

# **The Racist Liberal Humanist:**

**Black Plasticity and the Self/Other dialectic in Jordan Peele's Get Out (2017)**

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*This paper represents my own work in accordance  
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## Abstract

In *Get Out* (2017) directed by Jordan Peele, Chris, a black young male, discovers that his white girlfriend's family regularly lures in black men and women, hypnotizes them, sells off the body in an auction to a white audience, and subsequently transplants the brain of the white bidder into the black body. Critics of *Get Out* have almost all noted a) the film's critique of "the concomitant objectification and utilization of the black body" (Henry 1) and b) its reproach towards the covert racism still prevalent in this falsely perceived post-racial era. However, if the black person is considered inferior in society - is dehumanized with his body viewed as an object - then why are the whites in *Get Out* so eager to attain such a black body? Why should the body of an inferior being be coveted? In this paper, I will be using Zakkiah Iman Jackson's concept of the plasticization of black humanity as a lens to argue that the white liberal in *Get Out* sees the black not necessarily as an inferior but as an *Other* that is *plastic*, malleable, available to be molded as needed and used to cater to the demands of the white.

## **The Racist Liberal Humanist:**

### **Black Plasticity and the Self/Other dialectic in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017)**

The Academy Award Winner for Best Original Screenplay of 2018, *Get Out*, begins with a simple premise: Chris, a black young male, is going to meet the suburban white family of his girlfriend, Rose. At first, the microaggressions Chris faces from the seemingly well-meaning liberal white family seem satirical, but not sinister. Soon, however, the sense of impending doom becomes hard to miss. Chris discovers that the family regularly lures in black men and women, hypnotizes them, sells off the body in an auction to a white audience, and subsequently transplants the brain of the white bidder into the black body. The whole process is a well established family business where Rose's mom, a psychologist, is in charge of hypnosis and her father, a neurosurgeon, deals with the surgical intricacies of brain transplants. The white person gains autonomy over the black body while the mind of the black person is hypnotically confined to the daze of a "sunken place" where they lose control over the motor functions. From the sunken place the outside world appears as a small window of light in a dark sky. Critics of *Get Out* have almost all noted a) the film's critique of "the concomitant objectification and utilization of the black body" (Henry 1) and b) its reproach towards the covert racism still prevalent in this falsely perceived post-racial era.<sup>1</sup> However, if the black person is considered inferior in society - is dehumanized with his body viewed as an object - then why are the whites in *Get Out* so eager to attain such a black body? Why should the body of an inferior being be coveted? There is something paradoxical

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<sup>1</sup> See reviews by Henry, Austin, Romano, Jarvis and Harris.

and perverse about the desire of a white man to embody Chris's black body despite his view of the black body as an inferior.

In this paper, I will be using Zakkiyah Iman Jackson's concept of the plasticization of black humanity as a lens to argue that the white liberal in *Get Out* sees the black not necessarily as an inferior but as an *Other* that is *plastic*, malleable, available to be molded as needed and used to cater to the demands of the white. In the movie, the white liberal treats the black bodies as trophies, identifying the selective superiority of the black and perceiving it as a potentiality to be exploited and appropriated to the white's advantage. Eventually, white liberal humanism does not *ignore* racism, but rather insidiously *perpetuates* it by increased emphasis on a Self/Other dialectic that establishes the black's alterity and thereby facilitates its plasticization.

The current conversation around the film notes two things. Firstly, that there is a consensus amongst critics that the film depicts blacks as commodified inferiors. I seek to explore the notion and in doing so I argue that even though *Get Out* depicts a new form of racism (where white people become parasites of black bodies), there is discursive continuity in the objectification of black. The film shows black as a potentiality, *even when it is perceived as superior*, a plasticized matter which exists to fulfill the demands of the white humanist agenda. Before, black bodies were used for physical labour, *now* black bodies need to be inhabited; the demand is set by the white and fulfilled by the black. Secondly, critics concur that *Get Out* depicts white liberal humanism's dissimulation of the continuation of racism. I contend that the film shows that liberal humanism does not simply

*hide* the racism, but *exacerbates* it through the ideology's emphasis on the Self/Other dialectic.

