



HAL
open science

Black Bodies / White Spaces: the Horrors of White Supremacy in Get Out (2017)

Hervé Mayer

► **To cite this version:**

Hervé Mayer. Black Bodies / White Spaces: the Horrors of White Supremacy in Get Out (2017). Culture Wars and Horror Movies: Social Fears and Ideology in post-2010 Horror Cinema, Palgrave Macmillan, inPress, 978-3-031-53835-3. hal-04412810

HAL Id: hal-04412810

<https://univ-montpellier3-paul-valery.hal.science/hal-04412810>

Submitted on 23 Jan 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Black Bodies / White Spaces: the Horrors of White Supremacy in *Get Out* (2017)

Hervé Mayer
EMMA, Paul Valéry Montpellier 3 University

Biography

Hervé Mayer is Assistant Professor in American studies and cinema at the University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3. His research focuses on the construction of power and political identities in US-American cinema. He is the author of *Guerre sauvage et empire de la liberté* (Presses universitaires Blaise Pascal 2021), *La Construction de l'Ouest américain dans le cinéma hollywoodien* (Atlande 2017) and co-editor of *Transnationalism and Imperialism: Endurance of the Global Western Film* (Indiana UP, 2022). He has published chapters and articles on the politics of film and film genres with Presses universitaires Paris Ouest, Editions Rue d'Ulm, Ellipses, Mimesis International, LISA, Miranda, and Film Journal.

Abstract

Since *Get Out* came out in May 2017, it has been widely received as “political horror” for its strong commentary on race relations in the United States. The starting point for Peele’s exploration of race in the US was the way the racialized structures of social environments produced and organized unequal race relations. This structural perspective on race allows *Get Out* to raise political questions that deeply resonated with the dominant concerns of the movement for racial justice at the time of its release. But the film is also political in the way that it uses its status as a cultural object to question and reshape the racialization of US-American cultural space. In this chapter, I focus on three aspects of the racial politics of *Get Out*: how the film exposes the past and present objectification and exploitation of Black bodies; how it ties such exploitation to the racialized power dynamics of social spaces; and finally, how *Get Out* seeks to rewrite the racial coordinates of US-American cultural history by reclaiming historically predominantly white cultural spaces – such as the horror genre – for Black narratives.

Chapter

Since *Get Out* came out in May 2017, it has been widely received as “political horror” for its strong commentary on race relations in the United States (Keetley 2020). Viewers and critics were largely thrilled by director Jordan Peele’s successful attempt to merge cinematic entertainment with political critique. Some were less enthralled by its uncompromising stance, reading its portrayal of the wealthy white liberal Armitage family and their peers as anti-white racism (Stoddard 2017; Platts and Brunsma 2020). The already tense context of the film’s release, following the election of an openly racist US President that was largely read as white backlash after eight years of Obama, gave *Get Out* an air of fueling the ongoing culture wars waged by white conservatives on human rights in the US, when it was in fact pointing out in cultural form what social movements like Black Lives Matter had been protesting since 2013: that the lives of Black people still are precarious in white America.

The context of the rise of Black Lives Matter and the 2016 presidential campaign were not even the defining factor for director Jordan Peele’s project as it took shape in a different racial context, that of Barack Obama’s first election as President of the United States in 2008. At the time, mostly white pundits and scholars in the United States and across the world were raving with the possibility of a post-racial America, entertaining the belief that racism in the US was a thing of the past. But African American Jordan Peele knew race still mattered in US-American society and the project for *Get Out* took shape as a way to keep it in the conversation (Sublette 2020). As Obama was eventually replaced by the son of a Ku Klux Klan sympathizer, Peele’s vision for the racial meaning of *Get Out* shifted from a strictly cautionary tale about the persistence of race to empowering escapism from the racist violence unleashed by Trump’s election. But *Get Out* maintained and eventually achieved Peele’s initial intention of fueling a conversation on race and allowing different people to talk about race from a common cinematic standpoint (Zinoman 2017).

