

[FORTHCOMING IN *HOW THERAPISTS TALK ABOUT RACE*,  
ED. BEVERLY J. STOUTE AND MICHAEL SLEVIN]

GET OUT OF MY HEAD: EXPERIENCING CULTURAL PARANOIA  
IN JORDAN PEELE'S *GET OUT*

BY GRANT SHREVE

Engender in [him] a sense of his inferiority and it will  
paralyze his aggressiveness and do more to keep him  
down than a standing army. What we practice . . . is  
racial hypnotism.

—Sutton Griggs, from *Unfettered* (1902)

A mind is a terrible thing to waste.

—United Negro College Fund slogan

Numerous studies have demonstrated that African Americans are empirically less likely to seek out psychotherapy than white Americans. One of the most important causes of this is what Whaley (2001) calls “cultural mistrust,” which has “a significant impact on the attitudes and behaviors of African Americans, especially mental health services use.” Cultural mistrust is a mitigated version of “healthy cultural paranoia,” which Grier and Cobbs (1968) define as the conviction shared among many African Americans that “every white [person] is a potential enemy unless proved otherwise and every social system is set against [them] unless [they] personally find out differently” (p. 149). In one focus group of African American men and women conducted in 2004, for example, participants expressed concerns that to seek therapy would put them at risk of “misdiagnosis, labeling, and brainwashing” (Thompson, 2004, 23). Nor are they entirely wrong, since, as Whaley (2001) has shown, adaptive conditions like cultural

mistrust are often mistaken for symptoms of schizophrenia, which has resulted in the pathologizing of healthy, rational behavior.

What makes African Americans' cultural paranoia *healthy*, especially in a medical context, is that it is historically justified, since there exists nearly four centuries' worth of evidence documenting the continual medical experimentation upon black bodies by white physicians. In *Medical Apartheid*, her comprehensive history of medical experimentation on African Americans, Harriet Washington asks readers to remember that the "experimental exploitation of African Americans is not an issue of the last decade or even the past few decades. Dangerous, involuntary, and nontherapeutic experimentation upon African Americans has been practiced widely and documented extensively at least since the eighteenth century" (p. 7). Washington's emphatic claim reminds us that, given the endless parade of traumas that whites have visited upon African American bodies, cultural mistrust toward medical—and especially mental health—professionals not only *is* pervasive, but also *should* be.

While focus groups and surveys can give voice to the suspicions African Americans continue to harbor about therapy, these methods will never entirely capture the inside view of cultural paranoia as it is experienced. By necessity, these reports are conducted and packaged so as to be fit for print in the annals of professional colloquia and journals and are thus sanitized in ways that inevitably dilute the visceral skepticism and historical trauma seething beneath African American expressions of cultural mistrust. As such, their capacity to inform professional practice is inherently limited. Art can compensate for this lack. The representational flexibility afforded to novels, films, plays, paintings, and poems enables them to present human subjectivity in all its affective complexity, and in the past several years no piece of popular art has more intimately

and intensely depicted African American cultural paranoia than Jordan Peele's 2017 film *Get Out*.

Released to nearly universal acclaim, *Get Out*'s premise sounds at first like Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (1967) for the Obama era: Chris Washington and Rose Armitage, a young interracial couple living together in New York, drive upstate for the weekend to visit Rose's white, liberal parents, only Rose hasn't yet told them that her new boyfriend is black. Once they arrive at the Armitages' palatial country home, however, *Get Out* veers beyond the borders of Kramer's domestic drama into the surreal social horrors of *The Stepford Wives* and *Rosemary's Baby*. Peele, a biracial actor and comedian most famous for creating the incisive sketch comedy show *Key & Peele*, has said in interviews that he wished to capture in the film the sense of "justified paranoia" (Nigatu & Clayton, 2017) many African Americans feel on being the only black person in a white social setting. As the film progresses, Chris discovers his inklings of paranoia about the Armitages' intentions are indeed justified, for behind the genial racism of this affluent white social world—where residents pat themselves on the back for voting for Barack Obama and fawn over Chris' blackness in the most stereotypical terms—lies an insidious multidecade scheme to kidnap black men and women, sell them to white people, and replace their brains with those of the highest bidders. This is *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* retold as a story of American race relations. How the Armitages' enact this scheme begins with Rose luring black men (and occasionally women) to her family's estate, where they are promptly trotted out at a garden party to be sized up by a group of white elites, sold at a silent auction, and, finally, lobotomized. As if this weren't grotesque enough, a mote of each subject's original consciousness persists just beneath the surface of the new host, forced to observe but ultimately unable, except under one strange condition, to act.

