

**African American Film: How the Gothic Tradition is Utilized
to Expose Racism in *Get Out* and *Night of the Living Dead***

By

Kylee Kinnaird

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirement for the degree of

BACHELOR OF ARTS IN
ENGLISH, HONORS

at the

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHARLOTTE

2019

Racism is an insidious disease that plagues American society, impacting the Black community in nearly every aspect of daily life. The evils of racism are embedded in the foundation of this country; the enslavement and forced labor of African people facilitated the creation of the America that exists today. This discrimination exposes itself through socioeconomic disparities, hate crimes, institutionalized racism, stereotyping, and discrimination on the basis of race. African-American filmmakers have utilized their medium to address the major political and social debates of their era, depicting the lives of Black Americans as saturated by the bigotry that permeates our world through social inequality and racial othering. Mark Reid writes, “African American film is any film whose central narrative explores the life and experience of the African Diaspora in the United States” (1). Horror films have recently dominated the mainstream media as they pave way for the African-American narrative to be showcased and explored. Horror films historically omitted representation of the Black community, disregarding African-American characters unless portrayed in a stereotyped, racist light without a significant role in the film.

Some Black directors have reclaimed horror films by manipulating the gothic tradition to expose racism in a way that impacts the viewer. Gothic tropes are utilized by Black directors to display the anxiety and fear felt by those affected by racial discrimination. Gothic storylines explore an atmosphere of terror that give rise to specific tropes including twisted romances, trembling heroines, gothic male heroes, the supernatural, and the medieval grandiose castle (Bedford 190-3). These tropes are familiar to most, making this format an excellent tool or opportunity to convey the grotesque impacts of a prejudiced America. The execution of the gothic tradition within Black film involves “racial micro-aggressions and ominous signs”

(Zinoman) that scrutinize America's rampant racial discrimination. This thesis will explore the use of gothic devices within African-American horror films which focus on the oppression of the African-American people in modern America.

Gothic horror films historically lack Black representation or promote racist, stereotyped Black characters. In a country that is shaped by the "four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans," (Morrison 5) it is detestable that nondiscriminatory depictions of this community are, or have been previously, difficult to find within the gothic. Toni Morrison has discussed "responses to a dark, abiding signing Africanist presence" within the gothic genre. The defamation and vilification of the Black presence helped to define and contrast the "whiteness" which was thus truly "American" in the eyes of white authors (9). This inherit racism infiltrated the gothic for hundreds of years; it included "internal aggression, evil, sin, and greed" in the description of the "slave population" (38). Ultimately, the monstrosity projected onto Black characters in our history is inherently problematic; "characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular 'Americanness'" (5). The racism which plagues this nation's literary history encourages and justifies discriminatory acts. Repossessing this genre to dispel stereotypes and expose the ridiculousness of bigotry is vitally heroic.

Gothic conventions have been used in many texts belonging to the African-American community. Slave narratives utilized the gothic to display the "excessive brutality" (Bodzioc 256) inflicted upon the enslaved. Joseph Bodzioc describes how the gothic served as a tool meant to deconstruct the racist stereotypes associated with enslaved African Americans. He analyzes Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* to contextualize the "Gothic Other" in the "slave-holding" perspective (255). The Black character within this narrative is firstly portrayed as the "dark Other" (256) to pay homage to the orthodox racial other. This is

then deflected and deconstructed by pointing out the true “other”- the violent and evil aggressor which is the white slaveowner. Within these narratives the slaveowner was often linked to “[s]atan, and in more particular terms...the serpent” (259). Placing the white oppressor into the position of the dark other allows the reader to understand the “moral truth about slaveowners” (261). Douglass’s previous “self-demonizing” (261) characterization of himself mocks the ridiculous prejudiced views of his oppressors and exposes the cruelties of slavery. Douglass’s narrative is evidence of the influence of the gothic tradition; wielding its tropes and manipulating its conventional connotations is a revolutionary instrument in divulging the filth of a racist world.

The unavoidable, uncontained hatred and violence that blankets racism is sometimes exhibited through the “lack of cleanliness or health” of the abject (Kristeva 232). Julia Kristeva coined “abjection” as “what disturbs identity, system, order” (232). The primal fear that is evoked at the sight of a corpse is considered “abject” as humans are faced with the inevitability of death. Kristeva writes, “corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (231). The fragility of life is unavoidable when confronted with the corpse or the repulsive elements associated with death (231). The abject can be utilized as an essential vessel which reveals the depravity of racism. The brutality inflicted upon African-American people can lead to experiences of the abject, and images of this desolation most certainly give rise to feelings of “repugnance” and “disgust” (238). These abject phantasmagorias infect the tales of bigotry, Gothicizing these narratives forcefully. Brandishing the abject has allowed Black directors or Black authors to describe racism for what it is: “intolerable” (238) and “sickening” (231).

Homi Bhabha describes the fickleness of time; it is a “restless movement” that forces social constructions to morph and bend to their particular time period (1). Racism is revealed in a

plethora of ways that are suitable to the social expectations of the specific time period they exist within. Bhabha considers how forcing one race or culture into a new world, demanding assimilation yet expressing repulsion by their dissimilarities, inevitably places the marginalized group into a position of otherness defined by “the overlap and displacement of domains of difference” (2). “Slavery itself, is a process of displacement and disjunction” that cannot totally define a group of people yet haunts the history of Black Americans indefinitely. African American lives are still impacted by slavery; oppressed Black Americans are demonized for their differences and yet are told they can never assimilate to become a part of the white community as an ongoing consequence of racist colonial mindsets. Understanding Bhabha’s concepts will allow me to contextualize racism through different periods in the United States, as the films I am discussing premiered over fifty years apart from one another. I will also build upon his theory to explain the detrimental consequences of a nation that is founded upon racial violence and oppression. Bhabha describes the ways the tragic history of slavery impacts modern Black Americans, and I will discuss this within my analysis of the films.