Originally, the first idea for *Get Out* was not even about race, but social isolation. Peele had in mind a male character being invited by his girlfriend to her high school reunion and feeling completely alien in this social setting. It then struck the future director that such marginalization within social spaces powerfully captured the African American experience in the United States, who are compelled to navigate a society that constructs them into the other (Wisecrack 2018). The racial origins of *Get Out*, then, are strongly articulated to the power dynamics of social spaces. The starting point for Peele’s exploration of race in the US was the way the racialized structures of social environments produced and organized unequal race relations.

As one researcher noted, the articulation of race and social space remains one of the finished film's "most notable concerns".¹ This structural perspective on race allowed *Get Out* to raise political questions that deeply resonated with the dominant concerns of the movement for racial justice at the time of its release, and that remain unanswered to this day: the racialization of public and social spaces, the vulnerability of Black (male) bodies in those spaces, the historical continuity of racial objectification and exploitation, the violence of white power structures, and the systemic nature of racism. These pressing questions about the racial organization of social space certainly justify the label "political horror" for a film that so directly tackles contemporary racial politics in US-American society.

But *Get Out* is also political in the way that it uses its status as a cultural object to question and reshape the racialization of US-American cultural space. Cultural history and genre cinema are used by the director to review a loaded legacy of racial representations in US-American film and to reclaim the cultural space of genre film for marginalized, specifically African-American, perspectives.

In this chapter, I will focus on three aspects of the racial politics of *Get Out*: how the film exposes the past and present objectification and exploitation of Black bodies; how it ties such exploitation to the racialized power dynamics of social spaces; and finally, how *Get Out* seeks to rewrite the racial coordinates of US-American cultural history by reclaiming historically predominantly white cultural spaces – such as the horror genre – for Black narratives.

Black bodies as white commodities

Get Out tells us that if Black lives do not matter in white America, Black bodies certainly do. The film evokes a history of commodification of Black people as bodies and the types of violence that have been directed at these bodies once dehumanized (exploited by white people for their economic benefit; physically abused and violated by white people for their private enjoyment). These themes are woven into the film's central narrative development: the apparently respectable white liberal upper class family of the Armitage makes a business of capturing Black people, selling their bodies at auction, and transplanting into them the brain of their buyers, as a way to allow aging white upper class people to prolong their sentient

¹ "The relationship between place and race represents one of *Get Out*'s most notable thematic concerns." Bernice M. Murphy, "Place, Space, and the Reconfiguration of 'White Trash' Montrosity", in Dawn Ketley (ed), *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*, Ohio State University Press, 2020, p. 72.

existences in Black bodies. In this exploitative business, not only are Black people literally reduced to physical shells available for white colonization, but they keep just a flicker of self-awareness that turns them into passive observers of their own exploitation. This is the true horror of *Get Out*: not the fear of the racialized other lurking just off-screen to violate the space of dominant, white America, but the horrifying violence that socially-organized white power surgically inflicts on bodies of color. In other words, *Get Out* does not play into the dominant stream of the horror genre that, according to Robin Wood, locates the source of horror in the return of repressed otherness and (racial, sexual, or class) difference.² Instead, it unearths a marginal, yet potent, stream of the horror genre that thrived in the late 1960s and early 1970s in films such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Stepford Wives* (1975), where horror stems from the systemic operations of hegemonic power and dominant ideology.³ *The Stepford Wives* achieved this with patriarchy, focusing on the small town of Stepford, Connecticut, where men replace their feminist wives with animatronic homemaker clones. *Rosemary's Baby* exposed the horrors of religious oppression. And, although there were horror films that explored a history of racial exploitation and violence before,⁴ *Get Out* is arguably the first film to locate the source of horror in systemic white supremacy in the present. That the family responsible for such enslavement first appears to be liberal (with the casting of former *West Wing* regular Bradley Whitford as Dean Armitage, the neurosurgeon father, or Allison Williams from *Girls* as the daughter Rose) serves to highlight the responsibility of white liberalism in reproducing exploitative racial hierarchies in the present (Adams 2017). The film is not dealing with blatant and easily discarded forms of racism of the type embodied by white supremacists and other white terrorists, but it focuses rather on

² In his analysis of the horror film, Robin Wood identifies the “true subject of the horror genre [as] the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses” and sums up the formula of the genre as “normality is threatened by the Monster”. In Wood’s view, the genre is structured around the binary opposition of us vs the repressed/oppressed Other, the Other taking on various features of gender, racial, sexual, class, cultural, age... difference (Wood 2003, 68;71).

