***Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*, ed. by Dawn Keetley**
(Ohio State University Press, 2020)

In her recent book *Darkly: Black History and America's Gothic Soul*, Leila Taylor unearths the strains of gothicism interwoven with the history and culture of Black America. Alongside now canonical manifestations of the African-American Gothic – Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, Billie Holiday's haunting rendition of 'Strange Fruit' (1954) – Taylor also argues for the existence of a lived gothic reality unique to the Black experience. Taylor positions the violence of slavery, segregation, and structural racism as historical horrors capable of challenging the most chilling of ghost stories, the most gruesome of slashers. For Taylor, racism and its capacity to dehumanise Black Americans is inherently uncanny. Writing about the Three-Fifths Compromise, the historical decision that for the purposes of legislative representation only three-fifths of the slave population would be counted as people, Taylor describes this concession as inherently 'spooky'.[1] If only three out every five Black Americans were considered human, what happened to the other two? Should African Americans be considered only three-fifths of a full person? As Taylor herself puts it, '[d]id those extra two Black people never exist? Are they phantom people who are almost there but not quite? […] Like [Ralph] Ellison's invisible man, the three-fifths man walks here among us, yet not all here, not all whole.'[2]

Jordan Peele's 2017 horror film *Get Out* is equally preoccupied with the uncanniness of the African-American experience. Imagining a quasi-science-fictional reality in which ageing whites can pay to have their minds transplanted into the unwilling bodies of people of colour, *Get Out* literalises the physical and cultural estrangement at the heart of Black America. The film's depiction of Black bodies stolen and occupied by a powerful extrinsic force not only replays the trauma of the transatlantic slave trade; it also invokes pertinent questions about white liberal racism, the intersection of race and class, the insidious nature of micro-aggressions, and the racialised division of urban, rural, and suburban space. Alongside its profusion of textual meaning, *Get Out* has also emerged as an immensely important film in cultural and cinematic terms. Nominated for four Academy Awards – and winning in the Best Original Screenplay category – *Get Out* accrued a level of critical respect rarely afforded to a horror film. At the same time, some critics and observers attempted to disentangle *Get Out* from the claws of such a disreputable genre: it was, inexplicably, nominated for Best Picture

[1] Leila Taylor, *Darkly: Black History and America's Gothic Soul* (London: Repeater Books, 2019), p.65.
[2] Ibid.

in the Musical or Comedy category at the 2017 Golden Globes. Likewise, a number of writers have attempted to re-classify Peele's film as 'elevated horror', suggesting that *Get Out*'s incisive social commentary might be out of place within a cinematic mode commonly associated with exploitation, gore, and cheap shocks. Moving beyond these controversies, *Get Out* can be understood not only as a film that reflects the complexity of race relations in the US, but as a work of art that has actively contributed to the discussion of race, prejudice, and privilege in modern America. Phrases and images lifted from the film have been deployed and even memeified in mainstream and online discussions of systemic racism. The term 'Sunken Place' – a reference to the state of living death inhabited by victims of *Get Out*'s racist body-swap procedure – has even entered the discursive lexicon to describe the ongoing oppression of African Americans in the twenty-first century.

Compiling an academic study of such an immediately important and influential film was always going to be a challenge. Yet Dawn Keetley's new edited collection, entitled *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*, not only succeeds in unravelling the multitudinous discourses that have already accrued around the film; it also elegantly suggests new ways of reading and contextualising *Get Out*. The collection brings together sixteen diverse essays, each offering a fresh and insightful perspective on the film, its contexts, and its intertexts. The selection of essays is impressive, not only in its scope, but in the sophistication of the interconnections between the individual chapters. The collection flows beautifully, with each chapter building on the last to present a carefully interwoven, multifaceted view of *Get Out*. Taken together, the essays compiled in *Jordan Peele's Get Out* constitute a rigorous analysis of one of the most intriguing films of the past twenty years. The collection opens with an editor's Introduction by Keetley, in which she contextualises the film within an established canon of 'political horror', carefully placing Peele's work alongside an extant 'tradition of body horror that emphasizes the ways in which black bodies, in particular, are not their own' (p. 5). The Introduction also aligns *Get Out* with two other films, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (dir. by Don Seigel, 1956) and *The Stepford Wives* (dir. by Bryan Forbes, 1975), which Keetley identifies as works centred around politicised body-swaps. In these earlier works, Keetley notes, human bodies are swapped out for nonhuman forms – that is, alien invaders and robots. *Get Out* not only draws on this narrative tradition, but renders it infinitely more disturbing by focusing on whites who view African Americans as nonhuman, as 'Black repositories for white minds' (p. 6). Keetley then moves on to examine how *Get Out*'s central narrative conceit, ageing whites who desire to appropriate and occupy youthful