Racism as a topic is looming, overwhelming, delicate, and complex. Addressing such a subject is an undertaking unsuitable for the dispassionate. Black films have championed tackling this theme through horrifying gothic tales. In this thesis, I will explore two groundbreaking films which employ the gothic tradition to demonstrate the devastating consequences of racial discrimination against the African-American community. I will begin by discussing *Night of the Living Dead*, a film that uses gothic devices in a more traditional way while tracking an African-American man named Ben and his attempt to survive in a zombie apocalypse with a white woman called Barbara. *Night of the Living Dead* is categorized as “black oriented film” because it is a “black-focused film whose directors and screenwriters are nonblack” (Reid 1). I will also

focus on the film *Get Out* (2017), a psychological horror picture which follows Chris Washington's grotesque experience as he visits his Caucasian girlfriend's family. *Get Out* is directed by an African-American man, making this a work of "*African American film*" which "refers only to films directed, written, or cowritten by members of this community" (Reid 1).

Night of the Living Dead is an older film than *Get Out*, yet they share many Gothic devices that have not been explored in great detail. These films each reflect the social turmoil that existed during the time of each film's creation. I will investigate how the manipulation of gothic devices in each of these films helps to expose the harsh realities that result from racial discrimination; separated by over fifty years the films are contrasted by overt versus covert racism. By studying these movies, I will discuss how white entities project their monstrosity onto the Black presence within the films through the use of gothic devices. *Night of the Living Dead* relies upon more conventional tropes that access themes of racism. The house within this film is an obvious example of a psychologized landscape, and it can be connected with upfront, overt racism. The ending, where Ben is shot and killed by a group of white men who mistake him as zombie, is filled with grotesque imagery plainly connected to racism. *Get Out* is saturated with themes of the repressed; the white characters attempt to disguise their bigotry with various covertly racist remarks. A psychologized landscape and secret space within the Gothicized house become key in illustrating the impacts of the stifled prejudices lying beneath the surface of the white characters. The trembling heroine, which is commonly found within the gothic tradition, is manipulated in the film. The white girlfriend is not placed as the trembling heroine but as the monster who preys upon her African-American boyfriend. The grotesque imagery is only used when the truth of racism emerges, expressing the brutality inflicted upon Black Americans throughout history. The white characters portray a façade of acceptance that is shattered by the

film's conclusion, giving rise to the destruction caused by stereotyping and intolerance. There are several differences between the execution of the gothic within each film, marked by the time period which they were created.

Night of the Living Dead

Night of the Living Dead, released in 1968, provides fascinating social commentary as the film follows the survival of a Black man and a white woman during a zombie apocalypse. The film incorporates gothic tropes that work to reveal the truly terrifying storyline of being Black in America, especially during a period filled with political and social changes generated by the Civil Rights Movement. Though George A. Romero, the film's director, claims he did not intend the film to be about race, the picture provides deeply impactful imagery and dialogue that works to reveal the racial strife permeating the world during this time. The gothic tropes intertwined within the plot are used in a more conventional manner, effortlessly displaying the dangers of being Black in a racially discriminatory world. The film concludes with Ben being murdered by a group of white men, leaving viewers to consider the heartbreaking realities of a racially violent and prejudiced America.

News reports throughout the film consist of startling messages that invoke racial violence and tension infiltrating the realities of society at this time. Bodzioc's description of the dark other is utilized within the film as the reporters other the zombies just as the African-American people were, and continue to be, othered. One reporter describes the zombies as "ordinary-looking people, misshapen monsters, people who look like they're in a trance, and creatures that look like people but behave like animals." These shockingly abject descriptions of the zombies are reminiscent of the phrases used to describe Black citizens by racist news reporters. In 1880,

the *Atlanta Constitution* published articles entitled "The Triple Trapeze: Three Negroes Hung to a Limb of a Tree" and "Two Minutes to Pray Before a Rope Dislocated Their Vertebrae" (Pinsky). The dehumanization of the Black community is perpetuated by these news sources, justifying and encouraging racial violence. The ease with which the murder of Black citizens is described within these articles is disturbingly similar to the reporter's descriptions of zombies within the film. The Sheriff also says, "if you have a gun, shoot them in the head. That's a sure way to kill them. If you don't, get yourself a club or torch. Beat them or burn them. They go up pretty easy." These comments are nearly identical to the dialogue used before and within the Civil Rights era to promote the violence that ensued against the Black community. In 1919, a group of Black sharecroppers met to create a union to help end low wages and labor exploitation. Governor Charles Brough ordered troops to disrupt the union and to "shoot to kill any negro who refused to surrender immediately" (Uenuma). Hundreds of Black citizens were murdered, followed by the *Arkansas Democrat's* newspaper report that stated the Black union was a "deliberately planned insurrection of the negroes against the whites" (Uenuma). The newspaper justified these murders and encouraged the ongoing pursuit of violence against the Black community. Because the main character in the film is a Black man, the viewer is forced to consider how these violent messages directed towards the disgusting, horrifying zombies are also disturbingly similar to those used to describe African Americans. The film allows Ben to embrace the role of the dark other by making obvious parallels between him and the zombies to reveal that the inhuman qualities used to describe Black Americans are simply the reflection of the bigoted perpetrators.