Peele has described *Get Out* as a “social thriller,” a cinematic genre of his own invention. The clearest sense he has given us regarding how to think about this genre was in the film series he curated for the Brooklyn Academy of Music in February 2017 titled “The Art of the Social Thriller.” The diverse crop of films he screened for this series included *Rosemary’s Baby*, *The Stepford Wives*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *The People Under the Stairs*, *Rear Window*, *The Shining*, and *The ‘Burbs*, among others. One of the key features uniting many of these films is their exploitation of the paranoia experienced by marginalized and oppressed groups. These films take quotidian experiences of social anxiety and exaggerate them to monstrous proportions, tracking the cognitive dissonance this escalation induces in their protagonists. In *The Stepford Wives*, for example, familiar uses of patriarchal power intended to dampen women’s aspirations toward autonomy and erase their individuality are stretched to almost comical extremes when Joanna Eberhart and her family move—at her husband’s bequest—to the insular community of Stepford, a town run by a secretive men’s club that literally kills women and replaces them with docile robotic doppelgangers. Similarly, in *Rosemary’s Baby*, Rosemary Woodhouse pregnant after her husband rapes her and, over the course of her pregnancy, becomes convinced that a cabal of witches is plotting to abduct her child when it’s born and sacrifice it—the movie’s conclusion toys with the possibility that she may have been right all along. *Get Out*’s structure owes much to these antecedents, mining the struggle waged within the minds of marginalized people as to whether the small acts of violence inflicted upon them are *really* part of a larger conspiracy or whether they’ve just gone crazy. In a March 2017 interview with *The New York Times*, Peele was asked what scared him the most. He answered, “Human beings. What people can do in conjunction with other people is exponentially worse than what they can do alone. Society is the scariest monster” (Zinoman, 2017). This answer may border on cliché, but it

speaks to the psychosocial perspective Peele brings to his understanding of his film's genre, which is grounded first and foremost in the horrors human sociality produces.

Therapy is a crucial element in *Get Out*'s representation of cultural paranoia and racial violence. In fact, it is the narrative catalyst for the ghastly social rituals the film slowly unveils. Missy Armitage, Rose's mother, is a therapist who runs a practice out of her home. Played expertly by Catherine Keener—who has spent her career portraying earnest, well-meaning liberal women—Missy first offers her services to Chris under the cover of getting him to quit smoking. She promises to do this, however, not through talk therapy but hypnosis, which she assures Chris will relieve him of his nicotine habit without any effort on his part. Chris politely refuses, and the matter is forgotten until later that evening when, after having snuck outside to smoke, he reenters the house to find Missy waiting for him in the living room. Eager to impress the woman who may eventually be his mother-in-law, Chris sits and talks with her, even as Missy's questions become progressively more invasive. With the help of a delicate china teacup that becomes exponentially more menacing over the course of the film, Missy gradually puts Chris into a hypnotic torpor and, once in control, forces him to recount the day his mother died, the central trauma of his childhood. Chris's mother, we discover, had died in a hit-and-run while he was watching TV on his bed in the dark waiting for her to come home. In his retelling, Chris implies that he had intuitively known something was wrong, but didn't call for help for fear of the wave of pain he saw breaking on the horizon. Had he acted, he imagines, his mother may have lived. Once Missy has extracted this confession from him, she sends Chris's consciousness to what she calls "the Sunken Place," an endless expanse of empty space in which a person's conscious mind watches helplessly as the world passes in front of their eyes. It is as terrifying and vivid a representation of depersonalization as any that has been put on film.

