AfroGoth: The Horrors of Anti-Black Racism in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jordan Peele's *Get Out*

Wendell Rene

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By: Wendell Rene

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Signed by the final Examining Committee:

Dr. Nicola Nixon — Chair

Dr. Nathan Brown — Examiner

Dr. — Examiner

Dr. Danielle Bobker — Thesis Supervisor

Approved by:

Dr. Nathan Brown, Graduate Program Director

Dr. Pascale Sicotte, Dean of Faculty

Abstract

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Though the gothic has historically been viewed as European and an implicitly white genre, it is now a powerful tool for exposing anti-Black racism. This thesis argues that Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* and Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* use gothic scenes of Black suffering in order to illustrate and confront the horrifying effects of white supremacy on Black bodies. We will emphasize that the Gothicism of *Beloved* and *Get Out* exposes and criticizes "horrifying whiteness" not only by inverting Eurocentric gothic traditions but also by drawing on traditional African figures like the *watermeisie* and the *zombi*, and the spiritual values associated with them. Finally, we will show that because of the structural violence of supposedly helpful mainstream white institutions of healing and care, both works continue to be extremely relevant.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In *Darkly: Black History and America's Gothic Soul*, Leila Taylor offers the standard European explanation of how the gothic came to be associated with danger and irrationality in the early modern period:

> The word "gothic" originates from the Visigoths and Ostrogoth, Germanic tribes who sacked Rome in 410. The age of Enlightenment brought a rebirth of classical Greek and Roman forms of culture in which everything was to be rational, instructional, proportionate and harmonious. Rome became equated with culture and intellect, and since the Goths busted in and ruined it, "gothic" became a pejorative. Gothic became synonymous with the Middle Ages and a belief in the superstitions, the supernatural, the obsolete, and outlandish. Gothic architecture with its spiky, skeletal, overly ornate arches, was considered vulgar and barbaric. Gothic novels and their neo-medieval romanticism were thought to be a bit trashy. (34)

Despite this well-known European etymology and legacy, the gothic form has a special relationship with Blackness. The foundation of the United States out of the dehumanization of Black slavery still impacts Black and white lives to this day. Taylor goes on to argue that "if the gothic sensibility was an object it would be the extreme conspicuous futility of the ruin" (158). This "ruin" connotes America's twisted soul and the endless harms done to Black bodies and souls. The promise of the US Constitution that "all men are created equal" was and is a lie: clearly Black people have never been seen or treated as equal. Instead, they have been slated for

physical and financial ruin, holding the status of an afterthought within white American cultures and economic systems. Taylor points out that gothic novels were originally thought to be "trashy" and that throughout most of American history, the white mainstream has treated Black people as "trashy" and "ghetto," and even disposable. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman shows how "the crimes of slavery are not only witnessed but staged" (22), pointing out that there was (and is) a theatrical and aesthetic dimension to the violence inflicted by whites on Blacks. While certain Black athletes, entertainers, and upwardly mobile elites (such as Michael Jordan, Serena Williams, LeBron James, Beyonce, Denzel Washington, Snoop Dogg, and Barack Obama to name a few) are appreciated and celebrated by white and Black communities alike, the vast majority of Black Americans are still subject to structural inequality and gratuitous, even spectacular violence.

It is therefore only logical that Black Americans are particularly attuned to the artistic value and effects of the gothic, as Taylor argues that "the work" of the gothic is "processing our darkest fears, molding our deepest trauma into something not just manageable, but pleasurable. While everyone is asleep the gothic is up in the middle of the night making beautiful music" (186). Gothic narratives "were (and still are) a means of working through the discomfort of a changing world through the safety of fiction: fears of industrialization, the speed of scientific discovery, the uncertainty of secularism, epidemics and disease, immigrants and cultural others, nuclear annihilation, climate change … every real social fear has its metaphorical monster" (66). For Black authors and readers in particular, the gothic is even more powerful since it can transform the horrifying truths of white supremacist violence and hate into something new and bring a much-needed sense of control over the horror – because you can put a book away or turn

off a movie temporarily if you need to regulate your mind and emotions. Taylor's metaphor of "beautiful music" is especially deft as it recalls the fact that Black people in America and around the world have created some of the most beautiful music ever heard, and in many cases used music to deal with trauma and anxiety.

Similarly, in *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places*, Maisha L. Wester delves into the intersection of the African American experience and gothic literature. In the usual gothic colour scheme, black evil torments and is defeated by white goodness. Wester argues that African American texts go beyond merely inverting this colour binary by destabilizing the entire notion of fixed categories and boundaries. African American writers have substantially reimagined this genre. The Black gothic, Wester argues, is a ""multipolar reflecting reflection" that reveals how archetypal depictions of racial, sexual, and gendered Others are constructions used to enforce white patriarchal dominance" (2). The inversion of white equals good and black equals bad in the AfroGothic has powerful sociopolitical effects. It's not just that white people are not as saintly and Black people are not as putrid as they have been made to seem. Rather, the colour inversion is a revolutionary act by Black writers that confounds the notions white people have had of themselves and of society as a whole. AfroGoth, a term I picked up from Taylor's *Darkly* that also titles this thesis, is an idea and subgenre that Taylor presents as the possibility "to represent gothicness without representing colonialism" (29). The Black gothic is a way of putting "white patriarchal dominance" on trial for the crimes it has committed against the racial, sexual, and gendered minorities it has subjugated.

Building on Taylor's and Wester's views of Black Gothicism, this thesis will demonstrate that *Beloved* and *Get Out* make use of gothic tropes as defined within the white tradition but put a decidedly Black and African spin on them. *Beloved* and *Get Out* make use of the themes and images that have been used for centuries in European Gothicism. Both works take place in isolated gothic landscapes. There are haunted houses: 124 in *Beloved* and the Armitage House in *Get Out*. There are villains and monsters like Schoolteacher as well as the haunting figure of Beloved in Morrison's novel and the sadistic Armitages and their friends in *Get Out*. Moreover, Morrison and Peele have also obviously internalized Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny, which, as Wester helpfully defines it, is "that which is familiar but repressed and which returns to haunt the subject" (11-12). In *Beloved*, the haunting that lasts the entire novel is a prime instance of the uncanny, while in *Get Out*, the uncanny shows up in the film's defining scene discussed below. Morrison and Peele also explore European views of abject monstrosity, described by Wester as "that which is utterly denied within the self and projected onto an Other body. The abject monster […] is both horrible and somewhat familiar." (12). In Morrison's novel, the titular character acts as the protagonist's abject monstrous counterpart. In Peele's film, it is the guilt and shame that white characters deny within themselves that is projected onto Black people – specifically the guilt over the institutionalized brutality toward Black people that has lasted from the time of slavery to the Jim Crow era and beyond. Though both works take on well-known gothic tropes and themes, in this thesis we will see that their Gothicism is most visible and powerful when viewed through Black cultural lenses.

Chapter 2: Black Trauma and Horrifying Whiteness

In this section of the thesis, we will explore how Morrison and Peele represent anxiety and fear as fundamental to the Black experience. Oppressive systems have affected Black people for generations. Wester notes that African Americans have appropriated the gothic "to express anxieties and concerns about their place in dominant American culture," adding that "the genre has been the locale of contestation between normative and 'nonnormative' bodies since its very beginnings" (25). The profound anxieties caused by anti-Black racism and violence, though originating in slavery, have persisted long after Black people were ostensibly freed. Black Americans have never felt as safe as they should, having been treated as "nonnormative" and constantly Othered and harmed by white people. Following the US Civil War, physical and sexual violence followed Black Americans from the plantations to other rural areas and cities. Even after they were in theory free, they did not share all the liberties enjoyed by their white counterparts, facing all kinds of aggressions from the daily humiliation of having to drink from separate water fountains and attend separate schools to the deathly harms of mob lynchings for unproven "crimes." Though stories of Black suffering and anxiety are sometimes told in conventionally realistic novels, the gothic form can communicate this suffering and anxiety in a more intense and engaging fashion. Wester suggests that "Black literary gothic significantly rewrites the notion of the uncanny. In Black literature, revelation and recognition of the 'dark' secret proves vital to progress. Likewise, the notion of the repressed savage/primitive has already been historically inscribed upon the black body" (28). The "dark" secrets of slavery and Jim Crow have continually been diminished and dismissed as white racists play dumb and pretend they never happened or proclaim that they happened so long ago and were not as bad as they

have been depicted. Pan-Africanists have implored their Black brothers and sisters to go back to Africa to find greater freedoms, but many Black Americans vehemently disagree, refusing to leave the country that they were not only born in, but helped to build, and demanding reparations from their government for Black labour and suffering.

