OUR SUNKEN PLACE: “POST-RACIAL” AMERICA IN JORDAN PEELE’S GET OUT

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Contents:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract .................................................................. iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction:</strong> “A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste” ......................................................... 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter One:</strong> “Black is in Fashion:” Reading the Racial Gothic ........................................... 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Two:</strong> “The Only Loss We Had:” The Inversion of the Death Contract of Blackness and the Final Girl ........................................................................................................ 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Three:</strong> “Do they know I’m Black?” Post-Obama Liberalism in ‘Colorblind’ America ................................................................................................................................. 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion:</strong> “Stay Woke” ............................................................................................................. 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Works Cited:</strong> ................................................................................................................................. 69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract:

“Our Sunken Place: ‘Post-Racial’ America In Jordan Peele’s Get Out” takes a critical look at the contemporary United States using Jordan Peele’s metaphor of the sunken place. As a society, we are passengers to the ongoing forms of racism that dominate the popular culture and political framework. This project is divided into three chapters in which I provide a critical lens to examine Jordan Peele’s Get Out and address the sunken place within which the United States is ensnared. The first chapter focuses on what I call the "racial gothic." I argue that Peele’s work provides a modern representation of the southern gothic genre but Peele manipulates this genre in order to show how the scars of slavery and the southern gothic can speak to contemporary representations of socio-political ideologies in America. The second chapter looks at the "death contract of blackness," which speaks to the representation of black characters within the horror genre and how Peele inverts the tradition of the white final girl from the slasher subgenre of horror film. Get Out both speaks to the tradition of Blaxploitation films and against normative forms of whiteness that have been reinforced by the horror genre. Lastly, my final chapter speaks to the Get Out’s engagement with post-Obama colorblind attitudes and the film's relationship with the "Black Lives Matter" movement. I argue that Get Out’s achievement can be brought into focus by using Charles Mills’ notions of white liberalism and how much of the film's horrors lies in the reality that black men in contemporary America face everyday, despite how much society attempts to convey that we live in a "post-racial" America.
Introduction: “A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste”

As a category that has been cast aside because of its knife-wielding villains, the horror genre has been stigmatized for its focus on violence and anxiety since its emergence. Quite often both critics and audiences alike dismiss this genre for its patterns of tropes and representations of the gruesome, vehement, or unnerving ways in which humans bring out the worst in one another. These movies are believed to embody forms of societal anxiety and reaffirm cultural values that suggest certain forms of normativity are essential to survival. Films act as the medium through which anxieties and desires can be exhibited for audiences without the consequences of performing such acts of violence in reality. Occasionally films such as Joss Whedon’s *The Cabin in the Woods* or Wes Craven’s *Scream* will emerge to acknowledge explicitly the familiar tropes that have come to define the genre. These films, however, are self-referential as for the purpose of humor rather than utilizing their awareness to perform work on the common culture. Both of these movies play a role within the horror genre; however, neither of the meta-films utilizes their awareness to redefine cinematic possibilities or engage with larger ideological structures that influence viewers beyond their film going experience. American comedian and writer Jordan Peele, however, recognized the discrepancies within the genre as problematic and used his creative vision in order to create a horror film that denied the typical pleasures viewers derive from of the genre’s conventions.

*Get Out* was Jordan Peele’s directorial debut. Created with a meager $4.5 million dollars, the film was released on February 24, 2017 during what is referred to as the “dead zone” or the “dump months,” the time of year where there are the lowest critical
and commercial expectations for a film. This time period is typically relegated as time for outcast films as it is in the midst of the Golden Globe and Oscar seasons, leader newer releases to be overshadowed by critically acclaimed films that are garnering accolades. As a social horror film that focused on the experience of post-racial blackness within a genre that primarily sympathized with white viewers, *Get Out* was released in a time in which all of the variables were working against it. The film, however, persisted against all of the forces that attempted to ensure that it would slip into irrelevance.

*Get Out* resonated with filmgoers because of its acknowledgement of genre conventions and its relevance regarding the racial issues that still infiltrate the modern United States. *Get Out* was successful because it examined the fear within the quotidian for black individuals and it forced white viewers to realize the privileges that they had profited from for generations. Jordan Peele located the film within both subtle and obvious instances of racism that has existed in the “post-racial” United States, a term that I use with much hesitancy, as racist attitudes still shape both cultural and legal measures within the United States for people of color. Peele relies on contemporary colorblind attitudes in order to show that real horror of the United States is in its white dominant culture.

Rather than some nightmarish creature that haunts the screen, *Get Out* addresses the real fears and social trauma associated with the commodification of black bodies as a means of ensuring white ethnocentric dominance. The film is about black photographer Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya) and his white girlfriend Rose Armitage (Allison Williams), a couple that is returning to her childhood home for a seemingly normal weekend to meet her parents. In reality, this invitation to the Armitage home is
part of an elaborate plan for Rose and her family to strip Chris of his bodily autonomy. The Armitage family works for a secret society known as the Coagula, a white society that auctions racialized bodies as vessels to have the experience of blackness. Members of the Coagula believe African-Americans have an unfair advantage in life thanks to their physicality and abilities. The Armitage family is at the center of the society as they perform a process that relies on hypnosis, psychological conditioning through emotional torture, and neurosurgery in order to overcome unconsenting black bodies. Jim Hudson (Stephen Root), the blind art dealer who purchases Chris' body for the purpose of his eyes and artistic talent, states that “some people wanna change, some people want to be stronger, faster, cooler.” His comment exemplifies the ideological structure of this group: black individuals exist to be capitalized and commanded by white populations with enough economic power. With the assistance of his black friend TSA Agent Rod Williams (LilRel Howery), Chris works to escape this system and forces that echo the history of the American slave trade while simultaneously facing and coming to terms with the trauma of his childhood. He discovers that the idealized white-liberal Armitage family views him as one of their many consumer exchanges. Chris flees the household by overcoming elements of childhood trauma and combatting the forces that attempted to strip him of his sovereignty.

My thesis, “Our Sunken Place: ‘Post-Racial’ America in Jordan Peele’s Get Out,” examines Get Out using three frameworks that together will unfold the multiplicity of readings that can be performed on Jordan Peele’s film. I contend that Peele’s metaphor of the sunken place is an apt metaphor to locate the current socio-political ideological structures that dominate the narratives of race and gender that are applied to the United
States’ black population. The dominant discourse of our culture claims that the trajectory of racism has come to an end as a consequence of major civil rights movements and the eventual election of a nonwhite president. This move towards a “post-racial” America has created a framework where the marginalization of black bodies has been normalized and the violence that has been projected against them has been ignored or capitalized by white figures of the patriarchy. This thesis aims to examine how Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* asserts the persistence of the physical and ideological scars of slavery as continuing in the modern United States. By insisting that the United States has moved beyond racism, society has lodged itself within a sunken place of its own where it is forcing nonwhite bodies to be passengers to racists practices and legislation that ensure forms of white privilege remain commonplace. In order to escape the sunken place of “post-racial” America, the nation must recognize that racism is not a feature of the past but a feature that continues to be a part of the nation’s infrastructure. By acknowledging the trauma that others have caused in the past and combatting the racism that continues to influence the United States, our society can begin to mend the damage that it has inflicted upon nonwhite bodies.

The first chapter of my thesis, “‘Black is in Fashion:’ Reading the Racial Gothic” looks at *Get Out* as a contemporary representation of the southern gothic tradition in a genre that I call the “racial gothic”. The southern gothic genre focuses on the societal decay of the geography located below the Mason-Dixon line relying on the narratives of slavery and the supernatural following the era of Reconstruction. The racial gothic is a continuance of those themes but one that takes place in a context that acknowledges them within the present day and does not have to be geographically bound to the South.
The racial gothic relies on the iconography of the earlier genre in order to represent how the narratives of slavery and the Reconstruction-era continues to influence into the ideological construction of the modern United States. These narratives of African Americans are founded in a rhetoric of ownership which has legally been disbanded through emancipation but continues to circulate in narratives that attempt to dehumanize black individuals and transform them into property that can be purchased.

This new genre of the racial gothic is supported by Peele’s connections to the traditions of the South that are rewritten in a Northern state in order to emphasize that the operation of slavery is still present in even the most liberal spaces. I examine the home of Dean (Bradley Whitford) and Missy (Catherine Keener) Armitage as a central representation of this history. The Armitage home fosters an environment where racial superiority and ownership is practiced both by the family that inhabits the space and those who visit it. Artifacts such as the silver spoon and china set reaffirm that the house is a location of white privilege that allows the archetypal characters of the planation to continue to exist. Scenes such as the bingo auction or Missy’s use of hypnosis suggest that Peele was consciously reaffirming how the trauma of the past continues to exist in the form of the assertion that black bodies are expendable objects rather than human beings with individual identities.

In this section, I also examine Jordan Peele’s use of deer symbolism in the context of the “black buck” stereotype. *Get Out*’s repetition of the images is a direct correlation to a racial-slur that defined black men in the context of the Reconstruction-era United States. This slur is premised on the basis that black men what did not conform to the demands of white authority were seen as violent creatures that were less
than human. I argue that the white characters in the film continue these narratives against Chris Washington in the form of stereotypes that are prevalent in American culture. Blackness becomes a factor that warrants ostracism for those who inhabit the race and a factor that can commoditized by those who want to bring certain elements of it “in fashion” as a white character states. By recognizing these stereotypes of what it means to be black and placing them against a racial icon that has attempted to negatively define black men, Jordan Peele is reclaiming ownership and bringing awareness of the narratives that have plagued generations of African Americans in the United States.

The second chapter of my thesis, “ ‘The Only Loss We Had:’ The Inversion of the Death Contract of Blackness and the Final Girl,” examines the ways in which Get Out circumnavigates the gendered and racialized boundaries that have been normalized within the horror genre. I contend that black characters within the genre are forced to enact what I call the “death contract,” which is the narrative function where characters of color are repetitively subjected to death as a product of their race. Roles for black characters are often presented in a one-dimensional fashion: they are often the only character of color and their role is to offer the occasional moment of comedic relief before they perish. If they are a hero and one of the moral compasses of the film, they too must face death in order to fulfill a duty of black sacrifice. Thus, my reading of Get Out will look to the ways in which blackness in horror films is associated with death and how Peele reattributes agency to those the characters of color in the film. I discuss the use of the death contract in the genre over the course of several films, including George Romero’s Night of the Living Dead and William Crain’s Blackula, and argue that Jordan
Peele is relying upon earlier cinematic traditions in *Get Out* in order to consider a new racial possibilities for the genre for characters of color in the horror genre.

Horror primarily caters to its white viewership and therefore the basis of most representations in the genre is to reaffirm white forms of normativity and belonging. This is done through the representation of the “final girl,” a virginal character that audiences can both transpose their desire upon and sympathize with because of her innocence. Rose Armitage, the film’s romantic interest, encompasses the privileges that come with being a white female character in the horror genre and Peele uses these expectations in order to subvert the conventions that have celebrated whiteness. Jordan Peele overwrites the final girl’s typical role of innocence by presenting Rose’s sexuality as a white woman as irresistible and using the characteristics that have traditionally protected the final girl as a means to enact racial violence.

This chapter concludes by returning to Romero’s film and contends that Ben’s death in the film was a product of its historical context. As a film that emerged shortly after the civil rights movement, *Night of the Living Dead* could not have provided an ending where characters of color lived because white audiences defined what was cinematically possible. Despite withstanding the hubris of his peers, the character of Ben in *Night of the Living Dead* had to die because of a white figure of authority and perish as a product of the death contract. Chris, however, provides the possibility of black representation in the horror genre as the house burns behind him at the conclusion of *Get Out*.

