Get Out (2017), Us (2019), and Jordan Peele's New Black Body Horror

Brady Simenson
bradysimenson@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT


Brady Simenson, M.A.
Department of English
Northern Illinois University, 2020
Dr. Scott Balcerzak, Director

This thesis provides an analysis of Jordan Peele’s films *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019). The thesis contextualizes *Get Out* and *Us* as part of a protracted cultural conversation regarding monstrous images of the cinematic black body that began with Hollywood’s early monster films and continued into the culturally subversive era of blaxploitation horror films. While blaxploitation cinema reclaimed images of the racial Other that had been represented in the early creature feature subgenre, no such notable movement has subverted the more recent body horror subgenre. Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* and *Us* shift this subgenre toward racially inverted body horror. Rather than being films focused on white bodies and identities becoming Othered through violent transformation and mutilation, *Get Out* and *Us* primarily portray black bodies, already Othered forms, being overtaken and utilized by privileged whiteness.
GET OUT (2017), US (2019), AND JORDAN PEELE’S
NEW BLACK BODY HORROR

BY

BRADY SIMENSON
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Thesis Director:
Dr. Scott Balcerzak
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my wife, Jennifer Simenson, for her unwavering support and encouragement throughout the process of researching and writing this thesis. My graduate education would have been impossible without you.

I would also like to thank my director, Dr. Scott Balcerzak, for his guidance and insight over the past two semesters with this thesis. Your advice as a researcher, writer, and educator has been invaluable throughout my time at Northern Illinois University. I would like to also thank my thesis committee readers, Dr. Melissa Adams-Campbell and Dr. Ryan Hibbett, whose thoughtful questions, comments, and enthusiasm were a wonderful motivation every step of the way.

Finally, I would like to thank my M.A. cohort in the Northern Illinois University English Department. I am forever grateful for the friendship and support we have provided one another these past two years.
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Introduction

This thesis argues that director Jordan Peele’s films *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019) effectively rewrite the distinctly white and privileged fears of the traditional body horror subgenre from a black perspective. Traditional body horror films, such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978), *The Thing* (1982), and *The Fly* (1986), draw their underlying horror from the threat of the orderly, socially accepted form becoming violently and grotesquely transformed by monstrous Otherness. Peele’s films draw instead on the threats presented to black bodies in the United States such as the literal horrors of slavery, police brutality, and unjust imprisonment. More inventively, they also draw on less overt social and cultural horrors, such as the threat of racist caricatures, pervasive stereotypes, and imposter syndrome. Peele’s black body horror centers on the fear of the numerous ways that the black body is controlled by white society in ways both literal and figurative. In *Get Out*, we see the literal horror of insidious white minds infiltrating and controlling black bodies, but on a subtextual level, I will show how Peele harnesses the fear black audiences experience from the violent, bodily domination seen in police brutality footage. In Peele’s follow-up *Us*, the literal horror comes from the shocking uprising of a previously unknown class of subterranean doppelgangers called “the Tethered,” but the subtextual fear comes from the monstrous scapegoating and caricaturizing of black bodies and identities.

With *Get Out* and *Us*, Peele continues the legacy of blaxploitation horror, a cinematic movement that shifted the representation of horror to a new subversive racial perspective. Before the 1970s, monsters in many horror films represented thinly veiled white fears about racial and
ethnic Otherness, perhaps the most famous example being *King Kong* (1933), in which a giant ape kidnaps the blonde Ann Darrow (Fay Wray). However, with more black filmmakers receiving opportunities during the blaxploitation boom, white mainstream cinema’s most famous monsters were reappropriated for black audiences into figures of pride and power. Films like *Blacula* (1972), *Blackenstein* (1973), and *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* (1976) are all clear examples of the dominant white horror genre of monster movies being reinscribed with a black perspective. But monster movies, the dominant form in the horror genre before the 1970s, fell out of fashion and white filmmakers shifted noticeably in the 1980s and beyond to body horror, a subgenre focused on the terror of physical corruption, of personal identity destroyed and overtaken by Otherness. While blaxploitation cinema reclaimed images of the racial Other that had been represented in monster movies, no such notable movement has subverted body horror. That is, until Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* and *Us* shifted this subgenre toward a racially inverted body horror.

Peele delivers a body horror that resonates from a truly black perspective because his body horror is a fear of living in an Othered body controlled by insidious privilege rather than a fear of privileged bodies being controlled by insidious Otherness. The most memorable shots from the horror films of Jordan Peele are not white men like David Kessler (David Naughton) in *American Werewolf in London* (1981) as he recognizes the twisted, monstrous wolf’s claw that has taken the place of his own or like Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) in *The Fly* (1986) as he stares into the mirror, noticing his splotchy, deformed flesh for the first time. The most memorable shots of Peele’s black body horror are close-up images of black humanity under white control, for example, Chris Washington’s (Daniel Kaluuya) wide-eyed horror as he sinks into the “sunken place” or Red’s (Lupita Nyong’o) tearful trauma as she recalls a life of horrific, subterranean captivity. Peele’s black body horror does not focus on moments when we gasp in
recognition of a monster, but when we gasp in recognition of a human. Rather than being films focused on having white bodies and identities becoming Othered through violent transformation and mutilation, *Get Out* and *Us* primarily portray black bodies, already Othered forms, being overtaken and utilized by privileged whiteness. With *Get Out*, I will show how Peele draws on the horrors of racist idealization and police brutality footage to fuel black audiences’ fears of their lives and bodies being controlled by white minds. With *Us*, I will show how Peele draws on the history of racist caricature and W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept of “double-consciousness” to show the horrors of black Americans reconciling their true personal identities with the monstrous perceptions forced upon them by white minds. By rebranding the body horror genre in terms of fearing white minds rather than black bodies, Peele has established a distinct black body horror, a racial paradigm shift the horror genre has not seen since the blaxploitation era.
On White Anxiety, Black Identity, and the Monster Movie

To understand Get Out and Us and their positions in horror history, a perspective on the function of horror and the shifting course of racial portrayals in the genre is necessary. Unlike other genres, the appeal of horror seems counterintuitive on the surface. There is no confusion over why one would want the excitement that adventure films provide or the appeal of genres that make us laugh or vicariously experience love. Even with tragedy, there is no general resistance to the idea that we as consumers learn something through sadness or Aristotelian catharsis. With horror, however, many critical reactions see it akin to pornography, a genre where the satisfaction of base urges is paramount and where artistic merit is given little consideration. Andrew Tudor suggests many critics “view horror as the lowest of the low, and even liberal gentlefolk are suspicious about the motives and character failings of its consumers. Are they sick? Are they disturbed people indulging nasty, perverse desires? Or have they merely become so jaded as to be addicted to ever increasing doses of violent excess?” (“Why Horror?” 443-44). Horror does often appeal to shallow impulses, but anyone who dives into its depths will find a genre just as capable of tackling meaningful issues of the human condition as other popular genres. Tudor also believes horror films “appeal to their audiences in part because they express in accessible and entertaining popular cultural terms the characteristic fears of their time (458). Jessica Baker Kee agrees, calling horror films “the main cinematic barometer of cultural anxiety” (47). This idea reads horror as allegory. For example, readings of Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) see it as representing the insidious threat of communism or the conformist
tendencies of anti-communists. In the same way learning about the human condition through what makes us laugh or cry is important, so too is there much to learn from what we fear.

One of the most profound cultural fears is that of the Other. This fear is embedded human experience, an inescapable aspect of experiencing the world. Steve Jones writes, “We exist as social beings, but can never truly know each other as intimately as we can know ourselves” because “[o]ur relationship with the world and each other is limited to our embodied field of experience” (97). The impossibility of knowing anyone else’s mind plants a fear in all of us. Jones says our fear of the Other “reflects the nightmare that we are social beings, yet there are Others in the world who value our existence so little that they are willing to harm or even destroy us” (103). With visual human perspective so central to how we interpret the world, bodies become our preliminary understanding of the Other. Because of this, we develop fear toward the bodies most different from our own. According to Jones, “in cinema,” as well as real life, “selfhood is represented by images of bodies,” which is why bodily difference is such a critical focus in horror (97). Bodily difference that takes on the form of aspects like gender, race, and disability in real life often takes on the form of monstrosity in cinema.

