Dani Jin

Professor Yang

English 300

17 December 2018

"Behold the Coagula"

An Analysis of Jordan Peele's Film *Get Out*

Jordan Peele's directorial debut *Get Out* is a commentary on the African American lived experience in contemporary America is exposed through the genre of horror. *Get Out* incorporates both ends of the horror spectrum — nuanced to theatrically terrifying— in regards to racism in order to illuminate how blackness continues to be associated with racialised injustices in the United States, thus revealing what Saidiya V. Hartman calls the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman 5). The film intertwines the darkest chapter of American history in antebellum slavery with today's modern political and social climate in order to create a story that exposes to audiences how black people across the United States continue to live under white surveillance and control. Rather than solely using explicit violence to create the horror aspect of the film, Peele implements subtler scenes of racism that are packed with symbolism and allude to the realities of African Americans everywhere, not just in Peele's work. By doing this, the film forces audiences realize that much of the terror in the movie derives from the seemingly harmless scenes that stem from the actuality of present-day black society and their complicated relationship with the white American population. *Get Out*'s strategic use of symbolism, loaded dialogue, and graphic versus nuanced images teaches the audience about how being black in a contemporary climate does not differ drastically from the slavery era and what Hartman refers to

as the "terror of the mundane" (Hartman 4). This racism typically appears more subtly in real-world context but is very much alive in present day America. The horror depicted in *Get Out* is not purely fictional, rather, it is very much real in the material conditions of everyday lives of African Americans living in the 21st century United States.

In *Get Out*, Jordan Peele strategically tones down the amount of gore, violence, and jumpscares — which are typical attributes in a classic horror movie — in order to highlight the terror that lies within the more realistic scenes of Chris' experience with the Armitage family. While staying at his girlfriend's (Rose Armitage) childhood home, Chris Washington is informed that the Armitage's annual garden party would be taking place during his visit. Upon the arrival of Dean and Missy Armitage's friends, the dichotomy of white versus black is quickly and starkly introduced. As Chris circulates through the crowd and is introduced, the dialogue spoken by the family friends becomes very two-toned, thus creating a building tension that implies that it will be relevant later on. At the surface value of the dialogue, the commentary Chris receives appears to be purely ignorant and unintentionally racist which black people (and people of color in general) hear often and have come to accept as normative behavior by those that are less culturally aware. As the audience views the inspection process Chris endures during the party, the horror behind the scene begins to unfold. The party guests observe, manipulate, and fondle Chris as if they were observing cattle at an auction, thus dehumanizing him. This layer of the film emphasizes the historical aspect of the nuanced horror and heavily mirrors what it was like for a slave to be examined at an auction. When slaves were brought to auctions, the buyers would surround them and "examined with as little consideration as if they had been brutes indeed; the buyers pulling their mouths open to see their teeth, pinching their limbs to find how

muscular they were, walking them up and down to detect any signs of lameness, making them stoop and bend in different ways that they might be certain there was no concealed rupture or wound; and in addition to all this treatment, asking them scores of questions relative to their qualifications and accomplishments." which is the nearly identical treatment of Chris as Rose introduced him to the Armitage's guests (Copeland 115). In one scene, a man named Gordon, accompanied by his wife Emily, tells Chris: "Let's see your form" which, when out of context, sounds eerily similar to something that would be demanded by a person interested in purchasing a slave (Peele). Although under the guise of form when golfing, this line directly correlates to how Chris was being tested for his physical capabilities. Another pair of party guests, Lisa and Nelson, approach Chris and Lisa immediately feels his arms and chest, whispering "Not bad. Eh, Nelson?" which signifies how the couple was marveling at his build (Peele). Lisa continues and looks to Rose and asks, "So is it true? Is it better?" referring to his sexual capabilities (Peele). This scene subtly hinted that Chris's body would be used by Nelson (and in turn by Lisa when engaging in sexual acts), who was wheelchair bound, thus implying that he needed a new host body in order to regain all mobility. This detail may not be picked up right away, but when viewers do come to the realization, it is a frightening foreshadow of Chris's future.

