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abstract:

Jordan Peele's 2017 social thriller Get Out depicts a peculiar form of body swap resulting from the uncanny desires of the Armitage family to seize captured black bodies and use them as carriers of their white minds. This paper offers reading of the movie's disturbing plot through the lens of the origins and cultural significance of blackface. For the sake of argument, in this article blackface is to be understood as a cultural phenomenon encompassing the symbolic role of black people basic to the US society, which articulates the ambiguity of celebration and exploitation of blackness in American popular culture. This article draws on the theoretical framework of blackface developed by Lott, Rogin, Ellison and Gubar, in order to explore the Get Out's complex commentary on the twenty-first century race relations in the United States. In result, this paper turns the spotlight on the mechanisms of racist thinking in the United States, by showing the movie's use of the apparatus underpinning blackface.

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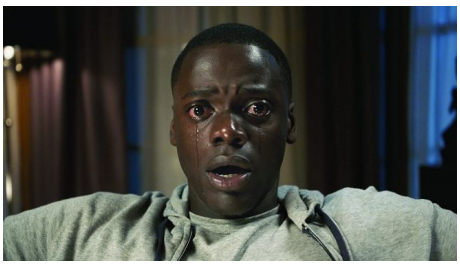
The Inclusion Solution? The Use of Blackface in Jordan Peele's "Get Out"

With the election of Barack Obama as President in 2009, many claimed that the United States had entered a post-racial era. They saw the election of an African American for the highest position as a landmark indication of the ultimate overcoming of racism in the United States. Jordan Peele, an American actor, comedian, and director of the 2017 movie *Get Out* calls this claim "the post-racial lie" and uses the horror genre to reveal the truth about indirect forms of racism, communicated by contemporary liberal elites.[1]

Jordan Peele, *Get Out*, 2017.

Get Out is not a story about blatant and obvious racists but instead, ostensibly non-racist white liberals, such as Obama supporters, who might veil their racist beliefs thanks to the fact that racial discourse in America has been conditioned and defined, perhaps wrongly, by the contrary attitudes of love and hate.[2] An American cultural historian, Eric Lott, examines "a kind of blackface anti-racism" – the ambiguities of whites' relationship with black culture, and accordingly, calls for thinking about other factors besides love and hate in the articulation of race relations in the United States. He suggests that blackface is an all-encompassing form capable of carrying the weight of that prominent ambiguity, beginning with nineteenth-century minstrelsy and remaining continuously significant in both the twentieth- and twenty-first-centuries.[3] Lott argues against the binary understanding of blackface and instead claims that it

"exposes contradictory racial impulses at work;"[4] and while he conceptualizes the ambiguity of American racism in the vague phenomenon of blackface, *Get Out* tells the story of its most contemporary avatar.


Jordan Peele, *Get Out*, 2017.

The origins of blackface date back to the minstrel shows of the mid-19th century, during which actors darkened their facial skin with burnt cork and wore tattered clothing in order to resemble a stereotypical black person. Minstrel shows quickly gained popularity across the United States and went on to eventually entertain audiences around the world. Blackface performers usually caricatured slaves, perpetuating their image as lazy, childish and hypersexualized beings. Perhaps the most recognizable blackface character in history was Jim Crow, developed by Thomas Dartmouth Rice; this white New York comedian danced and sang in a caricatured manner, using black vernacular to mimic a physically disabled black man.[5] Although such performances were intended to be funny and harmless entertainment for urban whites, blackface clearly drew on racist tropes, mocked African Americans and contributed significantly to a painful history of cultural appropriation. As claimed by Eric Lott, "blackface represents a strange mix of envy, fascination, desire and fear."[6] The damaging legacy of minstrel performances easily permeated films, such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *The Jazz Singer* (1927), fabricating a stereotypical image of African Americans through which they have been perceived up to this very day.[7]

This paper argues that Jordan Peele's *Get Out* utilizes the enduring legacy of blackface in order to comment on the place of African Americans within today's ambiguous racial discourse in the United States. It analyzes metaphors used in the movie to depict the mechanisms of racist thinking, and thus to show their

striking resemblance to the apparatus underlying blackface. For the sake of this argument, blackface is not understood literally as the aesthetic convention of blackening a white face with burnt cork and a mundane theatrical practice; rather, it is considered to be a protean form encompassing the basic, symbolic role of black people in American society, which marks their socio-cultural locus and significance. I state that blackface should instead be seen as an aggregate of cultural practices, the most legible form of cultural appropriation, and a cultural phenomenon reaching beyond theatrical stages and movie theaters. In this paper, blackface is to be understood as a carrier of enormous explanatory power that appears in countless ways on contemporary, genuine *stages* in the United States, continuously defining and reinterpreting blackness – the vast range of meanings and assumptions that black people are meant to signify, in and outside the United States, which allows their stylized, fabricated presence to be enacted. Drawing on theoretical works by Eric Lott and Michael Rogin, along with Susan Gubar and Frantz Fanon, I examine how *Get Out* utilizes a grim continuum of stereotypes, racism and the consumption of blackness, all of which are embodied in blackface. To that end, I apply statements derived from their theoretical work examining the phenomenon of blackface, its origins, evolution, meanings and cultural significance, to particularly relevant scenes from the movie, thus revealing their close connection with the concept of blackface.