³ Building on the influence of Ira Levin, author of *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives*, on the horror genre and *Get Out*, Adam Lowenstein argues that *Get Out* finds its source within the horror genre rather than disrupts it, building on the genre’s power “as a vocabulary for the illumination, not the demonization, of the pain endured by social minorities” (Lowenstein 2020, 102). In her introduction to the same collection, Dawn Keetley also notes that “While *Rosemary's Baby*, *Stepford Wives*, and *Night of the Living Dead* feature, respectively, demonic entities, animatronic doubles, and cannibalistic ghouls, they simultaneously represent societal structures—whether it be patriarchy or racism—as the monster. Indeed, characters in *Rosemary's Baby*, *Stepford Wives*, *Night of the Living Dead*, and *Get Out* live in constant fear—and constant, vigilant watchfulness—because of those social structures, even as that same society tries to tell them they are paranoid for doing so” (Keetley 2020, 4).

⁴ During the Blaxploitation of the early 1970s with films such as *Ganja & Hess* (1973) or in the early 1990s with films like *Candyman* (1992) or *Tales of the Hood* (1995).

the systemic operations of white supremacy and how they seep into every part of a white-dominated society (Keertley 2020, 7).

In keeping with Franz Fanon's argument that objectification and a reduction to physicality are the central features of the Black experience in a white world, *Get Out* articulates the economic exploitation of Black bodies to their fetishization in white culture (Citizen 2020, 90-91). Established as the locus of difference, the Black body as commodity is both repulsive and desirable to white society. The film evokes the marketing power of Black physicality, and establishes how such power is tied to dehumanization and violence as early as its opening post-credit sequence [04:53-06:34]. The sequence introduces viewers with the main characters, Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya) and Rose Armitage (Allison Williams), as they prepare to leave on a weekend at the Armitage family estate in the country where Chris will meet Rose's parents. The second part of the sequence shows Chris and Rose in Chris's apartment, with Chris raising the problematic status of interracial relationships in contemporary US-American society ("Do they know I'm black?" [07:16]). But what interests me here is the first part of the sequence, which introduces the characters separately: Chris is out of the shower and shaving in his bathroom, while Rose stops to buy pastries on her way to Chris's apartment. The first post-credit shots introduce the viewer to Chris's apartment: a spacious, well-decorated living room with a large flat-screen TV and framed pictures of Chris's artwork are meant to evoke the comfortable social status of Chris and his occupation as a successful photographer, establishing Chris as a Black man with the status and means to fully enjoy his subjectivity.

Yet, as Kyle Brett points out, what the *mise-en-scène* emphasizes here, with Chris's framed pictures and reflection in the bathroom mirror is not Chris himself, "but images and reflections of [the] character's life" (Brett 2020, 193). As Dawn Keetley convincingly argues, the mirror scene highlights Chris's split racial identity as a Black man in white America, and the white shaving cream covering his face when we first see him indicates the white mask he still accepts to wear in order to pass in white society (Moore 2017). After all, at this point in the film Chris still wants to believe in the post-racial lie that would have him be accepted into the wealthy white family. Yet, what is at play in these early shots of the character is also to establish Chris less as a human subject, with substance and depth, than as a surface for the projection of white fantasies. The very first image we get of Chris is that of a body, as the camera picks up the back of his naked upper body in the bathroom doorframe, teasing viewers with well-sculpted yet partially revealed shoulder and upper arm muscles [05:25-05:30]. And

the most effective means by which this Black man is turned into an object of desire is the choice of lighting, the white reflection of the bathroom light glistening on his moist shoulders, emphasizing his presence as a bodily surface rather than a substantial being. Such lighting, in the way it reflects off the skin of a fit Black man's naked upper body, is reminiscent of the way athletic Black bodies can be shot in advertisement and on magazine covers. Here the narration directs our attention to the larger, widespread objectification of Black bodies in Western visual culture. Chris is just another Black man deprived of subjectivity and objectified as a body for the enjoyment of white America.