My final chapter, “‘Do they know I’m Black?’ Post-Obama Liberalism in ‘Colorblind’ America” addresses *Get Out* as a horror film that speaks to the post-racial
climate of the United States following President Barack Obama’s election in 2008. What marks *Get Out* as an essential post-Obama film is its recognition of the current racial tensions and fears that have emerged in a supposedly “colorblind” United States. Peele maintains the integrity of the genre through his jump scares and unnerving cinematography, but more importantly Peele looks towards the Black Lives Matter movement and represents the ways in which people of color continue to be denied personhood. I examine the weight behind the question that titles the final chapter by describing the ways that black bodies have been disenfranchised in order to reaffirm white dominance. This dominance is especially prevalent in the film’s representation of police as figures of fear for men of color rather than protection. *Get Out*’s repetition of law enforcement and the fear that it elicits allows viewers to begin to comprehend the fears experienced by nonwhite bodies in modern America.

The types of white liberalism that dominated the political sphere following Obama’s election counteract this representation of the police. Dean and Rose Armitage are representative of the values that Charles Mills describes in his essay on white liberalism. Dean is an educated neurosurgeon who repeats his desire to vote for Obama and his large home is located within a democratic state. Rose uses her social privileges because of her status as a white woman in order to counteract some of the racist acts and commentary to which Chris is subjected. I draw on Mills’ writing to suggest that while the characters are aware of their own racial status, they use the ideological construction of post-racial attitudes in order to reaffirm their white personhood.

Lastly, this chapter analyzes the ending of *Get Out* and the alternative courses that it could have followed. I examine the alternative ending of the film that places Chris
within the prison pipeline and how it relates to the film’s post-racial context. The alternative ending functions as an extension of reality; its location in prison brings the fictional narrative to the realities that the Black Lives Matter movement fights against. I consider the final production of Get Out as representative of how black individuals have had to unjustly compensate against the white forces that have systematically attempted to dominate them. The final ending of the film suggests a world where the lies of a colorblind society have been eradicated and there is the recognition that race will impact one’s life course in the most horrific ways. By the end of Get Out, Jordan Peele has forced white filmgoers to recognize the ways in which the United States has catered to their race and encourages viewers to come to terms with their privileges and prejudices against nonwhite bodies.

Jordan Peele has crafted a political statement that addresses the most volatile social issues of our time with Get Out in a genre that has been generally regarded as one of the lowliest forms of cinema. Though the film does present elements of the horror genre, a large component of Get Out’s horror is fixated on the everyday forms of racism and violence against people of color performed by white populations. My reading of Get Out is not meant to suggest that all other works within the horror genre are inadequate or that they do not play their own specific role within the history of film. My thesis aims to allow others to recognize that Get Out is a relevant film that critically engages with the issues that most media chose to negate in favor of white-centric narratives. But mostly importantly, my analysis looks to locate the film as a liaison that allows those with white privilege to recognize the horrors of the modern experience of blackness and the ways in which they contribute to or are complacent about these narratives of
violence and oppression. This thesis aims to ensure that Get Out is not only recognized as one of the most important films to be released within the last decade, and a landmark work within the horror genre and film as a whole.
Chapter One:
“Black is in Fashion:” Reading the Racial Gothic

In February 2017, comedian Jordan Peele released his first major film, Get Out, to the surprise of critics and audiences alike. Known primarily for his sketch show Key and Peele with his comedic partner Keegan-Michael Key, Peele’s domain was laughter and commentary upon popular culture. This is not to suggest that his work was not critical, after all, many of his sketches focused on racial stereotypes and ethnic relations in a way that foregrounded these issues through a comedic lens. Key and Peele is a cornerstone of Peele’s engagement with race but this series led many to believe that his first horror film would be one filled with quick jokes and jabs at the racialized culture that it emerged in. While Peele’s comedic tone is presented through best friend character Rod Williams, Get Out takes the groundwork established by his earlier commentary to foster contemporary discussion of how the racial trauma of the past consistently speaks to present-day engagements with race. While Key and Peele has touched upon slavery in a sketch where neither Peele nor Key are purchased at a slave auction, Get Out uses narratives and traditions associated with the history of the south in order to emphasize how the role of slavery is still present in contemporary formations of American identity.

Beyond the comedic elements that directly address issues of stereotypes of black individuals, Peele relies on racialized iconography in order to capture how the United States still bears the scars of slavery’s past. In particular, the use of the Coagula in Get Out to consume nonwhite bodies speaks to the ways in which the trauma of the past is still very much alive in the modern shaping of identity and race. The utility of this body-consuming element allows viewers of the film to begin to comprehend the
psychological trauma of slavery that has all too often been dismissed as a relic of the past while simultaneously commercializing the brutality of black bodies in slave-narrative films. *Get Out*’s location in present day New York both addresses the erasure of slavery and its relation to black identities while simultaneously addressing the ways in which white individuals have commoditized the trauma of black bodies for individual profit.

This link between black identity and slavery is presented through the manipulation of the southern gothic genre, a literary tradition that is typically understood as part of the traditions of the early nineteenth century and through the works of renowned writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner, and Flannery O’Connor. Southern Gothic texts focus on the bucolic imagery of the south as a site of the grotesque and of horror through the region’s engagement with social issues. The roots of the genre were quite innovative as they addressed the echoes of slavery through racism, influences of the patriarchy upon female bodies, and the “ghosts” of the past that continue to haunt and shape the landscape of the historic moment in which a text was released. While the southern gothic is primarily utilized in literary texts to craft narratives that provide horror while still commenting upon social issues of the past, Jordan Peele adapts this genre to the medium of film and utilizes it as a lens to examine the scars of slavery. He creates what I call the “racial gothic,” a modern engagement that employs the traditions of the southern gothic in order to provide commentary upon the present day issues of racism that are fostered by the rhetorics of ownership that emerged as a product of the United States’ involvement with the slave trade.
This chapter will look at how Peele reinvents elements of southern gothic in order to represent the trauma of slavery and how it continues to impact the lives of black Americans. This impact will be examined through the representation of the black buck figure, the Armitage home as an extension of southern landscape, the sunken place, and iconography that links the social thriller to the traditions of slavery despite its temporal location. Unlike other celebrated films, Get Out uses the brutalization of black bodies as a means to address contemporary social issues rather than using violence as a tool for white cinematic consumption. Part of the film’s importance lies in its orientation towards the past; though many critics tend to read Get Out primarily in a contemporary context, as I do in chapter three, this section of my thesis aims to emphasize past history in order to configure our understanding of the present.

One of the foundations of Southern Gothicism is the emphasis on the home as a source of horror and mystery. Nestled amid acres of woodland, the Armitage household is reminiscent of the architecture of the southern tradition. With its luxurious wrap-around driveway, large white columns, large porch, and traditional brick exterior, the household is unlike Chris’ photography that captures the urban landscape of New York City. The trees that hang over the driveway speak to the weeping willows that one might imagine in a plantation-style home. The design and the greenery of the home embody an architectural presentation of status and power. While brick homes are very common in the South, the exterior emphasizes the wealth of the Armitage family in upstate New York. The presence of Walter the groundskeeper and Georgina the housekeeper further emphasize this southern iconography by recalling the tradition of using individuals of color to service the estates of the white upper-class of the South following
emancipation. These stylistic choices in setting and characters allude to the southern tradition, however, *Get Out*’s circumnavigation of the overtly “red-state type” that Peele describes in interviews creates a horror that lies beneath white upper-class blue-state type.

Peele uses the familiarity of the tradition of the southern home by relocating it in the north. Part of his reasoning for doing this is because the home is the definitive representation of a person and their values. The home is the physical breeding ground of familial lineage and the social cultivator of values. Therefore, by placing a house rooted in southern iconography in northern liberal territory, Peele is suggesting that the separation between the North and the South’s relationship to slavery is not as distant as one might think. While it is easy to project the narratives of slavery solely on to the geographic locations below the Mason-Dixon line, the film’s use of the New York location suggests that the history of the past continues to haunt the present even in areas that might deny their relationship to that history.

While chapter three of the thesis addresses the decision to directly connect the traditions of enslavement to modern white liberalism, it is important to note how the home relates to the economics of slavery. Neither the Armitage home nor the plantation home of the south would have existed without the elimination of black autonomy and the systematic abuse that was normalized as a function of the inherent white superiority of society. Just as plantations would be passed from generation to generation, the Armitage home embodies the legacy of racial violence that has been cultivated over time. Each family member embodies a different figure of the tradition of the southern plantation. Dean Armitage is the patriarchal slave-owner that both commands the
financial decisions of the family and teaches his son Jeremy the traditions of the business as Dean had been taught before. Missy Armitage, the mother, embodies the figure of the slave-owner’s wife through her actions and use of the teacup. Lastly, Rose embodies the figure of the Southern belle, the slave-owner’s daughter whose whiteness and beauty becomes fatal for black characters because of their attraction to her. The grandparents, Georgina and Walter, are living ghosts that haunt the home through the possession of black bodies. Thus, the structure of the home and those who inhabit it speak to the standard formulation of a southern gothic work that is related to forms of slavery. This structure, however, is made horrific by the fact that the characters that embody these archetypes are supposed to be educated and wealthy liberals that claim to exist beyond race.

The emphasis upon the Armitage household being located in the north in *Get Out* is crucial because it reaffirms that the forms of racism produced by slavery are not relics of the past that can only be attributed to the southern United States. If Jordan Peele had located the film solely in Alabama where it was filmed, audiences might have been much more complacent in their response to the film and might have believe that they are separate from the ideologies represented in the film. With the cultural significance of the confederate flag serving as one of the central symbolic conflicts of the last decade, filmgoers could easily detach themselves from the sentiments of the Coagula if the film was set in the South. Audiences would likely believe that they were not proponents of the historical, cultural, and physical violence that has been enacted against black bodies. But by locating the *Get Out* in the north, which has been idealized throughout history as an opponent of slavery despite many of the northern states maintaining slave
laws until the 1800’s, audiences must come to terms with the sociological conditions of slavery that are still practiced in modern day America. Though slavery was abolished with the thirteenth amendment, many African Americans are forced to live in a culture where their heritage has been erased and their lives have been viewed as consumable. Much like the economic patterns of the slave trade, black bodies are represented as capital that is expendable to wealthy white populations that echo the familial structure of the Armitage’s. It is essential to understand that the procedures performed by the Coagula embody both the process of dehumanization of black subjects and the ultimate exercise of white dominance over them. These black characters are not understood by the Coagula as beings with their own individual desires and life courses. Rather, these subjects are resources that can be exploited in order to perform the labor or characteristics that white bodies long to enact. These characters understand blackness as an expendable attribute that they can consume in order to gain the “advantages” that they believe blackness contains.

While the home speaks to certain forms of power that echo the traditions of the south, one of the most iconic scenes in the film is the “bingo” game which clearly illustrates the role of slavery in what I am calling the modern racial gothic. The scene begins with Chris and Rose by a lake where Chris is claiming that Logan King, a character that was seen being kidnapped in the beginning of the film in a suburban neighborhood, is really Andre Hayworth and that the bodily episode that occurred was not a seizure. The scene then cuts to the “bingo” game that is a silent auction: both in the sense that it is eerily wordless and that it is an auction for Chris’ bodily autonomy.
The dinner party scene leading up the auction works both as a platform to show modern stereotypes about race and to also show the merit of purchasing Chris’ body. As an auctioneer once might have described the attributes of the slaves that they had captured, Rose leads Chris through the party and engages with the questions of the guests in order to see if Chris would be tailored to their needs. Questions in the film range from Chris' golfing ability from a former golf professional, a woman who views his appearance and asks about the quality of their sex life, and the status of blackness as being fashionable. Audiences also watch Logan King/Andre Hayworth show his body off to his peers in order to exemplify the quality of the work from the surgery that was performed.