Get Out tells the story of Chris, an African American photographer, who is about to be introduced to the family of his white girlfriend Rose. Rose is consistently dismissive of Chris's concerns about her family, asserting that they are liberal and not racist in the least, citing her father's love of Barack Obama as evidence. However, once Chris and Rose arrive at the Armitage estate in Upstate New York, Chris witnesses Rose's parents awkwardly attempting to engage in social interaction, as well as

the strange behavior of the family's black servants, Georgina and Walter. The weekend turns into a party, hosted by Rose's parents, Dean and Missy, and it leads to a horrific twist; the party changes into an auction, during which Chris is to be sold to a white art gallery owner who wants to have his brain transplanted into Chris's body. Eventually, it turns out that the family's servants are carrying Rose's grandparents' minds, because the Armitage family have been engaging in a body transplantation procedure called "Coagula" and Chris is meant to become their next victim.


Jordan Peele, *Get Out*, 2017.

While *Get Out* is a political horror film heavily loaded with meaning, giving its viewers room to interpret things in numerous ways, I deliberately suggest reading the movie's plot through the perspective of the longstanding US tradition of blackface. I consider blackface – an intricate metaphor for a broad spectrum of practices, articulating the complex relationship of celebrating and exploiting blackness – an all-encompassing tool facilitating the movie's interpretation. The film depicts a peculiar form of body swap and, thus, instinctively draws on the contemporary politics of blackface. In the twenty-first century blackface has become so widespread and omnipresent that it comes almost naturally, adopted by both whites and blacks nearly imperceptibly. In *Get Out* whites not only want to don blackface, but they desire to come into possession of a black body in its entirety. Coagula, the procedure (which I will discuss later), reveals the darkest desires of white people - to seize blacks entirely and "black up" all over. Hence, the movie's plot becomes a metaphor for complete colonization, which, if correlated with the history of blackface, reveals the darkest recesses of the racial paranoia that haunts America. Blackface evinces itself in

Peele's film to reveal truths about the racial confusion that underpins American society.

Through such a grotesque plot the film appears to argue that liberals in the so-called post-racial era are more terrifying than one can imagine – in Peele's horror these supposedly non-racist allies of black folks become the most threatening monsters of all. Notably, the core plot device in the movie – white members of the Armitage family desiring to seduce, kidnap, hypnotize, and finally trade places with healthier, younger and stronger black people, who they are fascinated by – is closely linked with the American tradition of blackface. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon argues that "an individual who loves Blacks is as *sick* as someone who abhors them."[8] This obsession and longing to embody blacks reaches a crescendo during the family gathering when Chris endures a social nightmare: a garden full of white, middle-aged people who constantly invade his space; they touch and prod him without permission, objectifying him physically and sexually. One man asks if Chris plays golf, declaring that he knows Tiger Woods; someone else claims that now "black is in fashion," while a lady openly asks Rose how good Chris is in bed.[9]

Although odd and uncomfortable, these comments aim to compliment, approve of, and show general recognition of Chris among these white progressive folks, which is commonly seen as an indication of their color blindness.[10] However, as the viewer soon realizes, the Armitages and their guests have an ulterior motive; they do not so much admire Chris as a person as wish to assess the quality of Chris's body parts, which are about to be placed in a literal auction. Even his mental attributes, such as his artistic talent, are explicitly broken down into objectified physical parts; his talent as a photographer becomes reduced to his artistic "eyes," which are commodified in order to be taken away from him. Objectification of Chris is reminiscent of auction scenes

depicted in some slave narratives, such as *Clotel: Or, The President's Daughter* by William Wells Brown. A passage from the novel reads:

> 'Thirteen.' 'Fourteen.' 'Fifteen.' 'Fifteen hundred dollars,' cried the auctioneer, and the maiden was struck for that sum. This was a Southern auction, at which the bones, muscles, sinews, blood, and nerves of a young lady of sixteen were sold for five hundred dollars; her moral character for two hundred; her improved intellect for one hundred; her Christianity for three hundred; and her chastity and virtue for four hundred dollars more.[11]

Attendees at the auctions (both in *Clotel* and *Get Out*) overtly express their admiration for the subject of the auction and repeatedly emphasize "the value of the article."[12] Both scenes reveal the auctioneers' benevolence for what it really is: a cover for a system of dehumanization.

