

Monstrous Rage: Using the Supernatural to Navigate Black Horror and Rage

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Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

“Strange Fruit,” written by Abel Meeropol and
performed by Billie Holiday¹

INTRODUCTION: LYNCHING AN AMERICAN PASTIME

In her 1969 biography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou reflected on one of the recurring fears of her childhood by stating that “the Black woman in the South who raises sons, grandsons, and nephews had her heartstrings tied to a hanging noose. Any break from routine may herald for them unbearable news.”² Why did Angelou fear the “hanging noose”? In that specific moment, it was because her brother Bailey was a few hours late, his tardiness causing panic within Angelou’s household due to the very real possibility that he could have been lynched. Angelou grew up in a time and location known for, as Billie Holiday sings, its “strange fruit” or, in explicit terms, the prevalence of lynching Black men and women as a form of systematic racialized terrorism. Angelou feared the “hanging noose” that day and every day of her life because her lived reality proved that the murders of these Black (usually) men were not the deviant actions of one “bad apple” but a deliberate system of terror

used to keep her Black community “in their place,” that is to say, in fear of and beholden to the white community.

Many readers today would like to look at these illustrations of the United States as seen through a young Angelou’s eyes and dismiss them as examples of an unfortunate but long-gone history. However, as the murder of Black boys such as Tamir Rice³ makes clear, fear of a “hanging noose” is still as real today as it was during Angelou’s childhood. The difference between the reality of being Black in America today and in Angelou’s childhood is that the “hanging noose” is more likely to be an authority figure’s gun or, as the murder of George Floyd has shown, their knee. Furthermore, as the harassment, abuse, and murder of people of colour become more visible, American society is being forced to face the fact that not only is this hanging noose still as real and dangerous as ever, but also that the resulting heartache of mothers who will lose their children to it isn’t, and never truly was, limited to Black women in the South. It is a modern understanding of these new realities of Black horror and the subsequent Black rage at these indignities that inspired Victor LaValle to pull from his experiences as a Black man growing up in Queens, New York to create a work that depicts the realities of race, class, and gender through the lens of speculative fiction, giving a larger-than-life quality to true-to-life experiences. This paper will argue that through his graphic novel *Victor LaValle’s Destroyer*, LaValle attempts to both highlight the modern dimensions of the brutalities inflicted on Black and Brown people in the United States and use supernatural elements to give us new understandings of Black people’s navigations of these lived horrors. In doing so, LaValle creates a story that directly challenges culturally created images of Black femininity that stereotypically apply to Black motherhood and subsequently transforms the *Frankenstein* story from a story of horror with blackness in it to a story of Black horror.⁴ However, unlike typical Black horror narratives where the Black characters though central are still victims, *Destroyer* creates a space where a

single Black mother takes control of stereotypes such as the angry Black woman and the superstrong Black mother and refashions them into tools of her monstrous rage, making her both sympathetic and monstrous. In a world overflowing with monsters, both mythic and real, we will first analyse how *Destroyer* reimagines the *Frankenstein* motif to create a narrative of Black horror. This will lead us to a conversation on how, by embracing a narrative of monstrous rage in conjunction with the supernatural, LaValle uses Black horror and monstrosity as the ultimate equalizer that creates a space for Black resistance, connection, and conversation, even beyond the grave.

DESTROYER: A MODERN STORY OF BLACK HORROR

In *Destroyer*, LaValle takes an unflinching look at the modern realities and horrors of systematic oppression faced by Black people in America by crafting a modern reimagining of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. We enter a world where Dr. Frankenstein's legacy is upheld by The Lab, a shadowy institution that specializes in technological development largely used for the purposes of security and military action. However, its true purpose is to hunt down and capture Frankenstein's Monster who after 225 years is not only still alive but also in possession of extraordinary powers such as super strength, speed, and near indestructibility: abilities that the Lab's director believes can be used to unlock, and then sell, the secret of eternal life. Forced to leave his hiding place in Antarctica due at least in part to melting ice caps, the Monster, disgusted by the horrors man inflicts on the natural world, tears a destructive path back towards the source of his own human-caused pain, his long dead "father" Dr. Frankenstein. We are told that this path includes destroying the Lab and everyone connected to it. From this beginning, we are initially led to believe that "the destroyer" the story's title references is the Monster and that the conflict and horror of the story will focus on the supernatural and science-fiction elements introduced by the *Frankenstein* motif.

