THE (AMERICAN) GOTHIC AND JORDAN PEELE’S *GET OUT*: AN AFFECTIVE EXPLORATION

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The (American) Gothic and Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*: An Affective Exploration

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This essay functions as a Gothic- and race-based reader-response (or in this case “viewer-response”) analysis of Jordan Peele’s 2017 film *Get Out*. Throughout this essay, I — like critics before me — contend that (and convey how) Peele, through his creation of *Get Out*, effectively and aesthetically presents and projects his experience as a black American to and onto viewers. However, while *Get Out* has commonly been considered a horror film, I align it more specifically with the (American) Gothic tradition. I understand Gothic — as it has been employed by black artists — to be a genre that provokes particularly powerful passions, hinges on historicity and haunting, and — with proper audience intervention — has a particular potential to be personally and politically productive. This understanding of the Gothic is informed most notably by Teresa A. Goddu’s and Jason Haslam’s conceptions of the tradition in their respective works. My viewer-response framework relies heavily on contentions made by Rita Felski and Fred Moten in their respective works.

Dr. Joel Pace, Thesis Advisor
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In the following essay, I engage in a Gothic-based reader-response (or in this case “viewer-response”) analysis of Jordan Peele’s 2017 film *Get Out*. Throughout this essay, I — like critics before me — contend that (and convey how) Peele, through his creation of *Get Out*, effectively and aesthetically presents and projects his experience as a black American man to and onto viewers. Throughout *Get Out*, Peele intricately illustrates how said experience comprises daily race-related trials, tribulations, terrors, uncertainties (perpetrated and perpetuated primarily by white people, and specifically white progressives) — and he does so in a “refreshing, funny, and unflinching manner” (Bakare 2017). As the New York Times Magazine’s Wesley Morris professes in his piece about Peele, “Racism is old, but Peele found a poetic new way of talking about it. He gave us a language we didn’t know we lacked… Peele developed a tone, other than hysteria, to present the black experience of discomfort in seemingly benign white worlds and the way their residents chronically deny the reality of that experience” (Morris 2017). Peele cinematically and viscerally communicates said experience as an indescribable, complex, historically-haunted, underrepresented, misrepresented (by white Americans), misunderstood (by white Americans), unrecognized (by white Americans), and/or dismissed (again, by white Americans) experience that besets every facet of his existence and resonates deeply with other black Americans (and other people of color living in America). As I will articulate, it’s also an experience that manifests as and is best expressed through a(n) (American) Gothic mode.

It’s important to immediately note that the Gothic is a labyrinthine genre that is ultimately hard to contain or conceptualize, despite multitudinous attempts to do so. According to an article entitled “Gothic Motifs,” written by John Bowen and published on The British Library’s website, “there is no essence or a single element that belongs to all Gothics. It is more
like a *family* of texts or stories. All members of a family don’t look the same and they don’t necessarily have a single trait in common, but they do have overlapping characteristics, motifs, and traits. The genre of Gothic is a particularly strange and perverse family of texts which themselves are full of strange families” (Bowen 2014). The introduction to an extensive online encyclopedia article entitled “Society, Culture, and the Gothic” — which as a whole exists as a compilation of key concepts, texts, and subsequent critical analyses that pertain to and comprise the Gothic tradition as it has been variously practiced, defined, explored, and understood — states that the Gothic tentatively sprouted up in mid-eighteenth century Europe in response to swift and substantial societal, cultural, and theoretical change. From the beginning, the article claims, Gothic works have been “inherently linked to the social context in which they were created” and the critical conversations these works have most commonly spurred, according to this introduction, pertain to their representations “of societal and cultural fear in the face of the dissolution of tradition, gender roles, oppression, and race” (Encyclopedia.com 2006).

This brief and surface-level understanding of the Gothic already resonates with *Get Out* and my forthcoming analysis. *Get Out* was originally produced in response to the perceived post-race era of Barack Obama. However, it was released in the wake of Donald Trump’s inauguration. This resulted in a rhetorical shift. As Morris asserts, Peele’s film “would have made one kind of sense under a post-Obama Hillary Clinton administration, slapping at the smugness of American Liberals still singing: ‘Ding dong, race is dead.’... But Clinton lost. Now the movie seems to amplify the racism that emanates from the Trump White House and smolders around the country” (Morris 2017). In an interview with Jason Zinoman of the *New York Times*, Peele asserts that “What originally started as a movie to combat the lie that America had become
post-race became a movie where the cat is out of the bag, and now we’re having this conversation. I realized I had to shift it a little bit.” So, Peele ultimately “wanted to make a film that acknowledges neglect and inaction in the face of the real race monster… In the Trump era, it’s way more obvious extreme racism exists. But there are still a lot of people who think: We don’t have a racist bone in our bodies. We have to face the racism in ourselves” (Zinoman 2017). That the Gothic is hard to concretely categorize is also part of what makes Get Out decidedly Gothic: it’s a film whose form and content pull from multiple aesthetic and generic pools and is thus hard to concretely categorize. That being said, Get Out, up to this point, has generally been classified and contemplated by critics as a horror film that innovatively and impactfully engages with the complex concepts of race and racism (namely, white liberal racism; how it manifests and is maintained in modern America).

*Vox*’s Aja Romano, in her article “How Get Out Deconstructs Racism for White People,” is one of the many who contend that Get Out — in some shape or form — adds to a longstanding horror tradition. It’s important to note that Romano acknowledges “mainstream” Hollywood’s ultimate tendency to repeat narratives that reinforce racist and otherwise problematic ideologies because this tendency directly informs Peele’s creative process. In an interview with Lottie Joiner of *Crisis Magazine*, Peele states he “wrote Get Out because [he felt] like there was a missing piece to the conversation about race in America.” According to Peele, “Every other true fear has a great horror movie about it” but his own “fears of racism” were notably absent (Joiner 2018). This is likely because the people creating mainstream films have been and still are predominantly white. Robin Diangelo, in her book *White Fragility*, highlights the “homogenous” nature of cinema. According to Diangelo, directors of “the one hundred top-grossing films of all
time, worldwide” have been ninety-five percent white (Diangelo 2018) and, “of the hundred top-grossing films worldwide in 2016, ninety-five percent were directed by white Americans (ninety-nine of them by men)” (Diangelo 2018). Diangelo underscores the significance of this cinematic imbalance: “One of the most potent ways white supremacy is disseminated is through media representations, which have a profound impact on how we see the world. Those who write and direct films are our cultural narrators; the stories they tell shape our worldviews” (Diangelo 2018, emphasis added). Peele recognizes that “there are rules and unspoken understandings that are in place that perpetuate racial oppression and specifically the taking away of expression and voices” and that “voices are our best weapon against racism and violence and murder” (Joiner 2018). In creating Get Out, Peele works to (re)narrate and (re)shape cultural constructions and conceptions of blackness (and whiteness).

According to Romano, “Get Out is laden with standard horror tropes — creepy suburban artifice, attempts to gaslight the protagonist, mind control, bizarre medical experiments, you name it” (Romano 2017). She claims that Peele utilizes these tropes to “reveal truths about how pernicious racism is in the world” and impactfully does so without “inserting a ‘white savior’ or making overtures to pacifism and tolerance” (Romano 2017). As Romano suggests, “What keeps [Get Out’s employed] tropes from being rote is that Peele uses the modes of horror to make viewers feel what daily life is like for real black men and women” (Romano 2017). While she acknowledges Hollywood’s homogeneity, Romano asserts that horror as a cinematic tradition, unlike other popular genres, has “long been ripe for social commentary precisely because it subverts the idea of what is ‘villainous’ by allowing us to subtly empathize with the thing we fear while exploring why we fear it” (Romano 2017). This alleged tendency to interrupt and
interrogate rather than perpetuate cultural constructions appears to function as Romano’s primary proof that Get Out’s classification within the horror genre is accurate. However — as a tradition whose texts are “inherently linked to the social context in which they were created” and evoke critical conversations regarding their representations “of societal and cultural fear in the face of the dissolution of tradition, gender roles, oppression, and race” (Encyclopedia.com 2006) — it also works to affirm my own categorization of Peele’s film within the Gothic. The “standard horror tropes” that Romano relays as visible throughout Get Out and her emphasis on the emotional experience of the film are also particularly important in my situation and exploration of the film as Gothic.

