

Black Body, White Brain; White Body, Black Spirit:How *Get Out* (2017) Foregrounds the Underlying Racism of *The Skeleton Key* (2005)

Vivienne Tailor

Department of Cultural Studies, Claremont Graduate University.

ABSTRACT

The films The Skeleton Key (Skeleton, 2005) and Get Out (2017) both include “fish out of water” protagonists who follow Noël Carroll’s “complex discovery plot,” where characters suspect a monster, investigate its presence, and engage in a fight to the death. In each film, the monster is, in fact, racism. Yet, in Skeleton, the monster is the self-proclaimed anti-racist representation of black empowerment that is actually a fetishization of Vodou coupled with an eliding of black bodies and voices. In contrast, Get Out manifests a visual imaginary of Du Bois’s double consciousness and Franz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks (1952) to comment upon normalized American racism, which the main character battles through his “returned gaze.” Ultimately, each film demonstrates America’s struggles with race, gender, and identity, where both the physical realms of bodies and of consciousness represent the entities under attack and the vantage points for resistance.

KEYWORDS

Film studies, Fetishization of Vodou, the returned gaze, double consciousness; *White Skin, Black Masks*

Nothing more glorious than a garden—
gone every winter, back every spring.

The Skeleton Key

We're born. We breathe. We die. Even
the sun will die. We are the gods trapped
in cocoons.

Get Out

I. Introduction, Background, Film Similarities

On the surface, the horror films *The Skeleton Key* (2005) and *Get Out* (2017) possess numerous similarities—they include a “fish out of water” protagonist who must navigate a dangerous terrain that includes a plot twist involving body switching. However, upon closer analysis, these two films directly oppose each other in their racial implications. While *The Skeleton Key* (*Skeleton*) follows what director Iain Softley considers a real person in an extreme situation, *Get Out* reveals the prevalence of racism surrounding every aspect of life, even in the self-professed liberal homes of those who would have voted for Obama for a third time. Following Noël Carroll’s “complex discovery plot,” the protagonists undergo a process of suspecting a monster, investigating and confirming its presence, and engaging in a fight to the death. In both films, the monster is, in fact, racism. Yet, in *Skeleton*, the true monster is the ostensible representation of black empowerment that is actually a fetishization of Vodou coupled with an eliding of black bodies as opposed to *Get Out*’s exploration of the black experience through creating physically tangible manifestations of

double consciousness and revealing the pervasiveness of normalized racism. With the 2020 progress in human rights justice regarding American police biases, contemplating the covertly racist messages propagated in *Skeleton* contrasted to the call to dissent advocated by *Get Out* illustrates the power of media and its impact on transnational racial awareness.

Set in New Orleans, which is identified by the signifiers of jazz music and the downtown trolley, *Skeleton* falls within the Southern Gothic horror sub-genre, as the film is replete with forlorn Catholic statues and paintings, haunting trees draped in Spanish moss, and crashing thunderstorms. At the same time, Softley, a British director who felt he had more of an outsider's perspective on New Orleans and Vodou and Hodou culture, mentions in a Film Monthly interview that, "I had this feeling that I wanted this film to feel very authentic and have an almost like a documentary feel to it... not to be gothic-y in any way," which seems directly opposed to the final product that incorporates virtually every Southern gothic trope. In the DVD extras, Softley and his team also include what he described as a documentary-style filming of the recording of the "Conjure of Sacrifice," which is the incantation for the film's main Hodou ritual. This exemplifies the appropriation of Afro-Caribbean religious traditions and the Hollywood presentation of fetishized views of their rituals. The documentary style infers a realism and authenticity to the stylized, imagined rituals while removing the sense of the participants as actors, creating an impression of them as authentic Vodou and Hodou practitioners.

Jordan Peele, the writer and director of *Get Out*, refined the genre label for his breakout film moving from horror or thriller to an innovative sub-genre he labeled as the "social thriller." In a PBS interview, Peele stated, "For me, the social thriller is the thriller through which the fears, the horrors, and the thrills are coming from society. They're coming from the way humans interact." Using as inspiration *The Stepford Wives* and *Rosemary's Baby*, which represent two films where men make unwelcome decisions for women and their bodies, Peele focused his film on white people making unwelcome choices for black people. His film title's inspiration derives from an Eddie Murphy stand-up comedy skit,

which deals with the opposing ways that white and black culture can deal with the supernatural. In a humorous parallel to the fact that the *Skeleton's* protagonist of the white Caroline (Kate Hudson) repeatedly returns to the clearly supernaturally imbued house in her world, the black Eddie Murphy's character immediately leaves a haunted house upon hearing the disembodied whisper, "Get out," as Murphy says to his wife in perfect comedic timing, "Baby, we gotta go." Ultimately, the difference both in the directors' awareness of the labeling of genres and of the impact of the chosen genre on the films' visuality and content establishes a foundational point to assess the films' messages on race relations.

