoing from some unseen place. Having worked here, I know what to expect, and I let the other couple sit on the bench nearest where the scare will happen, the left side of the room. While my husband and I get seated on the right bench, I allow him to sit closest where the scare will happen on this bench, because I am a wonderful and loving spouse.

The door clicks back into place, and the nurse gives us an eerie smile, and begins her monologue. I did not expect to be surprised by this moment, given my work history, but I quickly realize she is not speaking, it’s a sound cue. The sound cue that makes it appear as if she has the power to speak with three voices simultaneously, one voice is higher pitched, one is a normal pitch, the last being a lower pitch. She mouths along

perfectly and it's because it is her voice. I learn later in the evening that she recorded this short monologue during the worst years of the pandemic.

Turing this first monologue into a sound cue was a work-around for the haunt during the 2020 season. The rules and regulations of the pandemic affected many businesses of all kinds, and many haunts and agritainment places were not sure if they were going to be able to open for their short seasons based on local regulations. However, this haunt was able to open, and being greeted by scary nurse wearing a surgical mask inside of a mental hospital didn't make people ask questions, it worked. She continues speaking and informs us that to enter the hospital, we must first take an eye-exam and she directs our attention to the left wall. The room is suddenly cloaked in darkness and a cacophony of noise takes place of the catchy ragtime that we were just listening to. A man in a surgical mask leapt through a spot in the wall where the medical diploma once stood, while the nurses three voices cackle, mixed in with the barrage of sound. The man that leapt through the wall is suddenly in the waiting room, waving his hands violently to have us follow him into the haunt further. The couple across us flinch, the woman brings her arms into her chest while leaning into her partner, she covers her mouth for a moment trying to hold in a scream, the man she is with flinches backwards. To my disappointment, my husband doesn't really have a reaction, just a slight flinch.

The room, lights, and music return to normal, and the nurse is still standing in the waiting room, smiling, she extends her arm to the hall where we are supposed to go next and bids us adieu. The other couple reluctantly stand up first, and the man leads the way, holding her hand as they round the first corner, she follows in his footsteps. We follow



closely behind, and I let my husband lead the way, so that I can observe everyone in front of me, and secretly hope he gets scared along the way. We weave our way through the scenes, long water-logged hallways with doors that appear to lead to inmates' rooms, a dusty, dank library with a broken piano, a padded cell with dismembered bodies on the floor and a female actor that contorts herself in impressive and eerie ways. In other long, dark hallways we are overwhelmed with the sound of overlapping voices, what are presumed to be the staff of the hospital making frantic calls for assistance. I keep an eye on the couple in front of us, I see the man flinch a few times, the woman he is with shrieks occasionally as she is startled by actors and sound cues. We walk into a cold morgue and come face to face with a wall of bodies in lockers, the doors opened, toe tags visible on grey, decaying feet. After the morgue, we enter a room full of fog and strobe lights, the couple in front of us step gingerly through the space, their hands up in front of their faces, trying to shield their eyes.

The last scene is a challenge for guests, it's where they meet the final boss, the scariest killer of the asylum, inside the operating theatre. They must duck and cover to avoid the weapon of choice for this killer, the chain saw, as the actor waives it wildly above their heads from a platform, while decaying corpses stand vigil from the seats of the theatre. The couple in front of us duck and cover, crouch down, screaming, and beeline for the exit, as expected. As I scurry through the scene, I take a moment to watch the actor from her spot on high, she is waving around a prop chainsaw this time, the one place in the haunt where it's a prop and not a former tool because they don't want to risk dropping it on a guest's head. She waives it wildly, like she is channeling that infamous

final scene in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, she laughs evilly, from deep within her belly, and screams “Let me into your head!” As we cross the finish line, the couple in front of us stands upright, sighing and laughing, still holding hands. I overhear them talk about how they enjoyed their experience. I stop them to ask more about their experience. The couple drove about 25 minutes to attend this haunt, and the woman is the one who organized the evenings events. When I ask about their enjoyment of haunted houses, the man shrugs a little bit and says, “I don’t really enjoy doing this kind of stuff, or scary movies, but....” the woman interjects, “I do! I love Halloween, it’s my favorite time of year!”

In this chapter, using ethnography, I will focus on cis-gendered patterns in the haunts that I have visited and lean into my own experience as a former haunter. I will focus on the way the industry has been documented as largely white, male, and conservative (Kerr 2017, 58), and how the intersection of those values influences the narratives the haunts perform. Keeping in mind the main demographic of owners, I will also discuss the ways that women are consumers of the genre, while also consistently being excluded from the genre. In my discussion I will focus on the role of toxic masculinity, which is defined as a highly rigid norm that cis-men must follow, these norms include: being a bully, hiding emotions, except for emotions like pride and anger, being assertive and aggressive, and maintaining a dominant position over their peers(Alton 2016). I will look at how toxic masculinity intersects with the world of haunted house attractions, their actors, and their audiences, and how other typically cis-gendered patterns, such as women performing in the role of a victim, are seen in the

haunts I visited, and the popular themes performed at these haunts. The genre of horror exists outside the binary of cis-gender, and always has. There are many arguments that horror is a very queer genre, that the subtext of many plots and characters have always been queer (Collins 2021; Smith 2021). I want to acknowledge that these arguments are valid and important to the genre of horror, in my personal experience working in haunts, and visiting the ones for this paper, I did not see much queer representation in person. While there is at least one professional haunting organization that supports the LGBTQIA+ organization, Haunters Against Hate, this organization was not present or openly supported at any of the haunts I visited. I saw mostly cis-heteronormative, and toxic masculinity-driven narratives. I will focus on these versions of gender and sexuality for this thesis. Lastly, I will reflect on my own experience as a performer in a haunted house attraction.

It doesn't surprise me to learn that the woman organized the evenings activities. While employed at this agritainment business, I also managed their social media marketing and was very familiar with the demographics of the people who engaged with our social channels. While the most recent data I have from this haunt is 2015, it did show that 70% of the people following our social channels identified as women. I want to note that the marketing data for this time only looked at the binary of men or women while excluding trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people. Women are generally the ones organizing a group outing, date night, team-bonding experience, sorority event, office social event, teenager's birthday outing, and the like (Ruiz 2019; Williams 2014). While it seems unusual that women would be drawn to this type of

experience, I would argue that it is a combination of two things, the first being that women tend to take on these kinds of organizational roles, the burden of social activities for the home, office, and group often fall on the shoulders of women. The second is that women enjoy the genre of horror and its many forms at the same rates, or even more than men. As an undergraduate student, it was a group of female students who wanted to organize a haunted house event in the theatre department, many of my female friends enjoyed watching scary movies, reading scary books, listening to scary podcasts, and counting down the days to Halloween. While my evidence is partially anecdotal, it has been said that the:

Theoretical discourse centering on horror film spectatorship privileges the male gaze and consequently, the male spectator. There have been extensive investigations into the horror film spectator and the psychological implications of his cinematic preferences. However, these studies identify the typical horror spectator as a young, heterosexual male and frequently neglect the female horror spectator (Vosper 2014).

This lack of discourse, yet again favors the cis-male opinion could very well explain why my data shows more women were engaged with us on social media. This one couple reinforces my ideas on gender and haunts, the woman organized the event, and the man admitted to not enjoying these types of events but went *because* of her.

Sociologist Dr. Margee Kerr notes that the haunt industry is largely white, male, and conservative leaning, and that tenants of this group is often reflected in the stories, props, and sets of haunts and industry specific companies (Kerr 2017, 58). The reflection

being a conservative mentality is built on ideas of toxic masculinity, a need to conform to rigid gender norms. For example, at the haunted house professionals' convention, many sets will include female actors where their role in the scene is an obvious victim, they are tied up, trapped, and held captive in any way imaginable. In the haunts I visited for this thesis, I've seen female actors may crawl out from behind objects while screaming for help, only to be dragged away by an unseen force, I have seen female actors thrown in prop wood-chippers, burned at the stake for being witches, pulled into the woods by a monstrous looking man whose intentions are violent. There is no context to their deaths in haunts, we don't know their names, their backstory, how they got to the haunt, we are just witness to their brutal deaths, often at the hands of male actors.

#### **HAUNTS: WHITE, MALE, AND CONSERVATIVE**

This demographic of white, male, and conservative extends to the rural farm/haunt agritainment business, as rural spaces tend to be cradles of conservative values and the tension of this space may be exasperated by the “clear geographical lines between urban middle class outsiders and desperately poor rural whites, (Satterwhite 2017, 239)” that allows people to deeply cling to the color of their communities' political identity, which creates tension. This tension in rural spaces is arguably felt more deeply by “white males who see themselves as entitled to power via the “wage of whiteness,”(Satterwhite, n.d., 239). This entitlement is certainly a byproduct of toxic masculinity and rural space, particularly on a farm, this is an excellent breeding ground for men to conform to rigid gender norms like being dominant over women, bullying, and showing aggression (Althof 2021) .

I have yet to discover public data on the demographics of haunted house actors, but my anecdotal experience between working and observing the ten haunts for this thesis, is that the actors are for the most part are white and male, and in the rural haunts, they are all almost exclusively white and male. This homogenous demographic certainly laid the groundwork for “hillbilly” and rural horror as one of the basic structures in these haunts. Emily Satterwhite describes “hillbilly” horror as something that “likely appeal[s] in particular to white males who feel themselves entitled to power but marginalized by class and geography,” and this genre of horror paints rural areas deserve their sufferings because they do not welcome the change of urbanization (239). It is in this genre of rural and “hillbilly” horror, there is an opportunity to lean into the way “rural horror frames its spaces and their inhabitants as a hostile and dangerous place for those who do not know it, and do not know what they are letting themselves in for,” (Pascuzzi and Waters 2020, 207). A place where “the marginalized are the monstrous and the monstrous are the marginalized,”(Poole 2018, 13). It’s a space for these white, male actors to safely share their “interest in seeing the suffering and brutality of the horror,” (Vosper 2014).

As stated above, when I first started working in one haunt, I found that many of the actors were white, male, cis-gendered, but the demographic of actors changed in the haunt as the creative direction began to change. Within a few years the haunt where I worked had more BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and more women joining the cast. There were more roles for them too, roles where they were not the victim.

Leading up to the election of Donald Trump in the 2016, it felt as if there was a change in the atmosphere of the haunt. I arrived to work one day wearing a shirt that read

“A Woman’s Place is in the House and State,” with an image of the United States Capitol Building on it, and was mocked by a white male farmhand, who also performed in the haunt, for this shirt. I overheard many white men who worked there calling then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton a “bitch” and accusing her of cheating in the debates. People are allowed to be critical of elected officials, but it’s clear that the criticism was based on gender, and not qualifications. Between the combination of the more diverse cast, and the “threat” of Hillary Clinton, it could be said that some of these white men in positions of power at the haunt felt threatened by the incoming diversity of the cast, in a way that mirrors the “hillbilly horror,” that Emily Satterwhite discusses. Satterwhite discusses how those who “align themselves with “hillbilly” against “outsiders” may see the empowerment of people of color, people of non-normative sexualities, and women as threatening what little sense of power they gain via “the wages of whiteness”(Satterwhite 2017, 239). The combination of change in employee demographic and the election of Donald Trump, encouraged resentment from many of the white male actors/farmhands, who wanted to maintain power in the haunt, and felt emboldened by the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States.

In my own haunt and the larger industry there was a palpable change in attitude, an obvious triumphant feeling, a new boldness among white men, a weaponized “gotcha” locked and loaded, ready for any political discourse. It was this idea that they were *finally* able to root for themselves with Trump in office. A sense that is paralleled in “hillbilly” horror genres where one might root for the “hillbilly” monsters that prey on the urban and suburban outsiders, and the “hillbilly” monster affirms “xenophobia and a conservative

‘states rights’ white supremacist stance on race and immigration,” (Satterwhite 2017, 239). In the haunt they can embody this specific character a little more openly, they are granted access to a type of power that they are not entitled to in their everyday lives. While I *felt* that there was a change, there was data to show that Trump supporters were driven by “white racial resentment, whether in the form of opposition to immigration from south of the border, or old-fashioned anti-Black racism,”(Katz 2020). They were fueled by this the perceived loss of power to BIPOC communities, feminists, and the LGBTQIA+ community(Gelfand 2019; Mutz 2018). They own the monstrosity the urban and suburban populations place on them, they own the misery they deserve because of their “refusal to conform, and opposition to urban progress,” (Satterwhite 2017, 229).

#### **EXTREME HAUNTS, EXTREME GUY IN MICHIGAN**

Simultaneously in 2016, there was a trend in the haunted house industry, more specifically in Michigan, and many haunts began playing with “extreme,” performances. While I can find no concrete definition of “extreme,” I do understand it often included variations on actors being able to touch guests, grab, pick up, trap, or blindfold guests. I would argue that the interest in variations on “extreme” haunts rose in popularity because of the rise in publicity of the infamous McKamey Manor (Carroll 2015).

McKamey Manor, is a non-profit “extreme” haunt, operated by Russ McKamey, guests do not purchase tickets for this event, they are instead asked to provide donations of dog food, which he will pass along to a local dog shelter. Guests are required to pass multiple health screenings, sign a 40-page waiver, and pass a day-of drug test before entering this haunt, once they meet the requirements, they are then kidnapped by the



staff, mostly white men, and held for upwards of 10 hours. The experience real life torture, are held underwater, confined to small spaces, bound, and gagged by staff, the list goes on, it is very real in comparison to the simulated fear found in many other haunts. I believe the increased media attention of McKamey Manor created a market of thrill-seekers and some haunts saw a possible new avenue for revenue.

Between the desire for the extreme experiences for both audiences and actors, and the election of Donald Trump, it felt as if haunts were looking to cross lines and muddy the waters of what a haunted house attraction should be. Perhaps by introducing an element of extreme this was a place for white men to express their “resentment, rancor, rage, reaction to humiliation and suffering,” arguably, “all of these are at play in right-wing populism and support for authoritarian leadership today,”(Brown 2019, 175). These are the things these white men operating and acting in haunts feel, resentment to a changing world, to a world that is actively trying to overthrow their power. I saw this in my own haunt, where I found myself at odds with white, male employees, as they fought back against scene changes with female actors, or creative direction from female employees.

Adding an extreme night to the haunt I worked at was never on the table, the owner didn't want to toy with the idea simply based on insurance premiums alone, but also, they didn't trust many of the actors to **not** do something inappropriate. I made a point to monitor several other nearby haunts through their social media pages and Google reviews that season as they rolled out their extreme events. I had no intentions on visiting them in person for this experience, but felt it was important to see how their customers

were reacting to their extreme additions. There were haunts on the east side of the state that adopted various levels of extreme, I noticed one had multiple reviews on their Facebook page by women that described their negative encounters with actors in the haunts. These women had been assaulted by male actors and in one review, a woman described an actor threatening to rape her, and described having her breasts grabbed and hair pulled by another actor. The haunt responded by dismissing their claim and stated, “We would never ever say that we would kill or rape or anyone. -Children purchase tickets to come through,” and encouraged the reviewer to give them a call. Image on the next page.

