Race in the Prison House of Language: Frantz Fanon, Ian F. Haney Lopez and Jordan Peele's *Get Out*

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Faculty Introduction

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In this essay, Kathleen uses Critical Race Theory to explore the dramatic tension of Jordan Peele's 2017 American horror film, *Get Out*. Not only does her discussion of the theory enrich her analysis, but her discussion of the film elucidates the theory, which is particularly valuable at this time as it has been much misunderstood and maligned in national media. Moreover, her focus on scenes in which the protagonist, a young Black man, interacts with the police is particularly poignant as the nation continues to struggle with inequities in law enforcement, racial profiling and police brutality. Simmons offers a compelling and relevant argument about a film that has become an instant classic.

Abstract

This essay is an analysis of Jordan Peele's 2017 film, *Get Out*, through the lenses of theorists Frantz Fanon and Ian F. Haney Lopez. The movie explores the concept of 'race' as an ideological construct that is in essence arbitrary, but, when accepted as 'natural' or 'a given,' becomes a justification for inequality, domination, and brutal violence. The movie presents a variety of scenes in which the main character, who is Black, struggles to 'get out' from the type-casting and labeling imposed upon him by a White community that aims for domination.

Ian F. Haney López asserts that, "Race may be America's single most confounding problem, but the confounding problem of race is that few people seem to know what race is" (193). He argues that "race must be understood as a … social phenomenon in which contested systems of meaning serve as the connection between physical features, faces and personal characteristics" (193); the "confounding problem" of race stems from the application of arbitrary definitions to classify, define, and separate people into (or out of) groups—as is the function of the word "race"—when those very linguistic conventions that enable such social organization are not challenged. Building on the work of Frantz Fanon, Haney López offers that "race consciousness" should call attention that race is entirely a matter of social construction, which can be challenged and broken down. In his film, *Get Out*, Jordon Peele explores how the social construction of race, and maintenance of its conventions, are essential to the political organization of American life. Close analysis of the film's depiction of encounters between law enforcement and the film's protagonist, Chris, a young Black American, exemplify what Haney López and Frantz Fanon call "race formation" and the "Black problem," and further what Haney López defines as "race-tainted law." Beyond a horror film, *Get Out* is a brilliant satire on race in America.

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The film opens with Chris and his romantic partner, a woman named Rose, in their shared apartment, planning a visit to Rose's parents' home for the weekend, when Chris will meet them for the first time. Betrayed by his furtive body language and sidelong glances, Chris is nervous: he and Rose are not just a romantic couple, they are an interracial couple. The racial tension of the film is then made explicit: Chris asks Rose whether her parents know that he is Black. Rose says, "No. Should they?" (Peele, 7:46-7:50) to which Chris replies, "It seems like, something you know… you might want to… mention" (7:53-8:01). Cut a moment later to their car driving down a country road: the audience is satisfied by Rose's reassurances; she is not racist and that her parents' intentions should not be a concern. It is at this point that Rose's car is struck by a deer and they have a resulting encounter with law enforcement.

One of the ways that this fictional encounter in *Get Out* confronts the confounding problem of racism in America is through meeting the audience's expectations of what Haney López calls "race-tainted law." During the exchange, it becomes clear that Chris is not from the local community—as Rose is—and this lack of belonging underscores the tension further when the officer surprisingly asks Chris, "Sir, can I see your ID?" (12:50–12:52). Because Chris was not driving when the car was struck by the deer, the audience can understand the subtext of the situation. The officer is exerting his authority by actively discriminating against Chris based solely on the color of his skin, and the color of Chris' skin is defined by its difference to the color of the officer's and Rose's skin. Haney López says that this predictable kind of encounter, played out repeatedly on any given day in real-life America, is because "the law serves not only to reflect but to solidify social prejudice, making law a prime instrument in the construction and reinforcement of racial subordination" (192). Chris, familiar with the historically proven stakes of the situation, is indeed going to submit and provide his ID when Rose tries to challenge the officer's request. With her protest, Rose's character calls attention to Haney López' argument that "no body of law exists untainted by the powerful astringent of race in our society" (192). Officer Ryan persists in perpetuating this race-tainted system of law, saying that "any time there is an incident, we have every right to ask" (13:08–13:12). It is this articulation of the officer's rights that underscores Haney Lopez' point that "race permeates our politics. It… twists the conduct of law enforcement" (192); the officer doesn't appear to be protecting or serving, he appears to be asserting the well-worn concept of his racial dominance over Chris in highly conventional ways.