Expressing anxiety about real-world bodily difference in the form of coded monstrosity became a staple of early horror cinema. Harry Benshoff contends, “The generic pattern of the classical American horror film oscillates between the ‘normal,’ mostly represented by the white, middleclass heterosexuality of the films' heroes and heroines, and the ‘monstrous,’ frequently colored by racial, sexual, class, or other ideological markers” (31). Classic examples of this would be King Kong (1933) or The Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954), both featuring white men who must rescue white women from the miscegenation threat of racially coded monsters.
The use of monstrosity to represent the racial Other started most significantly outside of horror, however, appearing in early cinema’s most important feature film. D.W. Griffith’s epic *Birth of a Nation* (1915) detailed the rise of the Ku Klux Klan after the American Civil War, a rise in response to the supposedly dangerous, animalistic black men freed from slavery. Robin R. Means Coleman, offering a historically revisionist reading of *Birth of a Nation* as a horror film, believes the film’s monstrous portrayal of black men set an indelible tone for blackness in Hollywood. Coleman writes, “These racist scenes housed in one of America’s most technologically important films is a wicked bell that cannot be unrung. Even today, Black representations draw from those created and popularized by Griffith [...] Blackness was effectively transmogrified, with Blacks becoming one of the most loathsome and feared of all creatures” (22). The film’s two most significant black characters, Gus and Lynch, are portrayed as “wolves overtaking the sheep,” with Gus in particular “viewed as a Black male sexual predator advancing on White womanhood” (22). Both characters are portrayed by white men in blackface, adding an uncanny quality to their bodies. Coleman believes Gus’s “monstrous look is heightened due to the use of blackface. As a result, Gus’ bulging white eyes appear frantic and wild, his skin a muddy, streaky grey-black” (26). *Birth of a Nation* was an incredibly successful and influential film, screening in the White House for President Woodrow Wilson, making blackness and monstrosity conflated in the American cinematic imagination.

While *Birth of a Nation* is debatable as a horror film, it certainly influenced the genre. When early horror films featured black characters, they were frequently shown as monstrous and uncivilized Others related to a tribal existence disconnected from a white “civilizing” presence. Coleman recalls “Blacks as savage, evil Voodoo practitioners chanting ‘ooo-ga boo-ga’ while whipping themselves around in a frenzied Voodoo dance to the cadence of jungle music” (34).
Whites conquering a mystical and untamed Africa is one of the most common tropes of the 1930s. One need look no further than the popular Tarzan films to see it. In the horror genre, this takes the form of films like 1930’s Ingagi and 1932’s White Zombie, both featuring elements of African influence as a “purported wellspring of evil” (53). Ingagi invokes white fear by portraying fictional African rituals where women are given to gorillas as sex slaves while White Zombie features a white woman under the threat of African voodoo zombification. While these types of films found various levels of box office success, none of them was as influential an example of this racial dynamic as 1933’s King Kong.

*King Kong* is the story of a white American film crew shooting a movie on Skull Island, a mysterious, primitive island near Indonesia. The crew meets a tribe of black natives wearing face paint and animal pelts while wielding spears. It is notable that the tribe is black people rather than Indonesian because, as Coleman states, it “illustrates a typical racial impulse by Hollywood to conflate anyone with dark skin as Other” (42). These natives sacrifice virgin women of the tribe to Kong, the island’s titular giant gorilla whom they worship as their god. The leader of the tribe becomes enamored with the blonde actress, Ann Darrow, for whom he offers to trade six of his tribe’s women. The horrifying offer reinforces Birth of a Nation’s implication that black men are particularly obsessed with white women, challenging the purity of the white race. Kong also becomes obsessed with Darrow, protecting her blonde beauty rather than consuming her as he has done black women. Kong’s obsession with Darrow “metaphorically implicate[s] Black men [...] Kong is ‘blackened,’ or racially coded, when juxtaposed against the presence of Whites in the film” (41). It is Kong’s size that makes him monstrous, alluding to the unnatural body composition that white people so often attribute to black people. This offers “another reason for
the dark Other’s termination—his body is far too endowed in comparison to the more modestly appointed White man” (41).

This racial prejudice in cinematic landmarks like Birth of a Nation and King Kong was an influence on future portrayals of black bodies, but not all early horror films featured coded bigotry, nor were all early horror films monster movies. The subgenres and social concerns of early horror are numerous, but presentations of monstrosity were especially popular with the success of Universal Studios’ groundbreaking films like Dracula (1931), Frankenstein (1931), and The Wolfman (1941), making monstrosity the hottest trend for decades. However, the traditional monster movie eventually reached the level of parody, like Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein (1948), or needed reinvention and recontextualization that can be seen in England’s Hammer Horror films. It was in the 1970s that the genre becomes mostly eclipsed by a new wave of gruesome horror like The Exorcist (1973) and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974). Pushing the violence envelope makes sense with loosened Hollywood censorship rules, but another factor influenced the paradigm shift toward hideous transformations and gruesome destruction of the body. The 1970s featured the blaxploitation era, a black revolution against much of what white cinema had come to represent. While the focus of this section, thus far, has been on films of white creators and troubling portrayals of black monstrosity, it should not be assumed that black creators have ever been taking this mistreatment lying down. As early as the despicable portrayals of blackness in Birth of a Nation, there were black directors like Oscar Micheaux responding with films like Within Our Gates (1920), which Coleman says is an “attempt not only to counter Griffith’s epic, but to reimagine the infamous ‘Grim Reaping’ scene,” that is, the scene where Gus attempts to rape a young white girl. In Within Our Gates, it is a white man who
wants to rape a black woman. Such cinematic responses against racism have forever been a burden for black filmmakers to bear. As Ed Guerrero writes,

The social and political meanings of ‘race,’ […] are not fixed but are matters of ongoing construction and contestation; whether in volatile debate or subtle transactions, the negotiation of racial images, boundaries, and hierarchies has been part of our national life from its very beginnings. The turbulent power of race is evinced by the varieties of ways in which the images and historical experiences of African Americans and other people of color are symbolically figured in commercial cinema. (41)

With white filmmakers denigrating blackness in their films, it has been necessary for black filmmakers to respond, to voice their own opinions in “the negotiation of racial images.” If black filmmakers, from Micheaux to Peele, remain silent, the monstrous images of blackness that many white filmmakers provide would win in the cinematic imagination.

The 1970s saw more black filmmakers given opportunities during the flood of blaxploitation films. George Lipsitz states blaxploitation films “did more than desegregate previously all-white genres. Rather, the prominence of race called the generic form itself into question” (220). This aligns with Benshoff, who suggests, “By embracing the racialized monster and turning him or her into an agent of black pride and power, blaxploitation horror films created sympathetic monsters who helped shift audience identification away from the status quo […] In some cases, they exposed white ‘normality,’ and especially white patriarchy, as productive of monsters” (45). No blaxploitation film fits Benshoff’s description better than *Blacula*, the era’s most celebrated reclamation of a white monster movie.

In *Blacula*, Mamuwalde (William Marshall) is a dignified African prince cursed after pushing back against the racist views of a white Dracula. Dracula strips Mamuwalde of his name, giving him the “slave name” of “Blacula,” which Coleman says “marks him as Other, even among vampires” (121). Mamuwalde is entombed for 200 years before being released to
take out his rage on 1970s Los Angeles. Mamuwalde claims many victims, most of whom are black, but eventually falls in love with Tina, a resurrected form of his wife from centuries ago. Frances Gateward writes,

> Blacula’s resistance to the power structure represented by the police, his heartfelt expressions of love for a woman of beauty, strength, and vitality, and his tragic realization that he has been forced by a White man to prey on a community of African descent created empathy for the character, making him one of the first filmic vampires to transform the archetype from one of the solitary, bestial predator to that of a more humanized, reluctant victim. (11)

*Blacula* shows humanity beneath the image of monstrous blackness. Mamuwalde is not “a monstrosity to fear or a source of horror” but rather “a Black avenger” (9). Not only did blaxploitation humanize the monstrous blackness, it also valorized it.

Another example of valorizing monstrous black bodies comes with 1974’s *Sugar Hill*, which Coleman sees as attempting “some reclamation of the Voodoo” white horror films had used to inspire fear of blackness (139). *Sugar Hill* tells the story of Sugar, a black woman whose boyfriend is killed by Morgan, a white crime boss. A Voodoo queen provides Sugar with an army of black zombies wearing shackles to code them as former slaves. The zombies help Sugar exact her revenge by killing Morgan and his team of thugs. The zombie attack is not played as horror, but rather shown as a triumph. Benshoff summarizes, “Unlike the classical Hollywood horror film narrative, there is no need to punish or destroy the monsters. In fact, the reverse is true: the monsters kill the racist agents of ‘normality,’ and the audience is expected to cheer these developments” (37). Slaves coming back from the dead to kill modern racists is an obvious metaphor for the sins of the past coming back to haunt us. The zombies are not just representatives of the slave trade but of the cinematic monstrosity that had been abusing black people for decades.
The blaxploitation era was a marketable confrontation with white Hollywood. After many black filmmakers found success with blaxploitation films, several white filmmakers followed suit with major studios. Monsters thought slumbering in the past were brought back to make a new generation pay for the “sins of the father.” The era was not without many offensive issues of its own, however. Benshoff says, “While appearing to critique white racism in America, most of these films were unable to withstand the genre’s more regular demonization of gender and sexuality, which are arguably more deeply embedded as monstrous within both the horror film and the culture at large” (31). Images of monstrosity related to gender and sexuality later become a crucial factor in analysis of modern horror films, specifically body horror. In the same way the black monster movie was a reaction to the white monster movie, so too can white body horror be a reaction to the black monster movie. As those Othered for reasons like race, gender, and sexuality gained more acceptance, more horror films focus on white “normalcy” becoming tainted by vague forms of Otherness. As when Gus in Birth of a Nation pursues a white girl or when King Kong kidnaps Ann Darrow, the threat of the Other forcing his way into the pool of white purity comes to fruition with the genre of body horror.
On White Anxiety, Black Anxiety, and Body Horror