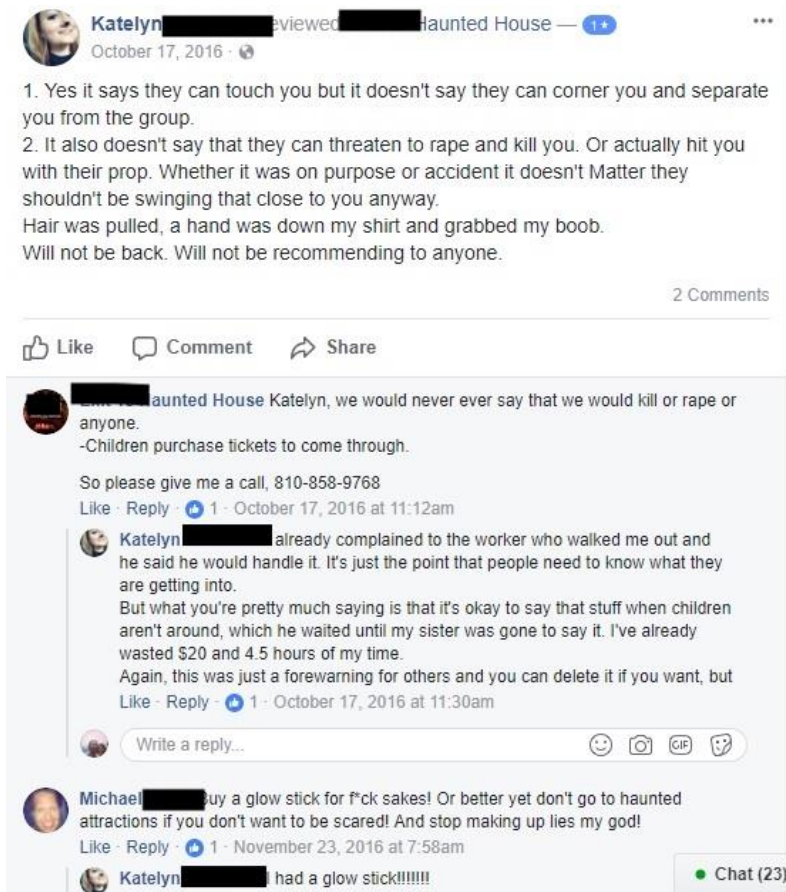


Figure 1: Screenshot of the first review and comments section described above.

In the second review, a woman described a male actor caressing her face with his hands and a corn cob, he also propositioned her with it. She also noted that many other women who went through seemed very uncomfortable and she was concerned about the type of actors they were hiring while citing male actors specifically. The haunt responded to their comment and encouraged them to reach out and call them.



Figure 2: Second Review with comments

In both reviews, a white-presenting man responded to their claims. It was unclear why they decided to respond to the reviews, as their public social media profile did not indicate that they were employed by the haunt. It seemed instead, they were taking part in the “passion and pleasure in trolling and trashing [which] are signs of what Nietzsche called “wreaking the will” simply to feel its power when world affirmation and world building are unavailable,”(Brown 2019, 171; Phillips and Milner 2017, 13,40). In the first

review, he encourages the reviewer to “not go to haunted houses if they don’t want to be scared,” and ends his statement with “And stop making up lies my god!” He is dismissive of her experience, he calls her a liar, they have a short argument in the comments where he asks her why she didn’t file a police report.

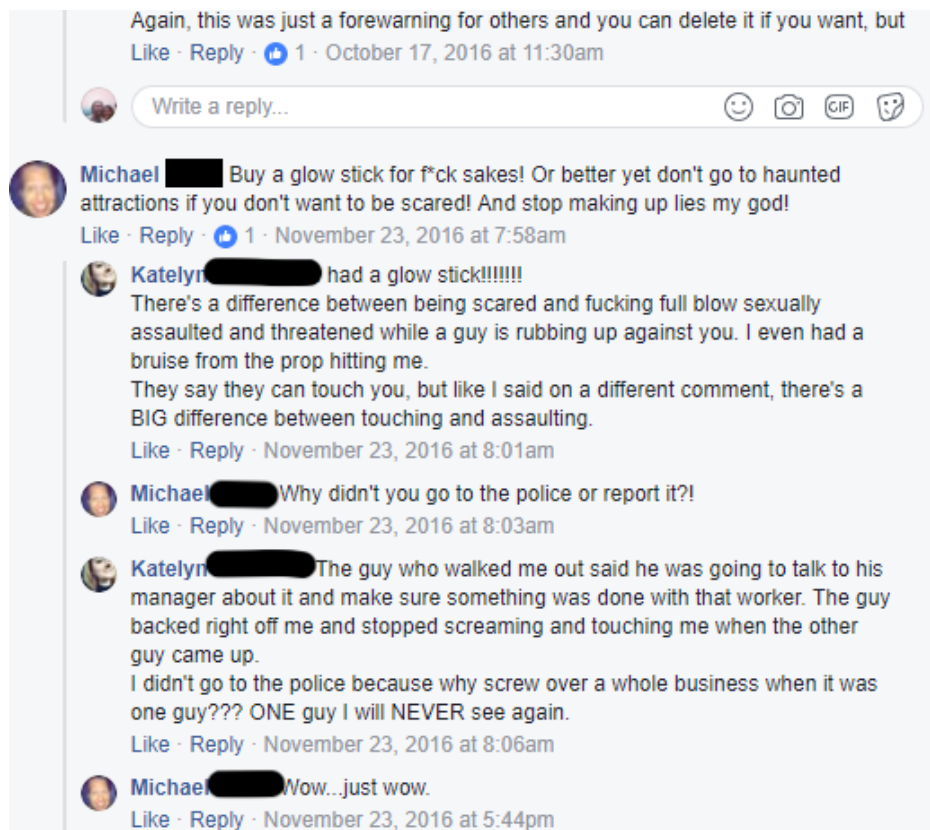
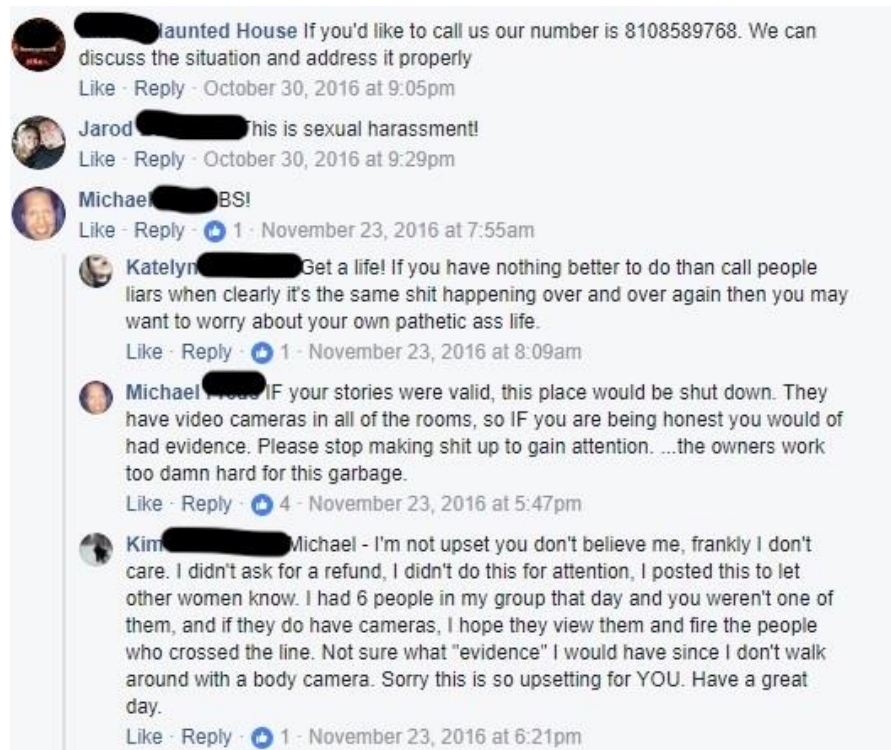


Figure 3: This screenshot includes to comments from Figure 1

In the second review, his first comment is “BS!” again, dismissing this woman’s experience in the haunt. In the thread, the woman who wrote the first review, comes to the defense of this second reviewer, he responds “IF your stories were valid, this place would be shut down. They have video cameras in all of the rooms, so IF you are being honest you would of had evidence. Please stop making shit up to gain attention...the owners work too damn hard for this garbage.” Again, his relationship to the haunt is unclear, he does not indicate he is employed by this haunt, but also claims to have intimate knowledge of the inner workings of this haunt and defends the owners work ethic from what he believed to be libel.



**Figure 4: Includes comments from Figure 2**

These reviews mirrored life too closely, these women engaged the honor code that many of know all too well, where we provide warnings about predators in places of business. We are conditioned to come across them in bars, but perhaps not haunts. Yet, once again, like in many cases of people who attempt to report sexual assault, they are met with backlash, they are called liars, and attention seeking. They are gaslit and dismissed by people in power (“Sexual Violence Myths & Misconceptions | ACESDV” 2014). What can be gathered here is: it’s okay for actors to behave this way if it serves

the purpose of entertainment for some. Boundaries were crossed in this haunt; the haunt didn't ask the man to stop antagonizing these people in the comments or hide his comments from other users. For context, this feature allows the business to hide a comment from everyone BUT the commentor. It's a tool used to allow the commentor to believe they are being heard, but not allow other visitors to the page to see it or engage with it.

The haunt never publicly apologized to these women and never publicly addressed the situation. I've worked with many actors during my time as a haunt professional, and in my recent field work, all the actors I interviewed agreed: the haunt is supposed to be a safe space to play with fear. The safety of that space was violated for those women, and the danger of the space was reinforced by men in the haunt and on-line. Perhaps, these actors felt they were entitled to this power because their job was to scare people, and they felt the best way to do that would be weaponize that power to assault and harass guests under the guise of haunt employee.

In their temporary access to power, it could be that they aligned themselves with "hillbilly" ideology that believes the empowerment of BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ communities, and women is a threat to what little sense of power they have as poor white people (Satterwhite 2017, 240). Emily Satterwhite describes this ideology as part of the "wages of whiteness," meaning that their white identity should automatically qualify them to power. Regardless of where these actors may come from, I argue that this "hillbilly" persona helps these some of these actors to "affirm and avenge their white masculinity," (2017, 240). In affirming their white masculinity, they see an opportunity to overcome



their rurality. The narratives that sometimes play out in these rural haunts are driven by resentment and revenge. Yet, there is no reconciliation for these men, they perceive a loss of power and become victims of their own situation.

### **HAUNTED BY GENDER BASED DISCRIMINATION**

It is important to point out that gender-based discrimination is common and well-documented across many different industries, and the haunt industry is not excluded from this (Parker and Funk 2017). I have found that it is harder to document the gender-based discriminations or other similar human resource issues in this industry due to the seasonal and amateur models of these businesses. In my first season working in the industry as a make-up artist, while there was much to enjoy, I also found myself navigating a frustrating professional space that many women find themselves in in their own workplace: dealing with figuring out how to be nice enough to male counterparts that it is not misinterpreted as flirting and mansplaining.

Being a make-up artist requires sharing an intimate space with the other person, this space was often misinterpreted by male actors, I was doing a job, they often saw it as an opportunity to show romantic and/or sexual interest in me. It's an unfair and often uncomfortable situation to be in. As a young theatre artist, I was seeking to build my portfolio, and earn a very much needed paycheck. The people in my chair were exploiting a discrepancy. It's a space that is impossible for me to clearly reject them. I am trapped in the situation. I *need* the paycheck. I don't want to cause trouble for fear that I might be seen as a problem and removed from my position (Litteken 2021).

In my years in the industry, I can only recall two incidents when a white, male actor was fired for sexual harassment that was directed at a female actor. During the investigation into the actor's behavior elsewhere in the haunt, it came to light that these men had made passes at me and other make-up artists. When we were questioned as to why we didn't report it, we very quickly explained that if we reported every comment on our appearance, every pass made at us, every weird thing male actors did, there would be very few actors left at the end of the night. It was a situation that we had been conditioned to deal with. It's easier for us to roll our eyes, be nice to the person making a pass at us, even if they didn't deserve it, and move them along out of our chair. At the end of the night, they'd become gossip during clean-up among the make-up staff, all of us debating if the person was harmless, or had other intentions, and creating contingency plans to move them through make-up faster or change their scene to have them wear a mask, instead of needing our assistance.

If it wasn't unwanted advances, the other side of it was having my job mansplained to me. In my very first season, a man sat down in my make-up chair and aggressively demanded I give him a bullet hole in his forehead. I attempted to explain to him that wasn't the look designed for the scene he was in; he ignored me and again aggressively demanded a bullet hole in his forehead. So, I grabbed some latex and fake blood, and quickly adhered a wound to the middle of his forehead, so I could move him out of my chair and as far away from me as possible. He stood up, turned to look at himself in the mirror, and glared at me in his reflection. I could hear him grumble profanity aimed towards me as he shuffled away into his haunt for the night.

I caught the knowing glances of a few other women, the look that said both, “are you okay?” and “that guy’s being an asshole, don’t worry about it.” As the last actor strolled out of the makeup area, the other makeup artist asked me about the situation, they had seen what happened, but wanted to get the whole story. There was some talk of sending the man to them the next night, as they’d be able to “keep him in line,” but then we thought it might be better to talk to someone about his behavior. We were able to bring the situation to the attention of a manager, who informed us that he would take care of it, and that the actor would not be welcome back. There was some slight protesting from myself and the other makeup artist, perhaps the actor could change, perhaps he just needed to be told what he did was wrong. The manager stopped our protests and let us know that our discomfort was okay, and that they do sometimes get guys like this. Men who are a little too aggressive, men who aren’t that interested in following the rules laid out by the haunt, men who might also cross lines if given the chance.

There are many times when women are harassed in their working lives and nothing is done, and while in this case the situation was handled, I still found myself afraid. I was afraid the actor would return to try and cause me harm; the other makeup artist felt the same way. We spent the rest of the weekend looking over our shoulders, asking the few other women in the haunt to keep an eye out for that man, just in case. I couldn’t help but reflect on what the manager told us, they sometimes get these men who are a little too aggressive, who might break the rules, who might cross the lines, who may mirror the monster too closely.

## **GENDERED PATTERNS IN HAUNTED HOUSE ATTRACTIONS**

Jeannie Banks Thomas describes three distinct gendered patterns in ghost legend tradition that I've seen replicated in haunted house attractions. They are the Extreme Guy, which "exaggerates many of the characteristics most stereotypically associated with masculinity, such as toughness and violence," the Deviant Femme, the "antithesis of the traits traditionally associated with femininity...a manifestation of rage, violence, mental illness, and eccentricity," and the Genderless Presence, where "the supernatural gives us its most radical take on gender: it eliminates it entirely," (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007, 82). These examples are culturally familiar, particularly to American audiences, and while they seem amplified in asylum themed haunts, these patterns also extend to other popular haunt themes like circus clowns or ghost towns. Variations on these described gendered patterns are often found in the productions created by the haunted house attraction industry.