That such objectification is inherently a commodification is suggested in the visual parallel between the images of Chris's body and mirror reflection, and Rose selecting a pastry in a bakery window display. The cross cutting [05:30-06:00] establishes a connection between the consumption of marketed items such as baked goods and the consumption of Black bodies, and places Rose at the center of the trade. This editing choice has narrative implications, as it suggests from the beginning that Rose is complicit in the consumption of Black bodies practiced by her family. But it also has political implications, further exposing that white US-American society and visual culture treat Black bodies as commodities available for consumption. Just like Rose was browsing the bakery display for pastries in the opening sequence, we later see her, now revealed as a villain, browse Bing to select her next victim among the top NCAA prospects [92:34-92:47].

White spaces and Black vulnerability

The objectification, commodification, and fetishization of Black bodies makes those bodies particularly vulnerable in the social spaces of white America. *Get Out* exposes this by articulating the way in which Black bodies matter for white supremacy to the racialized dynamics of social spaces. Throughout the film, Chris is subjected to marginalization in spaces dominated by whiteness: the road where a white police officer asks for his documents when he wasn't driving the car; the country house where Rose's family meet for a weekend; the social event organized by Rose's parents at their house that same weekend; and finally the Sunken place where Chris has been confined through hypnosis. Rose's parents' house becomes a metaphor for the destructive consequences of racialized spaces on Black subjectivity. This isolation is also played out at the level of the film, in which Chris is the only Black character with agency, with the exception of Chris's friend Rod (Lil Rel Howery), who

remains physically separated from Chris until the very last moments of the film. Here Peele repeats the horror film cliché of having a single Black character as token and early victim, except *Get Out* embraces the perspective of that character, revealing the horrors that come with being thus isolated in a white narrative.

That US-American social spaces are racialized in a way that threatens the Black body is established in the film from its very first images in the prologue preceding the opening credits. This prologue sequence [00:50-03:45] is a staple of slasher films, in which a secondary character is introduced and killed in the opening sequence as a way to establish a sense of menace and the killer's power. Here, the director introduces a racial twist, presenting us with a Black male character, later identified as Andre (Lakeith Stanfield), lost and alone in a wealthy suburban area, a type of urban geography that has historically and culturally been developed as a "whitopia" (Means Coleman and Lawrence 2020).⁵ The character's unease in such space, feeling like "a sore thumb," and ironic uttering of the word "suburb" indicate he is racially at odds with his surroundings [01:12-01:25], the line "not me, not today" [02:26] offering a reminder that other Black men such as Trayvon Martin have been killed precisely for walking alone at night in white suburbia. That the violence targeting this character finds its source in whiteness is indicated by the color of the car that stalks him and carries away his body, and the old-fashioned soundtrack coming out of it. In her article on the film, Jennifer Ryan-Bryant discusses the racial underpinnings of the song "Run Rabbit Run" playing from the white car's radio, which evokes "mainstream white World War II-era music" and whose origins can be traced back to a racist post-Reconstruction rhyme (Ryan-Bryant 2020, 96-97). This choice of soundtrack harking back to a pre-civil rights United States and a time when popular music was not yet influenced by Black culture associates nostalgia for the good ole times of great America with white terrorism. The lyrics of the song also resonate with the title and theme of the film, as they tell of a farmer who likes rabbit pie and urge the rabbits to flee. The song is played again towards the end of the film [93:13] as Chris takes the wheel of the same white car to escape the Armitage house, revealing Rose's brother Jeremy (Caleb Landry Jones) was the predator in the prologue, and fastening the identification of Black men in white spaces with prey.