The trembling heroine, or woman who is in need of rescue, is a major component of what engenders suspense and horror within the gothic tradition. Barbara, the trembling white woman,

requires protection throughout the course of the plot as she struggles to survive through this unexpected zombie apocalypse. She is represented as the victimized white woman, a stereotype often depicted in novels and film. Her virtuosity and pureness acts as a stark contrast to the decaying, grotesque zombies that prey upon her. Most prominently, her whiteness displays an even starker contrast to her Black hero, Ben. Morrison describes the tropes found throughout America's literary history in relation to the white response to Black characters. Morrison explains that in Poe's work, "images of the white curtain and the 'shrouded human figure' with skin 'the perfect whiteness of the snow' both occur after the narrative has encountered blackness.... Both are figurations of impenetrable whiteness that surface in American literature whenever an Africanist presence is engaged" (32-33). Barbara's innocence is connected to her whiteness, clearly contrasted by her Black savior, Ben. The root of Barbara's fear is never made explicitly clear, leaving viewers to wonder whether she is afraid of the zombies or her Black hero. Ben's virtuosity and impeccable leadership skills paint him in a positive light, mocking the white characters who seem to doubt or fear him within the film. *Night of the Living Dead* manipulates the tropes Morrison identified as being the root of American literature, tropes that are racist and dangerous. Viewers are forced to speculate upon the root of Barbara's fear while understanding that Ben is a virtuous entity who should not be feared. Jordan Peele comments on how this film inspired *Get Out* by saying, "all social norms break down when this event happens and a black man is caged up in a house with a white woman who is terrified. But you're not sure how much she's terrified at the monsters on the outside or this man on the inside who is now the hero" (Zimmerman). The film demonstrates goodness and virtue are not limited to white culture, thus liberating the audience from possible previous biases and mocking the racist portrayals of the African presence which so often plagued American literature. Audiences are able to see that

trembling white women are not always victims, and their assuming Black men to be predators is unacceptable and inaccurate.

Ben personifies the male hero that is a significant aspect of the gothic tradition. The demonization of Black men is refuted as he heroically works to keep Barbara and the rest of the relevant white characters safe from the impending doom of zombies. Ben is oftentimes challenged by the other white characters within the film, but his intelligence and resourcefulness make him the ultimate leader. His survival skills seem almost intrinsic to his character, harkening back to the necessity of obtaining survival skills while being Black in America. His heroic qualities are intimately reliant upon his understanding of the gothic world surrounding him, one he recognizes because he daily faces the gothic realities that result from being a victim of racial discrimination. Ben is able to navigate through this terrifying zombie apocalypse as it is not much different from the dangers generated by racial violence and oppression directed towards the African-American people. He protects the white trembling heroine within the film rather than preying upon her. At one point, Ben is forced to slap Barbara out of her hysteria, a shocking scene that would have evoked a wide range of emotions from viewers. The necessity and innocent intentions behind this slap are what makes this scene the most important, as the only *violence* ever directed towards Barbara by the Ben is that which is needed to protect her. His heroism and leadership permeates the plot as he bravely works to protect the trembling heroine along with the other white characters in the film. Ben's goodness is undeniable, breaking down racist labels and depictions in a way that simultaneously reveals what it is like to be a Black individual living in a racist America.

The gothic home is another prevalent gothic trope manipulated in the film to display the horrifying threats generated by being Black in a discriminatory America; the uncleanly, decaying

structure of the home is a direct reflection of the racial tension lurking within the confines of the home. The racially derived tension between the characters is reflected by the home's appearance as the traditional bliss associated with the domestic setting is annihilated by racism. Ultimately, the racial tension perpetuated by the characters Gothicizes the home into a setting of horror. The bulk of the film plays out within a boarded-up house meant to prevent zombies from entering. A tension between races is apparent yet never directly addressed. Being trapped within a home where the white occupants depend upon a Black man for survival evokes fear from these occupants. Much of the film focuses on the pushback spawned by Henry Cooper, a white man also trapped within the home who is unsettled by Ben fulfilling a position of authority. The Gothicized house also presents an element of domestic life, one where Henry seems to believe his whiteness intrinsically entitles him to be the leader. He is the only character who has a last name, once again pointing out the domestic heritage of whiteness that discredits the truly heroic leader, Ben. Henry seems to believe that he is entitled to a position of authority even though Ben is the man who executed the physical labor that provides protection to the occupants of the home. This dynamic is reminiscent of white citizens who force labor onto African Americans, such as in times of slavery, yet credit themselves with the work and receive recognition.

Although Ben is the ultimate protector of the home, it is clear that his presence is rejected as he feels unsettled within the domestic setting so often associated with whiteness. Ben is the only Black individual within the home, once again placing him into the position of the gothic other. He is forced into the home as it is the only "safe" area to retreat to in this zombified apocalypse. Ben is taken away from the safety of a community of African Americans and forced into a gothic home filled with terrified Caucasian individuals. The themes presented in *Night of the Living Dead* build upon Homi Bhabha's theories, incorporating "a process of displacement

and disjunction that does not totalize experience” (5). Ben must reside within the gothic home and work tirelessly to ensure the safety of himself and the white characters; yet he is still rejected by Henry Cooper as he is indefinitely othered because of his Blackness.

The home is not only Gothicized by the impending doom of zombies but by the anger and fear projected by Henry, his family, and Barbara. Bodzioc has described the myth of the southern garden which was found in slave narratives. The film utilizes the domestic setting of a home occupied by Henry, the demanding and authoritative white man, to show that white culture does not always equate to domestic bliss. Henry is often volatile and lacks the leadership skills connected to Ben’s character. Bodzioc’s explanation of the destabilization of the perfect southern garden is displayed here when domestic life itself is ultimately disturbed by the monstrous white oppressor Henry and the eventual intrusion of a murderous white mob.