Material and political oppression has taken a huge toll psychologically and emotionally. Black people have never shied away from expressing feelings of hardship, anger, and sadness through the blues and many forms of art and literature. But the theme of haunting, which is so central to the gothic, has proven especially useful for showing the effects of longstanding racism. As much as white America would want to repress the memories of slavery and Jim Crow, not facing them head on has meant that anti-Black racism plagues the whole of the United States in a powerful, sometimes indirect way. The memory of Black suffering is embodied in both Morrison's *Beloved* and Peele's *Get Out*. *Beloved* tells the story of how Sethe, her daughter Denver, and their house are all haunted by a ghostly being that eventually takes corporeal form: this ghost is believed to be Sethe's slain daughter, Beloved. In *Get Out*, we follow a man named Chris going to visit his girlfriend Rose's family in their palatial home. Though we can't tell immediately what its object is, it's clear that Chris's anxiety grows more and more intense in this setting. In *Beloved*, Sethe is a Black woman who has escaped the shackles of slavery to provide a better life for her children, yet the pervasive and invasive beasts of slavery, racism, and patriarchy have sunk their claws into her, leaving scars that impact all her relationships. In *Get Out*, white supremacy plays the critical role as the source of Chris's anxiety: his initial worry is about whether Rose's white family will accept him, but as the film progresses, the audience sees that their acceptance is not of the kind that he, or we, would want or expect.

Beloved and *Get Out* are especially resonant for Black audiences because the racialized identities of the protagonists of both works factor not only into how these characters are perceived and treated by others, but also how they move through the world and how they conduct themselves. Both Sethe and Chris use the repression of painful memories as a survival tool. Sethe has to actively work at remembering certain extremely painful experiences. She uses the word "rememory" when she struggles to remember or asks someone else to talk about their past. Morrison gives Sethe the prefix *re-*, which means "back" or "again," to indicate that Sethe has experienced memory loss, and that Sethe is challenging herself to "go back" to lost memories in order to stabilize her mental condition and find a path forward. The word "rememory," in contrast to the standard "memory," also points specifically to Black Americans' lack of access to education. At the same time, it conveys Morrison's demand to all her readers to go back into the history of America and face the horrors their country has enacted.

Pain resurfaces in the present whenever a past trauma is revisited. *Beloved* and *Get Out* especially emphasize that revisiting old traumas also can lead to new forms of suffering in the present and into the future. These ongoing, potentially endless consequences of old traumas are visible, for instance, when Sethe recounts a gruesome memory to Paul D, a man who, like Sethe, was enslaved and eventually fled from the plantation Sweet Home. Paul D has been reunited and reacquainted with Sethe after years apart and has been settling in nicely… until Beloved makes her (re)appearance. Paul D is growing fond of Sethe and believes they could build a future together. But when Sethe tells him about killing her daughter, Paul D finds her actions so unimaginable that he compares Sethe to an animal: "'You got two feet, Sethe, not four,' [Paul D]

said, and right then a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet" (194). It is one thing for white people to treat Black people like animals, but when a Black man compares another Black person – a Black woman, in particular - to one, that is white supremacy and patriarchy causing a chasm between two longtime friends. Although Sethe and Paul D are physically in close quarters, a massive emotional gap immediately appears between them. We can see why and how Paul D would question Sethe and respond in the way he did, but we can also see why Sethe has a problem with anyone, particularly a man, questioning her motives as an enslaved mother. In *African American Gothic,* Wester argues that the first mention of prostitution in *Beloved* "occurs in connection with Beloved's headstone. "Sethe exchanges ten minutes of sex for the seven letters of Beloved's gravestone […] The sold and filled space between her legs is thus rendered grotesque, a life-giving space remade as sign of death and dead subjectivity even as it is filled by another subject's desire" (195). With Sethe exchanging sex for the possibility of a lasting monument to her daughter, it's understandable why she's protective not only of Beloved, but of her own agency and integrity as well. Sethe did what she had to do to spare her daughter from a deplorable existence. The description of "life-giving space remade as a sign of death" harkens to a zombie image that we'll delve into later. Turning sex, a supreme pleasure when there is active consent, into an act of violence is disgusting enough; by setting nonconsensual sex in a graveyard, Morrison evokes all the everyday horrors Black people face whereby even things that should feel good are destroyed through white exploitation.

Paul D has missed the point. Sethe takes action to spare her daughter after being chased by Schoolteacher, a white man who worked at Sweet Home, and his cohorts. These men want to bring Sethe back to the plantation, but Sethe refuses to allow her children to grow up under

slavery. Infanticide was a mode of resistance among slaves. Since Black people and their offspring were seen as property under slavery, committing infanticide was a form of rebellion in the same vein as burning crops, poisoning crops, and fleeing plantations. C.L.R. James documents this phenomenon in *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, which is described as the definitive account of the Haitian Revolution. James notes that on certain plantations "the slaves decimated their number by poison so as to keep the number of slaves small and prevent their masters embarking on larger schemes which would increase the work" (16). Black women practicing medicine at the time admitted to these acts: James explains, "a Negro nurse declared in court that for years she had poisoned every child that she brought into the world" (16). Some Black nurses deliberately infected babies with jaw-sickness, a disease that affected children in their first few days after birth. The jaw-sickness prevented babies from opening their jaws, resulting in the children dying from hunger. According to James, "Negro midwives alone could cause it," and it led to "the death of nearly one-third of the children born on the plantations" (17). Sethe shares the same view as these Black nurses and midwives who refused to allow Black children to suffer under slavery like they did. Having been equated with and treated as animals and objects under total white control, many enslaved Black people had the wherewithal to subvert the economic logic of the plantations they worked in and to refuse to increase white wealth through their own bodies and offspring. Wester points out that *Beloved* was specifically inspired by the enslaved African American woman Margaret Garner who, rather than be brought back into slavery, decided to kill her own daughter and intended to kill her other three children and herself. Wester describes how in an interview Garner spoke about infanticide "calmly." Infanticide may seem inhumane, but the institution of slavery was even more so. It instigated a vengeful approach to justice – "an eye for an eye" – that is part of

all gothic literature. Construing Black lives as white property led to especially heartbreaking efforts to end that cycle of violence and control.

On the other hand, many Black people couldn't even fathom the thought of infanticide, let alone actually harm a baby. The disdain of infanticide is also shown in *Beloved*, in the way that Sethe is essentially shunned from her community. Ella, who was initially friends with Sethe when she first arrived in her new home, bluntly exclaims at one point, "I ain't got no friends take a handsaw to their own children" (221). The rest of the community in Cincinnati, Ohio likely feels similarly to Ella - Sethe's act has clearly repelled people away from her and Denver. Infanticide creates the circumstances under which Sethe becomes a social pariah in the Black community. Yet if racist slavers had not chased down Sethe to take her own child from her and treat them like property, this act would never have occurred.

The counterpart to Sethe's traumatic "rememory" in *Get Out* is revealed in the scene in which Chris tells Dr. Armitage, Rose's mother, about the night his mother was killed in a hit-and-run accident. Chris feels guilty because he didn't call for help right away. Chris's painful, repressed memories shape how the scene unfolds. It begins with Chris lying in bed next to Rose, unable to sleep, then deciding to step outside to smoke a cigarette. He then sees Walter, the Black groundskeeper, sprinting towards him with malicious intent in his eyes. Violins rapidly screeching keep pace with the sprinter, as Walter veers off path at the very last second just before reaching Chris. Shaken up, Chris looks into the house only to see Georgina, the Black maid, blankly staring out of her window while adjusting her wig. Unnerved, Chris foregoes the cigarette. When he goes inside, he is startled again at the sight of Dr. Armitage turning on the

lamp in her dark study with a teacup in her hand. She invites Chris to join her, and as he sits in the chair opposite of her, Chris radiates intense discomfort. Chris is apparently worried that Dr. Armitage will scold him about his smoking as he knows he should quit, and he is also worried about spending time alone with his girlfriend's mother at night. This discomfort also reflects an aversion towards psychotherapy, as he's presently in the setting of an impromptu therapy session.

