

Get in to *Get Out*: Peele-ian Horror and Consciousness-Raising

By

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Abstract

One area that has not fully been explored in terms of its ability to engage in Black feminist consciousness-raising (CR) is the horror film genre. This project examines Jordan Peele's 2017 Black horror film *Get Out*, arguing that this film engages in Black feminist CR by overtly and covertly addressing systemic racial oppression, white privilege, and the falseness of American post-raciality. I rhetorically analyze *Get Out* through the lens of Black feminist CR, which places an emphasis on collective experiential knowledge and combating intersectional oppressions while holding white/privileged participants accountable for their own complicity in perpetuating oppressive systemic racism. Ultimately, I argue that Peele's goal in writing, producing, and directing *Get Out* was to raise the consciousness of white/privileged audiences by forcing them to take note of systemic racism's presence in the present day, as well as recognize their complicity in keeping it intact.

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Chapter One: Introduction

I am terrified of horror movies. But after watching Jordan Peele's 2017 Black horror film *Get Out*, I sat in stunned silence instead of abject terror until the screen slowly faded to black and the credits began to roll. Robin R. Means Coleman (2011) claims in her book *Horror Noire* that Black horror films have the "ability to inspire provocative treatments of race and . . . offer unique lessons and messages about race relations" (p. xviii). With *Get Out*, Peele has added his name to the list of Black horror auteurs by creating a horror film that does more than scare audiences. *Get Out* is at its core a horror movie that revolves around a consciousness-raising (CR) message about systemic racism and the horrors of the Black experience today. Given this fact, and Peele's own account that he sought to make a horror film "that acknowledges neglect and inaction in the face of the real race monster," CR is a fitting method for analyzing how Peele's film is designed to address systemic racism (Peele in Zinoman, 2017). I argue that Black horror films are inherently sites for CR because of their focus on racial injustice and systemic racial oppression. *Get Out* serves as a case study to illustrate this point. I explain how Peele's first Black horror film crafts his CR message and confronts white/privileged audience members with their own complicity in systemic racism.

Introduction

bell hooks (2009) once said: "Movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues" (p. 3). In other words, films are able to tackle difficult topics and encourage audience members to discuss those topics once the credits have ended. Movies invite audiences to partake in the "shared experience" of digesting and interpreting images and sounds from the screen, and so it is important to study "what the film

tries to do to us” (hooks, 2009, p. 4). I examine Jordan Peele’s Black horror film *Get Out* because it covertly addresses systemic racial oppression through genre, but overtly critiques American culture with regards to white privilege and post-raciality while attempting to constrain audiences from responding with white fragility.

Get Out begins with the seemingly innocuous story of a Black man, Chris Washington, dating a white woman named Rose Armitage. Chris is meeting Rose’s family for the first time and the couple is spending the weekend with her family, the Armitages. Naturally, Chris is nervous. He becomes even more so as he realizes Rose and her family are, quite literally, supplanting Black consciousnesses with members of their own white family, controlling the Black bodies they inhabit while the Black consciousnesses are sent to suffer in agony forever in “The Sunken Place.” The film includes a modern-day slave auction towards the climax but is also rife with instances of “casual racism” which “tries to be aggressively unscary” and yet is “just as horrifying” as more blatant acts of racism (Wilkinson, 2017).

Get Out’s incredible success is perhaps due in part to its poignant dismissal of the myth of post raciality during a time when white, privileged people were questioning racism’s existence in the twenty first century. Moviegoers and critics alike lauded its salient political undertones and takeaways. For example, Manohla Dargis (2017) observes that the most terrifying adversary of *Get Out* is “an evil that isn’t obscured by a hockey mask, but instead throws open its arms with a warm smile while enthusiastically (and strangely) expressing its love for President Obama,” the first African-American U.S. President. Peter Debruge (2017) writes that *Get Out* “exposes a reality in which African-Americans can never breathe easy,” noting that despite rumors of a post-racial America following Obama’s time in office (2009-2017), racism remains an immutable part of the American experience. Therefore, this film merits analysis in order to

explain how Peele's filmic rhetoric was able to confront and address systemic racism in a "post-racial" society without incurring the wrath of white fragility.

First, I define whiteness, post-raciality, white privilege, and white fragility. Next, I briefly discuss the history of CR and detail how it can be applied to mediated texts. Then I discuss what horror films are generically, how they perform social critique, and how Black horror differs from more conventional, mainstream notions of horror. After that, I explain how CR is a fitting method for analyzing *Get Out*. Finally, I preview the chapters that follow.

Whiteness, Post-Raciality, White Privilege, and White Fragility

I first want to impart the manifold meanings and usages of the word "whiteness." Many scholars have delved into the ways that whiteness is defined, constructed, and reified by mainstream society. For example, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) posit that whiteness is a "strategic" form of rhetoric because the power whiteness wields is not "exercised in a naked manner" (p. 296). Instead, whiteness is more covert and cunning about the ways in which it consistently situates itself as both dominant and evasive. Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) concept of strategic whiteness serves as one of the most illuminating sources on the subject because of their focus on the purposeful and ingrained difficulties white people have when defining what "white" means. Frankenberg (1993) alludes to this phenomenon when she states that whiteness "changes over time and space," meaning that whiteness always eludes concrete definition and strategically places itself at the top of the social hierarchy regardless of year or location (p. 236). Griffin (2015) extends Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) strategic whiteness into the realm of media by asking how the 2011 film *The Help* "strategically center[s] and redeem[s] whiteness amid its purported 'post racial' aspirations" (p. 150). *The Help*, while heralded as an example of post-raciality given the maternal relationship between several Black domestic workers and a

white little girl, ultimately reifies whiteness's presence and power by presenting the audience with redeemable white characters that stand in opposition to the few racist ones. Crenshaw (1997) tackles whiteness from an ideological perspective, stating that "ideological work" is "necessary to make whiteness visible and overturn its silences for the purpose of resisting racism" (p. 254). Whiteness is so entrenched within mainstream society, and yet so invisible, that it requires the blatant deconstruction of an entire ideology that accepts whiteness as the favorable norm. Ultimately, whiteness is constantly restructuring and redefining itself in order to exist in perpetuity, and so it remains elusive and difficult to pinpoint and define. Whiteness's constant, yet evasive, presence in American society has manifested in "white privilege."

The term "white privilege" has existed for decades, rising in popularity after Peggy McIntosh's 1988 seminal essay titled "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." The word "invisible" gets at the heart of what makes discussing white privilege so difficult: just like whiteness itself, white privilege is invisible to white people. The strategic strings holding white privilege firmly in place are hard to detect and therefore hard to combat and confront. Cory Collins (2018) succinctly sums up the reason behind white discomfort with acknowledging white privilege when he states "1) The word white creates discomfort among those who are not used to being defined or described by their race. And 2) the word privilege, especially for poor and rural white people, sounds like a word that doesn't belong to them—like a word that suggests they have never struggled." For an example of white privilege in the everyday world, objects like crayons or Band-Aids are labeled "flesh-toned." The flesh in question is always coded white, meaning that a "flesh-toned" crayon or Band-Aid is generally a light peach or light tan color. Of course, there are insurmountable variations of skin tones and colors in the world, and so this serves as a prime example of how "white" becomes the accepted standard and norm. Collins's

second point touches on the fact that many white people react to the word “privilege” by thinking that it means they must have never encountered barriers of any kind. However, privilege here means that a white person in America will never be discriminated against for the color of their skin, and it grants white people, especially those in positions of power, the ability to engage in racism with impunity. In sum, white people balk at the term “white privilege” because they interpret it as a way of demonizing them for being white. The goal of pointing out one’s white privilege is not to guilt or admonish their skin tone and privilege, but rather to encourage white people to do something with their privilege by helping to change the systems and structures that marginalize and harm communities.

Many (white) people questioned the existence of white privilege and racism when former president Barack Obama was elected in 2008. For example, MSNBC’s Chris Matthews stated that he “forgot [Obama] was black” after watching Obama’s first State of the Union Address (Matthews, 2010, as cited in Associated Press, 2009). This statement takes away a large component of Obama’s identity and indicates that Matthews regarded Obama as white (or at least not Black) during the address. In other words, Matthews had to “forget” Obama’s Blackness in order to appreciate Obama’s State of the Union Address. Rudy Giuliani, the former mayor of New York City and current attorney for President Trump, said that with Obama’s election “[America has] moved beyond... the whole idea of race and racial separation and unfairness” (Giuliani, 2008, as cited in Wise, 2009, p. 6). Giuliani paints a picture of a utopic post-racial society brought about by Obama, willfully ignoring the continued racial barriers people of color were (and are) still experiencing. Matthews and Giuliani, both of whom are white, high-profile men, were able to make these claims very publicly with relative impunity. Senator Mitch McConnell, another high-profile white man, even went so far as to say that

electing Barack Obama as president “could be considered a form of compensation” for centuries of racial discrimination and slavery (McConnell, 2019, as cited by Aulbach, 2019). McConnell is outlandishly suggesting that Obama’s role as president effectively erased all racial injustice and adheres to the offensive notion that Black people should just “move on” from those injustices. Powerful white men used Obama’s election(s) to prove that the country had entered a “post-racial” age, where skin color no longer mattered and even a Black man could be President.

These claims of post-raciality are blatantly false, as evidenced by numerous researchers (e.g., Cohen, 2011; Aja & Bustillo, 2014; Bonilla-Silva, et al., 2015; Ledwidge & Verney, 2014; Bhopal & Alibhai-Brown, 2018) and comments made by current President Donald Trump (Heuman & González, 2018). There are many examples I could include here to bolster this statement regarding President Trump, one of which includes the fact that he told (non-white) Democratic Representatives Ilhan Omar, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ayanna S. Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib to “go back” to “the totally crime infested places from which they came,” even though three of the four women were born in the United States (Trump, 2019, as cited by Rogers & Fandos, 2019). Trump feels comfortable expressing his disgust and hatred of immigrants, especially immigrants of color, and he is able to do so with relative impunity due to white privilege. Trump’s offensive sentiment boils down to, as Colin Dwyer and Andrew Limbong (2019) put it, “You— and others like you— are not welcome here.” The continued existence of white privilege proves the continued existence of systemic racial oppression.

Despite rumors of America’s post-racial status, systemic racism is alive and well. Its influence and pervasiveness can be found in every facet of life, from public to private. However, a large and unyielding barrier all too often prevents the progress and process of dismantling systemic racism: “white fragility.” Simply put, white fragility is a way to define the “defensive

reactions so many of us who are white have when our racial world views, positions, identities, or advantages are challenged or questioned” (Martin, 2018). In her book *White Fragility*, Robin DiAngelo (2018) notes that these defensive white reactions include “anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation” (p. 2). Many white people hesitate to enter conversations about white privilege and express defensiveness, discomfort, and an unwillingness to admit that white privilege exists at all. Thus, “fragility” alludes to just how tenuous conversations about race with white people can be.

Moreover, conversations with white people about white fragility can be dangerous; “the social costs for a [B]lack person in awakening the sleeping dragon of white fragility often prove so high that many [B]lack people don’t risk pointing out discrimination when they see it” (Waldman, 2018). Not pointing out racial discrimination grants privileged white people the opportunity to drown out and/or silence Black voices with impunity. For example, the All Lives Matter (ALM) movement was formed in direct opposition to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. BLM began in 2013 after the hashtag #blacklivesmatter started trending on Twitter following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a police officer who unjustly shot and killed a young unarmed Black boy named Trayvon Martin in 2012 (Baptiste, 2017). Zimmerman’s acquittal was seen by the Black community as just another “[verdict] that prove[s] [B]lack bodies and [B]lack lives are disposable” (Bailey & Leonard, 2015, p. 68). ALM was a distraction from the work BLM was doing to dismantle white privilege and systemic racism; using the hashtag #alllivesmatter means “becoming the proverbial blanket that is used to cover the problem” (Olatunde, 2016). White privilege was actively at work within ALM, as ALM sought to drown out and silence the voices of those involved with the BLM movement, taking the focus away from systemic racism through the guise of color blindness and the ceaseless insistence that white

people also experience barriers. ALM falsely characterized BLM as whining and/or selfish, fixating on a problem that remains invisible to white, privileged people. In other words, ALM “represents a refusal to acknowledge that the state does not value all lives in the same way,” and that refusal is exemplary of white fragility (Smith, 2017). Responses of white fragility hinder discussions of white privilege and systemic racism, culminating in the seemingly perpetual existence of white privilege and systemic racism in the United States today.

So how does one go about confronting, combating, and/or dismantling systemic racism when whiteness’s elusivity, white fragility, and myths of post-raciality remain dominant? Hungerford (2015) claims that incivility in “Black protestors’ rhetoric” is a way to “[draw] attention to both historic and ongoing issues that whiteness works to conceal, and that post-racism denies” (p. 109). Bailey and Leonard (2015) look to the BLM movement for a way to dismantle white privilege, stating that “to say ‘Black Lives Matter’ is to challenge the . . . entrenched privileges afforded to whiteness” (p. 75). Groscurth (2011) conducted a study that examines the American Red Cross, arguing that its “organizational rhetoric . . . normalizes whiteness and facilitates the production of privileged identities at the individual and institutional level” (p. 303). Each of these communication scholars have provided valuable insight into how to combat and confront systemic racism in our “post-racial” society. Groscurth (2011) urges communication scholars to “question privilege” using “approaches that do not fit neatly into pre-established . . . traditions” (p. 311). To answer this call, I argue that Black feminist CR can be used as an approach for combating, confronting, and dismantling systemic racial oppression in America. In what follows, I explore CR as a concept and a method for giving marginalized voices a way to advocate for themselves and challenge harmful institutionalized norms. I conclude this section on CR by explaining the relationship between CR and media.