With the monster movie, the threat of the Other was a looming danger (to white women in particular) that was usually defeated by white masculinity. For example, throughout the 1950s, this is the continued cycle of the *Creature from the Black Lagoon* films. In the first entry, *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), the creature originating from the Amazon jungles of South America, Gill-man (Ben Chapman), becomes so enamored with a white woman, Kay (Julie Adams), that he kidnaps her. She is eventually rescued by her white boyfriend, David (Richard Carlson), who sends Gill-man back to the depths, riddled with bullets. The follow-up, *Revenge of the Creature* (1955), goes much the same way with Gill-man (Tom Hennesy) kidnapping another white woman and eventually being shot once again by a group of white men. In an interesting twist, however, the third film, *The Creature Walks Among Us* (1956), offers a more empathetic portrayal of the creature. Gill-man (Don Megowan) is captured by scientists and undergoes a surgical procedure that makes him something between creature and human. The scientists try to “civilize” Gill-man, but the creature is eventually falsely accused of murder by the true killer, Dr. Barton (Jeff Morrow). In the end, Gill-man flees back to the ocean, killing Barton along the way. While Gill-man never truly loses his status as outsider, the *Creature Walks Among Us* certainly points to a larger upcoming trend of the monstrous Other possibly being assimilated into the established culture.

In the 1970s and beyond, there is a growing sentiment in white horror films that monsters are winning, that normalcy is being overtaken from within. This takes the form of body horror films, which, as Steffen Hantke Sogang defines it, “create versions of an impossible body that is
defined by its creative, at times subversive, deviations from the normative one. These deviant bodies, marked by othemess, are presented as objects of revulsion” (72). In Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1978) and The Thing (1982), both prominent examples of body horror, monstrosity dominates the normative form, despite the endings of the films they remake. In the original Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956), the Federal Bureau of Investigation intervenes against the alien menace, implying a hopeful resolution. In 1978’s Invasion of the Body Snatchers, the protagonist, Matthew Bennell (Donald Sutherland), becomes a pod person at the end of the film, and the last living human in San Francisco screams helplessly as the credits roll. In The Thing from Another World (1951), which The Thing (1982) remakes, the alien is reduced to ash, and a reporter hits the radio waves to warn the world. In 1982’s The Thing, most of the men in an Antarctic research station are brutally killed by an insidious alien that physically mimics its victims. The final scene shows only two men alive, both appearing to be hopeless and distrustful of one another. The two remakes leave the impression that there is no hope of victory against insidious monstrosity, unlike monster movies that assured (or at least gave some hope that) normalcy will win out, that our societal efforts, our institutions, will see us through.

In “Unruly Bodies, Unquiet Minds,” Tudor writes, “Authorities and institutions are ineffective to resist the drift toward apocalyptic disorder and [...] may well be implicated in the collapse of ‘normal’ social relations. Our bodies, our minds, our homes, our basic social institutions are all subject to radical doubt” (37). There was also “a sense of intimate boundaries breached and the body no longer a safe haven for the self” (32) and that “the informing relationship between body horror and the distinctive fears of (post)modern society is best understood in terms of ambiguity and fluidity of boundaries” (38). Body horror is a fear of the identity, both of the individual and of society, being threatened by the ambiguities brought on by
change. For example, in both *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) and in *The Thing* (1982), the human survivors we follow are constantly betrayed by human allies who turn out to be murderous aliens in disguise. The tension of both films is in the ambiguity of every human form we see. Many of the characters in these films exist both as potentially human and as potentially alien until proven otherwise.

As Jones states, “Selfhood is represented by images of bodies.” The cinematic body manifests personal identity but, according to Mary Douglas, these bodies are even more. She writes, “The human body is always treated as an image of society and that there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension” (70). The invasion and destruction of bodily boundaries is not just an individual threat to identity, but a threat to society’s identity. From this perspective, it is easier to see how horror’s modern focus on the body is a reaction to the changing roles of underprivileged people. The privileged white male body that represents society is being challenged by the images of Othered bodies. *The Thing* (1982) illustrates this idea particularly well with the number of middle-aged white men whose bodies are gruesomely transformed into confusing and ambiguous hybrids of both human and alien appendages.

Barbara Creed focuses on these horrific transformations from a feminist perspective. She sees body horror as a genre that “brings about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order, finally, to eject the abject and re-draw the boundaries between the human and non-human” (53). Creed’s abject fits Julia Kristeva’s definition as “that which does not respect borders, positions, rules.” Creed is focused on images of monstrous femininity like we see in *Alien* (1979), contending that body horror is “an attempt to shore up the symbolic order by constructing the feminine as an imaginary 'other' which must be repressed and
controlled in order to secure and protect the social order [...] the feminine is not per se a monstrous sign; rather, it is constructed as such within a patriarchal discourse which reveals a great deal about male desires and fears” (70). In Creed’s view, the oppressed group, women in this case, are Othered because of the fears and anxieties of those who oppress them. Mothers represent the early stage of the child when there is no shame or revulsion attached to “blood, vomit, pus, shit, etc.” (47), and men represent “a universe of shame” where the child learns to act properly in society (51). In Alien, the creature bursts from the oozing chest wound of a male victim, leaving said male victim as feminine while the slithering creature becomes “the monstrousness of woman’s desire to have the phallus” (68). As “phallic mother, woman is […] represented as monstrous. What is horrific is her desire to cling to her offspring in order to continue to ‘have the phallus’” (68). The “monstrous feminine” is a border between two social orders, the blurring of which threatens chaos.

A feminist lens is valuable when viewing the subtext of body horror, but the long history of cinematic conflations of blackness with monstrosity opens the question of how these unique depictions of body horror monstrosity speak to race. Some argue that Creed’s viewpoint is compatible with seeing race as a key element in body horror. Cristina Pinedo writes, “If the racial Other is marked as monster in the larger culture, then to do so in the horror film is to tread too closely to prevailing anxieties. A more coded figure is called for” (112). And in Jessica Baker Kee’s opinion, “coding tends to sublimate racial, ethnic, class, and other forms of difference into the more ‘universal’ horrors of sexual difference” (48). Therefore, body horror can represent blurred lines of both sexuality and race, among other classifications.

Body horror’s fluidity of form is the whole point. The genre classifies Otherness, and whatever form that Otherness takes, as a threat to normalcy. Since the body represents selfhood,
according to Jones, and society, according to Douglas, attacks on the cinematic body are attacks on our sense of identity, both as individuals and as a society. Since these attacks often take the form of monstrosity, an Otherness deeply tied to blackness, it can suggest the appeal of body horror, at least for a significant percentage of the American audience, comes from a blurring of societal norms brought about by both feminism, by the Sexual Revolution, and by the Civil Rights Movement. America’s identity was transforming from the inside due to the influence of those most associated with the cinematic Other.

Body horror represents anxiety about societal borders put into flux, about becoming Othered and losing privileged identity. Peele eventually reclaims the genre with *Get Out* and *Us*, but before his films, cinema saw a sharp decline in black horror representation after the 1970s. The limited opportunities black filmmakers have received in mainstream horror have done little to respond to the rise of body horror. There are elements of body horror in the *Blade* series (1998-2004), which sees a protagonist who is half black man and half vampire, a liminal identity he struggles to balance. Body horror is also a factor in *Candyman* (1992), which features the lynched son of a 19th-century black slave returning as a murderous ghost who terrorizes a modern Chicago public housing development. Kee acknowledges *Candyman* for “explicitly drawing on the imagery of anti-Black racial violence, including lynching, as […][its] source of visual horror” (48). Kee says that such violence toward the black body, given the historical context of racial violence, “may strike too close to home to provide catharsis” (47). Therefore, cinematic coding comes into play.