In continuing to explore the similarities in both films, each film's protagonist suffers a psychological weakness, which makes them especially vulnerable to their predators. *Skeleton's* Caroline is inexorably drawn to the swampland, rundown Devereaux mansion because she feels compelled to act as the hospice nurse for Ben, who is actually a hybrid character himself in that he is the body of an elderly white man with the spirit of a different young white man inside. Ben represents the victim of the Hodou conjurer Papa Justify, who already succeeded in psychologically manipulating the young person in to "believing" in Hodou in order to make the spirit transfer. Caroline, now the prey for Papa Justify's partner Mama Cecile, cannot abandon Ben because of her guilt for not caring for her own father in his last days.

In *Get Out*, Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) is vulnerable to the psychiatrist Missy's hypnosis due to his own childhood guilt for not searching for his mother when she was late returning home after being hit by a car outside their home. A deer motif plays an integral role throughout the film to visualize Chris's mental state and evolution. The deer concept begins with the hitting and killing of a deer on the way to the Armitage family estate—a situation that clearly rekindles his remorse regarding his mother's death. It continues with the deer trophy head mounted in the Armitage home, which links into the Armitage family's mistreatment of living beings, as the father likens the deer to vermin that ought to be exterminated. Ultimately, the deer motif becomes a source of empowerment when Chris

uses the trophy head to impale the father character during his escape. This action is symbolically crucial as it externalizes Chris's psychological evolution from a guilt-ridden watcher of life to a self-aware agent within his own rescue. Throughout each film's storylines, both Caroline and Chris's weaknesses prove central to the characters' vulnerability, making them easy marks for the surrounding predators. Yet, it is when Chris evolves that he is able to make strides in his escape and in destroying the parasitic Armitage group.

II. Methods of Body Transfers & Racial Bodies Being Transferred

In *Skeleton*, the use of the Afro-Caribbean Vodou and Hodou religious traditions links into a long history of Hollywood's creation of entire genres of films that seek to codify and stigmatize African and African diaspora people and cultures. Many films, such as Edison Film's *The Watermelon Patch* (1905) and AMBCO's *The Chicken Thief* (1904), "presented blacks as subhuman, simpleminded, superstitious, and submissive. They exhibited qualities of foolish exaggeration and an apparently hereditary clumsiness and ignorance as well as an addictive craving for fried chicken and watermelon" (Leab 1). Of the 1949 Hollywood Negro Cycle—which includes films portraying Black soldiers as cowards, the source of environmental pollution, passing for white and being "discovered" through birthing dark-skinned children, and debates whether or not black women should marry black or white men—Ralph Ellison stated, "Obviously, these films are not about Negroes at all. They are about what whites think and feel about Negroes" (Ralph Ellison qtd. in Everett 307). Ultimately, an examination of *Skeleton* demonstrates how these damaging genres and essentialized characterizations are still at play.

Even the advent of the "positive" Superspade, which "is an uneasy but fascinating amalgam of Aristotle, D'Artagnan, Dick Tracy, Hercules, Robin Hood, and at times a militant yet forgiving Christ, ...Superspade is just another caricature" (Leab 3-4). In fact, Superspade

refers to an exceptionally talented black person, especially within athletics (such as Jesse Owens) or entertainment (such as Sammy Davis, Jr.), which simply links back into the concept of stereotypes where “whether Sambo or Superspade, the black image on screen has always lacked the dimension of humanity” (Leab 5). In fact, the idea of Justify and Cecile as “imperfect” black characters might garner some positive response; however, the creation of their characters as child-murderers and also as hypocrites in the struggle against racism in that they would prefer to transition in the bodies of young black people (instead of young white people who are gullible enough to stay) makes Justify and Cecile—who are undeveloped, flat, silent characters—less than innovative or groundbreaking in terms of character complexity or uniqueness.

Skeleton joins Hollywood’s longstanding fascination with this Creole religious hybrid of African, Caribbean, and Catholic traditions. “The affiliation of such ‘voodoo’ films as *Voodoo Man* (1944), *Voodoo Woman* (1957), and *Voodoo Island* (1957) with the horror genre already betrays a viscerally phobic attitude to African religion” (Shohat and Stam 812). These tropes of fetishizing Vodou culture as magical, demonic, backwards, animalistic, orgiastic, and illicit carry on into the 1980s with *The Believers* (1986), which links Santeria with child-murderers; *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988), which conflates mysticism and medicine in the zombie association with vodou; and *Angel Heart* (1987) and *Wild Orchid* (1989), which both rely on sensationalized portrayals of dangerous and forbidden sexuality.

Some particularly fetishized elements of Vodou and Hodou practices relate to the concept of possession, curses, magic, and Vodou dolls—all of which are used in a Hollywood parody fashion within *Skeleton*. The main motivation for the film centers on Justify and Cecile’s need to disorient and break Caroline’s mind to “believe” in the truth and power of Hodou in order to complete the spirit transfer of Cecile from her current elderly white body into Caroline’s youthful white body. The film is replete with semiotic images of Vodou and Hodou, including brick dust to ward off enemies, the arcane objects in the attic (such

as a taxidermy monkey with a mouth caught in a frozen scream and jars filled with grotesque, unidentifiable organic forms preserved in amber liquid), a book with magical, ritualistic drawings that form spells and incantations, and a ghastly life size Vodou doll of Caroline complete with clippings of her blond hair. Within *Skeleton*, Vodou and Hodou is initially viewed by Caroline as a psychosomatic or hypnotic effect. When she decides to try to connect with her patient Ben, she states, “He believes magic made him sick. Magic can make him better.” Instead of highlighting the communal nature of Vodou and Hodou traditions in peace and communication, *Skeleton* denigrates this spiritual worldview into the occult, yet still psychological experience that lacks authentic universal power deserving of the respect afforded to other world religions.

