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Return of the Living Slave: Jordan Peele's *Get Out* as Zombie Film

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Abstract

Jordan Peele's 2017 film, *Get Out*, seems far removed from the gut-munching excesses of the zombie movies of George A Romero or the exotic Haitian "voodoo" ceremonies wherein this folklore originated. However, the connection between the film and the original folk belief traditions are quite pronounced. Firstly, by looking at the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), and then to the folk beliefs within *vodou*, specifically those beliefs about zombification, a pattern of denunciation and fearmongering about Haitians and their beliefs spread throughout the (white) Western Euro-American worlds. The "first black republic" threatened the assumptions of the right of white rule across the 18th to the 21st centuries. Peele picks up on those white fears, and satirically explodes their inherent absurdity with his variation on *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1968), wherein a young black man finds, at first, a warm liberal welcome at his white girlfriend's family's home. But this warm welcome turns sinister as Chris uncovers the Armitages' plot to re-enslave healthy young African American men.

Keywords

Zombies
Haiti
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African-American films/Black films
Jordan Peele
Get Out
Slavery
Folklore
Folk belief
Folk medicine

Introduction

Jordan Peele's 2017 horror film, *Get Out*, seems quite removed from the gut-munching visceral horrors of George A. Romero's now-seminal zombie films. Peele's film lacks a single resurrected corpse anywhere. So how is this a "zombie movie"? Erin Casey-Williams notes, "Although *Get Out* does not feature hordes of brain-eating undead, it draws on zombie cinematic legacies especially in its depictions of racial tension, its comments on class and slavery, the interracial relationships, and nuclear family structures" (Casey-Williams 1). In particular, I want to pick up on how *Get Out* acts as satirical commentary on contemporary racial discourse in the United States, but through the figure of the Haitian zombie slave. To illustrate this, I want to turn our attention to the zombie slave motifs that emerge (primarily) from Haitian folklore, and which graced the silver screen in films such as *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943). But before this, I want to contextualize *Get Out* in the useful paradigm Robin Means Coleman makes between "blacks *in* horror" films – which she defines as "films [which] present Blacks and Blackness in the context of horror even if the horror film is not wholly or substantially focused on either one" (2011, 6) - and *black horror films*: the latter of which "are often 'race' films. That is, they 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" (2011, 7). In this regard, Blackness is an essential part of the filmic narrative. And in *Get Out*, director/writer Jordan Peele explores African American fear, particularly of white suburban "whitopias" (Rich Benjamin, quoted in Coleman 2011, 147) through this focus on Blackness.

Historical Context

To understand the Haitian zombie slave films, we need to understand Haiti itself. What follows is a highly cursory historical overview of Haiti to better contextualize the zombie slave films.

Haiti's colonial history dates to 1492 and Christopher Columbus's (1451-1506) "discovery" of the island he named Hispaniola on behalf of Spain. Spain's colony, on the southern coast of the island, was named Santo Domingo, however, by the early 17th Century, France had established its colony on the Western coast of the island, named "Saint-Domingue" (Coupeau 2008, 15-6). The island was officially divided up by the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697 (Coupeau 2008, 17). Glossing over the next hundred years of colonial history, France developed its holdings in Saint-Domingue by building sugar plantations and the importation of African slaves. At its peak, the estimation was that the slave population outnumbered the French colonists more than 10:1 (Coupeau 2008, 18). Less than a hundred years later, with the French Revolution well underway, Toussaint Louveture (1743-1803), a former slave, led an army of slaves in revolution against their colonial masters (Coupeau 2008, 22-4). Despite France abolishing slavery in all its overseas holdings in 1792, slave revolts continued until 1804 when Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1758-1806) proclaimed himself the president of Haiti, the first black republic (Coupeau 2008, 34). To contextualize the significance of the history of Haiti, the American Revolution had occurred in 1776 and the French Revolution had begun 1789; both of which shook Europe to its foundations simply as a challenge to the divine right of Europe's monarchs to rule. Haiti's right to self-rule was not only equally challenging to the European powers, but as a *black* republic, a republic of former slaves, Haiti represented the realization of Europe's worst nightmares. The fear was not just about