The film makes several references to anti-black racism as traditionally understood, which included the overt treatment of blacks as inferior, or as critic Chammie Austin puts it, the prevalent belief that “the value of Black life is negligible” (1). While packing for the trip to Rose’s parents’ home, Chris asks her whether they know that he is black, saying that he doesn’t “want to get chased off the lawn with a shotgun”. The warnings of Rod, Chris’s black friend who works for the TSA, represent these fears stemming from traditional racism more explicitly. He tells Chris “don’t go to a white girl’s parents’ house” and later claims that Rose’s family uses black people as sex slaves and warns Chris that “they could have you barking like a dog, flying around like you a fucking pigeon”. Initially, Rod’s speculations seem far fetched superstitions which have no place in an emancipated contemporary society. When he reports Chris’s disappearance to the police, the detectives laugh it off because of how ridiculous it sounds. The movie both depicts and anticipates the white liberal attitude of its (white liberal) watchers. On the surface of it, *Get Out* resonates with the current liberal mindset and Chris’s concerns do not seem realistic as such overt racism merely comes off as laughable and serves to reinforce the belief that racism isn’t an issue anymore. Whites do not simply view blacks as inferiors. Rose’s dad “would have voted for Obama a third time” and, as one of the white guests at Rose’s house remarks, “black is in fashion”. Austin’s observation that “black life is negligible” gives us the sense that black is merely inferior, which is not necessarily the kind of racism *Get Out* wants us to notice through these references. In fact, the film pushes the audience to notice that though the

white liberal has moved past the traditional overt racism, giving the impression that we are in a truly post-racial America, we have only dealt with *some part* of the problem, but not its *real roots*.

*Get Out's* racist violence is not encoded in treating the black as an inferior, but treating the black as a potentiality. While Kevin Lawrence Henry, another critic, notes the film's representation of the "racio-capitalist project that is underway - the commodification of the black body" (334), it is important to notice that this commodification is not only because the black body is seen as inferior. Surely in the past it appeared to be so, because black bodies were used to engage in inferior tasks like physical labor in chattel slavery - tasks that the whites considered disgraceful to be performed by themselves and therefore chose someone with an inferior status to perform them. But in *Get Out*, we see that the whites no longer see black bodies as inferior, rather, as Jim Hudson puts it, they see blacks as "stronger, faster, cooler" than whites. When Dean Armitage invites over all his white friends for the auction of Chris's body, disguised as a house party, there are multiple references to the idealization of the black body by the whites. One man notes that Chris has "quite the grip" and asks him if he plays golf. A woman looks at Chris admiringly; "So, how handsome is he?" she asks rhetorically while feeling up his arm and chest. She looks down at Chris's legs suggestively and asks Rose, "is it true, is it better?". At the family dinner, Jeremy Armitage, Rose's brother, points to Chris, "with your frame and genetic makeup, if you really pushed your body... you would be a fucking beast." As such, there are continual references to the whites' recognition of the "superiority" of the black. However, the recognition of this superiority, or "exoticism of racial difference" (334) as Austin puts it,

does not lead to the end of racist violence. Instead, the black is viewed as a potentiality, to be used or manipulated to achieve the white liberal humanist agenda of progress and immortality.

While the black body is idealized and identified as superior in *Get Out*, the black mind is considered dispensable, and is therefore depressed through hypnosis into the “sunken place”. The violence in *Get Out* extends beyond the simple physical commodification of the black body to the repression of the black consciousness through Missy’s hypnosis. Chris’s subjection is not achieved solely through violence against his body, but also through the “(con)scription of his) heart, mind, soul and flesh (which) must (also) contend with whatever the master (Missy) effects” (Jackson 117). In the terminology of Zakkiah Iman Jackson, the black is “selectively incorporated” (96) into the white agenda. Through her analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Jackson concludes that black slavery’s violence was “not the denial of humanity but the plasticization of humanity” (117).

Plasticity is defined by Jackson as “a fundamentally immanentist, mutable, transformable, and indeed plastic understanding of thought, matter, and being whereby the plastic is defined as that which is able to receive and give form and assumes the destruction of form in this giving and receiving” (118 Jackson).<sup>2</sup> Plasticization of the black, in other words, is the denial of a definitive form of the individuality of the black, and instead its interpretation as a malleable identity which may be molded as needed by the white.

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<sup>2</sup> Jackson is in fact referring to Catherine Malbou’s philosophical understanding of plasticity as an ontology.