Peele's staging of this scene is done with a deep awareness of African American suspicions toward psychotherapy. He remarked in one particularly candid interview that "the black community hasn't exactly embraced therapy as a means to get to where they [can resolve] inner turmoil . . . . There is this fear that I wanted to play off of here that's like, 'I don't know about anybody fucking with my head'" (Nigatu & Clayton, 2017). In *Get Out*, African American skepticism toward mental health services is accentuated by having Missy Armitage practice hypnosis rather than talk therapy. To the popular mind, hypnosis has long stood as a fecund metaphor for the psychological manipulation of individuals by mental health professionals at its most sinister (Leighton, 2001, p. 117). No wonder, then, that African American authors have at times employed hypnosis as a figure to represent either the strategies of white supremacy, as in this essay's first epigraph from Sutton Griggs's novel *Unfettered*, or as the only available solution to racism, as in E. G. Bamberg's 1968 short story "The Hypnotist," in which a black hypnotist passes as white and uses hypnosis to convince white racists that their skin (and favorite color) is brown. For Peele, the danger Missy's invasion of Chris's mind poses is two-fold. For one, it deprives him of agency by separating his mind from his body, but it also signals the prelude to the crude, brutal violence of the brain transplants performed by Rose's father and brother, which themselves evoke the long history of medical experimentation on black bodies.

Therapy in *Get Out* is therefore just the latest iteration of this violent tradition stretching back to the eighteenth century, which is itself—or so the film posits—borne out of an Anglo-European desire for black bodies without black minds. (The original motive for the Armitage's horrifying project was Rose's grandfather's loss to Jesse Owens in trials for the 1936 Olympic team.) Chris's childhood trauma had already engendered in him what the literary critic Christopher Freeburg calls "epistemic estrangement," a characteristic feature of black

personhood wherein an individual's deepest desires, attachments, politics, and ideas are withheld from outside knowledge. In Freeburg's account, "epistemic estrangement" often looks like the defiance of white efforts to assert their power over black bodies through knowledge, and his *exemplum par excellence* of this trait is the famous 1899 photograph of Frank Embree staring sneeringly into a camera right before he was lynched. But for Chris, on the other hand, epistemic estrangement is not how he most wants to relate to others and the world. Throughout the film he is cheerful, compassionate, and gentle, yearning to overcome this estrangement, to know and be known. When Missy Armitage sends Chris's consciousness to the Sunken Place, she exploits the formative trauma of his youth to control his mind, revealing herself definitively as a cog in the gears of a vast racial conspiracy, not a healer.<sup>1</sup>

The late-night hypnosis session is thus emblematic of how *Get Out* represents cultural paranoia on the screen, offering an inside view of what these fears *look like* and, more importantly, *feel like*. Even as the film indulges and validates this feeling, however, it also acknowledges how extreme and irrational such anxieties may appear, and not just to white people. Late in *Get Out*, when Chris's friend Rod approaches a black female police officer with his—correct—interpretation of the events leading to Chris's disappearance, she gathers her colleagues together to laugh him out of the station. Nevertheless, the film urges its viewers to take its horrifying premise seriously.

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<sup>1</sup> *Get Out's* paranoid fear of psychological manipulation by mental health professionals is not inherent to the genre of the "social thriller" as Peele has defined it. Indeed, in one of *Get Out's* most important forerunners, *The Stepford Wives*, a brief scene of talk therapy that appears towards the end of the film offers one of the few moments of hope and relief in an otherwise crushing film. There the therapist is a woman, and even though she doesn't necessarily believe in the facticity of Joanna's conspiratorial theories nevertheless understands the affective reality beneath them and counsels her accordingly.

Over the course of his psychohistorical journey at the Armitage house, Chris ultimately does resolve the trauma of his mother's sudden death, and this in spite of the fact that every white person in the movie is out to kill him. At the end of the film, after Chris has killed all the Armitage family but Rose, he begins to drive away in Rose's brother's car when he suddenly strikes the Armitage's black female servant, Georgina, who the audience has now deduced is Rose's grandmother. Chris hesitates, wondering whether to leave the woman's body on the driveway to die. The moment recalls his own failure to act as a boy to potentially save his mother's life. He knows, too, that some spark of the black woman whose body was wrenched away from her to preserve the mind of Rose's racist grandmother still lives inside. Earlier, in what is certainly the single most heart-wrenching shot of the film, Chris tries to speak candidly with Georgina about the anxiety he feels being around so many white people. While he speaks, the camera closes in on her face and tears well up in her eyes, as if something in her is struggling to escape but can't. Chris's memory of this instant of humanity swelling to the surface of a body whose agency has been stripped through racial violence is what finally compels him to lift Georgina's body into the car. Even though she viciously attacks him the moment she regains consciousness, his decision to assist whatever is left of the woman who once occupied this body enables him to overcome his guilt through an act of compassion. This is clearly a Hollywood version of psychological maturation, but we shouldn't fault the film for this, since its aim is to produce a psychological response in its audience through narrative structure rather than to represent psychological transformation with pinpoint accuracy.