In fact, Vodou and Hodou and New Orleans do have deep connections with resistance in terms of black cultural preservation, independence, and revolution. New Orleans has long been an international center and gateway between the American Southeast and the Caribbean, especially between the 1790s to the early 1800s when over 12,000 Haitian immigrants fled to New Orleans due to the revolution against French colonial rule. The hybrid, continually evolving religion and social practice of Vodou is believed to have originated from slaves brought from a variety of cultures, including Yoruba, Fon, Bambara, Mandingo, Wolof, and Fulbe, which all intermixed with native Caribbean and colonial Christian religious concepts. The main shift from what was known as Vodou occurred in the 1870s with the increasing Americanization of New Orleans into a white Protestant system that sought to control the French-African, Catholic-influenced Vodou community. This power shift led to a proliferation of propaganda that demonized Caribbean religions “in sensational images of bloodthirsty orgies and human sacrifices” (Turner 126). In order to avoid persecution, which included penalty taxes and potential jail sentences, many Vodou practitioners proclaimed to have abandoned Vodou for a “spiritualism,” which included talking to the dead and séances, and became recontextualized as Hodou.

Turner emphasizes that, “all of these profound changes in the culture of Black New Orleans and its connection to Haiti produces a new highly secretive magical emphasis in New Orleans Vodou that focused on spiritual work for clients and resistance to the religion’s enemies—it was called hoodoo” (127). While Vodou and Hodou do include the concept of spirit possession, it is certainly nothing like what is portrayed in the film *Skeleton*. In the Vodou and Hodou traditions, The Supreme God is referred to as *Grand Met* or *Bon Dieu* with *Lwa* spirits serving as agents in a vast interconnected universe of energy flow among the planes of nature, animals, humans, and the cosmos. In fact, the *Lwa* are summoned, not “worshipped” by Vodouisants, or Vodou practitioners, who might sacrifice an animal and/or offer food while dancing and singing to drum rhythms to honor the *Lwa*. It is during these ceremonies, which usually correspond to Catholic saint days, that a Vodouisant might experience horse possession wherein “The possessing *Lwa* temporarily displace the personality and consciousness of the persons who serve as their horses and use their bodies to communicate with the community” (Edmonds and Gonzalez 110-111). Obviously, this spiritual practice vastly differs from the imagined spirit transference in *Skeleton*. In a final note, Vodou has absolutely been a site of resistance and facilitated a tipping point for the August 1791 Haitian Revolution when a priest named Dutty Boukman and a priestess named Cecile Fatiman sacrificed a pig, presented the blood to the attendees, and called for resistance to the death. However, as will be explored further in the essay, while the characters of Justify and Cecile might ostensibly be portrayed as resisters to slavery, they are in fact muted images that serve as a concept for the whitened world of the supposedly Hodou film.

In *Get Out*, the use of pseudo-neuroscience as the method of body/spirit transfer might at first seem laughable with the brightly-lit, downstairs surgery room that would certainly not meet sanitation codes. Yet, there is an undertone that links it to the pseudoscience of phrenology and the extreme racism implicit within eugenics as well as the long, dark history of medical experimentation on African-American bodies. In her text *Medical Apartheid*, scholar Harriet Washington, who has been a fellow in ethics at Harvard Medical

School and later Harvard School of Public Health, recounts the history of medical experimentation on unanesthetized slaves, which was justified through a barbaric concept that black persons did not physically feel pain. Washington states that, “dangerous, involuntary, and nontherapeutic experimentation upon African Americans has been practiced widely and documented extensively at least since the eighteenth century” (7). Washington continues the research to the present day, detailing charges of scientific fraud levied by the Office for Protection from Research Risks at such esteemed universities as Johns Hopkins, Duke, and Yale, where “subjects were given experimental vaccines known to have unacceptably high lethality, were enrolled in experiments without their consent or knowledge, were subjected to surreptitious surgical and medical procedures while unconscious, injected with toxic substances” and many other unethical actions (Washington 6).

In *Get Out*, the method of transference involves an initial hypnotism by Missy, which renders the victims paralyzed and vulnerable while at the same time increasingly plunging them into the psychic underworld of “The Sunken Place,” whose metaphorical function will be explored in this essay’s Section III. Once the victim’s mind has become malleable, the victim’s physical brain is removed and replaced with the brain of a wealthy, usually white patron who wishes to experience or possess some physical attribute of the black victim. It seems that only black people are the victims, as audiences are introduced to three such lobotomized black persons and Rose’s photo box of victims only includes black people. Scholar bell hooks might assess Rose’s visual domination of these victims in connection with the fetishization of the black body, “When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other” (22). Rose has sexually engaged with these persons, fulfilled her fetish of the non-white body, reaffirmed her dedication to her white community’s belief systems,

and—like a serial killer—kept a memory box of her victims to endlessly relive her conquests.