The Gothic tradition seems to comprise tropes similar, if not identical, to those Romano considers “standard” within the horror genre. The Gothic, as I understand it, is also similar to Romano’s conception of horror in the sense that it provokes particularly powerful passions and has the potential not only to “reveal truths” (Romano 2017) but even, through this revelation, prompt progress. Bowen, in “Gothic Motifs,” identifies the following as recurrent characteristics of Gothic texts: “strange” settings; “uncanny effects” and disorienting resurrections of a supposedly buried past that “clash” with and complicate portrayals or perceptions of an absolutely progressive present; unequal power dynamics; productive terror; and, finally, doubt (which, according to Bowen, is conjured by sublime experiences and their ability “to shock us out of the limits of our everyday lives with the possibility of things beyond reason and explanation”) (Bowen 2014). All of these conveyed characteristics are apparent in Peele’s film and resonate with those Romano relays as “standard horror tropes” but also her contentions regarding Get Out’s viscerality and progressive potential.
Throughout *Get Out*, racially-fuelled persecutions presumed and proclaimed dead are not only revived but revitalized, racism’s repressed reality is relentlessly relayed. *Get Out*’s black male protagonist (Chris Washington) becomes a prisoner in supposedly-safe suburbia. He’s held captive — physically and mentally — by his white girlfriend (Rose Armitage) and her allegedly-progressive family. In *Get Out*, black bodies are stolen, fetishized, objectified, and exploited by white people. In *Get Out*, black minds are terrorized, trivialized, and literally hypnotized by white people. In this sense, the film functions as a modern-day slave narrative — and this association will be explored more thoroughly later on in this essay. Peele’s film posits quite plainly that progressive America is not as progressive as it perceives or professes itself to be. However, as Romano suggests, the film’s perspective-positioning — Chris’s perception becomes the audience’s perception, thus forcing audience members “to see white society as the terror it is through his eyes,” to see whiteness as the “other” to be feared (Romano 2017) — poses a potential for political and personal progress. Romano’s conclusion is particularly powerful and applicable to my exploration:

“Words and actions that seem banal turn out to mask gargantuan evils in *Get Out* because, in real life, those tiny, trivial things are born of a larger system of devaluing human lives. By framing that system as a horror film, Peele makes audience members of all races understand, in a visceral, unprecedented way, how demoralizing its effects are on the people it targets. In real life, minorities caught within that system can’t get out. But by outlining some of the tools with which racism perpetuates itself, *Get Out* also suggests that we can all use our newfound awareness to demolish that system and build something better” (Romano 2017).

While many (Romano included) recognize *Get Out*’s fundamentally horrific nature, the vague generic label of “horror” does not feel definitive or descriptive enough to encapsulate all that *Get Out* is and does. This labellic inadequacy is reflected in much of the critical conversation surrounding the film and informs my exploration of *Get Out* as Gothic. The general
consensus in existing critical conversation seems to be that, while *Get Out* deploys devices of horror, it also is and does something more. Even Romano, who doesn't actively attempt to come up with a more specific generic label but instead appears content with the film’s broad classification as a horror film, notes that “Peele doesn’t just present a standard horror film with a black protagonist; he’s not just subverting the hoary ‘black guy always dies first’ trope. What Peele is doing is much more elaborate and complex” (Romano 2017). Here, Romano highlights problematic aspects of the horror tradition — namely, its tendency as a genre to privilege and portray white perspectives and repress black perspectives — that contradict her aforementioned declaration of its cinematic distinction. She illustrates how *Get Out* ultimately disrupts and transcends the generic tradition of horror rather than preserves it — but does so without naming an alternative association. Beyond Romano’s exploration, there appears to be a collective (but varied) attempt to articulate a more all-encompassing generic or aesthetic label that sufficiently and succinctly suits *Get Out*.

For example, in the subheading of an article for *MTV News* titled “*Get Out* Understands the Black Body,” author Ira Madison III deems Peele’s film a “horror-satire” that validates the black American male experience in an unprecedented way. This immediately relays Madison’s attempt to articulate *Get Out’s* “something more-ness” and acknowledges the comic element of *Get Out* that has conjured confusion about its genre and informed its controversial inclusion in the 2017 Golden Globes “best musical or comedy” category (Morris 2017). Madison’s initial acknowledgement of *Get Out*’s comic element also adds to my situation of the film as Gothic. In *A New Companion to the Gothic*, there is an entire chapter — written by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik — dedicated to the concept of comic in Gothic. According to this chapter, which is aptly
titled “Comic Gothic,” “the most orthodox accounts of what is Gothic do not seem to capture the hybridity of many Gothic [texts], which includes their juxtaposition of incongruous textual effects. Such incongruity opens up the possibility of a comic turn in the presence of horror or terror” (Horner and Zlosnik 2012). *Get Out* certainly contains elements of horror but a concrete categorization as a horror film does not feel sufficient. Likewise, *Get Out* certainly contains elements of comedy but a concrete categorization as a comedy film does not feel sufficient.

In the article itself, Madison categorizes *Get Out* more specifically within body horror, a subgenre of horror. Again, this exemplifies an understanding that the label of horror is not nuanced enough to contain all that *Get Out* is and does. Body horror, according to Madison, “encompasses gross-out tactics… but the term is a bit of a misnomer, considering that horror’s very roots come from the politics of the human body” (Madison 2017). Horror as a genre, Madison mentions, is notorious for its repetition (and subsequent maintenance) of racist, misogynist, and otherwise problematic ideologies: “[horror] films often involve attractive white women (and their black best friends) getting hacked to pieces” (Madison 2017). Black bodies, like women’s bodies, are historically exploited in horror for the sake of entertainment and this exploitation resonates with and reinforces a racist reality. This contention about the horror genre’s tendency to repeat and maintain problematic ideologies directly contradicts Romano’s assertion that it has historically functioned as social commentary and complication, thus highlighting a discrepancy in how horror as a genre is understood and employed. Also, by deeming it a “misnomer,” Madison is hinting towards the inadequacy of (body) horror as a (sub)generic label of *Get Out* even as he attempts to apply it to the film. Madison’s main contention is that *Get Out* subverts rather than sustains horror’s historic exploitation of black
bodies. According to Madison, “Peele uses Get Out to take control of black bodies and give black men in the audience an allegory that they’ve craved in horror for decades… In the real world, [black men’s] bodies might not be [their] own, but in Get Out, they’re [their] greatest tools for survival” (Madison 2017). Get Out’s categorization within the horror genre (and its subgenres) — as both Madison and Romano illustrate — hinges most heavily on its disruption of horror tropes, rather than its deployment of them.

This generic justification and attempt at a more adequate articulation is reflected elsewhere. The Guardian’s Lanre Bakare, in his article titled “Get Out: the film that dares to reveal the horror of liberal racism in America,” categorizes Get Out as an “American horror story” that villinizes “middle-class white liberals… The kind of people who shop at Trader Joe’s, donate to the ACLU and would have voted for Obama a third time if they could. Good people. Nice people. Your parents, probably… to show how, however unintentionally, these same people can make life so hard and uncomfortable for black people” (Bakare 2017, emphasis added). According to Bakare, Get Out “exposes a liberal ignorance and hubris that has been allowed to fester. It’s an attitude, an arrogance which in the film leads to a horrific final solution, but in reality leads to a complacency that is just as dangerous… under that placid exterior lurks the dark subconscious, where the true horror lies” (Bakare 2017). Bakare (like Romano and Madison) contends that, throughout the film, traditional horror tropes are “inverted, subverted and turned on their head” (Bakare 2017). The most notable and noticeable trope-ic subversion, according to Bakare, is “the way Peele takes the idea of a white woman being in peril as soon as she’s in an inner-city area and turns that into a black man being at his [most] vulnerable in an affluent white neighborhood” (Bakare 2017). By stating that Get Out subverts and inverts traditional horror
tropes, and by classifying it specifically as an “American horror,” Bakare is also exemplifying the collective attempt by critics to more sufficiently and succinctly situate *Get Out* generically and aesthetically. *Get Out* is something more than horror, and critics not only acknowledge this but are trying to give this “something more” a definitive and digestible name.