It is difficult for black filmmakers to engage monstrous images of the black body, because they risk reinforcing the Othering of blackness. Kee writes, “Rather than reinscribing familiar narratives of monstrosity and victim-hood over images of anti-Black violence, we might
instead sit in contemplation of these horrifying images and ask what they can teach us about our collective assumptions around who qualifies as ‘human’” (55). Producing images of violence against the black body, even with the intention to position the black character as a victim rather than as a monstrosity, still risks evoking the Otherness that white filmmakers have inscribed on the black body:

To continue inscribing overdetermined binary significations of difference on human bodies [...] is to both identify and produce a multiplicity of abjected Others—‘outsiders’ to the exclusionary matrix who are then left vulnerable to the horrors of stereotyping, oppression, and violence. Instead, we must imagine alternative visual cultures capable of interrogating and troubling the primacy of such significations [...] to ethically re-imagine other ways of constructing identities. (Kee 54)

If black filmmakers are to “re-imagine other ways of constructing identities” for black bodies, they must do so without reinscribing the monstrosity that so many white filmmakers have written upon the black body. This is what Peele does with Get Out and Us, and this is how Peele breaks ground in with a new subgenre of black body horror.

Rather than reinscribe the monstrosity that white filmmakers have written upon the black body, Peele focuses on the horror of living in a black body whose identity is controlled by hateful, outside sources. For all the white artists and politicians who have used black bodies to push their agendas, the black body in American culture has been predominantly possessed by white people. Since the body represents an identity individual and societal, black identity is constantly under threat by white individuals who seek to control it. Kee suggests that white people control black identity via “the imposition of historical racial schema upon the body [...] to signify certain bodies as ‘Other’” (48). The years leading up to, and the time since, the release of Get Out and Us have included a great deal of cultural focus on white society’s control of the black identity and body.
Today’s most talked about sense of white control over black bodies is through the black community’s relationship with the criminal justice system, not only through police brutality, but through the prison industrial complex which profits from the disproportionate number of black men who are incarcerated. Michelle Alexander, in her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, argues that the disproportionate number of black men who are incarcerated indicates that black men are being controlled by one of the many “racial caste systems” that the United States has consistently used to oppress black people (22). She writes, “Since the nation’s founding, African Americans repeatedly have been controlled through institutions such as slavery and Jim Crow, which appear to die, but then are reborn in new form, tailored to the needs and constraints of the time” (21). Mass incarceration is the modern, and in Alexander’s estimation, perhaps most effective form of racial caste system that the United States has ever used to subjugate black people. She goes on to suggest,

More than 2 million people found themselves behind bars at the turn of the twenty-first century, and millions more were relegated to the margins of mainstream society, banished to a political and social space not unlike Jim Crow, where discrimination in employment, housing, and access to education was perfectly legal, and where they could be denied the right to vote. The system functioned relatively automatically, and the prevailing system of racial meanings, identities, and ideologies already seemed natural. Ninety percent of those admitted to prison for drug offenses in many states were black or Latino. (56-57)

Black bodies are controlled not just through literal imprisonment but also via bureaucratic imprisonment that legally controls their future rights to vote, work, and find homes.

This “New Jim Crow” has so powerfully inscribed the black body with monstrosity through implied criminality that modern culture has bred a new, and all-too-real, form of black horror film, that of police officers caught on video as they brutalize black citizens. Marcelo Diversi says racist police brutality and white America’s complicity with it is caused by “the persistent demonization of Black men in the United States” (246), a “dehumanization of the
Other, in this case people of marked African descent” (250). Diversi argues the rhetoric of black monstrosity is used to defend white police officers accused of brutality against black men. Darren Wilson, the white police officer who controversially killed Michael Brown, said during his testimony to the grand jury that “The only way I can describe it [Michael Brown], it looks like a demon, that’s how angry he looked” (249). Diversi stresses that calling “Michael Brown ‘it’ and ‘a demon’ in a carefully prepared and rehearsed statement” is not an accident, but rather a deliberate “demonization of Blackness” (249). White Americans tend to excuse police brutality against black men, as well as black women, as happened with Sandra Bland, due to the same monstrosity that popular culture inscribes upon the black body.

Kee believes images of violence against black bodies “may strike too close to home” because of their connection to real-world violence. She says, “Michael Brown’s corpse occupies a border zone circumscribed by familiar racial tropes circulating endlessly through U.S. visual media: as a defenseless victim inducted into the brutal history of anti-Black violence or as a frightening ‘thug,’ symbolic of an ongoing threat posed by Black men to White middle-class society” (47). Today’s police brutality toward the likes of Michael Brown and Eric Garner belongs in the same visual history of demonization as the lynchings during slavery and Jim Crow and as the cinematic demonizations in early monster movies.

Videos of police brutality may be so effective with modern audiences, effective enough to inspire the Black Lives Matter movement, because of their place within the visual history of inscribing monstrosity onto blackness. These police brutality videos not only show the demonization that Diversi stresses but are a startlingly visual example of the control white authority can exercise over the black body and identity. Diversi’s description of the video showing Eric Garner’s death describes the bodily domination these police altercations involve:
He [Eric Garner] raises both hands to the side of his body in a universal gesture of surrender. An arm swings around Mr. Garner’s neck. The chokehold comes from behind, and the motion throws him off balance in a backward spiral. Bodies swarm Mr. Garner. [...] Four policemen pile up on the man on the ground. [...] The pile of policemen twists Mr. Garner’s body this and that way. Mr. Garner reaches out to something away from the pile of policemen on top of him with his right hand, his body out-stretched, trampled, forcefully handled. That is when I hear Mr. Garner say he can’t breathe for the first time. I can hear him say it several more times. I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe. He does not speak again after that. (245)

Of course, the social messages at work in these widely shared police videos prove even more devastating than the images of racist domination portrayed in white monster movies and body horror. But, in a similar but non-metaphorical sense, the black body, the black identity, is overwhelmed by the concentrated efforts of America’s white power structure.

The prison industrial complex and the frequent recordings of police brutality are only a couple examples of how the years preceding the release of Get Out and Us were filled with a renewed and heated emphasis on black bodies dominated by white power. Shortly after the release of Get Out, there was another popular piece of art focusing on the same subject, Childish Gambino’s “This Is America” (2018) music video, which evokes black violence and minstrel show imagery to highlight the modern horrors of living in a black body. As Tre Johnson says, “This Is America” is “an upsettingly vivid illustration of the Faustian bargain that black America makes on a regular basis, trading our bodies for our expression and freedom.” Johnson even ties “This Is America” and its horrors involving the black body with Peele’s work, when he says,

With Get Out’s Sunken Place, Jordan Peele gave a name to the desperate, gasping, hellish depths that surround Black America – a place that so many of us are trying to escape while others seem to dive and wallow in it. There’s an echo of this image in “This Is America,” which closes with Glover running frantically in the dark with indistinct people in close pursuit. After a breathtaking four minutes of violence, somehow this moment is the most terrifying of all.
In *Get Out*, the “sunken place,” is a state of the black identity living under white control. Kelli Weston says, “The sunken place’ has effectively replaced the colloquial expression ‘Uncle Tom’ as a way of describing those black people perceived to have betrayed their community, either in ideals or actions. It is the more generous term, for it suggests not duplicity, but brainwashing or conditioning beyond the perpetrator’s control” (38). In *Get Out* and *Us*, primarily black identities are suppressed against their will, and the bodies that house these suppressed identities are subject to the puppetry of more privileged bodies.

This complex cultural moment is what Peele’s black body horror has the potential to tackle. There is a need for black artists to push back against the racist implications of the white body horror genre just as there was a need to push back against the white monster movie. The violence of white body horror makes this difficult for black filmmakers because tying black bodies to more images of violence and monstrosity risks reinforcing the monstrosity that white filmmakers have inscribed upon blackness. A unique approach is necessary, an approach that speaks directly to the anxieties of a black audience over the anxieties of a white audience.
Get Out, Us, and Black Body Horror

Beyond the horror genre, the various meanings and anxieties attached to black bodies as signifiers in popular culture have been discussed by not only film scholars but major cultural theorists. Stuart Hall, in his essay, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?”, argues that failing to acknowledge these underlying attachments to the on-screen black body “naturalizes and dehistoricizes difference, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological, and genetic. The moment the signifier ‘black’ is torn from its historical, political, and cultural embedding and lodged in a biologically constituted racial category, we valorize, by inversion, the very ground of racism we are trying to deconstruct” (111). In Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies, bell hooks argues that early cinematic markers of racism inscribed on the black body are still prevalent and that “there have not been sustained major visual leaps in the nature of black representation” even from the growing number of black filmmakers (6). Like Hall, hooks argues for the importance of politics, history, and culture when representing blackness on the screen, suggesting that diversity among filmmakers and actors is not helpful in and of itself if the representations of blackness are still damaging. She believes the “positive intervention” of several past white filmmakers like John Sayles and Jim Jarmusch in the portrayal of on-screen blackness have proven to her that “it was not so much the color of the person who made images that was crucial, but the perspective, the standpoint, the politics” (7). Blackness as an on-screen signifier must be challenged, dissected, and reappropriated.

