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THE DOUBLE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL COMMENTARY IN *GET OUT*

Ali Mohamed

Although the threat of a secretive, century-old cult run by an upper-class white family that aims to kidnap and hypnotize Black people in order to transfer their brains into the bodies of their captives might not be a truly legitimate threat, the film *Get Out* still proves to be hauntingly realistic in its portrayal of the African American experience. The 2017 award-winning horror film has been praised for its glaring social commentary on the race relations in America. Peele successfully blends horror and comedy in order to show a legitimate problem with today's society. There is no doubt of the film's implicit message about racism in America, however Peele's intention goes further than that. Today, racism has evolved in new and unrecognizable ways. Bigotry no longer solely comes in violent and explicit forms. This idea of subtle and polite racism has become more and more prevalent in the daily experience of African Americans. There are also nonviolent social forces that impact Black people that may not seem prejudiced on the surface. These specific struggles are generally less understood by the American public, and they are what Peele attempted to demonstrate throughout this film, beyond just the systemic racism that African Americans face. In this paper, I will analyze how Jordan Peele's *Get Out* attempts to convey the modern-day struggles of Black people interacting with overlooked nonviolent social forms of racism, primarily through the lens of W.E.B. Du Bois' work.

W.E.B. Du Bois was an African-American sociologist, author, philosopher and civil rights activist who was a leading thinker on racial issues and the struggles for Black people living in America. One of his most prominent works was a book of essays titled *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In this book, Du Bois coined the term "double consciousness" which illustrates the psychological challenge of how Black people living in America must constantly view themselves in two ways: How they perceive themselves, and how society perceives them as a Black person. As an oppressed minority, they must always view themselves through the eyes of an oppressive society. As Du Bois writes:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in

one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois)

Peele demonstrates this idea throughout *Get Out*, specifically via the protagonist, Chris. At the start of the film, we see Chris talk to his girlfriend before they visit her parents, asking her if they knew he was Black. While this wasn't a concern for her, he was worried about how her parents might perceive him as a Black man, displaying this idea of double consciousness. This internal conflict further continues throughout the film as he meets the family, and his suspicions remain. Chris is faced with numerous racist remarks from the Armitage family that make him feel uncomfortable. This continues throughout the party that the Armitage family hosts, as all the guests seem to treat Chris as some sort of commodity. When he tries to seek comfort by speaking with any other Black people he encounters, he is met with cold, robotic responses that we later find out is a result of their brain-transplant surgery. Chris becomes increasingly paranoid and uncomfortable because he is thinking of how everyone around him is viewing him through a racist perspective. This was Peele's intention when making the film, as he wrote about in the annotated screenplay: "I wanted to show Chris hit with the fear of unwanted attention walking into that space where everyone is already looking in your direction. That idea of being ambushed with attention" (Peele). Through their eyes, they only see Chris as his race and nothing more, and this exact "two-ness" is what makes him hyperaware throughout the film.

The film later goes on even further in its illustration of this concept of double consciousness. The audience learns that Chris' girlfriend, Rose, was luring him to her home for her family's plot to transfer their brains into the bodies of Black people. After this "Coagula" process, the host's consciousness remains in the "Sunken Place," a dream-like hypnosis. Chris is told that his existence would be as a "passenger" in this state. This is a physical manifestation of double consciousness, as the hosts are forced to view their lives in control by their white oppressors, completely helpless. They fully become this body with "two unreconciled strivings". Another layer is added to this regarding Chris specifically. Chris' body is wanted by Jim Hudson, a blind art gallery owner. Jim tells Chris that he wants him for his eyes, as he is a photographer. However, Chris is also likely sought after due to his double consciousness. As a Black man, he sees the world in a way that Jim could never understand. He is always "looking at one's self through the eyes of others," providing Jim with a diverse perspective to his own. By demonstrating Du Bois' idea of double consciousness through this medium, Peele was able to convey this internal conflict that is often overlooked. Many Black Americans are forced to deal with this hyperawareness, just like Chris,

as they view themselves through the eyes of a white, racist society and encounter these microaggressions and instances of subtle racism.

One of the primary themes of *Get Out* also highlights another overlooked form of racism: fetishization. Writer Dr. Janice Gassam Asare defined fetishism as “the act of making someone an object of sexual desire based on some aspect of their identity” (Asare). When placed in a racial context, that aspect of their identity is their race. While this might not fit the preconceived bubble of racism as being violent or blatant bigotry, it is still harmful for minorities. The main plot of *Get Out* is built on a critique of racial fetishization. The goal of the Armitage family and the Coagula cult is to inhabit the bodies of Black people and their desire for doing so is hinted at throughout the entire film. When Chris is having dinner with the Armitage family, Rose’s brother Jeremy tells Chris of his potential in MMA fighting because of his race: “with your frame and genetic makeup... you’d be a fucking beast” (0:24:45). Jeremy is fetishizing the Black male body and reducing Chris to simply his race and “genetic makeup”. This behavior is continued at the party that the Armitage family hosts as several guests harass Chris and make racially motivated comments. One guest feels Chris’ bicep and asks Rose “is it better?”, referring to their sex and the stereotypes regarding Black men (0:43:15). Another guest tells Chris that “Black is in fashion” (0:43:40). These interactions are all examples of this racial fetishism and how it is still harmful and bigoted despite how it may seem positive. We later discover that all of the guests are there to participate in an auction for Chris’ body, mirroring a slave auction. The eventual “buyer” is Jim Hudson. Before the Coagulation process begins, Chris asks Jim why they chose to target Black people. Jim says, “People want a change. Some people want to be stronger, faster, cooler” (1:25:30). These instances all demonstrate Peele’s intention to critique racial fetishization and how society overlooks its dangerous effects. Even though the party guests are admiring and even glorifying Chris, they are reducing him to nothing more than his race: attributing any positive features to his identity as a black male.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois had another important idea regarding the African American experience. The book talks about a metaphorical “veil” between Black and white people. Part of this veil is white people’s incapability to view Black people as Americans. This veil is demonstrated repeatedly throughout *Get Out*. The Armitage family, as well as all of the guests at their party, were incapable of viewing Chris as anything more than his identity as a Black male. With every encounter with the family members, Chris is met with microaggressions and so many instances of subtle racism. Her father tells Chris he would’ve voted for Obama for a third term if he could and refers to their relationship as a “thang”. Jeremy’s comments at the dinner table regarding MMA are another instance of this. These are all examples of a more “polite” form of racism that is overlooked because it is

not as direct as other forms of bigotry. This seemingly kind, liberal, white family are all only capable of viewing Chris as a Black man and not an American or even just a regular human being. This is a result of Du Bois' veil. Peele used the film to shine light on the danger of this form of racism that is exceedingly prevalent in the modern day.

Not only is *Get Out* a successfully scary horror movie, but Peele's film also accomplishes a remarkable feat with its meaningful social commentary. His goal is to demonstrate the external social forces that impact the daily lives of Black Americans such as Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, as well the nonviolent and overlooked forms of racism like subtle microaggressions and racial fetishization. Given the horror genre, Peele wanted audiences to be frightened, but also to feel uncomfortable as they saw life from an African American perspective. For many white Americans, these ideas were different from the blatant forms of bigotry and oppression that are easier to identify and combat. But if true progress is to be made with America's race relations, no stone can be left unturned. As a result of this significant underlying social message, Jordan Peele's *Get Out* is an incredibly important story for today's society.

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