Bakare’s particular awareness of *Get Out* as a compelling cultural critique of America (and its particular relationship with racism) resonates with my exploration of the film as Gothic. According to “Society, Culture, and the Gothic,” the Gothic tradition has become irrevocably linked to race(ism) — its construction, its preservation, its effects, etc. This introductory section specifically points to the tradition’s initial adherence to the widely-held nineteenth-century belief in physiognomy and phrenology, theories “that physical appearance and ‘blood’ determined and reflected a person’s character” (Encyclopedia.com 2006) which materializes through the characterizations of gothic villains and monsters. It is stated that the Gothic has historically conveyed “white anxieties and fears surrounding the black presence in society and desire to maintain the status quo of whites in control and blacks in servitude” (Encyclopedia.com 2006). However, and most importantly, the Gothic has also been deployed by black American authors as a critique of the genre itself, a way to explore and expose “how the image of ‘impenetrable whiteness’ is used in works of Gothic fiction… [which is] to assuage white Americans’ anxieties about black Americans, and to reinforce the institution of slavery by portraying ‘black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control’” (Encyclopedia.com 2006), but also as a means to reflect upon and/or relate the black experience, particularly the atrocities of slavery and its reverberating repercussions, through black eyes. Peele particularly
adds to this aspect of the Gothic tradition. In creating Get Out, Peele critiques cultural and historical conveyals of blackness while relaying its reality, based on his own experience.

Alison Landsberg, in her article “Horror vérité: politics and history in Jordan Peele’s Get Out (2017),” also conveys the collective critical attempt to sufficiently and succinctly situate Get Out generically and aesthetically. Through her exploration, Landsberg confirms my situation of Get Out as a Gothic text. Landsberg, like Bakare, acknowledges the film’s evocative engagement with and exemplification of issues that are uniquely American (namely, white liberal racism). She immediately acknowledges the “heated debate about what kind of film [Get Out] actually [is], generically speaking” (Landsberg 2018). In her attempt to resolve this generic debate, and understanding (like Madison and Bakare) that a broad categorization within the horror tradition does not suffice, Landsberg devises a term that she argues is adequate in articulating the particular type of horror with which Get Out aligns: “horror vérité” or “truthful horror” (Landsberg 2018). According to Landsberg, the term “horror vérité” encapsulates “certain cinematic conventions of the horror film — a specific set of formal and narrative strategies — [that] are uniquely suited to render everyday, endemic and chronic horror — a horror that many in U.S. society do not, or perhaps more accurately refuse, to see” (Landsberg 2018).

Like previously accredited critics, Landsberg contends that Get Out deviates from and disrupts the “standard cinematic conventions of horror” even as it “deploys” them. According to Landsberg, “horror vérité” functions as follows:

“...it deploys the standard cinematic conventions of horror — strong sound and visual cues that shock and unsettle the viewer, editing that also creates surprise and shock, a plot that involves either supernatural/science fiction elements, the struggle for survival of a person who is being chased by a psycho-killer, and/or a haunted house — but it does these things in the context of very real material and historical circumstances. In other words, rather than using these techniques to explore the psychology of a serial killer, or to enforce the dominant ideology… or to symbolize society’s fears in the form of a monster[,] the mechanics of horror are here engaged
in a project of re-representing the present... In horror vérité, the terrifying nightmare is everyday reality... the present and everyday is rendered unfamiliar and grotesque in order to bring the real conditions of reality into sharp relief. Horror vérité has the capacity to make the audience or... ‘the masses’ think, and is thus well-suited to the project of consciousness-raising” (Landsberg 2018).

*Get Out*, as a demonstration of “horror vérité,” utilizes “mechanics of the horror genre in order to expose actually existing racism, to render newly visible the very real but often masked racial landscape of a professedly liberal post-racial America” (Landsberg 2018). Traditional horror tropes and cinematic techniques, Landsberg argues, are employed but repurposed throughout *Get Out* “to advance a political message: that the pose of post-racial masks liberal whites’ active complicity in the oppression of African Americans” (Landsberg 2018).

Landsberg’s understanding of *Get Out* as a cinematic re-representation of reality that “operates on the logic of revelation” (Landsberg 2018) — *Get Out* as an aesthetic alarm clock, a call to consciousness — is particularly applicable to my Gothic situation of the film. Informed by Teresa A. Goddu’s and Jason Haslam’s contentions surrounding the American Gothic, I understand the Gothic — especially as it manifests in *Get Out* — to be a genre that can both “haunt back” (Goddu 1997) and “haunt forward” (Haslam 2016). *Get Out* utilizes terrifying — haunting — aesthetics to highlight how the past (slavery) haunts the supposedly post-race present, and to force (white) audiences to feel its effects. These same tactics of terror and haunting are employed to reveal a reality that (white) audiences have been ignoring (and therefore perpetuating). Landsberg’s understanding of *Get Out* also relates to Rita Felski’s emphasis, in her book *The Uses of Literature*, on reader (or viewer) “intercession” as necessary for a text to have any impact on the world (Felski 2008) and Fred Moten’s similar emphasis, in his book *Stolen Life*, on reader (or viewer) “mediation” (Moten 2018). Proper viewer
intercession/mediation of *Get Out* as a Gothic text — an acute awareness of and ability to articulate how the experience of it shapes and is shaped, haunts and is haunted — posit the potential for personal and political change.

Another critic that weighs in on *Get Out*’s generic and/or aesthetic categorization is Ryan Poll. In his article “Can One *Get Out*? The Aesthetics of Afro-Pessimism,” Poll — as the title directly indicates — considers how *Get Out* aesthetically aligns with and adds to a long line of afro-pessimistic assertions. This alignment, while “Afro-pessimism” likely isn’t as recognizable as “horror,” is significant. As I’ve relayed, horror films, as modes of mainstream media, have inevitably aided in the distribution and maintenance of “narrow and problematic” depictions of “the ‘other’” (Diangelo 2018). As Diangelo discloses, white people (and, more specifically, white men) dominate American institutions, including the film industry, and are therefore “in the position to disseminate and protect its own self-image, worldview, and interests across the entire society” (Diangelo 2018). While Peele’s infiltration of and impact in the mainstream — which hinged (at least in part) on a utilization of familiar and popular traits and tropes — are not to be discounted, *Get Out*’s general categorization as a horror film is not entirely appropriate. Rather than solely focusing on *Get Out* as a horror film, like all aforementioned critics, Poll situates it within a tradition created and controlled completely by black people. Likewise, I understand *Get Out* as adding to the Gothic tradition as it has been employed by black authors.

Afro-pessimism, according to Poll, is a “political philosophy” which maintains that “the modern world was created by Black slavery. The world of White Masters and Black Slaves is the world we have inherited and the world we live in today” (Poll 2018). Afro-pessimists, according to Poll, “assert that the great fiction of Whiteness is to posit and perpetuate the ideological
narrative of social progress, to believe that we are post-racialized slavery” and “[insist] that racialized slavery structures the contemporary” (Poll 2018). Poll proclaims that Peele’s film “narrates the deep truth of Afro-pessimism” in that it “seems to posit that, for African Americans, there is no escape. To be Black in America, Get Out suggests, is to be trapped within an unending narrative of racialized terror. For African Americans, horror is not a genre, but a structuring paradigm” (Poll 2018, emphasis added). White people, on the other hand, “fundamentally imagine the world without horror. Yes, such can happen, but it happens ‘over there,’ distant from the everyday ontology and experience of Whiteness” (Poll 2018). Poll’s understanding of Get Out resonates with Landsberg’s. Both critics contend that Get Out depicts just how prominently the past bleeds into the present. Both critics contemplate the film’s engagement with and evocation of racism as America’s reality, a reality that only white people are able to ignore. Both suggest that watching Get Out forces its (white) audience to face (and feel) that reality and their role in its perpetuation. Both assert that Get Out identifies “aesthetics” as the “way out” of “historical fixity” (Poll 2018).