Indeed, those elements are important to the narrative, but only in the ways in which they aid the true protagonists—Dr. Josephine Baker, a brilliant but often undermined scientist, and her reanimated 12-year-old son Akai.

At first, when the Lab sends operatives to find Dr. Baker, it is implied that they are there for her protection. The Monster has reason to attack all the Lab's scientists, also called alchemists, meaning that as a former employee Dr. Baker is in extreme danger. However, it becomes clear that Dr. Baker's former employers do not care about or even particularly respect her. The operatives have been instructed to drag her back to the Lab if she will not come voluntarily. This disregard for Dr. Baker's autonomy is the first indication that the Lab is only interested in what can be gained by using her and her unparalleled brilliance. We learn that all the wondrous technological advancements that we see throughout the narrative, such as advanced artificial intelligence, extreme military machinery, and the reanimation of the dead, are due to Dr. Baker's work. Thus, the Lab's director wants her "collected" because she sees Dr. Baker as a resource and a wayward toy to be called to order. It is even implied that the Director had encouraged Dr. Baker's feelings of isolation when she was younger in order to control her, wanting Dr. Baker's first and, ideally, only loyalty to be to the Lab. When Dr. Baker announced her pregnancy with Akai, the Director quickly had her "phased out" because "the Director took it personally somehow."⁵ This lack of respect is made even more evident when the white male operatives sent to find her display ingrained sexist and racist views. Their prejudices are immediately made clear upon their first meeting with Dr. Baker when they enter her favorite bar and, in an attempt to locate her, they approach every table but hers. When Dr. Baker queries, "You went to every table asking for me. But you never stopped at mine. Why is that?"⁶ they push the oversight back onto her by stating, "Well, for one, you seem to have scrubbed all images of yourself anywhere. It's almost like you're trying to hide from the

world.”⁷ In these men’s minds, the issue at hand is that Dr. Baker is making things difficult for them. They echo the statements of many real-world authority figures by maintaining that Dr. Baker is the problem because she is hiding from them, ignoring their commands, and not complying with their desire to forcibly return her to a place where she hasn’t been employed for over 12 years. Through this interaction we start to see one of Dr. Baker’s long-standing pains and one of the reasons for her monstrous rage: the deliberate and consistent disregard for Black women’s abilities, desires, and pains.

As a Black woman, Dr. Baker’s intelligence, abilities, and earned positions have constantly been questioned. As she explains, in all her years as a scientist, she has “usually been treated in two ways. Either I’ve been invisible, or I’ve been an angry Black woman. I can’t describe how frustrating this has been. But I’m going to try.”⁸ When she questions why the agents didn’t stop at her table, the implication is that she knows they did not approach her table because she is a Black woman and that they assumed at a glance that she had nothing worthwhile to tell them. This is just another example of the wall of racism and sexism that she has climbed all her life.⁹ She also makes it clear that she doesn’t appreciate them trying to collect her, cautioning, “I would advise you to go back to Maryland, tell the Director you couldn’t find me. I won’t warn you again.”¹⁰ To the agents this is a shallow threat by a woman whom they initially perceive to be weaker than them. But for the reader, her declaration of “I won’t warn you again” is our first peek at the rage and potential violence roiling under Dr. Baker’s calm veneer, a veneer that has been eroding for some time and is about to shatter.