Most importantly for this exploration of double consciousness, in *Get Out*'s method of body/mind transference, the victims remain conscious within "The Sunken Place" where they are able to witness everything, but are second to the inserted brain, here that of a race-biased person. It is chilling when the Armitage patriarch mentions they have struggled for many years to perfect this Coagula process, inferring the many victims of their ghastly experiments who were probably lured and/or outright kidnapped for these horrific activities. These actions are also reminiscent of the concept of "burking" people, a term derived from the late-19th century actions of William Burke that "denotes murder, usually by suffocation, carried out to effectuate a sale to anatomists" (Washington 130). Although there are no officially recorded incidents of burking of African-Americans (as there are of numerous impoverished Caucasians), Washington attributes this to the atmosphere of racism that veils these murders. On even another level of exploring the racism inherent within the Armitage family business, they financially benefit from the black victims in selling the black bodies to buyers. Their country Connecticut estate and world travels are financially undergirded by the usage of black bodies for their own gain and purposes.

III. Background Characters

While *Skeleton*'s "fish out of water" background of the white Caroline from New Jersey is integral to the character dynamics and plot progression, analyzing the black best friend from New Orleans is just as critical. While individually undeveloped as a three-dimensional character, Jill (Joy Bryant) serves numerous expository purposes within the narrative process. She acts as the sounding board for Caroline to vocalize her progression into believing in the validity of Hodou's power, the one who tells Caroline that she has stumbled upon a Vodou room in the dusty attic, a local who can show Caroline the location of a Vodou priestess, and, perhaps most importantly, a black person who intimates the fear of

the real power of Hodou. This last element occurs when Jill takes Caroline to the Vodou priestess, but then, with eyes wide and nervous, refuses to enter the Laundromat that serves as the front for the priestess's shop. This concept of "all black people" being knowledgeable and afraid of Hodou's power is echoed by the black character Hayley, who was the previous nurse to Ben and quit due to feeling afraid and uneasy at the Devereaux house. Overall, Jill does not have a unique identity; she is merely a black-bodied narrative device.

Beyond Jill, all the other black characters in *Skeleton* serve as background props to reinforce the atmosphere of New Orleans and the uncanny connections with Vodou and Hodou practices. In addition to the nameless jazz players, as Caroline drives out to the Devereaux house, she passes two, desperately poor black characters on the side of the road pushing a shopping cart. When she stops for gas and tries to pay inside the ramshackled, wooden station, a light-skinned, elderly woman with cloudy cataract eyes startles her. As Caroline turns to leave, she is again startled by a sweaty, dark-skinned black man, wearing overalls, who speaks French to her as he uses a knife to slice a raw oyster from its shell. At the Vodou priestess's place, a young black woman tearfully takes the collection of herbs from the priestess and promises to follow the instructions. The priestess herself is a large black woman wearing a headscarf, several thick necklaces, and brightly patterned mumu. All of these characters have one line or just a handful of lines. They have no character development beyond being the backdrop of New Orleans and in creating the sense that the creepiness of Vodou and Hodou culture pervades Louisiana.

On the very opposite end of the spectrum, the black characters surrounding *Get Out's* Chris are central to the plot; and, his realization of the truth of their experience and situation is crucial to his survival. Georgina, Walter, and Logan are all victims of the Coagula lobotomy process. Their behavior is robotic and inflexible, their facial expressions stiff and unnatural, and their language and gestures old fashioned. Georgina's brain has been replaced with the Armitage grandmother's brain while Walter's brain has been replaced with the grandfather's brain. Most of the dialogue in *Get Out* incorporates incredible levels

of subtext, and the moment Chris is introduced to Georgina speaks volumes. As the white father Dean guides Chris into the kitchen, the patriarch comments that the grandmother had loved the kitchen and that they “kept a piece of her” there just as the camera reveals Georgina, the black vessel carrying the white brain of the grandmother. The grandfather “chose” Walter as his vessel in a selfish desire to be able to absorb Walter’s running skills and, most likely, in a twisted, displaced revenge on Jesse Owens for beating him in the 1936 Olympics. In fact, in linking back to the Superspade concept, it is ironic that the auction attendees, although horrifically racist and objectifying in their dehumanization of the black victims, are in fact using black bodies as “superior” vehicles for their world experience.

The true personalities and minds of the original people of those black bodies now exist within the psychic purgatory of “The Sunken Place,” which can be construed to operate as a metaphor for concepts related to psychological colonization, internalized racism, and self-alienation. In *Get Out*, a black victim is transformed into a monstrous hybrid with a black exterior, sunken black consciousness, and a white brain that dominates functioning. “The Sunken Place” can be viewed as a metaphor linked into W.E.B. Dubois’s pivotal philosophy on double consciousness wherein a person outside of the dominant social group might come to measure, judge, and define oneself through the pejorative lens of said power group. This leads to psychic distress and an inability to find continuity, cohesion, and self-esteem. This psychic distress is seen in Logan when his true self is freed by Chris’s camera flash—Logan breaks out from the psychological purgatory of “The Sunken Place” to shout the warning, “Get Out!” to Chris. Franz Fanon famously explored these ideas of the psychological impact of colonization and slavery in his text *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), stating “The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation” (xiv). This neuroticism is painfully played out within the Coagula process where the fused black bodies and white minds inhabit a single, Frankenstein bodies; the black victims are monstrous hybrids in that

they are lobotomized zombies while the white aggressors are monstrous hybrids in that they are parasitic invaders.