Starting off casually, Dr. Armitage teases Chris about smoking and asks him if he's comfortable in their home. Then the conversation takes a sharp turn when she asks Chris about the death of his mother. Taken aback by the doctor's brazenness, Chris ends up begrudgingly sharing what happened. We can sense that he's doing this out of politeness and obligation as a guest in his girlfriend's family home, but he's definitely uncomfortable with her line of questioning. He gives Dr. Armitage the side-eye – a flash of distrust before he smiles and laughs to try to ease the tension. Academy Award-winning actor Daniel Kaluuya, who received his first Academy Award nomination for Best Actor in the role of Chris Washington, does a wonderful job of showing Chris's emotional decline over the course of this scene: sitting still, the tears slowly come down his face as he revisits his trauma and finds himself unable to control his body. Catherine Keener, who is stellar as Dr. Armitage throughout the movie, is also especially strong in this scene. In stark opposition to the stereotype of the empathetic white female therapist, she hypnotizes Chris with dead eyes that betray her callousness. Dr. Armitage deepens Chris's hypnotic state by brushing her spoon around the rim of the teacup, paralyzing him. Dr. Armitage, still dead-eyed, amplifies his guilt by following up with, "You're paralyzed. Just like you were on that night where your mother died." The score of the movie pauses when Dr. Armitage says, "Now, *sink* into the floor." The audience hears Chris pleading off-camera, but Dr. Armitage

repeats the word “sink” in a muffled, drowning voice. Chris’s body sinks below the floor, as he desperately tries to claw his way back up, and the score picks up again with undertones that confirm that something horrific is indeed occurring. The part of Chris we see sinking is in fact his spirit or consciousness - because his physical self still sits in the chair, immovable, streaming tears, with a look of abject helplessness and terror in his eyes. Dr. Armitage appears to Chris’s floating inner self across what looks like a giant movie screen, moving closer to his body. She tells him, “Now you’re in the Sunken Place,” before shutting his eyelids. Chris’s inner self is screaming and trying to reach back up, but his screams are horrifyingly silent. He is left behind in the dark. Taylor rightly describes this scene as a “psychic invasion” (122), alluding to the white European capture and enslavement of Africans and the way Black bodies were both physically and psychically invaded by their masters. In “Horrifying Whiteness and Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*,” Julia Mollenthiel defines “horrifying whiteness,” as a “perverse and pathological form of white supremacy that lays claim to innocence even as it destroys Black bodies” (208). Peele brilliantly exposes this white claim to innocence in his portrait of north-eastern liberals in *Get Out*. The Armitages are not the stereotypical white conservative racists of the south: Peele emphasizes that liberalism too may serve as a cloak for anti-Black racism, that Black people may also be subjugated and dehumanized by people who seem to care.

The “perverse and pathological form of white supremacy” that Mollenthiel speaks of is also prevalent in *Beloved*, although white characters rarely appear in Morrison’s novel. The original source of horrifying whiteness in the United States was the institution of slavery whose insidious effects are ongoing. Horrifying whiteness has had such a profound impact on Sethe that she represses her own memory: the events in her former life are too painful to hold consciously.

Thoughts of Schoolteacher, or anything that reminds her of white enslavers, are unbearable to her. A scene towards the end of the novel finds Sethe in duress at the sight of a white man. After snapping out of her initial trance, she attempts to strike the man before others intervene. Sethe has never encountered a gracious and generous white person in her life. There isn't anything obviously malicious about the white man in question (in fact, he's an abolitionist), yet to Sethe he still symbolizes horrifying whiteness. Because any reminder of her enslavement or even the sight of a white person is deeply distressing for Sethe, she has not only avoided white people whenever possible but also unconsciously suppressed all memories related to horrifying whiteness. However, when Beloved appears Sethe begins opening herself up more, sharing parts of herself she hadn't shared with Denver or Paul D. Sethe begins to act differently partly because seeing Beloved pleases her and partly because Sethe feels that she *owes* this openness to Beloved, considering what she has done to her.

Chapter 3: The *Watermeisie*

Beloved's spirit has first made her presence felt in Sethe and Denver's house, known as 124. 124 has been challenging for Sethe's sons, who eventually run away when the spirit of the house becomes too much for them to bear and for Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, who eventually passes away in the house. But Sethe and Denver have been surprisingly welcoming of the restless spirit of the house because they can sense something familiar in it. 124 as a character in the novel reflects the European gothic convention of the haunted house, but Sethe and Denver are not really afraid. At one point when Sethe and Paul D are getting intimate, 124 reacts: "The house itself was pitching. Sethe slid to the floor and struggled to get back into her dress. While down on all fours, as though she were holding her house down on the ground, Denver burst from

the keeping room, terror in her eyes, a vague smile on her lips" (21). 124/Beloved responds intensely to her mother's intimacy with this man whom she doesn't know, obviously disapproving of her mother's romance. Yet when Sethe attempts to hold "her house down," it shows her protectiveness – her motherly instinct – for 124. And though Denver is scared of the disruption, a "vague smile" crosses her face. Denver's conflicted feelings about 124 foreshadow how she will later come to feel about her sister in bodily form. At one point, Denver starts shivering: "Denver approached the house, regarding it, as she always did, as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits" (35). Although they may not yet have expressed it explicitly to one another, Sethe and Denver know where Beloved is through their attachment to 124 and develop feelings for the lost person through the structure itself. The personification of houses is a classic trope of the gothic and horror genres. But Morrison refuses the usual feelings of alienation and fear associated with them. The slain daughter was deprived of a home as an infant, thanks to white slavers coming after her mother and her. Morrison allows Beloved to *be* the home she was deprived of and creates Sethe as a mother who accepts this haunting.

Yet when Beloved takes on corporeal form, Morrison introduces her into the novel with the image of "a fully dressed woman walk[ing] out of the water" (60). In "Black Aesthetics and Deep Water: Fish-People, Mermaid Art and Slave Memory in South Africa," Mapule Mohulatsi discusses how African mermaid figures, the *watermeisie*, function as a "site of slavery memory as well as a reminder of the troubled relationship black and previously enslaved communities have with water" (121). Mami Wata, one of the mermaid figures Mohulatsi talks about, is a "water spirit venerated across the Indian and Atlantic Ocean worlds" (121) who "organise[s]

death and disappearance through water" (121-122). Beloved initially evokes life and re-appearance to Sethe as she has come back from the dead to rejoin her family. However, her destructive energies manifest as the novel goes along. Beloved gradually sucks the life force out of Sethe, "disappearing" her own mother through physical deterioration.

For Beloved herself, water is an element of survival. Early on she is shown gulping "water from a speckled tin cup and [holding] it out for more. Four times Denver filled it, and four times [Beloved] drank as though she had crossed a desert" (63). It is ironic to have a character who comes out of water show up so thirsty, as though she has been deprived of water in her own journey through the water. Beloved's thirst is symbolic of her insatiable nature. It is also symbolic of the overwhelming, drowning quality of her relationship with Sethe. Although she first came out of Sethe just as she later emerges from the water, Beloved requires all her mother's attention and care, just like she always wants more water. The *watermeisie* (water maiden/water girl) is a half-human, half-fish creature, where children are scared with stories that present the *watermeisie* as forces of "disappearance and malice" (125). The *watermeisie* are "reputed to capture and kidnap people," and behave in a "sinister and selfish" manner (125). Arguably, Beloved's gothic nature – her status as the central haunting figure in the novel – resembles the "sinister and selfish" *watermeisie* at least as much as she does that of a European haunted house or the conventional gothic ghost, a supernatural figure closely associated with weightlessness and air. Regardless of whether Morrison was aware of Mami Wata and other African mermaid figures, in choosing to have Beloved "walk out of the water," she links Beloved to one of the most significant African sites of slavery memory.