Destroyer is a story with numerous monsters both real and supernatural, but it becomes apparent that the most dangerous and potentially destructive force in this story is Dr. Baker’s rage. Dr. Baker is a woman shaped by cultural notions of a “strong Black mother” stereotype that tells Black women that a “good Black mom should be superstrong to protect her children, but she is also responsible

for controlling her children and preventing them from getting into trouble.”¹¹ Leaving everything behind—including her husband, Akai’s father—Dr. Baker embraces this ideal with a single-minded devotion, focusing all her resources and energy on building a stable and protected life for her child, and for a time she succeeds. As she says, “I had tenure. Akai attended St. Ignatius. I thought we’d made it. I assumed we were safe. But I was wrong.”¹² Dr. Baker was wrong because nothing she could do could protect her son and their idyllic life from being shattered by “the hanging noose.”

The noose, or in this case a police officer’s gun, did what both nooses and guns are made to do: it killed. A police officer murdered Akai, because he was scared by a 911 report of an 18- or perhaps 20-year-old Black man with a rifle, a report made by a woman of whom the reader is never shown more than a silhouette. However, we see this silhouette through the window of a nice home in a well-to-do neighborhood, with the woman’s voice fading in and out of range as Akai walks by her home as unaware of her as she is hyper-aware of him. From this figure’s no-nonsense ponytail, the way she talks, and the clear vigilance with which she watches her neighbourhood, we can easily imagine who this woman is and see the cultural systems at play. The first few coils in Akai’s noose were made by this “concerned” likely white woman who did not hesitate to weaponize her “fear” by calling the police and further empowered that fear with assumptions about Black youth. Akai was 12 years old when he was murdered, and with his big doe eyes and round baby face, he is drawn in a way that makes his youth undeniable. Yet it is unsurprising that he was reported to be 18 or 20, as “research has shown that Black boys, in particular, are often perceived as less innocent and more adult than their white male peers and, as a result, they are more likely to be assigned greater culpability for their actions.”¹³ That perception of a “lack of innocence” led to an assumption on the part of the caller, as in Tamir Rice’s case, that Akai was much older and must be holding a dangerous weapon. Thus, she told officers that a Black

18/20-year-old man was in front of her house with a rifle when in fact Akai, walking home from his little league game, was carrying his baseball bat. The final coils in Akai's noose were tied by the police officer who confronted him. This officer took his fear of the situation and combined it with a "shoot first ask questions later" attitude so common among police in the United States. He chose to leap from his vehicle with his gun already drawn and, once again paralleling the Tamir Rice case, shot Akai two seconds later. What could this officer have seen in two seconds that made Akai deserving of deadly force? The narrative suggests that he saw the same thing in Akai that the two agents from the Lab saw in Dr. Baker: the same blackness and perceived lack of innocence that allowed the court system of this world to decide that Akai's death was justified. After all, he was Black, it was dark, and the police officer was scared. Left with a dead son and denied any justice for his death, Dr. Baker's overwhelming grief quickly transformed into an awe-inspiring rage.

The world expected Dr. Baker to "move on" or at most embrace the iconic stance of the Black mother in grief. As Melissa Harris-Perry discusses, Black women's and particularly Black mothers' suffering has become "the conduit through which new conversations on race, class, and vulnerability began."¹⁴ Harris-Perry specifically discusses disasters such as Hurricane Katrina's destruction of New Orleans where "black women became the main characters through whose suffering and resilience the media told the story"¹⁵ of untold loss, shaping this story with image after image of Black mothers in distress. We see a similar strategy apply to the cases where Black men and boys are killed, leaving their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters to grieve in front of the cameras. Likewise, in *Destroyer*, the assumption was that Dr. Baker would continue to perform as Black women are trained, embracing her status as a "strong Black woman":

The strong black woman is easily recognizable. She confronts

all trials and tribulations. She is a source of unlimited support for her family. She is a motivated, hardworking breadwinner. She is always prepared to do what needs to be done for her family and her people. She is sacrificial and smart. She suppresses her emotional needs while anticipating those of others. She has an irrepressible spirit that is unbroken by a legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection.¹⁶

Applied to Dr. Baker, this means that society expected her to sacrifice her rage to remain a resilient and admirable icon of Black respectability for her people. After all, a “strong Black woman” never works for herself, she works for the world.

