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“Black Is in Fashion”:

The Black Body as a Commodity in Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*

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Jordan Peele’s horror film *Get Out* (2017) follows Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya), a Black man, as he spends the weekend upstate visiting the wealthy, ostensibly liberal family of his white girlfriend, Rose Armitage (Allison Williams). As the weekend unfolds, Chris discovers that the members of the Armitage family lead a modern-day slave trade operation in which Black people are abducted for the use of their bodies. The abduction of these individuals is carried out with the purpose of implanting the brains of affluent and sick white elderly people into “superior” black bodies through a surgical procedure known as The Coagula. When successful, Black victims live out the rest of their days in the “sunken place,” a psychological state of semiconsciousness where they become mere passengers within their own bodies as their new white owners take control of their motor functions. This very procedure gives way to the Armitages’s fixation on Chris’s black physique, which suggests a contemporary form of Black subjugation because they view Chris’s body as an object of physical desire. This depiction of a racial hierarchy, characterized by the shallow praises offered by whites, emphasizes a morbid obsession with what white people perceive as black prowess and attractiveness. As such, Peele introduces a form of American racism where the oppression of Black individuals is disguised by the adoration of their bodies, an adoration that ultimately erases their identity in the service of white people. *Get Out* is, therefore, a vision of our racist future, different in practice from past racist systems such as lynching and slave trades, yet common in their goal to utilize black bodies for the benefit of whites.

The Armitages's fixation on Chris's body is shown early in the film during an Armitage family dinner in which Rose's brother, Jeremy (Caleb Jones), during a drunken tirade, shares several upsetting remarks regarding Chris's physique. For instance, while questioning Chris about his potential interest in MMA Fighting, which Chris disregards as being "too brutal" for him, Jeremy fervently expresses a disturbing adoration for what he perceives as Chris's "frame" and "genetic makeup" (0:24:24). This misguided attention to Chris's figure demonstrates a white individual's fixation on a black body. In doing so, it reduces Chris's identity into a being of innate physical vigor while consciously erasing the possibility of other characteristics, particularly those aligned with emotion or intellect. My analysis is supported by Jeremy's claim that through "train[ing]," the action of "push[ing]" Chris's body to an extreme, Chris could become a "beast," the first of many associations in the film between animals and black bodies (0:24:53). In this case, Jeremy's troubling comment eradicates any trace of humanity within Chris by comparing him to an explicitly non-human creature. Such a creature lacks the skills of formal reasoning and abstract thought and exhibits unwarranted aggression and animosity. In ascribing such a label to Chris, Jeremy effectively indicts Chris as a being of enormous strength naturally inclined to violence due to an innate predisposition to harm others.

The family's fixation on Chris's physicality continues during the Armitages's annual party, a scene that stresses the fixation on a black body as the vehicle of subjugation within *Get Out*. While the instances of fixation are abundant at the party, the most striking occurrence of it is the interaction between Chris and one of the elderly white guests. During this conversation, an unnamed white man lectures Chris on the popularity of black skin, claiming that "fair skin has been in favor for the past couple of hundreds of years" and that the tide is now turning (0:43:44). This claim recognizes the social acceptance white individuals have enjoyed for centuries, a truth

with which Chris visibly agrees by nodding his head. Nonetheless, what appears to be a mindful description of the white man's privilege turns into a display of misguided praise by his reasoning that now, as times have changed, "black is in fashion" (0:43:49). Following this comment, Chris appears notably confused as he squints his eyes and takes a step back, indicating by his movements an apparent discomfort regarding the comment. For the white man, his perception of blackness is nothing more than a simple physical feature he can gaze upon for pleasure, deliberately overlooking the history behind the black color. By history, I, of course, mean the inheritance of slavery at the hands of white enslavers. This alarming statement, lacking awareness of racial struggles, strengthens the notion of Black subjugation in the film by diminishing Chris into a simple body that can be admired for the indulgence of white people.

Importantly, the white perception of black skin as "fashion" establishes black bodies as a trend or style. This use of language to describe Black individuals is what Priya Elan defines as "America's obsession with blackness without black people." Such obsession depicts the experience of Black individuals in America, specifically how they see themselves diminished by the white social perspective of "black [being] cool, unless you're actually black" (Elan). This view of Black people consequently deprives them of their ability to assert themselves as individuals due to their identity being deliberately ignored. Instead, Black individuals remain as simple objects of indulgence and desirability. When applied to Chris, this reasoning leaves him vulnerable to the dangers the white characters of *Get Out* represent to his life and liberty as they pursue the ownership of his body.