The secret space within the Gothicized home ultimately reveals the vicious, unceasing racism that existed during this time period. A major conflict throughout the film involved Ben and Henry arguing about whether or not the cellar was a suitable location to seek shelter during the zombie invasion. Ben believes that the cellar is a death trap, saying “get the hell down in the cellar,” in response to Henry’s demands followed by “[y]ou can be the boss down there. I’m the boss up here.” This statement is symbolic of the racial tension and racial dynamics permeating the real world during this time. While Ben continuously worked to ensure the protection of himself and the people within the house, he gained a sense of justified respect and power. Henry clearly resents the idea of a Black man wielding a position of authority, and wishes to delve into the hidden space of the home that is representative of the hidden spaces in America that allow his racial privilege to dominate and brutalize Ben. The cellar within the gothic home is the secret space where America’s racial violence and discrimination is able to flourish without punishment.

The secret space of the gothic home is where Ben meets his demise that is a result of his racial othering. The secret space within this film gives rise to abject violence that is the result of racial discrimination. Ben is the last survivor, though he fought relentlessly for the protection of the other fallen characters. His instinctual survival skills preserved his life during this zombie invasion; these are skills that Barbara and the rest of the white characters lacked due to their racial privilege. Eventually, Ben is forced to retreat into the cellar of the gothic home; he finally enters the secret space that he adamantly avoided throughout the duration of the film. Here, a group of white men consisting of civilians and police officers arrive, meant to rescue Ben from the gothic flood of the murderous living dead. They shoot Ben between the eyes and say, “[t]hat’s another one for the fire.” The heroic Black leader, Ben, is killed without hesitation. The blatant disregard and ease with which they murder him is chilling, sending a message that powerful Black leaders are often brutally murdered by white oppressors. Ben is carried to the fire to be burned amongst the living dead with hooks placed into his flesh. The abject ending of this scene is a consequence of Ben entering the secret space of the home—the place in which America’s racial violence runs rampant. Kristeva’s definition of abjection saturates the concluding scene as Ben’s demise is disturbingly violent. Kristeva writes, “the abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*” (230). She also describes the corpse as “upset[ing] even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance” (231). Ben’s corpse is penetrated with meat hooks and dragged into a pile of the rotting death, evoking a sense of repulsion associated with the abject. These images are essential components to the film’s racial undertones, depicting the abject “defilement” (231) of a racially violent America. The opposition to the self and the fragility of the body is depicted here to demonstrate the devastating and unnatural consequences of bigotry.

Night of the Living Dead is a powerful film that casts a Black man as the main character, a man that is also depicted as a heroic leader. Though the film does not directly address racism, the gothic tropes facilitate a message that translates the dangers of racism within the United States. Because the film was created during the Civil Rights Movement and was directed by a white man, the topic of racism is never outright addressed as speaking negatively about bigotry during this time was less acceptable. Even so, the gothic tropes unveil the overt, plainly obvious racism that was flagrant during the period of the film's creation.

Get Out

Get Out is a revolutionary film that works to expose the racism that still exists within modern America. This film combines the tropes often associated with the gothic tradition with themes relevant to race to demonstrate the fundamentally gothic experience of living in a world that directly and systematically discriminates against you based upon race. *Get Out* centers around a white family that forcefully performs neurological surgeries that place the brain of a white person into the body of an African American. The film boldly calls out the racism that impacts today's society: covert racism that takes the form of suppressed stereotypes that loom beneath the surface of falsely tolerant Caucasian citizens. Although less obvious, this covert racism is filled with the learned hatred that dates back centuries.

Jordan Peele is director whose passion, integrity, and determination to reform a racially-biased society permeate his films. Much of Peele's work is creatively innovative, and it focuses on political and social issues relevant to the world he observes around him. His films work as commentaries on the sensitive race issues that many ignore or claim no longer exist in modern society. Peele eloquently stated in an interview that "[s]ociety is the scariest monster"

(Zinoman). Peele brandishes the gothic tradition to express this fear, incorporating the anxiety and horror associated with being the only African American in a house full of Caucasian people; as Peele claims “the white liberal elite who communicates that ‘we’re not racist in any way’ is as much of the problem as anything else” (Zimmerman).

Racial othering works to ostracize or demonize a character or group; often times this demonization is reliant upon the character or group belonging to a racial minority. *Get Out* utilizes the element of racial othering to illuminate the dangers which arise as a result of being Black in America. The film manipulates the traditional reactions to the Black presence within American literature as described by Morrison. Typically, the virtuosity and pureness of whiteness is described in contrast to the introduction of the “darkness” (37) of a Black character. *Get Out* is imbedded with white reactions to Black presence, yet these reactions are filled with violence that ultimately reveal the monstrosity of white oppressors.

At the beginning of the film, a Black man named “Andre” is shown speaking on the phone as he wanders alone at night in a suburban neighborhood, experiencing the fear associated with being othered in a white community. He divulges his location to the person on the phone, commenting on the inherent whiteness of the suburb where he finds himself. Andre says, “I’m out here like a sore thumb” in reference to feeling otherized in the “creepy confusing-ass suburbs.” Moments later, Andre is strangled by an individual in a black helmet and forced into the padded trunk of their car. This gripping, disturbing scene symbolizes the grotesque consequences of othering and demonizing Black Americans by visually displaying the horror and violence inflicted onto this othered group. Andre feels ostracized in a community that is predominately white, fear building within him as he knows his race puts him in a vulnerable

position. He acknowledges the role that has been forced onto him through societal stereotypes, and his fears of being otherized are confirmed when he is kidnapped by a white man.