Black rule, but the bloody retribution on the white former masters which was likely to follow. One of Dessalines' first orders was to massacre the white population, or that was the story that circulated; a reflection of White fear of Black retribution, legitimized or not (Coupeau 2008, 34). Sarah Lauro makes explicit reference to "Jean-Jacques Dessalines's injunction to the rebel slaves of Saint Domingue to '*koupe tet, boule kay*,' (cut the slave owners' heads off and burn their houses)" (2018, 48; see also Lauro 2020, 156). Through colonialism, European leaders could convince themselves that their occupation of the territories in the New World (and elsewhere) was beneficial to the native populations who were less developed, less *human,* and needed paternalistic governance for their own protection and well-being. The African slave is the logical extension of the colonial mind's worldview; a process of dehumanization so complete the African was no longer a lesser human being, but livestock and property.

This Othering made the newly formed United States of America particularly nervous; the fear of a slave uprising in the US was a very real possibility. Of course, in the US, in the under the US slavocracy where slave ownership was legal, hundreds of slave-led attacks against their white "masters" occurred, with the most famous being Nat Turner's 1831 uprising. According to Anna Froula (2010, 201),

> US popular rhetoric at the turn of the nineteenth century cast the San Domingo Revolution (1791-1802) as a metaphoric contagion of insurrection threatening the American slavocracy as well as the commercial interests of European empires. The former slave Toussaint successfully led the liberation of the colony, the 'crown jewel' of the sugar trade, from French planters, British and Spanish forces, and the 'allegedly invincible armies of

> Napoleon Bonaparte' and renamed it Haiti, the first 'Black Republic' in the Western Hemisphere. The revolution threatened Europe's slave-trade based commercial interests and haunted American northerners and southerners alike with images of landless white planters fleeing from savage bloodshed.

Under Haitian President Jean-Pierre Boyer (1776-1850), in 1821, Haiti successfully annexed Santo Domingo giving them control of the entire island, with the Dominican Republic declaring its independence from Haiti in 1844. The Haitian expansion into the Spanish territories also fuelled American fears about further slave uprisings, if not an all-out Haitian invasion. As Froula again notes, "[Thomas] Jefferson nervously described Toussaint and his forces as prototypical zombies – the 'cannibals of the terrible Republic' – capable of 'sweeping the globe' with 'revolutionary storm'" (2010, 201). The Haitian-as-Other construction needed to be credibly threatening in order to justify the international alienation. As Michael Largey notes (1996, 38-9),

> … Haiti has stood as a symbol of hope for black Americans and of horror for white Americans since the nineteenth century. … Haiti's so-called exoticism and primitivism, depicted Haiti as a degenerate and dangerous place, an example of what could happen if black people were given equal rights with whites.

The United States refused to recognize Haiti until 1862, 58 years after Dessaline declared Haiti a Republic. Other countries were also anxious; Britain didn't recognize Haiti until 1833 and France's recognition had a hefty indemnity price tag of over 100 million francs, which effectively bankrupted the developing nation. Throughout the 19th Century, a seemingly

endless cycle of coups, assassinations, and rebellions make Haitian stability something of an impossibility.

In 1915, a coup that ousted President Guillaume Sam (1859-1915) took a turn for the ghoulish: Sam sought diplomatic sanctuary from the French embassy in Port-au-Prince, but his opponents caught him and threw him over the wall of the embassy garden where a waiting mob tore him apart and then paraded the body parts through the capital. However, as the Sam administration was particularly open to American interests, this coup would negatively impact the massive sugarcane industry as well as using Haiti for an American naval base in the construction of the Panama Canal. Although the US had yet to commit to hostilities, the First World War had broken out, and there were fears of Germany getting a foothold in the Caribbean, which an unstable Haiti might provide. And so, in 1915, the United States Marine Corps landed in Port-au-Prince and occupied the country until 1934 (Coupeau 2008, 68). The American presence stabilized Haiti, but to justify the occupation, the Haitians needed to be represented as a people *needing* occupation. The savagery with which Sam was murdered was just one story about how Haiti was unable to govern itself, and what the people were likely to do if left unsupervised, that is, occupied (cf. Lauro 2015).