Scenes like the garden party relate back to today's real world because black people were (and continually are) exploited for their bodies, much like Chris but on a more realistic level. In particular, African American women today are often fetishised by the media and "In the 20th-century context of a burgeoning print technology, popular culture and a modern sex industry, visual pornography exoticised black women to perpetuate the colonial emphasis on their hyper developed sexuality, and their status as sex object for others' gratification and use."

which finds its roots in the century when enslaved black women were frequently sexually assaulted by their owners (Lewis 13). The black women that were sold into slavery were often times viewed as inhuman and therefore treated as a "breeder" for more children that would then turn a profit for the slave master when the child was old enough to work or be sold at auction (Collins 56). African American women today continue to be peered at through a sexual lens but African American men also have a history with being viewed as sexual beings. According to Patricia Collins, "Black women were objects to be seen, enjoyed, purchased, and used, primarily by White men with money. African women's sexuality may have piqued the prurient interest of Western audiences, but African men's sexuality was seen as dangerous and in need of control." which relays back to when Lisa made her sexual remarks about Chris's body, impling that she and her husband would be the ones to "control" him (Collins 31). This history of hypersexualization of African American women and men by white people in the real world sheds light on a new breed of societal horror that Peele alludes to as Chris is touched and peered at through the eyes of his potential controllers.

White society finding pleasure in manipulating and taking advantage of black bodies has been a grotesque trend for years, prominent in the slavery era but continuing on to even present day. The white characters in *Get Out* take enjoyment in their inspection of Chris, knowing full well of their future intentions with him. Hartman argues in her book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* that some of the most chilling aspects of slavery was the delight and/or indifference slave owners felt as they brutalized their slaves. In her book, Hartman hopes "to illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle" which heavily relates back to Peele's directional take on an

untraditional horror movie (Hartman 4). Rather than highlighting the quick, graphic, and gory nature of typical horror tropes (jumpscares, blood, etc.), Peele instead incorporates a prolonged sense of unease throughout his film. He does this by incorporating a sense of realness in the uncomfortable situations Chris is placed in such as the garden scene or the scene where a white cop interrogates Chris despite not being the driver. By doing this, Peel's version of a horror movie relates to Hartman's theory of examining the unexplored but equally terrible natures of slavery, racism, and discrimination into practice.

Jeremy Armitage's character, in particular, especially exemplifies the idea of finding terror in "the mundane and quotidian" because his character's demeanor is void of any emotion other than sadistic joy in knowing what will become of Chris. From the start of his introduction to his death, Jeremy failed to hide his fascination of toying with and manipulating Chris. During a dinner scene, Jeremy states "Cause with your genetic makeup, if you really pushed your body, and I mean really train, you know? No pussyfooting around. You'd be a fucking beast," all while displaying a menacing grin, implying that he would push Chris' body to its physical limitations and then use it as a weapon (Peele). Jeremy then demands that Chris stand up and — presumably— demonstrate his abilities in natural fighting skills which mirrors how "the enslaved were required to sing or dance for the slave owner's pleasure as well as to demonstrate their submission, obsequiousness, and obedience," therefore acting as a reflection of the slave era (Hartman 8). Jeremy continually prodded Chris with racially charged questions about his athletic abilities and by attempting to make him stand and perform, Jeremy then begins to seem more like a slave master demanding that his "property" do as he is told.

In contemporary society, the act of using black bodies as a form of entertainment and spectacle is still relevant by means of Hollywood typecasting. African Americans and most actors of color constantly fall victim to this common trend of placing actors in roles that fall under racist stereotypes whereas white entertainers are given a wide range of characters and identities to choose from. In Nancy Wang Yeun's book *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism*, the author explains that whiteness is considered the norm in television and film whereas blackness is pigeonholed into tropes such as the angry black woman or the "badass" because that is what has been made the expectation by the history of film in the United States (Yeun 70). Although not as drastic as in *Get Out*, white society's manipulation of black society's free will in today's climate is still a major issue that goes unbeknownst to the public because it is so ingrained as the norm through popular culture.

Chris' realization that the other black characters in *Get Out* are enslaved by the Armitage's and their friends serves as the most distinct connection between slavery and modern day treatment of African Americans. In the film, "The Sunken Place" holds a multitude of meanings, both in the film and in the real world. In the context of *Get Out*, "The Sunken Place" is the method of enslavement the Armitage's use in order to capture Chris and the other black characters. They become mentally immobile, stripped of their autonomy, and wholly at the mercy of their white owner's brain. Rather than the white characters using brutality and violence to imprison the black characters, Jordan Peele created an innovative method of terrifying the audience by using a psychological method of abduction. By straying from the traditional cinematographic approaches of a horror movie, Peele developed an idea that doubles as a refreshing yet nuanced scare tactic as well as a metaphor for the mentality of black people.