Peele’s Get Out and Us are films overtly about challenging previous generations of on-screen racial signifiers. In Get Out, Chris Washington is a black New York City photographer
who is nervous to visit the wealthy family home of Rose Armitage, his white girlfriend. Throughout the multiple-day visit, Chris is not only subjected to a variety of racist microaggressions but also becomes increasingly frightened by the bizarre behavior of Rose’s family and their black house staff. Chris eventually discovers he is one of a long line of black men who have been romantically deceived by Rose so that the Armitage family and all their wealthy white neighbors can capture black men for their horrific aims. All the black people who are captured by this monstrous coalition, including the Armitage house staff, are auctioned off to the highest bidder. After purchase, the mind of a black victim is taken over by the consciousness of the white purchaser who may now experience the perceived benefits of the idealized black body. Chris escapes from the residence, but only after killing most of the family. Get Out flips the script on portrayals of monstrous blackness in the history of horror films. Chris is still Othered from the perspective of the Armitage family, but his relationship is not portrayed by Peele as a miscegenation threat against an innocent white society. Rather than displaying white bodies under the threat of insidious Otherness, Get Out presents Othered black bodies under the threat of a larger, societal force. Throughout the film, audience empathy is firmly rooted in the black perspective.

The same empathy is evoked in Peele’s follow-up film, Us. In Us, the Wilson family, comprising of mother Adelaide (Lupita Nyong’o), father Gabe (Winston Duke), and their children Zora (Shahadi Wright Joseph) and Jason (Evan Alex), go on vacation to their summer home in Santa Cruz. The Wilsons are violently attacked by a family of their doppelgangers and soon realize that similar incidents are happening all over the United States. Eventually, Jason is abducted by Adelaide’s doppelganger, Red, and Adelaide pursues them into a mysterious, subterranean facility. There, Red describes how all the doppelgangers, known as “the Tethered,”
that are terrorizing the country were originally built to control their surface-dwelling counterparts. The experiment failed and the Tethered were abandoned for years until they finally decided to violently revolt. It is also revealed that Adelaide was originally one of the Tethered and had forcefully switched places during childhood with her counterpart, who would grow up to become Red. Adelaide kills Red in the underground facility and escapes with Jason, who seemingly now knows about the childhood switch. While the Tethered are initially portrayed as monstrous Others invading privileged communities, Peele shows audiences how simply gaining an empathetic perspective on the Other can dramatically change our perceptions of them. The Tethered are a clearly oppressed lower class who are simply fighting back against that oppression in the only way available to them. Peele offers especially empathetic portrayals of Adelaide and Red.

Peele evokes this empathy for his protagonists through his deeply human images of the on-screen black body. One of the most indelible images in Get Out is when Chris is hypnotized by Rose’s mother, Missy Armitage (Catherine Keener). Chris is shot in close-up as he slowly succumbs to Missy’s influence and descends into the “sunken place,” a state of mental paralysis. Chris gasps with wide-eyed horror as he stares directly into the camera. The shot is so powerful that it might be the most memorable in the film, especially since it is prominently used in many of the film’s trailers and print advertisements. A strikingly similar close-up is featured in Us, where this time Red delivers a monologue about the longstanding repression of herself and the Tethered. Again, this close-up in Us is prominently featured in advertisements. In both scenes, the actors are shown on the emotional edge, desperately holding back tears that inevitably spill while maintaining eye contact with the audience. It is as if a part of them collapses under the power of our gaze as we watch them. They do not want us to see their horror and desperation,
but their wills are not strong enough to resist forever. With these close-ups, Peele makes Chris and Red unapologetically vulnerable, and thus unapologetically human. Unfortunately, however, these shots have also flustered and confused some critics in their resemblance to cinematic black caricatures of the past.

Controversial film critic Armond White suggests that Chris’s appearance on the screen, and the way Peele shoots his appearance, is a foolish and offensive misstep in how it recreates historical cinematic black stereotypes. White argues,

The actor’s dark-skin/bright-teeth image inadvertently recalls the old Sambo archetype. Kaluuya frequently goes from sleepy-eyed stress to bug-eyed fright. Surely Spike Lee would have recognized the resemblance to Stepin Fetchit, Mantan Moreland, and Willie Best, the infamous comics who made their living performing Negro caricatures during Hollywood’s era of segregation. Peele seems too caught up in exploiting modern narcissism to notice old repulsion. (“Return of the Get Whitey Movie”)

Not only does White suggest that Kaluuya’s appearance in *Get Out* is an offensive recreation of the “Sambo archetype,” but White also suggests that Peele’s offense comes from carelessness. The filmmaker supposedly cannot recognize the stereotypes he is replicating the way a more knowledgeable and racially sensitive black director like Spike Lee would be able to. White thinks that Peele is “too caught up” in his other ideas to recognize his transgression. There is no suggestion that channeling the Sambo imagery could be intentional, subversive, or positive in any way.

White has similar sentiments about the way Peele films his black actors in *Us*, claiming that “Peele depicts black American identity as a freak show” (“In *Us*, The Woke Generation Scares Itself”). White states that Nyong’o and the other actors who play her family “were obviously cast for their dark skin tone,” and while comparing Nyong’o directly to Kaluuya, White further says that both were chosen as examples of “ultra-blacks” as a way of “taunting”
their racial difference. White compares Nyong’o to Willie Best and Mantan Moreland as he does with Kaluuya, claiming both actors “get bug-eyed” to make the audience laugh and be frightened in equal measure.

Racquel Gates takes issue with White, though she does agree that “close-ups of Kaluuya’s emotive face” with his large, white eyes contrasting against his smooth, dark skin evokes the “legacy of cinematic minstrelsy” (38). She does, however, disagree with “the final damnation that White intends,” suggesting that Get Out’s echoes of cinematic minstrelsy do not deserve condemnation, but are rather an opportunity “to begin a conversation about the racialized politics of aesthetics” (38). Unfortunately, while Gates believes that the way Get Out presents blackness is an opportunity to “begin a conversation,” it is a conversation she wants to have about other texts. Like White, she neglects the opportunity to give Peele the benefit of the doubt as a filmmaker knowingly challenging past signifiers of race.

This thesis not only gives Peele the benefit of that doubt but also gives him credit for his powerful efforts to humanize the on-screen black body in the wake of a long history of racist and monstrous portrayals. Get Out and Us speak to a detailed range of race portrayals on film and respond to the specific context of their time; thus, inadequately detailing that time and space would have done a disservice to how much Peele accomplishes with his films. Keeping such context in mind, I will now move into a closer reading of both films to illustrate Peele’s racial subversion of white body horror and his establishment of a distinct black body horror.

**Get Out**

The suppression of blackness is one of the central anxieties of Get Out. Peele’s film shows us the new “racial caste system” that Alexander discusses where black bodies and ideas
are suppressed with modern tactics far different than what have been used in the past. From Peele’s perspective, blackness in America is not just being Othered through monstrosity, but, ironically, through idealization. According to Bryan K. Nichols, *Get Out* shows how previous demonizations of the black body have been largely repurposed as positive, albeit harmful and stereotypical, idealizations. Nichols draws on what Isaac D. Balbus calls “four pairs of demonizing and idealizing fantasies about blacks” (99). As Nichols goes on to explain with *Get Out*, popular stereotypes about blackness like “Lazy & Shiftless” become “Laid Back & Cool” (232). Similarly, we see “Dirty & Smelly” become “Black & Beautiful,” “Sexual Monsters” become “Sexual Marvels,” and “Animals” become “Athletes” (232). Nichols says, “What *Get Out* depicts superbly is that, though idealized, being the object of projection continues to dehumanize black people and inspire hostile envy” (232). Even though there are more idealizations of blackness in American media than ever before, blackness is nonetheless still under white control.

In *Get Out*, when the black protagonist, Chris, is taken to the family home of his white girlfriend, Rose, he is confronted with frequent compliments that are so stereotypical that they can only be read as microaggressions. At one party, Chris is fondled by an older white woman who, alluding to Chris’s sexual prowess as a black man, asks Rose, “So, is it true? Is it better?” At the same party, an older white man argues with Chris that “fairer skin” has been in favor for the past few centuries but the “pendulum has swung back” and now “black is in fashion.” This is in addition to microaggressions from Rose’s family, like her father who claims he would have wanted Barack Obama to have a third term as president and her brother who thinks Chris would be “a beast” in mixed martial arts. An initial viewing of *Get Out* leads audiences to believe these remarks are simply mundane microaggressions of white people overcompensating to prove they
are not racist, but once viewers realize the bodily control this white community exercises on black bodies, it all takes on a much more sinister tone.