Langsberg coined the term “horror vérité” to articulate Get Out’s aesthetics, which she considers to have “revelation-ary” potential, while Poll focuses on Get Out’s adherence to the already-existing tradition of black radical aesthetics. Both approaches — “horror vérité” and black radical aesthetics — involve “resignification” and “refigur[ation]” of “cultural tropes,” like those employed in horror films (Poll 2018). However, Poll contends that, while Get Out “echoes prominent horror tropes, more powerfully it echoes recent history” (Poll). Poll pays particular attention to Get Out’s illustration of and engagement with suburbia, especially in the film’s opening scene, claiming that “Real history and reel history have trained us… to read this
geography” as a “White zone” (Poll 2018). That the very first scene depicts a (black) man’s abduction in (white) suburbia is important, according to Poll. Not only is “the specific everyday terror of being Black in America, where in any space, especially spaces coded as White, one’s body is vulnerable and killable” immediately expressed but Andre Logan’s abduction, according to Poll, “is a scene of an intentionally failed aesthetics” implemented by Peele to “[foreground] the profound and perhaps impossible challenges of aesthetically representing the systemic horror of anti-Black violence” (Poll 2018): “From the onset, Get Out plunges us into two nonsynchronous contexts: the horror genre and contemporary history, an unfolding that exceeds the confines of any (White) genre” (Poll 2018, emphasis added).

That Get Out “exceeds the confines of any (White) genre” (Poll 2018) brings me to my attempt to situate the film as Gothic. Moten, in Stolen Life, emphasizes improvisation in the black radical tradition and claims that in order for the event of slavery — and blackness in general — to even begin to be explained or understood “telling must be situated at a frontier, on the border that is the condition of possibility of ‘the law of genre.’ Such a telling must simultaneously fulfill and exceed the generic responsibilities of narrative, must be both recit and recitation” (Moten 2018). Moten discusses terror as one form of generative improvisation employed in the black radical tradition, and this blends into my following exploration of the Gothic as it has been adopted and adapted by black authors, particularly as it manifests in Get Out. As will be explained in more depth momentarily, I, and the critics I include later in this essay, consider the Gothic tradition in a similar sense as Moten considers the black radical tradition: gothic devices have been employed by black authors because it allows them to speak the unspeakable, comprehend the incomprehensible, and take their endured terror and thrust it
upon (white) audiences to re-illuminate what they already know: that black Americans have been and still are unfree. Just as the black radical tradition, according to Moten, “is in apposition to enlightenment,” (Moten 2018) the black American Gothic is in apposition to the white American Gothic: “Stolen by it, it steals from it, steeling itself to it in preservative, self-defensive, disjunctively anachoreographic permeance” (Moten 2018).

Again, *Get Out* is something more than horror and much critical conversation surrounding the film is centered on its possible generic and aesthetic situations. As has been articulated, my proposed resolution to the incongruity and uncertainty surrounding *Get Out* is to situate the film within the Gothic tradition. That being said, I undoubtedly understand Gothic — as it been employed by black artists and especially as it manifests in *Get Out* — to be a genre that provokes particularly powerful passions, hinges on historicity and haunting, and — with proper audience intervention — has a particular potential to be personally and politically productive. As already mentioned, my understanding of the Gothic is informed most notably by Teresa A. Goddu’s conception of the genre related in her book *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and the Nation* (particularly in the chapter entitled “Haunting Back: Harriet Jacobs, African-American Narrative, and the Gothic”) and Jason Haslam’s conception of the genre in “Slavery and American Gothic: The Ghost of the Future.”

In her book *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and the Nation* — particularly in the chapter entitled “Haunting Back: Harriet Jacobs, African-American Narrative, and the Gothic” — Teresa A. Goddu examines the ways in which black authors, and white authors who have tried to write about the black experience, have deployed the Gothic in ways that both describe the indescribable events of slavery but also dematerialize and displace these events into effects
rather than reality. Slavery, according to Goddu, “is structured in gothic terms:” the Gothic centers itself on “terror of possession, the iconography of imprisonment, the fear of retribution, and the weight of sin” (Goddu 1997). The Gothic operates on multiple levels and Goddu “explores the extent to which the gothic is able to rematerialize the ghosts of America’s racial history and enable African-American writers to haunt back” (Goddu 1997). Goddu focuses intently on slave narratives, particularly on Harriet Jacobs’ and her tendencies, in her memoir entitled *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, to write with and against the grain of “an antebellum discourse that gothicizes slavery” (Goddu 1997) and her awareness of the Gothic as a particularly powerful “mode that can remember and combat, but also erase, the horrors of a racial history” (Encyclopedia.com 2006).

Authors of slave narratives, according to Goddu, are confronted with a “double bind: the difficulty of representing a gothic history through gothic conventions without collapsing the distinctions between fact and fiction, event and effect. The slave narrative must rewrite the conventions of gothic fiction for its own factual ends” (Goddu 1997). Jacobs, according to Goddu, “resists the gothic’s romantic effects… suggests how actual events produce gothic narratives… and insists… that the gothic’s effects are real (Goddu 1997) primarily through her use of repetition as a means to demonstrate and authenticate the brutal abuse of slavery. Jacobs ultimately exemplifies how the Gothic tradition can allow black writers to haunt back: “Haunted by the shadows of her past and the continued oppression of her present, Jacobs cannot completely exercise the demons of slavery; yet in bearing witness to them she haunts back” (Goddu 1997). Goddu, like Peele, attests to the power of narrative. She engages with and acknowledges the idea that texts can be acts of resistance, acts of fighting back. By explaining
how Jacobs “haunts” her readers, Goddu paves a path for me to walk on — she solidifies that
gothic texts impose on audiences just as much as audiences can impose on them and gives me a
space to explore this textual imposition.

Jason Haslam also illustrates and elaborates on the unavoidable and unbreakable bond
between the Gothic tradition and slavery, and emphasizes slavery’s lasting effects, in his essay
“Slavery and American Gothic: The Ghost of the Future,” which is featured in a larger collection
entitled Slavery and American Gothic. Haslam argues that the literary devices of the Gothic —
“Violence (physical, spiritual, sexual, cultural); the grotesque; otherness; incarceration; living
death; and the arbitrary exercise of power” — are also “material practices of various forms of
social oppression” (Haslam 2016) that have been (and still are) actually exercised and endured in
the United States. He contends that, perhaps, American culture, which is defined in (large) part
by slavery, is gothic in and of itself: the event of slavery still haunts present-day America. This
aligns with Goddu’s claims but puts them into a more current context that can more readily be
applied to Get Out. Haslam’s contentions also relate to those made by Poll about Peele’s
adherence and addition to Afro-pessimism. As already articulated, Poll proclaims that Peele’s
film “narrates the deep truth of Afro-pessimism” in that it “seems to posit that, for African
Americans, there is no escape. To be Black in America, Get Out suggests, is to be trapped within
an unending narrative of racialized terror. For African Americans, horror is not a genre, but a
structuring paradigm” (Poll 2018, emphasis added).

Haslam, like Goddu, acknowledges that black authors can (and do) adapt and adopt the
Gothic tradition in order to describe their indescribable experiences and materialize these
experiences in the form of haunting texts. Haslam considers this gothic ability to describe the
indescribable as an ability to “deal with trauma” (Haslam 2016). Haslam explores trauma’s
temporality, stating that everything before or after is irrevocably affected by the traumatic event
that is slavery: “trauma becomes the lens through which everything is read, darkly” (Haslam
2016). Gothic texts, according to Haslam, become “symptomatic effects of that originary social
trauma” (Haslam 2016). Interestingly, though, Haslam explores how the Gothic can potentially
go beyond a “limiting or repetitive” (Haslam 2016) re-narrativization of past trauma — how it
can, in some forms, be an enabling, generative genre through which black authors can
reconstruct and re-articulate the “originary trauma of slavery” in order to “ensure that it not
happen again, and indeed look to a brighter day” (Haslam 2016). “Generative gothics,” as he
coins them, are counter-readings of the Gothic structure that perhaps “can articulate the horrors
of slavery while still looking toward hope” (Haslam 2016).

Haslam, like Goddu, points to Jacobs’ text. He argues that slavery and its traumas aren’t
the only gothic figures in her text, “the complicated and always fraught relationship between
freedom and slavery: freedom is the gothic creature that resists and revolts against the constraints
of reality bound by the all-too-mundane horror of the practices and after-effects of American
slavery” (Haslam 2016). Haslam argues that, if the Gothic is able to “disrupt the status quo, then
perhaps it does not resurrect the traumatic past, but instead challenges the inevitable conformity
that hegemonic forces attempt to imprint on the future” (Haslam 2016). Peele, in creating *Get
Out*, had the ability to dig audiences into a pit of hopeless race-related anger and despair, he had
the ability — and this ability is proven in the film’s alternate ending (Poll 2018) — to offer
viewers no way out. However, he ultimately “made a nightmare about white evil that doubles as
a fairy tale about black unity, black love, black rescue” (Morris 2017). *Get Out* ultimately “offers
us a hero out of this turmoil,” it offers “escape and joy” (Zinoman 2017). While past traumas and repressed racial ideologies still linger like a ghost in the present, not all hope should be lost.