The aesthetics of the scene serve to heighten the sense of impending threat. The entire prologue is shot in one long take as a sequence shot, with the camera setting a dark stage for the character to enter in the form of a poorly lit suburban sidewalk at night [00:50-01:08]. The

⁵ For a sociological perspective on the question, see Massey and Tannen 2018.

slow traveling backward on a dark and empty sidewalk imbues the scene with an ominous atmosphere. As the character walks up to the camera for an introduction in close-up [01:33], the tight framing on Andre's head and shoulders is subsequently maintained, aligning viewers with the character's subjectivity. Viewers are meant to experience this Black man's hyper vigilance in white territory as the camera rotates around Andre's head to keep the incoming car in view [01:40-02:08]. The tight framing also relegates much of the space surrounding the character out of shot, so that his body appears very close to the limits of the frame, vulnerable to an assault from off-screen. The vigilance is legitimized and the sense of off-screen threat confirmed when Andre is eventually hit from screen right by a masked figure [02:42]. If the scene may remind viewers of the introduction to John Carpenter's classic horror film *Halloween*, in which the reassuring spaces of US-American suburbia are terrorized by an unseen killer (see Murphy 2020), the aesthetics of *Get Out*'s prologue invert the dynamics of horror by constructing an archetypal space of white America as a source of terror and violence for Black bodies.

Reclaiming cultural space for blackness

The rewriting of a classic horror film to expose its racial underpinnings and refocus on the othered, specifically African American, perspective in the prologue is a strategy that the film will repeat. The ultimate political trajectory of *Get Out* is empowerment, with Chris eventually resisting his commodification, asserting the right of people of color to self-defense, and escaping the Armitage house. Empowerment also comes from the emancipatory dynamics of violence, which bring Chris to shatter signifiers of whiteness (the China teacup used to hypnotize him) or turn them against the oppressor (the bocce ball used to knock out Jeremy, the cotton used to prevent hypnosis). Such cathartic victory of the Black man on white power is also played out at the level of cultural history, with the film including an African American artistic perspective through soundtrack and the profession of the protagonist. The song "Skiliza" by Michael Abels in the opening credits includes lyrics in Swahili and announces "Chris's triumph over racist conditions"⁶ while Childish Gambino's "Redbone" heard in the post-credit opening scene enjoins the main character to "stay woke" and shed the white mask we see him put on in his bathroom mirror. As for Chris's profession as a photographer, his

⁶ "The song, which contains the lyrics 'run far away' and 'save yourself' (Bowen), signals both to Chris and to informed viewers that Swahili possesses social power and that his cultural heritage may protect him from threats within his current environment" (Ryan-Bryant 2020, 98).

framed pictures [04:53-05:11] seem to use the contrasts of black and white photography as a way to explore the power dynamics of race – for instance, the white attack dog evoking slave patrols and police violence during the civil-rights movement is held with difficulty by a Black lower class owner, throwing him off-balance – and document the life force and social limitations of an African American urban experience – the pregnant woman’s belly in focus in the foreground, a Black passer-by and the projects out of focus in the background.⁷

But the cultural empowerment at play in the film is nowhere more effective than through the film’s work on cultural history and the racialization of the horror genre. I have mentioned how *Get Out* inverted archetypes of the horror genre by making systemic white supremacy the source of horror. I’ve also mentioned how the film was rewriting the classic horror film *Halloween* to expose its implicit racial politics and rewrite them from an African American perspective. I would now like to look at one other example of such cultural rewriting, that again articulates race and the power dynamics of social spaces: how *Get Out* appropriates Stanley Kubrick’s horror classic *The Shining* (1980). The Armitage house is introduced in a fashion similar to the mountain hotel resort of *The Shining* as a space that dominates the characters: the distant framing of the characters entering the house [14:50] or taking their seats [15:08] in the background of shots taken from an adjacent room establishes the house both as a domineering presence and as a space where the unseen bears on the visible. The film here nods to Kubrick’s distant framings on his characters (especially Jack Torrance/Jack Nicholson) walking through the hallways or sitting in the lobby of the hotel in *The Shining*. But direct references to *The Shining* are compressed into one sequence of *Get Out*: Dean Armitage’s tour of the house with Chris [16:19-19:07]. Here Peele combines two scenes of *The Shining*: the tour of the mountain resort by Jack and his wife and Dany’s discovery of the twin sisters’ ghosts.