The other key narrative by which the white colonial (and neo-colonial) world needed to vilify Haiti further was "voodoo". The preferred spelling of Haitian folk religion is *vodou*; and is comprised of traces from West African *Vodun*, Roman Catholicism, European mysticism, and the remains of Taino indigenous beliefs (cf Largey 1996). Practitioners and scholars of *vodou*, or *vaudou* (Lauro 2015), prefer this spelling to differentiate it from both New Orleans-based *voodoo*, as well as the negative popular culture associations "voodoo" has. As a folk religion, *vodou* is an animistic faith, meaning the practitioner has a personal

one-to-one relationship with the many deities, of higher and lower realms, and often, within *vodou* practices, the gods (*loa*) will possess the celebrant and speak through the possessed individual. During the 19th Century, in an effort presumably to help normalize Haiti's relationships with the outside world, *vodou* practices were banned outright, and the country maintained an ostensibly Roman Catholic façade: "Nominally Haiti is a Catholic country, but in reality, it is deeply pagan" (Hurston 1990, 83). As late as the 1930s, *vodou* beliefs were still denied, at least by the middle classes: as Zora Neale Huston noted, "the upper class Haitian will tell you that there is no such thing as Voodoo (sic) in Haiti and that all that has been written about it is nothing but the *malicious lies of foreigners*" (1990, 83; emphasis added). Predictably, such banning merely succeeded in sending *vodou* underground, in mysterious "secret societies", which simply fuelled the cryptic, dangerous, and possibly demonic aspects of the faith. Ironically, it was Dictator François ("Papa Doc") Duvalier (1907-1971) who helped bring *vodou* into more mainstream acceptance in the late 1950s.

Within *vodou* is some helpful terminology, particularly for discussing the Haitian zombie tradition. *Vodou* rituals tend to be practiced in the *hounfour*, a temple often consecrated to a specific *loa*. Each community would likely have its own *hounfour*, presided over by either a male (*houngan*) or a female priest (*mambo*). The *bokor* is a sorcerer, a magician; often one who works both light and dark magic (Moreman 2018, 31). While a *houngan* or a *mambo* would only deal in light magic, the *bokor* operates with both. As Hurston notes (1990, 189),

> Some maintain that a real and true priest of Voodoo [sic], the *houngan*, has nothing to do with such practices [as raising the living dead]. That it is the *bocor* [sic] and priests of the devil-worshipping cults who do these things.

But it is not always easy to tell just who is a *houngan* and who is a *bocor*.

Often the two offices occupy the same man at different times.

It is also through the *bokor* one makes a zombie, as I will discuss below.

Within *vodou* is the belief in two parts of the human soul: the *gros bon ange* and the *ti bon ange*; the big and the little good angel, respectively. The *gros bon ange* controls the body, the basic functions of life like eating, drinking, urination, and defecation; the *ti bon ange* is the individual's personality, what makes each person unique. In zombification, the *bokor* steals the *ti bon ange* of the victim, leaving just the shell of the person on the most basic functions of the *gros bon ange*.

"You Do Something to Me": Voodoo, Zombies, and Popular Culture

Most cinematic monsters have literary antecedents: *Frankenstein* (1818), *Dracula* (1897) and even the Mummy which can be said to originate in Bram Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903), if not Jane C. Loudon's *The Mummy!* (1827) (Hopkins 2003). But the zombie is a Caribbean creation. Kyle Bishop recognized "zombie narratives are unique in that they develop directly from folklore, instead of following an established literary tradition … and because they constitute the only major monster – cinematic or otherwise – indigenous to the New World" (Bishop 2010, 207). It is directly from the American occupation of Haiti that the zombie came to America (Vials 2011, 42).