In *Get Out*, it is not just Chris's body which he loses agency over, but also his mind. In this way, Missy does not just control what happens to Chris's physical identity, but his psychological being as well. Chris's mind, along with his body, is deemed plastic - "impressionable, stretchable" (Jackson 117) to fit the needs of the white. This plasticity of the mind is seen in the film through Jordan Peele's emphasis on the faces of characters. In crucial scenes, Peele includes closeups of faces that both reveal and conceal the contortion that the mind has undergone through Missy's hypnotic techniques. As a result of the plasticity of the black, that which is deemed worthy by the white, i.e. the black body, is used. That which is deemed unworthy, i.e. the black mind, is dismissed into the sunken place. The final product, a black body with a white mind, is what Roman Armitage, Rose's grandfather, deems "perfect". "With your natural gifts and our determination we could be part of something greater, something perfect", he asserts. This explains why the white desires to embody the black: not because the black body is deemed inferior, but because the black *being* is viewed as plastic. The black body (perceived as superior) may be used for the enhancement of the white and the black mind (perceived as inferior) is discarded. The eventual product - the white mind with the black body is in fact the most perfect end state perceived by a white man, and therefore to achieve this perfection for him he will demand whatever malleability is required of the black.

*Get Out* shows that white liberal humanism does not simply deny or ignore this plasticization, but rather *enhances* it. The prevalent understanding of intersubjectivity in white liberal humanism is through the Self/Other dialectic. As Jackson notes, the white has historically needed 'to cast (the) "animal" - human or nonhuman - as the abjected referent



in the production of the human Self' (Jackson 120). Donna Haraway, in *A Cyborg Manifesto* understands this concept of the Self/Other as a dialectic of domination. "The self is the One who is not dominated", she posits, claiming that the Self is defined in terms of its domination over the Other ( Bell 313). In other words, in order to define the notion of Self so significant in liberal humanism, the white liberal *needs* to define the black as the plasticized Other, present to fulfil the needs of the Self. In the film, Rose's family and friends, while trying to act inclusive towards Chris, only end up making it more obvious that he is an outsider, an Other, by "placing an indecorous emphasis on his blackness" (Jarvis 100). "I know Tiger", he is told by one of the white guests at the party in Rose's parents' house. Even in their attempt at inclusivity, it is his difference, his Otherness that they see. These microaggressions are very relatable for most black men in the audience. Jordan Peele himself told the New Yorker about *Get Out* being a "mirror of the micro-aggressions he'd long experienced" as an african-american man (Buckley). The result of the Self/Other dialectic seen in the movie is not just these microaggressions, but is also a tendency to view the Other as a malleable identity subjected to the demands of the Self - a demand of plasticity that leads to the horrors of racist violence.

Interestingly, Dean and Roman Armitage justify their actions with transhumanist ideals of enhancement, immortality and perfection of the human. The *humanist* particularly the anthropocentric view is that "humans are importantly distinct from non-humans" and that they must be accorded a "superlative status that all or most non-humans lack"(Roden 10-11). Transhumanism *extends* the aims of the humanist by adding "advanced technologies to the limited toolkit of traditional humanism"(Roden 13) with the primary

purpose of “human enhancement” (Ferrando 3). Transhumanists consider it a moral obligation to pursue human advancement, suggesting that we “add *morphological freedom* to the traditional liberal rights” (Roden 14). Near the end of *Get Out*, Dean Armitage says, as he stares into the fire just before Chris is abducted, “fire, it’s a reflection of our own mortality. When we breathe, when we die. Even the sun will die one day. But we are divine. We are the gods trapped in cocoons.” The transplant procedure is both meant as an enhancement and as an attempt at immortality. The image of humans as gods trapped in cocoons is resonant with the transhumanist ideals of human enhancement and morphological freedom. The narrative arc of *Get Out* therefore warns us that a world governed with transhumanist ideals, with growing technological prowess, is headed towards a future which enables the white to subject the plasticized black Other to demands more gruesome and horrific than were ever conceivable in the past.

To summarize, my intention was not to prove that the existing interpretations of *Get Out* as a critique of the objectification of the black body due to its perceived inferiority are *wrong*. Rather, I aimed to note that *Get Out* shows that racist violence includes but also exceeds this kind of objectification. White liberal humanism continues to *plasticize* the black identity, and in doing so it enables racist violence whether or not the black is considered inferior or superior, because in either state the black is viewed as a malleable substance available to be molded according to the needs, preferences and ideals of the whites. Whether it’s a black slave made to do the labor work on fields owned by whites before the civil war, or it is a black president deemed suitable for the interests of the white public in contemporary times, or it is a black body being used to fulfill the desire for

physical strength and likeability of the white bidder - blacks remain as Others to be made use of. The true horror of racism is in this demand and supply - demands that are set by the whites, and met by the "infinite malleability" (Jackson 119) expected from the plasticized blacks.

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