Since both Haslam and Goddu consider Jacobs’ text as foundational to and impactfully illustrative of the (American) Gothic tradition, and since their understandings of said tradition most thoroughly inform my situation of Get Out within it, it’s vital that I momentarily digress to note both the similarities and differences between Jacobs’ and Peele’s texts. I mentioned earlier that Get Out functions as a modern-day slave narrative, one that not only revives but revitalizes racially-fuelled persecutions that have been publicly presumed and proclaimed dead. Like Incidents, Get Out reveals racism’s terrifying reality — it reveals racism and its associated terrors as reality — in an evocative and visceral way. Both texts demand audience response, and are meant to conjure constructive conversations about race — conversations that America as a whole fails and has always failed to have. Both engage with mental and physical captivity. The grave-like garrett that conceals Jacobs for seven years is reminiscent of the sunken place in Get Out: both entities involve a living death, an absolute revocation of agency. While in the garrett, Jacobs is ultimately able to observe her surroundings, she’s forced to feel the physical and psychological effects of her cramped concealment, but is unable to engage with or control them. Similarly, when forced to the sunken place, Chris becomes a passive passenger in his own body. He witnesses and senses everything as normal, but has no authority over his actions. Both texts ultimately illustrate the ways black bodies are stolen, fetishized, objectified, and exploited — and the ways black minds are terrorized, trivialized, and literally hypnotized — by white people.

While prominent parallels can be drawn between Incidents and Get Out, there are also distinct differences between them that warrant attention. Both Jacobs’ and Peele’s texts blend
and blur the line separating fact and fiction, both are rooted in reality and employ tropes of Gothic fiction to express the inexpressible experiences of racism and slavery. However, *Incidents* is a memoir. As such, it relays monumental events as they really happened, as Jacobs’ really experienced them. Peele’s film, on the other hand, is fundamentally fiction. While it borrows from and resonates with Peele’s reality as a black man in America, it isn’t essentially factual in the way that Jacobs’ text is. Goddu notes that, in *Incidents*, “fact [mirrors] fiction” (Goddu 1997). As proof of this “uncanny” mirroring, Goddu turns to Jacobs’ “factual account of her seven-year imprisonment in her grandmother’s garrett” and how this echoes the “fictional tale about Cassy haunting Legree’s attic” in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Goddu 1997). It may be that the opposite occurs throughout *Get Out*: in Peele’s film, it could be argued, fiction mirrors fact. Also, the gender difference between Jacobs and Peele demands acknowledgment. So much of Jacobs’ narrative focuses on particular suffering endured by women in slavery, namely the repeated rape of female slaves by white slavemasters. While Chris is definitely fetishized, sexualized, and objectified by *Get Out’s* white characters, he doesn’t face the same sexual threat that Jacobs does. Sexual violence takes an entirely different kind of mental and physical toll, and Jacobs makes that absolutely apparent.

That being said, through his adherence to the Gothic and its associated traits and tropes, Peele visually and viscerally immerses me, a self-proclaimed progressive white woman viewer from suburban Wisconsin, in a projection reminiscent of his experience as a black man — a modern experience over which the ghost of an oppressive past lingers — in order to “haunt back” (Goddu 1997) but also “haunt forward” (Haslam 2016). *Get Out*, as a(n) (American) Gothic text, aesthetically manipulates me to meditate on my whiteness and what it means to be
white in a white supremacist society and its haunting aesthetics, through viewer mediation/intercession (Moten 2018/Felski 2008) — as both Langsberg and Poll contend — posit the potential for personal and political progress. *Get Out* immerses me into a subjective experience that I, up until my first viewing of the film, had honestly never been forced to fully face or feel — especially not to such an extreme extent. The experience of *Get Out* stirs something in me. Its aesthetics guide me to see my (white) self and the (white) world I inhabit in a “new” (terrifying, shocking) light. It could be and has been argued that *Get Out* is not and should not be made about whiteness but blackness, that its perspective and pain (and other passions) are problematically appropriated or incorrectly and inappropriately interpreted by white viewers. The film’s inclusion in the 2017 Golden Globes “best musical or comedy” category could be posited as proof of this problematicality. However, Peele has contended that he had an all-encompassing audience and overall experience in mind while crafting *Get Out*.

In an interview with Dave Davies of NPR’s podcast *Fresh Air*, Peele said that the film gets “the entire audience in touch in some way with the fears inherent [in] being black in this country” (Davies 2017). However, the experience of *Get Out* can vary between black and white audiences. *Get Out* sparks and expands upon constructive and comprehensive contemplations and conversations about race but it also inevitably entails limitations and variations in resonance and recognition depending upon viewer positionality. For white audiences, the film can potentially and evocatively function as an immersive, innovative exposure to racism’s reality and their role in it. For audiences of color, the film can potentially and evocatively function as validation of and solidarity to a reality they already knew to be true. Morris, in “Jordan Peele’s
X-Ray Vision,” asserts that “A nonwhite audience might have been Chris once, twice, or all the time. But white audiences are pushed into an uncomfortable new experience” (Morris 2017).

The film is loaded with depictions of racism in both covert and overt, real and surreal forms. Chris’s experience is meant to resonate most deeply with audiences of color (especially black viewers). Peele contends that its relayal may authenticate and accurately represent the experiences of people of color in a new and essential way. Chris’s experience may resonate with white audiences, too, but for a different reason: white audiences may “either recognize these moments as something that maybe they’ve done, or that they’ve seen someone do” (Davies 2017). White audiences may be guided not only to recognize how it feels to be at the receiving end of racism’s constant threat but also the ways in which they see themselves, or those they know, in the actions of the white, racist antagonists. In other words, white people may see themselves in the villains, or see the villains in ourselves. As I watch Get Out, I see myself in the villains, and the villains in myself.

Watching Get Out, I’m guided to recognize racism as an ever-present peril — and feel the perpetual paranoia this ever-presence produces for people of color — but also my role (however [un]conscious or [in]direct) in racism’s persistence. Despite potential moments of experiential dissonance and difference dependent upon lived experiences, Peele, in an interview with Crisis Magazine’s Lottie Joiner, contests that Get Out has the potential to evoke an inclusive — though varied — “catharsis” for its comprehensive audience (Joiner 2018). Ultimately, Get Out guides viewers to not only to contemplate “what it feels like to be black in America” but also “what it feels like to be themselves in America.” It has the potential to “encourage audiences to go outside of the film and into our own lives to find the associations we
make when we watch it... to examine our own location in society to discover how we have been conditioned to assign meanings — and sometimes only one — to familiar sights” (Shih 2018).

In an interview with Jason Zinoman of the *New York Times*, Peele said he “wanted to make something that has a perspective that you don’t often see” but he also wanted *Get Out* “to be an inclusive movie.” “That’s the power of story and genre,” Peele contends in the same interview, “You can ask a white person to see the world through the eyes of a black person for an hour and a half” (Zinoman 2017). In creating *Get Out*, Peele “wanted to make a film that acknowledges neglect and inaction in the face of the real race monster” (Peele 2017). He wanted to craftily and carefully conjure and continue universal, meaningful considerations of and conversations about the realities of race and racism — things that (white) America as a whole fails and has always failed to do and have despite temporal “progress” and perceptions of its present “post-race” position. Even the film’s categorization in the Golden Globes confirms a need to focus on *Get Out’s* engagement with whiteness, rather than denies it. After the controversial nomination and subsequent outrage, Peele tweeted the following:

“The reason for the visceral response to this movie being called a comedy is that we are still living in a time in which African-American cries for justice aren’t being taken seriously [by white people]. It’s important to acknowledge that though there are funny moments, the systemic racism that the movie is about is very real. More than anything, it shows me that film can be a force for change. At the end of the day, call ‘Get Out’ horror, comedy, drama, action, or documentary, I don’t care. Whatever you call it, just know it’s our truth.” (Morris 2017)

Peele, again in his interview with Zinoman, argues that “The liberal elite who communicates that we’re not racist in any way is as much of the problem as anything else. This movie is about the lack of acknowledgement that racism exists. In the Trump era, it’s way more obvious that extreme racism exists. But there are still a lot of people who think: ‘We don’t have a racist bone in our bodies.’ We have to face the racism in ourselves” (Zinoman 2017).
self-proclaimed progressive white liberal woman from suburban Wisconsin, need to face the ways that racist ideologies and images have inevitably been ingrained, however (un)subtly or (un)consciously, in the marrow of my bones and in the matter of my being. If I truly want to partake in the active effort to slay the real race monster, I need to recognize not only how I feed and nurture this monster whose existence I explicitly claim to despise but also how it protects me in my tower of whiteness and white privilege. Even further, I need to acknowledge how the monster is embedded in, not separate from, me. Again, through the Gothic experience of Get Out, I am aesthetically manipulated to face, but more importantly feel, racism’s all-pervasiveness and my role, as a white person, in its preservation.