The white community, led by Rose’s family, the Armitages, are secretly suppressing black identity into “the sunken place,” a helpless psychological state that leaves the black body vulnerable to control by an implanted white consciousness. Thus, the microaggressions toward Chris are about more than racial insensitivity. The praise he receives is the expressed predatorial desires of those who both fear and envy blackness. This white community does not focus on the black body as a source of monstrosity, but their idealization of the black body as a source of sexual virility and athletic prowess is a case of Othering nonetheless. As Judson L. Jeffries writes, “By removing the black man’s brains and inserting the brain of a white man, the Armitages, in their minds, strengthen the white males of the race by making a more complete, powerful, and balanced specimen and by extension, eradicate the Black man as we know him” (146). While from a surface level, the fear in Get Out comes from the literal threat of brain swapping and bodily control, the subtextual anxiety comes from the ways in which white minds think about black bodies. It is in this way that Peele shows us how black horror filmmakers can approach the subject of body horror without reinscribing violence and monstrosity on the black body. The horror in Get Out is directed toward the black body via white psychological monstrosity.

Nichols agrees that white minds, and not black bodies, are the source of horror in Get Out. He focuses on how Peele targets implicit bias, the concept that some prejudicial beliefs about race are held on the unconscious level even by those who may not desire to be racist. Before a viewer knows of the evil machinations of the white society in Get Out, it would be easy to interpret their microaggressive compliments toward Chris as the revealing of implicit bias. Yet
“we are only being teased with the phenomenon of implicit bias” because the threat of this community’s racism is far from unconscious and is rather a threat both calculated and malicious” (Nichols 224). This reveals an anxiety many black Americans have about the casual racism of white Americans, that “all this ‘implicit’ stuff is really just a smokescreen for the dark, larcenous, and knowing heart in White America” (226). Nichols believes Peele might also be suggesting a white exhaustion toward the futility of being good, and this exhaustion “ultimately leads to conceding to the intractability of bias and deciding to just take advantage of, rather than fight, privilege” (226). Racial bias from white society is reason enough to induce black anxiety, but since implicit bias can theoretically come from any group, Get Out suggests the racial bias coming from white society is of a more nefarious sort than what other groups produce. White racism in America, as it comes from positions of power and complacency, is a more frightening and damaging prejudice than any other.

Kevin Lawrence Henry, Jr., agrees with Nichols’s sentiment that the racist white mind is the underlying fear of Get Out, though he puts it in even stronger terms:

[Peel’s film] illustrates the protracted terrorism that is whiteness and the concomitant objectification and utilization of the black body for survival, accumulation, and pleasure. That is to say, whiteness—a socially constructed, yet materially manifested ideology, practice, and positionality—operates to secure its symbolic and structural advantage, its dominance, by devaluing, debasing, and dispossessing that which is constituted as black. (333)

It is fair then to compare the psychological “terrorism” of whiteness, with its ideological, practical, and positional threats toward underprivileged people, as a fitting inverse to the anxiety implied by body horror, the subversive threat of insidious Others who are corrupting the existing power structure from within. As Henry says, “In possessing black bodies, understood as objects, contemporary formations of power are animated and the materiality of racial oppression is made
manifest, as in periods prior. For instance, the line of demarcation between slavery and ‘post-slavery’ is collapsed in this film with the abducting, selling, and using of black bodies. The past is present” (334).

With Get Out, Peele creates a horror film that rejects the on-screen history of black bodies being used to mark monstrosity and instead channels the recent on-screen history of real-life racial violence to portray black bodies as the targets of monstrosity. In the first scene of Get Out, Andre (Lakeith Stanfield) is a young black man walking alone at night in a white, upper-class neighborhood. Andre is the Other here, but most certainly not the monster. He is on his cellphone with someone who is giving him directions because he is lost in what he calls a “creepy, confusing-ass suburb.” Andre confirms he is uncomfortable because he feels like a “sore thumb” in the neighborhood. The fear does not come just from the location itself but because of who Andre is in that location: a black man. Even before Andre expresses any discomfort, the audience already knows he is in danger. During a National Public Radio interview, Terry Gross says, and Peele himself agrees, that Andre “is thinking about Trayvon Martin. And you know most people in the audience are probably thinking about Trayvon Martin.” After the racist slaying of Martin and the subsequent establishment of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013, media screens have been flooded with footage and pictures of black bodies being unjustly controlled, brutalized, and destroyed by more privileged individuals. The cases of victims like Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown are only a select few whose physical abuse made national news after being caught on camera in the years leading up to Get Out. Andre’s fate in the film’s opening scene shares striking allusions to the viral abuse of black bodies that so many have witnessed on their television, computer, and phone screens.
As Andre walks innocently in the suburb, a white car drives past him and quickly does a U-turn. When he notices the car following him, he turns to leave the neighborhood, saying, “Not today, not me. You know how they like to do motherfuckers out here.” Andre, as Gross suggested, is thinking of Martin and has likely seen many of the other videos of abuse just like audiences have. He declares, “Not today, not me,” because he is trying to exclude himself from the horrifying pattern of racist abuse that has pervaded the recent media cycles. Unfortunately for Andre, his fate is horrifyingly similar to so many viral videos of racist violence, particularly the choking and manhandling experienced by Garner and Brown. Andre is attacked on the street by the masked driver, pulled into a vicious chokehold that quickly makes his body go limp. The famous phrase, “I can’t breathe,” uttered numerous times by Garner as he was choked to death by police, comes easily to mind when seeing this attack. During much of the violence, especially while Andre’s motionless body is dragged toward the car, Peele uses the top of the frame, as well as shadows, to obscure Andre’s face. Andre has met the fate he feared. He is reduced to another one of a seemingly endless string of controlled and abused black bodies on the screen.

The next time we see Andre is at the same party where Chris is barraged with microaggressions. Chris, taking a break from the offensive conversations, starts looking around for pictures to take at the party. Chris usually takes pictures of inner-city black life, so he struggles to find anything worth his interest at the Armitage residence. After a few minutes of fruitless searching through his viewfinder, his lens finally settles on Andre. Andre shifts his arms in strange, seemingly random ways because his black consciousness has been suppressed into the sunken place and an implanted white consciousness is now getting accustomed to its newfound control of a black body. Andre’s uncanny movements are akin to the bizarre movements of black bodies that we will later see being puppeteered in Us. These are the hopeless, defeated
movements of black bodies controlled by monstrous outside forces. Andre has become what he so desperately feared before his abduction: another black man whose body is no longer his own. Chris detects something is wrong with Andre when they speak to each other briefly. Andre now claims that his name is Logan King and noticeably has trouble speaking as a convincing young black man with Chris. When the two men separate, Chris offers a fist bump that Andre awkwardly meets with a handshake instead. While Peele has not explicitly revealed that a white consciousness is controlling Andre’s body at this point, the failed exchange is clear foreshadowing of just that.

Later at the same party, Chris raises his cellphone to sneak a picture of Andre, hoping to investigate the matter. Chris is embarrassed to realize that he left the flash active on his camera. The burst of light from the cellphone causes Andre to freeze horrifically in place. Andre stares directly at the camera just as we see Chris do earlier in the film and just as we will see Red do in Us. Andre’s eyes show the same humanity and the same desperate plea. Rather than tears slowly dripping down his cheeks, Andre has a stream of blood fall from his nose. Andre’s black consciousness is temporarily freed from the sunken place at this moment, but he still rests precariously on the border, just as we see with those moments from Chris and Red. Taking back control of his body, Andre rushes toward Chris, begging the other black man to “get out!”

It should be considered here that both black men are looking out for one another’s best interests despite not knowing one another previously. Peele highlights the power of black Americans looking out for one another in the face of racist control. Chris could have used his actual camera to take a picture of Andre from afar, but Peele has Chris take the picture with a cellphone instead. Just as Childish Gambino’s “This Is America” promotes the importance of using cellphones to capture images and video of police brutality, so too does Peele with Get Out.
Capturing images of police brutality is a way for black Americans to take back some semblance of autonomy from a society designed to control their bodies from the shadows. Peele wants his own camera to operate as a means of exposing the horrific control that has long been enforced upon black bodies both literally and on the screen.

Peele uses the subtext of police violence toward black bodies to create the tension not just in these scenes with Andre but in the closing scene of the film. After Chris escapes the horrors of the Armitage house, leaving a host of dead white bodies in his wake, a police car pulls up to him on the street. In any other horror film with a white protagonist, the arrival of the police would serve as a means of hope, but for a black man in this situation, it potentially means more danger. This was the case for Ben (Duane Jones), the black protagonist of the groundbreaking horror film *Night of the Living Dead*, who survives a hoard of zombies only to be gunned down by racist police. Luckily for Chris, the arriving vehicle is driven by his best friend, Rod (Lil Rel Howery), who works for the Transportation Security Administration, but despite the fake-out, the gut-punch lands with audiences nonetheless.