Written in 1929, Cole Porter's "You Do Something to Me" includes the following reference to *vodou*: "Do do that voodoo that you do so well." 1929 is also the year in which adventurer William Seabrook published his sensationalistic volume *The Magic Island*. While

this observation is not to suggest a direct causality between the two, Porter is unlikely to have written the line about Seabrook's book, both items of American popular culture, emerging in the same year, suggests "voodoo" was in the air; it was topical. In 1929, the American occupation of Haiti was at its height and Seabrook's travelogue exploited the sensationalistic and exploitative representations of *vodou* and in particular, the zombie. Seabrook did not coin the word "zombie" - Flint puts it as far back as 1819 (Flint 2009, 11), although Vuckovic suggests the first introduction of the word into American popular culture was via Lafcadio Hearne in 1889 (Vuckovic 2011, 14) – however Seabrook did help in popularizing this creature.

While today, we may automatically associate the zombie as a resurrected dead body with an insatiable hunger for human flesh (or even just for brains), the Haitian zombie slave is a creature to be pitied rather than feared. Within the Haitian *Vodou* tradition, a zombie is a resurrected dead body used as slave labour. As Bishop notes "the poor victim of a zombification ritual is a tragic figure, one who has had her identity and autonomy stripped from her, being converted to nothing more than an enslaved cipher" (2010, 53). It is from Seabrook (1966, 93), primarily, we first hear about the zombie:

> The *zombie*, they say, is a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life – it is a dead body which is made to walk and act and move as if it were alive. People who have the power to do this go to a fresh grave, dig up the body before it has time to rot, galvanize it into movement, and then make of it a servant or slave, occasionally for the commission of some crime, more often simply as a drudge

> around the habitation or the farm, setting it dull heavy tasks, and beating it like a dumb beast if it slackens.

While Seabrook himself never encountered one of these unfortunates, he learns about zombies from his "rational friend" Polynice (i.e., a black Haitian with a Western education) (1966, 100). Zora Neale Hurston, writing almost ten years later, however, met Felicia Felix-Mentor, a demented middle-aged woman believed to be a zombie; Hurston refers to her as "the broken remnant, relic or refuse" of the person that once was (Hurston 1990, 179).

Even before Wade Davis's celebrated explorations of Haitian folk medicine (1985, 1988), Hurston recognized that zombies were not *actually* resurrected dead bodies, but that a state of near-death "induced by some drug known to a few [i.e. the *bokor*]" was more likely (1990, 196). Hurston continues, speculating "that it [the mysterious drug] destroys that part of the brain which governs speech and will power. The victim can move and act but cannot formulate thought" (1990, 196). Seabrook too understood that the Haitian zombies were "nothing but poor ordinary demented human beings, idiots, forced to toil in the fields" (1966, 101). Philip Horne usefully summarizes the science behind zombification, working from Wade Davis's two books on the subject, the popular *Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985) and the more scholarly *Passage of Darkness* (1988):

> Most of the ingredients are chemically inactive (human remains, for instance, are always included for magical reasons); but all recipes include irritants (the powder is applied to the skin), and, most importantly, a powerful poison derived from the puffer fish: 'tetrodoxin offered a material basis for the zombie phenomenon' …. The effect of this poison ($C_{11}H_{17}N_3O_3$) in fatal cases is 'complete peripheral paralysis, marked by imperceptibly low metabolic levels

> and the retention of consciousness on the part of the patient up until the moment of death. When the dose is carefully administered it can produce, for at least a day, *apparent* death. Davis argues that 'there are only two certain indicators of absolute death', one an expensive combination of brain scan and cardiogram, the other putrefaction' …. In Haiti's hot climate corpses are buried immediately to avoid the latter (Horne 1992, 105; original emphasis).

Horne continues (and continues citing Davis),

> Its effects [the tetrodoxin] are 'an induced state of psychotic delirium marked by disorientation, acute confusion, and complete amnesia' …. These chemicals combine with the complex Vodou ritual to convince the pariah-victim, along with the Bizango secret-society members present, that he or she has been turned into a *zombie corps cadaver*, that the *bokor* has captured 'the victim's *ti bon ange* – that component of the Vodoun soul that creates personality, character and willpower' … The zombie, having lost itself, is ready to be renamed and put to work as slave-labour (1992, 105; original emphasis).