As a film that engages with the realities of racism and the truths of its timeless terror, Get Out inevitably engages with both whiteness and blackness. To put it simply: racism would not exist without whiteness, blackness would not exist without whiteness. Whiteness has been and continues to be conceptualized as a superior state of being (by white people) to justify injustices. People of color are violently aware of racism’s reality and weaponized whiteness — its truth is their truth, as Peele contends, and its existence and effects are ever present in their daily lives. White people, on the other hand — despite being the primary perpetrators and preservers of systemic racism — are ironically and irrationally the ones who are blind to its all-pervasiveness, its actuality, and their inevitable influence in its perpetuation. White people are the ones who don’t take the suffering that racism stimulates seriously because we are the ones who systematically benefit from said suffering. Our ignorance, silence, and complacency all have very real effects — and yet we never have to feel them and rarely (if ever) have to face them. Even white progressives are not as progressive as they perceive and proclaim themselves to be.
Proper progress requires that white people feel and face our whiteness. Peele is far from the first person of color to articulate (aesthetically or otherwise) the realities of racism from a subjective perspective. Even after a multitude of attempts by people of color to wake white people up, white people remain unstirred, cocooned in their comforting white sheets, covered by a cozy white duvet. *Get Out*, for me, acted as an aesthetic alarm clock.

Thus, the time has come for me to establish the reader-response (or in this case “viewer-response”) framework of which I plan to most heavily adhere to and rely upon. In the second section of the first chapter, “Knowledge of Freedom,” of his book *Stolen Life*, Fred Moten engages with the concept of continuing critical conversations, particularly about race. Race and racism are ever-present and require continued contemplation. I see much of what Moten says as mirroring Peele’s artistic and critical approaches. Moten starts this section by quoting Derrida: “…There is nothing monological, no monologue — that’s why the responsibility for deconstruction is never individual or a matter of the single, self-privileged voice. It is always a multiplicity of voices, of gestures… And you can take this as a rule: that each time Deconstructions speak through a single voice, it is wrong, it is not ‘Deconstruction’ anymore” (Moten 2018). This quote encapsulates Moten and Peele’s methods: they, like Derrida, blend a plethora of preceding and foundational voices and visuals that have considered, and constructed, race and related racial ideologies.

For Moten and Peele, the complicated compilation of these voices ultimately guides and informs their own complex exploration of the origination of blackness: “Blackness is the orienting principle of Peele’s art. Its richness, its strangeness, its beauty, its complication, its ridiculousness, its divisiveness, its allure, its very realness… It perplexes, amuses and excites
him, the way language obsesses some novelists and food delights certain cooks. Interestingly, though, he has wanted to do more for blackness — building that pipeline, for instance, through which other artists’ ideas would flow” (Morris 2017). While some critics — like Poll and Haslam — would likely argue that the event of slavery can be marked as that which birthed blackness, Moten, in his work, makes it clear that really no one event or person can be pinpointed as the birthplace or the birther of blackness. The same can be said for whiteness, and the same can even be said about the Gothic. Moten and Peele’s explorations are not meant to be apex pieces about race, but create a gap for others to enter and proceed to expand and explore.

In this section, Moten engages with the concept of genre, more specifically the black radical tradition. Moten emphasizes improvisation in the black radical tradition and claims that in order for the event of slavery — and blackness in general — to even begin to be explained or understood “telling must be situated at a frontier, on the border that is the condition of possibility of ‘the law of genre.’ Such a telling must simultaneously fulfill and exceed the generic responsibilities of narrative, must be both recit and recitation” (Moten 2018). Moten also coins the term ensemble — “the improvisation of and through the opposition of totality and singularity in and as a descent into the generative cut between description and prescription” (Moten 2018) — to describe both “a phenomenology of totality and singularity that would reveal some opening of the possibility of political agency, of another mode of organization unopposed to freedom” and its object (Moten 2018).

Moten contends that “autobiographies of ensemble” — texts like slave narratives — can move “from thought through what Levinas calls an ‘ethical saying’ to the possibility of ethical action that we must activate” (Moten 2018). Vital to this transference, according to Moten, is
mediation. This relates to Felski’s contention that texts can only have an impact on the world when reader “intercession” is involved (Felski 18). In fact, according to the dictionary, “mediation” is synonymous to “intercession.” Ultimately, what Moten is saying is this: “…the rest is what is left for us to say, the rest is what is left for us to do, in the broad and various echoes of that utterance, our attunement which assures us that we know all we need to know about freedom” (Moten 2018). Moten continues the racial conversation as it pertains to freedom, inserts his voice into the stewing pot of so many other voices, but he is sure to address that the conversation is far from over — that, in fact, just as there is no definite beginning, there will likely never be an end.

In her book *The Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski contends that literary critics have been trained to become “resisting readers” (Felski 2008) who find value in literary texts primarily through what they as critics can do to and with them while ignoring and discrediting the ways in which these texts actually can and do affect them intellectually and emotionally. Literary texts, Felski argues, are typically brought into critical discussion in order for a critic to “confirm what the critic already knows, to illustrate what has been adjudicated in other arenas” (Felski 2008). While Felski sees necessity in the critical tendency to impose on literary texts — while she knows the tools and insights that have been sharpened and gleaned by critics are valuable and vital, not to be discarded (Felski 2008) — she calls for readers to “ask what is lost when we deny a work any capacity to bite back… to challenge or change our own beliefs and commitments. To define literature as ideology is to have decided ahead of time that literary works can be objects of knowledge but never sources of knowledge. It is to rule out of court the eventuality that a literary text could know as much, or more, than a theory” (Felski 2008).
Felski breaks her book into four pieces — recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock — that represent what she calls “modes of textual engagement” (Felski 2008). Felski acknowledges that aesthetic responses are not completely contained within these four modes, that the lines between these modes are blurred, and that aesthetic responses are ultimately dependent upon and shaped by various educational and cultural factors (Felski 2008). According to Felski, aesthetic responses vary unpredictably from person to person, and even from reading to reading, and it is vital that we as critics begin to explore the ways texts affect us personally in order to begin to understand this variety. Felski aims to “give equal weight to cognitive and affective aspects of aesthetic response; any theory worth its salt surely needs to ponder how literature changes our understanding of ourselves and the world as well as its often visceral impact on our psyche” (Felski 2008) and emphasizes that reader “intercession” is necessary for a text to have any impact on the world (Felski 2008).

Felski’s contentions tie in well with the aforementioned academics. Moten is interested in “freedom and the relationship of certain narratives of slavery to the question of freedom not only in the historical context in which they were written but in the no-less-desperate context of our fiercely urgent now. We know something — narratives and understandings of narrative and understandings of the relation between narrative and freedom — that we need to know we know” (Moten 2018). This idea is reflected by Felski’s understanding of recognition: recognition, Felski contends, “brings together likeness and difference in one fell swoop. When we recognize something, we literally ‘know it again’; we make sense of what is unfamiliar by fitting it into an existing scheme, linking it to what we already know… Recognition is not repetition; it denotes not just the previously known, but the becoming known. Something that may have been sensed
in a vague, diffuse, or semi-conscious way now takes on a distinct shape, is amplified, heightened, or made newly visible” (Felski 2008).