If we look at the haunted house as a feminine structure, the site of domesticity, we can argue that it is haunted by the power structures of the patriarchy and echoes of the nuclear family. We often see repeated in contemporary supernatural and horror stories situations where "husbands, fathers, and various authority figures dismissing the claims of women and children as nothing more than their imaginations," (Meeuf 2022, 32). We often see how the haunted house is used to engage with anxieties around class identity and the family structure (Meeuf 2022, 28) yet, because of the unequal distribution of labor of in American households, we can argue that most anxieties and emotional labor about the family fall on the shoulders of women and specifically, mothers (Broadbent

2020). I argue that these gendered patterns extend to haunted house attractions and are integral to their popularity and success each season. In American culture there are gendered roles and norms that we are familiar with whether we like them or not.

If we think about the haunted house story as feminine in its history, a space to explore the anxieties of the family, then I argue these rural farms turned haunts are more masculine. The industry is again, mostly masculine, and the American farm is rugged, a place where the natural land was tamed through violent cultivation. Historically, the gendered patterns on the farm were: men worked long hours in the elements, while women maintained the home and children. In working at and visiting these rural haunts, I rarely see a traditional haunted house in their offerings. While I focus on ten haunts for this thesis specifically, I've patronized many haunted house attractions over the years: amateur and professional, urban, rural, home and yard haunts. In the rural haunts, I have yet to encounter the haunted house story that many Americans often think of: a spooky old Victorian mansion with a woman in a white gown floating around the inside (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007, 147). Instead, it is themes like asylums, circuses, ghost towns; and I argue that perhaps these themes are leaning towards a masculine lens.

These themes were also present in businesses throughout history, and we are conditioned to think of business as male-dominated, this idea aligns with these themes perhaps being more masculine. The circus wanted to make money as a form of entertainment, and perhaps it conjures images of P.T Barnum. The asylum sought to control women and those who deviated from societal norms, and we still understand the field of medicine to be male-dominated, and there is documented evidence of women's

suffering and pain in the contemporary medical industrial complex (Ellmann 2019; Vargas 2021; Lawson 2018; Ojanuga 1993). The ghost towns were once thriving thanks to a robust job market, like the auto or coal industry, something that many still assign masculine value to, but now these fabricated ghost towns look like so many of the rust belt towns across America. These were sites where mostly men were once in charge and the haunt themes lean into that. The asylum themes depict male doctors and female patients, the circuses tend to be all male clowns, and the ghost towns, are filled with aimless male ghosts, whose jobs are obsolete. These patterns of male unemployment are important because when boys and men have nothing to occupy their time, women are often faulted for this and expected to adjust to their needs, as studies often show that women will adjust their lives in service to the careers or even the unemployment of men (Parker 2015).

Within these haunts, there is an expectation of violent gender performances, roles, and patterns. While often an uncomfortable concept, asylum themed haunts remain popular among amateur and professional haunters. Many of these asylum themed haunts are mirrors of the deinstitutionalization movement, and during that period there was an influx in stories of former patients, driven by their mental illness to commit violent crime and that “much of the appeal of these stories lies in their gross entertainment value...but nevertheless they still encapsulate certain values as cautionary tales,” (Goldstein 2023, 159,168). In asylum themed haunts especially, there is often violent performance of gender patterns described by Thomas. In the many haunts I have visited, I have witnessed countless scenes in asylum themed haunts that depict women as victims of violent men.

In haunts in both Michigan and Virginia, I have visited haunts that had male patients parading around in white coats, pretending to be doctors, and it is often part of their performance to make it known that they are former patients. In Michigan, a male actor in this role recited dialogue about killing the doctor for the sake of assuming his identity. In a Virginia haunt, this role was implied by the layering of the costume, the male character was wearing a hospital gown underneath a white medical coat, while brandishing a chainsaw. In both scenes, despite the miles that between the two states, there was also a female nurse, in a “sexy” variation of a uniform. In one scene, she was a victim, strapped to an exam table, it is implied that her torture is both violent and sexual. In the other, a deviant femme, a sidekick to the patient-doctor, a Harley Quinn to Joker kind of relationship.

Many scenes in asylum themed haunts depict men as violent killers with “deviant minds coded on deviant bodies,” committing sexual and reproductive violence against women (Goldstein 2023, 163). Shannon K. Tanhayi Ahari describes her visit to PennHurst Asylum Haunted House, noting that the “female patients were portrayed as victimized, vulnerable, seductive, deviant, or a combination thereof,” (2019, 220) and that “the power dynamic was clear: male medical authority polices and attempts to abort, exorcise, or “fix” female deviancy,” (Tanhayi Ahari 2019, 221). The gendered patterns seen in asylum themes “generally reflect what we see in everyday life, with the exception of what the female character does after she’s victimized: she becomes a Deviant Femme,”(Tanhayi Ahari 2019, 85) and yet, in my recent experience at an asylum themed haunt in Washtenaw County, Michigan, I found a curious inversion. All but one of the

actors in the haunt were female, all perhaps becoming Deviant Femmes after being victimized. In this version, the women were nurses, patients, and doctors, and the “violence in these stories[were] expressive and responsive(Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007, 87). Thomas points out that “female violence is statistically unusual, but some ghost stories tend to focus on and play up dramatic female violence – just like the mass media does with its sensational replaying of accounts of female violence in everyday life,” (2007, 87) and perhaps this variation on the asylum was a sensationalized perversion of violence, one in which women are both villain and victim.

In this mostly female cast, I met a woman who holds a master’s in social work and is a licensed clinical therapist. When I asked her about her experience as someone who works in mental health, but simultaneously works in this haunt, it appeared she hadn’t really thought about it before. She explained she has been an actor most of her life participating in community theatre around southeast Michigan and enjoys being an actor in these communities. She went on to explain she had been previously employed by other haunts that had since closed due to the pandemic. She wanted to continue working in one because she loves Halloween and enjoys the improvisational nature of haunt acting and “it’s fun to scare people!” She thought more about her role and decided it wasn’t bad for her to be an actor here, these haunts are merely play and that they are also caricatures of the worst of American failure to provide mental health care. She thought perhaps there was something in here about confronting a dark history, while an exaggerated one, that might get people to think more about mental health care in the country. The asylum, and



its many variations continue to be popular themes at haunted house attractions despite their uncomfortable histories.

### **GENDERED PATTERNS & POPULAR HAUNT THEMES**

Clowns are a favorite among amateur and professional haunters alike, whether they get their own dedicated circus, or a few rooms within the haunt, you are bound to find a gaggle of confusingly menacing clowns in a haunted house attraction. One could argue that clowns are a variation on the Genderless Presence because clowns are uncanny, “their faces simultaneously human and familiar, and grotesque and monstrous,” (Gordon 2021, 31). Clowns are usually adults, but adults who look and dress like children in a way that breaks societal norms, and they create relationships with children, throwing all notions of stranger danger out the window (Gordon 2021, 47). Reflecting on the 2016 clown panic through the lens of gender, Sarah Gordon notes “motifs shared across the clown sightings, however, strongly suggest that the underlying anxiety was a gendered one, drawing on folk beliefs about rape and child abduction to perpetuate a fear culture that sought to penalize women for literally and metaphorically straying too far from home,” (2021,36). Perhaps once again, women and children are at the forefront of fears about public life, that their disobedience to the patriarchy, gender, and family values is what is at stake, and the clown became a manufactured moral panic to regain the balance of power in the name of the patriarchy.

Actors in ghost towns, are often coded as backwards, inbred, male “hillbillies,” destined to aimlessly haunt the town for eternity as the industry that once employed them became obsolete. Revisiting Satterwhite’s thought on the countryside deserving their

misery sounds very similar to conservative talking points about those who do not “pick themselves up by their bootstraps.” Perhaps it’s the narrative of rugged individualism that creates the monsters because our beliefs about the “intractable nature (Poole 2018, 164),” of the monster is the same as our fear of the other, as our fear of the poverty that comes with failure. Perhaps what we fear most is one another, the real people of our communities. There are no supernatural foes in literal ghost towns, just former family, friends, and neighbors that exist now as fractured relations, in the fight for survival.

### **A DEEP DIVE INTO DARKNESS**

I returned to my old haunt to conduct field work in the fall of 2022, where I interviewed staff and observed the changeover from daytime activities to nighttime activities. There are multiple haunted house attractions on the property, and the transition takes time, patience, and flexibility and, each haunt attraction has their own manager. The manager wears a few different hats, the first is akin to a theatrical stage manager, they uphold the integrity of the show by following the creative director’s vision. They also ensure the safety of the actors and guests, and act as general supervisors for the evening. The managers are generally the first to arrive to work if they weren’t already working daytime activities. They gather check-in sheets and other materials they need for their evening and start to do head counts on actors as they arrive, some actors are no-shows, some call off and it’s like a puzzle that the creative director and managers must solve. Watching this puzzle brought me back to a time when I became a puzzle piece for the show to go on.

Many performers in the haunt I worked for did not have formal theatrical or film training but make up for the lack of training in sheer enthusiasm. Arguably, many of the actors I have watched are incredibly talented, but perhaps it is the lack of formal training in combination with enthusiasm that causes them to burn out quickly. Many find themselves mid-season tired, with vocal cords exhausted, nursing mild colds, and often unaware of how emotionally drained they are after hours of reading and reacting to the emotions of strangers. Being a haunted house actor is not easy and requires rest. Most seasonal haunts are open for a period of six to eight weeks in the autumn, we were no different. Mid-season is when my haunts found themselves in a frantic puzzle, shifting actors around, leaving certain scenes unmanned, moving animatronics, and trying to put together a show with the remaining staff.

During one of these infamous mid-season weekends, I was approached by my boss while cleaning up the aftermath of monster make-up, he explained they were incredibly short on actors and needed someone to work the second scene of the barn for the night. Hesitant, I hemmed and hawed at the thought, but was encouraged to take on the challenge, they informed that they would also be working in the barn and would be able to check on me. After some gentle coaxing and some additional pay for the evening, I found myself in oversized flannel, denim overalls, and a terrifying burlap scarecrow mask.

I was placed in the second scene of the barn, a scene that I was familiar with having worked closely with the creative director, so I knew what it was supposed to look like. The actor in that scene would hide in the quiet darkness, behind a waist-high wall

with metal fencing attached to it that went all the way up to the ceiling. This created a secure barrier between the actor and guests, on the other side of this barrier, the guests traversed a labyrinth of old barn wood and burlap sacks hanging from the ceiling. Once the guests were in just the right spot, the actor would activate a blood red light, slam themselves against the fence, while dragging a piece of metal that would emanate sparks across the fence and scream in a “hillbilly” accent, "Looks like we got us some newwwwwwwww piggyies! You ready to squeal sweet meat?!"

I had only ever observed this scene before, an aware bystander hidden in the crowd of paying guests, but now, this was part of my initiation ritual to the monstrous. The actors perform this ritual and if successful, success measured by audience reaction, they are granted “authorization to perform activities or practices or to have knowledge or experience they had not usually been allowed to have or perform before,” (Finol 1996, 89). With anxiety, I awaited my first test, I heard the first scene unfold to my left, the actor opened the barn door with a loud crash. He delivered his lines, I could make out the inflection of his voice, cueing me into his timing. Then came the quiet shuffle of people in the darkness, the shuffle you do when you don’t want to wake a sleeping person, a shuffle done while holding your breath, anxiously waiting for your eyes to adjust to the darkness so you can navigate your path. The tension and anxiety filled the room as they whispered to one another “Who is touching me?!” “Be quiet, they’ll hear us!” “You go first!”

Now was my time to respond.

In a swift motion, I illuminated the hall in an eerie redness, threw myself against the fence, while screaming my lines, violently dragging the metal against the fence, providing brief spotlights on their faces from the sparks; and I watched them recoil in fear of my grotesque face and voice, and I felt powerful. The actor in the first scene could sense my confidence, and he began to cue me into the names of guests walking my way, he'd yell things like: "Goood bye, Natasha, hope ya make it out alive," or "John, I got some real nice friends in there, why don't ya tell 'em I said hi!" That night I played with darkness. I ran up and down the scene screaming, yelling, even running into the next scene to continue my dark game. I played with the dialogue, I added exaggerated pig calls, grunted laughter, and implied the danger was very real. I played with whatever the audience gave me: fear, sarcasm, hyper-masculinity, and even compliments on my nail polish.

It was a space of release, a space to void my emotions, it was a space of power. It was a different kind of power than I had ever experienced, I was in complete control of my audience. I watched as grown men jumped back in fear, I watched young women slam into one another as they ran from my scene. I stalked and followed groups of people down the hall and into the next scene with the intention of continuing my reign of terror, and it felt good. I had successfully performed the ritual of monster and had access to the power of the monstrous, the ritual granted me this power that I was not able to perform as a regular person (Finol 1996, 89). This power was amplified by the fluidity of my costume, I identify as a woman, but the mask and overalls disguised my gender, I was a Genderless Presence, the only identifying marker of my femininity was my nail polish

and arguably, not a concrete marker of gender, becoming simultaneously a Genderless Presence and a Deviant Femme, allowing myself to become a manifestation of rage and violence (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007, 82).

However, stewing in my Genderless Presence was the rage of being a woman, I was following the path from girlhood to monstress and was always destined to become the monster the world made me out to be (A. Miller 2021). The monstress was already doing what I was not able to do myself, screaming in the faces of men who stood taller than me, and were likely stronger than me, from the safety of my scene, where no one could touch me. The monstress gave me access to a new kind of power against men, I was allowed to verbally harass them, stalk them down dark hallways, scream in their faces, an experience that they paid for with their ticket, and a dark part of me enjoyed every minute of it. I was fueled by revenge of for my broken heart, I had only recently gotten out of a relationship with a man who gaslit and love-bombed me, versions of emotional abuse, and through that abuse and humiliation, I was transformed into a being that would be heard (A. Miller 2021). “Villainy and woman hood have always been in conversation in the genre [of horror],” and now, I owned that villainy and wielded power and would do whatever it took for me to survive in the world that sought to cast me out, (A. Miller 2021).

Seething within that rage was resentment, not only was I the villain, but also a henchman (Satterwhite 2017) in this haunted ecosystem, I could recognize the desire “to power but marginalized by class and geography,” (Satterwhite 2017, 239), as there was something akin to class consciousness in this role, I could “affirm and avenge,” who I

was and where I was from. I spent the evening performing in this folk drama and engaging in dark play, where I envisioned the audience as the people who hurt me, they were unaware of my version of play or my motivations, to me it was real, to them, simulated (Caines and Heble 2015, 386). I took joy in this dark play and folk drama, knowing the last person they'd meet in the haunt was a chain-saw wielding butcher. Here, they'd be damned to remain as ghosts forever, a space I haunted as a hungry ghost, never satisfied by the sacrifice. I had been given my stage to exercise my power, (Stoeltje 1993)my initiation was complete, I had been granted permission to act as the monstrous (Finol 1996), and I was not like the spirits of the dead, begging for tribute, I was demanding it.

That night was busy, despite it being a Sunday evening and for several hours it was group after group walking through the haunt until suddenly, the house lights came on and the manager of the haunt released the actors, one by one from their scenes. I could hear most of them maintain their character voice until they entered the backstage area where they finally exorcised their ghastly character and returned to their normal, human form. The manager finally came to my scene and the first thing he asked me was if I enjoyed myself in this role, and I did. It was such a freeing experience to be completely unhinged, to scream, yell, chase, growl, and explore the darkest part of myself.