Imagine being dosed with tetrodoxin and experiencing your own (near-)death; you are unable to move but are still conscious, unable to reassure your loved ones that you are not really dead. You watch your own funeral, and your family's mourning, helpless to comfort them. Worst of all, you experience being buried alive and left for dead in the wet earth. Your brain is already highly compromised due to the effects of the drug and combined with the sensory deprivation of the burial and the beliefs within vodoun culture, when the bokor finally resurrects you, not much more than a traumatized psychotic emerges from the grave,

good only for slave labour; the "somnambulistic laborer" as Lauro calls them (2015, 78). "When you have seen them, with their faces and their eyes in which there is no life, you will not only believe in these *zombies* who should be resting in their graves, you will pity them from the bottom of your heart" (Polynice, quoted in Seabrook 1966, 100).

Most commentators recognize that the fear of the Haitian zombie slave is about becoming one, not encountering one. As Bishop notes, "the indigenous locals aren't afraid of the zombies themselves, but of those individuals who have the power to create them" (2010, 53), the *bokor*; at least, such is the explicit fear (Moreman 2018, 34). As the first Black Republic, the zombie also functions as a reminder that, while today they are free (if impoverished), the Haitian is only a touch of tetrodoxin away from retuning to be a slave. Slavery is ever-present in Haitian culture, a tacit reminder of the country's bloody birth two hundred years earlier (Phillips 2011, 27). Daniel Cohen observes that the zombie is the "slave's nightmare": "For the slave, the only hope of release was death and the possible promise of a blissful afterlife. But if a dead slave's body was reanimated for labor as a zombie, then the slave existence would continue even after death, a particularly horrible thought" (Cohen 1972, 60). Bishop (2010), Davis (1988), and Moreman (2018) see the stories of Haitian zombies to function as a form of social control, a warning to the Haitian subaltern that they too could be enslaved to a *bokor*. While a life of toil is hard and impoverished, the zombie (narratives) functions as a continual reminder of an afterlife of toil without *any* recompense, and no family to offer warmth or love. For a country that first threw off the shackles of slavery to form a Republic, the master/slave relationship becomes deeply ingrained into the Haitian psyche; and that relationship manifests itself as the zombie.

Jordan Peele's *Get Out*

Critical accolades have showered down on Jordan Peele's directorial debut: nominated for two BAFTA and Golden Globe awards (including Best Picture – Musical or Comedy), and four Oscars (Best Picture, Director, Actor and Original Screenplay) in 2018. This is a tremendous achievement as the horror genre is often overlooked by award governing bodies, let alone genre contributions by African Americans filmmakers. While the film is not a "comedy" in the strictest sense of the word, and despite the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, who give out the Golden Globe awards, nominating the film in the "Best Comedy or Musical" film category, the film is, more precisely, a satire: a narrative genre about serious, often topical, issues, in an ironic or exaggerated sense, in order to explode the absurdity of real-world beliefs and prejudices. And, as Kimberly Brown notes, "Peele conceives *Get Out* as an allegory for slavery" (Brown 2020, 107), a satirical commentary on slavery in the guise of a horror film. Many commentators have picked up on *Get Out*'s satirical commentary. Sarah Ilott, for example notes, "Peele's film functions as a gothic satire on contemporary race relations in America that calls to mind the history of the slave trade alongside the contemporary systems that continue to disenfranchise African Americans in the present" (2020, 118); a point also noted by Jarvis (2018, 98), and Poll (2018, 70). Kimberly Brown notes, "In *Get Out*, Peele showcases post-blackness as a tool of liberation predicated on satirical and surrealist techniques as a more effective mode than social realism to combat and reflect the absurdity of our present 'post-truth' moment" (2020, 107). Returning to the subject of zombie movies themselves, and how *Get Out* functions as a zombie satire, Sarah Ilott makes the connection explicit, in noting how "the zombie has been employed by

authors, directors, and economists alike as a parodic critique of neoliberal economics and consumer culture" (Ilott 2020, 114). Peele's zombie movie is a highly regarded example in this tradition.