However, Dr. Baker isn't Maya Angelou's Mamma willing to quietly and respectably grieve for a son who will never return home. She is also not taking any tips from her namesake, the dancer Josephine Baker. Dr. Baker is not interested in crafting consumable performances for the world's enjoyment or benefit. She is interested in action and transformation. Thus, she takes her monstrous grief and directs it towards a monstrous rage. She combines this with the intellect that regularly earned her censure and mistrust to rebuild her son anew. She not only brings him back to life but rebirths him as more powerful than ever before, so powerful that he will never be killed by some authority figure's gun or anything else again. However, this isn't where Dr. Baker stops. If it were, she would be a creator and not a destroyer. Dr. Baker creates her own version of Frankenstein's monster through Akai, making him both her son and her tool. She sees Akai's successful reanimation as the first step in a war. She is motivated not only by love and grief but also by rage, thus constructing Akai to be an unbeatable weapon. What Dr. Baker wants is a revolution, for as she tells us, “This whole damn country is one big civil war monument. It's time to tear it down.”¹⁷

THE MONSTER SPEAKS BACK: USING THE SUPERNATURAL TO TELL NEW STORIES

When one considers Dr. Baker's and Akai's story, one wonders why the supernatural elements of the plot were necessary at all. Why bring in the spectacular and near-superhero abilities of Frankenstein's monster? Why have the various "living dead" versions of Akai? When the reader is first introduced to Akai, he is a literal ghost in the machine, speaking to his mother from beyond the grave in the form of an artificial intelligence. Readers then meet his reanimated form as an immortal superpowered undead child. One could argue that LaValle has set out to tell a speculative fiction horror story, and the uncontrollable violence of the Monster and the disturbing thought of a child as a living corpse add horror to the story. However, the fact remains that the story was already horrific without those elements.

When one considers the true horror of this story, there is nothing fanciful about it. There is nothing unique or unknown about Dr. Baker's pain. There is certainly nothing so mysterious about her experience that it requires a supernatural intervention for us to see it. As modern-day experiences have shown, all that is needed to truly see the pain of Black mothers like Dr. Baker is a population with easy access to cell phones and the ability to connect to social media. In the United States, society is inundated with historical examples, modern videos, and testimonies of the exact type of violence that Dr. Baker and Akai experience. In fact, it is often difficult to escape these stories. As Robin R. Means Coleman explains, when one creates Black horror (not to be confused with horror that happens to have Black people in it), what one adds is a "narrative focus that calls attention to racial identity, in this case Blackness—Black culture, history, ideologies, experiences, politics, language, humor, aesthetics, style, music, and the like."¹⁸ Thus, by simply telling those common stories of Black pain, stories that explore the racialized realities of extreme poverty, a history of violence, the systematic abuse of Black

and Brown people, and authorities that either turn a blind eye to or even encourage these abuses, one naturally tells a story of undeniable horror. In a reality where one can watch the murder of a Black man at the hands of the police, one doesn't need make-believe to find horror. As LaValle puts it in a letter to his readers, "I wonder which seems more fantastical: that a woman could bring her dead son back to life, or that our country might ever hold itself accountable for the injustices it has perpetrated."¹⁹ However, where the supernatural does not necessarily add to the horror elements of *Destroyer*, it does serve several essential purposes.

First, using the supernatural as part of a Black narrative has a long tradition in Black storytelling. There is a reason why folklorists such as Virginia Hamilton include "tales of the supernatural" as its own subcategory in Black folktales. These stories were not only common but also necessary, because the supernatural is one way to "even the playing ground." Black folktales often have main characters who for all practical purposes are weaker than the other characters in the story, just as the slave has significantly less power than the master. Thus these "weaker" characters are often given a skill, such as being extremely clever to win over stronger foes.²⁰ Similarly, supernatural abilities can also be used by a main or an allied character to make the defeat of a stronger foe possible. In tales such as "John and the Devil's Daughter," it would be impossible for a very human John to defeat the Devil, if it were not for the supernatural power of his ally, the Devil's Daughter.²¹ Similarly, it would be impossible for Dr. Baker to truly be a threat to corporations like the Lab or the US government if it were not for her status and abilities as an alchemist. Though the characters say that alchemist is just a title the Lab is using for its scientists, it is clear that the term is deliberately used to acknowledge that for the reader, Dr. Baker's (and Dr. Frankenstein's) work at times feels more akin to the occult than science, with Dr. Baker going so far as to claim that somehow extreme grief is what helped both her and Dr. Frankenstein succeed in creating their "monsters."²² Thus,