"The Sunken Place" shrewdly depicts the mentality of black treatment both during the 18th and 19th century as well as in contemporary society. "The Sunken Place" represents the mental prison of what it means to be black in contemporary society. Black people are limited in speech, movement, behavior, and more basic human rights because of white perception of the black community. This phenomenon happens daily, for example, many black children are given "the talk" at a young age regarding exactly how to act if they ever encountered or even came near a police officer because they are much more likely to be antagonized and brutalized by the law than their white peers. Black people cannot escape this mentality of constantly having to act to a certain standard of civility because the effects of slavery, such as racial profiling, still exist today. African Americans are under control and speculation at all times by white authority and the threats of incarceration, social restriction, or — at worst — death, restricts them in all aspects of their life. Although Chris manages to escape the Armitage's, thus displaying a degree of autonomy, it is still a film and as a film, the protagonist comes out victorious as do most in storylines. However, the alternate ending of *Get Out* concludes with Chris being detained and sent to prison, falling victim yet again to a white-dominated system of law which is vastly more realistic if a black man had been seen at the area of multiple murders while covered in blood..This lack of mobility and free will is explored in Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route,* in which the author describes her experience of travelling along a slave route in Ghana while reflecting upon her own genealogy. In this text, she formulates the idea of "the afterlife of slavery" which she describes as: "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment," all of which are aspects in modern day black life that stem from slavery (Hartman, 5). Even after slavery was

abolished, the black population was still left to suffer because extreme intolerance and racism never truly disappeared. Today, African Americans are born into a life where they are forced to act and think differently around certain groups of people, particularly white people, but they are still able to be themselves when they do not feel that societal pressure perhaps at their homes or while around their friends of color. However, when Missy Armitage hypnotizes and therefore enslaves her black victims, she is wholly erasing their blackness and using their body as a shell filled with white speech, behavior, and mentality that they can no longer escape.

Get Out's utilization of symbolism reflects the many contemporary issues with race the United States faces. Symbolism works as one of the Peele's most prominent methods of subtle horror in the film. In particular, deer are arguably the most critical symbols in this movie because they represent African Americans in *Get Out*. Early in the film, Rose and Chris are driving to the Armitage's house when a deer sprints across the street and is struck by the moving car. The deer lies limp and nearly lifeless in the woods with a look of desperation and pleading in its eyes as Chris approaches it to see the damage. In this moment, the audience begins to feel as if the deer were attempting to warn Chris to stay away from the Armitages. The deer in this scene may also represent Chris's mother who was killed by a car and lay slowly dying in the streets. Therefore, the deer acted as Chris's own family begging him to stay away.

After arriving at her father's house, Rose recounts how she hit a deer and Dean replies: "I say one down, a couple hundred thousand to go… I do not like the deer. I'm sick of it. They're taking over. They're like rats. They're destroying the ecosystem. I see a dead deer on the side of the road, I think to myself, that's a start." which at first may seem like a harmless — albeit harsh — statement but as the film progresses, it becomes clear that Dean was referring to the black

population in America (Peele). Evidence of this symbolism appears towards the latter half of the film when Chris is held hostage in the Armitage basement. As Chris is forced to look directly at a television set in front of him that is explaining the process of how his body will be used as a host for a white brain, the camera pans to a shot of a taxidermied buck's head mounted on the wall. The symbol of the deer begins to come full circle as the dead, tortured look in the bucks eye mirrors that of the dying one that lay on the side of the road after being struck by Rose's car. The lifeless buck permanently trapped in the house exemplifies the African American victims that were enslaved by the Armitage family and cannot escape.

Irony also lies within the symbolism when you take Dean Armitage's quote stated earlier into consideration. During Chris's escape, he manages to murder Dean using the antlers of the buck, depicting black revolt, power, and autonomy. The irony lies within the fact that Dean emphasized his hatred for the "deer" and how he was pleased every time he witnessed the death of one but was then later killed by exactly what he despised. The revolution of the "deer" fighting back and ending Dean Armitage, who represents a slave master, pays homage to the slave revolts in the 18th and 19th centuries such as the Stono Rebellion. The Stono Rebellion was "the largest slave revolt ever staged in the 13 colonies" and took place on September 9, 1739 (Gates). In *Get Out*, Chris creates his own revolution by killing the white people who were attempting to enslave him. As Chris is about to make his final escape down the driveway of the Armitage house, he is attacked by Walter, the Armitage's groundskeeper whose body was hosting the brain of Dean's father. Chris uses his cell phone's flash in order to "awaken" Walter whose original mentality is then restored as he shoots Rose, saving Chris's life. This scene was extremely bloody and violent, underscoring similarities to slave revolts, Gates describes the