## **CONCLUSION**

This was an experience that enabled me to play with power. This power was given to me by first, putting on a costume that muted my gender, I wore an oversized flannel, oversized denim, work overalls, and a gruesome scarecrow mask. In this

costume, I no longer had to subscribe to the gender norms and roles that narrate my existence, affect my behaviors, that are reinforced by capitalism (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007, 102). This power encouraged me to live outside the boundary of my own gender, to explore the spectrums of gender, and I chose to explore what are normally more masculine traits: rage and violence. In the scene I'd violently throw myself against the barrier between me and the audience, while growling my lines. I'd chase the audience into the next scene by menacing, stalking, slamming my fists along the walls. They didn't know that underneath my costume, I was a woman who is 5'6" on a good day, was and still is very feminine presenting, and held a job at the haunt that many associate with more feminine traits, a makeup-artist.

The second way I was given access to power was the scene itself, the scene was not designed for a victim, this scene was designed for a henchman, or violent goon. When audiences made it to the end of this haunt, they encountered a "redneck" serial killer, and the other characters encountered in this haunt merely worked for this killer. They were my fellow henchmen and violent goons, doing the bidding of someone in power, and I was one of them. My character had been granted power to do whatever it took to send these unsuspecting victims to their fate. If I had been an obvious woman, I may have been seen as a shrill victim of the haunt, and the audience may have spent their time waiting for a male actor to join me in the scene and victimize me. This scene, combined with the costume, granted me the authority of a loyal and violent goon, working for an experienced serial killer.



The final way I had been granted power in this role is through dark play, defined as chaotic, but self-gratifying by Richard Schechner. While the audience may have paid for their ticket, and knew that the danger was not real, I created a darkness in which it was *very real*, they didn't know that they were daring to play in my game (Caines and Heble 2015, 386). My time as a performer in the haunt ultimately reminded me that we are drawn to the monstrous because it can do what we can't, it is a type of freedom we don't dare engage with, and the monster fulfills an escapist fantasy (Cohen 1996).

In the next chapter, I will look at the evolution of the ten farms I visited and how they narrativized their experiences in a capitalist landscape by adding haunted house attractions.

## CHAPTER TWO: HAUNTS AS CARICATURES OF CAPITALISM

There are some family farms that once engaged in routine autumnal harvest practices, but large corporations created operations that could outproduce them, leaving “country people marginalized by the onward death march of capitalism,” (Bell 1997, 100). These agricultural practices evolved into agritainment, where family farms not only sold their harvest to outsiders but packaged it up in activities and entertainment including apple-picking, corn mazes, petting farms, and more. This is a very similar narrative at all ten haunts I visited for this thesis. Several haunts in northern Virginia found themselves up against expanding suburbia, as families flocked to just outside of Washington DC for federal jobs, another in Virginia Beach had been in the area since the 1700s, and over generations, they settled on the model of agritainment as the most profitable. In Michigan, the haunts often crossed paths with the auto-industry, that shoved them off their original land. In Pennsylvania, the haunts had been in the families for generations, and facing industrialization and its subsequent disasters. The haunt in Maryland opened as an addition to their growing agritainment and outdoor education business but these haunts shared a similar narrative: adapt, survive, and hopefully thrive in an ever-changing economy. Every single haunt I visited served a dual purpose, offering activities during the day and night, trying to make the most of the changing landscape, hoping that agritainment will provide a steady income for them.

Agritainment provides picturesque fields, spaces for families to play, couples to stroll through rows of ripe apples, and friends to enjoy fresh donuts and cider together. In

their contemporary versions, the remnants of agricultural lore became a source of income through where families visit the skeletal remains of these once thriving farms and learn what this rural, pastoral, romantic life was once. These farms are entrenched in laissez-faire capitalism, where they continue to grow bigger, with more attractions, seasonal entertainment, and perhaps more like the corporate farms that almost erased them from existence. The ten haunts I visited for this thesis have all evolved over time from traditional farming to agritainment, and that narrative is important to their business model.

Yet as dusk falls, the atmosphere changes, these farms have extended their operating hours well into the night with haunted house attractions, an added value to their business and a means of extra income. Every family farm has a different story to share in their haunt, however, I've seen repeated themes of exploitation in haunted house performances. Whether or not it is a conscious choice, to open a haunt is an act of working-class revenge, and one that I would argue is very noticeable in one haunt in Washtenaw County, Michigan. Across the state, not just concentrated in Detroit, working classes families relied on the employment of the auto-companies, where they could get good paying jobs on the factory lines, jobs that could easily support a family of four. Their closures over the years have devastated these communities and many have never recovered, and one owner I spoke with in Washtenaw County described having their orchard taken by Henry Ford, so that he could build a factory, and of course, the Ford family did not compensate his family for the land they lost. This haunt in Washtenaw

County, has narrativized this idea of working-class revenge in several of their haunts, including their haunted hayride attraction.

In this chapter I will explore the narratives that haunts perform that are reflective of exploitive capitalism. I will share ethnographic experiences of a Michigan-based haunted house whose haunted hayride shares a story that mirrors the states once-thriving auto-industry. I will examine similar narratives in Pennsylvanian haunts and the intersection of race and class that I believe are shared in their performances. In the last section of this chapter, I will focus on the trope of “redneck” horror and its intersection with gender, race, and class and why these narratives continue to proliferate in the genre and haunts.

#### **NARRATIVES OF EXPLOITATIVE LABOR PRACTICES**

At a haunt in Washtenaw County, Michigan, the entrance to the haunted hayride sits towards the back of the farm, my husband and I visited on a night in late September in 2022, a cooler autumn evening. The kind of perfect Midwest weather this business had been waiting for, after suffering through an abnormally warm September. The kind of weather they had hoped would draw in a crowd for the evening, unfortunately, the haunt was rather quiet for the night, perhaps in part to the local university football game schedule. The loading zone for the hayride is set up like a block of buildings from the old west, the wooden structure is made to look like it houses a few businesses, a classic saloon with swinging doors, a barber shop, and a place to get fancy dresses. As we enter the line for the hayride, we hear a voiceover, a deep, robust voice, giving us some background on the town we are about to visit. The voice warns us that we are about to

discover a town devastated by industrialization and a changing climate that affected their crops, but one day, a mysterious man arrives promising jobs and prosperity. As the voice continues speaking, it becomes clear that this mysterious man is using dark magic to enslave the people of the town to work in his factory forever. Making him money and leaving none for the town as it falls to blight and becomes a ghost town.

We climb aboard the wagon, and it creaks and groans as we take our spots at the very front, behind us sit families, couples, and groups of friends, eagerly anticipating the first ride of the night. Some of them take quick selfies, I overhear them talk about what attraction they are going to visit next, but the chatter is interrupted by an employee. I recognize her, and she has been in this role for decades at this point, dressed in a pink hoodie, big smile, and thick Michigan accent, she begins her spiel, on the rules of the hayride. Her delivery of this speech is incredibly consistent, she begins with a warm welcome, reminds everyone to always keep their arms and legs inside the wagon, that they are not to use flash photography, to not throw hay at each other or the monsters and lastly, she says, playfully, “Do not touch the monsters, and they won’t touch you!” With that, she waves us off, the tractor roars to life from its idling and creeps down the dark path towards the first scene, where the actor warns us of the danger we are about to encounter and startles the crowd with a massive pyro-technic effect bursts out of an old broken-down truck. Everyone on the ride reacts, they gasp audibly, I hear a few startled screams escape from somewhere, I watch a small group of teenagers grab on to one another.

As the wagon continues forward, I hear some people remark on the scenery, they enjoy looking at the sets and the way they are lit up amongst the trees with eerie lights in various shades of purple, green, and red, depending on the scene. They are enjoying themselves and are only occasionally taken out of that moment by an actor's screams. As we move through the town, the docks, downtown, the trainyard, graveyard, we see the actors are in various states of control of the villain in the story. Their lines either beg us to leave for our safety, or threaten us, wanting us to join them and be bound to the town. In the graveyard, the resident undertaker, jumps onto the wagon, a stunt he has been pulling for years. It's a pretty good stunt and the guests on the wagon scream and laugh as he stalks between the people sitting on the wagon. There's always a group of people who try to throw their terrified friend under the bus and bring the actor closer to them, and that happens on this ride.

The actor sees the commotion and gleefully creeps up to the terrified person to give them a better scare. The group erupts into laughter after the actor exits the hayride, but the one friend is still calming down, I can sort of see her through the crowd of other people, her hood up for protection, smiling and playfully batting at her friends for the trouble she just went through. There are a few more scenes left before the grand finale, and the audience engages in expected ways, reacting to the jump scares, and enjoying the set design. The grand finale is inside the factory, where we narrowly escape the curse of being stuck a never-ending cycle of producing labor, while making a strange man rich, and forced to lure unsuspecting folks to the town to continue to feed the curse. The story is such an apt metaphor of capitalism, one where the promise of a better tomorrow is

taken from the laborer and given to the capitalist, who further exploits the system for gain.

In another haunt, we traverse an abandoned mine shaft, where the corpses of its miners have been rotting for decades because the mine owner, hungry for gold, overlooked all safety protocols to make as much money as possible. These “tommyknockers,” as mine ghosts are called, are full of rage and each one you encounter is screaming, threatening, and menacing you at each turn. The actors we encounter in these spaces are deeply angry, and make threats to also make you a ghost, just like them. At this haunt, there is an obvious theme of exploitation of the working class, something that American corporations are very good at, something that has caused grief, stress, and fear for many Americans who live paycheck to paycheck. This is just one version of the caricature of capitalism I have seen haunts perform, I believe that the exploitive capitalism, narrativized in these haunts, is something that many Americans, particularly rural Americans have experience with and it defines their view on race, class, and gender relations. Many of the narratives describe a clash between poverty and affluence, the laborer, and the capitalist, and we know that historically, wealthy classes have weaponized the concept of race to sow division among working class and working poor peoples. White supremacy benefits from this division and perhaps convince rural, more conservative populations that they are temporarily embarrassed millionaires, as opposed to communities also exploited by the capitalist class, and I believe this can be felt even more deeply at the haunt I visited in York County, Pennsylvania.

## **RURAL PENNSYLVANIA**

In the fall of 2021, I visited a haunt in the deeply red county of York, Pennsylvania. One of the first scenes in a rural haunt I encountered was full of toxic waste, radioactive signs warned you the site was dangerous, and I made my way through a maze of Industrial yellow barrels splashed with neon green, yellow, and purple slime, while red emergency lights flashed, and sirens blared. Every now and again, I would stumble upon a fake body, dressed in an industrial work jumpsuit, and hard hat covered in what one could presume was radioactive slime. This scene may have felt familiar to the community. Less than an hour from York County, nestled on an island in the Susquehanna River, lay the now decommission Three Mile Island Nuclear Power Plant, which had a partial melt-down in the spring of 1979. This partial meltdown created fear and panic in the nearby communities and sowed the seeds of mistrust in local and state governments, as they failed to provide adequate information on what to do and how safe their community was after this accident. Mistrust lingers through to this day, and perhaps including this scene serves constant reminder of very scary moment in history for this community, one that serves as an alternate reality, or an alter to what could have been.

In another haunt on site, I immediately encountered mannequins dressed in Amish-style clothing, but when I turned the corner, I was met with a scene of dead bodies, dressed in clothing that was popular among Black youth in the 90s. I was uncomfortable with the design of the scene and I couldn't help but wonder if this was a dog-whistle of sorts, designed to share racist ideas regarding whose lives were more valuable to the community. It felt very plausible as the county was very red, I had even



driven by a billboard on my way to this haunt that read “Making the Taliban Great Again!” and featured a photoshopped image of current President Joe Biden holding what looks like a rocket launcher and wearing a turban. In the parking lot of that haunt, I noticed vehicle stickers using derogatory language towards current Vice President Kamala Harris that read: “Joe and the Hoe have to go!” The choice of clothing on these “dead” bodies felt like a code, and while it could have been merely accidental, the political ideas I encountered in the county didn’t make me think otherwise.

### **HORROR NARRATIVES AND RURAL POVERTY**

All the haunts I visited are in rural areas, and many, but not all, of these haunts are in red counties and in purple states. The political maps surrounding many of these businesses create a complicated picture of the community there, and we know that it is likely the haunt business owners hold conservative beliefs. These conservative beliefs may describe poverty as something that only affects Black communities, and poverty only exists because people refuse to work (Meeuf 2022, 33). However, this community is largely white (“U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Pennsylvania” n.d.), and is home to one of the poorest towns in the state (Woodall 2018). Perhaps poverty is felt more closely by some of those who might work at the haunt, or visit the haunt, but “the idea of poor White people disrupts the racialization of poverty. US culture stigmatizes poor whites as White Trash, people whose core Whiteness is often called into question by imagining them as messy, uncouth, or lazy” (Meeuf 2022, 33).

While conservatives may find poverty to be monstrous and may not see their rural space as impoverished, rural poverty is rooted in reality, with around 5 million rural

residents living in persistent poverty (“U.S. County Poverty Rates” n.d.), and stereotypes are amplified in pop culture and the horror genre. Emily Satterwhite discusses how the horror genre often frames “the countryside as deserving of misery because of its monstrosity, its refusal to conform, and its opposition to urban progress,”(Satterwhite 2017, 230) and how the tradition of “hillbilly” horror sees the countryside and its inhabitants as the monsters, and the urban/suburban outsiders as victims (Bell 1997, 95). Therefore, what could be a scarier theme than “rednecks?” The “rednecks” represent a version of themselves that could easily exist if they had not been resilient, persistent, capitalists who overcame obstacles to operate a successful business? Knowing that pop culture frames rural spaces as more frightening at night, I saw how these ten businesses leaned into that stereotype. They lean into how outsiders view them as “a static relic of a past that deigns to linger on out of obstinacy,” (Satterwhite 2017, 229), a place that clings tightly to an idea of the American past that focused on the nuclear family, hard work, not being distracted by technological advances like cellphones and the social media one can access through them.

It is important to look at this intersection of whiteness, capitalism, and gender. I discussed the intersection of gender at length in the first chapter, but at the intersection of whiteness and capitalism, I believe the biggest fear is poverty, and it is mirrored in horror films and haunts alike, poverty is seen as the biggest threat to whiteness (Meeuf 2022, 36). Reflecting on the demographics of the industry as being white, male, and conservative, and leaning into the work of Emily Satterwhite, who describes white men who live in rural areas as feeling entitled to power because of the “wage of whiteness,”

(Satterwhite 2017, 229), we can see in this intersection we see how capitalism defines how we behave based on race, gender, and class. In the rural haunts I've visited in Michigan, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, the "hillbilly" themes may be written in to be scary, but certainly describe underlying anxieties around class, race, and poverty.

Through my ethnography, I've come to understand that haunted houses have heavily relied on the "hillbilly" horror theme, and I've encountered "redneck"-esque, characters in ALL the haunts I have visited. I have visited many haunted houses that reside in counties whose median household income that is around \$40,000/year, like in Pennsylvania and Michigan ("U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Michigan" n.d.; "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Pennsylvania" n.d.). However, at a haunt I visited in Montgomery County, Maryland, a long-held democratic county, where the median household income is \$107, 758 (Schmidt 2019), I found the "hillbilly" horror theme even more unsettling. This haunt had built an entire town-like structure called the "Cursed Village," unlike many of the haunts I visited in Pennsylvania and Michigan, where I saw old barns and farm equipment repurposed for their haunts. The immediate difference in production value tells me that this haunt has access to more money, be it through revenue, generational wealth, or other means, as opposed to their peers in less wealthy counties.