these supernatural elements were needed in order to allow Dr. Baker to express her rage in these extreme ways and to help her escape the common stereotypical tropes society creates for Black women.

LaValle's use of the supernatural also gives Dr. Baker the opportunity to speak back to the audience. By the end of her story, Dr. Baker has shifted from victim to main antagonist, with her rage pushing her to ignore everything beyond her own need for revenge, including Akai's own autonomy and needs as her child. When Akai tells her that he is not willing to kill, that he does not want to be violent and can't let her destroy the world, instead of respecting his desires, Dr. Baker attempts to use her abilities as an alchemist to take control of his body, attempting to force him to be the weapon of destruction she wants as opposed to the son she has. In doing so she has embraced her monstrous rage, becoming something akin to the witch character found in folklore and fairy tales. As Sheldon Cashdan describes, the witch exists in these stories to "pose an external threat to the hero or heroine, [and] she magnifies inner flaws and frailties in the reader."²³ While *Destroyer* is not a fairy tale, its speculative fiction elements are drawing from many of the same ideas. Dr. Baker may be coded as a witch-like character because she represents an extremely powerful woman who, for better or worse, works against the norm, seems to have power beyond ordinary human understanding, is defined by her rage (a feature or idea that many work to purge from themselves), and is a threat to a main character, Akai. By the end of the story, Dr. Baker has become a threat to the very thing she swore to uphold at all costs—Akai's safety. She is now willing to aggressively force Akai to obey her even when that obedience will erode elements of his core personality, what she calls his "tender heart."²⁴ The very act of asking and then attempting to force him to become a killing machine hurts Akai in profound ways. Thus, like all antagonist witches, Dr. Baker dies. In the story, her death is depicted as a side effect of Akai's rebellion; in resisting

her control, Akai accidentally distracts his mother, which allows the Monster to murder her. But her death can also be understood as a kind of purging of rage, destroying a feature that many fear and thereby allowing Akai's more even and acceptable temperament to take over.

If this were a fairy tale or even the typical representation of a Black woman's rage, Dr. Baker's "madness" and death would be all we would have seen. However, one of the most important functions of the supernatural in *Destroyer* is that it creates an opportunity for Akai and his mother to continuously discuss their experiences, perspectives, and feelings. What shifts this story from a reactionary tale or a stereotype to a more mature well-rounded narrative is the opportunity to speak to our "witch." To Cashdan, "the very act of engaging the witch, the ability to experience what she thinks and feels, can be growth-enhancing."²⁵ The main point of *Destroyer* is that Dr. Baker and Akai are not only engaging in discussions that allow Dr. Baker to explain the shape of her pain and rage, but also that as her son, Akai inherently cares about this information. The discussions motivate him to listen, learn, and grow as well as to develop a deeper bond with his mother. The supernatural elements that facilitate Akai's reanimation are essential to the story because they allow these difficult conversations to happen even after extreme tragedy and death. Furthermore, Akai and his mother are only able to reach a place of true understanding and mutual respect after Dr. Baker's death.