slaves of the Stono Rebellion as having "gathered at the Stono River and raided a warehouse-like store, Hutchenson's, executing the white owners and placing their victims' heads on the store's front steps for all to see. They moved on to other houses in the area, killing the occupants and burning the structures, marching through the colony toward St. Augustine, Fla., where under Spanish law, they would be free." (Gates). As gory and terrifying as these accounts (both in *Get Out* and in real life) were, there was a sense of empowerment in watching Chris ultimately come out victorious in his escape as well as in the reading of the Stono Rebellion.

The dialogue in *Get Out* plays an important factor in the contrast between black and white and adds another illusive layer to Peele's take on a horror film. When Chris speaks with the other black character in the film, his diction and tone noticeably relax as he transitions from speaking Standard American English with the Armitages and their friends to African American Vernacular English (AAVE) with people such as Rod and Logan King. AAVE is "a variety (dialect, ethnolect and sociolect) of American English, most commonly spoken today by urban working-class and largely bi-dialectal middle-class African Americans" whereas Standard American English (SAE) is often considered the "proper" way of speaking because it is associated with "upper-class speech " and arose "from the metropolitan center of economic power" (Collazo; Bonfiglio 17). The distinction between AAVE and SAE in *Get Out* is most clear during the interactions Chris has when he attempts to start conversations with the black characters that are already under the control of white minds such as Georgina and Walter.

During the garden party scene, Chris notices another African American man, Logan King (formerly known as Andre), from afar and approaches him by saying: "Good to see another brother around here" and the phrase "brother" indicates Chris's transition to using AAVE once

again because “terms like *brother, bro, sister, or girl* refers to other African Americans” and is often a “…special in-group meaning used by African Americans,” when speaking with friends (Peele; Pollmanns 4). Logan’s demeanor is notably different than Chris’s, especially when his partner, Philomena, enters the scene and he explicitly tells her that his presence made Chris feel more comfortable, thus construing a disconcerting atmosphere that looms over the audience as they begin to understand that Logan was yet another victim of the Armitage family. Logan’s behavior and dialogue juxtaposes Chris’s which creates a dividing line between the enslaved and the free. The language in this movie adds a nuanced but very apparent sense of horror in *Get Out* because it is a definitive indicator for the audience that something has happened to the black characters to make them speak so rigidly, as if they were possessed.

African American Vernacular English in itself is believed to have originated during the slavery era of the 16th through 19th centuries. This linguistic system was often used between enslaved Africans (mainly from the Western Africa regions) to communicate with one another in way that their owners could not understand. Because of this rich history, many black Americans consider using AAVE as a method of embracing African heritage. With this in mind, *Get Out* comments on a new method of white dominance in the film by having the white characters take over their African American host bodies’ most basic right to speaking freely. This type of control can be seen in the world when African Americans Vernacular English is “stigmatized as bad or informal especially from those outside this social speech community, namely speakers of Standard English" and is associated with the less intelligent, mid to lower class in the black community (Pollmanns 4). Due to this stigmatization, African Americans often feel as if they must adjust the way they speak depending on who they are in conversation with in order to gain

the same degree of respect as their white counterparts. In *Get Out*, Chris partook in this behavior by only speaking with AAVE when on the phone with Rod or while trying to communicate with the black characters. However, because Logan, Georgina, and Walter were all being "spoken for" by a white person, there is an unmistakable contrast between the two races which adds another element of terror to the film because Chris cannot escape whiteness, even when he is in the presence of blackness.

It is a common misconception around the United States that racism is on its last leg and that progression is constantly being made in order to improve the lives of people of color. However, Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* challenged this idea by creating an untraditionally terrifying story that symbolizes how the black experience is still very much present. The ties to the era of slavery have yet to be cut and Peele explores this idea by utilizing both extremes of the horror spectrum— nuanced to graphic. Many of the quiet and seemingly harmless scenes are packed with dark symbolism that represent America's current state in regards to racism. The more intense scenes with the typical blood and gore of a horror movie help to emphasize the extent of how the slavery era never truly passed. *Get Out* explores the various ways in which African Americans today are continually fighting a legal, political, and social system that was historically built to oppress them. Hartman's theory of the "terror of the mundane and quotidian" appears throughout the film via methods of subdued dialogue and symbolism, thus conjuring a constant, unsettling atmosphere that the audience can physically feel as the movie progresses. Although *Get Out* falls back on classic horror movie tropes such as jumpscares and gore, the truly chilling aspects of the film arise from the slow realization that modern day American

society still has ties to the era of slavery and there is no clear telling of when said-ties will be cut or if doing so is even possible.