This manufactured village was the first stop in this haunt, there were about ten buildings in a large circle, with a lone building in the center of this circle, crafted in this sort of quaint German ski-chalet-esque style. The buildings were not merely for show, but also sold concessions, there was a building for cotton candy, pumpkin carving,

alcohol, hot cider, coffee, donuts, and even merchandise. There were also several large bonfires that dotted the space with plenty of seating. Yet, there was a disconnect, once inside their haunted trail, it didn't seem like this manufactured town supported the narrative on the inside of the haunt, it was built for concessions.

Once inside the haunt, I encountered “rednecks” in two different locations on their haunted trail, which is exactly what it sounds like, the audience members walk along a man-made path outside, as opposed to an indoor event. In both scenes with these “redneck” characters, they were played by young, aggressive, white, or at least white-passing men. As I walked by a dilapidated farmhouse, a group of young men leapt from behind the house and off the collapsing porch, and ran into the audience on the trail, chainsaws roaring. While the crowd screamed, I continued to make my way forward on the trail and I noticed one of the actors struggling to start his chain saw and muttering to himself, so I cracked a joke about chainsaw safety in his direction to which he venomously replied, “I don't give a fuck about safety.” I was a little taken aback by his language, in every haunt I've visited, foul language was often avoided, if used in dialogue it could be mistaken as being used at a guest. While guests pay to be scared, they generally didn't pay to be cursed out, there is still some customer-centered etiquette in haunts. The haunt I worked at avoided using this kind of language, especially towards paying guests. Most haunts and actors I had spoken wanted to create a safe place to play with fear and cursing at someone does not create that space.

In other haunts, like the one in the conservative York County, PA, where the median household income is around \$40,000/year, the “redneck” character I encountered

was wandering the property, sneaking up on people, cracking jokes, and he even escorted me and my husband to an entrance of one of their haunts. The man playing the character seeking to entertain and prank people, unlike the young man with a chainsaw, who clearly wanted to terrorize people, but was foiled by his prop. The stark juxtaposition between these two “redneck” characters, and the two haunts, was jarring, especially in Maryland. Where I feel I can presume that these actors come from upper-middle class backgrounds and people cosplaying in poverty, something that they likely do not have lived experience with.

Anxieties around poverty are put on display at haunts, reminders that in America, you are one large bill away from being the forgotten folk, from not receiving healthcare, from watching your town, and neighbors go under. These themes remain powerful in their replication because “Halloween and horror movies are basically about the American fear of dirt and disorder,” (Skal 2003, 99). Dirt and disorder are associated with poverty, when we see disheveled people, dilapidated homes, cars, scruffy furniture, we see poverty. We see people who have failed in the system for several reasons, we assume it is because they did not value education or hard work and are suffering from their own actions. Disorder is rooted in the notion of bootstraps capitalism. These families who are white, working class or working poor find themselves still living in poverty, still struggling despite their efforts and hard work, and they may believe that their suffering is because of the empowerment of black and brown people, LGBTQIA+ communities, and women. These lost, lonely, souls have succumbed to “disorder and dirt,” unable to compete in the capitalist systems, are a stark reminder of the failure that comes to those

who don't pull themselves up by their bootstraps, a metaphor so often employed to describe the inherent suffering that is needed to succeed in America.

Yet there is a meta-narrative that occurs within the industry that resembles so many of the stories they share. As a former haunt employee, I knew that haunt season provided a sense of financial agency to many, I argue that they found a sense of power and agency in a world that saw many of these actors as "poor white trash," as there were actors were also farmhands, without much education or work experience. As a person who grew up working poor/working class and was a working theatre artis at the time, I also achieved a sense of financial agency during the fall, I knew I could reliably supplement my income and make ends meet, feel a little more comfortable, and even treat myself a bit. During my tenure as a haunt employee, I learned the actors came from a wide variety of backgrounds, we had some college-aged students, some veterans, even a few non-violent felons, and when I first started working in the industry, most actors were at the haunt I worked at were white and male. Many of the actors during that first season were also daytime farmhands and would work upwards of 18-hour days at the business. Many actors were men who job-hopped, telling me about their experiences in fast food service, warehouses, some had jobs with utility companies, some, the lucky few, were able to get steady work with one of the big three auto companies outside of Detroit. I found however, that all of them wanted the extra money, many needed the extra money, I was included in that second category. The actors were playing a version of themselves in these roles, over-worked, tired, ghosts, making money for someone else.

## CONCLUSION

In the haunts I visited for this thesis, I found that they all share monstrous performances of people who once lived in thriving communities, but are now relegated to the outskirts of society, people used as examples of moral, ethical, and employable failure. At the haunts I visited, I witnessed them narrativize their own experiences in layers of darkness. Their narratives fueled by revenge, where actors threatened to trap paying guests in the ghost towns to wander aimlessly forever, the performances almost like a mourning ritual, doomed to repeat the same ghastly tasks, night in and out. The narratives are active reminders of their past and how their intimate relationships with disaster, either economic or industrial, have shaped and negatively impacted their community over many generations. Their haunts constantly “juxtaposes the presentational and the representational; that is, reality and fantasy intertwine and merge,” (M. Miller 2012, 2), the spaces are real, once used for harvesting, processing, and distributing crops, but have now become stages for their own contemporary legends and ghost stories to play out.

In the next chapter I will discuss the way the haunts I visited for this thesis use ritual to create collaborative folk dramas. I will discuss the production of the haunt and the ways the haunt shares power through performance. I will discuss the ways actors and audiences assume roles within the haunt that create an immersive narrative. I will share the perspectives of working actors in haunts, and the perspective of power from the audience.

### **CHAPTER THREE: THE SPIRIT OF COLLABORATION: FOLK DRAMA, ACTORS AND AUDIENCES**

To craft a haunted house performance is to create an elaborate folk drama, and it is common for many haunts to perform an elaborate opening ritual, an opening act full of sound and fury. The haunt industry “has a strong atmosphere of ritual initiation, with faux-gruesome ordeals curiously akin to the rumored membership rites of secret societies,” (Skal 2003, 86), and at the haunt I was employed at, the opening ritual required actors descend into the darkness and become monsters as opposed to trained character actors and engage in a fast-paced dark parade, called the monster march. This opening ritual was mostly playful but would certainly startle and get a rise out of guests waiting in line.

The ritual began when an older, seasoned farmhand, and general manager of the haunt made a radio announcement to the entire farm that there was a long line of guests eagerly awaiting their night inside the haunted houses, a rite of passage or annual tradition for those about to buy a ticket. This announcement of a line forming at the ticket booth also created an atmosphere of excitement for the employees elsewhere on the property. After this confirmation, he’d make final calls for actors to be in place in the barn for the next part, after a few last-minute radio calls, he was ready. The old farmhand would wander into the area between the barn where the monsters were corralled, and the line of guests, who would come to a quick hush once he began to speak. He’d bellow warm-welcome the crowd, never needing a microphone, he had a short speech every



night that touched on the history of the haunt, he'd then ask the audience if they were ready for the night, and with a mischievous grin he'd yell, "Let me see if we're ready!"

The garage door on the barn adjacent to the ticket booth would open slowly as fireworks exploded above. A fog machine working overtime would force a wall of vapor to billow out as the door continued to rise on its tracks, and a white, pulsating light emanated from within, cloaking each actor waiting on the inside. They would stand briefly, menacingly, and backlit within the fog as the last of the fireworks died before they began to move. Then, the monsters [actors] would run at full speed towards line of guests, where they'd get the first few screams of the night, overlapping with some laughter, and leave the audience excited, then they'd run to the entrance of their haunt. If working at the haunted house was a marathon, completing the Monster March was akin to completing the first five kilometers of the marathon. This ritual was critical to getting the crowd excited, but it also got the actors excited too. After running by the line of guests, they'd take the energy, the screams, and the delight with them into their haunts. If you were paying attention, you could see the manager and other staff of their respective haunts waiting at the front doors cheering them on, like proud parents. Once they crossed the thresholds of their haunts, the ritual was complete, and the night could continue.

In this chapter I will focus on the elements of folk drama that are found in the haunts I visited. I will discuss how the actors and audience are enmeshed in one others narrative at the haunt, as opposed to something like theatre, where the audience and the actors are distinct and separate from one another. I will lean into Beverly J. Stoeltje's model for power in the ritual genres, which discusses sources of power in the ritual

genres. These sources include form, production, and discourse, and these sources of power are found in the haunts I visited, they are found in the actors performances, with the larger staff at the haunt, the way the audience interacts with them, the ways the audience share their experience with one another. I will share the experiences of three actors and their relationship to performance and power, I will then share an audience's perspective on power in the haunt. I will then discuss the immersive feature of haunts and how the audience engages with it from a gendered viewpoint, and lastly, I will discuss the collaborative nature between audiences and actors within haunts.

## **ACTORS**

In the haunts I visited for this thesis, I saw actors' performance as a powerful, layered, complex cultural performance. A place where identities and precarious histories are combined with the tradition and ritual of Halloween. These actors navigate portraying identities that are often marginalized, such as "rednecks" and mental patients, for audiences to complete the ritual and initiation of haunts. As the last ray of sun dips behind the horizon, the darkness comes out to play and the show begins. The haunt is an immersive folk drama, and horror darling Clive Barker calls it an American hybrid of theatre, art and puppetry, he describes this hybrid of art and performance as something that confuses the senses, leaves one on edge, brings the audience out of their world, something that is "environmental." (Skal 2003, 118). I would agree with this statement having worked at, and visited many haunts, and I noticed many, if not all these elements at each haunt visited for this thesis. This immersive environment is the opposite of what

Ellis and Miller discuss about the distinction between players and spectators as being clearly marked in folk dramas (M. Miller 2012, 80).

In the haunt, those lines appear very blurred, just like in the oral dissemination of contemporary legends where “boundaries between performer and audience are unclear,” (Prizer 2018, 141). When sharing urban legends through oral storytelling, the teller is not a performer, they are merely one of the group, there is nothing that indicates that they have a special position to share this story, nothing in the traditional theatrical sense that indicates a story is being shared. This is like the audience in a haunt, there is nothing special about who they are, they have not done anything to create a character, costume, or persona in the haunt, they are the next victims, they are fresh meat, the next meal (Prizer 2018, 141). While the audience *thinks* they are merely spectators, they are about to become performers. Unlike theatre, the haunt sets an expectation that audiences members perform their roles in this space as well, there is no fourth wall, they become characters in the haunt, but not heroes, victims. I will dive deeper into audiences in the next section and will refocus on actors in the next paragraph.

I’ve found in my own experience that haunt actors have various levels of training. I’ve visited haunts in Virginia where it is a rite of passage for many young theatre students, particularly high school students. In Pennsylvania, in casual conversation with employees, I learned it was lots of family members, and local community members, but most worked because they loved the horror genre. In the haunt I worked at some of the actors were self-described theatre nerds in high school but were now working adults without much creative outlet. Others were theatre students at the college level, others just

wanted to scare people, and some really loved Halloween and wanted to express their love by working in a haunt. During my tenure as a haunt employee in Washtenaw County, Michigan, I was among a handful of former and current theatre professionals who had made their way into the industry because of a love of the horror genre. I worked with two other make-up artists during that time who had been trained in theatre school and had professional work experience in the local theatre scene. An additional make-up artist I worked with was a self-proclaimed theatre kid in high school and had trained professionally in cinema special effects makeup. That same artist had convinced several former high school theatre friends to act in the haunt, while they had not performed since high school, they enjoyed performing in the haunt.

While these actors only had a high school level of training, they were often in roles that had more lines and had more purpose than merely attempting to startle someone in the haunt. Watching them perform, it was clear that they enjoyed themselves, and had a passion for their role in the larger haunt ecosystem. At this same haunt, there was another actor who also had some performance skill from high school and a little from college, but is now a stand-up comedian, and improv actor. I had the opportunity to interview him during the fall where they described their experience over the last seven years of employment. I had seen them perform as both comedian and haunt actor, and their performance range was quite impressive.

After years of working in haunts, I don't scare easily, but I always found this actor's performance unsettling. When I asked about their performances in both the haunt and comedic venues, they described this relationship between fear and fun. He

talked about how as a comedian, their job is to make people laugh, but as a haunter, his job is to make you feel fear. They described how these two things feel like they are the opposite ends of the spectrum, but as a performer, working with these two emotions is similar. The fear and the laughter are both sort of punchlines, both horror and comedy bring up strong, reactive, emotions. But he also described how they would never want to force someone to be truly afraid, the type of fear in the haunts is one to play with, to overcome, to leave the haunt laughing and sighing with your friends because you just experienced this simulated disaster, you overcame obstacles together and it was more fun, than scary.

The example they gave was how they wouldn't resort to making fun of someone's appearances or making lewd sexual comments in comedy or in the haunt, as they are both "gross and lazy," forms of performance. He felt that these gross and lazy forms of performance are harmful and do bring up real anxiety and fear in the person on the receiving end. He also talked about his position as a male actor in a haunt, again, he wants to create a place for fun with fear, acknowledging that some women might be more frightened of him because of his gender. He was aware of the power he had to create a space that was real in the moment, fun, scary, but not something that could trigger a person to dive into a bad headspace. It's a fine balance, but one that is possible in haunts. He recognized the form of power he had as a performer, he was just one part of the larger production, and it all came together in his scene.

In the fall of 2022, I spoke with three women who have worked at the same Michigan haunt for about seven years as, both as actors and make-up artists. I spoke with

them as they were setting up for an evening's show, they shared a make-up table, and described what working at the haunt was like for them. They described it as being a "lifestyle," and a chance to think about Halloween "24/7/365." The three of them have spent most of their acting careers inside the mental hospital themed haunt, performing in various roles, however, one is now the head of makeup and no longer performs. The two that still act described how they are very attached to, and proud of that specific haunt, but also described the range of both good and bad experiences in this haunt.

They talked about when they played victims in the haunt, they felt that more guests would mess with them, make fun of them as they portrayed a scared, suffering nurse. They felt more vulnerable in that position, it was as if the audience members tapped into a monstrous energy when they walked by them in this scene. The head makeup artist shared a story with me when she was in that role. She described a very young boy, possibly around 8 years old, walked up to her and told her she wished she would die. It was a very surreal experience for her, she talked about having young kids come up and sort of examine her in this role, looking at the makeup and trying to decide if she is real or something, but this was new. The adults with this child sort of laughed and they moved on to the next scene.

However, when they were not portraying this victim nurse character, they described how powerful it felt. They were often given prop chainsaws or knives, and their goal was to be aggressive, and they loved this opportunity. It was an opportunity to be truly scary and powerful, something that they don't experience in their everyday, partly because of their gender, and the other part being that in their day jobs, they don't get to

scream at paying customers. The power dynamic shifted depending on the form they took in the production, as a victim, they had less power, but as an aggressor, they had more. They noted that the audience also recognized the various levels of power in each performance and sometimes they would try and capitalize on that lack of power to harass actors and become a villain in the story.