The observations of the unnamed white man and Jeremy concerning Chris's body set the foundation for the white fixation on the black body. This fixation can be contrasted with W. Fitzhugh Brundage's perspective regarding the lynching of Black people prior to the American

Civil War, which he describes as a southern obsession. With the acknowledgment that the term “southern” references white Americans living within slave-owning states, such a description recognizes that lynching functioned as a practice whereby white southerners could fixate on black bodies. In other words, lynching became an obsession for white individuals, the same way fixation on blackness became in *Get Out*. As a result, the subjugation of Black individuals through murder persists as a source of pleasure for white people. With this in mind, it makes sense to understand the fixation in Peele’s film as a modernized form of the southern obsession with lynching. This modernized fixation operates as an evolution of Black subjugation that has taken place due to multiple historical events, such as the abolition of slavery and the eradication of Jim Crow Laws. This modern form of racial subjugation works covertly, avoiding the direct denigration of Black individuals, preferring to deploy ill-intended compliments and adorations instead. This contemporary subjugation illustrates the functionality of the fixation on blackness in terms of its ability to tyrannize Black individuals, a reality of Peele’s dystopian America that is explored in subsequent scenes within the film.

The veiled subjugation Chris faces in the Armitage household through the fixation on his body further echoes the atrocities of lynching by drawing parallels between the two. Jennifer Ryan-Bryant correlates the “example of a lynching” to Chris’s experience during his weekend getaway as his “individuality” and “life” are threatened (93). Specifically, Chris’s innocence when facing these attacks on his physical and mental integrity, the same way individuals who were lynched were innocent of the crimes they were accused of, establishes the correlation Ryan-Bryant identifies between Chris’s own experience and that of Black individuals who were lynched. *Get Out*’s fixation on blackness thus operates as a modern-day practice of lynching, although covertly and taking longer in the murder of the victim until The Coagula procedure is complete (the end

purpose of *Get Out*'s fixation on blackness). To visualize Chris's innocence, Peele introduces a series of self-evident examples of commonly perceived innocent behavior—actions that affirm Chris as free of ill intentions or other factors that could define him as a malicious character. Such cases include his loving relationship with his dog, his disposition to please Rose by visiting her parents despite his hesitation due to their interracial relationship, and his fascination with photography (to such an extent that he travels with his camera to visit the Armitage family). More substantial, however, in proving Chris's innocence is his interaction with Missy (Catherine Keener), Rose's mother, during an unplanned hypnosis session.

The hypnosis scene illustrates Chris's innocence and the exploitation thereof by a white character. The scene takes place with Chris walking back to Rose's room after a failed late-night attempt at smoking when Missy suddenly appears in her office, asking Chris to join her. Chris, though apprehensive, decides to indulge Missy by heeding her request. Throughout the beginning of their conversation, Missy pressures Chris into talking about the death of his mother, even though Chris remains visibly uncomfortable. Despite this, Chris finds himself recounting the events of the night his mother died, albeit with indicators of physical pain such as the sharp turning of his neck and his rigid posture while sitting, as if something is forcing him to stay seated. This bizarre behavior exhibited by Chris, unknown to him, is Missy's hypnosis taking effect as she continuously scrapes a spoon around a teacup. The scraping produces a piercing sound that becomes louder as the scene progresses, representing the mind control Missy is gradually exerting upon Chris. Furthermore, Missy's use of the teacup, while symbolic of civility associated with affluent whiteness, embodies a hostile and destructive force.

The dynamics between Chris and Missy during the hypnosis session suggest a modernized form of a racial hierarchy that resembles the racial hierarchies of American slavery prior to the

American Civil War. Missy's manipulation of Chris's innocence drives this claim as she cruelly convinces his vulnerable mind that he is responsible for his mother's death. She accuses him of doing "nothing" while being "scared" as he remained in his bedroom and did not call for help (0:34:45-0:35:08). The results of Missy's hypnosis leave Chris in discernible distress as he whispers, "I cannot move," with a panicked voice. At the same time, tears frame his face (0:34:58). From this point on, Chris remains in a catatonic state that strongly emulates the lives of enslaved Black people during the period of American slavery. Like those enslaved, Chris became incapable of exerting his own actions due to the elimination of his autonomy. As Missy removes Chris's ability to control his body by suppressing his free will, her mind control simulates a white enslaver's dominion over those he enslaved. Ultimately, terror consumes Chris with his pleas to "wait" as Missy gives him the order to "sink" into the sunken place (0:35:18).