Eric Lott argues that "blackface arose from white obsession with black (male) bodies," a strong white fascination with black people, black culture and commodified blackness.[13] In *Get Out*, Chris is hypersexualized and fetishized in the eyes of whites who add a magical bonus value to his black body.[14] Long-established racial demarcation and differentiation have prompted racial fantasies, desire and delight concerning the patronized, racially exoticized black bodies. Laws, such as *The Civil Rights Acts* (1866, 1964), and landmark cases, for instance *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), have banned systemic segregation in the hope of restraining racism. However, simultaneously, they could also have contributed to an intensified mainstream celebration of a certain representation of blackness, which Toni Morrison calls "American Africanism."[15] As John Blair argues, blackface minstrelsy was a significant contributor, if not the sole cause, of the spread of such forms of racial prejudice across America.[16]

According to Lott, the blackface dynamic was brought about by white subjectivity and a "constant coupling or complex play of racial fear and desire, 'othering' and identification, ambivalence and attraction."[17] In *Get Out,* blackness is only recognized and accepted in order to serve the white people; it is the same old disease manifested in a new, different way, which makes it merely a fallacy of progress Lott argues that blackface is responsible for making erotic objects out of black figures (both men and women). Then this eroticized image is, according to the author, central to the white political imagination.[18] Blackness serves as white people's entertainment (acquiring black physical strength, sexuality) and justification (showing off liberal ideologies). It is love interwoven with hate, a reinvented form of slavery, an affirmation that makes exploitation possible, in order for whites to get the best of both worlds. With blackface, blackness becomes a commodity representing a racial difference that serves to sustain white dominance.

These white post-racial fantasies are closely tied to the ideal of anti-racist progress envisioned in social and political change. Since the second half of the 20th century, "loving black" in America has gained proper political currency. *Get Out* amplifies the subtle racism that emanates from liberal Obama voters, seemingly representing a utopian post-racial America. Dean Armitage praises Obama and declares that he would vote for him again if he could. Rose's dad shows off his liberal viewpoint while indirectly exposing his conviction that African American upward mobility is only possible thanks to white people. This scene recalls James Baldwin's bitter reading of Bobby Kennedy's claim, from the 1960s, that America could have a black president in the next forty years. According to Baldwin, this statement is deeply contemptuous, because it means nothing but "if you are good, we [white people] might let you become President."[19] Moreover, Dean's ambiguous stance resembles

that of Matt Drayton, the benevolent patriarch in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), a movie that Jordan Peele mentions among the twelve films that inspired the making of *Get Out*.[20] Both Drayton and his wife are avowedly liberal in their political declarations but are deeply surprised when their daughter introduces her black fiancé. Eventually, the Draytons' daughter, Joanna's marriage to an African American is only possible due to Matt's kind approval; in other words – the future of this black man resides in the white man of the house. That said, it becomes truly difficult to argue that America has changed considerably in the last 60 years, since *Get Out* depicts the sympathetic affirmation of modern white liberals, such as Dean Armitage, as a new front for racism.

Dean's tendency to over-perform his acceptance of "all black things" is a sign of him willing to demonstrate how successfully he has "moved beyond racism." During the first, introductory meeting with Chris, Armitage asks him in a peculiar way: "How long has this *thang* been going on?" mimicking African American vernacular Englishand palpably appropriating black parlance.[21] Eric Lott argues that every time "an expansive white man drops into his version of black English," he evinces "blackface's unconscious return."[22] In this scene Dean wears blackface almost literally, using it as an "instrument of identity transfer."[23] It enables him to inherit the coolness and virility that comprise the prime components of white people's idea of black manhood.[24]

Dean's insistence on loving "all the black" turns into a spectacle enforcing black difference as bodily excess, just as blackface does.[25] Although blackface was patently considered a "form of unfreedom," Lott explains that minstrelsy performers believed in its potential to become a "venue of possibility."[26] Its liberating effect stems from the fact that blackface performers were bringing black culture (mostly music) to the public, enabling its spread among white audiences.[27] Undoubtedly, blackface minstrelsy played a crucial role in bringing black culture to

mainstream attention.[28] At the same time, since the early 19th century, Anglo-Americans have appropriated black culture, concealing a racism that operated alongside their fantasies under fallacious declarations of pseudo political support.

In *Get Out*, Peele lays bare and ridicules the liberal paranoia that results from a constant denial of white racism and a false assertion of the post-racial reality.[29]

Jordan Peele, *Get Out*, 2017.