In *Get Out’s* first and last scenes, on-screen blackness is used to create tensions in scenarios where tension otherwise would not exist. The film bookends with these allusions to police brutality videos because the history of on-screen control of black bodies is at the heart of *Get Out’s* specific brand of body horror. Traditional white body horror relies most often on the terror of the privileged body under siege, of the privileged body being subjected to Othering from within, but Peele finds his monstrosity within the many forms of racist, societal control enforced upon Othered bodies. With *Get Out*, Peele has provided a cinematic companion to Alexander’s evolving concepts of racial caste systems. These caste systems do not just reside in the literal confines of plantations or prisons, but in the symbolic confines we see in our popular
culture. As the blaxploitation era sought to expose and subvert the racist ideologies that persisted in the early monster movies, Peele seeks to expose and subvert the evolving forms of racist ideology that persist in the present body horror genre.

*Us*

While critical interpretations of *Get Out* have been consistent in saying the film draws on the horrors of racist fetishization of the black body and police brutality, Peele’s follow-up, *Us*, leaves far more room for debate. It is too soon after the film’s release for much in terms of academic discourse, but the reactions from popular publications have found *Us* to be a much more baffling film. As Van R. Newkirk II says, “*Us* is not an easily decipherable film, nor is it likely to prompt the same kinds of immediate political takeaways as *Get Out* […] My operating theory after one viewing is that *Us* is a movie about marginalization, about those ‘Americans’ rising up from the underclasses and dispossessing the masters of ill-gotten wealth and status.”

Most mainstream writers tend to agree with the class marginalization argument, such as Richard Brody, who believes that the film is a “radical vision of inequality, of the haves and the have-nots, those who are in and those who are out.” Therefore, the indictment from *Us* goes far beyond just race. Anthony Lane believes the film “spares nobody, regardless of color, age, or creed,” and that the film’s murderous Tethered “represent the nation’s id, or, in the profoundest sense, its underclass.” So, despite the critical interpretations of *Us* being comparatively fewer than *Get Out*, the theme of class emerges as an unmistakable trend, placing Peele’s second film in interesting company with his first. Both *Get Out* and *Us* are dramatically different in a multitude of ways, yet both feature startling examples of horrific bodily control of the underprivileged.
Lane is correct to suggest that *Us* “spares nobody, regardless of color, age, or creed,” but the film is still crucially from a black perspective, making black bodies the primary locus of the film’s body horror. During the film’s climax when Adelaide confronts her doppelganger, Red, in an underground classroom, Red explains the story of the Tethered. She stresses the bodily humanity of the Tethered, saying, “We’re human too, you know? Eyes, teeth, hands, blood… exactly like you.” Because of the grunting, physically uncanny, and violent behavior of the Tethered, they appear distinctly inhuman to those who live above them and one of the things that Red wants most is to attack this Othering of the Tethered. Red continues, “And yet, it was humans [as in not Tethered] who built this place.” The place she is talking about is the horrific underground facilities and tunnels that the Tethered are forced to live in while those above can thrive. By emphasizing the blame of the original humans, rather than the Tethered, Red is emphasizing that the thoughts of those who built that place are more monstrous than the bodied beings created by those thoughts. As with *Get Out*, the privileged mind is an external monstrosity controlling the bodies of those with lesser privilege.

Ironically, Red confirms that the Tethered were designed originally to control those above “like puppets,” rather than the other way around. The project mysteriously failed and the Tethered were “abandoned,” forced to continue life “without direction” until eventually they “all went mad.” The project Red describes is societal control where the lowest class is used to control the middle classes on behalf of the highest classes. All this control is literalized and physicalized in the film. As Red describes the history of the Tethered and of herself, we see images of the Tethered being controlled helplessly by the movements of those on the surface world. The project has resulted in string puppets rather than hand puppets. The Tethered move their bodies in stilted, uncanny gestures that mirror the autonomous actions of those above. One of the most...
horrifying images is of Tethered bodies shaking violently in place while those they are connected
to above ride a rollercoaster. These images of the Tethered being used as puppets is akin to the
body horror seen in *Get Out* when Andre’s (LaKeith Stanfield) body is moved uncannily through
a party at the Armitage home under the control of a white man’s consciousness. Unlike *Get Out,*
the control exercised over the Tethered is seemingly an unknowing control, but as critic Richard
Brody writes of *Us,* Peele is challenging “the unwitting complicity of even apparently well-
meaning and conscientious people in an unjust order that masquerades as natural and immutable
but is, in fact, the product of malevolent designs that leave some languishing in the perma-
shadows.” Therefore, those on the surface, even those who know nothing of the suffering lower
class, are still complicit in that suffering through their willing ignorance.

The film’s physical puppetry of the lower class is reflected by a more systemic puppetry
in the real world, a “racial caste system” as Alexander would say. The simplest explanation of
the Tethered would be that they represent those who are the lowest in the caste system, but *Us*
complicates this notion with its assertion that the Tethered were created to control a middle class.
The idea of the middle class being controlled in any way by the lower class is far too close to
racist, conservative rhetoric to make any sense for Peele. It makes far more sense to look at the
way the upper class uses false ideas about the lower class to control those in the middle. The
Tethered are not the actual lower class, they are the horrific perceptions of the lower class that
are meant to control the middle class with hatred, anger, and most importantly fear. Armond
White, who sought to critically eviscerate both of Peele’s films with charges that Peele, using
“Sambo” imagery, unintentionally “depicts black American identity as a freak show” (“Return of
the Get Whitey Movie”), fails to understand the complexity of Peele’s social commentary.
Through *Us,* Peele is attacking the “freak show,” not those who have been horrifically
misrepresented as freaks. The Tethered represent the product of calculated Othering within the American cultural consciousness, an Othering crafted by the upper class to control the middle class while the lower class gets scapegoated. The freakish black caricatures that White connects to Peele’s films, along with all other racist lies and misrepresentations propagated in plain cultural sight during the Jim Crow era, are the Others that the Tethered represent.

The presence of non-black Tethered in the film does not change the fact that the film is from a distinctly black perspective and that the Tethered overall are coded as, generally, non-white. While Red describes the Tethered, she says that the ones who created the Tethered “figured out how to make a copy of the body but not the soul. The soul remains one, shared by two.” She is also describing the creation of a racist caricature, manufactured human bodies that do not have souls of their own but are connected inextricably to bodies that do. The caricature is not the self, it is a deceptively exaggerated and manipulated way a person is seen by others. While everyone can suffer caricature, Us is most interested in the way that the black body has been controlled through caricature in the United States. We know this because of the Sambo imagery that White and Gates both confirm and, particularly, because of the way both films so specifically highlight the inner humanity of that previously dehumanizing imagery.

Additionally, the concept of two selves, one an ordinary human being and the other a misrepresentation, is crucially tied to blackness through the work of W.E.B. Du Bois in The Souls of Black Folk. Du Bois argues that "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world [. . .] One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (214-15). The veil that Du Bois discusses is a “color line,” one of the invisible social barriers that divide America’s racial
caste system (221). A black American’s knowledge of the color line forces them to develop a “double-consciousness,” essentially one consciousness of how you view yourself and a second of how everyone else views you. A black American must live in constant awareness of the mental caricature other Americans potentially see when looking at them. *Us* makes the notion of double-consciousness literal. There is the surface Wilson family who only wants to live a happy American life, taking beach vacations and buying boats to keep up with the white Tyler family. There is also the subterranean Wilson family who are violent, grunting, and underdeveloped Others, manifestations of the “id” as Lane would say. *Us* punishes the complicity of the middle class and the calculated oppression from the upper class by making everyone, regardless of skin color, come into violent confrontation with their second, monstrous consciousness.

It is all too appropriate that the film’s most important confrontation, that between Adelaide and Red, takes place in a classroom. School is the environment where many black Americans first develop a double-consciousness, not only through lessons in the classroom itself but also by having their blackness made “hypervisible by their peers” (Ramon 49). Forming such a double-consciousness in school is incredibly important in “the African American literary tradition” (Ramon 49). Du Bois himself recalls a white girl rejecting his friendship in school because of his blackness and how he realized “with a certain suddenness that [he] was different from the others […] shut out from their world by a vast veil” (Du Bois 214). The biracial protagonist of James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) is shocked when his grade-school teacher insists that he sit with the black kids instead of the white kids. Before school, he had only “a faint knowledge of prejudice,” but this incident makes his blackness hypervisible (412). In reaction to the formation of a double-consciousness, the protagonist decides to live life attempting to pass as a white man. Donavan L. Ramon argues that
such academic “scenes of race learning” (49) in literature often lead a protagonist to racial passing, as evinced by Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) and Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000).