In connection with the greater racial commentary explained by the plot of *Get Out*, the other character who requires analysis remains Chris's best friend Rod, the TSA agent. In another contrast to Caroline's perfunctory black Jill character, Chris's Rod provides wonderful comic relief that hyperbolically increases as Chris becomes more imperiled. Rod not only arrives to save Chris in the last moments of his escape from the Armitage house, Rod's dialogue offers another chilling reminder of the reality of the African-American experience—being subjected to sexual slavery. When Rod comically explodes about white people using black people as sex slaves, it garners an audience laugh. But, , this is in fact what is happening to the Logan character, who has clearly replaced the elderly white woman's husband as he is dressed up in clothes of an older man and speaks in an old-fashioned manner; plus, when Chris attempts to “fist bump” him, Logan stiffly grasps the entire outside of his fist. And, the woman at the auction, who feels Chris's muscular arm and nods to her husband who agrees about the “attractiveness” of Chris, mentions the stereotype of sex with black men being “better.” Rod's reference to the white serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer—who lured, drugged, raped, and cannibalized numerous black male victims—also injects a surface level joke that holds chilling levels of truth. Tragically, Rod's comments regarding white people using black people as sex slaves is all too true in the long history of the normalized and institutionalized sexual abuse of slave women, male castration, and forced procreation between enslaved people to bear offspring to further the white owners' benefit.

IV. The Look & Audience Spectatorship

In an interesting inversion of unauthorized scopophilia, *Skeleton's* Caroline believes she is not allowed to look in the Hodou room or investigate Vodou or Hodou traditions when in fact those are the very actions she is being lured into performing. Vodou and Hodou are reduced from spiritual practices to be a game of cat-and-mouse and reverse psychology. In the long tradition of women being linked to the proverb "curiosity killed the cat," Caroline is punished for looking. There are two main posters used to advertise the film with one showing a grotesque, muted-palette close-up of an eye where the pupil is rendered with the wheelchair-bound character of Ben, who will act as the lure and demise for Caroline. The other poster links to concepts in the film in a different way. Highlighting reds and picturing the finale scene with a classic occult ritual image, the poster shows the blond Caroline in a world a danger as she intensively studies the skeleton key. The poster also features a vagina-shaped keyhole, which links into the film's entire sexualized imagery of the key and the keyhole that harkens back to classic Gothic tropes that also underscores the themes of women investigating and looking at the forbidden. Throughout the film, the director includes multiple extreme close-ups of Caroline peering through keyholes and keyholes in general. And, in continuing this idea of the taboo of seeing, she finds a Hodou doll of herself in effigy with both its eyes hideously sewn shut. This moment visualizes the character Caroline's descent into "believing" in the truth and power of Vodou and Hodou traditions.

Kate Hudson, a white, blonde actress, is in truth still at the mercy of sexism in her own role as a White Woman who is an object of spectacle, as in the scene where she walks with her back to the camera while topless and preparing for a bath. She possesses her own sense of taboo and sexual lure in what Laura Mulvey defines as a "to-be-looked-at-ness." The fact that she is a young woman in danger merely adds to the scintillating effect. In truth, Caroline can also be positioned as an object of fetishization from Justify's perspective, especially considering that Violet also is a white, blonde woman. In the film's Act III, Caroline discovers several photos of herself on Luke's desk, indicating that he had been

watching her and had found her attractive as a potential vehicle for Cecile's new body. And, previously in Act II, when Caroline asks Luke into her bedroom to show him Ben's bed sheet with the words "Help me" scrawled on it, Luke/Justify introduces a sexual undertone by stating, "If a lady invites you in her room, she probably isn't much of a lady." When Violet/Cecile sees them together, she gives Luke/Justify a warning look to which he states, "Now, Violet, you know you're the only woman for me." In a filmmonthly interview, Softley discussed a scene cut from the film, particularly due to a negative audience reaction during a preview, where Luke (already inhabited by Justify) and Caroline kiss, which creates undertones of interracial sexual relations. Ultimately, the race and gender issues at play in *Skeleton* cross back and forth through pretending to be a film about black empowerment while eliding the voices of black characters and simultaneously fetishizing the blonde, white female form that is now in danger of being sexually "used" by a black male and female couple.

In *Get Out*, the Armitage estate is replete with coded representational objects that confer a message and history of colonialism and slavery. Various maps and European style portraits adorn the walls and a globe stands in the corner. The father Dean shows off two Balinese statues and states, "It's such a privilege to be able to experience another person's culture." While on the surface Dean's comment seem worldly-wise, the truth of his perspective remains more sinister and, once the truth of his maniacal personality is revealed, links more into an objectifying, Orientalizing view of the "Other." Kaplan notes that "travel provokes conscious attention to gender and racial difference...looking relations are never innocent. They are always determined by the cultural systems people travelling bring with them" (6). The blue and white tea cup also alludes to the history of colonization that undergird the massive tea trades out of China and India while the entire Armitage estate reminds viewers of the Southern plantations. Even Rose's seemingly innocuous stuffed lion references European colonization of African nations and the whole concept of man's hunting and self-professed dominion over animals. It is no accident that Jeremy assaults Chris with a lacrosse stick, the equipment of a sport associated with white, upper-class culture. Yet,

Chris is able to overcome all of these iconic codes of domination when he repurposes the armchair's cotton to plug his ears to avoid further hypnosis. In fact, this action creates the pivotal opportunity for Chris to attack Jeremy, which begins the entire escape sequence and the killing of the Armitage clan.