The continual efforts of white people to appear as good allies of African Americans reveal the systemic and personal racist beliefs that are hidden beneath a thin veneer of liberalism and seemingly tolerant attitudes. While driving to the Armitages' house, Rose and Chris hit a deer and they are compelled to inform the police. When a policeman arrives (a white one, to be precise), he asks Chris to show his identification, even though Rose was the driver. In response, Chris humbles himself and smiles, willing to show his identity card, but suddenly Rose decides to come to his rescue and starts arguing with the police officer, whom she accuses of being overtly racist. Acting from her position of privilege, she is aggressively uncooperative and unaware of the fact that her antagonism could put Chris in serious danger.[30]

Eric Lott claims that blackface embodies the "racial unconscious." Coupled with Lott's observation, the scene analyzed above paints a compelling picture of seemingly innocuous, but significant "crimes against settled ideas of racial demarcation."[31] Rose does not appear aware of the threat she could pose to Chris and, most importantly, she does not stick up for him. In fact, Rose acts to her own benefit, as she tries to avoid a paper trail – had the cop run both of their licenses, there would have been a record later that Chris and Rose were driving together to the Armitage's residence. If the previously planned

process of Coagula had met with success and Chris had disappeared, police would have had evidence against Rose. Notwithstanding the fact that she is protecting herself more than Chris, her behavior implies that she thinks that she can save him by simply letting the policeman know they are together.

Rose's benevolent demeanor reveals her unconsciously held prejudice – she believes that Chris is incapable of protecting himself because he is black. This scene shows how a white person can be angered by overt racism (manifested by a policeman), and still be complicit in white supremacy. Simultaneously, it is perhaps the most obvious and literal critique of white liberalism, as well as the presumed innocence of those white people who believe they cannot be racist because they have black friends or lovers. Rogin argues that "textually the African American alone is vulnerable to racial hate; subtextually, as with blackface, he is vulnerable to racial love."[32] Rose explicitly shows her routine racism, in which general acceptance and support towards blacks is underpinned by an integral – even unconscious – confidence in black inferiority. Blackface's innocuous interracial narratives, according to Lee Artz, appear to try to raise up African Americans, while in fact they simplify race relations, contributing to the emergence of a new racism, which consists in "touting equality while ignoring the actual condition of race relations."[33]

A similar white superiority is evinced in Missy's feigned concern for Chris when she asks whether he is a smoker. She seems to be worried about his health and – since she is a psychiatrist – promises to bring relief from smoking through hypnosis. In fact, however, her intentions are entirely different – Chris must quit smoking because it is harming his body, which the Armitages want to use and implant a brain of one of the family members within. Missy, under the guise of giving selfless help, does some hypnosis which is essential to incapacitate the victim before carrying out the Coagula transplantation procedure. Hypnosis is a disturbing metaphor for the long history of white

control over black people. As Michael Rogin argues, blackface was invented to keep black actors off the screen, an exclusion that contributed to the enormous amount of historical white power over the black body and its representation in American cinema.[34]

Since, in the eyes of the law, white people are no longer allowed to enslave, kill and segregate black bodies, they can do nothing but accept and include them. Rogin claims that "blackface joins white power over black to personal [white] mobility and self-expression."[35] The reason why the groundskeeper in *Get Out* runs so much is because Rose's grandpa, whose brain is implanted within, wanted to have a fast black body, as he had lost to Jesse Owens in the qualifying round for the Berlin Olympics in 1936.[36] Similarly, Rose's grandmother, residing in Georgina's body, dresses herself and admires -her newly-obtained ideal black beauty in front of the mirror; and while Hudson – the blind gallery owner who buys Chris at the auction – denies being racist, he does admit to acquiring Chris's body for "these things" Chris sees through, namely his artistic eyes. Keeping the black at least partially out of society is only possible through annihilating the black spirit and distancing the black mind, which will eventually allow the black body to be used for white benefit and pleasure. At the same time, Georgina and Walter (carrying the consciousness of the Armitage grandparents) force viewers to face the fact that "the Tom stereotype" is the optimal fate for blacks in America, even if they are carriers of a white mind.[37]

As argued by Elizabeth Davis, the popularity and consumption of certain representations of black life has been grounded in African Americans' social death.[38] Mainstream celebration of blackness might nowadays manifest itself, for instance, in attempts to make Harriet Tubman the new face of the US twenty-dollar bill, or the commercial success of such films as *Black Panther* (2018), *Moonlight* (2016) and *Get Out.*[39] .