Consciousness-Raising (CR)

Sowards and Renegar (2004) define consciousness-raising (CR) as “a rhetorical strategy utilized extensively by women in the 1970s to give voice to women’s experiences,” and contend that CR “remains an important part of developing . . . awareness today” (p. 535). The 1970s fell under the umbrella of “second wave feminism.” Women involved in this movement would primarily practice CR through CR groups. The idea of forming CR groups is attributed in particular to the New York Radical Women, an early Women’s Liberation Group based in New York City. In these CR groups, women (usually around a dozen or so) would begin the discussion by “selecting a topic related to women’s experience, such as husbands, dating, economic dependence, having children, or a variety of other issues,” and then ideally each woman in the group would have the opportunity to share her own personal experiences about the meeting’s chosen subject (Napikoski, 2019). CR managed to work well in groups because it first and foremost “destroyed the isolation that men used to maintain their authority and supremacy” allowing women to have a community of safety and understanding (Napikoski, 2019). As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1999) states, “the goal [with CR] is to make the personal political: to create awareness (through shared experiences),” and CR groups attempted to do just that (p. 128). From its inception, there is a clear method for how CR was designed to work: using collectivity to encourage identification and awareness with the goal of combating, confronting, and critiquing harmful institutionalized norms.

There is a bevy of criticism focused on second-wave feminist movement CR groups (e.g., Mann & Huffman, 2005; Cauley, 2016; Fetters, 2013; hooks, 1984). The main issues revolve around excluding women of other races, and even dismissing the issue of race in favor of the issue of sexism. Furthermore, women in these groups were often wives and mothers, excluding

women who chose to remain unmarried or chose to not reproduce. Missing from these CR groups was an accessible way to discuss intersectional oppression. In essence, much of the second wave's problems came from whiteness, privilege, and a general lack of understanding how sexism, racism, and classism formed interlocking systems of oppression for marginalized women. Black Feminist Movements sought to secure rights for all women, not just white, privileged ones.

Raising one's consciousness is not merely theoretical, it is practical. But how else can someone engage in CR, and what does it look like to do so? Kathie Sarachild (1978), one of the members of the New York Radical Women, describes engaging with CR as "actions brought to the public for the specific purpose of challenging old ideas and raising new ones" (p. 145). This broad definition of how to enact CR means that the practice can be adopted by a variety of people through a variety of ways. Sarachild (1978) elaborates on this by stating that from its inception, "there has been no one right method of raising consciousness" and what truly matters are "not methods, but results" (p. 147). CR is not restricted to feminism and feminist movements, and it can be employed by a variety of disciplines. For example, communication scholar Donald G. Ellis (1982) writes that CR "may be useful to any group of self-selected individuals who define themselves as alienated, disintegrated from the mainstream of social life, or desirous of a break with the past" (p. 77). Ellis's (1982) comments illuminate CR's adaptability and flexibility.

Tasha Dubriwny (2005) approaches CR from a rhetorical perspective. She argues that CR rhetoric is inherently collective, meaning that "the roles of speaker and listener, orator and audience, are collapsed," and "because collective rhetoric takes shape through the validation of individuals' experiences, it necessarily has lived experience as its epistemic core" (p. 396). By engaging in the collective rhetoric of CR, Hayden (2018) notes "oppressed individuals bring

their voices together to articulate perspectives at odds with hegemonic norms” (p. 237).

However, a focus on the collective does not mean that the individual is excused from their own complicity in reifying these detrimental hegemonic norms. A large component of engaging with CR is that participants must “confront themselves, recognize their own ambivalence, and face their own participation and collaboration in the roles and processes that have such devastating effects” on marginalized communities (Campbell, 1999, p. 129). In sum, CR is a collective form of rhetoric that (re)privileges individuals’ experiences as a means toward critique of systemic oppression and their complicity in it.

A piece of media can engage in CR by raising the audience’s awareness and challenging their complicity regarding a certain issue. Sometimes, this can lead to concrete, policy-based change. For example, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1905) can be labelled as CR media because it ultimately sought to raise awareness about the hazardous meat industry practices in the United States while implicitly challenging readers to take action and rectify the situation. Eventually Sinclair’s book helped create the Meat Inspection Act of 1907. Another example of CR media is Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962). Carson wrote this book with the intention of raising readers’ awareness of impending ecological destruction, using the possible eradication of birds to prompt readers to take action. Eventually her book helped create the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970. One particular area of media that has not fully been explored in terms of its ability to engage in CR through raising awareness and challenging detrimental hegemonic norms is the horror film genre.

Horror Films

The elasticity of the phrase “horror genre” means that it can be difficult to create solid boundaries around what a horror film is and what it is not. Instead, it is easier to say what a

horror film is designed to *do*: frighten people. James Naremore (1995) defines genre as “a loose evolving system of arguments and readings, helping to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies” (p. 14). Kendall Phillips (2005) applies this definition to the horror genre, stating that “if we talk about a film as if it is a horror film—market it that way, respond to it that way, interpret it as one—then it is, effectively, part of the horror genre” (p. 5). In other words, a film does not necessarily have to be labeled as horror in order for it to count as a horror film. For example, we can turn to the horrifically racist *Birth of a Nation*. This 1915 film about heroic Ku Klux Klansmen brutally murdering “unlawful” Black people was not meant to be interpreted as a horror film. In fact, white audiences saw it as a confirmation of white purity and goodness, a sure sign that the KKK were saviors waging war against “evil” Black people. Black audiences interpreted *Birth of a Nation* as a horror film, and rightly so (Gallagher, 1982; Lehr, 2016; Coleman, 2011). Therefore, the elasticity of the horror film genre is rooted in the ways in which the film is perceived by the audience in addition to the creator’s intent.

Horror films often reflect national anxieties and fears. For example, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) reveals American fears of Communism as members of society are replaced by doubles devoid of real feeling. George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) is rife with national fears of rampant consumerism. And then there are horror films that specifically reflect fears of race and racial miscegenation. For example, in *King Kong*, the monstrous gorilla with a passion for a slim, blonde, white woman is clearly a stand in for an amorous Black man intent on capturing and “soiling” the purity of a white woman. It is important to keep in mind, though, that the national fears horror reflects are fears usually rooted in the dominant American demographic: middle-aged, middle- to upper-class white men.

Horror as Social Critique

Horror films are particularly adept at critiquing society. It is impossible to untangle art from its contextual factors, and so horror films often deliver commentary on society at the time of the film's release. Horror films do not create their monsters ex nihilo. The monsters are formed from the often political anxieties and worries of the general white, middle- to upper-class population. Kendall Phillips (2005) notes that horror films "tend to become more popular during times of social upheaval," suggesting that people flock to these movies perhaps in order to make sense of the chaotic world around them (p. 9). Robin R. Means Coleman (2011) puts it even more plainly when she states that horror "has something to say about religion, science, foreigners, sexualities, power and control, class, gender roles, sources of evil, an ideal society, democracy, etc." (p. xix). Horror is not the only genre to perform this job, but it does creep into and reflect an audience's collective psyche onscreen.

Over time, those belonging to groups outside of the dominant American demographic began to showcase their own fears on screen, in hopes of enlightening movie audiences about their oppression. For example, the film *The Stepford Wives* (1975) equates paradigmatic domesticity with the loss of humanity. The titular wives are stereotypical examples of femininity and obsessive housekeeping, but they are robots. The fact that this is a horror movie is where the social critique aspect comes in: The world of *The Stepford Wives* is a paradise for men but a nightmare for women. Thus, the audience is encouraged to feel sympathetic towards women trapped in the cage of antiquated gender roles and wary towards men who desire to keep them there. *Carrie* is a film about one woman's revenge on her cruel classmates, warning audiences that women can be powerful, and that cruelty has consequences. These films serve as examples of how horror can be used to address oppression. Black horror is another way in which horror engages with societal critique and the oppression of marginalized communities.

“Blacks in Horror” vs. Black Horror

In her book *Horror Noire*, Robin R. Means Coleman (2011) categorizes horror films involving Black people into two categories: “Blacks in horror” and “Black horror” (p. 7-8). “Blacks in horror” films tend to rely on tropes such as the “Black man dies first.” In other words, having a Black person in a horror film does not immediately make that film worthy of the label “Black horror.” Oftentimes films that fall under the category of “Blacks in horror” are guilty of tokenizing. For a film to be a Black horror film, Coleman states that it “must have an added narrative focus that calls attention to racial identity, in this case Blackness— Black culture, history, ideologies, experiences, politics, language, humor, aesthetics, style, music, and the like” (p. 7). To better illustrate this difference, Coleman (2011) uses the examples of the horror movies *Def by Temptation* (1990) and *The People Under the Stairs* (1991). The former is a Black horror film because it “draws on specific tropes of Black culture— it invokes Southern Black church rituals, Black urban spaces, Black masculinity performances, and Black vernacular, music, style, and other aesthetic features” (p. 8). The latter is a “Blacks in horror” film because, while the film’s protagonist is Black and it takes place in a “predominantly Black neighborhood,” it is a “rather white affair with a predominantly white cast, crew, and textual thrust” (p. 8). *Get Out* is Black horror because it was written and directed by a person of color and it centers around a Black protagonist.

Black Horror and Consciousness-Raising

Stacey K. Sowards and Valerie R. Renegar (2004) contend that “not only does feminist consciousness-raising provide women and men with a vocabulary to describe their experiences, but it also helps illuminate the interconnected nature of oppression and inculcate a more critical perspective on the world” (p. 546). Since horror often engages in social critique, and Black

horror focuses those social critiques on issues of racism and oppression, the Black horror movie *Get Out* should be examined with regard to its attempts to raise audience consciousness. I plan to use the Black feminist practice of CR to determine how Peele's film critiques current societal issues such as post-raciality and white privilege while preventing responses of white fragility. While other scholars have studied media and CR (e.g., Hess, 1998; Warren, 2012), horror media exists as an untapped source for CR examination. The connection between CR and horror may not be readily apparent, but since Sarachild (1978) and Ellis (1982) posit that CR has no restrictions as far as how it can be practiced and who can practice it, I believe that this will give scholars a new way of seeing horror's potential for combating pervasive systemic racism.

Peele-ian Horror

Get Out unflinchingly reminds privileged white Americans of their own complicity in continued racism. These reminders are seen in moments spanning from small micro-aggressions (such as a policeman pulling the main Black character over when there was no reason to do so) to an actual modern slave auction complete with bids and a pedestal. *Get Out* challenges privileged white audience members by critiquing white society's fetishization of Black culture while simultaneously oppressing and dehumanizing Black people. In *Get Out*, white people want to occupy Black bodies while still maintaining their white consciousnesses, colonizing these bodies and keeping Black consciousnesses imprisoned within the Sunken Place.

But why study Peele's film at all? As McIntosh (1998) puts it, "to redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions." Therefore, acknowledging that systemic racism exists is pivotal to the creation of a new social system that does not place whites at the top of the social, racial, and/or economic hierarchy, and dissolves these hierarchies. Peele's film acknowledges the "colossal unseen dimensions" of systemic racism, particularly since *Get*

Out takes place in the present day. This means systemic racism cannot be relegated to the past and Peele is thus actively combating the idea of a modern day post-racial society. He is showing the audience that systemic racism is still strongly enforced and experienced within all aspects of American society. This is why Peele's work is rife with reasons for study, both practically and academically.

Peele is showing viewers the realities of systemic racism that still exist today, despite the election(s) of Barack Obama and claims of post-raciality. Racial oppression is undeniably harmful to marginalized populations. For example, hundreds of unarmed Black men have been shot on sight during an altercation whereas armed white men have been taken into custody alive and unharmed (see Khan, 2019; NewsOne Staff, 2019). Therefore, it is important to study his film because it exposes the continued mistreatment of marginalized communities. In *Get Out*, "marginalized communities" means Black people. If we abide by McIntosh's (1988) statement above, then we can say that Peele's acknowledgement of the "colossal unseen dimensions" of systemic racism is key to dismantling it. In sum, Peele's work is important to study to combat and challenge systemic racism through basic acknowledgement of its perpetual existence in the United States. In addition to this basic acknowledgement, Peele's film prompts white, privileged audience members to admit and examine their own complicity in sustaining systemic racism.

In this chapter, I have set up the main question(s) of my study, as well as the method I will use to answer these question(s). My research questions are: How does the Black horror film *Get Out* employ CR to critique the notion of a "post-racial" society while confronting its (white, privileged) audiences? How does this film employ CR to amplify conversations surrounding systemic racism while confronting (white, privileged) audiences?

Thesis Layout

This thesis will take the following form. My second chapter is a more detailed discussion of CR as a heuristic. I identify the functions of CR, such as encouraging identification and raising awareness while challenging complicity in detrimental hegemonic norms. More specifically, the hegemonic norms I explore are white privilege, white fragility, and post-raciality. In my third chapter I examine *Get Out* using a broad range of filmic strategies while employing CR as a lens for examination, meaning that I will be looking for instances of Peele's attempts to engage in CR through various strategies. Finally, my last chapter summarizes, notes limitations, and suggests future research for scholars who are interested in these subjects.