Black bodies, draws on nineteenth- and early-twentieth century theatrical traditions of Blackface minstrelsy. Intriguingly, however, Keetley argues that this kind of racial masquerade is also adopted by Black characters in the film, who, in order to survive in a white world, must present themselves as what philosopher Lewis Gordon terms 'black bodies with white conciousnesses' (quoted p. 7). Keetley's careful teasing out of the psychological, philosophical, and political horror at the core of *Get Out* thus situates the film within a long-standing tradition of African-American Gothic, in which the iconography of stolen bodies and fractured minds expresses the fundamental uncanniness of racist dehumanisation.

After the Introduction, the book is divided into two parts, whose reverberant titles suggest how the sections will mirror and indeed converse with each other. Part One, 'The Politics of Horror', locates *Get Out* within the broader horror tradition, exploring its links to texts as diverse as William Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604), Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932), and the horror novels of Ira Levin. Part Two, 'The Horror of Politics', engages more explicitly with the politics of *Get Out*, analysing how the film offers a rigorous yet nuanced critique of racist institutions and ideologies. Essays in this section of the book explore a wide variety of interconnected themes, from *Get Out*'s fantastical reconfiguration of the slave revolt to its engagement with W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of 'double consciousness'. The breadth and insight of these essays is truly extraordinary, and it is difficult to do justice to the conceptual inventiveness of the book's sixteen chapters in a brief review. The critical dexterity evinced by each of the authors included in this book is breath taking, and the entire collection offers an enticing glimpse at the creative scholarship currently being undertaken in the study of Black speculative fiction and popular culture.

Chapter One, by Jonathan Byron and Tony Perrello, charts the generic shift from tragedy to horror in fictive representations of interracial relationships. Comparing *Get Out* to *Othello*, Byron and Perrello argue that, not only do both texts centre on an accomplished Black man who is forced to confront the racist assumptions of white society, but they also explore how that white society mobilises stereotypes in order to manipulate and nullify Black agency. In Chapter Two, Linnie Blake convincingly argues that *Get Out* adapts a number of the narrative and aesthetic tropes of the Female Gothic to reflect uniquely African-American experiences, while simultaneously refusing to feminise the film's protagonist. Next, Robin R. Means Coleman and Novontny Lawrence show how *Get Out* renders monstrous the 'Whitopia' – a predominantly white space valued for its homogeneity and 'exclusivity'. Chapter Four opens with a discussion of a 2012 skit in which director Jordan Peele and his

sketch-comedy partner Keegan-Michael Key confront an army of racist zombies who simply refuse to bite them, even backing away in fear from the two Black men.

From here, Erin Casey-Williams moves on to explore the textual and conceptual links between *Get Out* and earlier zombie films like *White Zombie* (dir. by Victor Halperin, 1932) and *Night of the Living Dead* (dir. by George A. Romero, 1968). Following on from this, Bernice M. Murphy offers an engaging analysis of the role of space in *Get Out*, examining how the film restructures suburbia as a site of Black anxiety, and reconfigures the cinematic tropes of the 'backwoods-horror' subgenre. Chapter Six presents an intriguing comparative reading of *Get Out* and John Frankenheimer's 1966 film *Seconds*, in which Robyn Citizen unravels the political subtexts embedded in the body-swap narrative. In Chapter Seven, the wonderfully titled 'Jordan Peele and Ira Levin Go to the Movies', Adam Lowenstein reads *Get Out* in tandem with two novels, *Rosemary's Baby* (dir. by Roman Polanski, 1967) and *The Stepford Wives* (dir. by Bryan Forbes, 1972), by popular mid-century novelist Ira Levin. Through an insightful analysis of Peele and Levin's representations of the minority experience, Lowenstein maintains that both creators treat the persecution of social minorities (African Americans, Jews, women) as real, legitimate pain rather than the paranoid fantasies that their fanciful narratives might initially suggest them to be. The final chapter in this section, Sarah Ilott's discussion of African-American gothic realism, serves as an apt coda to arguments put forward in the previous chapters, as the author demonstrates how the Gothic serves an ideal form through which to critique structural and systemic racism.