One of the most understated details from this moment is the costuming decisions that were made for the characters in this scene. Chris is in a blue button up shirt and Rose is in a red and white striped sweater. Together, the two characters present a design that mimics the American flag in a setting that sets the practice of slavery and black bodily appropriation within the fabric of the United States. Wearing red and white, Rose is associated with the original thirteen colonies and with notions of purity and hardiness. In a post-revolution context, these colors directly connect her to the colonizers and people that had removed the rights of Africans for the advancement of the land. Chris, wearing blue, embodies the themes of perseverance and justice that are seen in the struggle against the white narratives. Lastly, the costuming of blind art dealer Jim Hudson speaks to his desire to achieve the external appearance of blackness. Garbed in a black suit with all black secondary pieces, his clothing further suggests his desire to be costumed in the appearance of blackness while maintaining
his white identity. Many of the background characters within the scene also wear similarly colored clothing and their emergence from black vehicles at the beginning of the scene further reaffirms their desire to be inside blackness.

Consequently, the transition to the auction scene is incredibly unnerving as it represents the climax of the racist stereotypes that Chris has been subjected to and it suggests that despite the generations that separate today’s African Americans temporally from their enslaved ancestors, the effects and attitudes of slavery are still thriving within the modern United States. As a photographer, Chris’ talent and passion is used against him as a printed image of him stands on a platform for the crowd to confer their value upon his abilities. The lack of language in the scene parallels the systematic silence against these issues of violence against black bodies. The bingo cards further show the frivolity of the scene to those who are engaged with it. The white members of the Coagula choose not to recognize the historical implication of turning an African American body into capital, rather, they view it as a necessary means of achieving the qualities that they believe should have been given to them but were not because of their race.

Missy Armitage’s role in the film is particularly haunting in this system of capital as she not only forces Chris to quit smoking, but also she removes his autonomy by hypnotizing him. While audiences might initially find Rose’s insistence on Chris quitting endearing in the sense that she wants him to be healthier and not waste his money on cigarettes, part of Peele’s narrative strategy is that Chris was poisoning the body that would be consumed by a white host for capital and therefore this was used as the access point for Missy to psychologically imprison him. Missy’s fear of bodily harm
being performed against her daughter is incredibly ironic when one considers the fact that the family’s motive is centered on the perpetuation of violence. Smoking becomes the guilt-induced avenue through which Missy Armitage can have Chris submit into hypnosis. It is an act that emphasizes the economic value that she places upon his body as well as her exertion of power through education and privilege.

Hypnosis in *Get Out* continues the traditions of the southern gothic by emphasizing the images of the past in order to present the modern social decay and horror of racism. While swinging pocket watches or swirling black and white devices that can lure an individual into their subconscious often represent hypnosis in popular culture, the film relies on the iconography of the silver spoon and the fine china teacup in order to subdue Chris. In an interview with SBS, a national television network in Australia, Jordan Peele addressed the silver spoon that Missy uses as another one of his nods to the scars of slavery in the United States. Peele says that Missy “is using a silver spoon in the scene, which is a symbol for privilege, but there’s also a connotation for me of clinking a teacup to calling a slave. I do know it was used to call slaves in that way in the same way as a bell” (SBS). This image confirms my reading of Missy as reaffirming the archetype of the slave-owner’s wife.

While her son Jeremy possesses a direct violence that is reflected in his engagement with Andre Hayworth and her daughter Rose uses her sexuality as her primary means of exerting dominance, Missy possesses a different type of racial violence because it is manifested through the psychological warfare that she uses against people of color. The silver spoon, as noted by Peele, is an allegory for forms of privilege and it also signifies narratives of white dominance that have been fed to
generations of white bodies. This image of Missy as the slave owner’s wife is further reaffirmed by Georgina and Walter serving the family through domestic and physical labors that would be found in a plantation-era home. Similar to her daughter’s use of her feminine sexuality, Missy uses her matriarchal status in order to reaffirm racial control over nonwhite bodies. While a master might strike the body of a slave physically, the striking of the teacup to enact hypnosis is equally violent because it enacts psychological wounds that cannot be healed.

These wounds are located within “the sunken place,” a landscape within one’s consciousness that is inescapable, which reinforces my argument that the remnants of slavery continue to dominate contemporary forms of being. In March 2017 on Twitter, Jordan Peele stated “[t]he Sunken Place means we’re marginalized. No matter how hard we scream, the system silences us.” The sunken place both captures the mysticism of the gothic while simultaneously alluding to the aftermath of emancipation. While legally black individuals were considered free beings, their freedom was limited to the boundaries of law as equality was not and has not entirely been reached in modern America. While I review these conditions in chapter three, the sunken place is important in the context of the racial gothic as slavery has been translated to systematic forms of oppression such as the prison pipeline or the lack of funding for education in black neighborhoods so that they remain economically immobile and beneath white individuals in power.

The sunken place in Get Out is a crevice of the mind in which Chris is a passenger in his own body and he must endure the violence that is being forced upon him by white individuals in power. This location symbolizes the marginalization of African Americans
in the ways narratives of the United States have profited from black bodies being subjected to the trauma enacted by white individuals in power. These narratives are often intertwined within white claims to knowledge or the assertion that the regulations and rules that they are subjecting black bodies to are done for “their own good” while possessing sinister undertones. One thinks in this context of Rudyard Kipling’s poem, “The White Man’s Burden,” which suggests that it is the duty of white bodies to control nonwhite subjects through colonial rule, a rule that is inescapably entangled in patterns of violence and the dehumanization of minority cultures.

This rhetoric is the guiding principle of Missy’s hypnosis; her claims to heal Chris are located in patterns of violence and enslavement. Her claim to bodies such as those belonging to Chris or Georgina or Walter speaks to a legacy in which blackness has become equated with systematic abuse and negligence by the common culture. Enslavement in Get Out is not just about turning black bodies into capital; it is also about completely consuming the autonomy of black bodies. While Missy suggests that this process is about “heightened suggestibility,” it shows the ways in which people of color are both conditioned by these narratives of dehumanization by society and taught that these forms of marginalization are a natural part of black existence. Black individuals are forced to be passengers to policies about themselves, their bodies, and their livelihood by people who want to commodify their culture without recognizing them as autonomous individuals. The white individuals of Coagula do not view their narratives and systems of power as oppressive but as necessary to maintain their position at the top of the societal hierarchy, just as proponents of slavery did centuries ago.
This organization of power through racial positioning is reaffirmed through the narratives that are crafted by white bodies in order to reaffirm their status. One of the most historically resonant symbols of *Get Out* is the reoccurring image of the deer, which is represented as both a doe and a buck. The importance of deer within the film will be examined throughout the thesis; however, this chapter looks at the icon as reflecting upon the racist term “black buck.” According to Ana Kocić, this phrase refers to “those of African origin [that] were marked as brutal savages” and the “alleged violent, beastly, and subhuman presence of African Americans threaten[ed] the ‘ideal’ white community, most commonly embodied in a body of a beautiful, fragile white woman” (88). This racist stereotype was most common in minstrel performances; however, this perspective is inverted by Peele in *Get Out* by using it as a way to defy the stereotypes about blackness that are portrayed by white bodies and how one can mobilize this identity category against “the ‘ideal’ white communities” that are represented as the slaveholders within the film.

The audience first sees the deer in the scene where Chris and Rose are driving to upstate New York to visit her parents. The deer initially emerges as a jump scare in order to scare audiences when Rose accidentally hits the animal with her car. This is a two-fold moment in the context of the film. Firstly, this is the recognition of whiteness as a vehicle associated with violence and death. As Rose is the one who injures the deer with her driving, it speaks to the way in which innocent black lives have been lost at the hands of white individuals. The innocent deer that was killed by Rose without compassion and remorse represents the “black bucks” of society. Rose, after all, is more concerned about ensuring that her financial and bodily exchange of Chris can be
completed undetected than she is about the animal that she has just killed. The deer, like men of color, are detachedly considered as objects in the way of completing financial success rather than as living beings. Secondly, the deer in this scene symbolizes Chris’ journey within the film and his development beyond the “black buck” stereotype is bookended by its appearance at the conclusion of the film. The deer in this scene also speaks to the loss of Chris’ mother. Like the deer, she was left at the side of the road to perish alone. This, too, speaks to the history of slavery in which the children of female slaves were quite often stranded without their mother because of the forces of white violence that refuse to take responsibility for their crimes.

This detachment from violence is further echoed by the exchange that occurs shortly after Chris and Rose arrive at her childhood home. Chris and Rose discuss the car accident with Rose’s father, Dean, when they enter the Armitage household. In a very calm manner, Dean states: “I say one down, a couple hundred thousand to go. I don’t mean to get on my high horse but I do not like the deer. I’m sick of it; they are taking over, they’re like rats destroying the ecosystem. When I see a dead deer on the side of the road, I think to myself: that’s a start.” While one can view this quite literally in the sense of overpopulation of deer in rural areas, this statement is also consistent with the deer acting as a symbol for Chris’ character. African Americans are viewed as having a biological edge that white society does not in Get Out and therefore they must be either controlled or eliminated. In the case of the deer, they are physically eliminated by Rose with her vehicle and by Dean himself, as represented by the mounted head in the basement of the house. Black characters as deer, then, are either slaughtered or subjected to the elimination of their autonomy. The film’s repetition of deer being
correlated to black individuals suggests that if one cannot control black figures, then they must perish (as represented by the conclusion of the film). In a post-emancipation context, black individuals were seen as infesting the ecosystem of Ana Kocić’s “ideal white communities” and were eradicated through forces such as the Ku Klux Klan. Racist and ethnocentric values guided white individuals during this time in order to reaffirm their status over the individuals that they once defined as property. By comparing deer to rats, Dean is suggesting that they are pests that need to be eradicated in a similar way to how following emancipation individuals reacted angrily to freed slaves that tried to redefine themselves outside the boundaries of whiteness.

Thus, the perpetuation of the “black buck” stereotype emerged as a product in a post-reconstruction period as a way to describe those who did not conform to the powers of white authority that attempted to devalue them as individuals. Though white bodies had separated individuals from their families, eradicated languages and communities, and stripped slaves of their autonomy in a foreign land, the “black bucks” were the ones that were considered to be violent. The narrative use of the “black buck” typically ended with the execution of those who violated the standards of an abusive white patriarchy. By situating black men within a narrative of aggression that is only highlighted further against the context of the “beautiful, fragile white woman,” Peele reveals how this dynamic is still very much at work with Chris and Rose. Despite Chris’ artistic roots and kind demeanor that define his character, white characters still understand his race as a product of physical ability and aggression rather than his violent white girlfriend. Rose, who possesses the very beauty that post-reconstruction white individuals were attempting to protect with their racist ideologies, embodies the
excessively vicious attitudes and a form of oppositional racial sexuality that was projected against black males.