Chapter Two: Methods

Consciousness-raising (CR) is an appropriate method for analysis primarily because Jordan Peele explicitly states his intent in producing *Get Out* is to raise audience consciousness. Critics have largely picked up on this, showing that at least those who professionally critique films were aware of his attempts at CR. Peele often refers to the intent or message for his film using CR rhetoric and ideals. For example, on his production company's website, Monkeypaw Productions, the "About" section says, "Monkeypaw Productions cultivates artistic, *thought-provoking* concepts" and "champions highly specific perspectives and artistic collaborations with unique and *traditionally underrepresented voices*" (Monkeypaw Productions, emphasis mine). Peele's production company seeks to represent the underrepresented (oppressed peoples) through these "thought-provoking concepts" that encourage CR by raising awareness about oppression. Social statements prompt the audience to be aware of current oppression(s).

Peele highlights the importance of personal interpretation with regard to his films, pointing to an epistemology rooted in experience, a key tenet of CR (Dubriwny, 2005). Monica Castillo (2019), a reviewer for Roger Ebert's movie review site, alludes to Peele's CR efforts when she says, "Peele wants [the audience] to talk, and he's given audiences the material to think, to feel our way through some of the darker sides of the human condition and the American experience." By encouraging audiences to speak, think, and feel through and about his films, Peele is prompting the audience to raise their consciousness regarding the "American experience" as felt by groups oppressed by American racism and classism. Reviewer Richard Brody (2017) echoes Castillo (2019) and Peele's interview with Rotten Tomatoes (2019) when he writes that Peele wants audiences to realize the "actual differences between black and white Americans aren't . . . biological or qualitative, but political, psychological, experiential." Again,

emphasizing the experiential takeaways of Peele's films indicates the experiential epistemology of CR. CR is a fitting method for analysis because Peele himself and critics have described his films in terms consistent with CR.

To further develop a rationale for using CR as a method, I first provide the origin story for CR, tracing from its popular inception in the 1960s and 1970s to the 1974 Combahee River Collective. Next, I detail how CR has changed in form and practice from the 1960s and the 1970s to present day, using researchers Sowards and Renegar's (2004) work as a guide. Finally, I describe and detail how I will be using CR as a critical heuristic for analysis, providing explicit questions to ask when analyzing *Get Out*.

The Origins of Consciousness-Raising

Feminists in the 1960s and 1970s spearheaded CR as a method for “collect[ing] and analyz[ing] data” based on women's personal experiences, “get[ting] to the root of sexism . . . understand[ing] that the pain and struggles in [women's] lives are not . . . individual problems,” and “tak[ing] action” primarily through CR groups (“Feminist Consciousness-Raising,” 2018.). CR and women's liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s stemmed from the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s, as stated by the National Women's Liberation website (“Feminist Consciousness-Raising,” 2018). Second-wave feminist CR groups are exemplars of CR, but it is important to keep in mind that their view of womanhood was largely rooted in sexism, racism, and classism. In these CR groups, women would gather together and discuss personal stories themed around topics such as “husbands, dating, economic dependence, or a variety of other issues” (Napikoski, 2019). After a theme for the meeting was selected, the CR groups “generally followed a three-step method of sharing, analysis, and action planning” (Keating, 2005, p. 89). First, members of the group would share their personal feelings and experiences surrounding the

chosen topic or question for that particular meeting. These questions could be something akin to, “How are you oppressed as a woman or how are women in our society oppressed?” Every woman in the group would be given the chance to share and speak about her own thoughts, feelings, and experiences with oppression and womanhood. Next, the group would discuss their answers. This was mostly done through acknowledging similarities between stories and/or reflections regarding personal complicity in oppression (Keating, 2005). Finally, the group would figure out ways to address the issue of oppression through political actions. It was through these CR groups that the phrase “the personal is political” was born and promoted (Hanisch, 1970).

The CR groups of the 1960s and 1970s abided by several core tenets which have been explored by many communication studies scholars. One of these tenets was the focus on the social and cultural norms that promoted sex and gender discrimination, rather than placing the blame on individual women. Hayden (2018) describes a CR group as “a powerful tool for second wave feminists” that helped them “see and understand the ways personal relationships, sexuality, violence against women, and women’s attitudes about their bodies, among other topics, were shaped by systems of power” (p. 244). The emphasis here is on the “systems of power” and exploring how that translates into feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and fatigue, rather than placing the blame on oneself. These feelings would then frame the questions that grounded each group session. Ryan (2013) describes CR as “becoming aware of things you did not notice or accepted without considering how such assumptions or practices came to be, and especially not questioning who benefitted from these practices” (p. 1). Often, harmful hegemonic social and cultural norms are able to fade into the background and hide in plain sight, making it difficult to both name and combat or confront oppression (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Sullivan & Tuana,

2007). Therefore, CR is crucial for enacting social change because it first and foremost seeks to make people aware of harmful social and/or cultural norms based on gender, race, sexuality, class, and other sites of oppression. CR places the blame for oppressions on the institutions, discourses, systems, and hierarchies responsible, rather than solely blaming individuals for their ignorance or unwitting complicity in perpetuating systems of oppression.

Another tenet of CR groups in the 1960s and 1970s was a focus on using groups as a way to take political action. McCarthy and Moon (2018) describe second-wave feminist CR groups as “a particularly important component of the fight against inequality, because for some individuals the process led to disruptive institutional work” (p. 1169). In this sense, McCarthy and Moon (2018) ascribe second-wave feminist CR groups as necessary, though not explicitly required, stepping stones on the path to achieving the eventual eradication of harmful social and cultural hegemonic norms. McCarthy and Moon (2018) state that second-wave feminist CR groups were a “critical antecedent to the disruption of . . . institution[s] and the inequality therein” (p. 1161).

CR groups in the 1960s and 1970s came to the consensus that it was not enough to critique the systems of power for their complicity in oppression; CR participants must also turn their critiques inward. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1990) writes about the importance of self-reflexivity and self-awareness with regard to second wave feminist CR groups. Campbell (1999) argues that when participating in CR, “participants must confront themselves, recognize their own ambivalence, and face their own participation and collaboration within the roles and processes that have such devastating effects” on marginalized communities (p. 129). In this sense, CR of the 1960s and 1970s involves becoming aware of both external hierarchies that oppress and one’s own internal complicity within those hierarchies and systems. Again, the

blame lies within the institutions themselves, but that does not excuse willful participation and perpetuation of systems such as sexism, racism, and classism.

CR is malleable and can be adapted to address and combat a variety of oppressions, as evidenced by the following examples of Freedman (1990) and the Combahee River Collective Statement (1978). By this I mean that CR can combat and address not only feminism, but racism, classism, etc. as well. Freedman (1990) conducted an experiment of sorts with her “Introduction to Feminist Studies” students at Stanford University. After grouping her students together using a random selection process, she had the students meet in CR groups throughout the semester to discuss class readings primarily, but other issues were not off limits. Freedman (1990) reported that “the demographic composition of the groups . . . strongly influenced the tone and depth of their discussions of race” (p. 614). In essence, CR groups with more students of color had more in-depth discussions about race, while groups composed entirely of white students had more difficulty with this topic. This example shows how second-wave feminist CR groups can be adapted as an instructional pedagogical tool for college classrooms. The results of Freedman’s (1990) experiment were messy and difficult to parse, but the end result was that overall the CR groups “clearly played an important role in allowing internal, emotional shifts to occur gradually in students who had been resistant to feminism” (p. 622).

The Combahee River Collective participants used CR in a different way. Rather than using CR as a pedagogical tool within a college classroom to facilitate comfortability with feminism, these women used CR specifically “to build politics that [would] change [their] lives and inevitably end [their] oppression” (Combahee River Collective Statement, 1978). The Combahee River Collective serves as an example of the synthesis of different oppressions faced by women in the 1960s and 1970s, exemplifying an intersectional approach to CR.

The Combahee River Collective was formed in 1974 and lasted until 1980. One of the group's main contributions to feminism writ large was the focus on a host of overlapping oppressions. It was primarily composed of Black lesbian feminists who "wanted to clarify their place in the politics of feminism and create a space apart from white women and black men" (Napikoski, 2019). These women felt second-wave feminism ostracized them because second-wave CR groups were comprised mostly of white, middle-class women who saw only gender and sex oppression as paramount. In essence, the Combahee River Collective believed that oppression should not be ranked according to importance, and they sought to embrace a feminism that included combatting and confronting the overlapping oppressions of race, class, and sexuality in addition to gender and sex oppression. They enacted an intersectional version of CR designed to free people from intersectional oppressions.

What Happened After Combahee?

Of all of the scholars who have written about CR, Soward and Renegar (2004) offer one of the most comprehensive explanations for how CR has changed in the decades following the 60s and 70s. In the next few paragraphs, I detail how and why I use Sowards and Renegar's (2004) definition of CR based on their argument that feminists in the early 2000s "employed consciousness-raising in ways both similar and different to the feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960's and 1970's" (p. 546). CR was brought into the spotlight with the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, but as Sowards and Renegar (2004) posit, these CR groups were "designed to overcome a distinct set of barriers, and as these barriers have evolved, so must the consciousness-raising designed to address them" (p. 541).

I follow Sowards and Renegar's (2004) definition of CR because they take the 1960s and 1970s feminist approach to CR and expand it by going beyond the standard format of CR groups.

In their article, they note that CR “remains an important part of developing feminist awareness today” but that we need to pay attention to the “ways in which the process of consciousness-raising has evolved and been adapted” since its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s (p. 535). By selecting a variety of influential feminist CR texts written after the 1970s, Sowards and Renegar (2004) strive to highlight that, following those decades, people created “a number of different consciousness-raising approaches,” and this informs the “nature, scope, and functions of feminism in the twenty-first century” (p. 537). What makes CR after the 1970s complex is the fact that there was indeed progress made on the equal rights front in the decades after, but not nearly enough. Thus, CR performed and enacted after the 1970s must first consistently prove that it (and feminism writ large) is still necessary. These new barriers also force CR to contend with a more complex sense of unity and identification between feminists. The unity of the 1960s and 1970s began to split largely due to the fall of revolutionary minds and groups of the 1960s and 1970s such as Martin Luther King and the Black Panthers. CR splintered and was adapted by many other new groups that each molded it to their own wants and needs. CR expanded in definition, form, and in the scope of practitioners. Sowards and Renegar (2004) claim that feminist CR has changed since the 1960s and 1970s in the following ways: 1) personal stories became shared publicly instead of just within small CR groups, 2) CR became more widespread due to an increase of accessibility through higher education, 3) CR became more widespread due to an increase in accessibility through popular culture and mass media, 4) CR began to have less of a focus on encouraging political activism, 5) CR became more inclusive and diverse.

One change is that sharing personal stories in small CR groups was no longer necessarily the norm after the 1960s and the 1970s. Personal stories (and therefore experiential epistemology) still remained strong, but at that point in time those stories “tend[ed] to appear in

public venues like anthologies, books, and feminist magazines such as *Bitch* and *Bust*” instead of only being heard by members of one’s small CR group (Sowards & Renegar, 2004, p. 541). This change has expanded even further after Sowards and Renegar’s (2004) publication with the invention of social media as a platform for telling personal stories. For example, the #MeToo movement began in 2017 on Twitter and spread rapidly. In this sense, CR after the 1970s and 2004 up until now still hinges on the importance of personal stories that contribute to group CR and awareness, but now those stories are on Twitter are told in 280 or fewer characters, read by billions of people, and shared instantly online instead of within a small CR group. The advent of social media as a way of engaging with CR also means that current CR is not bound by time or location constraints as it would have been in the 1960s and 1970s.

After the 1960s and 1970s came the rise of “consciousness raising in the classroom” (Sowards & Renegar, 2004, p. 542) as evidenced by Freedman (1990). Sowards and Renegar (2004) claim that in the decades following the 1960s and 1970s, “college and high school teachers and students . . . [had] a much wider array of feminist texts to choose from, so that individuals [could] find texts that [spoke] to their experience, expos[ed] them to new ideas, challeng[ed] their notions of what feminism means, and creat[ed] new ground for feminist theory” (p. 543). Keeping in mind that their article was published in 2004, it is natural to assume that these feminist texts have multiplied exponentially since then and resulted in even more experiences, new ideas, and different feminist theories. Most major universities have a Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies department, giving even more college students the chance to major in, or just take classes in, feminist thoughts and ideals such as CR.

Sowards and Renegar (2004) state that “popular culture and mass-mediated consciousness raising” exploded in the decades following the CR groups of the 1960s and 1970s

(p. 543). They look to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as proof because the hit television show “expose[d] viewers to new ideas of female empowerment” and therefore audiences had their consciousnesses raised (p. 544). This trend has quite obviously continued after this 2004 article was published, as evidenced by television shows such as *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, *Killing Eve*, *GLOW*, and *Broad City*, to name a few. Many viewers now have the ability to stream shows like this directly into their living room at a moment’s notice, making these ideas of female empowerment even more accessible and widespread; and thus, making CR more accessible and widespread. Even music can be a way to enact CR in popular culture. Gwendolyn Pough (2019) credits hip hop with raising her consciousness about oppression, stating that listening to this style of music growing up “helped [her] to develop a feminist consciousness” because of the “exposure it gave [her] to sexual harassment and the attitude it gave [her] to deal with it” (p. 89). Pough took issue with the derogatory comments Black male rappers would make in their songs, and in this sense, she was beginning to develop feminist consciousness as a teenager.