Regardless of their skill level, I saw how the actors created their own communities at the haunt. The actors described the intra-haunt rivalries, had their own mythology, they'd share their stories of how well they scared the guests, they'd talk about guests who turned around and left the first scene, they'd talk about times that a guest peed themselves, or even passed out. The women of the haunt would talk about how exciting it was to scare men far larger than they were, the more unique the discourse, the more power that actor had within their community. Within these actor communities, they had their own rituals and traditions that helped to define their performance for the night.

In my recent field work at a multi-attraction rural haunted house in Washtenaw County, Michigan, I observed the behind-the-scenes preparations with production staff. The different haunted houses have their own manager, and they act as a supervisor. This job is akin to a theatrical stage manager, they uphold the integrity of the show by following the artistic directors' orders, but their duties also include making sure actors, guests and everything in between stays safe, while also ensuring their actors are putting on a good show and following the stage directions. The managers of each haunt are generally the first to arrive for the evening if they weren't already working daytime activities. They gather check-in sheets and other materials they need for their evening and

start to do head counts on actors as they arrive. Some actors are no-shows, some call off and it becomes a puzzle for the artistic director and his managers solve. They move people around until, actors get into costume and makeup, and everything falls into place and the show is ready.

This space is liminal, everyone is working together to transform this quaint farm into a nightmare factory, they are physically and metaphorically moving into an embodiment of darkness. The sun has set, the farm is dark, employees are working to alter its quaint, pastoral glow, into one that is a creeping darkness. I leave the makeup area and step outside and realize the first hayride of the night is full of actors, dressed in their monstrous costumes. They are chatting with one another, I can see their manager doing a headcount, like a schoolteacher after a field trip. There are even more actors milling about the property in their grotesque makeup and masks, a 'lot monster,' a person who wanders the ground and interacts with the guests is sitting on a bench with his costume head tucked under his arm, a water bottle in the other hand. He sits by himself waiting for the night to begin until he can take on the persona of his costume, a sort of swamp monster, Gollum creature.

As the managers round up their actors for the night, the transformation into monster is almost complete. Up until this moment, it has been chaos, regardless of how many years someone has spent doing this transition, and it is here where the chaos turns into ritual. I observe the managers pull their actors into a huddle, with a hands-in and cheer at the end of their pep-talk. I could hear the actors as they found their places in their respective haunts engage in a call and response with one another, "Let's go Monsters!



Clap-Clap-ClapClapClapClap! Let's go Monsters! Clap-Clap-ClapClapClapClap!" These cheers, calls and response are a momentary cross-over with athletics, as they act as their own cheerleaders, fans, and players in the moment.

When actors transform into their grotesque makeup and costumes, they evolve into a new person learn that they have agency in their performance, this is a space for them to play out their many identities and histories, allowing them to converge together (Feintuch 2003, 121). The combination of makeup and costume helps narrativize a new identity for a person, giving them access to a type of agency, or a new form, they may not have in their everyday lives. The women I spoke with in the fall of 2022, all described this feeling, that they suddenly had access to a powerful agency as a woman, behaving "crazy" and wielding a prop weapon against the audience. I also happened to notice one of these transformations in an actor for the very first time that same evening in the fall of 2022, in Washtenaw County, Michigan. As I watched the shuffle of makeup, actors, costumes, managers, and other staff, I took a moment to chat with a few actors, I turned away from a make-up table, and noticed a shorter man, standing with his hands in his pockets already wearing an elaborate clown mask. The visual was creepy, but also hilarious, this terrifying clown mask on the head of someone, wearing khaki shorts and a black t-shirt, and clearly waiting for instructions, was so bizarre. I struck up a conversation with this actor, he was incredibly soft-spoken and seemed almost nervous. I very quickly learned that it was his very first night on the job. He explained to me that a friend invited him to tag along to auditions and encouraged him to try out for an acting

job, but he had no previous experience performing. I learned that he had graduated high school the previous spring and was working full-time in landscaping.

Our conversation ended when he was given the remainder of his costume and collected by his haunt manager. Later that night, I made my way to the circus-themed haunt where he was working in hopes to catch them in action. I immediately noticed a clown running up and down the front of the house, chasing a small group of young boys who wanted a selfie with the clown. This clown is brash, loud, witty, funny, overall, incredibly entertaining to watch, I confirm with the manager if that clown is the young man I spoke with earlier, and it is. I am personally not surprised by this because I've seen this happen before. It always seems like the quietest people who come in to audition have the biggest personalities in the haunt, it's an epiphany for them. They have access to a different person in this production, somewhere deep inside of them, and gives them a new sense of agency of who they are as a character and themselves. Several actors I spoke with confirmed this feeling, their sense of agency when they are in the haunt, someone who is powerful, frightening, funny, weird, or any combination of.

While being an actor may seem like a rather cushy job, being a haunted house actor is not an easy job. For starters, it is an intensely physical job, this is a job that requires people to be high energy, loud, be able to navigate dark, confined spaces, move quickly, and repeat that same performance many times throughout the night. I've spoken with several actors whose jobs included working on a short zip-line each night, these actors described it as being fun at first but, physically exhausting, especially on busy nights when the audience is non-stop through their house. There are many actors, whose

job required them to hide in smaller, confined spaces until the right moment, and pop out to startle the guests.

At haunts in all the states I've visited, I always encounter an actor with a chainsaw, and by the looks of it, they are almost always real chainsaws with the blade-chain removed. These are not lightweight objects, yet every actor I've seen with one gleefully runs as far as they can chase an audience member with it. One actor I spoke with who was a "lot monster," had been performing in this sort of role for almost 15 years, but now he needs frequent breaks due to age, but he described being energized by the reactions he would get out of people.

The job requires a sense of intuition, knowing who the most vulnerable person is in the audience, and how to rile them up just enough. That same intuition must also be able to understand the fight or flight risk of each guest, and the faux fight or flight risk, a person who desires only to harm under the guise of "being afraid." It also requires actors to protect their mental well-being, as each season a few audience members will chose to behave poorly, perhaps inspired by the power of Halloween and engage in discourse that is unfortunately harmful and sometimes hostile. A bi-racial actor described having racial slurs thrown at them in response to scaring a woman in a group of guests, and described having women attempt to touch him inappropriately. Many female actors have described repeated verbal harassment from male guests, and sometimes sexual harassment. These situations were mitigated swiftly by management, a luxury that many women and BIPOC people do not even have in their day-jobs. While these situations do happen, it is not something that happens every night, once a season at most, and when it does happen, I

was informed that management resolved the issues quickly and made the actors feel safe in their work environment, a type of power that I would argue many Americans may not have access to in their regular jobs.

In one story shared with me, a female actor described spending a season in a room in the mental hospital themed haunt with a male actor who identified as Muslim-American. They had a great working relationship and she described that on several occasions that season, male guests entering the scene would become rowdy and attempt to touch her. When this happened, the male actor would pop-out from his hiding place and immediately begin aggressively speaking Arabic to these male guests. She said that seemed to scare them more, and he knew it would. He leaned into this moment, he leaned into American fear of the “Other,” to defend his haunt community, but he admitted he was always saying nice things to the guests just in case they understood him. Here, the actors experienced a shifting of power, the actress was basically taken out of the scene by these male guests. These male guests were breaking the idea of play in this scene, instead of feeling empathy for this victim in the haunt, they felt it was their job to harass her, however, they didn’t know they were being watched by another actor. The actor quickly took back the power in the space by scaring them, and reminding them that they too, could end up like this victim. In this scenario the form, production, and discourse did not come together the way they should in the ritual genres. They clashed and the power shifted between the audience and actors, as they actors needed to regain control from the audience, instead of sharing the power for the enjoyment of the experience.

In this folk drama, actors have an immense amount of power in their scenes. The actors I spoke with were very aware of their power and discussed wanting to create a safe environment to play with fear and used their power to drive their performance. That power is shared with their audience though, once audience members enter the haunt, they become victims for the monsters on the inside. They take part in the story sometimes by engaging in playful improv, trying to get the actors to break character, or win the favor of the actor by charming them, as if this will build an alliance and provide safe passage through the remainder of the haunt. Audiences will sometimes run in fear and sometimes make attempts to fight back. The performance space of the haunt is constantly changing between the actors and the guests, lines between reality are blurred (M. Miller 2012, 2).

#### **AUDIENCES**

For a folk drama to be successful, the audience must “act as though they believe in its fictional elements and characters,” and the drama requires the spirit of collaboration (M. Miller 2012, 8). This collaborative spirit asks the audience to create their own narrative, to act as though this haunt is their new reality, an opportunity to practice those strategies that we have rehearsed in the most paranoid parts of our minds: what happens if zombies do attack? What happens if I encounter an angry, murderous spirit? How do I fight back against the banjo-wielding “hillbillies” who are chasing me?(McAndrew 2020, 4)

Audiences not only pay for this experience, but are cast in this experience, an accidental main character in a horror film. The folk drama engages with the anxieties of real life and combines real images in simulated sets, like that of dilapidated buildings, abandoned work sites, and gruesome makeup. The folk drama also engages with the

supernatural using animatronic werewolves, zombies, ghastly and extraordinarily large monsters in the dark (M. Miller 2012, 5). Haunts require their audience to engage with a suspension of belief and to play with this liminal space between reality and fiction.

The collaboration between the guests and the actors is vital to the ritual performance of the haunt, it is a culmination of power, form, discourse, and production that is shared between the audience and the actors (Stoeltje 1993, 136). The folk drama of the haunt continues because of the collaboration even if it's not screams, it can be laughter, banter, and light defiance (M. Miller 2012, 5). The performance in the haunt is particularly complex, as many forms of entertainment do not require audience participation. Concerts, plays, musicals, and the like do not invite guests to be part of the performance and do not expect the audience to become prey for the performers. Performing is currency, there is an exchange between the actors and the audience, they exchange words, energy, and feed off each other's emotion (Feintuch 2003, 133). Power comes in many forms in the haunt, it can be emotional, it can be predatory, as actors behave in domineering and frightening ways to scare, but that power circulates between performers and audience "a kind of reciprocity develops between the performers and the audience; each feeds on the others' excitement to produce mounting tension," (Magliocco 1985, 23).

When the audience plays their role of victim, the actor can find it very encouraging, the actors I spoke with all described the ability to find "the right one," in the audience. The "right one" is going to be the most scared, but also the most fun. They often know they are the target, know they are startled easily, and know that by the time

they exit, they are going to be laughing. The actors I spoke with in the fall of 2022 all described this experience, it is a type of intuition they have when scanning the group of people that come through. It's a combination of reading the groups body language and making educated guesses. They all agreed that the person most easily scared is going to be in the middle of the group, thinking they are going to be protected by being "sandwiched," between the rest. Yet, this truly makes them the most vulnerable to the actors, one described this as being able to "smell blood in the water," this is the person they are going to get the most reaction out of. Getting a scare out of that person produces that tension for the group, they are going to get scared by their reaction or laugh.

Audiences invite the monstrous into their personal space by purchasing a ticket, an experience that most people do not pay for. The consumption of this performance is an extension of the spirit of Halloween, a carnivalesque time (Santino 2009, 18). It's a time when power structures seem flipped, when children demand treats from strangers, who they are taught to avoid, when those engaged in costume, find a new power in their character for the evening. Here at the haunt, actors have the power to become monsters, and harass paying customers, an opportunity not accepted in American consumerism and capitalism.

Within these two groups, the audience and the actors, there exist systems of order, and their identities are defined by this performance.(Feintuch 2003, 29) The haunt's "power also resides in the capacity to create, transform, or otherwise make things happen."(Stoeltje 1993, 140). The actors violate the natural system of a paying customer by harassing, shocking, and scaring them, the audience can achieve a sense of power by

completing the ritual of the haunted house. It is a chance to dabble with darkness and see how one might manage it.

#### **AN IMMERSIVE AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE**

In the fall of 2019, I participated in an immersive, outdoor, zombie-themed haunt with a small group of friends that included my older sister, and two friends, one man, one woman, in Carbon County, Pennsylvania. In this haunt we were given flag-football belts to wear with three plastic flags attached to it and challenged to traverse an outdoor maze filled with actors dressed as zombies and “survive,” the maze. The way to survive the maze was to have all three flags on our belt when we exited the maze. Once we had our belts secured, we walked to the entrance of the event and an employee provided us with the rules. The main rule was to WALK not RUN inside the event, even though we were supposed to be dodging the living dead. The employee explained that we were entering what was once a “safe zone,” for the those still alive, and it had been overrun by the living dead, our job was to act as scouts, seeing how many zombies were still inside, and be on the lookout for survivors.

After we were given the story, our mission, and reminded of the rules once more, we were let inside the former safe zone. It was poorly lit and filled with the detritus of a civilization that was coming back together, and the props inside this space created a maze that guided us through the attraction. We wandered our way through the stacks of tires, old cars, and furniture, quietly, a little anxious, instinctively clutching the flags on our belts, our literal lives for this moment. We were all trying to tap into the survival skill of stealth while maneuvering a danger zone. I have never been in a military warzone, I have



never been in high stress situation life or death, but as a child of the 90s, I am very well-practiced in active shooter drills. There was an instinct that kicked in, I was trying to be quiet, I was trying to find places to take cover, just like I had been taught throughout my younger years. I was engrossed in my own performance, someone who had been tasked with scouting this zone for the undead with no weapons, just the small group of scouts who bravely took up this mission alongside me.

The tension broke when we finally encountered our first zombie and startled us. This one was a little off the path, arms outstretched, moaning, groaning, and shuffling towards us, but we easily outmaneuvered it. Our first encounter brought the initial feeling of shock, then relief, some laughter, and a triumphant feeling. We were totally going to get away from these zombies. We ventured on through the maze, walking through bloodied trailers that looked like make-shift command centers, with emptied, upturned desks, radios still blaring out emergency broadcasts, and hungry zombies waited for us in the darkness, some of us losing a flag in the mayhem. We walked by abandoned buildings, with suitcases and backpacks strewn about in front, the remnants of a failed escape and those who had been turned into zombies shuffling towards us.

As we neared the end of the maze, we were ambushed by about five zombies, at this point, none of us knew if we were going to survive the maze. I think perhaps the main reason we all walked away with at least one flag left was partially because of some light cheating, like tucking a flag into a pocket, but we also owe thanks in part to my older sister. She had become so engrossed in her role, but also desperately trying to respect the rules we were given at the entrance. With her hands deep into her pockets, to

prevent her from instinctively swatting at the zombies, she was involved in a slow speed chase around a pile of tires, a zombie was following her in that small circle while she laughed nervously. The zombie chasing her reminded her to not run, in a grumbly undead voice, and my sister anxiously replied that she was, in fact **not** running, but walking briskly. The remainder of our group stopped our stealth mission work to observe the circus unfolding in front of us, as did the other zombies. I imagine the other zombies stopped to observe the situation and make sure their fellow performer remained unharmed, but we stopped to laugh at our companion. The chasing zombie finally gave up and we made it to the exit, laughing and triumphantly waving the remaining flags we all had.