The unique aesthetic experience of the Gothic hinges on its illustration and evocation of the sublime. Edmund Burke defines and engages with the sublime in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful with an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste* and his understanding of the concept ultimately was inspired by and has inspired the Gothic tradition (Encyclopedia.com 2006). Burke attests to the power of the sublime: “The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor, by consequence, reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force” (Burke 1757). According to Burke, fear — which signifies a cognizance of pain or death — functions similarly to the experience of actual pain and it is argued that at the soul of the sublime in its most powerful state is terror or an equally potent passion. The sublime can only be conjured when one is also confronted with “fear-inspiring principles [like] vastness, difficulty, power, darkness, vacuity, obscurity, silence, solitude, infinity, massive solidity, and magnificence” (Encyclopedia.com 2006). In her book, Felski claims that the sublime falls under the umbrella of what she discusses as “shock.”

Shock, according to Felski, pertains to “literature’s power to disturb” (Felski 2008), it includes responses to moments in a text that are unforeseen, alarming, and altogether upsetting;
encountering them is “an assault equal parts intellectual and visceral” (Felski 2008). There’s a sense of “suddenness” — “a violent rupture of continuity and coherence, as time is definitively and dramatically rent asunder into a ‘before’ and ‘after’” (Felski 2008) — when it comes to shock. This facet of shock relates to Haslam’s discussion of trauma: how, once a traumatic event occurs, the past and present can’t be viewed through any lens but that of said trauma, of said darkness (Haslam 51). *Get Out* is a film that has irrevocably altered how I see the world, and how I see myself, and new insights are gleaned with each viewing. The film never gets less shocking. It illustrates just how seamlessly white American liberals (like me) can be characterized as, or morphed into, gothic villains reminiscent of slave masters and how prejudices produced in slavery, that manifest daily in multitudes as microaggressions, can quickly become debilitating. Peele comments on the characterization of the Armitages in an interview with Elbert Wyche of Screen Daily: “Some people think that a white supremacist is the definition of a racist person, but what I’m trying to point out with this movie is that there is a spectrum of actions that are all connected to the same sense of tribalism and otherness that is racism; and that there’s a system in place at this point that perpetuates itself. We’re not going to get anywhere if we don’t include ourselves as possible racists” (Wyche 2017).

As someone who identifies as a white American liberal, and as someone who has viewed white supremacists as the epitome of racism and liberals as the “good guys,” the chilling effects of my encounters with *Get Out*’s characterizations linger like a ghost — after viewing the film for the first time, I sat in my car for over fifteen minutes trying to process what I had just watched. Its contents cast a dark shadow over our country, and over myself, and attests to Felski’s claim that texts reach their peak shock-capacity, texts are most disturbing, when they
“(resist) our most heartfelt values” — it is only then that we are “left floundering and speechless, casting about for words to make sense of our own response” (Felski 2008). Shock has the ability to “unravel the certainty of one’s own convictions rather than sustaining them. Shock in this sense is not a blithe herald of future freedom from all tyrannies and oppressions but a graphic illustration of the internal as well as external obstacles that lie in the way of such freedom” (Felski 2008). This film, as Peele suggests, shows me that, despite any “certainty” I may have had in my own “convictions” pertaining to my preconceived progressiveness, I simply can’t assume that I’m exempt from, that I’m not potentially a part of, the perpetuity of prejudice. It’s important that I recognize this, and refuse even the slightest complacency. Ultimately, Get Out illustrates just how unprogressive supposed progressives may be, how the passage of time and actual political progress are not one in the same.

The hypnosis scene in Get Out and the moments surrounding it are the most shocking for Chris and, therefore, for me. Up until this part of the film, the (c)overt racism displayed by the Armitages had been relentless. It’s made clear that these microaggressive tendencies have altogether and ultimately aligned with Chris’s daily experience and his reality as a black man — Chris isn’t surprised by the Armitages’ inability to see beyond his race, to fully recognize his humanity. As Romano suggests, “Through the first two-thirds of the film, Chris is strategically silent while enduring a fusillade of casually racist behaviors, and it’s clear he’s learned this maneuver through countless social interactions. Chris’s silence is deliberately designed to avoid hostility and create an appearance of politeness and compliance. He remains nonviolent until the last possible second, to his peril” (Romano 2017). Chris almost appears numb to the racist behaviors, and this numbness extends into my own experience of the film. Felski argues that
shock can also evoke numbness, emotionlessness. My experience of numbness becomes an alternative experience of shock that opens my eyes to the fact that society as a whole has grown numb to these kinds of microaggressions, they’re deemed typical and almost acceptable. I specifically see myself in the Obama moments — I’ve raved about Obama and, like Dean Armitage claims, would’ve voted for him for a third term if I could’ve.

The hypnosis scene and moments immediately surrounding it are where the film takes a truly terrifying turn — anything that took place before it, and anything that takes place after it, can’t be seen in the same light, can’t possibly be viewed through a lens of innocent ignorance or deliberate denial. This part of the film solidifies any hunch that there is something in the Armitage house to be truly terrified of. This part of the film is also undoubtedly Gothic, it illustrates nearly every one of the aforementioned gothic characteristics: “Violence (physical, spiritual, sexual, cultural); the grotesque; otherness; incarceration; living death; and the arbitrary exercise of power” (Haslam 2016), it is ultimately uncanny in its entirety, it centers itself on “terror of possession, the iconography of imprisonment, the fear of retribution, and the weight of sin” (Encyclopedia.com 2006), it confronts me with “fear-inspiring principles [like] vastness, difficulty, power, darkness, vacuity, obscurity, silence, solitude, infinity, massive solidity, and magnificence” (Encyclopedia.com 2006).

The suspenseful moments leading up the hypnosis scene make clear that something is about to go horribly wrong for Chris. The tension begins to build when Chris, unable to sleep, heads outside to smoke (Peele 2017). As Chris begins navigating the halls of the Armitage house in silence, there’s a jump scare: Georgina walks, unnoticed by Chris, past a well-lit doorway and this is accompanied by a sharp and short burst of high-pitched orchestral music (Peele 2017).
Watching it now, it still made me jump even though I knew it was coming. My palms are sweaty, my heartbeat is elevated, but Chris is still unaware of the looming circumstances. This awareness of my body — my sweaty palms, my increased heart rate — reflects Landsberg’s claim that jump scares and similar “stylistic conventions of horror — it’s shocks and jolts — interrupt the forward movement of the narrative. They have the effect of forcing viewers back into their own bodies, breaking the narrative ‘spell.’ These moments of interruption can be intellectually productive” (Landsberg 2017). With this particular jump scare, I’m made aware of my separation from Chris and his experience.

Soon after Chris leaves the house, the massive body of Walter is barreling towards him, emerging from the dark, vast woods surrounding the Armitage house. This part, at times, is filmed from the perspective of Chris — it looks like Walter is running right at me (Peele 2017); his cold, angry stare and aggressive manner is directed at the camera, at me, just as much as it is directed at Chris. Chris is paralyzed, threatened, and so am I. Walter just barely avoids a direct collision with Chris, and we (Chris and I) barely have time to recover before being startled by Georgina’s figure in a large window. She’s humming, admiring her reflection (Peele 2017). Chris is clearly disoriented, and I’m right there with him. Interestingly, these jumps, jolts, and shocks don’t have the same effect as the aforementioned one. In these moments, my bodily experience feels linked to Chris’s rather than separate from it. Chris ultimately decides to bypass the cigarette break and go inside, only to be startled again by Missy Armitage, who was sitting in the dark waiting for him (Peele 2017). As Landsberg contends, “Throughout the film, and with great regularity, the audience is jolted with the standard horror technique of the jump scare — sudden jarring, unexpected, noises or images — but unlike the standard horror film, where these
shocks are an end in themselves, here the jump scares are racially inflected, calling attention to race and racial hierarchies. The shocks, in other words, are meaningfully connected to the black characters in ways that radically undermine the very idea of the post-racial” (Landsberg 2017). Reflecting on these consecutive disturbances and my response to them, I discern that they’re meant to relate the pervasiveness and relentlessness of racism — the monster that is racism can be found at every corner. It’s always prepared to pounce on its prey, and black people are constantly in fear of its attack. And attack the mother does.