Part Two, 'The Horror of Politics', engages in a subtle shift away from generic, formal, and literary concerns, and towards the real-world inequalities and abuses that produced *Get Out*, and the context of unrelenting violence into which the film was ultimately released. Chapter Nine constitutes an in-depth study of *Get Out*'s critical reception, in which Todd K. Platts and David L. Brunsma undertake a qualitative content analysis of twenty-six different reviews of *Get Out*. In doing so, the authors seek to uncover how reviewers responded to *Get Out*'s treatment of race; how reviewers deployed diverse analytical and interpretative frameworks to guide audiences through the film; and how reviews by white writers differed from those of writers of colour. Next, in what might be one of the collection's most inventive chapters, Sarah Juliet Lauro explores how, in *Get Out*, Peele found 'a way to talk about slave revolt without talking about slave revolt' (p. 149). Commencing with an overview of the complex historical responses to Nat Turner's 1831 slave uprising, Lauro argues that *Get Out*'s story of 'capture, occupation, and revolt' not only re-enacts the

historical trauma of the transatlantic slave trade, but also revisits some of the diverse strategies of resistance performed by enslaved peoples in the US (p. 149). In Chapter Eleven, Mikal J. Gaines reads *Get Out*'s Sunken Place through the lens of Du Bois's notion of 'double consciousness'. A formative analysis of Black subjectivity, Du Bois famously described double consciousness as a 'twoness' that arises from the dual condition of being Black in America: 'two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder' (quoted p. 162). Gaines persuasively argues that the Sunken Place, where people of colour watch helplessly as their bodies are controlled by occupying whites, 'literalizes the paralysis that accompanies being forced to occupy a splintered sense of self as a principle condition of life' (p. 161). Protagonist Chris's foray into the dark, cavernous Sunken Place, his alienation from his own mind and body, can therefore be understood as a visceral expression of the splintering inherent in double consciousness. Chapter Twelve is an engaging discussion of Black manhood, wherein Robert Larue uses *Get Out*'s 'tea cup' sequence to explore the disturbing manner in which Black males are regularly (mis-)interpellated as men/boys.

The subsequent chapter, by Kyle Brett, examines the role of photography in *Get Out*, unpacking the paradox of the photographer's privileged position behind the camera. Chapter Fourteen is another highlight, as Laura Thorp engages *Get Out* in an inventive intertextual dialogue with James Baldwin's 1965 short story 'Going to Meet the Man'. Here, Thorp argues that, just as whiteness is portrayed in Baldwin's story as contingent upon anti-Black violence, so too does *Get Out* predicate the endurance of whiteness on the occupation of the Black bodies. In the penultimate chapter, Cayla McNally convincingly argues that the violence enacted against people of colour in *Get Out* forms part of a disturbing history of scientific racism, wherein racial difference was ascribed biological origins to legitimise structural inequality. Lastly, the concluding chapter undertakes a detailed study of *Get Out*'s paratexts, with a special emphasis on the film's advertising campaign. Here, Alex Svensson pays particularly close attention to a billboard advert that accompanied the film's release. Emblazoned with the confrontational question 'Do You Belong in This Neighborhood?', the advert, Svensson maintains, provoked vital discussions about Trumpism, anti-immigration sentiment, gentrification, and segregation.

As stated above, Keetley's book is an impressive achievement and a fitting response to an important film. The essays that comprise the collection are well chosen, and each author approaches *Get Out* from a distinct critical, theoretical, or political perspective. Although

offering a multiplicity of diverse readings of the film, there is also a coherence to the essays, as each work clearly foregrounds the unique imbrication of speculative horror and political critique that defines *Get Out*. The essays are brief – all under twenty pages – and, as such, the pace of the collection remains lively and dynamic. Yet, despite their brevity, the essays are all endlessly insightful. *Jordan Peele's Get Out* is a book certain to attract a wide and varied audience. While possessing obvious appeal for scholars of horror and popular cinema, researchers working on African-American history and culture will likewise find much to engage their interest. Teachers, too, should also find Keetely's book both edifying and useful. Indeed, the collection would be well suited to courses on Black cinema, science fiction, contemporary Gothic, and popular culture. Because the essays are both brief and written in an accessible style, they are ideally positioned to serve as recommended readings on college/university courses.

At this point in history, with the Black Lives Matter movement once again mobilised against racist violence and police brutality, it seems almost trite to describe Keetley's collection as timely. It might, in fact, be more accurate to say that, at this moment in time, it is a necessary book. Each of the essays collected here foregrounds the deft, disturbing manner in which *Get Out* intertwines politics and horror. Excavating the dense layers of meaning embedded in Peele's film, each chapter frames the African-American experience of pervasive, insidious racism as inherently uncanny, infinitely horrifying. *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror* examines the horror of a history marred by slavery, violence, and dehumanisation, while simultaneously elucidating some the ways in which horror can give us a language through which to speak about both the corporeal and psychic trauma of racism.

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