While the CR groups of the 1960s and 1970s were labeled as “the entry point for many who became involved in the women’s liberation movement in the 1960’s and 1970’s,” more recent forms of CR do not necessarily have the same focus on promoting CR as a means for engaging with political activism in the form of attending rallies or protests, or explicitly joining a liberation group (Freedman, 2014, p. 1). As Sowards and Renegar (2004) put it, CR in the decades after the 1960s and 1970s began to look like this: “the writers present[ed] their ideas and let the audience decide what to do with them, rather than overtly building a platform for social movement” (p. 548). This may have to do with the fact that more recent CR “allows individuals to read stories, watch movies, or participate in popular culture wherever or whenever is

convenient for them” (Sowards & Renegar, 2004, p. 547). Increased flexibility “emphasizes the individual nature of consciousness shifts” for the decades following the smaller group-based CR of the 1960s and 1970s (Sowards & Renegar, 2004, p. 547). This presents a bit of a paradox: CR has become much more accessible to a wider array of audiences, but with that accessibility also comes an increase in individuality and personal choice when it comes to how feminists use CR as an “entry point” for more explicit political action and involvement. The increase in individual choice with political involvement does not mean that the CR of today is less effective or less important than it was in the 1960s and 1970s. It just means that this is a marked difference between then and now.

Sowards and Renegar (2004) claim that feminist CR in the decades following the 1960s and the 1970s “deliberately [sought] to include diverse, ethnic, social, and economic perspectives to create a sense of inclusiveness,” taking a cue from the Combahee River Collective Statement in 1977 and applying it to the twenty-first century (p. 544). However, these more recent feminists expanded the notion of inclusivity one step further by extending their CR efforts to men as well. This is why Jordan Peele, a biracial man but a man, nonetheless, is able to actively participate in and encourage feminist CR through *Get Out*. bell hooks explicitly invites men to advocate for and participate in feminism, a key tenet of her book *Feminism is For Everybody* (2000). CR is a feminist invention and that deserves recognition and respect, but “feminists are focused on the oppression of *all* people” (Sowards & Renegar, 2004, p. 548; emphasis mine). Therefore, it stands to reason that other oppressed groups are more than welcome to engage with CR as a method and a practice. Because of the ways in which harmful hegemonic norms tend to hide in plain sight, CR bases knowledge in the “thoughts, feelings, and experiences” of the oppressed (Keating, 2005, p. 87). CR can be used by many different people and groups, and these examples

show that CR after 2004, when Sowards and Renegar's essay was published, continued to grow in its acceptance of diverse participants. In the following section, I detail how CR functions as a critical heuristic for ascertaining how a work is attempting to raise consciousness. In other words, this section will explain how I examine Peele's Black horror film.

Consciousness-Raising as a Critical Heuristic

When using CR as a critical heuristic for analysis, critics must first and foremost deduce what the rhetor is raising the audience's consciousness about. Put simply, what issue(s) is the rhetor attempting to bring to the forefront of the audience's mind, thereby raising awareness of those issues? For example, the #MeToo movement seeks to raise awareness about the invisibilization and minimization of rape and sexual assault, emphasizing patriarchy as the system of power at fault. In the case of Jordan Peele, he made a Black horror film that focuses on systemic racism as it is currently experienced by African Americans. A work cannot usefully be labelled as an attempt at CR unless there is a concrete issue that critics can point to. While there can be a variety of issues that the rhetor is attempting to raise consciousness about, lack of a CR issue means that CR is most likely not the best analytic and/or methodological approach.

Critics should examine whether the rhetor is placing blame on the system or the individual. This is a large component of CR, because it considers that systemic issues such as racism, classism, or sexism are not the fault of individuals. Instead, a rhetor employing CR will direct the audience's attention to the institutions, discourses, systems, and hierarchies responsible for perpetuating these harmful social and cultural norms. If we view Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel *The Jungle* as an example of CR rhetoric, it is evident that Sinclair is blaming the meat packing industry rather than immigrant workers for horrible working conditions. In CR groups of the 1960s and 1970s, women would not shame each other for engaging in sexist thoughts or

practices. Instead, they would direct their focus to the institutions, discourses, systems, and hierarchies that held (and hold) sexism firmly in place. There is an important caveat here, however: While the blame is not placed solely on the individual, the individual is still responsible for performing self-reflexivity and confronting their own ambivalence, participation, and collaboration within harmful social and cultural norms. In short, for a work to be usefully analyzed as an attempt at CR, there must be a focus on highlighting and combating systemic oppression rather than individual oppression, and the audience should be encouraged to examine and challenge their own complicity within that systemic oppression.

Critics should determine what strategies are being used to raise audience consciousness when using CR as a critical heuristic for analysis. Since CR is an incredibly malleable practice and theory, there can be a wide array of strategies used. Going back to the example of #MeToo, those who tweeted with the hashtag #MeToo were attempting to raise collective consciousness by sharing personal stories and narratives pertaining to sexual assault and rape. The implication with #MeToo is that these stories were unable to be shared previously because of the oppressive patriarchy's minimization and invisibilization of these issues and stories. Peele is also using narrative as a strategy for conveying his message, but other strategies could include conversations, like in CR groups, or protests or demonstrations.

Along with considering CR strategies, critics must also consider CR barriers. For example, one barrier for #MeToo is that not everyone who has suffered from sexual assault has access to the Internet. Therefore, they cannot participate in this form of CR. A barrier for the CR groups of the 1960s and 1970s was that there was a determined time and place for the meetings. If a woman could not make the meeting due to time or location constraints or due to her own life circumstances, she could not participate in that form of CR. In addition to these barriers, being a

woman of color attempting to participate in a CR group during the 1960s and 1970s is another constraint, because more often than not these groups were not inclusive with regard to class or skin color.

Medium factors into how a CR message is communicated and received by the audience. Different mediums can sometimes produce different results, or varying degrees of CR. The medium for #MeToo was the Internet, specifically Twitter. I have already noted several barriers and constraints for this medium, and critics must remain cognizant of those elements while approaching this step in the process as well. The medium for the CR groups of the 1960s and 1970s would most likely have been someone's living room, meaning only women who had transportation and free time to meet could participate. The medium for Upton Sinclair was a novel, meaning that literacy was a requirement for understanding his CR message. Each CR medium comes with its own advantages and constraints.

CR is a fitting method for analyzing *Get Out* as evidenced by Peele himself and film reviewers. By using CR as a critical heuristic, I explain how Peele encourages his audiences to acknowledge and self-reflexively confront the continued existence of systemic racism in America.

Chapter Three: Analysis

Black horror films function as a unique rhetorical CR tool for addressing systemic racism. In this chapter, I analyze one of the most pivotal Black horror films to date: Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017). This film is rife with material for analysis but I have chosen to focus on three key scenes, each of which highlight Peele's attempts to raise audience consciousness regarding systemic racism during a time when many (white people) in power falsely claim that it no longer exists. These scenes are crucial to understanding Peele's attempts at CR in *Get Out* because each scene employs certain macro- and micro-level CR strategies which work to bring systemic racism to the forefront of audience consciousness. Camera frames and genre serve as overarching macro strategies for each scene, while micro strategies involve more specific scenic details such as dialogue, costume, and setting. Peele uses strategies to name systemic racism as the main antagonist of the film, thereby raising audience consciousness regarding its continued, frightening existence. Ultimately, I argue that Peele uses CR strategies to cast systemic racism as *Get Out*'s main antagonist, thus prompting audience members to acknowledge its existence and confront their own complicity in enabling the monster of systemic racism to thrive mostly unchecked.

First, I describe the scene in question, providing a short plot-based synopsis. Then I sequentially analyze the scene, discussing various macro and micro strategies Peele uses to confront audience members with their complicity in systemic racism and cast systemic racism as the main antagonist. Before focusing on the three key CR scenes, I set them in the context of *Get Out* as a whole.

Get Out: A Brief Synopsis

Get Out tells the story of Chris Washington, a Black male photographer happily dating Rose Armitage, an upper-class white woman. Tension builds when Rose admits that she has not told her white family about Chris's Blackness despite having been romantically involved with him for five months. Chris and Rose are visiting Rose's wealthy, white family for the weekend, and upon their arrival Chris immediately begins to pick up on some uncomfortable anomalies surrounding the Armitage home and way of life. The overwhelmingly white Armitage estate is unnervingly reminiscent of a southern plantation home, showcasing pristine white columns and Black domestic workers: Georgina, the maid, and Walter, the gardener, who both seem unperturbed with their positions of servitude. Chris attempts to engage with the Black Armitage workers via their shared Blackness, but his attempts are rebuked by Georgina and Walter's confounding commitment to exemplifying whiteness through their speech and mannerisms. Georgina even goes so far as to wholeheartedly deny any racism on the Armitages' part, and neither Georgina nor Walter seem to regard Chris as a friendly face in a sea of wealthy, privileged whiteness.

Rose's mother, Missy Armitage, is a psychiatrist who practices hypnosis on her clients to cure them of their addictions and vices. Against Chris's will, she hypnotizes him to stop his deadly smoking habit, claiming that she wants her daughter to be with someone who takes care of his body. At the film's climax, it is revealed that Missy has been using hypnosis to trap Rose's Black romantic partners (of which there have been many) in what Missy calls "The Sunken Place." In the Sunken Place, Black consciousnesses suffer for eternity in silence, unable to cry out and resume control over their Black bodies. The Armitages have concocted a surgery called the Coagula, which essentially supplants Black bodies with white consciousnesses, including members of the white Armitage family. Georgina's Black body has been overtaken by the

Armitage matriarch, Marianne, while Walter's Black body has been overtaken by the Armitage patriarch, Roman. Chris is the next intended surgical victim, but he miraculously manages to kill off the Armitages and escape alive and intact at the film's conclusion.

In the next section, I begin my analysis of *Get Out*'s first pivotal CR scene by providing a brief plot synopsis. Then I explain macro and micro strategies Peele employs during this scene in an attempt to raise audience consciousness regarding systemic racism. Overall, I argue that this first pivotal CR scene seeks to show audiences that systemic racism serves as the film's main antagonist, and it prompts audience members to acknowledge and confront their own complicity within systemic racism.

Andre's Abduction

Get Out opens on a dimly lit, rich, affluent, white suburb at night. A dark figure walks on a sidewalk, completely cloaked in shadow (see Figure 3). Once the figure passes by a nearby streetlamp, the camera reveals a Black man nervously glancing about at his surroundings while speaking on his cellphone to an unknown person. His name is Andre, and he complains to the person on the phone that he is lost and cannot navigate the suburb's menacing and seemingly labyrinthine streets. After hanging up the phone, Andre continues on his way but is then followed closely by a mysterious, ominous white car. He attempts to escape this unwanted surveillance by turning around and hurrying away, but suddenly a lone figure climbs out of the car and rushes him in the darkness. After a brief struggle, a now unconscious Andre is dragged away and thrown in the trunk of the white car. The anonymous driver calmly drives away into the night, all while Noel Gay and Ralph Butler's eerie song "Run, Rabbit, Run" plays from the car's speakers.

The first few moments of the film establish that Peele has made a horror film set in a distinctly white location, inducing audience members to view whiteness as horrifying and thus raising audience consciousness regarding systemic racism by positioning racism as the main antagonist. Peele prompts audience members to categorize *Get Out* as a horror film through the ominous setting and introducing a character that is afraid of their surroundings. The neighborhood is dark and murky, but the sun's absence still cannot hide the fact that this is a white, affluent suburban street. Peele's camera lingers on manicured hedges, uniform streetlights, and white picket fences that manage to pristinely gleam even in the darkness. Although there certainly are houses nearby, Peele does not allow the audience to see mailbox numbers or street names, attempting to make the audience feel as lost and afraid as Andre. It also establishes the idea that, without numerical signifiers or street names, this particular street could be any white, affluent neighborhood in America. Systemic racism does not abide by a zip code. Likewise, by marketing and designing *Get Out* as a horror movie, the first scene prompts audience members to realize that many parts of the Black experience in America are horrifying. Andre represents the fear Black men understandably feel while walking alone down a dark street in a white suburban neighborhood. Peele wants audiences to come to terms with the fact that Andre's fear of white spaces is felt by Black men every day, and it is every bit as terrifying as a horror movie.

Suburbs have often been positioned as sites of horror in horror films. This white suburb has an agency of its own, purposefully working against Andre by having similar and confusing street names and obscuring helpful information such as address numbers. Peele is showing audiences the familiar trope of suburbs as a site of horror, as well as the trope of a lone dark figure stalking the suburban streets at night. In horror classics such as *Nightmare on Elm Street*

(1984), *Poltergeist* (1982), *Halloween* (1978), and *The Amityville Horror* (1978), each film's various frights take place within seemingly idyllic suburbs, turning the supposed haven into a site of horror (see Figures 1 and 2 for *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Halloween*). The irony here is that "white flight" prompted white people to flock to the suburbs in search of "safety" from non-whites. Horror films sought to show that evil exists outside of urban cities as well. Peele opens his film with a familiar horrific setting in which a dark figure walks the suburban streets alone in the night, similar to Freddy Krueger or Michael Myers. However, the audience is quickly led to realize that Andre is not playing the role of the menacing lone killer, but rather the unjustly captured victim.

Figure 1



Figure 2

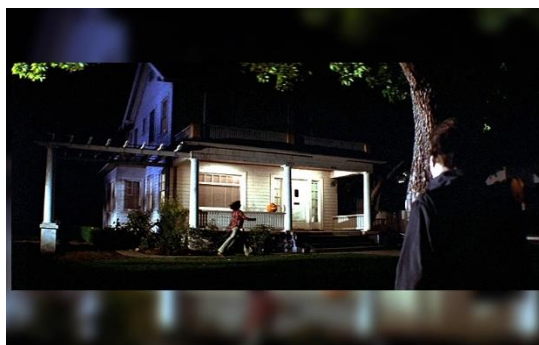


Figure 3



Peele cements the idea that *Get Out* is a horror film intent on raising audience consciousness regarding current systemic racism and prompting audiences to confront their own

complicity in it once Andre passes a streetlight. The light reveals that Andre is Black, and Peele has already established that the suburb Andre finds— or, rather, *loses* himself in— is decidedly white and middle- to upper-class. This introduces a tension familiar to all U.S. audience members, regardless of their own racial identity: the tension that exists when a Black man enters a white space. As Andre walks closer to the camera, Peele uses character dialogue and facial expressions to convey Andre's fear. Andre states to the unknown person on the other end of the phone that “[they] got [him] out here in this *creepy*, confusing-ass suburb” (Peele et al., 2017, 0:01:39, italics added). The word “creepy” is important because it further establishes the white suburbs as the site of horror, and it shows the audience that Andre is acknowledging his fear of the dark, white suburban streets. The white suburbs exist as a confounding space for his Black eyes, subtly working against him. Andre lets on that he is aware of the juxtaposition of his Black skin with his white surroundings, saying, “I’m like a sore thumb out here” to the person on the phone (00:01:48). Andre knows he is not welcome in a space like this because of his race and gender.