Their interaction in the therapy room begins innocently enough and by the time her not-so-innocent intentions are revealed, it’s too late. Missy starts by explaining how hypnosis is practiced, explaining how she utilizes “focal points” that “guide someone into a state of heightened suggestibility” (Peele 2017) as she’s casually scraping her spoon repetitively along the bottom of her teacup. The noise this motion makes is emphasized so that I can hear it too, as loudly and clearly as Chris can. She’s getting into Chris’s mind, and therefore into my mind, and this is made evident when, after a few probing questions about the night Chris’s mother died, she tells him to “find” the sound of rain (Peele 2017). I find myself straining my ears to hear it, and eventually the sound of pattering rain is clear for both Chris and me. This scares Chris even more; he’s paralyzed with fear as an image of young Chris watching TV fills my own TV screen (Peele 2017) and his fear just makes him all the more vulnerable.

Finally, Missy addresses Chris’s inaction on the night of his mother’s death and Chris says he “just sat there… (he) thought that if (he did something), it would make (his mother’s death) real” (Peele 2017). Chris’s guilt is transferred onto me, as I sit here, watching TV, doing nothing: “I can’t move” (Peele 2017), I’m sitting at the edge of my seat, my heart is beating fast,
but I can’t look away. Then, Missy says “Now, sink into the floor. Sink” (Peele 2017) — the sound of her last word is morphed into a low, evil tone and upon hearing it, my heart actually sinks, and I get chills. Chris and I are both sinking as my ears are filled with white noise. Reality, Missy sitting in her chair, becomes a television that Chris is watching, just as I’m watching Chris on the television. I’m falling into a pool of endless black alongside Chris, the music in the background makes me feel helpless and small. Chris emulates this helplessness as his screams blend into the blackness, their sounds have nothing to cling to.

As the scene progresses, I’m frequently immersed in Chris’s perspective, seeing exactly what he sees (Peele 2017). I’m then confronted with Chris’s face of pure terror (Peele 2017) accompanied by silence. He’s looking directly at the camera, directly at me, as if to ask why I’m not doing anything to help him. We are in the sunken place (Peele 2017). Landsberg, in her article, notes the role cameras play throughout Get Out: “The camera performs a revelation; the revelation is political because it lends itself to action, to make visible new possible sites of intervention” (Landsberg 2018). This part of the film, as Landsberg suggests, functions partially as a call to action and partially as a means to momentarily immerse me in the perpetual position of unfreedom, the sunken place, that black people still occupy in America. By discussing the resonating repercussions of slavery, its racist remnants that even exist within my own being, I make them real. Just as fear was necessary for Chris to be sent to the sunken place, fear is necessary for me to be sent into action, to address and actively acknowledge my own role in the preservation of slavery’s trauma before it’s too late.
In creating *Get Out*, Peele didn’t want viewers to resist or impose on the experience of it. My experience of *Get Out* becomes something like a text itself. As Shih asserts, “We stand to learn the most when interpreting literature as a personal experience and not a thing” (Shih 2018). As a viewer, I often see what Chris sees, I almost always want what he wants, and I frequently feel what he feels. I ultimately notice and endure what he notices and endures, his survival and success temporarily become my survival and success. However, the thick glass of my television screen and my physical position outside of the projected experience provide a sense of secure separation that allows for conductive, multidirectional considerations about the reality in which I actually exist. My simultaneous immersion and separation let me get swept away into Chris’s relayed reality while keeping one foot rooted in my own reality. I am submerged in Chris’s affective experience, but am still aware of my existence outside of it. I am able to both emotionally/viscerally respond to and intellectually reflect upon the reality I am receiving and how it relates to the reality in which I physically exist. Chris, throughout *Get Out*, is trying to decide if his paranoia about the Armitages is warranted: if their covert racism and seemingly “innocent” ignorance are “typical” or symptomatic of something more sinister. As a viewer, I am acutely aware of the danger Chris is in before he is.

While there are moments in which I am cinematically seeing through Chris’s eyes and feeling through Chris’s body, I also occasionally witness what Chris does not — like Andre’s ominous suburban abduction at the very beginning of the film or the Armitage’s silent slave auction that takes place during their “party” under the guise of a bingo game. While I do not know the Coagula procedure specifics until Chris does, while I do not immediately know that the ultimate plan is to surgically embed a white consciousness into Chris’s black body, I am acutely
aware of the severity of his situation before he is. I know of the Armitage’s evils and ills, and that — if they're successful in whatever it is they’re trying to do — things won’t end well for Chris. However, as a viewer, I am unable to alter Chris’s course — I can only watch and feel it unfold. In this sense, I am forced into something like a sunken place for white people. This intensifies the affective experience of Get Out. Chris’s experience becomes my own, I am often perspectively immersed in it, but I am also able to both objectively observe and escape it. I am simultaneously submerged in but separate from it. Chris’s narrative is set in stone and, while left open-ended, ultimately ends with the film’s final scene. My narrative as a viewer, on the other hand, is fluid and inevitably continues even once the screen has gone black. Reality resumes as soon as the credits begin to roll — but it resumes, for me at least, with a new resonance.

Like Felski and Moten, Peele attests to the power of narrative and viewer interposition. In an interview with The Verge’s Bryan Bishop, Peele said “I'm a true believer in story. I think when you just tell people to think, people tend to get resistant and defensive, and feel like you're accusing them of not thinking. But when you tell a story, and you draw them in through allowing them to see through the eyes of a different person, and when you can affect their feelings and emotions — whether it's making them laugh, or making them scared, or making them scream, or making them cheer — then you have them on a starting point, already, to think about why they had those visceral reactions. The way I look at it is, when you allow people to submerge themselves into a story, they will react by thinking through what it's about. That's just so much more fun and effective, I think, than a lecture” (Bishop 2017). In my experience with Get Out, Peele’s desire for the racial dialogue that the film inspires to continue after the end credits start rolling is met. The film has disrupted my worldview, plunged a knife into the heart of my
supposedly secure self. Peele, like Jacobs, took his actual experience and turned it into a gothic horror that has the ability to haunt me — he, too, is “Haunted by the shadows of (his) past and the continued oppression of (his) present” and he “cannot completely exercise the demons of (pervasive racism); yet in bearing witness to them (he) haunts back” (Goddu 1997). My experience watching Get Out as a white woman is far from pleasant — it’s uncomfortable, it’s upsetting, it’s distressing, it’s overwhelming, it’s shocking. This very unpleasantness is what makes my encounter valuable, vital even. Racism is a reality that I, as a white person, am able to ignore (even as I perpetuate and benefit from its existence). However, in pursuing this analysis I’m actively deciding not to ignore it. I’ve decided I would rather be painfully aware of societal inequities and injustices than blissfully blind.

While Get Out “haunts and infuses” me (Moten 2018), it doesn’t leave me utterly hopeless. Get Out, when explored in terms of my experience of and response to it, functions as what Haslam deems a “Generative gothic.” It solidifies just how imperative it is that I keep exploring and engaging in racial dialogues and it guides me to know something I already knew — that, as a white person, I am inevitably involved in the upholding of racist structures and that unfreedom persists into the present for black people — while submerging me in what I didn’t know in a way that makes me want to know, do, and say more. I have so much still to learn, so much still to understand, and Get Out, while its ending sends a message that the death of the Armitages does not equate the death of racism — that the monster that is racism still reigns and ultimately needs to be slayed — shows that escape from cyclical racism may be possible. Racism, as Get Out illustrates, thrives in silence, ignorance, and inaction. As Peele posits, “voices are our best weapon against racism and violence and murder… And voices that call out
those in power are really needed and really valued” (Joiner 2018). This essay is an attempt to add my voice to an existing ensemble (Moten 2018). Just like Peele’s portrayal of his experience as a black American — which adds to and is informed by preceding portrayals — won’t be, and shouldn’t be, the last of its kind; just like Moten’s exploration of blackness — which adds to and is informed by preceding explorations — won’t be, and shouldn’t be, the last of its kind; my analysis of Get Out — which adds to and is informed by preceding analyses — won’t be, and shouldn’t be, the last of its kind. My analysis, enacted from my inherently limited (human) perspective, is inevitably incomplete and created to be continued. As Moten suggests, there is always more to say, always more to do when it comes to dismantling established systems and cultural constructions. The most important conversations, like those regarding race or (un)freedom, can and should always continue.
REFERENCES