Similarly, the commodification of blackness has become evident in the widespread trend of *blackfishing*, observed in the US nowadays. *Blackfishing* means artificially enhancing one's appearance to look more "black."[40] Alongside celebrities, such as Kim Kardashian and Selena Gomez, who attempt to turn their skin a darker shade for commercial reasons, Rachel Dolezal has claimed to be doing it in order to *become* the person she regards as "her true self." The process of Rachel's transformation from a white girl of European heritage to pass as a black American was marked by "elaborate braided hair extensions" and distinctively darkened facial skin. Small wonder then that she was soon accused of exploiting blackface – after all, burnt cork does not differ that much from dark foundation, except for the advances in cosmetics and their increased availability.[41] According to what bell hooks writes in an essay that bears a very meaningful title – "Eating the Other" – contemporary mass culture "perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgment and enjoyment of racial difference."[42]

Having said that, current instances of blackface emphasize its role as a conveyor of meaning. As is argued by Ralph Ellison, blackface is a ritual mask, "the thing" meant to "enact a symbolic role basic to the underlying drama of American society."[43] Ellison claims that American life is most American when it is apt to be theatrical. Thus, in the process of defining roles in the United States – the land of masked jokers– black people have been reduced to a set of negative signs characteristic of grotesque and comedy, and this joke, as stated by Ellison, has been "at the center of the American identity."[44] Blackface is a carrier of that joke, thus the stylized and iconic mask has become required of anyone who is supposed to play the role of a black person – including black people, whose coloration and ancestry should, practically speaking, make it unnecessary. This explains why black people have also worn blackface – literal and metaphorical: since society does not accept their authentic, individualistic

identities, they have poisoned themselves with the image others have of them and play an assigned role. The mask is an evocation, a fabricated thing, never a reflection of reality or the identity of a performer, thus race has never been a matter of importance. The mask may be worn by both white and black people and its function, according to Ralph Ellison, is to veil the humanity of black people, reduce them to a sign, and create an "atmosphere in which the fascination of blackness could be enjoyed."[45]

The hypnosis, guided by Missy, aims to transport Chris into a catatonic state, one in which his mind separates from his body – the black inner man will from now on reside in the Sunken Place, from which he can only view his life from the perspective of a passive observer. According to Rogin, "blackface creates visual doubleness... in the separation of voice from body."[46] The Sunken Place inevitably leaves captivated blacks without a voice – their identity is suppressed for the sake of their body's elevation.[47] Toni Morrison argues that enforcing invisibility through silence is allowing the black body "a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body."[48] The Sunken Place metaphorically presents the internal conflict experienced by African Americans living in a structurally racist society, what W. E. B. DuBois calls the "double consciousness."[49] The Sunken Place disconnects the voice from the body, thus resembling the "twoness" of a black person, who is, as DuBois writes, "an American and a Negro," but can never fully participate in American society as a coherent individual.[50] Thus, the Sunken Place symbolizes the colonization of the black body, something that is prompted by a love of commodified blackness, and possible thanks to white control over the black body, embodied in blackface. Black people's minds and consciousness must reside inside the Sunken Place, so that their bodies, governed by white minds, can be finally

upgraded and brought to reside in superficial post-racial harmony via the process of Coagula.

Coagula – the procedure of transplanting white brains into the black bodies depicted in *Get Out* - is a peculiar form of affirmative action that aims to bring blacks over to join the white family and thus, society.[51] Just like blackface, Susan Gubar argues, it "illuminates the longterm effects of slavery and white people's efforts to rationalize, camouflage, confess, or repair the grievous injury inflicted on blacks by intentional forms of subjugation."[52] Dean's exaggerated declarations of how he loves blackness are aimed at pulling the wool over Chris's eyes and masking the Armitages' true intentions. Coagula allows "the subordination of black people" to be replayed, while simultaneously exonerating it – which is, as argued by Gubar, a unique function of blackface; as a result, it feigns the utopian participation of blacks in white society. In addition, Gubar suggests that blackface "arises from the dynamic of white guilt" and a history of slavery that annihilated black personhood.[53] At the end of the day, the Armitages believe that they do not cause any harm to black people, but work towards their complete inclusion to "make something perfect"– as Rose's grandfather declares in the TV ad projected in the basement for Chris – a truly post-racial America.

Jordan Peele, *Get Out*, 2017.

Jordan Peele, *Get Out*, 2017.

Hudson, looking forward to swapping bodies with Chris (for his award-winning photographic eyes), refuses to attribute his purchase to racism. In the message that Chris receives through the TV screen after being kidnapped, Hudson assures him that he did not chose Chris based on the color of his skin. *Get Out* suggests that white liberals attempt to delude African Americans with their supposedly progressive attitudes, in order to secretly foster racism and continue the exploitation. As argued by Rogin, "blackface heals the division in the white ability to playfully expropriate black under conditions of hierarchical, interracial harmony."[54] Such "harmony," however, is only possible by "taking out their eyes," which becomes literal in *Get Out*. Hence, the movie conveys the need for African Americans to stay woke[55] – be conscious and see through bogus care and friendliness.[56] In addition, *Get Out* openly speaks of the danger of African Americans donning masks and giving up their black identity in order to become accepted into white society.[57] Although blackface has been seen as a public forum for slave culture, *Get Out* proves that it is only staying woke that might have liberating effects.[58] If Chris decided to carry the burden of trying to fit into the white world, from which he had been fundamentally excluded, he would fall victim to the Armitages' interracial "adoption." Luckily, at the garden party, Logan – another victim of the Coagula – tells him to get out, which then makes Chris open his eyes.