Starting a film by introducing a character afraid of their surroundings is a standard move for horror films. However, Peele makes it plain that Andre is frightened not just of the suburb's darkness, but of its whiteness. Audiences are prompted to make the connection between Andre's fear and the fear that Black men feel every day in the real world when existing in predominantly white spaces. Privileged, white audience members are meant to realize that this fear is justified because Black men such as Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless others have been murdered for daring to infringe upon white spaces. In many cases, such as Arbery's, Black men are murdered in broad daylight, meaning that the sun's presence does not make them any safer. Peele wants the audience to infer that what happened to

Brown, Martin, Floyd, Arbery, and countless others could just as easily happen to Andre. Peele is using audience expectations of how the scene will play out as a way to encourage self-reflexivity and raise audience consciousness, prompting white, privileged audience members to identify with and understand Andre's fears as valid and justified.

Peele changes the camera angle in order to keep the threat of whiteness looming in the background, mimicking the way whiteness is ever-present and ever-threatening to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People Of Color) in the real world. The camera swivels in front of Andre as he hangs up the phone, making sure to track the white car as it drives past Andre and turns around. By having the audience see the car turn around and begin to follow Andre, Peele further cements the idea that Andre is right to fear the white suburbs and audience members are further prompted to predict Andre's fate based on the current state of systemic racism in the U.S. Before Andre notices the car he mumbles directions to himself, trying to locate the street names in the darkness and gain some sense of control. Once he spots the car, he falls silent instantly and stops in his tracks. The car follows suit, stopping the moment Andre does. Andre's next few lines of dialogue hint again to countless other unjustly murdered Black men when he mutters to himself, "just keep walkin', bruh" and "don't do nothin' stupid" (Peele et al., 2017, 0:02:40). Andre is trying to calm himself, and his fear comes from the fact that it is very likely he may end up another statistic, joining the thousands of unjustly murdered Black men at the hands of systemic racism. Notably, Andre is speaking these words using a Black vernacular pattern, showing that not even his voice matches his white surroundings. The "nothin' stupid" part alludes to cases like Martin's and Arbery's, where no actual crime was committed but Andre must nevertheless remain calm and unobtrusive lest the wrath of whiteness descend upon his

Black body as well. To do something “stupid” would be to draw even more attention to himself and risk white violence in the name of systemic racism.

At this point, Andre’s fear becomes palpable as he tries to escape the white car’s surveillance. He turns around and begins to walk quickly in the opposite direction, away from the mysterious and threatening car. As he does this, Andre mutters once again to himself to alleviate his panic. This time, he says, “Not today. Not *me*,” again trying to differentiate himself from the countless other Black men unjustly murdered for merely existing in predominantly white spaces (Peele et al., 2017, 0:02:50, italics added). Andre believes that by striding away from the mysterious white car and remaining calm and reserved, he might yet escape unscathed. Peele is again prompting white, privileged audience members to view whiteness as intentionally horrifying and Black fear as valid. The connection between this scene and the real world becomes even more explicit as Andre adds, “You know how they like to do motherfuckers out here, man. I’m gone” (Peele et al., 2017, 00:02:55). Peele wants the audience to know that Andre is thinking the same thing they are: His chances of walking out of this white neighborhood alive and well are very slim indeed. Self-reflexivity from white, privileged audience members is prompted again here, as is the notion that Black men endure their own set of horrors in the real world. White, privileged audience members are unable to downplay or disavow Andre’s fear of the white suburbs because his fear proves valid when the white car begins to follow him, and this validation is heightened when he is eventually abducted. Peele wants audience members to recognize that, just as Andre’s fear is valid, so is the fear that Black men feel in predominantly white spaces every day. Black men are not safe in white spaces in the real world, just as Andre is not safe in this fictional white suburb.

Andre is unable to get away from the white car. “Run, Rabbit, Run” swells from the car’s speakers and Andre looks up, horrified, to find that the driver’s side door is wide open. Before he can even start running, a figure attacks him in the darkness and quickly renders Andre unconscious. The figure places a rag over Andre’s mouth, most likely doused in formaldehyde. This means Andre’s capture was premeditated and likely would have happened to any Black person daring to walk these affluent white suburban streets at night. The white car’s driver was on the prowl and Andre just happened to be the unlucky prey. The car’s color is obviously meant to signal the threat of horrific whiteness to the audience. As Andre’s body is thrown in the back of the trunk, the audience is reminded that this is a horror film which situates whiteness as the main antagonist. Andre’s fear and subsequent abduction only occur because of systemic racism’s continued existence in America, and white, privileged audiences are not meant to be surprised at Andre’s fate. No one comes to Andre’s aid, and the white streets remain undisturbed as the white car drives away with Andre’s Black body lying prone in the trunk. This mimics the way that whiteness preserves itself, doing away with BIPOC’s presence as quickly as possible in order to systemically maintain the white racial pecking order. Peele wants audience members to recognize their own complicity by preying upon the audience’s fear, showing them that this scene mirrors so many that occur in the real world and Black men have every right to fear white spaces. For just a few hours, white, privileged audience members are invited to see the world through a Black man’s eyes; First Andre’s and then Chris’s.

Chris and Georgina

This scene happens during the Armitage yearly party, which is later revealed to be an annual silent auction for the latest Black body that the Armitages have captured for the Coagula procedure. This year, their intended victim is Chris. Chris experiences a multitude of racist

microaggressions at the party. For example, one woman grabs Chris's arm, sizing him up, and then suggestively asks Rose if sex with a Black man is better, echoing a baseless stereotype regarding Black men's sexual prowess. A white man upon meeting Chris instantly begins to profess his love for Tiger Woods, a famous Black golfer. Another white man tells Chris that "Black is in fashion," nodding at Chris's skin tone approvingly (Peele et al., 2017, 00:44:12). To escape, Chris seeks solitude in the guest bedroom. He calls his best friend Rod and addresses the microaggressions, stating, "It's like [the white, wealthy partygoers] haven't met a Black person that doesn't work for 'em" (Peele et al., 2017, 00:50:30). Chris then realizes that he has been missing from the party/silent auction for a while. He hangs up the phone and Georgina announces her presence moments later, startling Chris with her unnerving, unwavering smile. Georgina advances into the bedroom and begins the conversation by apologizing to Chris for unplugging his cell phone while cleaning the bedroom earlier in the day. After a brief and unsettling conversation during which Chris tries (and fails) to bond with Georgina over their shared Blackness, she quickly exits the room, leaving a bewildered and frightened Chris standing alone.

Peele begins this second pivotal CR scene by acknowledging the existence of microaggressions and the impact they have on Black men, prompting audience members to recognize both the reality of microaggressions and their own complicity in this facet of systemic racism. Chris has already endured a host of thinly veiled racist assumptions about his sexual prowess and supposed innate athletic abilities. This scene displays the aftermath of that unpleasant and horrifying experience. Chris seeks solace and comfort from his best friend Rod, but once Chris hangs up the phone, he suddenly hears Georgina's voice and turns to see Georgina standing threateningly in the doorway by blocking his path back down to the party. He

is startled by her unexpected presence, jolted out of the comparatively lighthearted conversation with his best friend. While speaking to Rod, Chris was able to release some of his annoyance and confusion regarding the microaggressions, but Georgina's sudden appearance has instantly put Chris back on his guard. Before Georgina shows up, Peele uses the very beginning of this scene to force audiences to witness how dehumanizing microaggressions are, prompting them to recognize that their own complicity in systemic racism has had the same effect on countless other Black men and BIPOC writ large.

Once Georgina starts speaking at length to Chris, Peele uses her blatantly insincere apology and white formal language to frame her whiteness as horrifying for the audience. "How rude of me to have touched your belongings without asking," Georgina silkily muses (Peele et al., 2017, 00:52:20). Chris is caught off guard and brushes off her apology, claiming that he was "just confused" about why she had unplugged his cell phone earlier that day while cleaning (Peele et al., 2017, 00:52:25). Georgina advances towards Chris and fully enters the room, but the camera does not pull back to give her more space in the frame. Instead, the camera's frame stays stagnant so that her face is unsettlingly close to the screen and the audience. Georgina, although a Black woman in appearance, has a decidedly white hairstyle and white manner of speaking. Later, the audience finds out that her straightened, perfectly coiffed hair is a wig meant to cover up the surgical scar on her forehead from the Coagula procedure. Her natural, Black hair lies beneath, hidden from view. Georgina's confounding white way of speaking becomes more evident as she continues her off-putting apology and says, "Well, I can assure you there was no *funny business*" (Peele et al., 2017, 00:52:26, italics added). This is a phrase commonly used by an older white crowd, and it stands in stark contrast to Georgina's Black skin. Her eyes widen as she says this, as if trying incredibly hard to convince Chris that she is telling the truth. Her odd,

formal, white way of speaking is highlighted again when she awkwardly refers to Chris's cell phone as a "cellular phone," a phrase indicating she is not very familiar with the devices (Peele et al., 2017, 00:52:34).

These white verbal mannerisms coalesce moments later when Chris declares that he "wasn't trying to *snitch*" and get her into trouble by complaining to Rose about his unplugged cell phone (Peele et al., 2017, 00:52:52). Georgina is confused, taken aback by this slang term, and replaces it with the much whiter "tattletale" before she grasps what Chris is trying to say (Peele et al., 2017, 00:53:00). In this sense, Peele is mimicking the way white people stamp out Black vernacular phrases, acting as though they do not understand unless the words being used in conversation are acceptable by white standards. All these white verbal mannerisms create a sort of white mask for Georgina, a mask that masquerades as pleasant and proper but comes off as sinister and eerie. These white words coming out of a Black woman's mouth are meant to be jarring and horrifying, leading the audience to acknowledge that something is wrong with both Georgina and the Armitage household. Although Georgina's proximity to the camera and facial expressions are unnerving, this is not what is meant to be frightening. Instead, whiteness and its inescapable presence, even during a conversation between two Black people, is meant to be frightening.

Georgina escapes blame for unplugging Chris's cell phone by claiming immunity, mirroring how horrifying it is that older white people are practically untouchable when engaging in acts of lying or racism in America. When Chris tells her that he wasn't trying to "snitch" on her to Rose for the unplugged cell phone, Georgina responds by saying, "Oh, don't you worry about that. I can assure you, *I don't answer to anyone*" (Peele et al., 2017, 00:53:11, italics added). These words are undeniably white, and they sound strange coming from a Black maid.

Georgina's job description is to answer to the Armitages, and yet she claims that she answers to no one. White people writ large are rarely held accountable for wrongdoing, especially if they are wealthy. That is, they literally do not have to answer to anyone. When Chris was at the mercy of the other partygoers' microaggressions downstairs prior to this scene, he could only grin and bear it rather than accusing them of racial insults. This is because they, just like Marianne Armitage, were white, wealthy, and therefore free to do as they pleased regardless of the harm done to non-white/underprivileged others. Peele is encouraging audience members to realize that this is the way that America currently operates; that is, white people (especially those with a large amount of money and resources, like Marianne Armitage and presumably the entire Armitage clan) can act without repercussions, without having to answer to anyone.

The real-world examples of this are legion, but one privileged, wealthy white person comes to mind first: Donald J. Trump, the current President of the United States of America. President Trump is a wealthy white man who has proven time and time again that he is exempt from repercussions for his lies and racist actions and words. During his campaign run and while he has been in office, Trump has uttered some of the most public disparaging and degrading marks about BIPOC, women, and immigrants. I am far from the first person to mention this fact, yet Trump still holds a position of power, arguably the highest position within the entire country. He answers to no one. Even impeachment was not enough to oust him from this position of power. Peele, by having a white woman in a Black woman's body proclaim that she answers to no one, is drawing attention to the fact that wealthy white people in the United States are horrifyingly untouchable when it comes to answering for their crimes, while Black people are anything but.

Peele shows audiences a crack in Georgina's terrifying white mask as Chris attempts to form a bond with Georgina over their shared Blackness, highlighting once again the horrors of ever-present whiteness. Since so many white people are in the Armitage home and in attendance at the annual Armitage silent auction, it is rare for Chris to be alone with one of the few other Black people around. He slyly says, "All I know is sometimes if there's too many white people [around], I get nervous, you know?" as if setting up a test to see if Georgina is friend or foe (Peele et al., 2017, 00:53:19). If Georgina agrees, then she is an ally. If not, she is not to be trusted. This is when Georgina's white mask begins to crack. Instead of responding to Chris affirmatively or negatively, her eyes well up with tears and anguish as she gasps softly (seen in Figure 4). Peele is showing audience members that Georgina's consciousness has briefly surfaced again in her own body, although this cannot be fully understood until the Coagula

Figure 4



procedure is explained a few scenes later. Marianne Armitage's consciousness regains control and uses Georgina's Black mouth to chuckle mirthlessly even with tears still pouring down her

face. The script notes that there is now a “pain behind her smile” (Peele, 2017, p. 61). This crack in Georgina’s white mask reinforces the idea that whiteness is horrifying, especially in its ability to quickly regain control when solidarity is attempted between marginalized peoples.