Water is an original AfroGoth element in *Get Out* too. Slavery lives on in the Armitage home: they have a Black maid ("the house nigger") and a Black groundskeeper ("the field nigger") and hold an actual auction for Chris's body. The film was even shot in Alabama where the American South fought to keep slavery alive through the Confederacy. The "troubled relationship" of Black people to water is also a significant part of the film's exploration of anti-Black racism: Peele shows Chris figuratively sinking into a large body of water. The Middle Passage was the area between Africa and America that twelve million Africans were forced to cross during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. In "Fixing Methodologies: *Beloved*," Barbara Christian writes that "the Middle Passage was, for Africans, a most extreme violation of one of the basic tenets of West African cosmology" (8). The Middle Passage represents the area between life and death (life being Africa, death being America). Christian also observes that, in the many talks she's given on *Beloved* around the United States, few students or even teachers knew what the Middle Passage is (8). Just as Beloved flirts with a watery line between life and death, in *Get Out*, the Sunken Place functions as a "Middle Passage" of sorts. Peele's Sunken Place evokes Africans willingly jumping off slave ships during the slave trade or being thrown off them by force if deemed to be ill. The Sunken Place also connotes Black people without access to pools in the 20th century due to Jim Crow redlining. The brilliance of the Sunken Place as an AfroGoth image is that it conveys a feeling and experience that are central to Black history but that any viewer can relate to – as most people have been under water and can imagine drowning. Seeing Chris sunk several feet deep against his will is an image of anti-Blackness but also potentially terrifying for anyone.

Mohulatsi also discusses how for certain African communities “water is a spiritual medium, so much so that different bodies of water can each have their special significance in the spiritual realm. Water is often understood as a medium or route towards transcending to another world” (127). In *Get Out*, Chris in the Sunken Place is in a state where his soul and consciousness have been suppressed, a pseudo-death if you will. In *Beloved*, we have Sethe’s daughter returning from the dead in the form of a young woman whose presence takes the life energy out of Sethe. Christian, who is a Caribbean-American literary scholar, mentions how Morrison posits Beloved as an “embodied spirit, a spirit that presents itself as a body. In the Caribbean, spirits are everywhere, are naturally in the world, and are not ghosts in the horror-genre sense of that term” (9). Christian is speaking from first-hand experience about Afro-Caribbean cultures. Her anecdote underlines the way Morrison’s story engages common Afro-Caribbean beliefs, yet at the same time shows just how much the use of specifically Black spiritual traditions challenge and reframe the European gothic genre. As Christian points out, in the Caribbean, spirits are not ghosts “in the horror-genre sense.” There is a harkening to the kinship between ancient Black spiritual traditions, the gothic, and the sense of cultural inversion as a major feature of African American engagements with Gothicism. Mohulatsi similarly describes the watermeisie as “an undetermined figure; we can never really know how real she is in the physical world” (131). Beloved’s passing between the spiritual and physical worlds is perceived by Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, but other people in their community are unaware of Beloved until the end of the novel.

Chapter 4: Racism and Zombies

The line between life and death that both Beloved and Chris walk along introduces a zombie aspect to both works. Like water and water spirits, this trope holds special meaning within AfroGothicism. In "On *Get Out* and the Problem of Racialized Aliveness," Rebecca Barnett explores the relationship between racialization and zombification in Peele's film. Although the characters of Georgina and Walter are *technically* alive, with the brains of the Armitage grandparents inside their heads, they are essentially dead when the audience encounters them, as their soul and consciousness - their true essence – are gone. Significantly, at the Armitages' party, the character of Andre is formally introduced to Chris, and the audience, as Logan. Everyone in the Armitages' community knows him as Logan King, not as Andre Hayworth, the name given to him at birth. This renaming recalls the practice of slave owners making enslaved Black people adopt the names of their masters and erasing the names that link them with their family and ancestors. Barnett emphasizes the psychological violence that Chris has to endure: from the police officer questioning him to Rose's brother Jeremy referring to his "beast-like" strength. Barnett argues that "these assaults on [Chris's] humanity lead to what we could term death (or at least psychical death) by a thousand cuts" (205). Affronts on the psyche and character of Black people are also traumatic and have bodily effects – they are figurative beatings into submission by white supremacy. The notion of a "death by a thousand cuts" also evokes the notion of multimorbidity (which we will discuss below) whereby mutually reinforcing mental and medical conditions diminishing Black energy and agency at an exponential rate.

Barnett points out that “Chris’s apparent equanimity in the face of these assaults poses questions about the way in which lives that have been violated can become compliant, beginning to act out the zombie complex that has been forced upon them, experiencing themselves as deadened inside” (205). A corporeal form may appear lively, while the inside is not at all. This discrepancy between the inside and the outside is where the genius and horror of *Get Out* comes from. It is not enough for the white people in *Get Out* to directly (through racism) or indirectly (through silence) cause physical, psychological harm to Black people. Rather, they *literally* dispossess Black people of their bodies via the Coagula experiment. Additionally - and possibly worse - this dispossession is done by the very same supposedly liberal and progressive people who are most intimately romantically and/or sexually involved with Black people or white people whose children are romantically and/or sexually involved with Black people. In the Coagula experiment, it is not enough to allow systemic racism to “deaden” Black inner worlds, this submissive state then allows white people to use Black bodies for their own whims. Barnett argues that *Get Out* dramatizes “the termination of Black consciousness” (206). Taylor also makes a similar point in *Darkly* when she says that, under the ongoing logic of slavery, the “Black body has value, [but] the Black mind is disposable” (122). A strong mind is urgently needed when facing difficult experiences. The imagination can help a person to literally or figuratively escape hardships. Memories can unlock aspects of one’s previous self or – in much the same way that Beloved required water after she came out of the water – they can serve as a well from which to draw new mental strength. The overwhelming challenge of moving on from painful, unprocessed memories while still surrounded by anti-Blackness shapes the plots of both these AfroGoth horror stories. Chris breaks down while recounting the passing of his mother to

Dr. Armitage which leaves him vulnerable to her control and Sethe cannot move forward with her life with Paul D and the rest of her Black community because she is clinging to Beloved.

Barnett cites a passage from Judith Butler's book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* in which Butler explains how acts of violence serve to "derealize" the Other – to make the Other "neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral" (334). This kind of spectrality is central to the figures of horror in *Get Out* and *Beloved.* Georgina, Walter, and Logan are not actually themselves since the brains of white people have occupied their bodies and Beloved too both is and is not herself when she appears after her death. In *Get Out*, it is non-consensual hypnosis that "derealizes" Black people. In *Beloved*, the violence of slavery is physical and visceral and immediate. Sethe has taken a handsaw to her daughter to prevent her from having to live under slavery. Butler "contends that when such spectral lives are terminated they are very difficult to mourn, having lacked real existence in the first place" (cited in Bartlett 206). The fact that spectral lives usually go un-mourned accounts for Sethe's determination to remember Beloved, first with a tombstone, then by refusing to shun her when she shows up at 124. Since Beloved never had a "real existence in the first place," it is understandable that Sethe latches onto to her however she can: she desperately hopes that Beloved's short existence will not be permanently forgotten and erased. In *Get Out* it is vile that Andre Hayworth's name has been changed to Logan King, as Andre is still being looked for as a missing person by his family and friends. When a person has been de-realized, the in-between state of the person in question affects all the people who loved and cared for them as well. We might also recall here heartbreaking scenes in the media when the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice were crying over the murder of their sons while pleading for justice in front of

cameras and the entire world. The heartbreak is intensified when their pleas end up falling on deaf ears. Similarly, when Chris screams for help in the Sunken Place, the audience can't hear him. The acute pain of white-on-Black violence is why Sethe is resolute in her decision to commit infanticide – because she'd rather do the deed herself than have Schoolteacher or any other white racist harm Beloved in any way. The pain of Beloved's death is unbearable but less unbearable than having had her daughter stripped away from her, an experience that countless enslaved Black mothers endured on auction days. Baby Suggs has had four of her eight children taken away from her and the other four chased away. Baby Suggs says that Sethe's suffering is less intense since at least Beloved's spirit is still close to her. Baby Suggs describes the extent of the repression she has used to cope with the loss of her children: "My firstborn. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember" (6). The only memory Baby Suggs can cling to of her firstborn child is something so banal yet so specific: slavery has deprived her not only of the possibility of bringing up her own children, but even of memories. In *Get Out*, the threat of Chris's body getting auctioned off raises the prospect of the loss this would represent to his family and friends, particularly Rod. The traumas of anti-Blackness spread widely and infect deeply.