The anxiety induced by acknowledging the role of the racial other is demonstrated through Chris Washington's apprehensions of meeting his Caucasian partner's family. His girlfriend, Rose, reassures him that they are not racist and that her father "would've legit voted for Obama a third time if he could've." This temporarily eases his fears, yet he still remains on guard as he acknowledges the role of the dark other which will ensue as he enters the home of an all-white family. As the couple nears the family home, Chris begins to be othered by the white community in the area. The couple encounters a police officer who demands to see Chris's license. It is clear that the officer is profiling and othering Chris because of his race. These scenes display the hypocrisy of bigoted white Americans who demand African American assimilation into white culture yet still cast them as "their projections of 'otherness'" (Bhabha 12).

Chris is instantly othered by the family through disturbing, destabilizing comments that arise as reactions to his race. Rose's father, Dean, says "I know what you're thinking. White family; black servants. Total cliché." He claims that there is no racism involved in this paradigm and that he "would've voted for Obama a third term." As this is the second time Chris is informed of the family's enthusiasm for Obama's presidency, it is clear that film is pointing out the absurdity of relying upon the support of a singular African American to express their apparent total lack of racial discrimination. The blaring inappropriateness of immediately introducing a topic revolving around one Black person to relate to another Black person intentionally evokes palpable discomfort. Dean's insistence on not being racist and his justification of having African-American "servants" places the Black characters into the position

of the gothic other. He points out their dissimilarities in a disrupting manner as he attempts to rationalize having Black servants. This ultimately serves as a justification and perpetuation of the very apparent racial power structures that have previously existed and continue to exist. Dean realizes that Chris can recognize the racism that is presented by this racial power dynamic, therefore Dean's comments are not only futile but are conveyed as racial microaggressions that have resulted from this racial tension. The family initiates awkward conversations that together serve to other Chris. Rose's brother, Jeremy, insists on discussing sports. He asks Chris if he is interested in street fighting while nearly shouting, "With your frame, your genetic make-up? If you pushed your body, I mean really trained, you'd be a fucking beast." This statement focuses on the physical differences of Chris's race. The inappropriateness of this comment is made acceptable by the white figure's "authorized power" and "privilege" (Bhabha 2). Jeremy is seemingly unaware of how discriminatory his statements are, as he believes he is complimenting Chris by pointing out his physical "advantages." Chris has been relocated from the community that he is safe within as he is targeted for being in the racial minority of the home. He is othered by the family's attempt to mask their bigotry with remarks that ultimately participate in the "fetishism of identities" that are described by Bhabha. This fetishization is dangerous as it demeans Chris's humanity and reduces him to a symbol of physicality. Jeremy neglects to recognize the complexity of Chris's Black identity that has been shaped by histories of oppression and racial violence as he simply associates Chris's Blackness with athleticism.

The white community within this town other Chris by pointing out many physical characteristics of Chris that they believe are attributed to his race. The comments are loudly inappropriate as they fetishize and other the single Black person within the home. One guest says, "Fairer skin has been in favor the first couple of hundreds of years, but the pendulum has

swung back again hasn't it? Black is in fashion!" This comment is clearly dangerous as it suggests race is a "fashion" trend, ignoring centuries of violence and oppression endured by the African-American community. Another woman feels his bicep, then asks "So is it true? The love making. Is it better?" The constant fetishization of the Black body is apparent throughout the film. Though the guests seem oblivious to the dangers of this racist mindset, the viewer is expected to understand the threats which will impact Chris later in the film. When it is later revealed that the party is evaluating Chris's physicality to determine if they would like to inherit his body by replacing his brain with their own, we understand just *how* dangerous this mentality is. Jordan Peele points out that America as a nation often claims we "don't have a racist bone in our bodies" (Zimmerman), but the gothic elements of this film reveal that this is not necessarily true. Tolerance of racial minorities may exist within our modern world, but the otherization within this film allows the viewer to understand that romanticizing the bodies of African Americans while simultaneously insulting their intellect is absolutely discriminatory and racist. The unceasing othering of the Black characters within the movie is a compelling gothic trope that assists in revealing the distress and fear evoked from covertly racist remarks that ultimately lead to far darker, deadlier outcomes.

The Black characters within the film fulfill the role of the dark other, embodying the dreadful or grotesque images associated with being a demonized entity. Georgina, the African-American woman which works for the family, oftentimes evokes discomfort throughout the film. Her blank stares, unnerving smiles, and tendency to appear suddenly allows the character to participate in "embracing the role of the dark Other" (Bodzioc 255). Walter, another Black employee of the family, acts as the dark other in a few alarming scenes. Chris encounters Walter as he is running swiftly through the dark of night. The oddity of this moment reverberates

throughout the movie, causing panic to overtake the viewer. When Andre, the man who was abducted at the start of the movie, returns he also personifies the dark Other by behaving oddly. At one point, Andre rushes towards Chris in an anxiety-inducing scene. The white characters apologize for Andre's behavior, othering and blaming him in a way that makes him appear as a monstrous entity. Towards the end of the film we discover that Rose's family abducts African Americans in order to perform neurological procedures to replace their brain with that of a white person's while inheriting the Black individual's body. This conclusion determines that the previous otherization of the Black character has "a peculiar retributive content to it" (Bodzioc 255). Bodzioc explains that casting African Americans into the role of the dark other is a trope utilized in slave narratives to reflect the true monstrosity of the white oppressor to reveal the "human betrayal" (256) of racial violence. The grotesque behavior of the Black character is solely reliant upon the monstrosity of the white character's racial violence. To be quite literal, the grotesque behavior of the Black character is caused by the white person's brain that is now within their body. The white characters are directly responsible for the Black character's representation as the dark other within this film, which reveals the danger of racism within our real modern-day world.

