

Book Review

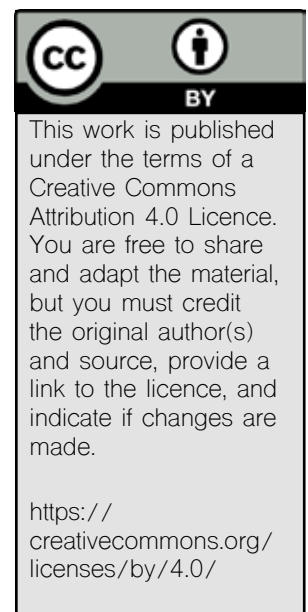
Kevin Wynter, *Critical Race Theory and Jordan Peele's Get Out*

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In 2017, Jordan Peele's *Get Out* was nominated for a Golden Globe in the category of 'Best Musical or Comedy', highlighting the fact that the White establishment did not know what to make of a Black-led horror film, and was deeply uncomfortable with one that addressed the issue of racism in contemporary America. The nomination caused outrage in the Black community, giving rise to Peele's sardonic tweet: "*Get Out* is a documentary". The film quickly became a reference point for discussions of racism and the African American experience, with its chilling concept of "the sunken place" becoming a much-used metaphor for the repression of Black identity and subjectivity.

In this volume, Kevin Wynter sets out to explore the film and its historical context through a productive dialogue between critical race theory and film studies. He raises the possibility that horror - which dramatises repressed trauma and thrives in contexts of social unrest - might be well suited to exploring the Black experience - but notes that historically the genre has been dismissive of Black characters, using them very much as comic relief or disposable Cassandra figures for White protagonists. He makes the case for the cultural significance of *Get Out* in changing that narrative, and in presenting a critique of the afterlife of chattel slavery that may be unique among Hollywood films. The first half of the book provides a lexicon of contemporary critical race theory, coining two new terms - 'trans/plantation' and 'the final brother' that build on these ideas in the context of the film. The second half constitutes a close reading of *Get Out*, drawing on these ideas and providing working examples for many of them.



Chapter 1 begins with an account of the recent political backlash against critical race theory. Over-wrought and often downright absurd, the nature of this backlash both demonstrates the unsettling power of the ideas encapsulated in critical race theory and, ironically, has served to raise popular interest in them. It goes on to introduce a succession of key terms, each with its own subtitled section. Notwithstanding the author's reference to Raymond Williams' *Keywords* (2014) as a model, the chapter is not alphabetically but intuitively structured, addressing the concepts in an order that allows the explication of each in the context of, and drawing upon, those that precede it. This approach makes for an effective and engaging introduction and in that sense sets up a productive conceptual framework to inform the film analysis that follows.

The chapter goes on to unpack the concepts of White grievance, Black America Now, Afropessimism, microaggressions, White privilege, colourblindness, the White gaze, the Black body, wokeness and the associated idea of 'wake', as well as the significance of Black Lives Matter and the ontology of Blackness. It also introduces Wynter's concept of trans/plantation, which he distinguishes from 'transplantation' as it is understood in the context of critical race theory, in terms of highlighting the connection with plantation slavery, as well as that of the 'final brother', a play on Carol Clover's typology of the 'final girl' in slasher films (1992).

On the whole each account is clear and well-illustrated, however there is some unevenness in their presentation. While some sections, such as that on ontology, are written in a traditionally academic style, supported with existing scholarship, others, such as that on Black Lives Matter read as more of a personal account, rather heavy on exposition and rhetoric. There were, moreover, rather too many 'diversions' along the way. The lengthy passage on *Nightmare on Elm Street* used to illustrate how the concept of White grievance might inform horror was unnecessary, as, I would suggest, was the discussion of trans/plantation in *Candyman*.

The section on torture porn at the start of Chapter 2 was a similar case of superfluity. While I would not argue with Wynter's argument that *Get Out* shares some of the conventions of the sub-genre, his brief discussion of this within his analysis of the film needed very little by way of justification and certainly did not warrant the extended taxonomy provided. The film analysis itself, however, which accounted for the remainder of the chapter, was both insightful and compelling.

The connections between the chapters might have been better signposted. Some of the key terms are highlighted in section titles (e.g. "Staying woke and the White gaze"), and others are explicitly

referenced in the analysis (e.g. the concepts of ‘colourblindness’ and microaggressions, both of which are key to identifying what initially appears to be the ‘soft’ racism of a liberal, White middle-class family). However some of the concepts set up as central in Chapter 1 are not clearly signposted within the film analysis, despite clear opportunities to do so (‘Black America Now’, for example, is mentioned just once, almost in passing, but could easily have been the title of the first section of analysis proper, that describes Andre’s experience of the White suburbs; ‘White grievance’, meanwhile is not explicitly referenced at all in Chapter 2, despite the tale of the grandfather who was beaten by Jesse Owens in 1936). Nonetheless Wynter’s reading was firmly based in critical race theory and made a convincing case for the director’s conscious engagement with its key concepts.

The first part of the conclusion neatly bookends the whole with further discussion of the backlash against critical race theory, as exemplified in the 2021 news conference in which Florida Governor, Ron Desantis, possessed perhaps of an underdeveloped sense of irony, proselytised against such ‘unsanctioned narratives’. The final section, ‘Welcome to the desert of the real’, in which Wynter draws comparisons between the respective treatments of false consciousness in *Get Out* and *The Matrix*, reads as something of a coda and could probably have been economically encapsulated within the final part of the film analysis, leaving Peele’s film, and indeed Wynter’s critique, to join the unintended honour roll of unsanctioned narratives.

In summary, notwithstanding the structural and stylistic concerns expressed above, I would thoroughly recommend this volume – in particular to any reader who, like this reviewer, brought more interest than expertise to the topic. An engaging introduction to critical race theory and an insightful analysis of the film.

References

- Clover, C. J. (1992). *Men, Women and Chain Saws*. BFI.
Williams, R. (2014). *Keywords*. OUP. (Original work published 1976).