In "'The Unshriven Dead, Zombies on the Loose': African and Caribbean Religious Heritage in Toni Morrison's *Beloved,*" Robert Yeates delves into Black spiritual traditions of vodou, zombies/zombi, and ghosts that are relevant to both Morrison's and Peele's AfroGothicism. Morrison's gothic novel draws on vodou practices. Yeates refers to the moment when Sethe's community comes to "exorcise" Beloved from 124. Some of these people have amulets in their aprons or around their necks, while others bring their faith in Christianity as a

weapon. Yeates is interested in how the melding of African and European practices is a symptom of "how the processes of slavery have disrupted and confused identity and tradition for these characters" (516). Vodou was brought to the Caribbean and the United States by enslaved Africans. Along with the erasure of Africans' names, languages, and histories by white supremacist institutions came attempts to erase African religious practices. White supremacists denigrated vodou and indoctrinated Africans into the Eurocentric religion of Christianity, hoping to keep slaves subservient in the name of their Lord.

Eurocentric values and beliefs have not only harmed Black people in real life but also limited the scope and possibilities of literary criticism. Critics have focused on Britain as the point of origin of literary Gothicism and mostly analyzed gothic novels, including *Beloved*, through a white European prism. Yeates mentions how critics have convincingly described Beloved as "a ghost, a reincarnation, a vampire, and a manifestation of repressed trauma" (516). But Yeates argues that "while such Euro-American interpretations may go some way to explaining the origins of Beloved, there is compelling evidence that African religious concepts of the living-dead, the Caribbean concept of the zombi, and the American adaptation of the zombi as zombie all bear profound influence on the composite identity of the character of Beloved" (516). It's a testament to Morrison's talent that she has created a complex and fleshed out "dark villain/supernatural monster" whom audiences sympathize with while being terrified as well, and that there is no consensus view of what kind of entity Beloved is or what tradition she represents.

It's not that Euro-American interpretations have no role in explaining Beloved. Instead of discounting Euro-American interpretations, Yeates argues that to fully understand the

supernatural character and the novel as a whole, Afro-centric interpretations must be taken into account and that it behooves readers of a Black story written by a Black woman featuring predominantly Black characters to attend to its use of Black traditions. Yeates explains that under slavery Black people reinterpreted Christian traditions to keep alive African practices and meanings that they had only partly lost during the Middle Passage. For instance, the Neo-Hoodooism of another African American novelist, Ishmael Reed, "is modeled on the formation of Vodou in Haiti [where] Haitian followers of Vodou appropriated and subverted tenets of Catholicism, reconstructing their meanings to fit traditions brought over from West Africa" (516). *Beloved* melds the African and the Caribbean into European cultural concepts in this way too.

Yeates elaborates *Beloved*'s European qualities in an extended exploration of how *Beloved* plays on Mary Shelley's classic gothic novel *Frankenstein*: "Beloved, as patchwork composite, is a Frankenstein's monster, a revived phantom of Sethe's mutilated self" (521). Comparing the character of Beloved to Frankenstein's Creature is apt as both are "birthed" then discarded by their makers. Sethe "discards" Beloved in order to spare her daughter a life of servitude and dehumanization whereas Victor Frankenstein flees from his own creation because of his own personal feeling of pure, unadulterated horror. Just as The Creature is a version of Frankenstein, Beloved is a version of Sethe. As Yeates mentions, "the two begin to look and to dress alike, sharing in an identity and even monstrously reversing the mother-daughter dynamic by the end of the novel […] Though Sethe is initially Beloved's guardian, Beloved, in shadowing Sethe, slowly takes over this role. The boundaries between the two steadily become less distinct, to the point where they become rather like two parts of the same person" (521). Not only is there

a similar doubling between the protagonists and their creations in *Beloved* and *Frankenstein*, but the parent-child dynamic is similarly inverted in both. By the novel's end, we see Beloved as the adult in the relationship with Sethe. Stamp Paid describes how Ella saw Sethe and Beloved: "She say they was holding hands and Sethe looked like a little girl beside it" (321). (Stamp Paid interestingly refers to Beloved as "it," acknowledging that Beloved isn't fully human, which is akin to how The Creature is seen as non-human, even by his own "father.") The parent-child inversion in Shelley's novel has to do with the way The Creature acquires knowledge and understanding of the world in a way that resembles then overtakes Frankenstein's own brilliance. This intellect, coupled with The Creature's size and strength, makes Frankenstein seem inferior to his "son." Eventually, Frankenstein is told what to do and the consequences he will face if he doesn't abide by The Creature's demands, like how a child is grounded or given a timeout for disobeying their parent. Morrison pays homage to the European gothic classic with the doubling that echoes Frankenstein's relationship to The Creature. Sethe and Beloved are "two parts of the same person" just as *Frankenstein* and *Beloved* are two parts of the same lineage of classic gothic-horror.

Yet in many ways Beloved also embodies the African tradition of the living-dead zombi. Yeates cites John S. Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* when explaining the notion of the living-dead that informs *Beloved*. The Swahili words "Sasa" ("life") and "Zamani" ("death") represent the two states humans can occupy. Whether they inhabit Sasa or Zamani, people are still people – they still have an existence. Mbiti notes that zombi and people close to death serve as ideal audiences for the living, according to this spiritual view: for instance, it is understood that people "experience a sense of psychological relief when they pour out their hearts' troubles

before their seniors who have a foot in both worlds" (84). Yeates sees the same respect for those in-between Sasa and Zamani in *Beloved* when observing that "Beloved acts as Sethe's confidant from the next world" (522). It is telling that only a person in between life and death is able to tap into Sethe's "rememories" and that Sethe feels more comfortable sharing with a zombi than even Denver or Paul D – the living people who know her well.

Sethe's conversations with Beloved are echoed in *Get Out* when Chris talks freely in his bedroom with Georgina. Georgina is defending herself from accusations of having unplugged the charger of Chris's phone while cleaning. Chris is at first skeptical of her answer and of her countenance overall, then he has a vulnerable moment where he expresses how uncomfortable he feels when surrounded by white people. Chris confides to Georgina, a zombie-like figure, something he wouldn't utter to his girlfriend Rose. As Mbiti points out, in the African tradition, it is not uncommon for living people to find themselves "pouring their hearts out" to people who exist in both worlds. These longstanding African spiritual relationships deepen aspects of the European gothic-horror genre even as they uncover very different spiritual and cultural meanings within each text. Knowing about the African traditions may not fully alleviate the audience's sense of dread about the zombi, but at the same time it could also excite wonder at the prospect of contact with the living dead that is soothing and clarifying.

The scene in the storeroom in which Beloved propositions Paul D and demands that he call her by her name is another moment that draws on African zombi traditions. Yeates explains that only "people whose names are forgotten will not return to the Sasa" (523). Beloved's name has been said out loud when she was a baby spirit: the single word carved on her gravestone is in

fact what Beloved can cling to. Having a name and being called by it gives Beloved a partial entryway back to life – unlike the many other Black people who, from the time of the Middle Passage through the Jim Crow era, have died unnamed. The custom of keeping alive the memories of slain Black people, from George Floyd and Breonna Taylor to Sandra Bland and Philando Castile, by saying their names aloud might seem like a fully contemporary custom but it keeps alive a powerful and ancient African value. Yeates comments that the "ascribing of the word 'Beloved' on the headstone enables a bridge between the Sasa and Zamani, summoning Sethe's deceased daughter back to the world of the living" (523). Renaming, on the other hand, divorces a person from their true self and makes them unrecognizable to themself. Historically, Black people have been forced to give up their original African names and adopt the names of their colonizers and enslavers. In *Get Out*, we don't know if Georgina and Walter's names have been imposed by the Armitages. (This seems very likely since we know that Lakeith Stanfield's character goes by Logan King after he is in the Sunken Place, whereas Chris, Rod, and other people who knew him before he went missing call him Andre Hayworth.) Stripping people of their personal identity is a horrific practice. It is easy to understand, by contrast, why holding onto people's original names and speaking them aloud is so important in both *Beloved* and *Get Out*.