While *Get Out* is literally a life and death battle between the black Chris and the Armitage family, it is played out through the battle between the power of the gaze. "The external image of the desirable, for example, is historicized and localized. Individual and national subjectivity, forged through mutual looking, reaffirm, produce, and reproduce each other in the scopic field" (Taylor 30). Initially Chris, is the object of the gaze, as he has been targeted and seduced by Rose as the next lobotomy victim. In a late scene in the film when she believes Chris is being lobotomized downstairs, she voyeuristically surfs the NBA website looking for new prey. When the family and Chris sit at the outside table getting to know one another, the father has a camera set on the table pointing right at Chris. At this point, Chris is still in the process of realizing the value that has been placed on his black body. "The difference lies in the deployment of power relations, what Edward Said calls the 'effect of domination,' or the ethnographic, cinematic, and colonial process of designing an identity for the 'other' and, for the observer, a standpoint from which to see without being seen" (López 861). Chris has been identified, defined, and categorized by the Armitage family according to their white supremacist thinking.

Throughout the film, Chris must resist the scrutiny of "oppressive gaze structures" (Kaplan 292). In one of the more blatantly racist comments in the film, the drunk, leering brother Jeremy pointedly asks Chris if he has ever been a fight and proceeds to needle him about his sports preferences. Jeremy builds to a racist crescendo commenting that if Chris really trained that his frame and genetic makeup would make him a "beast." Ostensibly, this word has in recent years come to be a compliment for someone who is extremely strong; however, in this film's context, it operates on racist, dehumanizing levels. Throughout the film, Chris endures what Stuart Hall calls the "burden of representation," as in the question

from the Japanese man who asks, “Do you find that being African-American has more advantages or disadvantages in the modern world?,” as if Chris could and is responsible for speaking for all black persons. At the auction pre-party, Chris must maintain politeness in the face of racist comments from the guests. These include a man immediately saying that he knows Tiger Woods, a woman asking if sex with a black man is “better,” and another man saying that being black is back in fashion. In a scene cut from the final film, Chris is lured by Jeremy and Rose into a game of badminton. Chris becomes clearly disturbed as all the auction attendees quickly congregate around the badminton match to watch and measure his physicality at play.

Yet, Chris becomes increasingly aware of the validity of his racial paranoia and begins to return the gaze, which becomes his weapon to save his life. “Like everything in culture, looking relations are determined by history, tradition, power hierarchies, politics, economics. Mythic or imaginary ideas about nation, national identity and race all structure how one looks, but these myths are in turn closely linked to class, politics and economic relations” (Kaplan 4). The large eyes of the actor Daniel Kaluuya, who plays Chris, visually enhances this thematic element. After Rose and Chris’s car gets hit by the deer, Chris sits contemplatively on the back bumper of the car with a close-up of his shocked and distraught eyes. Chris, as a photographer, already possesses a critical eye on his environment; however, here it becomes his salvation. In fact, Chris already possesses a sense of his racial identity as a black man in a white-dominated world and expresses what scholar bell hooks would define as a “critical consciousness” where he already engages with the world with a counter-hegemonic consciousness. Chris survives this house of horror through overcoming what bell hooks might call his “suppressed gaze” and engaging in his “overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze” (116). Before he and Rose depart the city, he asks her directly if she has told her parents that he is black. And, after the gratefully uncomfortable first day and dinner with the Armitage family, Chris tells Rose that he had told her that there would be these race issues lurking under the surface.

Part of Chris's view on the world has probably developed and been enhanced by his talents and skills as a photographer, which often means a person is contemplative and watchful in absorbing information. Just as the concept of viewing plays integrally in *Skeleton*, it also plays integrally in *Get Out* and features prominently in its movie poster as well. The poster shows a montage of shards of broken glass, which is probably meant to link to the hitting of Chris's mom and the deer with cars. It also probably links into the idea of "The Sunken Place" as a shattered consciousness, as well. In the poster, the top two, large shards show Rose lovingly looking at Chris while another shows the Armitage father happily hugging Chris. Yet, the lower shards use darker color palettes and show Jeremy in his medieval helmet mask (that he wears in the film's opening scene when he kidnaps a black male) and one shard shows an extreme close-up of Chris's terrified eye.

Scholar Racquel Gates investigated some film reviewers' assessments that actor Daniel Kaluuya's prominent eyes undercut the anti-racist messages of this film through echoing the Hollywood minstrel visuals of large-eyed black actors behaving idiotically or immorally for white audience entertainment with the additional trope of humor being found in the terror of a black character's exaggerated motions and emotions. Gates considers what Peele writes and how Kaluuya acts to successfully reject these racialized cinematic politics of minstrelsy aesthetics to convey the genuine terror of an endangered human being. Gates supports her claim of these artists circumventing these stereotyping tropes in Peele's "recurring motifs of single tears or blood trickling down the fixed black faces, even the fact that the whites of Chris's eyes are bloodshot rather than pure white, could be seen to operate as a commentary on the minstrel mask rather than a straight forward rebirth of it" (38). Thus, Peele and Kaluuya might be said to take these minstrel stereotypes and imbue these beings with depth and humanity.