The escape scene at the conclusion of *Get Out* echoes the history of slave emancipation. The three devices that Chris uses in order to escape the operation that Dean and Rose’s brother, Jeremy, are about to perform upon him support this claim. Peele uses the iconography of cotton as the first device to overcome legacies of racial violence. Chris is strapped to an oversized leather chair in a manner that recalls the way that slaves were shackled when they were being transferred and sold. Chris uses the cotton from the leather chair that attempted to trap him in order to silence the television that attempted to hypnotize him. Chris’ actions connect the history of the trauma of slavery to the racist crimes being performed in modern times. Peele’s use of cotton allows the historic forces that defined the labor of generations of black individuals to become the very force that enables Chris to escape. Secondly, he uses a croquet ball as a device to knock Jeremy unconscious so that he can escape. This ball, like the bingo game, embodies the frivolous way in which white individuals live while performing these systems of violence against black bodies. The use of the croquet ball suggests that Chris is able to overcome the patriarchal and economic forces of whiteness that have attempted to confine him. The third device, the mounted buck, is incredibly powerful as it captures the essence of the stereotype that has been associated with his identity and warranted the death of other black men before him. While the image of the “black buck” was intended to be a derogatory slur and a way to affirm white power through the dehumanization of black individuals, Chris’ use of the buck inverts the stereotype by turning it into a tool of autonomy and freedom. While the buck mount is
considered a souvenir of hunting and conquering another body, the use of the antlers is a form of resistance that overrides the white patriarchal forms that attempted to ensnare Chris within the Coagula’s modern form of slavery.

Lastly, Chris’ escape at the end of the film follows the trajectory of a slave narrative. After being coerced into a system that reduced his humanity to capital, he overcame a manhunt in the woods like slave-hunters would perform in the south. Walter was sent into the woods like one might have sent a hound in order to find where Chris was attempting to escape. The mindset of the Coagula was clear; either one would submit to this system of bodily slavery and would be renamed by their master’s identity, or they would perish as property that could not be utilized. By overcoming the Armitage family using the devices that defined their status and power, Chris redefined the conditions of white dominance in a context that uses the elements of the southern tradition in order to formulate the racial gothic.

It is essential to understand Get Out in the context of slavery and its historical implications in order to examine the film through other ideological lenses. While the following two chapters of the thesis will address the film in contemporary contexts of filmmaking and post-Obama liberalism, the trauma that slavery left upon the nation is a crucial part of understanding why this film is so relevant at this social moment. By taking the images that once were used to oppress people of color and continue to shape African American identities today, Jordan Peele has reclaimed power from the colonizing voices that attempt to marginalize those who do not conform to the boundaries of whiteness. Get Out both speaks to the violent history of America’s past while simultaneously addressing a present that promises equality; reminding viewers
that there is still much more critical work to be done because the wounds of history have only just begun to heal.
Chapter Two: “The Only Loss We Had:” The Inversion of the Death Contract of Blackness and the Final Girl

On October 1, 1968, the genre of the horror film was rewritten by the emergence of George A Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*. While other haunting films such as Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* or Andre DeToth’s *House of Wax* had simultaneously captivated and scared audiences, *Night of the Living Dead* brought forth a dimension of representation that other horror films did not have: a black character that was not represented as a background service worker or a racist archetype reduced to cheap laughs for the audience. Ben, portrayed by literary scholar and actor Duane Jones, was the sensible hero and moral compass of the zombie film that has captivated audiences for decades. Unlike the other characters in the film, Ben remained composed as the ghouls directed their attack at the other humans in the house and was the sole survivor through the night. But Ben’s fate was tragically plagued by one factor: his race.

Despite surviving the hubris of his peers and the monstrous creatures that swarmed the farmhouse, Ben was forced to submit to the trajectory of death that has been normalized for black males within horror cinema. Sheriff McClelland, a member of the group that is taking the property back from the zombies as a new day dawns, instructs his group to “Shoot for the eyes boys...like I told you before...always aim right for the eyes.” At that moment Ben, who has survived the night despite the forces that have attempted to negate his survival strategy, emerges from the cellar only to be shot between his eyes. Ben’s death at the hands of law enforcement is a moment
speaks to the modern fears of the Black Lives Matter movement, but these concerns are addressed in the final chapter of the thesis. Instead, what I focus on in this chapter is the narratives that have normalized violence against black bodies as a standard element of the experience of watching horror films. I argue that this form of violence against black bodies has allowed white characters, specifically females, to emerge as a privileged and protected class in the horror genre. Jordan Peele’s Get Out, however, both speaks to the tradition of the horror film and inverts these predetermined archetypes through his nuanced and complex characters that rewrite the racial possibilities of the genre.

In a Variety interview, Jordan Peele stated that “Get Out takes on the task of exploring race in America, something that hasn’t really been done within the genre since Night of the Living Dead 47 years ago. It’s long overdue ” (Kroll). While Night of the Living Dead is regarded as a cult classic for its presentation of zombies and explicit gore in a mainstream film a month prior to the enforcement of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) film rating system, Peele’s Get Out has been praised for the way it unabashedly brings the conflict of race to the foreground of horror films in modern America (Egbert). Both films explicitly address the conditions of race in a society that adamantly claims that racism is not an issue. Though many people want to solely focus on its status as a zombie film, it is impossible to ignore Night of the Living Dead’s historical context of black characters because it emerged only six months following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1968. Get Out also emerged in a politically charged moment in the post-Obama era when a supposedly equal and colorblind society has witnessed law enforcement
disproportionately slaughter black bodies on a regular basis. While many film critics contend that horror films are the locus of societal anxiety and I agree with this observation, I want to argue that this social lens speaks to anxiety at the cost of non-white bodies and that Jordan Peele is inverting this structure by using a black male as the hero rather than a “necessary” martyr in the structure of *Get Out*.

The horror film genre as a whole is stabilized through the proliferation of white ideals of culture and this is most often seen within the subgenre of slasher films. Since the release of John Carpenter’s *Halloween* in 1978, the majority of horror films have represented the lifestyles of white suburban settings and established this as a standardized lens for audiences to relate to. Wealthy populations inhabit these suburban loci where white virginal females are faced with horrific outcomes that disrupt their otherwise picturesque lives. When watching slasher films, one rarely has to worry about whether the female protagonist will be subjected to death or not because she is the Final Girl. She is protected by her transition from innocence to experience and her ability to rise against the force that is targeting her. The Final Girl will always survive while those who are defined by sexual promiscuity, pride, and other forms of superficiality are always certain to die. These common attributes can be translated to most films and are understood as the cornerstones of the genre; those who deviate from sexual and racial ideologies are subject to death. This protection of the virginal white female, however, usually comes at the cost of a one-dimensional nonwhite character experiencing death. They are the token character, a sign that the director was attempting to show some degree of diversity but did not want to have to deal with social issues, and these nonwhite tokens are never the characters that are remembered or
culturally celebrated. *Night of the Living Dead’s* Ben is an exception to the Final Girl rule because he acts as one of the centers of the ensemble cast of the film; however, he is unable to escape a death contract because of his blackness. He is assumed to be as nightmarish as the ghouls that invaded the rural Pennsylvania setting of the film and his death is summarized by a single line: “It’s too bad ... an accident ... the only loss we had, the whole night.”

One can also look back Wes Craven’s *Scream 2* in this context because it is a horror film that was explicitly about the experience of film going and its awareness of race within the genre. Maureen Evans (Jada Pinkett Smith) and her boyfriend Phil Stevens (Omar Epps) are brutally murdered while watching the film-within-a-film *Stab*. While viewers should be critical of this representation of race because of its stereotypical depiction of the over-sexual black male and assumptions that black colloquial language is centered on swearing, *Scream 2*’s opening explicitly addresses the issue of racial representation in the genre. Maureen does not want to attend *Stab* because “it’s a dumb ass white movie about some dumb ass white girls getting their white asses cut the fuck up.” When Phil pushes her further about her disdain for the film, Maureen states, “the horror genre is historical for excluding the African American element.” Maureen and Phil’s death directly correlates with Craven’s awareness of race’s function within the genre. Horror movies are predominantly “white movies” that portray “dumb ass white girls” in violent situations that allow audiences to consume gore in a manner that both sympathizes with and protects their race. African American audiences, however, are excluded from both representation in these “white movies” and the right to life within the film.
Blackness in the horror genre is often portrayed in the form of hyperbolic urban attitudes that remove the humanity from the characters and present them as props within the film. While this awareness is useful, Craven himself contributes to the narrative when the only other female of color Hallie (Elise Neal), the protagonist’s best friend, is slaughtered as a means of building momentum in the series. Perhaps this scene was intended to foreshadow the fate of Hallie or it was intended to create a more inclusive horror film that addresses racial implications. Whatever Craven’s reason, he does little to negotiate the terms of race in his other films. While Craven could have both created a black character that does not die and included “the African American element,” his meta-film favors a style that presents whiteness as the only means of experiencing and critiquing the tropes of the horror genre.

Jordan Peele’s characters in *Get Out* negotiate the terms of existence by counteracting what has been assumed to be the naturalized racial order within the horror genre. Chris Washington negates the trope of the dying black male by existing as a three-dimensional character; he is neither reduced to a comedic companion nor to a figure whose body is the centerpiece for gory consumption. The complexity of his character and his talent as an artist allow him to exist beyond the token role that has been reserved for black individuals. This focus on artistic ability is very different from the narratives that attempt to ignore talent from nonwhite bodies. In both film and society, black representations are often located in physicality rather than one’s internal self due to the “black buck” narratives that I discussed on my chapter on the racial gothic. It is Chris’ talent and narrative history as an individual rather than his ability to replicate an archetype that sets him apart from other black characters in the genre. Chris is an artist
that is represented as possessing emotional trauma; he had a life prior to the narrative arc of *Get Out* that has shaped him in terms of his emotional, economic, and artistic development following the death of his mother in a hit-and-run accident when Chris was a child. Chris’ personal backstory could have been a movie of its own, a sign that his character is both nuanced in its formulation and has the potential to develop over the course of the film rather than remain a stagnant silhouette of blackness.

The movie’s internal plot of commandeering black bodies speaks to the very type of narrative that Craven perpetuates in *Scream 2*. But unlike Craven, who uses blackness as a means for violence and cheap gore, Peele uses the idea of consuming black bodies as a commentary that goes against typical representations of whiteness and ultimately contributes to the larger socio-political framework developed in *Get Out*. Just as society has appropriated black culture for mass consumption and economic profit, Peele has commandeered the primarily white horror genre in order to repurpose and signify blackness. Peele offers an opportunity beyond the death contract of the genre; he offers racial possibility for those who were not represented beyond a racist silhouette in the background of the genre by creating multi-dimensional characters that survive the trajectory of the film.

This move by Peele can be traced back to the earlier trajectory of the Blaxploitation horror films of the 1970’s. Blaxploitation films were a type of exploitation film, which was a genre that attempted to encapsulate popular culture and cultural subsets, or would often portray overtly gruesome horror films. When referring to this exploitation genre in relation to horror films, one can think of Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* or Tobe Hooper’s *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The exploitation films often
thrived by extending the possibilities of the horror genre; they were gorier, more provocative, and responded to the issues of censorship through the production of explicit material. Harry Benshoff states that Blaxploitation films “signify a historically specific subgenre that potentially explores (rather than simply exploits) race and race consciousness as core structuring principles.” Just as the exploitation films possessed subgenres such as cannibal to mockbusters, Blaxploitation possessed its own subgenres that allowed black characters to exist in different settings that conventional narratives did not provide. Blaxploitation films addressed the social meanings of race and issues of identity through a lens that did not exist solely to profit from the representation of violence.