Yeates notes that a zombi "is… representative of the figure of the slave: it is bound to its master, forced to work in inhumane conditions and prevented from autonomous movement and thought: in essence, divorced from what makes it human and alive" (527). Slavery effectively turned a large group of people into figurative zombies by depriving them of basic humanity and self-possession. Interestingly, the master-slave dynamic gets multiplied and internalized within

Sethe's family in *Beloved* when Beloved (a zombi) grows proportionally bigger, fuller, and stronger after Sethe (a former slave) submits to her. Yeates cites Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* which argues that the slave "is fundamentally alienated into a state of social death" (527). Sethe is "dominated" physically and spiritually by Beloved, and she is also alienated from the rest of her community throughout much of the novel. Likewise, in *Get Out*, where the Black people in the Sunken Place are dominated by the Armitages and thus become not just psychically but also socially dead to themselves and one another.

Yeates explains how the Haitian zombi differs somewhat from those in African and other Caribbean belief systems. There is an especially intense fear "associated with the Haitian zombi [that] appears to result from the potential for [living] people to be transformed into zombi themselves" (526). As a Haitian myself, I can attest that I've heard my parents and their friends talk about these fears. While some Haitians will joke about it, others (from what I remember) don't completely believe in the zombi but they still don't want to tempt fate by mocking them. It's similar to how some people who are not completely enamored with the paranormal and don't believe in ghosts still won't tempt fate by denying their existence. The spiritual importance of the presence of ancestors is deeply embedded within many Black cultures and thus zombi-like figures in *Beloved* and *Get Out* are characterized and humanized with a care that is seldom seen in European and Euro-American gothic stories. Yeates observes that the AfroGothic is now beginning to have a broader impact as gradually "the zombie has ceased to be the paradigm of monstrosity that it was in early Hollywood" (531). Complex multidimensional zombie characters are more affecting for the whole audience and may touch something deep within Black audiences in particular.

Chapter 5: Black Audiences

Black audiences have played a major role in the success of *Beloved* and *Get Out*. Lydia Magras's engaging paper, "Popular Reception of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Reading the Text through Time," explains how Black bibliophiles, BUPPIES (Black Yuppies), and Black women first propelled Morrison to mainstream visibility and academic acclaim. According to Magras, this is because Morrison "was being read by the daughters (and sons) of those who marched, bled, and died in the cause of social change. We wanted both literature and liberty" (32). Black audiences were ready for Morrison's contributions because they had the education (that had been deprived from their ancestors) and parents who taught them about fighting against systemic racism and social injustice. Magras recalls how she "wholeheartedly embraced the political reality of holding in [her] hands a nicely packaged hardback book written by a Black woman" and how her friends who were "college educated and voracious readers like [her], also experienced the political relevance [she] felt as [she] purchased the book. [She and her like-minded folks] bought Morrison's latest book for the reasons [they] bought other texts by other Black authors of the day—as a demonstrable, cultural, and economic support of one of [their] own literary giants" (32). This description of the loyalty of Black readers, especially Black women readers, reminds me of the community support Sethe receives at the end of the novel when the Black women of Cincinnati try to help and save her from Beloved's grip.

There is a reason why certain books by Black authors are getting banned across the United States today while Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is still considered eligible reading. Many Black writers ask all their readers to face the horrors that white supremacist governments are still trying to discredit or minimize. As Magras expounds, "literature exists in some instances to

challenge [dominant] worldviews through the telling of a story" (42). This is what both *Beloved* and *Get Out* strive to do. While the horrors of slavery are passed through the prism of the gothic in *Beloved*, *Get Out* passes liberal anti-Black racism through the prism of the gothic in order to dispel the notion that twenty-first-century America is a post-racial society. (Consider for instance that Black people are overrepresented in American prisons, where they are essentially slaves – deprived of their freedom and forced to provide unpaid labour, and that Black people are also overrepresented as victims of police brutality.) The arts provide one of the most important vehicles by which Black Americans decry the ongoing inequity they face and demand justice. As Magras says of Morrison's audience in particular "BUPPIES and Black scholar activists alike found themselves properly spoken of in a text in which they 'heard' themselves, as writers and as witnesses" (42).

Mikal J. Gaines similarly stresses the importance to Peele of reaching Black audiences in "After Peele: *Get Out's* Influence on the Horror Genre and Beyond." Gaines argues that "*Get Out*… goes to great lengths to present itself as a Black horror film invested in Blackness (and in Black audiences) rather than as a Blacks in horror film that likely would not have resonated in the same ways" (254). It's a crucial distinction. Very often minor Black characters appear in horror movies either for tokenism or brutality – that is, either to hit some quota of diverse characters or so that a Black person may be gratuitously killed on screen before going back into the "real" plot. *Get Out*, like *Beloved*, humanizes and dignifies Black characters and Black suffering in a way that is seldom seen in the usual examples of Gothicism and most mainstream horror.

When I think about the first time I watched *Get Out* in a theatre, what first comes to mind is witnessing my mild-mannered, stoic brother moving up into his seat during the movie's climax, resting his chin on his interlocked fingers. It was clear from his reaction that this movie could resonate with anyone and make even generally carefree people get engaged. Secondly, I recall seeing a young, interracial couple excitedly anticipating watching the film and getting affectionate with each other. When the screening ended and my brother and I were silently rejoicing over what we just saw, I noticed the same couple walking in front of me. The girlfriend, a petite white woman, had her arms nervously crossed and she was constantly looking up at her boyfriend, a tall Black man, waiting on his first words. He was incapable of looking at her. Although *Get Out* is obviously fiction, you could see how much it had impacted him – to the point where he may have been questioning his intimacy with a white woman. Even if this man had been unfamiliar with the sordid history of the white supremacist violence to Black men in interracial relationships, the complicated race and gender dynamics at the heart of the movie would have resonated. Although we know how white women have been historically discriminated against through sexism and misogyny and classism, some of them were/are still complicit when it came to slavery and upholding white supremacy. The brilliance of *Get Out* is that it does not portray Rose and Dr. Armitage as innocent bystanders – in fact they're the ones leading this villainous charge. It must be acknowledged that the AfroGothic power of works like *Beloved* and *Get Out* is owing not only to the unique artistic contributions of Morrison and Peele, but because ongoing anti-Black racism unfortunately keeps them extremely relevant. For Black audiences today, the horrors represented in these texts are not abstract or distanced in the same way that the conventional European gothic threats were (and are) for most white audiences.

Chapter 6: Institutional Racism

Many traumas originating in slavery have been passed down through generations and have not been healed because white supremacy persists in so many powerful American institutions, including the very institutions of health and wellness that promise to help us understand and recover from trauma. This last full section of the thesis explores research that details the extent to which the traumas depicted in *Beloved* and *Get Out* are repeated and reinforced to this day under the guise of white expertise and care.