The notion of passing, defined as "appear[ing] to belong to one or more social subgroups other than the one(s) to which one is normally assigned," is not immediately apparent in *Us* until the audience receives an education of their own at the end of the film (Moynihan 8). The surprise ending reveals that Red was the one originally living on the surface and Adelaide was her Tethered. They were switched during childhood when the original Adelaide wandered into a carnival funhouse and was attacked by her Tethered inside a house of mirrors. The audience does not see this switch the first time the scene is shown, giving the film’s entire introduction a new perspective on second viewing. Everything that occurs before the opening credits is a representation of the original Adelaide’s development of a “double-consciousness,” only with her education coming in the form of monstrous on-screen images of blackness. Before the carnival, the first scene of *Us* opens on a television screen that the original Adelaide is watching. There is never a direct shot of her, only brief, but distinct, shots of her reflection in the screen. Our introductory image of her, but also to blackness itself, is a murky, vaguely formed image reflected by media. Peele wants us to know immediately that there are two Adelaides, one who just wants to live a normal life and another whom she sees vaguely reflected at her on the screen.

At the carnival, we receive even more information about how much young Adelaide is becoming aware of a double-consciousness. Her father wins her a prize at a carnival booth and Adelaide picks a t-shirt depicting Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” music video. Her mother is not happy about the choice, thinking Adelaide will have “nightmares” because previously “she was terrified when it came on TV.” Jackson’s “Thriller” also begins with black characters watching
themselves reflected on the screen. The character Michael (Michael Jackson) and his unnamed girlfriend (Ola Ray) are watching a horror movie at the theater. In this horror movie, Jackson and Ray also play a couple on a date, during which Jackson’s character shockingly turns into a werewolf. John Landis directed “Thriller,” and the werewolf transformation is portrayed almost shot for shot with the body horror transformation in Landis’s *An American Werewolf in London*. Jackson even gazes in horror at his wolf hand in the same fashion that Kessler originally did.

Michael and his girlfriend, the versions of them in the theater watching the werewolf film, must leave because, like Adelaide, Michael’s girlfriend is horrified by the transformation from human to monstrous Other. After leaving the theater to walk home, the two of them are surrounded on the street by zombies and it is further revealed that the real version of Michael is capable of his own form of monstrous transformation. Michael abruptly turns into a ghoulish zombie, but unlike his on-screen counterpart, there is no sense of body horror. He controls his transformation, dancing triumphantly with the other zombies and even transforming back into his human form later in the dance. While his girlfriend is still horrified, the tone of the song and video is celebratory of Jackson’s ability to blur the line between human and monster. His dance itself represents his ability to blur such a line.

The “Thriller” music video is more than a brief reference. The lyrics sung by Jackson in the street tease his girlfriend because of her fear of “the terrors on the screen.” More importantly, the lyrics give away the original Adelaide’s fate just minutes before it happens. Jackson sings,

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It's close to midnight
And something evil's lurking in the dark
Under the moonlight
You see a sight that almost stops your heart
You try to scream
But terror takes the sound before you make it
You start to freeze
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As horror looks you right between the eyes
You're paralyzed. (Jackson)

As young Adelaide wears the “Thriller” shirt, she wanders alone to the carnival funhouse. In neon letters above the funhouse, we see the words, “Find Yourself,” again alluding to her imminent discovery of her double-consciousness. She enters, and discovering her Tethered doppelganger, reacts as described in “Thriller.” She and her doppelganger look each other “right between the eyes” and Adelaide is “paralyzed” by the sight. She tries “to scream,” but the shot cuts away before we see or hear what really happens. The doppelganger “takes the sound” before Adelaide can “make it,” choking her so strongly that her throat is damaged, and she is unable to talk normally for the rest of her life. This is when the switch occurs. The original Adelaide is forced to live underground with the rest of the Tethered, eventually becoming the character Red. The doppelganger becomes the new Adelaide and begins the lifelong struggle of passing.

Their initial confrontation represents the childhood discovery of a double-consciousness, one where you are not only an everyday human being but also a reflected “terror on the screen,” or in this case, in the mirror. Rather than being horrified by a monstrously transforming hand as Kessler is or by looking at a monstrous transformation in the mirror as Brundle does in The Fly, a young black girl need only look at the way she is reflected in monstrous images created by others, whether those creations live on the screen or whether they live hidden away beneath the surface of polite society.

When the doppelganger takes over for young Adelaide, this is when the double-consciousness sets in. Adelaide just wanted to live a normal life, but a monstrous caricature created by forces beyond her understanding takes control of her life instead. She begins passing for the rest of her life, always wondering if someone will discover what she really is, will
discover that she is a monstrous Other. She is confronted by Red again decades later while her entire family feels like they are only passing as a higher social class during their beach vacation. Her final confrontation with Red is a final confrontation with the idea that she can never go back to a time before the double-consciousness existed. She kills the original Adelaide and returns to passing, becoming a being coexisting as human and monstrous Other forever. Peele does offer some triumph in coming to terms with this horror of double-consciousness. When the new Adelaide fights with Red, the violent confrontation is interspersed with images of their respective younger selves ballet dancing. The fight is a ghoulish dance of the double-consciousness just as we see in “Thriller.” Coming to terms with the double-consciousness is a constant and delicate dance between two beings, one human and one monster. In a sense, Peele himself, who is biracial and married to a white woman, may be using his own art as a means of confronting double-consciousness. He just uses film instead of dance.

The day-to-day life of a double-consciousness is at the heart of Peele’s black body horror. At the end of Us, the new Adelaide goes back to passing, but this time with a twist. Her son, Jason, was also in the subterranean world of the Tethered while Adelaide and Red fought. While driving in the film’s final moments, Jason and Adelaide stare at each other while the rest of the family sleeps. Jason knows what happened with his mother; just like many black American children, he has become aware of the need to dance between one consciousness and another. Throughout the film, Jason has always enjoyed wearing a werewolf mask, the same monster from the “Thriller” music video and from many other images in the long history of on-screen body horror. While Jason and Adelaide stare at each other, Jason brings the wolf mask over his face to signify the birth of his double-consciousness just as the new Adelaide did when she slipped on the “Thriller” t-shirt of the original Adelaide.
Conclusion

The horror of the double-consciousness is a horror that all black Americans must come face to face with eventually. It is a distinct form of body horror, only the horror is not of a physically invasive Othering, but of a mentally invasive Othering coming from the racist thoughts, ideas, and creations of a more privileged class. This Othering comes from racist taunts at school, from microaggressions while socializing in white spaces, and from monstrous images of blackness throughout the history of film. This Othering is what Andre feels in the opening scene of *Get Out* when he walks through a white neighborhood and promises himself, “Not me, not today.” He is horrified simply to live in a black body that is constantly vulnerable to monstrous Othering inflicted by white minds. Therefore, Adelaide at the end of *Us* brings Peele’s duology together in an elegant full circle. Both Adelaide and Andre are traveling in a world where they are painfully and horrifyingly aware of the double-consciousness, of the monstrous Other that people might see. Adelaide wants to keep her secret to continue passing within a higher class forever. Andre, however, wants something far simpler. He only wants to pass through a white neighborhood, but all he can think about are the videos he has seen of black Americans being bodily controlled and tortured by racist men who think they are taming not just an animal, but a monster.

The continuously monstrous portrayals of black bodies in American image culture demands a more thorough critical examination of blackness in horror films. Writers such as Coleman, Benshoff, and Kee have notably written on the presence of blackness and black bodies in horror films, but all were published before either of Peele’s films. In many ways, this thesis is
a continuation of ideas that they present through a subgenre explicitly about the boundaries of the body. While my thesis generally extends the historical survey of black representation in horror films that Coleman provides, I hope to provoke further exploration specifically into the overarching racial debates in the genre that Benshoff stresses. In the same way that Benshoff argues for blaxploitation horror films subverting early creature features with a more empathetic and human representation of blackness, I argue for Peele offering such a subversion of body horror films. Kee stresses the importance of reinscribing the black body with humanity in horror films without unintentionally using violence to reinforce previous monstrosity. This thesis illustrates how Peele notably avoids such graphic violence against the black body and how his themes and camera shift empathy and humanity to those bodies.

The importance of my thesis thus goes even further than providing a better understanding of *Get Out* and *Us* as films. This thesis places Peele’s films in the larger, historical “negotiation of racial images” that Guerrero describes and proposes the existence of a distinct black body horror separate from the current critical understanding of the subgenre. The works of Kristeva, Creed, Tudor, and others illustrate how the popular presentation of body horror in film has come from a place of privileged white fear. In contrast, Peele’s films illustrate a remarkable entry point into body horror from an unprivileged black perspective. Peele’s black body horror emphasizes the humanity of the black body being literally controlled by systemic racism, police brutality, professional sports, class hierarchies, and the pressures of imposter syndrome. Finally, the films’ black body horror goes further than such literal control by emphasizing the fear of the black body under the racist control of white image culture. In the end, Peele’s black body horror is a call for black Americans to take back control of not just their literal bodies but of their on-screen images.
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