Reflecting on my time in the maze, I felt as though I was in a position of power, serving in the role of someone who is protecting the rest of the community from the hoard of the undead, someone who was willing to sacrifice everything they had for the greater good. I was either the bravest human on the planet, or the dumbest willing sacrifice. The feeling was mutual among the group I was in. There was some practical discussion among the group first, we acknowledged that this was firstly, sort of stressful, but fun. There was this sense of danger, but a danger that felt safe to engage with, an opportunity to practice what we *might* do in the event of an actual zombie apocalypse, also acknowledging that during an actual zombie event, we would be allowed to run.

The audience is often able to compartmentalize their emotions, they understand fully that the environment they are in is simulated, there is no real danger, but that doesn't always connect with the fight or flight response we are so deeply programmed to

have. In her work observing the Bloomington, Indiana Jaycee's Haunted House, Sabina Magliocco noted that the audience collaborated with the actors, suspended their disbelief and became "engrossed" in the performance,"(Magliocco 1985, 23). She noted that audiences do report experiencing something like fear, it's closer to anxiety due to the impending surprise scares, just like we experienced at the interactive zombie haunt(Magliocco 1985, 23).

### **AUDIENCES AND GENDER**

The audience generally performs in heteronormative gender roles, with men behaving as stoic as possible, trying not to physically express their fears, and women clinging to men for protection (Magliocco 1985, 24). In my own observations and participations at the haunts visited for this thesis, I have noticed that young men would come in with a lot of bravado, letting the world know they were not to be trifled with, older men more stoic, women and children tended to carry the weight of both anxiety and excitement.

I've witnessed some of these heteronormative gender patterns at the haunt I was employed at in Washtenaw County, Michigan. One busy Saturday evening, in the fall of 2014, I was completing a walkthrough of the haunt to ensure that actor's makeup was holding up, when I decided to join a small group of guests that were about to enter the mental hospital themed haunt. This group, the audience, consisted of about eight people, they all appeared to be college-age, filed into the first scene of the haunt. The actor in that scene at the time, an older white male, was dressed as a mad, gory doctor, and with a menacing, sick smile, he welcomed them to his derelict waiting room.

After he shut the door, he turned to us in the waiting room, before speaking, he menacingly walked by each person, looking them directly in their eyes, sizing them up before he began his monologue. He began to speak, pacing erratically in the waiting room, delivering his lines with as much terrifying gusto as every performance I had seen that evening. However, as he leaned in towards a young woman during his monologue, she abruptly stood up and exclaimed something like, “I don’t want to do this.” Her partner, a man around the same age looked at her with an expression of shock and attempted to calm her down, reminded her it wasn’t real, said he would protect her throughout the night. As she continued to panic, the actor playing the Doctor broke character to encourage her to continue through, trying to assure her that this was all just for fun. The other actor in the scene playfully popped his head out from the false painting on the wall to prove to her that the monsters weren’t real. I stayed in my seat and watched, they didn’t need an intervention, they had it under control. She continued to protest, and her group was let back out the front door, and I stayed behind.

Once the door was closed, I took a few moments to chat with the actor, I applauded how well they handled the situation, and asked how frequently did this scenario occur? He explained to me this happens with some frequency, but generally, the rest of the people in the group will drag the hesitant person into the next scenes, but that leaving the haunt all together is rarer. However, in his experience, he believed there was a chance she and her group would return later in the evening. After our short conversation, he reset the scene, and I snuck back to the backstage area to watch the next group start their journey into the asylum without any issues. I was generally skeptical of actors’

triumphant claims to have scared a guest out of a haunt before they could even begin, my skepticism rising from being familiar with the no-refund policy of the attraction. Yet, I had finally seen it, in person, a guest became so frightened before the show could start and needed to leave. The guest was frightened by something, was it the power of the actor, was it the power of the abject, realizing that what she was witnessing was too close for comfort? I later learned that she and her group did return later that evening, where she and her group completed the entire attraction screaming and laughing the entire time.

#### **AUDIENCES: COLLABORATION**

In peak moments of anxiety and fear, the audience relies on one another to escape. Often starting out as groups of strangers, they draw upon their resources to build community as they traverse the haunt to attain this group identity. It is because of this anxiety, this intuition of chaos that the audience comes together to find order, who leads, who is in the middle, who is the last in the group, who holds hands with who. I can recall the creation of community in the audience many times as a participant observer at haunts.

On a haunted trail in rural Virginia Beach, Virginia, my husband and I found ourselves as temporary caregivers when a child in front of us on the trail attempted to back away from the scene in front of him. He and I were holding hands along the trail, and the child was snagged in-between us, his parents laughing at his mild distress. We guided him back to his parents up front and he protested, yelling how he wanted to stay with us, and not his parents. To be fair to his parents, the scene wasn't that scary, it was well-lit, and the trauma from this moment was probably enough to give him a funny anecdote in the future.

In almost every haunt I've visited, the moment a chainsaw is revved, a stranger becomes a friend as the audience slam into one another to escape the simulated danger. On a long, haunted trail in southern Maryland, a young woman wrapped both arms around me and buried her face into my back to escape a bloodied, plaid wearing "hillbilly" as he laughed and screamed in a country accent. On the same trail, I found myself anxiously reaching out to the person in front of me as we descended into total darkness, walking through a claustrophobia-inducing section of the trail. I laughed at myself and thanked the person in front of me for being a brief guide, while a well-seasoned haunt-goer, I am not immune to tripping over my own two feet in the dark. As the audience completes their journey through the haunted house attraction, they have completed a ritual of initiation. They have overcome the anxiety of fear together, which Magliocco noted in her own work observing the Indiana Jaycees Haunted House, appears to increase self-esteem and strengthen the groups bonds(1985, 26). Even though she observed this in the 1980s, it appears that there is *still* a certain type of joy that comes from playing with fear.

## **CONCLUSION**

Being an audience member at a haunt can feel like participating in dark tourism of the abject and powerless, and we are sometimes fascinated with the abject because we can't look away. We can't look away because this is a very real horror, particularly in America, where there are almost no social safety nets, and the ghost towns we encounter in haunts, are not full of ghosts, they are full of poverty. The fear and dread are not

brought about by ghosts, but by the reality that we could also end up left behind in a ghost town (Roth 2007, 202).

As discussed earlier, the American haunt tradition will often rely heavily on tropes about “hillbillies,” mental patients, and ghost towns; it is easy to forget that these tropes are reflections of American history. These tropes are created into the image of the monstrous “they emerge out of the central anxieties and obsessions that have been a part of the United States from colonial times to the present,” (Poole 2018, 4). The tractor drawn haunted hayride is often the preferred stage for the performance of these stories of the monstrous and marginalized, where we are forced to interact with the monsters who “also represents our hatreds. Whatever makes us lose our lunch, whether natural or supernatural, can be defined as a monster. The monster is the sickening Other” (Poole 2018, 13). Yet through the production of simulated horror, the audience and actors have come together for the sake of the production, they have collaborated in their performance and assumed forms for that performance to be successful (Stoeltje 1993, 136).

## CONCLUSION

The 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic brought hardships to many businesses, agritainment and haunts were not excluded from that. They faced another wave of upheaval, just like the waves of industrialization and urbanization that their ancestors experienced. Another crisis for them to navigate, evolve, adapt, and hopefully survive. This upheaval is arguably very different than what many have faced in the past. Industrialization and urbanization only directly affected their families, however, there have been many events that have affected their communities, which in turn, may affect their business for the season. For example, in the wake of 9/11, there were many conversations regarding how to handle the upcoming Halloween season: how should we handle a season of simulated death after so much real death? How do we manage the fake blood, skeletons, monsters, and ghouls, after having come face to face with so much real carnage?

9/11 was a national tragedy, but the events were localized to the East Coast, and sociologist Dr. Margee Kerr's research was quoted in a *VOX* article that many haunt owners noticed an uptick in attendance after 9/11 (Maddeaux 2020). Kerr did not reference a specific region of the country in her research, but in my own field work, a haunt owner in Michigan described the opposite. That same Michigan haunt owner also referenced the DC Sniper homicides as also being detrimental to their business that season. With that in mind, I hypothesize that perhaps the uptick was localized to the East Coast?



Perhaps after so much real horror, navigating through simulated horror provided a sense of control to those still reeling from their proximity to immense tragedy. As discussed previously in my chapter on the folk drama, Sabina Magliocco noted that guests leaving the haunt appeared to leave with heightened self-esteem (Magliocco 1985, 26), Kerr also shares these findings, noting that after completing a scary task, our brains change how we process information, it's this kind of experience that makes us more confident dealing with other scary, stressful, and even mundane tasks (Kerr 2020).

So, amid a national, on-going tragedy, haunts adapted, and it could very well be argued that many of these conservative haunt owners did not view this tragedy the same way their more liberal peers did. Their adaptations varied based on state and local regulations, there were haunts that evolved into a drive-thru experience (Mallenbaum n.d.). A haunt in Washtenaw County, Michigan adapted by incorporating more scary masks, with the actor underneath the mask wearing a standard surgical one, and surgical masks worked well in their mental hospital haunt, an easy solution for this very specific situation. The creative director explained to me that they recorded more sound cues and voiceovers as opposed to having actors perform lines live.

When I visited a Fairfax County, Virginia haunt in the fall of 2021, I noticed in their clown themed haunt, the actors used noisemakers, horns, and other silly instruments to startle guests instead of speaking lines. They focused on jump-scares instead of dialogue throughout their haunt, and I saw how actors used tools to bang on the sets, or use chainsaws to make noise. Many I visited did not adapt at all, like some of the haunts in Virginia and, all the haunts I visited in Pennsylvania, they were in counties that were

more conservative leaning, and I noticed that I was one of the only, if not the only guest wearing a face mask.

Many made adaptations, many did not, and many closed, another victim of the pandemic. In 2020, Halloween was not cancelled, it just looked different, and Dr. Margee Kerr argued that “the jolt of terror from haunt actors might be a necessary evil after the pandemic,” in an article written in May of 2020 for The Global Association for the Attractions Industry, a trade association for amusement parks, theme parks, and family entertainment. (Kerr 2020). While this article may have had good intentions, it ultimately sided with the capitalist function of these venues, and opening during the pandemic may have left its employees feeling less safe (Hammonds, Kerrissey, and Tomaskovic-Devey, n.d.).

If festival is the community enacting their values (Lindquist 2006), then I believe that the farm turned haunted house attractions I visited for this thesis are re-enacting their own brush with death, using actors as sacrifice for the ritual of capitalism. The haunted house is a place to express the feelings of being othered, a chance to perform power, put it on display, and welcome darkness, knowing they’ve already conquered it. The performative power of the haunted house attraction is what draws actors and audiences to it. “Performance is always an exchange – of words, energy, emotion, and material,” (Feintuch 2003, 133), there is a distinct exchange of energy, emotion, and power between the audience and the actors. Folk horror and contemporary legends are dense, layered, and intricate genres. They have dual identities, they mean different things to different people, they are both powerful and problematic, depending on the context. For these

farms, they are a powerful way to make money, but it seems like there are some problematic undertones relating to employment and labor.

After another year of hardship, it will be interesting to see how these stories will be reflected into the haunts in years to come. In the years leading up to the pandemic, I encountered many zombie themed haunts, which are certainly an adjacent theme to pandemic and communicable illnesses. While not examined in this thesis, there is room for research into this theme, particularly in relation to the pandemic. Just like other horror themes that reflect cultural anxieties, I am left to wonder how haunts will relive this specific tragedy. I discussed at length the intersection of white, rural, conservative communities as owners and operators of agritainment-haunts, but other research to consider moving forward includes the intersection of rural haunts owned and operated by BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities.

In this thesis, I have argued that capitalism defines how we experience and perform gender, and this is true in the haunts I visited for this thesis. The gendered performances are both problematic and empowering. As a woman, I found my acting experience incredibly powerful, but have also found how men can weaponize their experience in the haunt under the premise of “acting.” Within the popular themes found at the haunts I visited for this thesis, there are coded messages about gender. When they parade clowns within their walls, the clowns are a reminder to women that they are at odds with the patriarchy for betraying their gender roles. The farms visited for this thesis acknowledge the betrayal of women leaving the farms to start new lives in the suburbs somewhere, leaving the rural life behind. Asylum themes are constant remnants of the

pain and suffering of women's trauma that can still be found in medical industrial complex. The ghost towns are haunted by the ghost of industry, closed factories, where men worked, and women kept the families. Yet sometimes women step into these roles, and in these roles, they find power in a patriarchal system.

I have argued that the haunts visited for this thesis perform in these caricatures of capitalism, and have had to adapt in the face of industrialization. They now lean into these metaphors and other capitalistic practices to make money; these haunts commodify what they can to maintain cultural relevancy. Through the commodification of belief in folk horror and contemporary legend, these farms can carve out a new culture for themselves, a space for suburban-urban populations to consume their new culture, a space for the farm to perform a new kind of power again. The themes these haunts choose to perform are broad metaphors, ambivalent enough between what is real and what is believed. The asylum themes, found in variations at all ten haunts I visited, lets the audience know that despite its uncomfortable history, it still serves a place in culture. The dark drama of asylum narrative serves as a reminder of living in a country lacking healthcare, that stigmatizes those living with mental illness and disability, that perhaps one day, you might find yourself a character in an asylum haunted house. When performing as ghost towns, the farm is reliving the end of their world from the industrialization that forced them to desecrate the family farm. The chainsaw serves as an ever-present reminder of the hard work around the farm and now it serves as a tool to act out violent rage, a cathartic release.

I have argued that these ten haunts are folk dramas rooted rituals of power, that defines the way groups are supposed to behave within a culture, the initiation of the actors, of the audience into this dark drama provides them with an opportunity to join in the darkness, and by playing with that darkness, they learn how to approach and tame their own darkness (Finol 1996, 89). For the actors, we know that “certain kinds of identity are derived from performance,”(Feintuch 2003, 28). The identities they are playing out are caricatures of marginalized peoples, yet they can draw a certain sense of power in that identity. From my personal experience in working with these actors, they find a sense of power in this work, a sense of control, and a sense of joy. They find the joy in this type of performance, a performance that relies on a series of climaxes (jump scares) combined with a slow build-up to one grand climax, usually in the final scene (Abrahams 1972, 81). This sense of teamwork is palpable, each actor knowing their part, knowing how it adds value to the overall experience.

For the audience, the opportunity to act as voyeurs of the marginalized, to see the “hillbillies, rednecks, or mountain men. Trading on assorted cultural myths—of inbreeding, insularity, backwardness, sexual perversion (especially incest and bestiality)—these rural white trash,” (Bell 1997, 96), or examine “the monsters body is a cultural body that demonstrates an embodiment of a certain cultural moment, be it a time, feeling, or place,” (Kitta 2019, 70). Acting as voyeurs of the monstrous body, the audience is playing with a fear that is too close for comfort, perhaps recognizing that they too, are one misstep away from becoming the outsider, the othered, the marginalized. The

audience toys with that fear, and learns how to control and manage it, giving them useful tools for future stressful and scary scenarios (Finol 1996, 92).