For those unfamiliar with the film, a brief precis: Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), a young African American photographer, and his white girlfriend Rose (Allison Williams), are on their way to visit Rose's wealthy, yet liberal, family upstate. Her mother, Missy Armitage (Catherine Keener), is a hypnotherapist; her father, Dean (Bradley Whitford), is a neurosurgeon (and "would have voted for Obama for a third term" as he tells Chris, thereby establishing his liberal credentials). Chris and Rose's visit coincides with an annual Armitage family get-together, started by Rose's grandfather, of friends of the family. Or so it appears. The stereotypes of inter-racial coupling in American cinema tend to focus on either black male desire for white women or white male desire for black women (even as a structured absence in the case of mulattos – wherein the miscegenation is unseen, but the mulatto's existence is proof that it had occurred). While not unique in American cinema, white female desire for black men is less common (as such would suggest female agency). Up until the film's climax, Chris is passive; it is Rose and her family who have agency, until Chris reclaims his own. This structured active/passive dynamic is an inscription of an older master/slave relationship, at least in regards to character agency within the narrative. The film's conclusion, with Chris reclaiming that agency, is a violent overturning of the film's power dynamics, a violent form of black rebellion against white control, and by extension of the racial politics of the film, against white hegemony. Sarah Juliet Lauro observes an almost identical dynamic of overturning the power relations in the Haitian oral tradition about zombies, as well as the connection between this moment in the film and Dessalines' massacre of the White slave owners in Haiti, noted previously.

So how does this connect with zombies? Up at the Armitages', Chris encounters only three other African Americans, all of whom act rather strangely. Two, at least, are in menial/domestic roles as maid/housekeeper (Georgina – Betty Gabriel) and groundskeeper (Walter – Marcus Henderson). Both "servants" are formal and polite, and there is something distinctly peculiar about them. Chris also encounters Logan (Lakeith Stanfield), the husband, partner, or possibly paramour to the wealthy and much older "white-lady" Philomena (Geraldine Singer). As Chris's best friend, Rod (Lil Rey Howery), would call it, Logan appears to be Philomena's "sex slave". These three African American characters behave strangely: stiff, formal, and even old-fashioned in their grammar and vocabulary. These three appear like something out of Ira Levin's 1972 novel, *The Stepford Wives*. Chris tries to take Logan's photograph, but the flash causes a kind of "seizure" in Logan and he attacks Chris, screaming to "get out!" Earlier, Chris has a conversation with Georgina about her "accidentally" unplugging his phone, and we see the maid struggling with some kind of inner demon as a single teardrop falls down her otherwise expressionless face.

When Chris and Rose go off together during the garden party, the celebration gets down to its real purpose: a silent auction to "buy" Chris. Chris, of course, is completely unaware that he is being sold to the highest bidder (using Bingo cards, of all things). And here is where we get the meat of *Get Out*'s central discourse: an expression of African American fear about White Liberal America's actual agenda. Despite the apparent kindness, generosity, and progressive attitude toward Chris in particular, it is all a ruse. Dean tells Chris he knows how it looks to have African American servants, but both were hired to look after his ailing parents and when they died, it just seemed right to keep them on. For by Darrius Hills and Seth Vannatta note, "Rose's parents represent what Shannon Sullivan describes as 'good white people' [2014]. … They affect the veneer of stereotypical progressive white liberals