While Night of the Living Dead’s Ben was represented as rational and rounded, his role was still exploited through his death as an “accident” with no other consequences and no commentary upon the implications of his race. Blaxploitation horror films, however, were centralized on these issues and how the genre had consistently excluded them. William Crain’s Blacula is a prominent example of the Blaxploitation genre that worked to reclaim power and ownership of race within the horror genre. Unlike Romero’s Night of the Living Dead, which had representation but focused primarily on the role of the undead, Blacula explicitly brought racial representation to the forefront of the genre by inserting itself into the horror tradition of vampires and Dracula. Blacula is centered on Prince Mamuwalde (William Marshall) of the Abani African nation who is transformed into a vampire following his pleas to Count Dracula to terminate the slave trade in his nation. The remainder of the movie focuses on his reawakening in modern day Los Angeles and his experience as a vampire that
was enslaved into his supernatural identity. This film was foundational to the emergence of the Blaxploitation horror genre as it was the first on screen portrayal of a black vampire. But more importantly, it was a representation of a character of color within the horror genre that was not reduced to a racist sketch of what blackness was thought to be in the eyes of white producers. While Prince Mamuwalde does die, his death is portrayed as a suicide that audiences sympathize with because of the loss of his loved one; it was an act of agency rather than punishment. The fact that he would later be reanimated in the film's 1973 sequel *Scream Blacula Scream* speaks to the nonwhite audiences' longing be represented in the cinematic sphere.

Both Jordan Peele and William Crain use the scar of slavery as the foundation of the construction of the modern day horror genre and see the issues of the past as indispensable to the cultural identity of the present. One can argue that there is a secondary rise of Blaxploitation through films such as Barry Jenkin’s queer drama *Moonlight*, Ryan Coogler’s superhero film *Black Panther*, and Peele’s *Get Out*. All of these films are repurposing the role of racial consciousness through popular culture that typically excluded issues of identity. These films touch upon the conflicts that have been negated within mainstream cinema and remind audiences that remnants of racism are still very much thriving in a “colorblind” society. The importance of these issues is highlighted through the films’ success: *Moonlight* was the first all-black cast to win an Oscar for Best Picture in 2016, Jordan Peele was the first black Oscar winner for Best Original Screenplay for *Get Out* in 2018, and *Black Panther* has become one of the highest-grossing films in history.
The presence of nonwhite characters in cinema has continuously spoken to the social moment and is essential to understanding the undertones of racial meaning in society at the time of any given film’s release. Thus, Peele’s contribution to the horror genre is crucial as it correlates the historical relationship of racial identity to the fear that the medium works to evoke. *Get Out* is a social thriller and a continuation of the tradition of Blaxploitation as the film is centered on Benshoff’s conditions of “exploration” rather than “exploitation.” While Blaxploitation was relegated to a subgenre for those who were specifically looking for representation of black characters, *Get Out* was a mainstream horror film that intended to carry on the work that began in the 1970’s. Chris Washington’s character is a voice of diversity within the horror genre, which has ignored a black character’s presence, forced them to die as an accepted trope, or relegated them to the role of the comedic best friend that also sadly dies.

While Rod’s character in the film does fall into the category of the comedic best friend, Rod is a hero and remains fully aware of the very real fears of racism that Chris might experience when visiting the Armitage family. He forecasts the conditions of the Final Girl and is a voice that Peele uses to condemn the racial tradition that had been solidified in the slasher genre. Rod is not a source of comedic relief that plays upon racist stereotypes for white audiences but rather the voice of reason throughout the film that speaks to the genre and against what society perpetuates. When Rod makes a joke to Rose that she should have romantically pursued him rather than Chris, she states, “This is all just a ploy to get to you” and Rod tells Chris he should have listened to his advice to not go “to a white girl’s parents’ house.” Rose plays up her sexuality as a joke that is later used to reinforce her alibi in a phone call with Rod at the conclusion of the
movie. This moment is a signifier of Peele inverting the genre in two ways: through Rose’s inversion of the innocent Final Girl because of her intention to capture black men like Chris and through Rod as the black comedic best friend that has the knowledge to become a hero. Though this moment is often viewed as a comedic exchange or shadowed by the car accident jump scare moments later, it speaks to Peele’s screenwriting abilities and willingness to reject standardized depictions of race within the horror genre.

*Get Out*, however, does not escape death entirely for characters of color. But unlike many other mainstream horror films, the conditions of death within the movie are not intended to gratify bloodlust. Both Georgina and Walter die at the conclusion of *Get Out*, however, these deaths are not used to provide the quick gratifications of gore as *Scream 2* does with Maureen and Phil. The deaths of Georgina and Walter are devastating as audiences are experiencing a second death of these characters. The first death was the death of their autonomy; both of the characters exist within the sunken place as detached passengers to the desires of Roman and Marianne Armitage. The lives that they had beforehand, including Georgina’s queer identity that is shown in the couple photo with Rose, are erased in order for Roman and Marianne to extend their lives. The second death in the film is bittersweet because these characters die because of the white violence that has stripped them of their autonomy, but each fulfill a narrative function that frames the film.

Georgina’s death occurs shortly after Chris accidentally hits her with Jeremy’s Porsche. This first purpose of Georgina’s death is to frame the trauma of Chris’ mother’s passing that he has spent his entire life overcoming. Dominant cultural narratives
applied to black children consistently frame them as older and therefore more responsible than their white peers. Thus, Chris had harbored feelings of guilt and inadequacy for his inability to help his mother in a hit and run accident despite only being a child. When the car hit Georgina, Chris was capable of overcoming his trauma by collecting her from the roadside and placing her into the car unlike the dead deer that he thinks about throughout the film. The reason why her character dies is that her pilot, Marianne, regains consciousness and is very angry. This anger is rooted in her animosity that Chris “ruined” her house that speaks to a fundamental issue of whiteness in the film. While the genre has typically represents suburban values, Peele is addressing how these values are valued more than black lives. Marianne does not think of the life that she has “ruined” by taking over Georgina’s body; she only thinks of her home and the materials within it. It suggests that the white individuals within the film perform violence as a response to materiality and ownership. The white characters’ desires to maintain the superficial characteristics of the home and social appearances are more important to the individuals than the autonomy of black characters. Georgina’s death, then, is utilized as a tool to show that the maintenance of white ideals that are often depicted in horror films comes at the cost of black bodies.

Walter’s death, however, speaks to the tradition of Blacula in the sense that his character dies through an act of suicide rather than murder. While Georgina’s character is framed in such a way as to show the horrors of active white violence, Walter’s death is one that reclaims the autonomy that had been stripped from him by Roman. Roman saw Walter as a way to overcome his defeat by Olympian Jesse Owens and this capturing of the body is a form of enslavement that speaks to the physical labor of
slaves in an antebellum context. I believe that Walter’s death parallels the narrative of
the Igbo Landing as a correlation of history to the genre. The Igbo Landing was a mass
suicide that occurred when a group of Igbo people were enslaved and revolted onboard
a slave ship that landed in Georgia (McDaniel). Rather than submitting to the forces of
slavery, the Igbo people committed a mass suicide by drowning themselves in the water
surrounding the ship. Walter faces his death because he has ownership of his life.
Unlike the other white characters in the film, Walter receives a dignified death. While
audiences see the blood from the bullet wound in Rose’s body or the gore from the
antlers that pierce Dean’s torso, the normally graphic nature of death by gunshot wound
is denied to audiences and Walter is provided with a dignified ending that characters of
color do not normally receive.

Chris’ survival at the conclusion of the film is marked by both compassion and
integrity. It is clear to audiences that Chris is not psychotic like the rest of the Armitage
family; the bloodshed that occurs at his hands is because he is fighting for survival
rather than seeking revenge. He does not chase after the other characters for
vengeance or scorn them for what they have done; his mindset is to escape the
Armitage family to ensure that neither he nor anyone else is enslaved into the Coagula
system. Even in the film’s final moments when he is within arm’s reach of the weapon,
he does not attempt to exert any additional violence upon Rose despite her being the
only member of the family that could possibly be alive. Chris only reacts with violence
when Rose reaches for the gun. But even when he possesses the potential to choke
Rose to her death and ensure that he is entirely safe, Chris loosens his grip and allows
her the chance for survival that she did not grant him.
Get Out, then, rejects the representations of blackness that have dominated the horror genre and resulted in the normalization of the deaths of nonwhite bodies. The film’s refusal to make Chris a barbaric black male speaks to both the truth of his sensitive character and Peele’s desire to rewrite the possibilities for black characters within the genre. Peele creates a world within his social thriller that addressed the issues of race in a mainstream context that contributed and built upon traditions of black horror. In doing so, Peele redefines the ways in which whiteness has been privileged as the inherently innocent and pure vessel for audiences to empathize with when watching films.

Get Out’s assumed female protagonist Rose contradicts the ways in which white womanhood has typically been represented in the horror genre. Rose Armitage is the product of the types of white culture that are at the core of the genre: her father Dean is an established neurosurgeon, her mother Missy is a hypnotherapist, and her brother Jeremy is also studying to become a neurosurgeon like his father. She emerged from a large familial estate and her primary struggle that is depicted throughout the film consists of her romance with Chris.

Prior to the reveal at the conclusion of the film, Rose is established as a cosmopolitan woman that is both financially secure and socially aware. She is the type of character that would normally be desirable to the modern horror market; she is a white female that uses her privilege to help others and she fiercely supports her boyfriend in spite of her family’s racist habits. White audiences, who are the primary target of horror films, spend the majority of the film identifying with her character because they want to accept themselves as progressive individuals that can see
beyond both subtle and overt racist comments. The trailers leading up to Get Out’s initial release emphasized the racial implications of the film and by knowingly associating the film with this information, this racial awareness allows a viewer to identify with the progressive attitude that Rose personifies throughout the film. White audiences can recognize the tropes that the Armitage family and their guests are perpetuating but by associating with Rose, they are able to escape the consequences and history of the horror genre.

But the conclusion of Get Out forces audiences to recognize and rethink their whiteness through the suspension of the Final Girl. While the Final Girl is typically at the heart of the story and invokes sympathy because of the violence that she has been subjected to, Rose’s status as a white woman becomes the epicenter of violence for black bodies within the film. She views Chris as a body that is easily commoditized and as part of a larger collection of black individuals that she has collected through her sexuality. Just as her parents gather tokens and trinkets from around the world, Rose keeps photographic mementos of her sexual and racial conquests. She uses the very medium that Chris has built his adult life around as a reminder that her sexuality as a white woman will always dominate over a black body.

Rose’s first appearance in the film is framed by the warm glow of a bakery window as she peers at croissants; an image that both frames her in the light of a white domestic womanhood while also framing her character’s preoccupation with selection and consumption. Just like the pastries that she selects to share with Chris, Rose has selected him as an object that can be consumed by the Coagula, the secret society that profits off of black bodies. Her opening scene is characterized by several moments of
intimacy; she first enters Chris’ apartment by leading him with a kiss and she later positions herself on his bed in a way that evokes a sense of sexuality for her white female character.

This emphasis on Rose’s sexuality becomes the centerpiece of denying the virginal status of the Final Girl. Linda Williams focuses on the Final Girl in the context of sadomasochistic cinematography and she argues that the slasher genre is often “accounted for by appealing to a sadistic ‘male gaze’” (207). Williams contends that the violence performed against the Final Girl brings forth “a pleasure mixed with the vicarious threat of pain” and that the conclusion of the film provides “great pressure of its relief” that is similar to the way one engages with the practices of sadomasochism (207). I believe that Williams’ metaphor of sadomasochistic pleasure, pain, and relief in horror movies is applicable to my reading of Get Out’s gender structure.