Annotated Bibliography

Topic: An analysis of the techniques used in Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* to depict the relationship between contemporary racism against African Americans and 19th century slavery.

Thesis Statement: *Get Out*'s strategic use of symbolism, loaded dialogue, and graphic versus nuanced images teaches the audience about how being black in a contemporary climate does not differ drastically from the slavery era and what Hartman refers to as the "terror of the mundane" (Hartman 4).

Peele, Jordan, director. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2017.

This contemporary horror film tells the story of an African American man in a relationship with a white woman whose family hides a dark secret that stems from the history of slavery.

Hartman, Saidiya. "Lose Your Mother." *Google Books*, books.google.com/books/about/Lose_Your_Mother.html?id=u7fkZ5w6am4C&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false.

This book depicts author, Saidiya Hartman's, journey of travelling the same route slaves were forced to take as they were captured and brought across the Atlantic. In particular, I will be focusing on the section in which Hartman explores the idea of how the essence of slavery continues to exist for black people in modern day America.

Stupp, Jason. " Slavery and the Theatre of History: Ritual Performance on the Auction Block." *JSTOR*, 2011,

www.jstor.org/stable/41307505?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=slave&searchText=auction&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dslave%2Bauction%26amp%3Bwc%3Don%26amp%3Bgroup%3Dnone%26amp%3Bfc%3Doff%26amp%3Bacc%3Don&refreqid=search%3A651955447c305290819e90303b279a14&seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents.

This essay describes the nature of slave auctions and how the white audiences that attended them were a major part of the auction culture. Stupp compares these historical auctions to modern day reenactments that are used for educational purposes but are nonetheless inaccurate depiction of how the auctions actually were.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

This essay explores the idea of how the terror of slavery lies heavily (but less known) in the white enjoyment of black torture and abuse.

"World Englishes in Asian Contexts." *World Englishes in Asian Contexts*, by Yamuna Kachru and Cecil L. Nelson, Hong Kong University Press, 2006, pp. 211–221.

Chapter 15 of this book focuses on the history of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and its effect on white and black culture.

Gates, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: a Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

This book explains a linguistic theory known as "Signifyin'" which is someone related to AAVE in that it is a method of speech that is typically associated with black culture and

black power. It explores the multitude of ideas that Signifyin' can have such as a secret language or even trickery between speaker and audience.

Lewis, Desiree. "Against the Grain: Black Women and Sexuality." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 63, 2005, pp. 11–24. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4066624.

Lewis discusses the historical and modern day perception of black women's bodies and sexuality.

Yuen, Nancy Wang. "HOLLYWOOD'S TYPECASTING." *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism*, Rutgers University Press, NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY; LONDON, 2017, pp. 69–81. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1kc6jvm.7.

Wang explores the phenomenon of Hollywood typecasting actors of color and how it limits this limits their career mobility.

Copeland, David A. *Antebellum Era Primary Documents on Events from 1820 to 1860*. Greenwood Pub Group, 2007.

This book provided documentation from 1859 that depicted how slaves were treated during auctions. The document described how the buyers would inspect slaves and put them through a multitude of tests to ensure they were in good physical and mental condition.

Gates Jr. , Henry. "The Five Greatest Slave Rebellions in the United States." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 19 Sept. 2013, www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/did-african-american-slaves-rebel/.

This website offered information on several slave rebellions in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Collazo, Richey. “AAVE Is For Black People And Black People Only.” *Affinity Magazine*, 4 Sept. 2017, affinitymagazine.us/2016/05/22/aave-is-for-black-people-and-black-people-only/.

This magazine article offered the most concise and cohesive definition of African American Vernacular English.

Pollmanns, Milena. “The Influences of Africanisms on American English: The Variety of Afro-American English.” *Google Books*, books.google.com/books?id=3cKi_I93A68C&pg=PA4&dq=aave%2Bbrother%2Bslang&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjd3KGr3aTfAhWviqYKHQxNB3sQ6AEIKDAA#v=onepage&q=aave%20brother%20slang&f=false.

This book discussed how African American English Vernacular is incorporated into Standard American English. It also provided an extensive history of how AAVE originated during the slavery era and is now considered a part of black identity in modern day America.