Georgina’s denial of Chris’s experience downstairs prompts audience members to acknowledge both the presence of and their own complicity in microaggressions. Georgina finally answers Chris’s question by repeating the word “No” over and over again, shaking her head firmly and proving herself untrustworthy (Peele et al., 2017, 00:53:50). This “No” is performing two different actions. First, it is Marianne Armitage telling Georgina “No” as Georgina attempts to regain control over her own Black body, and second, it is Georgina (as Marianne Armitage) disagreeing with Chris’s nervousness when too many white people are around. She goes a step further in denying the microaggressions, stating, “That’s not my experience. Not at all. The Armitages are so good to us. They treat us like family” (Peele et al., 2017, 00:54:08). Here, “us” is taken to mean “Black people.” Georgina/Marianne’s refusal to acknowledge the microaggressions inflicted on Chris mirrors the way white people tend to minimize racial slights against BIPOC in America. Oftentimes, when a Black person comes to a white person seeking solidarity because of a microaggression they experienced from another white person, the white person they are confiding in either minimizes or downright denies the occurrence. Since white people rarely experience microaggressions, it is easy for them to refute the existence of microaggressions. Jordan Peele is drawing attention to this insidious phenomenon by having Georgina (as Marianne Armitage) dismiss Chris’s concerns of racist behavior and deny that she, too, has felt oppressed, repressed, or suppressed while existing in the white Armitage household. Even the word “*microaggressions*” downplays and minimizes the innate cruelty of these acts. The audience does not yet know that the Armitages quite literally

treat Georgina and Walter like family because their Black bodies are under the control of Roman and Marianne Armitage. Nevertheless, Chris is left bewildered and confused. Georgina's skin color, occupation, and gender would lead many to assume that she has been oppressed on multiple fronts. Instead she denies any racism on the Armitage's part, or on any white person's part for that matter. This denial is meant to be terrifying and jarring, especially since audiences have just witnessed a multitude of blatant racial microaggressions minutes earlier. Georgina exits, and the scene ends.

The Final Scene

At this point in the film, Chris has escaped from the Armitage household, but he is still pursued by Rose, who is determined to murder Chris. Collapsed and bleeding profusely from a gunshot wound, Rose reaches blindly for the shotgun which has fallen on the driveway. Chris pushes the gun away and Rose falls back, disappointed. Chris leans over her and Rose apologizes and professes her love to him. However, her pleas fall on deaf ears and Chris begins to strangle her, squeezing tightly. Realizing that her words are not working, Rose's face settles into a cold, frozen smile. Chris suddenly removes his hands from her neck, unable to kill her. Before either of them can speak, a police siren is heard, and blue and red flashing lights descend upon the scene. Rose weakly cries for help. Chris stands with his hands above his head, defeated and downcast. But instead of a police officer, Chris's friend Rod emerges from the cop car. Chris gratefully clambers in and they drive away from the Armitage house of horrors, leaving Rose to bleed to death in the middle of the road. The screen fades to black.

Rose's false apology serves to highlight the insincerity of white people when it comes to publicly regretting their racist actions and/or words. Despite the many atrocities she and her family have committed against Black people for presumably years, all Rose can manage to come

up with is, “Chris, I’m so sorry. It’s me. And I love you. I love you. I love you” (Peele et al., 2017, 01:37:43). Her empty words and insufficient regret mimic the fact that “white America struggles greatly with apology because apology also comes with accountability” (Jones, 2020). In other words, Rose has only scraped up this inadequate modicum of an apology because she has been backed into a corner, and even then, she cannot dredge up more sincere words admitting her own complicity in her racist actions. Peele wants the audience to recognize that her words mirror the tendency white people have to publicly deliver insufficient apologies for racist actions and/or words. For example, radio and television personality Howard Stern delivered a non-apology apology earlier this year after being confronted with using Blackface and racial slurs on his show during the 1990s. His response was, “that was my shtick and that’s what I did, and I own it” easily evading the more direct and appropriate words, “I’m sorry” (Stern, as quoted in Urdiales Antelo, 2020). More recently, current president Donald Trump was able to get away with calling Haiti, El Salvador, and an assortment of African nations “shithole countries” in 2018 and said that “all Haitian immigrants have AIDS” in 2017 (Vitali, Hunt, & Thorpe, 2018). He attempted to walk back both comments, but each halfhearted apology was incredibly insufficient. The White House did not deny the remarks, and Trump denied ever using that language. In *Get Out*, Rose’s false apology mimics the insufficient apologies and/or outright denial given by so many white and/or privileged people when confronted with their racist actions. Rose’s words and actions reflect common responses of white/privileged people when challenged with their either implicit or explicit racism, prompting white/privileged audience members to engage in CR regarding their own participation in systemic racism.

Peele plays on firmly cemented stereotypes involving altercations and interactions between Black men and white women to raise audience consciousness regarding the inaccuracy

of these stereotypes. As Chris begins to strangle Rose instead of listening to her, the camera depicts him as violent and threatening and Rose as innocent and in need of saving. The stereotypical view of a white woman is that she is innocent, pure, and in need of protecting from “villainous” Black men. This concept has existed for centuries, and the two stereotypes are often used in conjunction with one another to highlight the contrast between the “good” white woman and the “bad” Black man. D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) notably includes a scene where “a white actor in black face chases a white woman, who rather than succumb to his advances—symbolic of the rape of the South—throws herself from a cliff” (Fleishman, 2016, p. 1). Thus, Black men are portrayed as lustful and eager to sully the purity of chaste white women. The stereotype of Black men as aggressive and violent when contrasted with the image of a sweet, demure white woman means that white women have the innate power to tarnish a Black man’s reputation based on their words alone. Often Black men will be seriously harmed or murdered for this. Charles Blow (2020) comments that “untold numbers of lynchings [have been] executed because white women claimed that a black man raped, assaulted, talked to or glanced at them” (p. 2). Peele has Chris strangle Rose in order to play off these ingrained stereotypes involving Black men and white women, trusting the audience to recognize the falseness of these stereotypes since Chris is the innocent protagonist and Rose is the dangerous, violent killer. The stereotypes are fully turned around when Chris suddenly stops strangling Rose, much to her (and the audience’s) surprise. Chris, despite how systemic racism views him, proves that he is not violent or villainous, not even when given the opportunity to murder his would-be killer.

As Chris is still threateningly bent over Rose, a police car arrives on the scene with sirens and flashing lights. Although Chris has stopped strangling Rose, the camera shows audiences the

scene from the supposed cop's point of view, and by extension, and the view systemic racism has of white women and Black men. The audience knows that Chris is innocent, and Rose is guilty, but they are led to believe the cops will act on social assumptions rooted in dangerous stereotypes. Peele attempts to raise audience consciousness regarding the incorrect stereotypes of Black men and white women by forcing the audience to acknowledge who is truly "good" and who is truly "bad." Rather than film part of the scene from a wide angle, or even from Chris's point of view, Peele chose to keep the camera close to Chris's face as the cop car arrives on the scene. This means the red and blue flashing lights are first shown on Chris's Black skin, imbuing him with the stereotypical identity of a criminal Black man. The police car is not shown in full until Chris registers the lights and the sound of the sirens and looks up, afraid. Even then, the camera does not switch to his point of view, but rather to the point of view of whoever is behind the wheel of the police car. Peele's intention here is to show the audience what a police officer, and, by extension, systemic racism would see, which is a Black man leaning threateningly over a prostrate white woman. His Black hands are no longer on her white neck at this point, but the sight is still damning, nonetheless. Showing the bodies of Chris and Rose in this way displays Peele's attempts to raise audience consciousness regarding systemic racism, because the audience knows that Chris is innocent, and Rose is the threat, but the supposed police officer does not. Therefore, the camera purposefully frames Chris as the violent Black man intent on killing a harmless, pure, innocent, chaste white woman.

Chris then slowly stands and places his hands above his head, mirroring the actions that occur almost every time a Black person is in an altercation with a cop in America. Although there is no third person omniscient narrator to tell audiences explicitly what Chris is thinking as the police sirens and lights approach him and Rose, his facial expressions convey his emotions

and thoughts quite clearly. As he backs away from Rose and stands, his face is a mask of defeat. His entire visage begins to sag downward. His eyes convey disappointment and exhaustion. He takes care to move slowly and steadily so as not to give the supposed police officer any reason to shoot. And then Chris does the most familiar motion of all, which is to raise his hands into the air above his head, the very picture of docile surrender. Peele has Chris take this stance on purpose in order to mimic the stance known as “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot.” This phrase became popularized after the murder of Michael Brown in 2014. Brown, a Black teenager, was shot by white police officer Darren Wilson after stealing from a convenience store in Ferguson, Missouri. Although there is still some debate over whether Brown actually held his hands up in a gesture of surrender before being shot, his death still sparked countless protests. Over time, “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” became a rallying cry for those adamant about the unjust killings of Black men by police officers across the entire country. Peele prompted audiences to raise their consciousness by having Chris mirror Brown’s alleged stance when confronted by police officers, and call attention to the fact that police brutality remains a core tenet of systemic racism. Chris knows how to respond to cops because of systemic racism, just as audience members are led by systemic racism to assume how the cops will respond to Chris’s “threatening” presence: with murder.

Rose, noticing the police car, weakly begins to cry for help, playing the role of the weak, defenseless, pure white woman in need of saving from the terrible, violent Black man standing above her with his arms raised above his head. She is hoping the scene will end the way so many in real life have, with the police unquestioningly coming to the wealthy white women's aid instead of taking or even listening to the Black man’s side of things. Emmett Till serves as one of the most oft-cited examples of this phenomenon, where white women claim a Black man has

harmed them and the police ignore the Black man's side of the story. Often, the Black man winds up dead before he can even defend himself. Emmett Till was a fourteen-year-old Black boy who was visiting Mississippi. While there, a few of his friends allegedly dared him to approach a young white woman inside of Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market. The young woman, Carolyn Bryant, claimed that Till approached her and "asked her for a date, used obscene language, squeezed her hand, put his arm around her waist and pulled her body tight against his, or—what has become the most widely accepted version of the story—simply whistled at her" (Tell, 2008, p. 156-157). Till was then beaten, shot, and drowned in the Tallahatchie River. Decades later, Bryant, now Donham, admitted to writer Timothy B. Tyson (2017) in his book *The Blood of Emmett Till* that several of her allegations were "not true" (p. 6). In other words, Till was brutally murdered for the crime of molesting a white woman, and yet his crime never existed. Like Till, Chris believes the police will brutally murder him for the crime of molesting a white woman. Like Till, Chris had committed no crime. Rose was the murderer, not Chris, and yet systemic racism has shown us time and time again that the word of a wealthy white woman will always triumph over the word of a Black man in the eyes of the police. Peele is raising audience consciousness regarding systemic racism by appearing to show audiences the same events they have certainly seen countless times: An innocent Black man begging for his life with his hands held up, completely at the mercy of cops who will likely not hesitate to kill.

Peele uses Rod's unexpected presence to prompt audience members to question why they assumed Chris would either be immediately killed or arrested, thereby raising audience consciousness regarding the way systemic racism and police brutality tirelessly work to keep Black men imprisoned and murdered. Peele is leading audience members to assume that what will happen to Chris will be the same thing that happens to almost all Black men when they dare

to assault, or even approach, a white person. Therefore, he is attempting to raise audience consciousness of systemic racism by doing the opposite of what the audience expects. Until Rod emerges from the car, Peele gives no indication to the audience as to who is behind the wheel. Reasonably, audiences are meant to think that a police officer is driving the police car. In fact, in the original scripted version of this scene, two police cars show up. Several officers leap out of the vehicles and scream at Chris to put his hands up and get on his knees. He is then arrested and imprisoned for an indeterminate amount of time. In this original version, Peele is following audience expectations. While this ending is still powerful and makes a statement about systemic racism and the prison industrial complex, the final version plays with audience expectations instead of meeting them, heightening the potential for reflexivity. Peele shot the original version of the ending and it can be found on YouTube, but his choice to ultimately include the opposite version for the theatrical release is infinitely more impactful because it highlights the aspects of systemic racism involving police brutality and misconceptions of Black men as violent and aggressive.