The twisted romance is a trope associated with the gothic tradition. It involves a dangerous romantic relationship where one member preys upon the other. Conventionally the woman fulfills the role of the prey, the trembling heroine, and requires rescue from a male hero that is outside of the relationship. Peele manipulates the traditional trembling heroine that is so often found within the gothic genre to facilitate the exposure of racism and demonstrate the dangers of assuming white women always fall victim to Black men. Rose is not the trembling heroine in this film but rather the monster that preys upon her African-American boyfriend. In a

sense, Chris fulfills the role of the heroine as he desperately seeks salvation from the evil family he has been entrapped by. Throughout the film, Rose portrays herself a progressive individual who believes in equality. When the police officer asks to view Chris's registration, Rose quickly defends him and shames the clearly racially provoked discrimination of the officer. She even remarks to Chris that she is "not going to let anyone mess with my man." Rose also deflects the racist comments of her family several times throughout the duration of the film, claiming that she is shocked by their discomforting behavior. It is revealed that Rose specifically chose Chris to prey upon due to his physical fitness which she attributes to his "racial makeup." Chris is the victim within the film, revealing that his race is his ultimate vulnerability in a racially violent world. During Chris's entrapment, it is shown that Rose is scouring the internet for her next victim. Specifically, Rose is viewing a college basketball page for potential African-American male targets. Her monstrosity ultimately puts her into the position of the antagonist, oppressing and abusing African Americans in a way that can only be achieved through her own racial privilege.

Chris is also victimized by another female antagonist who uses her racial privilege to dominate and brutalize him into a position of vulnerability. Rose's mother, Missy, is a psychiatrist who forces Chris to participate in hypnosis, claiming this would cure him of a smoking addiction. While inducing hypnotherapy, she prompts Chris to speak of the traumatic death of his mother which occurred during childhood. She then tells him to "sink" into a place that is coined as the *sunken place*. The *sunken place* is later utilized to paralyze Chris so that the family is able to ensnare him to accomplish their horrifying procedure. This scene incorporates a glimpse of the supernatural, a common theme associated with the gothic. When Chris finds himself within this state, he loses control completely and is forced to lie lifeless at the command

of Missy. She asserts her control and dominance over Chris, wielding her race as a weapon of superiority. His actions are thus governed by the white woman who is imposing her will upon him. Once more, revising these roles is a key component in demonstrating the threat of being Black in America, ultimately placing African Americans into the position of the heroine that requires rescue.

Chris occupies the role of the trembling heroine as well as that of the male hero. Despite being preyed upon by the traditionally victimized white woman, Chris is able to save himself by relying on the survival skills acquired from being targeted daily due to racial discrimination. Though Rose does not occupy the role of the heroine, she also is not the savior. Chris is forced to save himself from the evils of racial violence once more. In Chris's attempt to avoid being hypnotized while tied up in the family basement, he stuffs cotton into his ears to avoid hearing the sound that would force him to become paralyzed. Chris's quick thinking and instinctual survival skills are activated as he fights for his life. The cotton that is placed within his ears is ironic. The enslavement and forced labor of African Americans in this nation's history closely involves working on cotton fields. Chris utilizing cotton to aid his survival suggests that African Americans can be their own saviors and heroes within a racist world as they find empowerment in their history of overcoming oppression and racial violence. Chris's constant paranoia about the racism of this family is his ultimate lifesaver as he calls upon the survival skills obtained from years of facing discrimination. After Chris escapes from the home, he is again hunted by Rose as she wields a gun. Walter, one of the Black victims of the family, charges Chris in order to kill him. Chris remembers that his phone light triggers a reaction that brings the Black character out of the *sunken place* and into understanding the reality of what is taking place. Upon his awakening, Walter turns the gun around and shoots Rose, then himself. Walter becomes Chris's

savior, once again creating a hero that is an African American. Finally, Chris's best friend Rod arrives to drive Chris to safety. Heroizing the Black characters of the film is an important move. By manipulating the gothic tropes of the trembling heroine and male hero, the viewer is able to conclude that although Blackness is a vulnerability in a historically and currently racist world, African Americans are ultimately their own saviors. The hardships of centuries of oppression ultimately provide the African-American people with the strength to persevere and override their oppressors in a way that Bhabha coins as the "migrant act of survival" (7).

The Gothicized home is a prevalent aspect of the Gothic genre; the grotesquery of the home is a product of the evils of its inhabitants. The home often involves secret spaces that contain dark, suppressed familial secrets. This film incorporates these elements to unveil the insidious truth hidden behind the family's culturally aware exterior. *Night of the Living Dead* incorporates a gothic home that also houses a singular Black man amongst all-white occupants, yet the characters within this older film do not directly address race as the family in *Get Out* express so candidly. The home in *Night of the Living Dead* does not mirror the Edenic landscape as the home is set amongst decaying, dead ghouls. This older film manipulates the gothic home to show that racism was much more apparent and overt during the time period, whereas *Get Out* manipulates the beauty of an Edenic home to demonstrate that suppressed racism is more common in modern-day America. The family home within the film mirrors the Edenic paradise that was that was often connected with the southern garden during times of slavery. The home sits upon rolling green land with lush gardens, appearing charmingly pristine. The beauty of the home mimics the outward acceptance and love which the family deceitfully emanates. Frederick Douglass involves this trope within his slave narrative in a way that "indicates a mythic place has been corrupted. The garden, then, in spite of its bounty, is quite unnatural" (Bodzioc 258).