Rose embodies what the male gaze aims to accomplish in the genre, however, she is not the standardized virginal figure and this shift is a brilliant move on Jordan Peele’s part. While Rose is an attractive, able-bodied, and articulate individual that is represented as being alluring to all of the black characters in the film, Peele uses this gaze as a tool to employ the racist structure of the Coagula. Williams argues that in the slasher film, the Final Girl “must be the asexual ‘good girl’ rather than the sexual ‘bad girl’” in order for her to gain power (209). Peele defamiliarizes the role of the white Final Girl by suspending her innocence, embracing the “sexual ‘bad girl’” and suggesting the characteristics that once protected the archetype are the elements of which one should be wary. My reading of Rose as a “sexual ‘bad girl’” is not meant to condemn Rose for possessing an active sexuality but rather to recognize how Peele inverts the standard
structure of the Final Girl’s “goodness” by using the affirmed forms of white womanhood and sexuality as device for villainy.

Rose is aware that she is at the center of the male gaze and that her white womanhood is both irresistible and indestructible, thus, this awareness becomes her weapon in the film. The shot of her brushing her teeth in an oversized shirt and black lace underwear following dinner is supposed to invoke a subtle sexuality for viewers to project their desire upon her in the film, but second-time viewers of the film recognize this as a costume while Rose confronts her family’s subtle racism in frustrated performance. This is reaffirmed by Chris’ discovery of the photographs where she is pictured with nine different individuals, including Georgina and Walter. All of these individuals fell victim to her performance of colorblind attitudes and the “irresistible” white womanhood that she used to ensnare them.

While the standard slasher film would use Rose’s body as a platform in order to satisfy the “sadistic gaze,” Peele inverses the structure by making Rose a sadistic figure in Get Out. Rose is not the one undergoing threats of pain; she expresses mild dissatisfaction with her family but her autonomy is never threatened within the film. Chris and the other black characters, rather, are the ones that are experiencing the “vicarious threat[s] of pain.” Unlike a slasher film, the threat of pain emerges from the detachment of the body rather than abuse of it. Peele denies the pleasure of the Final Girl because of Get Out’s status as a social thriller; the threats that are experienced in the film are regarding the trauma of racism and therefore Rose could never embody these same threats of pain. Instead, she causes this pain through the innocence of her white womanhood. Though audiences are aware that Rose
collaborates with her parents when they see the pictures, there is still a sense of devastation when she states “You know I can’t give you those keys, right, babe?” While *Get Out* insists on making viewers aware of the commonplace conversational racism of the exchanges in the film, there is a sense of shock that the woman who spoke up for inequality is at the very root of the Coagula system. Furthermore, the use of a term of endearment for Chris speaks to Rose’s belief that she still possesses a sense of innocence even when she is sentencing Chris to a lifetime of psychological torture. It is patronizing and insincere; she derives pleasure from the power that she enacts over him from sexually.

Rose’s confidence in her sexuality is reaffirmed by her next appearance in the film where she is sitting on her bed with her computer. She is seen with a silver platter that embodies the lifestyle: it shows that her upper-class life has been delivered to her and that she too, is now serving the Coagula community the bodies that it requires. She is eating cereal and drinking milk, which one can as her unwillingness to integrate her whiteness with color, as well as an indication of her innocence in a childlike manner through Fruit Loops. What is most unnerving about the scene, however, is the calmness that she possesses as the searches for her next victim. *Dirty Dancing’s* (1987) hit “Time of My Life” plays as she scrolls through and selects the next black male that she plans on conquering. This music choice both speaks to Rose joining the power of a white cinematic identity such as the iconic film *Dirty Dancing*, as well as her sadistic joy in seduction and the “dance” that she has choreographed in order to seduce black individuals. The male gaze cannot find relief in Rose as she has become the “slasher” figure in her hunt of Chris. Wearing a khaki ensemble that echoes the tradition of safari
hunters, Rose becomes the force that she warned Chris about in the beginning of the film: she is the one that is chasing him off of the porch with a shotgun. *Get Out*'s “great pressure of relief” lies not in the brutalization of a final female body but rather in the affirmation of Chris’ autonomy.

This is not to suggest that Rose escapes violence but that harm that she experiences in *Get Out* is a way to reaffirm the innocence of white womanhood. Though she has attempted to shoot Chris and has already engaged in this system of stripping autonomy from black bodies, she still attempts to allure Chris into saving her through her reiteration of innocence. She states, “I’m so sorry, I love you” despite reaching for a gun to shoot Chris moments earlier. Even when she is being choked, she smirks because she knows that ultimately her status and Chris’ emotionality will protect her. The flashing lights initially provide a sense of dread as the bodily harm and her white womanhood that Rose has experienced would most certainly be believed over Chris’ narrative. Her cries for help continue this innocence and speak to the tradition of the Final Girl being rescued at the conclusion of the film from the mass murderer that they have just battled. The “great pressure of relief” that Williams mentions in her essay emerges when Chris realizes that the flashing lights that he sees are his friend Rod rather than the law enforcement that had racially profiled him earlier in the film.

While slasher films typically enacts a death contract for black characters and the presence of whiteness ensures survival, *Get Out* denies this predetermined fate for the characters as this film is a social thriller that both recognizes the tropes of the horror genre and provides a critical lens that challenges the racialized traditions of the past. *Get Out* provides a sense of resolution in that the film implies that the legacy of the
Armitage family has ended and that Chris has survived the brutality that has been enacted against him. What the film does not do, however, is resolve the unease of the audience from seeing a film that actively calls out both the racial issues of the horror genre and the socio-political colorblind attitude that has been normalized as the predominant ideology. Though Chris escaped this particular scenario and therefore ensured that the basketball player that Rose selected earlier would be able to live his life freely, there is no justice for Georgina who had no choice in her death or for Andre Hayworth who exists in the Coagula as a passenger to Logan King. Just as the Coagula system was not eradicated entirely, Get Out's success will not eliminate the issues of racism that are still at the forefront of political issues and social justice.

What Get Out does provide, however, is an ending that Romero’s Night of the Living Dead could have never received as a product of its historical context. Relying of the history of racial inadequacy and the groundwork laid out by the Blaxploitation films of the 1970’s, Get Out has allowed the issues of race to come to the foreground of both the horror genre and film as a whole. While both films posses a final black male whose survival is the product of strategic thinking against white hubris, the fate of the final black male in these two films is drastically different due to the racial climate at the time of their release. The most notable connection between the two films is the house burning at the conclusion of the film. Night of the Living Dead justifies Ben's death as an accident and when the house is burned, his story of heroism and courage against white egotism is eradicated entirely. The burning at the end of Get Out, however, is contrasted by Chris’ survival and ability to convey the narratives of racial violence that have been performed against him. Furthermore, the two films parallel each other in
terms of in the role of police within the film. While white law enforcement in *Night of the Living Dead* leads to the contractual death of blackness within the genre, Rod’s role as intellectual black male despite his constantly undermined status as a TSA agent is what allows Chris to survive the conclusion of *Get Out*.

My examinations of blackness and the role of the white Final Girl in *Get Out* are not intended to negate the traditions of the past that has founded the genre. The presence of characters such as Nancy Thompson in Craven’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series or Laurie Strode from Clover’s *Halloween* series are foundational to the culture of the slasher film and ultimately the genre as a whole. Rather, the purpose of this chapter is to recognize how the possibilities of the horror genre have been expanded by Peele’s innovation and reflection upon a tradition that has been mostly ignored in mainstream scholarship. *Get Out* represents a historic moment within cinema and the public’s call for more social thrillers speaks to the need for more inclusive practices within the filmmaking. While it is easy to recognize the possibility of more social thrillers emerging, it would be dangerous to eliminate the roots of the slasher film that Peele is engaging with. The slasher film and the social thriller should both hold a place within the horror genre as they both critically speak to different issues through the engagement of anxiety and desire. But it is important that more films like *Get Out* emerge as it provides representation for those who have otherwise been victimized onscreen. More importantly, the horror of systematic racial violence and the privileging of whiteness in Peele’s narrative speak to the social moment in a way that regular films have not.
Chapter Three:

“Do they know I’m Black?” Post-Obama Liberalism in ‘Colorblind’ America

On January 20, 2009 Barack Hussein Obama II was inaugurated as the forty-fourth president of the United States. Over one million individuals were estimated at the national mall and the crowds for the ceremony spanned from the Washington Monument to the Capitol Building. Obama was the first African American to be elected to the presidency and was the first Democratic president to take office since Bill Clinton. His inauguration was centered around sixteenth President Abraham Lincoln. Obama first announced his candidacy for the 2008 election president in front of the Old State Capitol Building in Springfield, Illinois, the very building where Lincoln had delivered his historic “House Divided” speech nearly one hundred and fifty years before.

Obama’s entrance into the political sphere marked a shift in anecdotes regarding the racial climate of the United States. His emergence marked a hope for a post-racial future in which the trauma of the past had been eradicated by the first non-white president. This shift in the political landscape hoped to reduce the racial inequities of the nation as a marker of previous ideologies and Obama embodied the notion of change in the midst of the Great Recession. It had been less than half a century since Jim Crow laws were eradicated and many individuals still felt the remnants of such a scar upon the nation. Others, however, viewed this historic moment of an African American being elected to the presidency as erasing systematic inequality and suggesting that strife over racial justice would cease. Many individuals believed that Obama’s presence ended inequality and announced the beginning of a post-racial future where any forms
of privilege could be overcome because a citizen of color had risen to the highest position within the government.

In 2017, just ten years after Obama’s bid for presidency, Jordan Peele released his physiological horror film Get Out. The premise of the movie locates audiences within a society where white individuals desire to take over and occupy the bodies of black individuals due to their notions of racial exceptionalism. Peele locates Get Out specifically in a democratic state, arguing that: "[i]t was really important for me to not have the villains in this film reflect the typical red state type who is usually categorized as being racist. It felt like that was too easy... I wanted this film to explore the false sense of security one can have with the, sort of, New York liberal type." (Washington Post). Peele’s determination to portray a social horror that built off the Obama-era negation of racism was met with widespread praise.

As Peele’s directorial debut, Get Out was both critically acclaimed and a box office success, a somewhat unusual combination for its role as a horror film. Peele was the first black person to win an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay and this accolade is even more exceptional given the long history of horror has being discredited as lacking merit within the traditionally white Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Though it did not win at the Golden Globes, Get Out’s multitude of nominations suggests that audiences recognized that this film was a socially relevant commentary on the racial framework of modern America.

In this section of the thesis, I will argue that Get Out’s success indicates that the concerns of Charles Mills’ “racial liberalism,” or that is to say white liberalism, are still very much alive and further, that Mills’ work helpfully illuminates both Get Out and its
success. Mills' theory claims: “full personhood [is restricted] to whites (or, more accurate, white men) and relegated nonwhites to an inferior category, so that its schedule of rights and prescriptions for justice were all color-coded” (Mills 1382). Using Mills’ framework and the context of a post-Obama film, my reading of Get Out will focus on the extent to which white liberalism is still prominent within the political sphere and the extent to which Peele anatomizes the power of white personhood over black bodies.

African American bodies, even in the context of the Civil Rights movement and Black Lives Matter activism, are still commoditized by the white public under the guise of white liberalism where colorblindness is a signifier of abusive power and privilege. Furthermore through the film’s representation of law enforcement, I argue that Peele is suggesting that post-racial ideologies are as terrifying as the familiar tropes of the horror genre because of their unquestioned prominence within modern society. Lastly, I contend that Peele uses the presence of the police in Get Out as a tool to counteract voices that claim racial bias has been eradicated entirely in a post-Obama context, as this can be seen in the film’s alternate endings.