Peele uses an unexpected and relatively happy ending to signal to audiences that although the Armitages are dead, the real antagonist is systemic racism and it is decidedly very much alive. Chris climbs into the police car with Rod and they drive away while Rose bleeds out in the middle of the street, giving audiences a coherent horror movie plotline on one level and an incoherent one on another. Gary Heba (1995) writes that horror films tend to follow either an ideologically “incoherent” storyline or an ideologically “coherent” storyline (p. 108). Heba (1995) explains that an ideologically coherent film will always resolve its major conflict by the end and “restore harmony and coherence to the master narrative” (p. 108). On the other hand, an incoherent horror film “can be characterized by a lack of definite closure or conflict resolution”

(Heba, 1995, p. 108). By resolving the major conflict, coherent horror movies are meant to instill audiences with feelings of safety and security because the monster has been destroyed. By contrast, incoherent horror movies instill audiences with feelings of unease and uncertainty, because the monster has not been destroyed and can therefore still be lurking in the shadows. The Armitages (the literal antagonists) are dead by the film's conclusion, but systemic racism (the symbolic antagonist) lives on, both in the film and in real life. Peele purposefully kills off the Armitages to show audiences that the literal antagonists have been defeated. Yet, he does not show the audiences that Chris and Rod manage to escape unscathed after murdering a slew of influential and wealthy white people. This means that audience members are led to wonder what will happen to Chris and Rod after they drive away, and systemic racism shows that they will still most likely end up murdered or imprisoned for their "crimes" against the white Armitages.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this chapter I argued that Black horror films are inherently sites for CR. To prove this, I used Jordan Peele's 2017 Black horror film *Get Out*, looking for strategies Peele used to raise audience consciousness regarding systemic racism. To raise audience consciousness, Peele cast systemic racism as the main antagonist, prompting white/privileged audience members to realize that it is a monster in the real world, too. He also sought to confront white/privileged audience members with their own complicity in keeping that monster alive. Because Peele chose a horror film as the medium for his message, white/privileged audience members were forced to experience the world through a Black man's eyes, if only for one hour and forty-four minutes. What they were forced to contend with is that the Black experience in America is horrifying, and they themselves are part of the reason why. In sum, this film has three unique takeaways with regard to CR: 1) the film challenges the myth of a post-raciality, 2) casts

systemic racism as the main antagonist, and 3) sheds light on a variety of issues within systemic racism as it exists today, such as police brutality, Black men feeling unsafe in white spaces, microaggressions, and perceptions of Black men as violent and aggressive.

Peele challenges the myth of a post-raciality in *Get Out* through several avenues, one of which is the film's time period. Peele chose to set the events of his film in 2017, which challenges the myth of a post-raciality by refusing to relegate racism to the past and forces audience members to contend with racism's continued existence. *Get Out* features several moments where Black characters are visibly uncomfortable while infringing upon predominantly white spaces, which adds to the argument that post-raciality has not been achieved in America. Andre, a Black man, is afraid to be Black while walking around a wealthy white suburb at night, and Chris is nervous when surrounded by too many white people at the Armitage estate. Both Andre's and Chris's fears are shown to be completely justified, as Andre is kidnapped and Chris is chosen as the next Armitage victim for the Coagula procedure. Although the Coagula procedure was invented for the sake of the film, Peele is attempting to show audiences that Black men fear white spaces in the real world for good reason. The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin, and countless others prove this to be true at the time *Get Out* was released and even now in 2020. Chris's scene with Georgina shows that racism is clearly not over, as the Armitage party's onslaught of microaggressions has quickly reminded Chris why he feels uncomfortable when there are too many white people around. The final scene is perhaps the most blatant of all when it comes to Peele pointing out the falseness of a post-racial America: Audience members are led to think that Chris will be murdered by the police simply for trying to stay alive while being hunted by the evil white Armitage clan. The actual ending is even more

shocking because instead of being shot, Chris escapes after murdering several white, wealthy, privileged people.

Peele casts the main antagonist of the film as systemic racism as it manifests today. Microaggressions and the effect they have on BIPOC are shown throughout the film, but especially during the second key CR scene between Chris and Georgina. Writer Aja Romano (2017) notes that

in *Get Out*, as in real life, white people's seemingly innocuous comments on Chris's race are not innocuous at all . . . [he] endures a social nightmare: a garden party full of rich white people who invade his space, touch him without permission, prod him, and explicitly objectify him physically and sexually. They do all this while expecting him to approve of their benevolent approval of black people. (p. 1)

Within this scene, Peele shows audience members that microaggressions are a necessary component of systemic racism because they allow white people to make incredibly derogatory comments all while under the guise of Black admiration and approval. In the film's very first scene, Andre is assailed and thrown into the back of a white car. The color choice for this car was entirely intentional, and the fact that no one in the white, wealthy neighborhood comes to Andre's aid reflects how often white/privileged people turn a blind eye to Black suffering. Again, this shows that systemic racism is the true antagonist of *Get Out*. Finally, the last scene places systemic racism in the role of the monster as well, because its existence is the reason why audience members are led to think that Chris will be murdered by the police for daring to harm a white, wealthy woman. The Armitages serve as the tangible antagonists, but their deaths at the end of the

film does not prompt audience members to assume the death of systemic racism. Instead, Peele points to systemic racism as the film's overarching antagonist in order to raise audience consciousness surrounding its continued, ever-present, and mostly unchecked existence.

Get Out raises audience consciousness regarding systemic racism by highlighting its many different facets and aspects. The film's very first scene focuses on the real fear and discomfort Black men feel while existing in predominantly white spaces. Peele also showcases other components of systemic racism, such as police brutality and the perception of Black men as violent and aggressive (highlighted especially in the film's final scene), and the many microaggressions endured by BIPOC on a daily basis (highlighted especially in the scene between Georgina/Marianne Armitage and Chris). By including all these various aspects of systemic racism, Peele makes it much more difficult for audience members to completely shut out his CR efforts. Chris and Rod are the only survivors at the end, making it impossible for audience members to empathize, sympathize, or identify with any other (white) characters.

The entire film wrestles with the barrier of white fragility. Audience members who respond with white fragility will quite literally not have the ears to hear nor the eyes to see Peele's CR message and strategies. When engaging in white fragility, white and/or privileged audience members might respond to Peele's confrontative and numerous CR attempts with anger, denial, defensiveness, or even simply getting up and leaving. For example, Ben Shapiro gave a review of *Get Out* that firmly exemplifies a white fragility response. Instead of seeing and hearing Peele's CR strategies and message regarding systemic racism, Shapiro seemed to believe that the film was racist against white people. He says that the main theme of the movie is that "whiteness is bad" and "Blackness is good," meaning that by condemning white people for racist actions, Peele

is engaging in racism himself (Shapiro, as quoted in Staff, 2020). Peele tries to overcome this barrier by situating his film within a genre that privileged and/or white people tend to flock to. Nevertheless, it should be noted that it is impossible to guarantee that all white/privileged people will watch the end credits with a raised consciousness regarding systemic racism.

Get Out attempts to raise audience consciousness through strategies including camera frames and genre, character dialogue, costumes, and setting. Peele created a horror movie, but more importantly he created a *Black* horror movie that seeks to confront white and or/privileged audience members with their own complicity in perpetuating and maintaining systemic racism. This is especially poignant because Peele asserts and debunks the myth of a post-racial America, proving that systemic racism is still alive and well. In addition, Peele makes it plain that the true antagonist of the film is systemic racism itself, as opposed to just the evil Armitages. *Get Out* is horrifying, but not because of jump scares or ghosts. It is horrifying because it shows audiences a truth so often denied.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

After *Get Out*'s 2017 premiere, several movie reviewers and critics from prominent American newspapers praised the film for challenging the illusion of American post-raciality and for bringing systemic racism to the forefront of popular culture's consciousness, at least for a brief time. For example, Manohla Dargis (2017) of the *New York Times* called the film "both exciting and unsettling" because "real life [kept] asserting itself, scene after scene" and that Peele was "after more than giggles and shocks: [he was] taking on 21st century white racism and its rationales." Dargis (2017) goes on to say that she "[flashed] on Trayvon Martin" during Andre's abduction in the film's first few moments, meaning she picked up on Peele's purposeful mirroring of racism in the real world. Brian Tallerico (2017) of Roger Ebert's review site summarized *Get Out* as "unsettling and hysterical . . . totally unafraid to call people on their racist bullshit," adding that Peele "understands that every time a [B]lack man goes home to visit his white girlfriend's parents, there is uncertainty and unease." The uncertainty and unease Tallerico (2017) mentions is indicative of the ongoing presence of systemic racism. *Like Stories of Old*, a movie analysis YouTube channel with 363K subscribers started in 2017, says that *Get Out* shows white fragility "no mercy," and Peele is "relentless" by not allowing his film to end on a resolution that absolves the white Armitages of their sins (van der Linden, 2017). There is no white savior complex, no forgiveness for the Armitages or, by extension, systemic racial oppression. In sum, the film garnered praise from critics, many of whom pointed to *Get Out*'s crucial dismissal of post-raciality. In that sense, Peele successfully created the conditions for raising audience consciousness regarding continued systemic racism in America.

The number of American newspaper headlines mentioning the phrase "post-racial" has dropped in recent years, suggesting that there has been less talk surrounding the myth of post-

raciality. According to LexusUni, there were 2,180 newspaper headlines that included the words “post-racial” from the beginning of 2014 to the end of 2016, but that number dropped to 1,341 from the beginning of 2017 to October of 2020. However, the phrase “systemic racism” has skyrocketed in American newspaper headlines in the past few years. There were 2,672 headlines mentioning systemic racism from 2014 to 2016, and that number went up to 10,000+ from 2017 to October 2020. In the year 2017 alone, it showed up 999 times. This suggests that perhaps post-raciality has faded out of American consciousness and more attention is being given to the systemic racial oppression that keeps racism in place and actual post-raciality at bay. In this way, Peele’s film paved the way for more public discussion surrounding oppression, while at the same time exposing and debunking the myth of post-raciality.

Jordan Peele began writing *Get Out* during 2008, the first year of the Obama administration. In a 2017 interview Peele stated that when he was writing the script “people were saying, ‘racism is done’” but that statement was a “post-racial lie” (Peele in Galuppo, 2017). Peele understood that, although a Black president was certainly an important milestone in American history, Obama’s presence in the Oval Office did not mean that systemic racism had been eradicated. Systemic racism is built into this country’s very foundation, and thus the work to dismantle it is at times arduous and cumbersome, but necessary. That is not to say that complete eradication is forever impossible, just that Obama’s presidency did not dismantle systemic racism in one fell swoop. Changing the emperor does not change the empire. Peele sought to expose this post-racial lie by creating a Black horror film that cast “the system itself and society” as the role of the “monster,” thereby raising audience consciousness surrounding systemic racism’s continued existence and their continued complicity in it (Peele in Galuppo, 2017). By placing various CR messages within a horror film, Peele prompted audience members

to equate *Get Out*'s horrors with the horrors intrinsic to the Black experience in America.

Audience members were encouraged to recognize that those horrors did not vanish once slavery was legally outlawed, or once Obama came into office; Rather, they still existed during legalized slavery, during Obama's presidency, and today in 2020.

Systemic racism continued/s to stifle marginalized groups through every facet in society, even after *Get Out*'s release. For example, according to Statista, 803 Black people were shot to death by the police from 2017-2020 ("Number of people shot to death by the police in the United States from 2017 to 2020, by race," 2020). Many of those 803 people were never named or discussed in the news circuit, proof that systemic racism always seeks to protect itself from detection so that it can continue unchecked. Those whose murders were acknowledged by the media include Botham Jean (2018), Breonna Taylor (2020), and George Floyd (2020). It is important to note that finding and compiling data for police violence against civilians is a flawed science. While police often claim that murder while on the job is justified, "it's difficult to gauge how many killings are justified and aren't when so much data is missing" (Lopez, 2018). Still, the fact that I was able to find statistics regarding police brutality against Black civilians at all shows that perhaps this is changing as more studies are conducted. White violence and police violence against BIPOC in general did not decrease in the years following *Get Out*'s release, as seen in Amhaud Arbery's murder, Botham Jean's murder, Breonna Taylor's murder, George Floyd's murder, and the rise of the Proud Boys, a violent white supremacist group.

Get Out did not eradicate systemic racism, just as Obama's time as president did not herald an age of post-raciality. However, they both serve as important moments for recognizing and dismantling racial oppression in America. CR seeks to raise awareness and challenge complicity, but participants must then take it upon themselves to actively work to eradicate

systems of oppression. Oftentimes this step requires more commitment and activism than (white/privileged) people are willing to give and has more to do with ourselves and each other than presidents and films. Peele, forced to contend with this and white fragility writ large, attempted to insert CR messages into a Black horror film. Unfortunately, white fragility is a strong adversary comfortable in its proliferation of racial (and racist) willful ignorance. In other words, white/privileged audience members could easily claim to “just not *get*” the film and absolve themselves of any CR response or realization.

Peele’s use of the horror genre allowed him to reach a wider audience. *Get Out* was voted one of the top ten films of 2017 by the National Board of Review and the American Film Institute, and Peele won an Academy Award for the Best Original Screenplay among a host of other awards (“‘Get Out’: Nominations and awards”). Oftentimes a more direct approach to confronting systemic racism risks white fragility. In other words, blatantly calling out a white/privileged person for their privilege and complicity in oppression tends to evoke responses of anger, denial, and defensiveness. These reactions only strengthen systemic racism’s hold, because they do not result in true CR or self-reflexivity. To work around this barrier of white fragility, Peele implemented his CR message within a horror film, a genre that appeals to large swathes of the population, in order to reach the maximum number of people without necessarily inciting white fragility and/or complete disregard. Using film as a medium for CR also restricted audience members from leaving. While theatregoers are not held captive in their seats, it is generally frowned upon to leave in the middle of a film, meaning that audience members were encouraged to experience *Get Out* in one uninterrupted sitting.

It is important to note that restricting films to the horror genre is a fraught topic. After all, who gets to decide what is and is not terrifying? Peele, in an interview with *Rolling Stone*,

unequivocally asserted that with *Get Out* he “set out to make a horror movie” and so I interpret it in my analysis as such (Peele in Hiatt, 2019). While at times the film has been referred to and labelled as a social thriller, the root of *Get Out* lies in horror. It fulfills Coleman’s criteria for a Black horror film: it has “an added narrative focus that calls attention to racial identity, in this case Blackness - Black culture, history, ideologies, experiences, politics, language, humor, aesthetics, style, music, and the like” (p. 7). Not only that, but the film was written and directed by a biracial man, imbuing the film’s creation with Blackness and a Black perspective.