In *Get Out*, Chris is given a racially laden tour of the Armitage house by Rose’s father Dean. Narratively, the sequence serves to clarify the spatial coordinates of the building Chris will eventually have to escape. Thematically, it also builds up unease and the sense of a threatening space and articulates this sense of threat to racial competition. The story of the

⁷ Here, Kyle Brett convincingly argues that Chris’s photographic eye does not so much seek to celebrate its human subjects as it decenters and dehumanizes them – the dog owner and pregnant woman have their faces cut out-of-frame, the balloon holder competes for attention with his balloons’ shadow on the wall. Chris’s photographic pursuits, while a celebration of African American artistic talents, also reproduce the objectifying violence that Chris himself will be subjected to and comment negatively on the ability of an institutional form of art, sought after by gallery owners such as Jim Hudson (Steven Root) who buys Chris for his “eye”, to bring about emancipation. Grace instead comes from a much more democratic form of art in the shape of a smartphone camera flash that briefly frees the victims of the Armitage from their enslavement (Brett 2020).

Armitage grandfather Walter (Marcus Henderson) who never got over being robbed of the 1936 Olympics by Jesse Owens leaves an unsettled racial score in the family's history. This story is immediately followed by the mention of black mold in the basement [17:34], which has led the family to condemn access there (the basement actually houses Dean's operation room). Positioned after the grandfather story, the mention of black mold eating at the white family house's foundations becomes symbolic of a racial strife animating the Armitages. Narratively, the sequence also combines many of the clichés of white liberalism that highlight its complicity with white supremacy. The collection of native artefacts from countries in the global South highlights unequal international power relations Western tourists reproduce [16:22]. This is followed by Dean's comment that "it's such a privilege to be able to experience another person's culture" [16:56] which applies to natives in the global South, but also seems directed at Chris, associating the African American man with what Dean conceives as primitive natives from underdeveloped countries. The laudatory reference to Obama then comes as a cliché of whites showcasing anti-racism in conversation with people of color [18:55]. But above all, the unequal economic power dynamics of white masters and Black servants is reproduced in the Armitage household, with Dean casting himself as the white savior ("I couldn't bear to let them go" [18:43]) and worrying about appearances ("But, boy, I hate the way it looks" [18:46]) rather than oppression itself.⁸

Accompanying the establishment of a racial strife and the characterization of the Armitages as participants in white supremacy, a sense of unease and possible threat is created by the camera movements. For instance, when the camera lingers on the hypnosis room after the characters have passed it [16:26], the narration dissociates itself from character subjectivity to comment upon the scene and point viewers' attention to an element that will be essential to Chris's entrapment. In a manner similar to the opening shot of the film on an empty suburban sidewalk, the autonomous gaze of the camera also suggests something is lurking in these spaces that viewers cannot quite yet see. Such camerawork is reminiscent of the stalking or lurking camera in *The Shining*, alternately embracing and dissociating from the victim's perspective (Barker 2009, 80).⁹

⁸ "By offering a multicultural résumé—"I voted for Obama," or "some of my best friends are black"—white people attempt individually to excuse themselves from the functioning of a racist society. Such microinvalidations allow white liberals to feel comparatively superior and, crucially, to do nothing, as they are not figured as part of the problem. This means that a more insidious systemic racism is allowed to proceed unchecked" (Ilott 2020, 115).

⁹ Barker argues that this type of stalking camera places viewers in the position of the stalker even as they elicit dread that the character will be assaulted, investing viewers' bodies in the film's "gesture". Such camerawork

The height of unease is reached with the introduction of the Black servants, Georgina (Betty Gabriel) in the kitchen and Walter (Marcus Henderson) in the garden. Appearing in the frame as the characters turn a corner to the kitchen [17:38], Georgina is aligned with the dead twin sisters in *The Shining*, revealed as Dany turns a corner on his tricycle. Her body language is meant to confirm the reference: she is standing erect and motionless like the *Shining* twins, as an apparition, giving her introduction something of the uncanny. The soundtrack, an extradiegetic score softly accentuating the unease, starts right as Georgina comes into view, emphasizing the importance of the moment in building up Chris's and the viewer's conscience of a threat. But if *Get Out* takes its cue from *The Shining*, it also rewrites the reference to focus on race. Chris's unease is not so much produced by Georgina's sudden appearance in the frame as by her artificially polished response to his greeting, with a close-up on Chris's puzzled face following her formal welcome ("Hello" [17:46]). The sense of uncanny comes from the erasure of blackness in Georgina's behavior, who appears but a ghost of herself. Not only does she serve the Armitages, but her subjection to white economy has killed blackness in her and replaced it by a white consciousness (again, literally, as viewers later discover).¹⁰ Here, the movie confirms the destructive effects of white spaces on black subjectivity introduced in the prologue, and comments on the ways in which economic subordination also contributes to this destruction.