Get Out opens with a scene where Andre Hayworth is walking in a suburban neighborhood and talking on the phone to his significant other. While Andre is walking, a vintage cream colored Porsche pulls up behind him while playing “Run Rabbit Run,” a song performed by Flanagan and Allen. This scene opens the film by establishing the dichotomy of power that many African Americans experience in their day-to-day lives. When Andre realizes that the white Porsche is following him, he states that he should “keep on walking” and “not do anything stupid.” This moment looks towards the scripts of violence that influence the black community. Passivity and silence have been utilized
in this script as a tool of survival in order to ensure white ownership over enslaved bodies. Peele’s decision in selecting the song “Run Rabbit Run” imbricates Andre within this system of power; he is the vulnerable rabbit that is being hunted by the strikingly white vintage Porsche. This is a car that is a literal representative of whiteness by virtue of its economic status, vintage and traditional presentation, and it’s function as a vehicle of violence and power. It is from this vehicle that a man in a knight helmet emerges and asphyxiates Andre, enabling the first act of black violence in the film and doing so in the context of a visual image (the helmet) that is supposed to embody chivalrous values such as mercy, fairness, and willingness to protect the disadvantaged. Instead, the image of the helmet evokes the hoods that protect the identities of the Ku Klux Klan members that are still being worn in modern times despite the fact that the United States is supposedly defined by a “post-racial” climate.

The film then transitions to the first glimpse of Chris Washington in his apartment with Childish Gambino’s “Redbone” scoring the scene. Chris embodies artistic and economic excellence; his large urban apartment is decorated with black and white photos of concrete lots, basketball courts, and images of city life as the music reiterates “stay woke,” a term coined in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement. This term reiterates the importance of being aware of social justice and racial inequality as well encouraging others not to “sleep on” these issues that are framed in Chris’ photography. These photographs are one of many reminders of Jordan Peele’s artistry in establishing the contrast between black and white as well as emphasizing the importance of perspective. In this context, ‘perspective’ refers to both the literal sense of capturing the images through his lens as well as the perspective of growing up in an urban
environment very different from Rose’s white upper-class world that will be introduced later in the film. Chris’ profession as a photographer, despite being a career that would have likely suffered with the recession and the advent of the smart phone’s accessibility to the art form, has made him successful and well known within the art world. There is a cruel irony in the fact that he overcame the narratives of economic hardship that attempt to define black identity and because of this, Chris’ excellence within the field of photography establishes him as a candidate for white commodification in Get Out’s system of bodily appropriation.

Though interracial relationships in the United States have been nationally legal for half a century, the undertones of difference still remain prominent within contemporary society even in blue states that are typically at the forefront of resolving social justice issues. While interracial relationships are legally recognized and have become more common with each passing decade, older generations and the remains of racism that have trickled through their offspring often socially condemn such relationships. Even those who are self-defined as liberals are often caught within the constraints of Mills’ racialized forces of white liberalism. Though society aims for “policy that respects the equal personhood of individuals,” Mill argues these “conceptions of personhood and resulting schedules of rights, duties, and government responsibilities have all been racialized” (1381). These rights and duties, while being legally protected, do not socially protect those who have been racialized and must perform terms of identity that have been shaped by marginalization.

When Chris poses the question to Rose “Do they know I’m black?” he is asking Rose for information about whether he will be subjected to narratives of what it means
to be black in the context of a “post-racial” liberalism. This liberalism is rooted in systematic inequality and definitions of personhood that exclude those of color. To ask if Rose’s parents are aware of his race is to ask Rose if he will be faced with the set of expectations that accompany generalizations about black men, generalizations that include narratives of European ethnocentrism and their expectations of superiority over other nonwhite bodies. Chris is addressing the stigmatism of the violent and angry African man, the types of characteristics that led to young black boys like George Stinney and Emmett Till to be victims of pre-civil rights racism. Chris’ question suggests people like Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner, along with black bodies in general are not valued by the American legal system. This question evokes generations of racist narratives directed at black men and rooted in normalized racism. Chris’ question is asking whether or not he’ll be subject to these narratives by Rose’s white parents. He is navigating the terrain of marginalization and violence that has defined his race.

Rose’s response suggests a colorblind attitude that is quite common in post-racial rhetoric: “No. Should they?” From the perspective of white liberalism, this response is suggesting that Rose sees beyond the implications of race by means of a colorblind perspective. It suggests that she is not bound by identity politics and that she views Chris through the lens of an authentic essence of self. Rose reaffirms this position by stating that her father “would’ve voted for Obama a third time if he could have, like the love is so real…they [her parents] are not racist,” a statement that echoes the hope for post-racist future. If an African American man such as Barack Obama, who had already served two terms as President and helped the country out of one of the worst
economic recessions since the Great Depression, could be supported by white individuals such as Rose’s father, the potential for any identity that had been targeted in the past was limitless. The use of Obama as representative of one’s character endorses Mill’s critique of history in which he claims that the “political history of the west is sanitized, reconstructed as if white domination and the oppression of people of color had not been central to that history” (1384). Rose’s response looks to eliminate any of the identity claims that have been placed against black men like Chris through a history of inequality and violence. Rose’s response is a move that “sanitizes” the history of racism against people of color. It works in favor of a future where race is not recognized as an optimistic state, but only by negating a history of inequality.

While I have already discussed the image of the deer in the context of the “black buck” iconography of the southern gothic in the first chapter of the thesis, I want to emphasize how the first car accident in the film touches upon the anxiety and inequality that people of color face on a regular basis in their engagements with law enforcement. When the police officer asks Chris for his license despite him not being the driver, it represents the frequency with which interactions with the police for people of color are rooted in racist beliefs. With the awareness that any mistake can end in death even if the police demands are out of jurisdiction, Chris knows that he must comply. This reading is not an attempt to demonize the police; rather, it is meant to suggest that Get Out is both aware of and alludes to the day-to-day horrors that nonwhite individuals face when their autonomy is left in the hands of abusive white individuals that benefit from their racial privilege.
This moment in *Get Out* evokes the type of violence that has propelled the Black Lives Matter movement, which has attempted to seek accountability for the deaths caused at the hands of police violence and ensure that the lives that have been lost are not erased from history. Chris’ experiences are even more relevant in this current “post-racial” climate and instances such as when Philando Castile was fatally shot within his car during a routine traffic stop for brake lights in June 2017 (ABC News). Or in August 2017, when Lt. Greg Abbott, a white cop from Cobb County, Georgia, told a female driver that the police “only kill black people” and that she should not worry about being in danger during a traffic stop (CNN). Though both of these instances occurred following *Get Out*’s release, together they embody the dangers and anxieties that people of color face in white liberal society where they are considered subordinate and their fundamental rights are thought to be negotiable. Barack Obama may have been President but his achievements are not a shield from these forms of violence.

Both the scene when the car hits a deer and the conclusion of the film invert the structure of the culturally celebrated police movie into the horror film. Police films tend to fall under the buddy-cop genre or within crime mysteries as a staple of American Culture. While the police film can range from robot companion science-fiction flick to unlikely duo comedies to noir detective films, the depiction of police in film has often been celebratory. Similar to how a member of the military is celebrated for their willingness to fight for national liberties overseas, law enforcement officers have been commended for their work in protecting local areas and ensuring that domestic citizens are safe from those who break the law. Though this celebration is not intentionally malicious, this glamorized portrayal of cops has perpetuated a narrative that crime-
causing individuals are often minorities and that their conquering should be celebrated. Police films attempt to entertain the public by reaffirming localized figures of nationalistic values that emphasize honor and duty to one’s neighborhood. Jordan Peele, however, flips this scenario by depicting the police in a post-racial moment that locates the horror in the forces that are supposed to be ensuring the safety of America’s domestic citizens.

Chris remains cooperative with the police officer as he presses for his driver’s license even though Chris was not driving during the accident. There is an unwritten code of social behavior that has been normalized for individuals of color by law enforcement. It follows a narrative that the Blue Lives Matter movement encourages: that everyone is important, especially law enforcement, and that no individual would be hurt at the hands of the police if they follow the laws and commands of the officers. This narrative ignores the systemic forms of social and economic oppression that subject black bodies to discrimination and violence while appropriating the name of a black-oriented movement. Blue Lives Matter suggests that black bodies are at fault for the racist acts taken against them. The Blue Lives Matter and All Lives Matter movements are prime examples of the ways in which post-racial liberalism has negated the hardship of minorities in favor of an “inclusive” narrative that truly subjugates nonwhite bodies.

When one mentions All Lives Matter, one unavoidably overlooks the systematic oppression of black individuals in favor of a narrative that reaffirms the value of whiteness. This ignores the deaths and issues that led to the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement in the first place. If one were to say, “All Lives Matter, especially the lives that experience oppression through social and legal measures,” there might be a different approach to the movement. This, however, is not what the phrase “All Lives
Matter” means in practice. It implies that black lives do not matter and that those who have died as a result of police engagement are complicit and responsible for the consequences of a system that targets black bodies. Critic Theo Goldberg suggests that the experience of contemporary blackness is viewed as symptomatic of immorality being an established part of black identity:

Black people in America are objects of social suspicion. Blacks are presumed to be up to no good, to be no good. Black lives are flippantly extinguished, not least by the institutions of law and order, for no good reason other than being suspected because they are black. We need to insist “black lives matter,” to organize around it, because this society provides proof on a daily basis that for it, for many, blacks don’t.

Because Black bodies are not believed to possess merit they are immediately criminalized. As Mills has pointed out, post-racial voices cast doubt on why black individuals might counter normalized racial ideologies because they have not been given rights to argue in the first place. The Black Lives Matter movement has been discredited because it challenges the contemporary forms of liberalism that argue that racism has been eradicated. Counter movements like All Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter have likely emerged from the general anxiety that white bodies are the proponents of these forms of violence. It is easier to discredit black bodies than accept responsibility for the forms of societal and police brutality that American society has allowed to continue. While the experiences of law enforcement will surely shape the officers and influence their daily lives, “blue lives” are capable of removing a uniform at the end of the day. There is no removable uniform for black bodies; they are forced to carry out the performances that have been forced upon them as natural and as foundational to their identities every day.
Though the police officer in *Get Out* is stepping beyond reasonable questioning by demanding that Chris present a form of identification when he was not doing anything, Chris’ acceptance of the situation is just as much a fight for survival as his fight at the conclusion of the film. If Chris were to reject this demand for identification, he could have potentially become the next personification of police brutality and violence that Black Lives Matter fights against. Others would have likely argued that if Chris had listened to the “reasonable” demands of the officer, then he would not have faced the consequences.

Rose, however, uses her voice of white privilege to insist that this inquiry is discriminatory and should not occur. While this moment may seem like Rose is being an ally to Chris by using the rights that have been granted to her by racial liberalism, it is actually reflecting a trend of using white privilege as an ally in order to achieve gratification. While white individuals might occasionally stand up for those who are facing discrimination, such actions are often premised on the basis of individual gain. Sometimes this is done as a means of negating white guilt or reaffirming one’s morality, but in this case, Rose is using her privilege with malicious intentionality. By preventing the officer from seeing Chris’ identification, she is eliminating the possibility of anyone tracing him to the Armitage family after her plan to conquer his body has been performed. If the police officer had taken Chris’ identification, there would be a potential record of his whereabouts and a connection to Rose that would reveal her family’s role within this body-capturing system. While this is a clever plot device that filmgoers that watch the movie multiple times may recognize as foreshadowing, I ultimately believe
that Peele is commenting on the fact that contemporary racial profiling and police engagement for black bodies is as terrifying as the horror tropes that define the genre.