Upon entering the home and delving into its depths, this myth is debunked in the film. Once again, Peele brandishes this trope to demonstrate the racism that still permeates American society despite it being less apparent than previous time periods. The covertness of the major racism that still exists today is what ultimately allows the use of secret space to be a suitable symbol.

The horror of the film emerges when Chris discovers a secret space within Rose's bedroom that is filled with the sinister truth of the family's intentions. He finds a collection of pictures that capture Rose posing adjacent to many Black individuals, smiling lovingly at the camera. Some of these photos include Georgina and Walter, the oddly behaving Black "servants" that Chris has been skeptical of previously in the film. The menacing motives of the family are slowly unpacked within the incorporation of the first, smaller, secret space. Rose's false love and acceptance aimed towards Chris are debunked as her secret space is discovered. The secret space is representative of Rose's fetishization of African Americans as she utilizes her seemingly innocent exterior to bury the ugliness of her true, manipulative, menacing intentions. This secret space is much smaller than the one which is revealed next, inciting a plethora of violent scenes.

The largest secret space of the home is the underground wing that gives rise to racial violence and mutilation. This hidden space is representative of the concealed prejudice and violent bigotry that lies beneath the surface of this family's exterior. The family uses the secret wing of the home to perform their neurological procedure to mar and mutilate African Americans. Chris is tied to a chair and forced to listen to a tape that explains the horrors which he will soon face if he does not find a way to escape. The video includes images of the beautiful, peaceful home surround by a manicured lawn and the sound of birds singing. Rose's grandparents, specifically her grandfather Roman, speaks to the camera. Roman directs his comments to the entrapped Chris saying, "You were chosen because of the physical advantages

you've enjoyed your entire life. I'm certain that with your natural gifts and our determination we'll soon both be a part of something greater. Something perfect." He follows this bold statement with "Save your strength. Don't try to fight it. You can't stop the inevitable." Within the secret passage of the home the true purpose of Chris's visit is revealed. The dark, abject intentions of the family have been hidden by smiling faces and false acceptance. Generations of racist mindsets are preserved here, enlivened by the video of the grandparents that epitomize their fetishization and bigotry. Roman's statements suggest that he believes his horrifying procedure is not harmful as he judges he is simply combining the physical advantages of a Black person with the intellectual superiority of a white person. This obviously bigoted mindset conveys the grotesquery of suppressed stereotypes. Peele explains that Black minds matter, using the concept of secret space to explicate this notion. Roman's final suggestion to "not fight ... the inevitable" is also a startling statement that insinuates the dangers of racism are unavoidable. The otherized African American tied to a chair within the secret space of the home is a visual representation of the fear felt by the African American people as they are oppressed by rampant, covert discrimination.

The entirety of the film avoids the use of violence until the secret space is revealed. This meticulous, intentional incorporation of violence is reminiscent of the historical and contemporary brutality inflicted upon the African-American community, violence that is often denied in modern America as it resides in the secret spaces of society. Chris is able to escape through the use of violence, allowing for a justified, empoweringly retributive conclusion.

Get Out also utilizes the traditional gothic trope of the mad scientist, a trope that relies on an evil entity performing violent procedures on unwilling victims with the purpose of producing harm. This family forces their neurological procedure onto the Black victims in a way that

reveals the detrimental impacts of racist mindsets that leads to images associated with abjection. The brutality and violence of the procedure evokes sensations within the viewer that depicts the true detriment of racism; abjection is directly associated with these racially violent descriptions as the gore and fragility of humanity is revealed to the viewer in a way that threatens the safety of all of humanity. Jim, the man whose brain is meant to be placed into Chris's body, lies within the secret space of the home in the makeshift operating room. His head is cut in a circular motion, exposing his brain. This gory, unsettling image is linked to Kristeva's theory of abjection, images which disturb "identity, system, order" (232). The togetherness and pureness earlier projected by white characters is disassembled as the scene utilizes the abject to reveal the "immoral, sinister, scheming" (232) intentions of Rose and her family. The bed beside Jim is meant for Chris, foreshadowing the sickening violence that will soon be forcefully inflicted upon him, reminiscent of the violence often inflicted onto the African-American people.

The immoral, sinister beliefs of the family demand Chris to defend himself with equal amounts of forceful violence. His retaliation involves bashing in Jeremy's skull, piercing Dean with the horns of a deer, and stabbing Missy. These images are filled with decay and gruesome death that provoke heart-stopping astonishment. The grotesque scenes that are initiated by the secret space, or the exposure of dangerous discrimination, promote the message that violence is inevitable within the parameters of bigoted hatred that is often fermenting within the souls of American citizens. The violence within the scenes exposes the fragility of humankind, promoting peace and the destruction of racism. Internalized intolerance is certain to evoke violence, that of which is destructive to the foundation of humanity. Connecting the secret space of the home to the suppressed racism that results in violence serves as a warning; America's modern

internalized racism results in detrimental violence, just as the overt racism of the past resulted in violence. Modern covert racism is equally dangerous to historical overt racism.

Get Out does not shy away from addressing racism, innovatively wielding traditional gothic tropes in ways that help to expose the covert racism plaguing America's society. The film is more direct than *Night of the Living Dead*, as each film is a testament to the time in which they were created. *Night of the Living Dead* relies on the conventional tropes associated with the gothic while *Get Out* manipulates and distorts them to prove racism is infectious, learned, destructive, and ever-present within modern-day America.