Similar uncanny moments of failed racial recognition are played out later when Chris, this time alone, tries to establish a racial bond with Walter the gardener [38:42-40:31] and Logan King (Lakeith Stanfield), the sole Black guest at the Armitage social event [44:51-46:07]. On both occasions, Chris explicitly mobilizes blackness to form a connection and is met with a whitewashed response, and both characters not only refuse this black social territory, but seem uncomprehending of, if not hostile to, his attempts at bonding, and completely alien to code switching. Here again, the horror does not come from otherness but from what hegemonic power and dominant ideology do to people who are othered and see their bodies turned into a human resource (both bodies actually sustain a white mind).

The Shining is thus mobilized in the tour of the Armitage property as a way to situate the film within a history of the horror genre, and rewritten in a way that refocuses the genre on race:

was also adopted in *Halloween*, whose introductory sequence famously adopts, and abandons, the killer's perspective.

¹⁰ "The other black people in the Armitage household do not talk, dress, or act like Chris and cannot understand him: Walter, Georgina, and Logan are racially uncanny. While Logan is literally familiar (Chris knew Logan as Andre), all three characters are repressed—enslaved and marginalized within their own bodies by a white consciousness" (Casey-Williams 2020, 66).

ghostly presences do not simply evoke past acts of violence, as they do in *The Shining*, but manifest a kind of violence that is specifically racist, exploiting othered bodies while erasing others' humanity. Horror thus comes from witnessing Black subjectivity being crushed to spectral remains in white social spaces.

In rewriting horror classics to refocus on race, *Get Out* plays out the empowerment of Black masculinity not simply at the narrative level through the character arc of Chris, but also at the aesthetic and cultural levels through the re-appropriation of the horror film and its history for African American perspectives. In doing so, the film pays tribute to the history of the horror genre while also reimagining its racial politics in liberating ways.

Conclusion

The power of *Get Out*'s racial politics thus comes especially from its articulation of race and space (both social and cultural). The film establishes that Black people in the United States matter only as bodies to be commodified, consumed, and exploited, and that such erasure of subjectivity and physical vulnerability essentially stem from their marginal and subordinate positions within white social spaces. In doing so, *Get Out* expresses in cinematic terms what movements like Black Lives Matter have consistently protested: the systemic forces that dehumanize and endanger Black people in present-day US-American society. *Get Out* provides an empowering and escapist perspective on this horrifying reality, with its main protagonist successfully surviving the ordeal, his subjectivity and agency reclaimed. Empowerment is also channeled through the appropriation and racialization of US-American cultural history, and the horror film genre in particular.

But *Get Out* maintains even in its final, triumphant moments the awareness that a much darker conclusion would have been more plausible if this hadn't been a fiction film. As the police car arrives on the scene of Chris's escape, a mortally wounded Rose is relieved while Chris appears defeated, surrendering to a hopeless turn of events [97:58-98:18]. Both characters as well as the audience know that Black men have been killed by police for far less than standing above a wounded white woman. Here, the film invokes the memory of another classic horror film, yet a rare one that adopted a critical perspective on race. In George Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead*, Ben (Duane Johnson), a Black man secluded in a house with white people, survives a zombie attack only to be killed at the last minute by the police, who mistake him for a threat. In *Get Out*, it turns out the car is not police, but airport

security, and its driver is Chris's friend and TSA officer Rod (LilRel Howery).¹¹ But the comment has been made that the arrival of the cavalry is not a good news when one is the racially othered, or that the racialized law enforcement of state authorities in a white social space is a systemic threat to Black lives.