And, returning to Peele's cinematic visualization of multiple Critical Race Theories encoded within *The Sunken Place*, this poster with shattered segments echoes Frantz Fanon's indignant frustration at being interpellated by and held fixed in a negative

identification by the Other, meaning by dominant white culture. Fanon recounts his rejection of racist stereotypes heaved upon non-white bodies: “I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self. This ‘look,’ from—so to speak—the place of the Other, fixes us, not only in its violence, hostility and aggression, but in the ambivalence of its desire” (109). Yet, as Chris becomes increasingly aware of the uncanny atmosphere of the Armitage estate and the auction, he uses his camera to actively return the gaze. At the auction, he uses his telephoto lens to surreptitiously view guests. And, the concept of controlling the gaze figures prominently in his battle escape when he stabs the hypnotist mother in the eye, thus denying her ability and power of sight and control over others. Of course, Chris’s use of his camera’s flash initiates his true understanding of his danger when the flash ignites a breakdown in Logan, which elicits the first warning for Chris to “Get Out!” And, Chris’s use of his flash on Walter in the final showdown between himself and Rose literally saves his life, as Walter snaps out of his lobotomized being to act to save Chris.

Not only does Carroll’s complex discovery plot of suspecting, viewing, realizing, understanding, and battling filter throughout both *Skeleton* and *Get Out*, the concept of audience spectatorship provides an interesting commentary on race relations within society. “Individual and state formation take place, in part, in the visual sphere through a complicated play of looks: looking, being looked at, identification, recognition, mimicry” (Taylor 30). This desire to see and know something forbidden and mysterious links into the spectator fascination with *Skeleton*’s method of body and spirit transference. Most, if not all, of Hollywood Vodou films elicit an “ambivalent attraction and repulsion” in spectators, and the 2005 *Skeleton* is no different (Shohat and Stam 812). This entire concept of spectatorship of *Skeleton* links back into the questions surrounding the interpretation of these horror film characters as monstrous hybrids. In *Skeleton*, Justify and Cecile can easily be construed to be monstrous hybrids in that they defy categorization and “pass” across race boundaries, rendering them impossible to label and racially identify. Yet, there is a strange level of hypocrisy imbued within Justify and Cecile’s powerful conjurer characters,

who could be construed to be secretly maintaining their black identities while “passing,” in the most complete method possible, for white people.

In *Skeleton*, this whole concept of audience spectatorship of the crisscrossing “miscegenation” of black and white bodies and spirits especially becomes critical during the flashback lynching scene. Most likely, many audience members would be upset by the drunken lynching scene; yet, in a bizarre racially laden music choice, the mob lynching is set to African tribal music, which links the violent hysteria of the drunken white guests to a stereotypical audio-visual concept of African culture as violent, animalistic, and out of control. And, after the twist of the body transfer system is revealed at the film’s conclusion, audiences no longer need to think of the lynching scene as a site of two innocent black people (black bodies) being hanged, but instead can mollify their reaction to this barbaric action by thinking that it was really the white Thorpe family children being killed. Thus, the sense of sympathy might be transferred into a generalized sympathy for the two white children, who can be perceived as victims themselves in the larger chaos of racism and slavery. *Skeleton* truly removes the sense of the horror of slavery and epitomizes the concept that “the taboo in Hollywood was not so much on ‘positive images’ but rather on images of racial anger, revolt, and empowerment” (Shohat and Stam 813). Most importantly, the fact that Cecile comments that she had wanted a “black one this time,” undercuts the entire concept of Justify and Cecile being part of any larger racial dialogue or resistance in that she would not only use the body of a black woman to further her own life cycle, but she would *prefer* to use a black woman for her nefarious purposes.

Get Out provides an excellent opportunity to explore the role of race in spectatorship studies. Mayne discusses how “several concepts have emerged to engage with the tension between cinema as monolithic institution and cinema as heterogeneous diversity. The competing claims of homogeneity (of the cinematic apparatus) and heterogeneity (of the spectator and therefore of the different ways in which the apparatus can be understood)” (90). And, Leab mentions how the movement of white audiences to the suburbs has altered

the urban cinema demographics so that “blacks have inherited the urban centers and the older, larger, downtown movie house” (3). In the PBS interview, Peele discussed the fact that while he did want all types of audiences to relate to Chris and perhaps have a “piece of the black experience through this character,” Peele stated that:

I did think of it in terms of two audiences... Sometimes I would say to Daniel, who plays Chris, I'd be like: Your quote unquote blackness will come to the surface a little more and just give me that thing where a black audience member will go, like 'Thank you. Thank you! Alright. There it is. Ok, ok, he's black. He's black.'

It is interesting to consider Peele's personal awareness of these issues as a biracial man himself, who externally would probably be initially viewed as African-American, and his heightened awareness of different spectator demographics' potential reactions.