"Addressing Racism in Psychiatry: Is the Therapeutic Community Model Applicable?" by Bridget Dolan, Kevin Polley, Ruth Allen, and Kingsley Norton documents the anti-Black biases among British psychiatrists. The writers demonstrate how "psychiatrists perceive a greater risk of violence from a black patient than a white [one], and… more often suggest that police involvement is appropriate when a patient is black" (71). The paper highlights inequities and injustices Black people face, such as receiving inferior service in comparison to the indigenous British population and being over-represented in psychiatric facilities. Additionally, the authors state: "Not only are black people more often diagnosed as psychotic but, perhaps as a consequence of this labelling bias, black people are more likely to receive enforced treatment, be prescribed psychotropic medication and to be kept in hospital longer […] often in seclusion or on locked wards" (72). Labelling Black people as "crazy" has been and still is hurtful and silencing on multiple levels, as Black criticism of white supremacy is more readily dismissed or ignored if this criticism is considered a symptom of mental illness. The seclusion of mentally ill Black people mirrors the isolation that Sethe and Denver feel. Because her community sees Sethe as "crazy," she receives less of their help and concern even though they are generally ready to help

each other out. In *Get Out,* the Sunken Place is effectively a locked ward that Chris' consciousness and soul are trapped in. When cracks appear in the Sunken Place and Black people try to escape, Dr. Armitage gives them another round of hypnosis to subdue them even more. When Chris takes a picture of Andre with his smartphone, the flash snaps Andre out of his slumber. Blood leaks from Andre's nose, and he repeatedly yells at Chris to "Get out!" In the next scene, Andre steps out of Dr. Armitage's office, looking like nothing has happened: he has been locked up in the Sunken Place again.

The authors of "Addressing Racism in Psychiatry" admit that the "NHS [Britain's National Health Service], like all institutions, is culture bound, and as such favours the needs of the dominant groups and fails to provide equitable services for other groups[...] Not surprisingly the experiences of black people within NHS psychiatry have often been negative and have led to a distrust of mainstream psychiatry" (72). This systemic racism that this article documents helps to explain why Chris is worried that he has been subject to hypnosis without his consent and why he is right to be paranoid. "Addressing Racism" also points out that the norm of "verbal culture" in psychiatry is another way that systemic racism plays out: since "the Therapeutic Community is predominantly a verbal culture, it is necessary for residents to express feelings in English. This automatically excludes from therapy those who do not speak English and may be problematic for some people for whom English is not a first language" (75). Enslaved Black people were deliberately denied education as slavers wanted less articulate and ignorant slaves who would not challenge their servitude. This strategy continued into the Jim Crow era: most Black people still didn't have the same level of education as white Americans under segregation. This ongoing under-education has made it harder for Black people to communicate in terms that white

physicians can understand, which has deepened the preexisting barrier between them. The authors observe: “Enforced treatment approaches, involving loss of personal liberty, place the recipient in a state of subjugation and powerlessness” (72). It is startling how the racial dynamics of slavery are echoed in this characterization of psychiatry, confirming that the distrust Black people have felt towards white people holding the power to dictate how their bodies should be treated is warranted. Post-traumatic stress, stemming either from immediate personal experiences of suffering or those that have been passed along, is pretty much inevitable in this context.

Discrimination is also prevalent in American mental health services. In “The Weaponization of Medicine: Early Psychosis in the Black Community and the Need for Racially Informed Mental Healthcare,” Sonya C. Faber, Anjalika Khanna Roy, Timothy I. Michaels, and Monnica T. Williams refer to a study that explores how Black Americans have higher lifetime rates of disorders when compared with Latino, white, and Asian American people and they discuss how “some of these disparities are due to clinician error, including overdiagnosis and misdiagnosis” (02). This malpractice creates a vicious cycle, as it brings Black people more often under the scrutiny of law enforcement. The harms then continue since, if you are a Black person and you have been “diagnosed with both a serious mental illness and [you have] a history of incarceration [, it] makes gainful employment nearly impossible” (03). It is difficult enough to be in need of medical assistance, but a misdiagnosis can make life even harder. The authors add: “Taken together, these inhumane and punitive barriers are a recipe for homelessness and marginalization and virtually ensure that first-episode patients will be unable to establish independent lives” (03). This inequality in the treatment of Black and white patients is highly damaging. The authors observe that a “reduced empathy on the part of White clinicians toward

their Black patients may partially explain how mood symptoms in Black patients are often misinterpreted, or why psychotic disorders are overdiagnosed" (04). They go on to say that "instead of viewing a Black patient as 'sad,' they are characterized as 'mad.' Instead of being comforted because they are 'afraid,' they are labeled as 'paranoid'" (04). These studies show how apparently neutral "assessments of psychosis and schizophrenia across racial groups may in fact be biased" (04). The authors of the paper provide examples of how white clinicians have weaponized medicine to uphold white supremacy over centuries, subjugating political actors like fugitive slaves to the Civil Rights activists in part by "redefining schizophrenia as a disorder to be feared" in order "to support and preserve racial segregation and use the threat of mental illness to control agitators and punish social gains" (05). Clearly Dr. Armitage weaponizes her mental health expertise to uphold white supremacy in *Get Out*. As previously mentioned, Andre was "treated" by Dr. Armitage for the "episode" when Chris's camera flashed. When Georgina is pouring iced tea for Chris and the Armitages, she zones out momentarily, leading her to spill the iced tea through overpouring, and Dr. Armitage proclaims that Georgina is "unwell" and needs to "get some rest." The calm demeanour of all the Armitages is doubly chilling since it shows that they've put so many Black people in the Sunken Place through the Coagula experiment that they not only know how to act when glitches happen, but they expect them and know how to subdue them quickly.

Dehumanization is a result of white clinicians' massive disconnect from their Black patients. The article notes that "a White psychologist interprets a remark about 'people out to get me' as paranoid delusion while a Black psychologist may understand this as perfectly reasonable given that the patient has been stopped by police seven times in one month" (05). The disconnect

between Chris and Dr. Armitage is contrasted in the movie by the deep connection between Chris and his best friend Rod, who not only understands where Chris is coming from, but understandably affirms Chris's paranoia with examples of conspiracies that seem initially outlandish but prove to be closer to reality considering the actual circumstances. The dehumanization of Black people is also reinforced by the misunderstanding or willful ignorance of the way "trauma experienced in childhood may increase the likelihood of hallucinations and delusions," (08) and of the fact that Black people "are at high risk for traumatization, including racial trauma, due to discrimination and racism at individual, societal, and structural levels" (08). Black patients are therefore regularly overmedicated after "being stereotyped as 'dangerous' by clinicians" (08), prescribed older or first-generation antipsychotic medications, yet more quickly evaluated than their white peers. The white eagerness and power to subdue Black voices is powerfully evoked in *Get Out* when, after Chris attempts to flee, Dr. Armitage makes Chris instantly drop to the floor and return to the Sunken Place simply by tapping her teacup.

Perhaps the most infamous example of Black mistreatment by the white medical establishment is the Tuskegee Syphillis Study, which was conducted by the United States Public Health Service and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on nearly 400 African American men between 1932 and 1972. James H. Jones writes that when Jean Heller broke the story in 1972, "news of the tragedy spread in the black community. Confronted with the experiment's moral bankruptcy, many blacks lost faith in the government and no longer believed health officials who spoke on matters of public concern. Consequently, when a terrifying new plague swept the land in the 1980s and 1990s, the Tuskegee study predisposed many blacks to distrust health authorities, a fact many whites had difficulty understanding" (38). Earlier we

spoke of the conspiracy theories Chris's friend Rod shared with him. Jones shows that conspiracy theories are not new to Black people:

> "Bizarre as it may seem to most people," declared the lead editorial in the New York Times on 6 May 1992, "many black Americans believe that AIDS and the health measures used against it are part of a conspiracy to wipe out the black race." To support their assertion, the editor cited a survey of black church members in 1990 that revealed "an astonishing 35 percent believed AIDS was a form of genocide." Moreover, a New York Times/WCBS TV news poll conducted the same year found that 10 percent of all black Americans thought the AIDS virus was "deliberately created in a laboratory in order to infect black people," and 20 percent believed it could be true. (38)

A person reading this passage from Jones might lean into unconscious biases or racist stereotypes (of Black people as undereducated or ignorant) and characterize them as "crazy" or "dumb" for believing such things. But Jones shows that even educated Black people would not summarily dismiss the possibility of a government conspiracy:

> When Newsweek inquired about the conspiracy theories that were sweeping the black community, none of the black academics, politicians, and civic activists interviewed in 1992 subscribed to the genocide theory, at least not in the literal sense. Yet many educated and thoughtful blacks detected a pattern of neglect aimed at American cities that smacked of racism. "You don't need five people in a room saying we're going to jam black people. But if you decide cities are last on your list, and 60 percent of African-

> Americans live in cities, you have targeted African-Americans," Julianne Malveaux, an economist and writer based in San Francisco, stated. "There is deliberate disregard," she added. "I'm not willing to call it a conspiracy, [but] this is neglect that is not benign. (40)

The mistrust was further entrenched when the Black community noticed that white people would talk about Black people afflicted with AIDS in a very similar way to how they had talked about syphilitic Black people earlier in the century. Jones notes that "the Tuskegee study became a symbol of [Black] mistreatment by the medical establishment, a metaphor for deceit, conspiracy, malpractice, and neglect, if not outright racial genocide" (38).

