

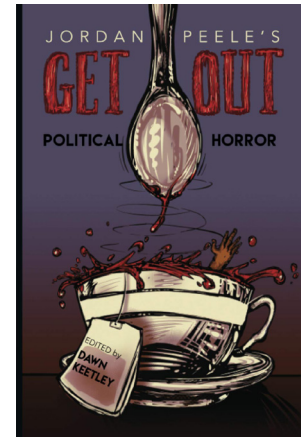
Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror, edited by Dawn Keetley



Rebecca Hankins

Dawn Keetley, ed. *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror*. The Ohio State UP, 2020. New Suns: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Speculative. Paperback. 254 pg. \$29.95. ISBN 9780814255803.

Dawn Keetley's edited volume *Jordan Peele's Get Out: Political Horror* is the best advertisement for the blockbuster debut film. The book provides viewers with a manual to investigate all of the film's nuances, not only the overt but especially the hidden meanings elucidated throughout the sixteen essays. Keetley introduces the reader to the film's storyline that centers on Chris Washington, a young Black man who encounters the family of his white girlfriend Rose Armitage. This encounter is the catalyst for the horror or, as Peele designates it, "social thriller" about race, racism, and society that inevitably leads to violence. Peele notes that those who wield power in society are often the purveyors of terror and horror, especially to those without power. As Stokely Carmichael notes, "If a white man wants to lynch me, that's his problem. If he's got the power to lynch me, that's my problem."¹ Peele's *Get Out* represents an archetype of humans wielding power represented in the Armitage family and the Coagula Society, which becomes the horror for those without power, Black people generally and Chris Washington specifically.



Keetley situates the film in the long tradition of horror films in which humans are the monsters, e.g. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *American Psycho* (2000), *Hostel* (2005), the *Purge* franchise (2013-18), and many others. The debate over whether human monsters depicted in political horror films, as opposed to a nonhuman monster, can be called horror continues. Keetley and Peele argue forcefully that his work is an extension of the social and political commentary that adds a layer of racial critique to this genre of horror. Following in the footsteps of social, political, and racial horror are the three films that Peele acknowledges were influences for *Get Out*, specifically *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), and *The Stepford Wives* (1975), each a critique of "societal structures-whether it be patriarchy or racism...-as the monster." (4)

The themes of the essays include those that influenced Peele's film, e.g. zombies, body snatching, and a new Black gothic tradition that recognizes that "violence remains a part of everyday Black life" (120). Sarah Ilott's "Racism that Grins: African American Gothic Realism and

Systemic Critique” (Chapter 8) is reflective of those themes that allude to Georgina, Walter, and Logan’s “mask that grins” (Paul Lawrence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask,” qtd on page 169). Each of these characters has already endured the Coagula brain transformation, their bodies already *snatched*, but conversely, they continue to retain a fading recognition of their former selves.

There are also connections to contemporary themes such as gentrification, rural v. urban, and neighborhoods as place. The Armitage home represents the gothic plantation of the South, but Peele turns this notion on its head by locating the home in the liberal bastion of Upstate New York. There are a number of essays that discuss what Robin Means Coleman and Novotny Lawrence describe in their essay “A Peaceful Place Denied: Horror Film’s “Whitopias” (Chapter 3) as places where Black people feel conspicuously out of place. Andre Hayworth succinctly labels the setting as a “creepy ass suburb” (56) before he is snatched. These essays are particularly prescient for our current times with Trump’s recent tweet to those “living their Suburban Lifestyle Dream” that they will no longer have to be bothered by low income housing intruding in their neighborhoods as he rolls back another President Obama-era program designed to reduce racial segregation in American suburbs. For Trump it is the Whitopia that is “often prized for its segregation and homogeneity” (47).

Another group of chapters discuss *Get Out*’s connection to other historical and contemporary figures that include Othello, W. E. B. DuBois, Ira Levin (author of both *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Stepford Wives*), and James Baldwin. Particularly noteworthy is Robert Larue’s “Holding onto Hulk Hogan: Contending with the Rape of the Black Male Psyche” (Chapter 12), which compares Missy Armitage’s hypnotizing Chris to police officer Darren Wilson’s explanation of his fatal 2014 encounter with teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. For Missy and Wilson, Black men are never children, they are always scary and in need of subduing. This chapter adds to our understanding of the Black male as vulnerable and targeted. We see that vulnerability as the camera focuses on Chris’s eyes as he is rendered into the Sunken Place, unable to move and awash in tears.

Another group of chapters, under the heading “The Horror of Politics,” includes Todd K. Platts’s and David L. Brunsma’s “Reviewing *Get Out*’s Reviews: What Critics Said and How Their Race Mattered” (Chapter 9), a chapter that offers some revelatory contrasts between how white reviews and reviews by people of color focus on very different elements of the film. Other essays speak of scientific racism in how Coagula Society members poke, feel, and prod Chris, rarely discussing his intelligence or accomplishments. Their only interest is as it relates to his abilities, his stamina, his athleticism, and physical characteristics, their ultimate motive to learn his body’s suitability for the brain transplant.

The other essay that stands out is Kyle Brett’s “The Horror of the Photographic Eye” (Chapter 13),” which discusses “the eyes of horror” (188), both physical eyes and the white gaze that sees Chris as a vessel. The other “eyes of horror” are represented by the mechanical through the use of Chris’s camera phone. Brett discusses the white gaze of the Coagula Society’s Jim Hudson

who covets Chris's eyes to replace his blindness. Chris uses his camera at the Armitages' party to hide his uneasiness with the attention he receives. It is through his lens that he recognizes the Coagulated Logan and attempts to communicate their shared Blackness, but it is only after his camera accidentally flashes Logan that he screams at Chris to "Get Out." It is also his camera phone that saves him after he flashes Walter, who shoots Rose and then commits suicide. This essay has relevance to our current state of police killings of Black men and women, e.g. George Floyd, Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, Botham Jean, Eric Garner, and Mike Brown, and many more. It is this "horror" that is now captured on anyone's cell phone and shareable worldwide that too often represents an exploitation of their deaths, but also an awareness that has resulted in investigations that would not have been possible in the past.

Keetley has compiled an excellent collection of essays on Jordan Peele's *Get Out*. The book captures all of Peele's influences and nuances; from his choice of music to his use of camera angles, every aspect has been theorized, imagined, speculated, and critiqued as horror, social horror and/or thriller, from its opening scene through to its conclusion. This book is an excellent text for graduate level film studies students. Scholars and students of Africana, Women's and Gender Studies will be discussing the meaning, the methodology, the comparisons, and the film's influence on new films that explore social horror or social thrillers for years to come. Can't wait for the critique of Peele's recent film *US*!

Rebecca Hankins is the Wendler Endowed Professor and certified archivist/librarian at Texas A&M University. United States President Barack Obama (2008-2016) appointed Hankins to the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), where she served from 2016-2020. She is an affiliated faculty and liaison in the Africana Studies, Women's & Gender Studies, and Religious Studies programs. She has published widely in journals and book chapters and has presented all over the world. Her most recent work is titled "Reel Bad African Americans Muslims," published in *Muslim American Hyphenations*, edited by Dr. Mahwash Shoab, 2021.