Chris's time in the "sunken place" exemplifies the hyper-awareness Black individuals experience over their identity and actions within American society. Peele introduces the "sunken place" by evoking the feeling of perpetual falling as Chris finds himself sinking into a black abyss. This fall functions as an indicator of the Armitages's ulterior motives to eliminate Chris's selfhood. During this state of semiconsciousness, Chris can observe what his eyes see in the outside world through a square cutout in the darkness surrounding him, yet the square appears smaller the more he sinks. This use of imagery, in turn, materializes W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of double consciousness, the sense of "always looking at oneself through the eyes of others" (8). Du Bois uses this concept to define the experience of Black individuals in America, particularly how they may see themselves while considering how white people would identify them, entailing the idea of "two-ness" when it comes to this dual self-perception. This very notion is embodied by Chris's role as a passive audience within the "sunken place," there only as an observer of the white

person's control of his body. This depiction, therefore, demonstrates what double consciousness would look like in an oppressive white society where the minds of Black individuals are not equal to those of whites. As such, the Black mind finds itself subjugated to the rule of a white person as the body in which it resides is colonized for the service of the white oppressor.

Peele further affirms *Get Out's* contemporary Black enslavement by depicting Chris as an auction prize within the Armitages's household. *Get Out's* auction scene depicts Dean (Bradley Whitford), Rose's father, leading an entirely silent game of bingo with the white guests of the Armitages's annual party without Chris's knowledge. This game, while seemingly harmless, attains a macabre meaning as the white guests play in front of an image of Chris, suggesting that the end prize of this game is Chris himself. The portrayal of this scene is reminiscent of slave auctions during the period of American slavery, carrying on the film's deployment of past racist systems as analogies for modern racist structures and practices. Nonetheless, this modern-day form of a slave auction is distinguishable from past slave auctions by its use of bingo as the preliminary purchasing method. The slave auction, in this version, becomes both frightening and humorous at the same time; Bingo is not typically a game with life-or-death stakes. The white people see their bids on Chris as a harmless game rather than an act of genocide, as if their intentions were so benign that the use of bingo is a fitting way to decide ownership over Chris's body. Notably, the use of this harmless game, paired with the silence in which it is conducted, alludes to a form of Black subjugation done openly while its true intention remains hidden.

Get Out also establishes a hyper-racialized system of white normativity by its rendering of black subjugation using reimagined racist practices. Michael Morris explains white normativity as the belief that "white people are people, and the members of other racial groups are people to the extent they resemble white people" (952). Such principle has served as the foundation for the

Armitages's modern-day slave trade, which they and the rest of their white friends see as a reasonable and warranted practice because it provides the physically "superior" black body with the mind of the intellectually "superior" white brain. This view depicts black bodies as "incomplete" without the brain of a white person to control them. Echoing Morris's notion of white normativity, the white characters in *Get Out* only begin to recognize black bodies as "people" once a white person has taken control of that body. It is also important to note that white normativity operates within the movie through subtle means, as opposed to past forms of "overt discrimination or racial animus" (Morris 952). This modern racism is presented through flattery and adoration, concepts that initially appear benevolent in nature but that, in reality, have fueled the menacing fixation on Chris's black body. This benevolent outward appearance, in turn, aids the white characters of *Get Out* in deifying themselves as individuals of great compassion and love for Black people, even though this is not true.

Ultimately, *Get Out* presents a nightmarish version of future American racism inspired by historical racist systems. This is made possible through the misplaced obsession with black bodies exhibited by the film's white characters, thus revealing their immoral longing to retain their status as the dominant racial group. I ground this claim on the fact that the very intention and success of The Coagula procedure is a testament to the white people's desire to rule over everything Black. The white people taking part in The Coagula are old and mostly sick, and by transplanting their brains into the body of young Black individuals, they are evading the natural death that awaits them. This defiance of mortality signifies a white desire to keep living at any cost. Therefore, seeing that the black bodies that are colonized for this procedure will be under the control of white people, the original Black minds now suppressed into the "sunken place," I reason that, after The Coagula, the Black people are no longer Black. Instead, what is left of them is solely their black

bodies functioning as mere vessels under the control of white people. Because of this, the racial dominance of white individuals carries on even within the black bodies. To synthesize this idea, Peele has constructed a form of white supremacy that does not rely on the body of white people to exist; instead, white minds do the work of advancing white dominance over American society. In *Get Out*, the body is not representative of white “excellence;” it is merely an object of aesthetics and pleasure. As a result, white people have been able to obsess over black bodies due to their sinister attraction to them. Once a white mind controls a black body and the Black identity that once inhabited it is erased, white supremacy can endure as the white “intellect” lives on, even beyond the initial white body it once occupied. Therefore, this film illustrates a dystopian America characterized by the eradication of Black identity, leaving behind black bodies that are enslaved for the use of white individuals seeking racial supremacy.

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