Jordan Peele, *Get Out*, 2017.

Not only did "the post-racial lie" inspire *Get Out*, but it also helped Jordan Peele to decide on the movie's genre. He chose a social thriller with horror and comedy elements, as these genres express

the experience of African Americans living in the USA most accurately – an experience defined by racist terror and liberal grotesque. In doing so, Peele managed to reveal white fantasies of living in America without blacks.[59] The horror genre brings the real conditions of society into sharp relief and lets people come to terms with things they are otherwise blindly subject to. Thanks to the use of the "uncanny," horror enables "the return of the repressed."[60] "The repressed" issue that comes back in *Get Out* is racism expressed through blackface. *Get Out* as horror allows the cannibalistic nature of consuming the blackness to be revealed. The movie ingeniously uses common horror tropes to reveal truths about how pernicious racism in the United States is. Small social slights (microaggressions) and tiny injustices of casual racism, which are culturally embodied in blackface, are revealed in *Get Out* to be masking the most hideous form of racism there is: slavery.[61] *Get Out* contributes to the conviction that post-racial America does not exist; this utopia is shattered by backhanded, often unconscious forms of racism that do exist and, most importantly, are equally threatening to African Americans. It suggests that racist exploitation is still alive and kicking, even among supposedly friendly, white liberals.

The message of the movie could have been even more pessimistic, given its original ending, in which Chris is caught by the police and imprisoned for killing the whole Armitage family. Such an ending would suggest that, for African Americans, there is no escape from racism in the racially structured, ideologically white United States. As Ryan Poll states in his article, "to be Black in America, means to be trapped within an unending narrative of racialized terror."[62] Blackface – a form of cultural appropriation, fetishization of blackness, a perfect apparatus for masking racism, and an enactment of white fantasies and desires – is utilized in *Get Out* to present a parable of slavery and manifestations of racism as an ongoing social force. In this film, white society is an evil perpetrator and black people must remain

alert to its benevolent racism. *Get Out* lays bare white people's classic racist beliefs, hidden behind a thin veil of progressivism.

This notwithstanding, Jordan Peele chooses not to pay lip service to Afro-pessimism, and instead he lets Chris *get out* of both the racial terror of the Armitages and incarceration.[63] While Chris could have been unjustly imprisoned, like thousands of blacks in America, Peele chooses to set him free, and does so by allowing him to fight against everything that blackface has ever attempted to perpetuate. This is why Chris does not kill Rose – his main tormentor – in order to defeat the image of a violent black man; this is why he fights the Armitages with the attributes of the white elites (antlers, china, and a bocce ball) and not stereotypical bestial black strength. Early in the movie Jeremy (Rose's brother) is having a conversation with Chris about sports, during which Jeremy scoffs at Chris for not taking ju-jitsu lessons, because, according to Jeremy, it is like chess in that it demands "thinking three steps ahead." In the scene by the doorway, when Chris stabs a knife into Jeremy's leg, he not only outmuscles Rose's brother, which would perpetuate the stereotype of a dumb and strong black man, but most importantly Chris outsmarts Jeremy at his own game, thinking "three steps ahead." Finally, fighting the image perpetuated through blackface reveals the rationale behind Peele's decision to free Chris - ironically - with cotton balls, and later with the help of Chris's best friend, Ron. Jordan Peele provides the audience with a story about black unity and self-sufficiency, spectacularly confirming the profitability and salience of black power, while at the same time likely spelling the end of blackface.

The author is a student of the MA Program at the American Studies Center, University of Warsaw. **The article was originally written for the Research Proseminar „Race in American Film" taught by Prof. Agnieszka Graff in the Spring of 2020. The publication effort was partly funded by the ZIP and PIK programs.**

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7 William John Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 1–8. Lott and Marcus, *Love & Theft*, 3–10. "Friday Facts: Blackface," Algonquin College of Applied Arts and Technology. February 8, 2019. https://www.algonquincollege.com/diversity/2019/02/08/friday-facts-blackface/. Accessed on May 20, 2020.

8 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), xii.

9 Lott argues that blackface asserts "the power of the back penis in American psychic life;" Eric Lott, "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy," *Representations*, no. 39 (1992): 35.

10 Davis, "Beside(s) Love and Hate," 577.

11 William W. Brown, *Clotel: Or, The President's Daughter* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2009), 48.

12 Brown, *Clotel: Or, The President's Daughter*, 48.

13 Lott, "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy," 23, 25, 27.

14 Michael Rogin, "Democracy and Burnt Cork: The End of Blackface, the Beginning of Civil Rights," ed. Nick Browne, *Refiguring American Film Genres. History and Theory*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998), 178.