The reappearance of the cop at the conclusion of the film further reiterates this point. Though Chris has endured several attempts upon his life and his autonomy through her actions, Rose reiterates her status of the innocent white woman by crying out for help as the police lights flash upon Chris’ body. Rather than expressing joy that the police have arrived like most horror films do at their conclusion, audiences sense the dread that washes over Chris and believe that the police officer from earlier in the film has returned to finish his racial targeting. Despite Chris being the victim of violence, the racial conditioning evoked by Goldberg’s idea of “social suspicion” forces Chris to raise his hands in surrender. This act resonates with “Hands up, don’t shoot,” a mantra that emerged following the August 2014 shooting of Michael Brown. Witnesses claimed that Brown stated “don’t shoot” with his hands in the air before being shot by police officer Darren Wilson after robbing a convenience store. This mantra is not intended to negate the criminal actions of Brown but to suggest that he was unfairly killed and this statement resonates with individuals of color who are killed more often in police interactions than their white counterparts regardless of their innocence or guilt. Scholar Dora Apel argues that the act of “hands up, don’t shoot” is “equivalent to an animal in a fight showing its opponent its neck, its most vulnerable part, signaling defenselessness and submission.” This submission both suggests that nonwhite bodies are viewed as both animalistic and are expected to submit to the white individual in power.

When audiences see that the vehicle possesses the New York state insignia and car detail that belongs to the Transportation Security Administration at which Chris’
friend Rod works, they are relieved that Chris does not have to submit to the narrative that frames the Black Lives Matter movement. Rod, a black male, effectively removes Chris from the ensnarement of the white female and the violence that emerges from her sexuality. Rod has appropriated a vehicle of white power that mirrors the white Porsche in the opening sequence in order to protect Chris’ life. This also ideally protects other black lives that could have been potentially ruined by the Armitages’ process of bodily appropriation and consumption.

When Chris asks Rodney how he found him, the conversation in the car is intended to bring a sense of humor to the gravity of the situation. When Rod states, “I’m TS-motherfucking-A, we handle shit. That’s what we do. Consider this situation, fucking handled,” audiences are supposed to laugh. This line follows Rod’s failed attempt to report to the police earlier in the film. But this remark speaks to the ways in which even minorities in power can often negate the voices of those suffering violence. This kind of rhetoric is seen in “All/Blue Lives Matter” propaganda where a single police officer of color’s statement will overrule the voices that attempt to express the abuses that they have faced. Though the detectives in the film are all people of color, Rod’s presence is immediately discredited by the female detective because of his employment in a position that she considers to be lower than her own. This mirrors how social strata, even among minorities, lead to only certain voices having the right to be heard. Moreover, Rod’s statement suggests that violent situations often have to be “handled” by those that do not have the same abilities and status as those in power. Whether this handling is through Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson or through the
commandeering of a TSA vehicle to save a companion, voices of reason such as Rod are expected to compensate for situations that they did not willingly enter.

If scenarios of racial violence are not “handled,” what can occur is the alternate ending of Peele’s film in which it is the police that arrive rather than Rod and Rose is found dead on the road of her family property. Chris is arrested by the police because of the surplus of blood on his clothing, him standing over Rose’s dead body despite her reaching for a gun moments earlier, and presumably because of his status as a black male. As long as there is a white female and a black male, it will be assumed that someone like Chris will be a powerhouse of violence and aggression. In the Blu-ray edition of the alternate-ending commentary, Jordan Peele states that he wrote Get Out “in the Obama era and we were in this post-racial lie…so this [alternate] ending to the movie felt like it was the gut punch that the world needed because something about it rings very true. And when something rings true in your core… you have to deal with it.” The reason why he decided not to follow the alternative ending was because some of society became aware of this lie and began to act through Black Lives Matter, which suggested that the post-racial lie was being recognized. The alternative ending being included in the bonus features, however, reveals that the “post-racial lie” is very much alive and it forces audiences to be accountable for their contributions to these systems of oppression. The audiences who just watched the movie are forced to recognize that they have also been watching how these post-racial systems continue to profit from the marginalization of nonwhite bodies.

In this commentary, Peele states that the house burning has eradicated all of the evidence that could have potentially saved Chris and he has joined the long list of black
men that have been unjustly trapped within the prison pipeline in the alternative ending. This ending is one that firmly locates the film as a social horror and depicts an anxiety that the white population can typically ignore because of their privilege in society and the legal system. This system, Peele states, values the "rich white people, it takes their side" and even though Chris had been subjected to an intense power that wants to strip him of his humanity, he does not fall within the protected signifiers of power. Thus the white walls of imprisonment suggest that regardless of what Chris would have done in this version of Get Out, he would have been stripped of his autonomy and would have ultimately been subjected to the forces of a white body of power. But this ending still provides him with the right to his mind, something that could have been eradicated entirely.

In an interview with Chris Hardwick, Jordan Peele states that there were multiple endings of the film including one where the surgery was completely performed and Jim Hudson did in fact take control of Chris' body. This ending was in the early drafts of the script where the film took place in a gated community and Rod breaks in, only to discover that Chris had fallen into the sunken place. In the final version of Get Out, audiences learn that the reason Jim Hudson had wanted to have Chris' body was because of Chris' artistic ability and vision. In their pre-operation conversation, Jim Hudson informs Chris: "some people want to change--some people want to be stronger, faster, cooler. But don't, please, don't lump me into that. I couldn't give a shit what color you are: what I want is deeper. I want your eyes, man. I want those things you see through." Jim Hudson's blindness is both physical, as he cannot see, but also metaphorical, in the form of liberal colorblindness. Jim disassociates himself from the
other appropriating bodies by stating that his purpose is more admirable, as if he values Chris as a person more than a commodity. But this argument would falls flat if Chris was auctioned and located in this supposedly “post-racial” economy. Jim Hudson would never have to pose the question “Do they know I’m black?” to others because he would only understand blackness through appropriation.

Jim does not understand that Chris’ artistic ability is located in individual experience and the iconography of growing up as an impoverished black child. Chris’ images of the street are the product of his upbringing, his trauma, and his ultimate ability to rise to a higher economic class following the Great Recession. No amount of financial or racial superiority could ever capture this vantage point. If the completion of the surgery were to be the ending of the film that Peele selected, it would be reaffirming the idea that black lives must sacrificed in order to fulfill their cinematic duty. But more importantly, it would suggest that there is no escape from the systems of oppression that white liberalism and colorblind attitudes perpetuate.

This notion of naturalized violence against black bodies and white superiority resonates in a particularly clear manner in Jim’s directions to Chris. Jim tells Chris that their “common understanding of the process has a positive impact on the success rate of the procedure.” This statement can stand in for the whole of the post-racist liberal framework. Jim, as empowered white body, has the power to determine what bodies possess the right to autonomy or which ones should be commoditized. This logic is the formulation of much of the government of the United States in which white bodies control the narratives of individual rights and submission to these systems of power is not only expected, but also celebrated. The submission and compliance of post-Obama
citizens in believing that racism is over is like the transition of bodies within the film. People of color are required to be “passengers” in the sense that they are expected to follow the actions of white leaders. They do not have the right to question what is occurring to them as white bodies that pretend to represent them are leading them without caring about their desires, voices, or autonomies. Those who speak out against these “post-racial lies” are failures in the eye of the larger social system; not because they are speaking the truth, but rather because they are questioning the systems of power that attempt to control them in the first place.

Thus, Chris’ escape at the conclusion of the film provides a satisfactory ending in which this context of white liberalism and the belief in a post-racial world have been eliminated. *Get Out*, however, leaves audiences with the sentiment that work is still left to be done because of this post-racial lie. While Peele has stated “racism was being dealt with, people were woke” since *Get Out*’s original conception, the brilliance of the film lies in the very fact that racism “is still simmering under the surface” and that the horror genre opens up the possibility of examining these fears. *Get Out* is one of the most socially relevant films of this historical moment because it addresses the very reasons why individuals claim that society has progressed beyond racism.

If modern America has progressed beyond its racist roots, there would be no counter political movements to Black Lives Matter nor would there a suspicion that black bodies are inherently corrupt. Moreover, Barack Obama’s presidency would not be used as pawn for post-racialism; instead, policies would be enacted to ensure that both nonwhite and all bodies as a whole, are protected from systematic forms of violence or discrimination. The question “Do they know I’m black?” would not serve as an indicator
of a long history of injustice and prejudice but as a moment to learn about the different upbringings of another culture or race. A post-racial society should not be one located in colorblindness and commodity but in the recognition of difference and protected rights that ensure autonomy.

Though some may critique *Get Out* for invoking feelings of discomfort or guilt, that is the very reason why more films of its caliber must exist. *Get Out* has drawn upon the tradition of signifying the familiar in order to depict the horrors of the past as a part of our living present. The film thrives thanks to its accessibility in popular culture and because of its powerful portrayal of the white monopolization of black oppression. While not all wounds can be healed through the production of art and history will always leave stories left untold, works such as Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* allow for conversations to be facilitated and audiences can begin to recognize their complicity in the larger framework of a society that has profited from the trauma inflicted upon black bodies.
Conclusion:

“Stay Woke”

Last spring I met with a supervisor who had attended *Get Out* with his girlfriend in a movie theater in Central New York. He and his girlfriend were the only interracial couple in the entire theater and he was the only black male in the white audience. Like most of the individuals I have met while writing this thesis, my supervisor shared the same sentiment of excitement of seeing a well-written film that critically engaged with race while simultaneously being scary and comedic. His experience, however, differed from my own as he received a room full of glances when the film concluded. It was as if the audience recognized their own role within the forms of systematic oppression and the types of racism that continued within post-racial America. His girlfriend, too, received looks as she was suddenly translated into a narrative where her white womanhood was questioned.

This anecdote is not to condemn his girlfriend as a person or translate my supervisor into a narrative that locates him as a victim, rather, it is to draw attention to the type of reaction that *Get Out* has elicited even in rural areas where issues of race and gender are quite often behind the reaction to such issues in more cosmopolitan regions. *Get Out* is a film that has not only rewritten what issues could possibly be tackled within the horror genre, but also created a film that has localized larger issues of race within audiences who might have not realized that these conflicts were still ongoing. While the horror genre can still maintain the earlier traditions of the canon, Peele has given a new potential to cinema that suggests that critical work on race can be performed and understood in a format that is easily accessible for larger audiences.
My opinion on the subject of racial relations is a product of my white privilege that I have benefitted from throughout my academic career; I am not lodged within a history of trauma and a present that attempts to disfranchise my identity. While this thesis aims to bring forth the racial dimensions I noticed within the text, my frameworks should not overshadow those who are experiencing the systematic forms of oppression that have been normalized within the United States. As a white woman, I do not have the experience of racism. I have only the understanding of it through academic studies and I can identify more closely with the narratives that protect Rose’s status than with the violence that has been plagued against characters of color. Those who have been subject to marginalization will always have a greater understanding of how it operates. This thesis did not aim to speak for those who have been subjected to the scars of the past, but rather, present a historical and cultural lens that explores themes within Jordan Peele’s film.

Therefore when Jordan Peele announced on May 8, 2018 that he would be continuing his legacy with a film entitled Us on Twitter, I felt a sense of excitement for those who identified with the Chris Washington in Get Out. The tagline, “A New Nightmare from the Mind of Academy Award Winner Jordan Peele,” suggests that others are beginning to recognize the significance of the film. Us is expected to be another social thriller that addresses the issues that began with Peele’s early work. With three more films planned over the course of the next decade, Peele has found his role as speaker of the identities that have been otherwise subjected to silence and violence through cinema. While many filmgoers might have a sense of discomfort when leaving
theaters at the conclusion of his social thrillers, Jordan Peele's work will continue to
breathe life into the “nightmares” that are inescapable for many Americans.
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