We might go so far as to say that *Get Out* presents itself as a complement, and maybe even an alternative to, therapy insofar as it aspires both to represent the experience of cultural paranoia and to be a homeopathic balm for it. Peele has spoken openly about his hope that the

film would function *like* therapy by providing audiences with a communal experience of catharsis. In an interview for *The Guardian*, Peele said that the reason “why [films] get primal, audible reactions from us is because they allow us to purge our own fears and discomforts in a safe environment. It’s like therapy. You deal with deep issues that are uncomfortable with the hope that there is a release.” Peele here appears to propose an Aristotelian form of collective psychotherapy. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle theorized that tragedy’s chief aim is *catharsis*, a purging of pity and terror through the excitement of these same emotions. Although it is now firmly ensconced in the philosophy of art, *catharsis* was originally a medical term describing a bodily phenomenon. It is a process that affects us at the most fundamental levels of our being, or, to quote the novelist Ralph Ellison (1995), on our “lower frequencies” (p. 581). *Get Out*, Peele clearly hoped, would trigger a collective catharsis in its audiences and thus act as a kind of social therapy. This is not, however, to say that once the pity and terror evoked by this film have been purged, viewers will suddenly feel at ease with each other and the world, for terror, as the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2003) reminds us, “has this good thing about it: it makes us sit up and take notice” (p. 26).

I saw *Get Out* on its opening weekend in Baltimore, Maryland, a city that has been a focal point of the nation’s conversation about race over the past several years. The theater was packed to the brim with an audience about as diverse as one could hope for in this city. Men and women, black and white, teenagers and the over-forty crowd, all crammed together to see a low budget *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?*-themed horror film directed by a sketch comedy performer for which only one trailer had been released. That so many people showed up to see this film made the experience of watching it feel electric and rare. From its chilling cold open to its closing credits, a communal bond was forged amongst this motley group of strangers. When

Chris finally wraps his hands around Rose's neck to kill her in the film's closing minutes, there were audible cheers. For a mixed-race audience to be unanimously invested in watching a black man murder a white woman—however psychopathic she may be—is unprecedented in the history of American art, but *Get Out* achieved it. Never in any of the hundreds of movies I've seen in theaters have I ever had a feeling that so closely approximated Aristotelian catharsis, where, for a brief moment, the pain and the guilt and the hopelessness surrounding race in the United States could be shared, wept over, and even laughed at.

Although the film's therapeutic catharsis is meant to be a shared experience, it functions differently for white and black audiences. For the former, it provides a vision of black agency on the screen in a genre where black characters typically exist only to be victimized. In bucking this tradition, *Get Out* draws African American viewers out of the Sunken Place that is a typical moviegoing experience and invites them into the world of the film through their identification with the protagonist. Catharsis for this audience thus stems from seeing a racial avatar survive a scenario that taps into some of their deepest and most diffuse anxieties. For white audiences, on the other hand, catharsis is achieved by drawing viewers into an empathetic relationship with the film's black protagonist so that they, too, begin to feel, viscerally, his paranoia, fear, and tension along with him. Peele explained his hope for the film's impact on white viewers this way:

[T]he power of story is a profound thing. Maybe you get white people coming to see this movie and for 90 minutes they're seeing through the eyes of this black protagonist, and they're not being told what that perspective is, they're feeling what that perspective is, they're going through it. And that's the missing part of the conversation, experiences where you can go and feel and empathize, not just be dictated that "this is what it's like."  
(Nigatu & Clayton)

Peele puts his faith in narrative's power to compel white audiences to see the world through a black person's eyes, but the film is not so naïve as to think such an identification is either simple or inevitable. Indeed, the film even reflects on this aspiration through the person of Jim Hudson, the failed photographer turned blind art dealer who eventually purchases Chris's body at the silent auction.