15 American Africanism is a set of concepts that constitute the fabricated literary imagery of African Americans, which has been influenced by the coexistence of Africans and Europeans in the United States. The author claims that such fabricated black persona serve a reflexive function, indicating "the sycophancy of white identity." Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007), 6–8, 19.

16 John Blair G., "Blackface Minstrels in Cross-Cultural Perspective," *American Studies International* 28, no. 2 (1990): 56–57.

17 Lott, "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy," 27.

18 Lott, 35.

19 James Baldwin, "The American Dream and the American Negro," *The New York Times*, March 7, 1965.

20 "Jordan Peele: The Art of the Social Thriller," *Brooklyn Academy of Music*, March 10, 2017, https://www.bam.org/film/2017/jordan-peele.

21 By "thang" Armitage means Chris's relationship with his daughter. Michael Ryan and Melissa Lenos, *An Introduction to Film Analysis: Technique and Meaning in Narrative Film* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 240.

22 Lott and Marcus, *Love & Theft*, 5.

23 Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998), 95.

24 Lott and Marcus, *Love & Theft*, 52.

25 Rogin, "Democracy and Burnt Cork: The End of Blackface, the Beginning of Civil Rights," 190.

26 Eric Lott, *Black Mirror: The Cultural Contradictions of American Racism.* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2017), 60.

27 Perhaps the most prominent example of this cultural exchange is jazz - a music genre that originated in the predominantly black communities of New Orleans, and was later popularized in shows and movies, for example in *The Jazz Singer* from 1927, which was the first movie with lip-synchronized singing and speech in several isolated sequences. "Jazz Origins in New Orleans," *New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park* https://www.nps.gov/jazz/learn/historyculture/history_early.htm. Accessed on May 20, 2020.

28 Leroi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (HarperCollins, 1999), 151.

29 Wesley Morris, "Jordan Peele's X-Ray Vision," *The New York Times*, December 20, 2017, sec. Magazine, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/20/magazine/jordan-peeles-x-ray-vision.html. Accessed on May 20, 2020.

30 According to *The Washington Post*, more than 54 cases of unarmed black men and boys killed by the police were reported in 2015 and 2016 – right before the movie's release in 2017. Ryan and Lenos, *An Introduction to Film Analysis*, 239.

31 Lott, "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy," 23.

32 Rogin, "Democracy and Burnt Cork: The End of Blackface, the Beginning of Civil Rights," 189.

33 Lee Artz, "Hegemony in Black and White: Interracial Buddy Movies and the New Racism," in *Cultural Diversity in the United States*, 1998, 68.

34 Rogin, "Democracy and Burnt Cork: The End of Blackface, the Beginning of Civil Rights," 173.

35 Rogin, 178.

36 Jesse Owens was an African American athlete and four-time gold medalist at the 1936 Olympic Games, often acclaimed as "the greatest and the most famous athlete in track and field history." His triumph was all the more so great, since it was considered a symbolic overthrowing of the Nazi myth of Aryan supremacy." Frank Litsky, "Jesse Owens Dies of Cancer at 66." *The New York Times*, April 1, 1980. https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0912.html. Accessed on May 20, 2020.

37 The Uncle Tom stereotype originated from the 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe and its movie adaptations; it refers to a compliant, simple-minded black man, subservient to whites and at peace with his lower-class racial status.

38 Davis, "Beside(s) Love and Hate," 576.

39 Alan Rappeport, "See a Design of the Harriet Tubman $20 Bill That Mnuchin Delayed." *The New York Times*, June 14, 2019, sec. U.S. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/14/us/politics/harriet-tubman-bill.html. Accessed on May 20, 2020.

40 Blackfishing involves artificial tanning or doing one's makeup in order to appear as if one had black heritage. It is often considered an equivalent of modern day blackface because it expropriates the appearance of historically oppressed groups, and this is done by people who come from privileged backgrounds. Kim Kardashian is one celebrity often accused of blackfishing. Priya Elan. "Blackfishing: 'Black Is Cool, Unless You're Actually Black.'" *The Guardian*, April 14, 2020, sec. Fashion. https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2020/apr/14/blackfishing-black-is-cool-unless-youre-actually-black. Accessed on May 20, 2020.

41 Chris McGreal, "Interview. Rachel Dolezal: 'I Wasn't Identifying as Black to Upset People. I Was Being Me'," *The Guardian*, December 13, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/13/rachel-dolezal-i-wasnt-identifying-as-black-to-upset-people-i-was-being-me. Accessed on November 20, 2020.

42 bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance." *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. New York, London: Routledge, 2014: 366–80, 366.

43 Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," *Shadow and Act*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995, 47, 49.