Works Cited

- Adams, Sam. 2017. In Jordan Peele's Horror Movie, *Get Out*, the 'Monster' Is Liberal Racism. *slate.com*. January 27. <https://slate.com/culture/2017/01/at-sundance-jordan-peelee-explains-how-obama-s-election-inspired-his-horror-movie-get-out.html>. Accessed 23 June 2023.
- Barker, Jennifer. 2009. *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Boger, Jillian. 2018. Manipulations of Stereotypes and Horror Clichés to Criticize Post-Racial White Liberalism in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*. *The Graduate Review*, 3: 149-158.
- Brett, Kyle. 2020. The Horror of the Photographic Eye. In *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*, ed. Dawn Keetley, 187-199. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Casey-Williams, Erin. 2020. *Get Out* and the Zombie Film. In *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*, ed. Dawn Keetley, 63-71. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Citizen, Robyn. 2020. The Body Horror of White Second Chances in John Frankenheimer's *Seconds* and Jordan Peele's *Get Out*. In *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*, ed. Dawn Keetley, 87-100. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Ilott, Sarah. 2020. Racism That Grins: African American Gothic Realism and Systemic Critique. In *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*, ed. Dawn Keetley, 114-130. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Keetley, Dawn (ed). 2020. *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Keetley, Dawn. 2020. *Get Out: Political Horror*. In *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*, ed. Dawn Keetley, 1-22. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

¹¹ An alternate ending available in the DVD bonus material showed the police arriving on the scene instead of Rod, and Chris talking to Rod in jail. But test screenings and Trump's election decided Peele to adopt a more cathartic tone (Heben and Clayton 2017).

- Lowenstein, Adam. 2020. Jordan Peele and Ira Levin Go to the Movies: The Black/Jewish Genealogy of Modern Horror's Minority Vocabulary. In *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*, ed. Dawn Keetley, 101-113. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Massey, Douglas S. and Jonathan Tannen. 2018. Suburbanization and Segregation in the United States: 1970-2010. *Ethnic and racial studies* vol. 41.9: 1594-1611.
- Means Coleman, Robin R. and Novotny Lawrence. 2020. A Peaceful Place Denied: Horror Film's 'Whitopias'. In *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*, ed. Dawn Keetley, 47-62. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Moore, Omar P. L.. 2017. Do the White Thing. *Popcorn Reel*, March 7. <http://www.popcornreel.com/html/getoutessay.html>. Accessed 23 June 2023.
- Murphy, Bernice M.. 2020. Place, Space, and the Reconfiguration of 'White Trash' Montrosity. In *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*, ed. Dawn Keetley, 72-86. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Nigatu, Heben and Tracy Clayton. 2017. Incognegro. *Another Round* 83, March 1. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/episode-83-incognegro-with-jordan-peelee/id977676980?i=1000382040164>. Accessed June 23 2023.
- Platts, Todd K. and David L. Brunsmma. 2020. Reviewing *Get Out*'s Reviews: What Critics Said And How Their Race Mattered. In *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*, ed. Dawn Keetley, 131-146. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Ryan-Bryant, Jennifer. 2020. The Cinematic Rhetorics of Lynching in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*. *Journal of Popular Culture* 53.1: 92-110.
- Stoddard, Christine. 2017. 'Get Out' Movie Controversy? Film Called 'Anti-White' and 'Racist' by Some Viewers. *Mic.com*, February 24. <https://www.mic.com/articles/169514/get-out-movie-controversy-film-called-anti-white-and-racist-by-some-viewers>. Accessed 23 June 2023.
- Sublette, Cammie M.. 2020. Post-Racial Lies and Fear of the Historical-Political Boomerang in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. In *The Politics of Horror*, ed. Damien K. Picariello, 233-246. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wisecrack, 2018. *Get Out* (Directed by Jordan Peele) – Exploring the Sunken Place. *Show Me the Meaning! – A Wisecrack Movie Podcast*, 9 February. <https://www.wisecrack.co/show-me-the-meaning-movie-podcast/episode/cc007609/get-out-directed-by-jordan-peelee-exploring-the-sunken-place>. Accessed 23 June 2023.

Wood, Robin. 2003. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan...and Beyond*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Zinoman, Jason. 2017. Jordan Peele on a Truly Terrifying Monster: Racism. *New York Times*, 16 February. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/movies/jordan-peeel-interview-get-out.html>. Accessed 23 June 2023.