who try to show superficial solidarity with Chris" (Hills and Vannatta 2019, 4), and which Ryan Poll refers to the Armitages's "insidious mask of liberalism" (2018, 85). The mid-film revelation that Chris is on the auction block – with Chris unaware and unable to have any say in this – clearly and explicitly evokes the auction and sale of Africans as slaves in American history. Returning to the idea of the Haitian zombie stories which expressed fears regarding being *re*-enslaved, despite their liberation through revolution, and the establishment of the first Black republic. The fear of becoming slaves again is all too real. And zombie-slave narratives reflect that uneasy awareness about how easily their freedom could be taken away. *Get Out*, as an African American horror movie, reveals white liberals' ultimate intention: to re-enslave black men and women. Dawn Keetley notes this explicitly, wherein she reads the Armitages' "false allyship of progressive whites" (2020, 7). Thus, *Get Out* emerges as a satirical discourse masquerading as a horror melodrama. But, the best horror movies have always been social satires – i.e. *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978) and *American Horror Story: Cult* (Season 7, 2017), to name but two. Sarah Ilott makes the connection explicit, in noting how "the zombie has been employed by authors, directors, and economists alike as a parodic critique of neoliberal economics and consumer culture" (Ilott 2020, 114). We now see the significance of the Bingo cards: "Bingo!" in the sense of the satirical revelation of what white liberals are really up to (Keetley's "false allyship" or Poll's "insidious mask of liberalism" (2018, 85)), as much as the cultural stereotype that white people apparently enjoy playing Bingo. The point echoed by Brown (2020, 114): "The bingo game enables Peele to make fun of white-themed pastimes, but also to highlight how white elites play games with black lives, while blacks are oftentimes oblivious to their peril".

So why are Black folk being sold at auction in Upstate New York (actually filmed in Georgia, a former slave-owning state, giving the film an even greater resonance of place)? The

answer shifts *Get Out* from a horror movie to science fiction: Dean's father, Roman, invented the Coagula: a process whereby the brain of one person is grafted onto the brain of another. "Weird science of the most egregious kind", to use Maitland McDonagh's wonderful phrase (1994, 77). In the film, rich (mostly, but not exclusively, white) folk are bidding on strong black men so the wealthy can have new younger, stronger bodies. Our "zombies" – Georgina, Walter, and Logan – are Rose's grandparents and (one assumes) Philomena's husband, respectively. The higher function parts of the brain – personality, memory, emotions – are grafted onto the parts of the brain responsible for basic motor function: white higher brain and black motor functions. Through the Coagula, the host's own higher functions are assumed overwritten. However, as we see in the film, a camera flash can momentarily reawaken the person within. Logan's forceful admonition to Chris, to "Get out!", was a warning, not a threat. Likewise, Georgina's single tear suggests an awakened original consciousness, momentarily overriding the foreign brain in control. Putting these pieces together, between the Coagula and the zombie-slaves, the host's *ti bon ange* is removed and replaced with the buyer's. The buyer's *ti bon ange* sits atop the hosts' *gros bon ange*. And effectively renders Georgina, Walter, and Logan zombies, at least in the Haitian tradition.

One of the most horrifying aspects of the Haitian zombie tradition is the thought that deep within the zombie's brain, the original person may not only be still alive, but conscious too – fully aware, but unable to do anything about their current state. Even if only momentarily, the camera flash acts like salt in the Haitian tradition; whereby, giving salt to a Haitian zombie slave, will awaken the person within the zombie. Seabrook notes succinctly, that "as everyone knows, the *zombies* must never be permitted to taste salt or meat" (2016, 96). Later, Seabrook illustrates this superstition with a story about accidentally giving zombies

some salted peanuts: "… and as the *zombies* tasted the salt, they knew that they were dead and made a dreadful outcry and arose and turned their faces toward the mountain" (2016, 98). Chris's camera flash awakening Logan/Andre is a direct parallel with the Haitian folk belief about zombies and salt. We can see other brain transplant zombies in Marino Giorlami's *Zombie Holocaust/Dr Butcher, M. D. (Medical Deviate*) (1980). This motif may also be in some of the other zombie slave b-movies of the 1930s and 1940s; but that is another research project altogether.