In general, there are numerous references in interviews and in YouTube postings to the vocal reactions from *Get Out* spectators. “It could be argued that spectators do ‘respond’ to films, in the form of inner-speech reactions, or of verbal commentaries during or after the film” (Stam 35). Yet, an interesting comment from white actress Allison Williams also alludes to the racial difference in reaction. In an interview on the talk show with Seth Meyers, she commented on white people's assessment of her character of Rose Armitage: She was hypnotized, right? And, I'm, like, No! She's evil. How hard is that to accept? She's just bad. We gave you so many ways to know that she's bad. She has photos of people whose lives she's ended behind her. The minute she can she hangs them back up on the wall behind her. That's so crazy. And, they're still, like, Maybe, she's also a victim? No! No! And, I will say, it's 100% white people that say that to me... It is very divided.

Although these people might harbor subconscious racial bias, they might be naïve, sheltered, or ignorant white people in denial of accepting the level of racism being exposed in this film. Williams also commented that when she overhears audiences watching the film when she is answering press questions that there is usually a loud audience cheer each time

one of the white supremacist Armitage family member dies. Considering that these scenes would have been inconceivable fifty years ago links into the idea that “because ideology is constantly negotiated, Hollywood cannot construct a permanent, seamless image of white superiority on the screen” (Guerrero 6). It would be fascinating to hear the opinions of an admitted KKK member or someone affiliated with a staunchly, openly white supremacist group in reacting to this film.

Twitter also offers insight into the public reaction to *Get Out*, especially in terms of the contestation over its genre categorization, which indicates a massive social battle regarding the messages of this film. Citing the “sad fact” of an absence of a horror film category, Universal Pictures submitted *Get Out* in the comedy/musical category for the Golden Globes to which Peele tweeted, “ ‘Get Out’ is a documentary.” Other tweets included the comments, “White privilege is watching ‘Get Out’ and thinking it was funny,” “Putting the movie *Get Out* in the comedy category is so disrespectful it’s a horror movie being kidnapped and brainwashed is terrifying,” and “Dear Golden Globes, There are a lot of white people in your mentions agreeing w ur decision to mark *Get Out* as a comedy, VERY few Black people doing so. That’s Clue #1.” Others echoed the Golden Globes’s perspective on using the comedy/musical category to increase the chances of winning, which was also done with the film *The Martian* (2015) (that many felt was more appropriate for the Drama category in content), commenting, “*Get Out*’s creator’s along with the studio SUBMITTED the film under comedy to give it a better chance to win since the Golden Globes have no horror category but rather DRAMA or COMEDY/MUSICAL. Pls read up on these things before getting outraged for no reason. Thanks.” Once again, this leads back into the initial concept of *Get Out* being a genre hybrid experience, which in itself can be a subversive statement, that can be defined as a social thriller, horror, comedy, social commentary, and/or documentary as it defies categorization in its bold reflection on the pervasiveness and continuation of racism in America.

V. Conclusion

Skelton and *Get Out* seem to play like the A-side and B-side of the same record; yet, their socio-political messages could not be further from each other. *Skeleton* professes to be a ghost story that in fact insidiously promotes deeply stereotypical, long-standing Hollywood fetishization of Vodou and Hodou rituals and beliefs. It also promotes itself to be supportive of anti-slavery messages when in fact all the black characters are only used to serve expository purposes or as background beings that create atmosphere. Of course, the supposedly central, powerful beings of Justify and Cecile are rendered voiceless and only viewed in brief glimpses or in still photographs. And, the black “characters” are all played by white “bodies.” Most egregious, Justify and Cecile are denigrated as resisters—who are basically inferred to be “passing”—in that they would use black people as their victims for their eternal body switching.

On the very opposite end of the spectrum, Peele has stated that he created *Get Out* as a response to his frustration with America’s belief that the election of Presidential Barack Obama led to a post-racial world where racism had subsided. These ideas link into Benedict Anderson’s famed concept of nations as imagined communities with the “definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). Citizens of a geographic space or an ethnic, racial, or religious identity imagine themselves within certain points of identification that they volley back and forth in mutually confirming manners of speech, dress, gestures, and value systems. In interviews, Peele has often highlighted an alternative ending they filmed where Chris is arrested and jailed for the Armitage murders, which Peele initially felt was a more accurate telling of the probably fall out of such a series of events for a black man in a white dominated culture.

Scholar Kimberly Brown discusses how *Get Out* “represents the necropolitics of contemporary black existence” and highlights how Chris is purposefully costumed for his

final showdown in a gray hoodie, which served as a symbol of solidarity worn by protestors against the controversial acquittal in the 2012 killing of the black teen Trayvon Martin. *Get Out* functions as a bullhorn to America that racism has not been “cured” and that many Americans are deluding themselves that racism ended with the 2008 election of Barack Obama or even with Peele’s 2018 Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. Thus, America continues to explore the ideas of race, gender, and identity, especially in dubious films like *Skeleton* pretending to be racially aware in portraying white bodies imbued with black spirits. Yet, in the heteroglossia of call-and-response, groundbreaking films like *Get Out* powerfully represent the possibility of awareness and resistance. These are the legacies of racism lingering just out of the corner of America’s eye.

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