44 Ellison, 48, 54.

45 Ellison, 49.

46 Rogin, 181.

47 Jordan Peele revealed that the Sunken Place was a metaphor for black people being constantly marginalized and silenced in American society (and also in the film industry, specifically in the horror genre) Zack Sharf, "'Get Out': Jordan Peele Reveals the Real Meaning Behind the Sunken Place," *IndieWire* (blog), November 30, 2017, https://www.indiewire.com/2017/11/get-out-jordan-peele-explains-sunken-place-meaning-1201902567/.

48 Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 10.

49 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

50 White liberals attempt to trick black people into believing that it is finally possible (in the movie, metaphorically through hypnosis; in reality, through their fake declarations of progress and support for the Black Lives Matter Movement).

51 Coagula in the film is carried out by a secret cult consisting of Armitage family members. It was probably founded around the 1940s, after Roman Armitage lost to Jesse Owens. Unable to deal with his loss, Roman developed a hatred towards (and obsession with) black athletic bodies and perfected a process of kidnapping black people, brainwashing them and implanting the brains of old relatives and friends into their younger and stronger bodies.

52 Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 54.

53 Gubar, 55.

54 Rogin, "Democracy and Burnt Cork: The End of Blackface, the Beginning of Civil Rights," 177.

55 As sung in the song *Redbone* by Childish Gambino, that was used in the movie.

56 Chris's photographic talent might be, for the sake of this argument, interpreted as regaining consciousness. According to Landsberg, photography, as a technology of vision, enables its viewers to see those aspects of life that usually remain invisible. The movie begins with pictures of everyday scenes from black life; Chris is a photographer and his eyes become the prey; Chris's camera becomes a tool that wakes up the 'Coagulated' blacks; finally, Chris finds pictures in the closet, which make him realize he is in stalemate and it is a camera that saves him from the Coagulated Walter. In *Get Out* photography may be interpreted as a metaphor for becoming woke and being able to see the complicity of black exploitation and the lie of post-racial America. In contrast, TV is a symbol of subjugation and obliviousness – Hudson tries to assure Chris through

the TV screen that he is not driven by racism; Chris did not save his mother, because he was staring at a TV, which later enabled Missy's hypnosis and control over Chris's body. Such an interpretation boosts this paper's argument, as television has contributed greatly to perpetuating the whole set of prejudices (about black people) embedded in blackface. Alison Landsberg, "Horror Vérité: Politics and History in Jordan Peele's 'Get Out' (2017)," *Continuum* 32, no. 5 (September 3, 2018): 630.

57 In *Get Out* such conformity is exemplified in Logan's code switching (adjusting one's way of speaking to adapt to a predominantly white professional and social environment). Code switching is often crucial to becoming accepted within a white group, however, in the movie it acts as a signal to Chris, who becomes suspicious of Logan and it leads him to finally uncovering the Armitages' creepy secret. Logan behaves the way he does because he was forcibly abducted to become a vessel for the white mind; hence *Get Out* frames code switching as betrayal and threat, a practice that contributes to the self-interest of white people, and deeply wounds blacks. Aja Romano, "How Get Out Deconstructs Racism for White People," *Vox*, March 7, 2017, https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/3/7/14759756/get-out-benevolent-racism-white-feminism. Accessed 11.05.2020

58 Lott, *Black Mirror: The Cultural Contradictions of American Racism*, 60.

This is an area in which a clear distinction between the movie and blackface can be discerned – blackface has always been designated for white audiences, while *Get Out* is addressed to black people. Nevertheless, while watching *Get Out* viewers are asked to identify with a black person without a white co-star (there is no white savior), because white people are insatiable predators of blackness and Chris becomes the "final girl" (subverting the "black guy always dies first" horror trope.) Hence, the viewer is pushed into an uncomfortable new and uncanny experience, which might imply the liberating and empowering face of blackface, while suggesting that the movie itself IS the blackface, as it forces the white audience to identify with the black person.

59 Or such, in which they can successfully lull and silence blacks through hypnosis, namely: fake liberal post-racial love for the black.

60 The uncanny is a process whereby repressed elements, preserved in the unconscious, tend to reappear, in consciousness or in behavior, in the shape of secondary and more or less unrecognizable "derivatives of the unconscious."Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 17 (1919): 217–56.

61 Romano, "How Get Out Deconstructs Racism for White People."

62 Ryan Poll, "Can One 'Get Out?' The Aesthetics of Afro-Pessimism," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association,* 51, no. 2 (2018): 70.

63 Afro-pessimism is a term, coined by Snehal Shingavi, asserting that the great fiction of whiteness is to posit and perpetuate the ideological narrative of social progress, which in fact is just post-racialized slavery; it is the presumption of the impossibility of racial justice or equality in the world; in: Snehal Shingavi, "The Politics of Afro-Pessimism," *We Are Many*, July 1, 2016, https://wearemany.org/a/2016/07/politics-of-afro-pessimism. Accessed on May 15, 2020.

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