There are other *vodou*/Zombie slave references throughout *Get Out* too: Missy's hypnotherapy and Dean's neurosurgery can be read as a form of modern arcane arts – a new voodoo, if you will. Missy triggers hypnotic trances with her tinkling a teaspoon inside a teacup, echoing (New Orleans) voodoo use of bells to aid celebrants into ecstatic states. And much like other white *bokors* in the classic Zombie slave films, like *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932), the Armitage's "new voodoo" is an appropriation of black folk traditions, much as the Coagula is an appropriation of black bodies. We could also extend this analysis to include, like in the old zombie movies, Chris and Rose having to travel *to* the "land of the zombies"; here, upstate New York rather than the Caribbean islands. Upstate may be where Rose is from but underlines why the suburbs are no place for African Americans, an observation explicitly voiced by Andre (soon to be transformed into "Logan") immediately prior to his abduction in the film's pre-credit sequence. If white fear about black *vodou* rites suggested young white women abducted off the streets, in Peele's satiric inversion, we see young black men abducted in much the same way. It is also not too much of an interpretive stretch to note that, while Logan's born identity as Andre King, is revealed, as both Rod and Chris knew him from years back, we do not know Georgina's or Walter's birth names. This issue of naming and renaming, and the power of retaining one's own name, is an intentional

echo of the renaming of African slaves upon arrival in the slave states of the US; the original names of the Coagula victims are as unknown as a slave's former African name.

In this regard, *Get Out* reflects African American anxiety regarding white liberal agendas. The film's satire suggest that the white progressive agenda is to return African Americans to slavery, and those slavery motifs abound in the film. In addition to Georgina and Walter serving as domestics employees in the Armitage household, or Logan as Philomena's "sex slave", symbols/images of white supremacy and black slavery abound in the film's mise-en-scene: Chris is literally saved in the film by "cotton-picking" (in this case, he is able to pick out wads of cotton from the chair he is restrained in, and uses the cotton, like Odysseus's men do, to block his ears making him resistant to Missy's hypnotic teacup). Rose's brother, Jeremy (Caleb Landry Jones), drives a white sports car and wears a knight's helmet when out abducting black men, in an inversion of any chivalric code, but also an intentional echo of the "white knights" of the Klu Klux Klan. We see Rose eating a snack of dry Fruit Loops cereal with a glass of milk; thereby ensuring that white doesn't mix with "colours", as well as commenting on Rose *being* a "fruit loop" herself (i.e. crazy), a point also noted by Brown (2020, 116).

Conclusions

Sarah Lauro notes the following, connecting *Get Out* with the zombie slave tradition:

"Though it may not be a zombie movie per se, *Get Out* does similar work as does the Haitian zombie myth; the film allegorises both slavery *and* slave revolt, which I have elsewhere called the zombie's dialectic: the zombie has historically borne not only imagery of slavery in the entranced's servitude to the witch doctor but also to a historical connection to the

Haitian Revolution, the largest slave revolt on record" (2018, 39). While *Get Out* is certainly allegorical and even satirical, as are zombie movies, the connection is stronger than Lauro suggests. The Coagula itself literalizes the relationship between the *ti bon ange* and the *gros bon ange* within the Haitian *vodou* belief traditions, and the flash on Chris's camera triggers a momentary awakening of the gros *bon ange* of the original person inside, much as Seabrook notes salt does to the Haitian zombie. Missy and Dean Armitage are modern day *bokors* – *mambos* and *houngans* – fusing Western medicine with "native" folk medicine, much like Mrs Rand in Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943); and just as Mrs Rand is that film's actual monster, so too are the Armitages in *Get Out*.

I opened this chapter by citing Robin R Means Coleman. In the conclusion to her book, *Horror Noire*, she states (2011, 213), "Horror, for Blacks, continues to be a study in racism, exoticism, and neocolonialism in which Black Americans are portrayed as outside of Western images of enlightenment, while being subordinated to a system of primitive images – political, economic, cultural, religious, and social". *Get Out*, and Peele's subsequent films, attempts to redress these cultural discourses by putting Black identity and discourse at the centre of *Black* horror films, as Coleman calls them (2011, 7). In *Get* Out specifically, Peele reworks the ideas of the Haitian vodou zombie into the modern-day United States as a means of commenting on, satirically, the suspicions surrounding white liberal America's actual agenda: the re-enslavement of African Americans. Understanding the relationship between the Haitian zombie belief tradition and the black victims of the Coagula, gives Peele's satire its bite.

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Index terms
Peele, Jordan
Get Out
Haiti/Haitian
Vodou/Voodoo
Slave/Slavery/Enslavement
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