Conclusion

Black directors and actors have successfully and innovatively wielded their medium to create impactful, educational, revolutionary films that display the detrimental impacts of the rampant racial discrimination which permeates American society. The incorporation of the gothic tradition within these works is appropriate as the experience of being Black in America is inherently gothic. The Gothicized treatment of African Americans is creatively and impactfully displayed through these films, pointing out the flaws of a country saturated with bigotry. Black directors like Peele create works that encourage the obliteration of mindsets and institutions that allow flourishing bigotry to seep into the cracks of America's foundation. The American education system oftentimes excludes teaching about the tumultuous, empowering, and heartbreaking history of African Americans. These films are able to reach mainstream audiences, educating and celebrating a culture founded in overcoming oppression that otherwise may not be made known through the American public curriculum. The films positively portray Black characters and demonstrate the tenacity and resolution obtained from experiencing years of

oppression. They are heroic, resourceful, and determined to survive and improve the world that they live in for the betterment of society as a whole. *Get Out* and *Night of the Living Dead* depict the destruction of a racially violent world. The manipulation of gothic tropes within these films perfectly displays and confirms the dangers of bigotry and its inevitable violence. Humanity's very foundation is threatened and undermined when humans are treated as lesser beings, leading to outrage and violence.

The othering of Black characters within these films helps to demonstrate the African-American experience. Othering based on race is immoral and dangerous as this encourages and justifies violence and oppression to be inflicted onto the othered group. *Night of the Living Dead* connects the othering of the zombies to the othering of African Americans who also are brutalized and murdered. *Get Out* shows that othering Black Americans often times reveals itself through covertly racist remarks, yet these remarks are equally dangerous as they lead to deadly, destructive outcomes.

The gothic home is incorporated in *Get Out* and *Night of the Living Dead* to reveal that domestic bliss is not limited to white culture. The gothic qualities permeating the domestic settings of both films are direct results of the white character's fear or oppression directed towards the Black character. Secret space within these films represents the populations of Americans whose oppressed lives are ignored and forgotten by elitists or racially privileged citizens. These hidden spaces also represent the areas created in America that allow unjustified brutality inflicted upon African Americans to occur without consequence. The denial and avoidance of addressing dangerous harbored stereotypes and racial discrimination encourages these violent acts to continue. The secret space of America is the historically learned hatred that blankets racism, allowing for the continuation of oppression that maintains racial inequality and

encourages heinous racial violence. The existence of this space is often denied by many white individuals, but these films explain that white privilege exists and allows for this violence to withstand time.

The film's exploration of the trembling heroine depicts the stereotype of the virtuous white woman. American society tends to victimize white women and illustrate them as objects of prey for Black men. This dangerous stereotype has been manipulated within these films to show that African Americans should be awarded the same respect and fairness as white members society. These films show that no one should *assume* white women are victims of Black men as this is dangerous and simply racist. The films reveal that Black men are often the victims of a racist society, one that works against them to demonize the African American people. Placing women in these films as either predators or heroines who are saved by Black men crucially symbolizes the need for the stereotyped victimized Caucasian woman to be obliterated.

These films utilize abjection and violence to depict the gothic lives of oppressed African Americans. The unjustified and horrifying violence saturating Black history is repulsive; these films expose the violence created by racism and prove that this learned hatred allows racism to morph and withstand the duration of time. Racism ultimately creates a cyclical effect of violence with devastating impacts to humanity's very core. *Night of the Living Dead* reveals the direct impacts of violence towards the African-American people whereas *Get Out* ultimately demonstrates the violence which is sure to blanket all of society as a direct result of racial discrimination.

Night of the Living Dead and *Get Out* are representations of the time periods within which they were created. The gothic tradition serves as a perfect vessel to help reveal the devastating, terrifying impacts of a racist American society. Black Americans are ultimately

forced to endure gothic lives on a daily basis as they are brutalized and discriminated against by white oppressors. Duane L. Jones, the man who plays Ben in *Night of the Living Dead*, and Peele are important, influential artists who have wielded their medium for the betterment of society as a whole. Historically, Black directors and Black characters were omitted from film as many movies lacked accurate, fair Black representation. These men have overcome the oppression and discrimination so often found within America to contribute to pictures that depict the disturbing, violent, unacceptable consequences that result from a racially violent and oppressive America.

Works Cited

- Get Out*. Directed by Jordan Peele, performances by Daniel Kaluuya ,Allison Williams, Lil Rel Howery, Bradley Whitford, Catherine Keener, Lakeith Stanfield, and Caleb Landry Jones, Universal Pictures, 2017.
- Night of the Living Dead*. Directed by George A. Romero, performances by Duane Jones and Judith O’Dea, Walter Reade Organization, 1968.
- Bhabha, Homi. K. “Introduction: Locations of Culture.” *The Location of Culture*. London & New York: Routledge, 1994, 1-18.
- Bodzioc, Joseph. “The Cage of Obscene Birds: The Myth of the Southern Garden in Frederick Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom*.” *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination*. Ed. Ruth Bienstock Anolik and Douglas L. Howard. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000, 251-263.
- Kristeva, Julia. “Individual and National Identity” and “Powers of Horror.” *The Portable Kristeva*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1997, 230-239.
- Morrison, Toni. “Black Matters & Romancing the Shadow.” *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1992, 1-26.
- Peele, Jordan. Interview by Jason Zinoman. “Jordan Peele on a Truly Terrifying Monster: Racism,” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 16 Feb. 2017.
- Pinsky, Mark I. “Maligned in Black and White: Southern Newspapers Played a Major Role in Racial Violence. Do They Owe Their Communities an Apology?” *Poynter*, www.poynter.org/maligned-in-black-white/.

Reid, Mark. "Introduction ." *Black Lenses, Black Voices: African American Film Now*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, 1–6.

Uenuma , Francine. "The Massacre of Black Sharecroppers That Led the Supreme Court to Curb the Racial Disparities of the Justice System." *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 2 Aug. 2018.