Chris first meets Jim Hudson during the garden party. After the barrage of explicit racism unleashed by the other guests, the solitary blind man is a breath of fresh, nonracist air. He can't see Chris's skin, but he knows who Chris is, claiming to have had Chris's photographs described to him by his assistant. He praises the young man's keen artistic eye. "You've got something," he remarks, "The images you capture. So brutal, so melancholic. It's powerful stuff, I think." At first blush, these encomiums seem like a welcome reprieve from the crude compliments the other attendees had made about Chris's body. But are Chris's photographs *really* "brutal" and "melancholic"? It's easy for the first-time viewer to forget that they've seen Chris's photographs before, splashed across the screen in quick succession during the film's opening credits as Childish Gambino's funk track "Redbone" plays beneath them. The three black-and-white photographs we see are naturalistic snapshots of African American urban life: a man walking along an empty sidewalk clinging to a bunch of white balloons, a pregnant woman's exposed belly on a street corner, a Rottweiler in an abandoned lot straining on a leash its owner is struggling to rein in. They are scenes of life, and while they evoke themes of solitude, fecundity, and restraint, there is nothing inherently "brutal" or "melancholic" about them. Jim Hudson may be literally blind and may use that biological reality to present himself as also being race-blind, but his assessment of Chris's photographs reveals a distinctive racial tilt to his thinking, since

what he describes to Chris is not the actual content of the pictures but his own internalized projections about the terrible conditions of black life.

If one doubted Jim Hudson's claims to race blindness in his first conversation with Chris, they become even harder to ignore (and stomach) in his second. This brief exchange occurs via teleconference while Chris is bound to a chair in the Armitage's basement, having just learned that his body will soon play host to another mind. Stunned, Chris asks Hudson, "Why us? Why black people?" The art dealer throws up his hands and chuckles. "Who knows?," he says, "People want to change. Some people want to be stronger, faster, cooler. But please don't lump me in with that. I could give a shit what color you are. No. What I want is deeper. I want your eye, man. I want those things you see through." For Hudson, Chris's body holds forth the promise not only of regaining sight but of acquiring an aesthetic gift, too. But this raises the question of whether it is even possible to see beyond race? Chris's photographs, we recall, are all photographs of black life. His artistic eye is already racialized insofar as it is directed towards certain objects and certain themes drawn from a certain kind of historical experience. It is an eye honed by experiences of race. There is no separating race from art, no possibility of color blindness. Hudson will never truly be able to see as Chris sees, because race is so profoundly formative. Chris's aesthetic sensibility is indelibly shaped by his mother's death and by his experience as black person living in a racist society. The very act of deciding what to point his lens at is already, in some sense, racialized. In this final conversation between the two men, we can sense Peele throwing down his own aesthetic gauntlet and declaring that no film, and especially not this one, can be race blind. At the same time, however, *Get Out* is also asking its white audience to do precisely what Jim Hudson claims to want to do: see through Chris's eyes.

The difference lies in the fact that, unlike Hudson, the film insists we see Chris's experience with the full knowledge that to what we are watching is inextricable from the realities of race.

But what lessons can be drawn from *Get Out* for clinicians? Obviously, the film is not didactic, which is to say that its purpose is not to instruct but rather to communicate a kind of social experience rarely represented on film. It implores its white viewers, especially, to bear witness to how centuries of racial violence and the Anglo-European desire for black bodies without black minds continues to inform race relations in our own moment. Peele (Zinoman, 2017) has been blunt about what he sees as the film's driving force: "This movie is [. . .] about how we deal with race. As a black man, sometimes you can't tell if what you're seeing has underlying bigotry, or if it's a normal conversation and you're being paranoid. [. . .] There are still a lot of people who say, 'We don't have a racist bone in our bodies.' But we have to face the racism in ourselves." If, in conclusion, you will permit me to reduce such a complex work of art to a simple maxim for practice, it's this: Get out of my head, but see through my eyes.

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