Tina K. Sacks discusses a somewhat less well-known example of Black mistreatment by the white medical establishment in her book *Invisible Visits: Black Middle-Class Women in the American Healthcare System*. The Mississippi Appendectomy, "a term used to denote the eugenic practice of overuse of hysterectomy among African American women" (13), was first brought to light thanks to Fannie Lou Hamer, an activist spurred into political action when a doctor performed a nonconsensual hysterectomy on her in 1961 when she just wanted a uterine fibroid removed. (For Black women, uterine fibroid tumors are a common condition.) Sacks notes that "reproductive healthcare is a contentious, vulnerable, and anxiety-provoking experience for many women" (105) but that Black women experience their race as an additional burden. Through her study, Sacks found out in focus groups, some "women felt their hysterectomies were medically necessary while others saw the procedure as a way to control Black women's reproduction" (106). These coerced or nonconsensual hysterectomies differ completely from the rebellious infanticide described earlier in this thesis: they prevented free

Black women from starting a family and raising children as citizens in American society. These women had made themselves vulnerable by putting their care in the hands of physicians holding anti-Black biases: the white American establishment had brokered a deal with Black people without telling them that the price for their freedom is their ability to reproduce.

Given the need for hypervigilance that is confirmed by the Tuskegee Study and the Mississippi Appendectomy it is not surprising why Black artists are deeply drawn to the gothic. The adage that life is stranger than fiction is so true in this context as to be almost a joke. The Black American experience and a constant state of anxiety has forced Black people to be dubious of predominantly white institutions, even those institutions that are supposedly there to care for them. This recent history readily explains Chris's discomfort in Dr. Armitage's chair. It also provides another context for Sethe's fear of white people. Sethe tells Paul D. about how, at the hands of Schoolteacher and his goons, she has experienced one of the more appalling and revolting assaults that could happen to anyone, especially a new mother:

> After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still."
>
> "They used cowhide on you?"
>
> "And they took my milk."
>
> "They beat you and you was pregnant?"

"And they took my milk!" (19)

Sexual assaults were distressingly commonplace for enslaved Black women, but this attack is on another level. Sethe has had her milk forcefully extracted, a cruelty that is almost unimaginably twisted. Were Sethe's attackers aware of the effects of this assault on a lactating woman and, indirectly, her offspring? Paul D is focused on the use of cowhide and Sethe being whipped since it is something he can relate to and formally understand. But he is missing the point. Sethe twice repeats that her milk was taken from her.

The way hardships suffered by Black people have tended to reinforce one another is a phenomenon encapsulated in the multimorbidity theory. In "Discrimination and Multimorbidity Among Black Americans: Findings from the National Survey of American Life," Hans Oh, Joseph Glass, Zui Narita, Ai Koyanagi, Shuvam Sinha, and Louis Jacob write about how anti-Black discrimination can lead to multimorbidity, which is "the simultaneous occurrence of two or more chronic health conditions" (211) whether physical or psychological or both. The authors describe two different types of discrimination. Everyday discrimination includes "incidents that can occur on a day-to-day basis and relatively frequently," whereas major discriminatory events "are incidents that occur less frequently but require a significant shift or adjustment in one's life" (211). Chris and Sethe endure both types. Chris's encounter with the police in the film is an instance of everyday discrimination, while the Armitages forcing him into the Sunken Place is a major discrimination event. Sethe faced major discriminatory events every single day since she grew up in slavery, though her milk being stolen could be classified as a major discriminatory event - although that classification still seems too light given the multilevel violence it

represents. The authors note that people "experiencing the highest levels of discrimination were 2.39 times as likely to report physical multimorbidity, 5.36 times as likely to report psychiatric multimorbidity, 5.31 times as likely to report mixed multimorbidity, and 3.82 times as likely to report any multimorbidity when compared with people who did not report any discrimination" (214). They add that "among the different types of multimorbidity, the strongest associations [they] found were between discrimination and psychiatric multimorbidity" (215). This shows just how traumatic discrimination and racism are for Black lives and the toll they take on the mind.

Black multimorbidity continues in the more contemporary context of the most recent pandemic as well. In "Structural Racism and COVID-19 Response," Tobias M. Holden, Melissa A. Simon, Damon T. Arnold, Veronica Halloway, and Jaline Gerardin explain how non-white people were disproportionately harmed by COVID-19. They show that "particularly Black and Hispanic/Latinx communities, suffered an outsized share of infection and mortality burden in the US" (2). Structural racism is evident in the "combination of a lower share of cases but higher share of hospitalizations/deaths among Black people [which] suggests either increased susceptibility to severe disease, under-testing, or both, in this population" (4). These findings are similar to those in the paper about systemic racism in British psychiatry: Black people are receiving inferior treatment yet are overrepresented in hospitalizations and deaths. The multimorbidity discussed in the paper by Oh et al finds a correlation here as it is noted that minoritized groups "experienced an outsized burden of COVID-19 morbidity and mortality in Illinois during 2020, primarily due to differences in exposure risk" (10). The paper provides data to support this statement: "During the first epidemic wave in March to May 2020, Black and Hispanic/Latinx populations were 2.5-5 times and 2.5-8.5 times more likely to experience a

COVID- 19 case, respectively, and 2-18 times more likely to die of COVID-19, compared to age-matched White populations. Racial and ethnic disparities in COVID-19 deaths were driven primarily by higher risk of exposure for minoritized populations, which can be explained by underlying structural racism" (12). Putting together Jones' argument about how it is reasonable for Black people to develop conspiracy theories given the facts about their (mis)treatment with Faber et al's argument about how Black patients are often diagnosed as paranoid when they claim, "people are out to get me," we have a clearer picture than ever of how horrifying whiteness impacts the lives, psyches, and bodies of Black people. How can you tell stories that do justice to these unending racial horrors? This is the question answered in the unforgettable AfroGothicism of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jordan Peele's *Get Out*.

Chapter 7: Endings

Beloved ends with Sethe seemingly falling into a depression after Beloved's disappearance, while Denver is thriving and gaining some agency as she steps out more into the world. *Get Out* ends with our hero surviving the Armitage onslaught: rescued by his friend Rod, Chris lives another day. Both these AfroGoth stories leave Black audiences with openings for hope. Sethe has Paul D next to her and another shot at love (if she wants to pursue it) while Chris has a shot at a non-zombie life (though I'd be surprised if he ever has another white girlfriend). Yet these endings also convey the exhausting reality of many Black lives: the need to continually deal with the effects of past suffering (whether inherited or immediate, remembered or repressed) and the need to balance the work of expressing and healing from anti-Black racism with the desire to live free and make new memories.

The gothic genre provides an ideal template for telling Black stories. Black people have lived inside the horrors of white supremacy and anti-Black racism in North America for centuries. The AfroGothic recognizes this suffering as a reality of past and present Black lives and rejects the stylized suffering of conventional European and white Gothicism. Even though all gothic thrives on the notion of the Other, the dominant European gothic has ironically tended to Other Blackness by ignoring, marginalizing, and understating Black pain, both historically and in the present. Fortunately, brilliant Black creators like Toni Morrison and Jordan Peele have transformed Black trauma into original art and made a space not just for their characters but also for their audiences to begin to see and heal from it. They also make it clear that Black healing (and white healing for that matter) will never be complete until white people and white institutions fully acknowledge their violent past and commit to never repeating it.

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