Dig deep into the roots of American haunts and buried beneath the barns that line old highways and byways are skeletons, stories, and legends that hold the dark secrets of generations of family farmers. The stories of small communities get whispered back and forth until they become tales of tragedy with morals and lessons to be learned. The abandoned silos serve as headstones of family long gone, an industry that has continually survived the upheaval of capitalism. The haunts I visited for this thesis have perpetuated their own legends in rural spaces for decades through community stories, through their own near-death experiences of navigating new economies. Those brushes with darkness allow them to welcome various forms of ostension, both positive and negative, that might draw people into the farm so they too can feed their morbid curiosity. The haunt provides audiences the space to experience fear in controlled environments, a space for audiences to embrace their own dual nature, have their own brush with darkness, and remember, like they tell you before cross the threshold of the haunted house: “don’t touch the monsters, and they will not touch you.”

Playing with the belief in various horror, supernatural, and legend themes helps keep the farms alive as a version of themselves. These family farms now stand vacant for most of the year, but just as their ancestors did before them, they return for the harvest during Autumn. This harvest, once a practice to provide sustenance through a long winter, turned commerce locally, turned entertainment still holds on to the belief that they serve a purpose, and have value to their community. While they may no longer cultivate

crops, they cultivate screams. It is “here are societies which seem idyllic, but which are malignant, at a dead end, and viewed in the grip of their own death throes. That condition is the real horror of the rural,” (Bell 1997, 102), it is here, where the farms get to choose how to haunt their land.

## REFERENCES

- Abrahams, Roger D. 1972. "Folklore and Literature as Performance." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 9 (2/3): 75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3814159>.
- Althof, Holly. 2021. "How Toxic Masculinity Is Ruining Your Workplace Culture." SHRM. March 6, 2021. <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/pages/how-toxic-masculinity-is-ruining-your-workplace-culture.aspx>.
- Alton, Liz. 2016. "Halloween Is Big Business: An Inside Look At The Haunted House Industry With Larry Kirchner." *Forbes*. 2016. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizalton/2016/10/31/halloween-is-big-business-an-inside-look-at-the-haunted-house-industry-with-larry-kirchner/>.
- Bell, David. 1997. "Anti-Idyll: Rural Horror." In *Contested Countryside Cultures : Otherness, Marginalisation, and Rurality*. Routledge.
- Bennett, Gillian, and Gillian Bennett. 1999. *Alas, Poor Ghost! Traditions of Belief in Story and Discourse*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press.
- Broadbent, Elizabeth. 2020. "The Bulk Of The Emotional Labor Falls On Moms, And It's Destroying Us." Blog. Scary Mommy. September 14, 2020. <https://www.scarymommy.com/women-do-most-emotional-labor-family>.
- Brown, Wendy. 2019. "5. No Future for White Men: Nihilism, Fatalism, and Resentment." In *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*. Columbia University Press.
- Caines, Rebecca, and Ajay Heble, eds. 2015. *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Carroll, Rory. 2015. "Extreme Haunted House: Inside the Real Life Kingdom of Masochists | Halloween | The Guardian." *The Guardian*. 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/oct/30/extreme-haunted-house-masochists-mckamey-manor>.
- Chesky, Anne. 2009. "Can Agritourism Save the Family Farm in Appalachia? A Study of Two Historic Family Farms in Valle Crucis, North Carolina." *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 15.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. 1996. "1 Monster Culture (Seven Theses)."
- Collins, Chad. 2021. "The History of Horror Is the History of Queerness." *Dread Central*. June 7, 2021. <https://www.dreadcentral.com/editorials/402352/the-history-of-horror-is-the-history-of-queerness/>.
- "Consumers Anticipate New Ways to Celebrate Halloween, Despite COVID-19." 2020. NRF. September 15, 2020. <https://nrf.com/media-center/press-releases/consumers-anticipate-new-ways-celebrate-halloween-despite-covid-19>.
- Degh, Linda, and Andrew Vdzsonyi. 2023. "Does the Word 'Dog' Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend-Telling."
- Denis, Matthew. 2022. "Looking for Work-Life Balance? The Case for the Four-Day Work Week." *The Manual*. October 2, 2022. <https://www.themanual.com/culture/why-4-day-work-weeks-are-good-for-everyone/>.



- “EDUCATIONAL SESSIONS.” n.d. NAFDMA Convention & Expo. Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://www.nafdmaconvention.com/educational-sessions>.
- Ellmann, Nora. 2019. “Immigration Detention Is Dangerous for Women’s Health and Rights.” *Center for American Progress* (blog). October 21, 2019. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/immigration-detention-dangerous-womens-health-rights/>.
- “Fact Sheet #32: Youth Minimum Wage - Fair Labor Standards Act.” n.d. DOL. Accessed March 7, 2023. <http://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/32-minimum-wage-youth>.
- “Fact Sheet #43: Child Labor Provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) for Nonagricultural Occupations.” n.d. DOL. Accessed April 26, 2023. <http://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/43-child-labor-non-agriculture>.
- “Facts.” n.d. *America Haunts, Representing the Best Halloween Attractions in America* (blog). Accessed March 7, 2023. <https://www.americahaunts.com/ah/facts/>.
- Feintuch, Burt, ed. 2003. *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Finol, José Enrique. 1996. “The Semiotics of Ritual: Halloween in an American Community.” *Universidad Del Zulia*, no. 21.
- Gelfand, Vanessa Williamson and Isabella. 2019. “Trump and Racism: What Do the Data Say?” *Brookings* (blog). August 14, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2019/08/14/trump-and-racism-what-do-the-data-say/>.
- Goldstein, Diane E. 2023. “Deranged Psychopaths and Victims Who Go Insane:”
- Goldstein, Diane E., Sylvia Ann Grider, and Jeannie B. Thomas. 2007. *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press.
- Gordon, Sarah M. 2021. “A Woman’s Place Is in the (Greasepaint) White House: How the 2016 Presidential Election Sparked a Creepy Clown Craze.” *Journal of American Folklore* 134 (531): 25–52. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.134.531.0025>.
- Hammonds, Clare, Jasmine Kerrissey, and Donald Tomaskovic-Devey. n.d. “Stressed, Unsafe, and Insecure: Essential Workers Need A New, New Deal.”
- Heller, Chris. n.d. “A Brief History of the Haunted House.”
- Katz, Jackson. 2020. “What Donald Trump Understands about American Men.” *Ms. Magazine* (blog). October 22, 2020. <https://msmagazine.com/2020/10/22/donald-trump-patriarchy-masculinity-men-male-voters/>.
- Kerr, Margee. 2017. *Scream: Chilling Adventures in the Science of Fear*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- . 2020. “Should COVID-19 Cancel Halloween? Nope! | IAAPA.” Blog. May 20, 2020. <https://www.iaapa.org/news/funworld/should-covid-19-cancel-halloween-nope>.
- Kime, Lynn. 2013. “Agritainment.” 2013. <https://extension.psu.edu/agritainment>.
- “Kirshenblatt-Gimblett - 1995 - Theorizing Heritage.Pdf.” n.d.

- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1995. "Theorizing Heritage." *Ethnomusicology* 39 (3): 367. <https://doi.org/10.2307/924627>.
- Kitta, Andrea. 2019. *The Kiss of Death: Contagion, Contamination, and Folklore*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Lawson, Kimberly. 2018. "California's Dark History of Forcibly Sterilizing Latinas." *Vice* (blog). August 16, 2018. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/gy339b/california-forced-sterilizations-latina-women-history>.
- Lindquist, Danille Christensen. 2006. "'Locating' the Nation: Football Game Day and American Dreams in Central Ohio." *The Journal of American Folklore* 119.
- Litteken, Lindsey. 2021. "Dear Men: It's Not Okay To Hit On The Girl Who's Paid To Be Nice To You." *The Financial Diet* (blog). February 15, 2021. <https://thefinancialdiet.com/dear-men-not-okay-hit-girl-paid-nice/>.
- Maddeaux, Sabrina. 2020. "Everything's Scary. What's Halloween Going to Be like?" *Vox*. September 28, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/21451615/halloween-2020-masks-trick-or-treating-costumes-candy-canceled>.
- Magliocco, Sabina. 1985. "The Bloomington Jaycees' Haunted House." In *Indiana Folklore and Oral History*. Vol. 14.
- Mallenbaum, Carly. n.d. "Halloween Drive-Thru: In COVID Times, Is a Spooky Car Experience Worth the Trip?" USA TODAY. Accessed April 3, 2023. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/2020/10/15/halloween-drive-thru-during-pandemic-make-fun-car-experience/5941906002/>.
- McAndrew, Francis T. 2020. "The Psychology, Geography, and Architecture of Horror: How Places Creep Us Out." *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* 4 (2): 47–62. <https://doi.org/10.26613/esic.4.2.189>.
- Meeuf, Russell. 2022. "WHITENESS UNDER SIEGE, PART 1: Haunted House Films." In *White Terror*. Indiana University Press.
- Miller, Alyssa. 2021. "Girlhood to Monstress: How Women in Horror Have Always Been the Hero and the Villain." No Film School. August 9, 2021. <https://nofilmschool.com/women-as-hero-and-villain-in-horror>.
- Miller, Montana. 2012. *Playing Dead: Mock Trauma and Folk Drama in Staged High School Drunk-Driving Tragedies*. Ritual, Festival, and Celebration Vol. 2. Logan: Utah State University Press/University Press of Colorado.
- "Minimum Wage: Teen Unemployment." n.d. Employment Policies Institute. Accessed March 7, 2023. <https://epionline.org/minimum-wage/minimum-wage-teen-unemployment/>.
- Mutz, Diana C. 2018. "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115 (19): E4330–39. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1718155115>.
- Needleman, Sarah E. 2010. "Farm House to Haunted House: Making Hay With Horror." *The Wall Street Journal*, October. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703735804575536081022245798.html>.

- Ojanuga, D. 1993. "The Medical Ethics of the 'Father of Gynaecology', Dr J Marion Sims." *Journal of Medical Ethics* 19 (1): 28–31. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jme.19.1.28>.
- Parker, Kim. 2015. "Women More than Men Adjust Their Careers for Family Life." *Pew Research Center* (blog). October 1, 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/10/01/women-more-than-men-adjust-their-careers-for-family-life/>.
- Parker, Kim, and Cary Funk. 2017. "Gender Discrimination Comes in Many Forms for Today's Working Women." *Pew Research Center* (blog). December 14, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/12/14/gender-discrimination-comes-in-many-forms-for-todays-working-women/>.
- Pascuzzi, Francesco, and Sandra Waters, eds. 2020. *The Spaces and Places of Horror*. Vernon Press Series in Critical Media Studies. Wilmington, Delaware: Vernon Press.
- Phillips, Whitney, and Ryan M. Milner. 2017. *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online*. Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity.
- Poole, W. Scott. 2018. *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsessions with the Hideous and the Haunting*. Second edition. Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press.
- Prizer, Tim. 2018. "'Shame Old Roads Can't Talk.'" In *Legend Tripping*, edited by Lynne S. McNeill and Elizabeth Tucker, 129–52. Utah State University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7330/9781607328087.c006>.
- Ringo, Allegra. 2013. "Why Do Some Brains Enjoy Fear?" *The Atlantic*. October 31, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/10/why-do-some-brains-enjoy-fear/280938/>.
- Roth, LuAnne. 2007. "Beyond Communitas: Cinematic Food Events and the Negotiation of Power, Belonging, and Exclusion." In *Folklore/Cinema: Popular Film as Vernacular Culture*. University Press of Colorado; Utah State University Press.
- Ruiz, Rebecca. 2019. "Women's Invisible Labor Leaves Them Feeling Empty, Study Finds." *Mashable*. January 22, 2019. <https://mashable.com/article/women-invisible-labor-mental-load-study>.
- Santino, Jack. 1983. "Halloween in America: Contemporary Customs and Performances." *Western Folklore* 42 (1): 1. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1499461>.
- . 2009. "The Ritualesque: Festival, Politics, and Popular Culture." *Western Folklore* 68.
- Satterwhite, Emily. 2017. "The Politics of Hillbilly Horror." In *Navigating Souths: Transdisciplinary Explorations of a U.S. Region*. UGA Press.
- Schmidt, Ann. 2019. "The 20 Wealthiest Counties in the U.S., Including These Washington, DC, Suburbs: Report | Fox Business." *News*. December 18, 2019. <https://www.foxbusiness.com/money/washington-dc-suburbs-richest-counties>.
- "Sexual Violence Myths & Misconceptions | ACESDV." 2014. September 18, 2014. <https://www.acesdv.org/about-sexual-domestic-violence/sexual-violence-myths-misconceptions/>.
- Skal, David J. 2003. *Death Makes a Holiday: A Cultural History of Halloween*. New York, N.Y.: Bloomsbury.

- Smith, Nadine. 2021. "Your Favorite Horror Movie Is Queer Now. Is That a Good Thing?" *Them*. October 28, 2021. <https://www.them.us/story/your-favorite-horror-movie-is-queer-now>.
- Stoeltje, Beverly J. 1993. "Power and the Ritual Genres: American Rodeo." *Western Folklore* 52 (2/4): 135. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1500083>.
- Tanhayi Ahari, Shannon K. 2019. "Narrative Portraits of Asylums: The Contested Authorship of Mental Illness & Psychiatric Healthcare in Contemporary Legend." Indiana University.
- "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Michigan." n.d. Accessed April 15, 2023. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/MI/INC110221>.
- "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Pennsylvania." n.d. Accessed April 15, 2023. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/PA/INC110221>.
- "U.S. County Poverty Rates." n.d. Tableau Software. Accessed April 28, 2023. [https://public.tableau.com/views/U\\_S\\_countypovertyrates/Povertydashboardorig?language=en-US&:display\\_count=n&:origin=viz\\_share\\_link&:embed=y&:showVizHome=n&:tabs=n&:toolbar=n&:apiID=host0#navType=0&navSrc=Parse](https://public.tableau.com/views/U_S_countypovertyrates/Povertydashboardorig?language=en-US&:display_count=n&:origin=viz_share_link&:embed=y&:showVizHome=n&:tabs=n&:toolbar=n&:apiID=host0#navType=0&navSrc=Parse).
- Vargas, Theresa. 2021. "Guinea Pigs or Pioneers? How Puerto Rican Women Were Used to Test the Birth Control Pill." *Washington Post*, October 28, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/05/09/guinea-pigs-or-pioneers-how-puerto-rican-women-were-used-to-test-the-birth-control-pill/>.
- Vosper, Amy Jane. 2014. "Film, Fear and the Female." Blog. Offscreen.Com. July 2014. <https://offscreen.com/view/film-fear-and-the-female>.
- Williams, Joan. 2014. "Sticking Women with the Office Housework." *Washington Post*, April 16, 2014. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2014/04/16/sticking-women-with-the-office-housework/>.
- Woodall, Candy. 2018. "The 35 Poorest Towns in Pennsylvania." *Pennlive*. January 18, 2018. [https://www.pennlive.com/news/2018/01/the\\_35\\_poorest\\_towns\\_in\\_penssy.html](https://www.pennlive.com/news/2018/01/the_35_poorest_towns_in_penssy.html).

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Betty Aquino received her Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts from Eastern Michigan University in 2012. After earning her undergraduate degree, she spent time working professionally in haunted houses, and theatre, before transitioning into a marketing career. During the 2020 Covid-19 global pandemic, a chance encounter with folklore on television led her to pursue a degree in the discipline. The completion of this thesis will earn her Master of Arts in English with a concentration in folklore from George Mason University.