Summary

In this study, I have argued that Black horror films can be used as strategies for raising audience consciousness regarding systemic racial oppression. I examined *Get Out* for its embodiment of Black feminist CR beliefs and the various strategies Peele used to raise audience consciousness through a Black horror film format. Black feminist CR revolves around several key tenets, including: “[illuminating] the interconnected nature of oppression” with regard to race, class and gender, and a focus on addressing and confronting one’s own complicity within those interconnected oppressions (Sowards & Renegar, 2004, p. 546). While the general public’s impression of CR is that it only takes place in CR groups composed of white middle- to upper-class women, Sarachild (1978) dismantles this notion by pointing out that “there [is] no one right method of raising consciousness” (p. 147). Not only that, but anyone of any gender, race, or class, can participate in CR strategies.

I analyzed three key pivotal CR scenes from *Get Out* in order to describe and explain Peele’s strategies for raising audience consciousness regarding systemic racism in America and the myth of post-raciality. Each of the three scenes occurs at paramount moments during any narrative: the beginning, the middle, and the end. Along with where they occur, I also chose

these scenes based on their CR salience. All three point to systemic racism as the true monster and to the overlapping oppressions still enforced by systemic racism today. Thus, they represent Peele's attempts at CR. Peele employed both macro and micro strategies to transmit his message. Macro strategies involved components such as camera frames and genre, and micro strategies involved components such as character dialogue, costumes, and setting.

Peele uses Andre's abduction in the film's first scene to signal his CR attempts to audiences, prompting them to both acknowledge the continued presence of systemic racism and confront their own complicity in it. Andre, a lone Black man, is accosted and kidnapped while wandering lost in an affluent white suburb at night. Systemic racism is the reason he is unsafe and the reason that no one comes to his aid, and Peele is purposefully mimicking the times this has happened in real life. For example, Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man, was shot while wandering around a white suburb in 2020. He was unsafe, and no one came to his aid, either. However, Arbery was murdered while the sun was still up, proving that Black men are not safe in white spaces even during the daytime. Andre's Black presence, like Arbery's, is simultaneously unwelcome and threatening to the pristine white space. His Black body is disappeared mere minutes after daring to infringe upon a white suburb. The street remains quiet and undisturbed after Andre is abducted, mimicking the way systemic racism resumes its control quickly any time someone tries to fight back and expose it. The suburb, having rid itself of Andre's problematic presence, can once again resume its white, affluent silence. For months, Arbery's murderers walked free. Only after "an article by the New York Times, the release of a video of the confrontation, and increased attention from lawmakers, celebrities, and civil rights activists" were any steps made towards justice (Fausset, 2020). They have now been indicted for murder and are awaiting trial, but it took an enormous amount of community effort to make that happen.

The second pivotal CR scene occurs towards the middle of the film, during a time where conflict is heightened, and the audience is led to realize that something is deeply wrong with the Armitage family and estate. In this scene, systemic racism appears as the monster again, this time through the Armitage's Black maid, Georgina. Her white mannerisms and white voice jarringly contrast with her Black appearance and serving occupation, leaving Chris bewildered, frightened, and alone in his Blackness. Georgina is not a Black ally for Chris to confide in. Rather, she represents whiteness's ever-present and domineering existence, denying Chris's numerous experiences with racial microaggressions at the Armitage party downstairs and resolutely proclaiming that the Armitages are "so good to [Black people]." Here, Peele is mirroring white/privileged responses to BIPOC claims of microaggressions: white/privileged people tend to deny the existence of microaggressions, thus denying the existence of systemic racism. The audience has seen Chris subjected to a host of microaggressions during the scene prior, and they are led to mistrust Georgina's denial of what was just witnessed. In this way, Peele is prompting audience members to simultaneously acknowledge that microaggressions exist and acknowledge that they themselves must stop using microaggressive language regarding BIPOC.

The third scene casts systemic racism as the main antagonist through the supposed police officer and Rose. Rose, relying on stereotypical depictions of Black men and white women, attempts to garner sympathy and aid from whoever is behind the wheel of the police car that pulls up moments after Chris stops strangling Rose. Real world situations have taught the audience that the police officer will most likely spring from the car, gun in hand, and fire several shots into Chris's Black body before a single word of explanation can leave Chris's lips. Rose's cry for help mirrors the way white women have used sympathy, pity, and lies to assist in the unjust killing of Black men. Chris, seeing the police car, slowly stands and raises his hands

above his head. He knows how to respond to the police car's presence because of systemic racism. Countless Black men in the real world have been wrongfully murdered by police for much less than strangling a white woman out of self-defense. Trayvon Martin was only walking while wearing a hoodie. George Floyd was only (allegedly) using a counterfeit bill. Freddie Gray was only trying to breathe. Systemic racism is the reason for the stereotypes Rose is calling upon, and it is the reason that the audience is led to assume that Chris will be murdered for the crime of being a Black man. When Chris's Black friend Rod emerges from the car instead, Peele is prompting audience members to confront their assumptions surrounding Chris's probable murder at the hands of the police. If systemic racism was gone, why would they assume for one minute that Chris wouldn't escape alive and intact? After all, he is the true victim in this situation, while Rose, masquerading as the white damsel in distress, is the violent killer. Peele included this scene to prompt audience members to question and confront their assumptions surrounding systemic racism, purposefully playing on audience expectations.

All these scenes point to systemic racism as *Get Out's* true monster, and they also cement the Black feminist idea that oppression is intersectional. In the first scene, Andre is seen as threatening and unwelcome in the white, affluent suburb not only because of his race but also because of his gender. Black men have been regarded by the criminal justice system as thugs or brutish criminals intent on seducing white women and/or participating in gang violence. Thus, both his gender and his skin color factor into his oppression. For Georgina in the second scene, Chris (and the audience) is led to assume that she has been oppressed by the Armitages based on her skin color, gender, and occupation. This combination would normally lead to subjugations on multiple fronts in the real world, and yet she denies any semblance of racism from the Armitages. In the final scene, Chris's oppression is intersectional given that he is, like Andre, a

Black man. His skin color is one reason for his oppression, but his gender also factors into how he is perceived by the assumed law enforcement officer.

Limitations

This project sought to discuss strategies for prompting white/privileged members of society to acknowledge and confront their own complicity in continued systemic racial oppression. With that in mind, I turned to Jordan Peele's *Get Out* to determine how it critiqued the myth of a post-racial America while simultaneously calling for a raised audience consciousness regarding continued systemic racism and audience complicity in it. There were several limitations to this approach.

First and foremost, I only examined one film to see how Black horror films embed CR messages in a way that seeks to avoid responses of white fragility. While this has enabled me to understand how *Get Out* functions as a CR tool for white/privileged audience members, there are a host of other Black horror films that I could have used to add to my study. For example, Peele released another Black horror film in 2019, *Us*. Given Peele's track record, it is likely that this film also contains CR attempts and messages for audience members. Adding other films to my analysis could have helped to bolster and strengthen my claim, and other researchers may decide to take up that call and see if my work transcends just one film.

I used CR as a method and lens for analysis, but I adapted it to fit a rhetorical perspective. This means that I did not rely on statistical data for my findings, nor did I offer an explicit examination of audience reactions to *Get Out*. In other words, I did not survey audience members about their takeaways or conduct interviews about their thoughts surrounding the film. Instead, I relied mostly on film critics' reviews and Peele's intentions. This restricted me from being able to make claims about *Get Out*'s effect and efficacy on audience members writ large,

but that approach remains open to future researchers wanting to examine the film using social-scientific research methods.

While Peele's film represents a less direct and less confrontational approach to CR, there are plenty of valid and effective ways to engage with CR in a more direct and confrontational manner. For example, BLM (Black Lives Matter) protests promote the acknowledgement of systemic racism and confront white/privileged Americans through protests. These protests are highly visible, and the hashtag #BLM has become common shorthand on social media for referencing the movement. Twitter has become a place for public callouts of systemic racial oppression, especially with regards to voter suppression during a heated election season. The drawback with more direct confrontational CR strategies is that they risk inciting reactions of white fragility. However, the drawback with less confrontational CR strategies, such as Black horror films, is that they risk tiptoeing around white fragility rather than facing it head on, meaning that white/privileged audience members have an easy out when it comes to just "not getting" the film's message. Academia could absolutely benefit from a study that analyzes more direct and confrontational CR strategies to determine their effectiveness for dismantling systemic racial oppression.

Potential Future Research

Get Out sparked a revival for racial social commentary overtly placed in horror films. Since it premiered in 2017, several noteworthy Black horror films have been released, all with ties to Peele and *Get Out*. His sophomore film, *Us*, premiered in 2019. *Us* revolved around themes of race and immigration, while still positioning systemic racism and injustice as the true monster. Gerard Bush and Christopher Renz's *Antebellum* (2020) was produced in part by Sean McKittrick, who first helped produce *Get Out*. From the title alone audiences can intuit that

Antebellum places slavery in the context of the horror genre, prompting white/privileged audience members to confront and grapple with slavery's lasting legacies in 2020. Nia Dacosta, a Black woman, is directing the remake of the famous Black horror film *Candyman* (1992), set to release in 2021. Jordan Peele wrote the screenplay for the remake, and his production company *Monkeypaw* is slated as one of the film's producers. *Us*, *Antebellum*, and the remake of *Candyman* serve as potential future avenues for research, and each would benefit from analysis through a Black feminist CR lens. Judging from their respective trailers, numerous opportunities remain to explore the ways in which each film tackles, confronts, or engages in Black feminist CR regarding current manifestations of systemic racism. Unfortunately, the killings of BIPOC in this country have not halted. Therefore, it is likely that *Us*, *Antebellum*, and *Candyman* will encourage audience members to make connections between filmic elements and real world injustices in the hopes of curbing the death toll of BIPOC; or, at the very least, encourage white/privileged audience members to both see and confront the existence of systemic racism and their ongoing complicity within it.

CR is a highly adaptable method for encouraging acknowledgement and complicity within systemic oppression. This means that strategies for raising audience consciousness are essentially limitless. As Communication Studies researchers, we can look towards a variety of media for ascertaining attempts at CR, ranging from other Black horror films to books to television shows. Black horror deserves a closer look for academics, and opportunities are rife for analysis with the upcoming Black horror films slated to premiere in the next few years. However, researchers can absolutely look to other avenues for discussing CR efforts towards eradicating systemic oppression in America. For example, what CR messages regarding systemic

racism might be entrenched within the latest episode of *Blackish*, or within Nicki Minaj's latest music video?

Those that teach feminism classes or are interested in the intersection between race and rhetoric can use *Get Out* as an example of modern-day CR regarding systemic racism. Including this film on a course syllabus could prompt other future scholars to take up the call and examine different ways that CR strategies appear in other Black horror films, or in films writ large. It is important for rhetoricians to think about how art and rhetoric emerge from major cultural events, such as Obama's election prompting Peele to write the script for *Get Out*. The election of Donald Trump, for example, was a major cultural event that shifted America's post-racial narrative to one that is decidedly steeped in racism and hate for those that deviate from the image of a stereotypical, heteronormative, white American. How might art and rhetoric reflect this narrative shift?

Conclusion

Get Out has had a lasting impact on American society since its release. References to the film abound in conversations regarding race, horror films, and systemic injustice. For example, in a film recently released on Netflix entitled *The Babysitter: Killer Queen* (2020), a Black male character exclaims that "'that's some post-Jordan Peele era movie horror progress' when he finds out his character isn't the first to be killed off" (Shutler, 2020). This certainly marks a change from horror's beginnings, where Black characters were often used as easy first targets for the killer or sacrifices for the white characters' survival. When browsing *Antebellum*'s recent reviews, Peele's name and/or films are mentioned almost immediately. "In the wake of *Get Out*, there is plenty of scariness and satire to be extracted from the toxic matter of American racism," writes *New York Times* reviewer A.O. Scott (2020). Rolling Stone reviewer K. Austin Collins

(2020) also uses *Get Out* as a measuring stick for *Antebellum*, stating that the directors' project "of course earns comparison to Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, a phenomenon whose global success can safely be credited with making the green-lighting of projects like *Antebellum* much more viable to begin with." In sum, Peele took up the torch of creating Black horror films and is using it to raise the consciousness of white/privileged people in the hopes of one day dismantling and eradicating systemic racism for good.

Movies can and often do respond to and reflect societal issues and problems, and horror films are known to be subversive because they tend to challenge, reveal, and/or prey upon current societal fears. For example, the slew of horror movies set in idyllic suburbs during the 1970's and 1980's (*Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Halloween*, *Child's Play*, *Friday the 13th*) preyed upon parental fears, such as the fear that rampant teenage sex and drug use would result in death and murder. Horror films during those decades showed this in different ways, but primarily through the trope of the Final Girl. The Final Girl is the one character in horror films that is allowed by horror movie conventions to live, mostly because of her virginal asexuality, while her more sexually promiscuous friends are killed. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) mirrors the fear Americans felt about Communism. Neighbors were turned into emotionless "pod people," referencing the way Americans feared that Communism would steal into one's mind and render them indifferent strangers to their friends and family despite looking the exact same as before. George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) reflected public fears regarding racial boundaries and debilitating consumerism, respectively. More recently, the *Purge* horror film franchise (2013-2018) ramps up audience fears surrounding unrestrained patriotism in conjunction with systemic injustice. Horror films have and will continuously function as social commentary amidst all the jump scares and screams. Jordan

Peele's *Get Out* overwhelmingly assures us of that. But even more importantly, Peele reminds us that Black horror has been and will continue to be “a vehicle to take up all sorts of topics of empowerment, revolution, and rewriting the sites for heroism and evil” (Coleman, 2014, p. 9).

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