CONCLUSION: THE SUPERNATURAL AND BLACK POTENTIAL

In the end, Dr. Baker doesn't get to burn down the world. Instead, like every witch, she dies. However, anticipating her own death, Dr. Baker has her thoughts, personality, and voice uploaded and integrated with the technology she had used to rebuild her son,

allowing her to become a part of Akai—an act that once again creates a literal ghost in the machine, now with Dr. Baker being the one to speak to Akai from beyond the grave. This allows Akai and his mother to continue their conversations, even though all decision making is now left to Akai. In the last frames of the graphic novel, we are with Akai watching a baseball game, and he says to the voice of his mother, “Mom I hear you. I do. I’m going to think about everything you’ve said. But right now, I’ve got a good seat for a little league baseball game. All I want to do is watch these kids play.”²⁶ We don’t end this story with rage and violence. We end it with a picture of Black pleasure: of happiness, contentment, and peace. Dr. Baker’s monstrous rage pries open a space where a little Black boy who has been violated by his society can find a perfect moment of safety and happiness. More importantly, we end in a space where the important conversations can continue. Akai tells his mother that “he hears her” and that he is thinking about what she is saying, but he also refuses to live in a world of constant rage and cynicism. LaValle ends *Destroyer* with a letter to his readers in which he writes:

There’s a reason Akai refuses cynicism in this comic, a reason why he won’t succumb to rage. Because Akai Baker embodies the best that humanity has to offer. Despair doesn’t do a damn thing. And fear only turns people into animals. But as long as we have kids like Akai in the world, there’s still a chance for us. The trick then, is to make sure they actually are in the world, living, breathing, growing up, growing old.²⁷

Using the supernatural, LaValle gives readers the opportunity to truly hear and understand Dr. Baker’s perspective. At the same time, he creates a world that gives people like Akai a fighting chance. The world needs people like Akai, people who intimately understand the realities of Black horror, who can understand both their story

and the story of others, yet are still willing to build and not simply destroy. It is through people like Akai and stories like *Destroyer* that one can start to see beyond the horror of Black pain and begin to see the potential for Black pleasure.

NOTES

- 1 Abel Meeropol and Billie Holiday, "Strange Fruit" (Commodore, 1939), <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/billieholiday/strangefruit.html>.
- 2 Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Random House, 1970), 114.
- 3 Tamir Rice was a 12-year-old Black boy murdered by Cleveland Ohio Police. Police received reports that the toy gun Rice was playing with was a real gun and in response shot Rice almost immediately after arriving on the scene. Richard A. Oppel Jr., "National Questions Over Police Hit Home in Cleveland," *New York Times*, December 8, 2014.
- 4 As Robin R. Means Coleman explains in *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present*, most horror is horror with blackness, meaning that it is horror that happens to have Black people in it. This is to be distinguished from Black horror, which is horror that focuses on Black people's narratives and experiences.
- 5 Victor D. LaValle et al., *Victor LaValle's Destroyer* (Los Angeles: CA: BOOM! Studios, 2019), chapter 1.
- 6 LaValle, *Destroyer*, chapter 1.
- 7 LaValle, chapter 1.
- 8 LaValle, chapter 3.
- 9 LaValle, chapter 6.
- 10 LaValle, chapter 1.
- 11 Sinikka Elliott and Megan Reid, "The Superstrong Black Mother," *Contexts* 15, No. 1 (2016): 49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504216628840>.
- 12 LaValle, *Destroyer*, chapter 3.
- 13 Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia Blake, and Thalia González, "Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, June 27, 2017, 2, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3000695>.
- 14 Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 15.
- 15 Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 15.
- 16 Harris-Perry, 21.
- 17 LaValle, *Destroyer*, chapter 6.

- 18 Robin R. Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* (London: Routledge, 2011), 7.
- 19 LaValle, *Destroyer*, End Letter.
- 20 Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* (New York: Borzoi, 1985), x.
- 21 Hamilton, *The People Could Fly*, 107-115.
- 22 LaValle, *Destroyer*, chapter 3.
- 23 Sheldon Cashdan, *The Witch Must Die: How Fairy Tales Shape Our Lives* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 17.
- 24 LaValle, *Destroyer*, chapter 1.
- 25 Cashdan, *The Witch Must Die*, 252.
- 26 LaValle, *Destroyer*, chapter 6.
- 27 LaValle, End Letter.