Subsequently, in her responses throughout the scene, Rose displays what Haney López terms as "race consciousness." When Rose responds to the officer's request for Chris' ID, she says, "No, no, no. F*** that. You don't have to give him your ID 'cause you haven't done anything wrong" (13:03–13:07). In this way, Rose is seen to answer Haney Lopez' call, "explicitly encourage[ing] Whites to critically attend to racial constructs" (193). She is standing up against the historical American paradigm that has labeled bearers of Black (and other non-White) skin as inherently suspicious in terms of the law. With her attempt to reject the label, she is confirming that it is there in the first place. She speaks for all critics of the status quo when she calls the officer's request and attempt at justification "bullsh*t" (13:12–13:13). In turn, Chris becomes a stand-

in for the critical race theorists' approval of the portrayed exchange when he sums up Rose's dissent saying, "That was hot" (13:48–13:49). It is here upon viewing *Get Out* for the first time that an argument could be made that it inadvertently also reinforces the well-known trope of a "White savior." However, the genius of this movie is revealed in a subsequent screening once the viewer has learned that Rose is not worthy of the word woke. She is merely exploiting that distinction. In this scene, she is not standing up to injustice as much as she is protecting her villainous family from the discovery of their crimes by thwarting the efforts of an officer who is likely already aware of the disappearances of several young Black people in the area (an awareness the audience does not yet share). With this theatrical twist, the film reinforces the absolute need for Americans to be vigilant, alert, and critical when encountering and deciphering so-called "racially charged" interactions with the law.

The concepts that Haney López highlights, as depicted in this scene, are merely the necessary result of the distinction that Anglo-centric people have created and perpetuated in the self-perceived need to label non-Whites as the other. It is this concept of the other that Frantz Fanon explores in his essay titled, "The Fact of Blackness" and can be linked to the film. As this scene opens, Chris is standing apart from Rose and the officer as they talk. He is neither moving nor saying anything when the officer requests his ID; his character is observed as simply existing. And yet the inescapable truth is that because of the contrasting color of his skin, Chris clearly and simply exists as "the other" within the company of two White people, the officer and Rose. Without protest, Chris turns to the officer, and this small moment is so beautifully analogous to what Fanon describes in his own experience: "The occasion arose when I had to meet the White man's eyes" (Fanon, 68), "for not only must the Black man be Black; he must be Black in relation to the White man" (67) and this is what Fanon calls "the moment of "being for others" (67). It is in this moment, so aware of his relative "othernes" that Chris does not put up any opposition to the officer's request, and in fact tries to subdue Rose's objection in saying, "Baby, baby. It's okay" (13:07–13:08). (The irony is that for Chris, nothing about this moment is "okay.") Both men know that there is an imbalance of power here, and that the White officer has the advantage as part of the historically ruling majority. The sinister implication of this scene is that Chris' otherness comes with the implied simultaneous label of "lesser than." Without submission,

however, Chris might find himself in a worse situation.

After this initial encounter with a police officer, the plot unfolds to reveal the allegorical theme that Frantz Fanon alludes to as the "den*grification" (68) of the Black man. Rose is revealed to be the bait in her family's scheme to acquire Black people, who are then literally, physically appropriated by aging White friends and customers of the family. Chris narrowly escapes his own lobotomy by incapacitating his captors and it is during his escape at the end of the movie that he encounters law enforcement once again, illuminating another of the concepts Fanon argues.

For Fanon, "the Black problem" is the result of society's reliance upon a language-dependent ideology relegating moral superiority to the White, and varying degrees of inferiority, or baser human nature, to the non-White. Historically, Blackness is not just a difference; it is a problem. This line of thinking justified slavery and the otherwise villainous mistreatment, dehumanization, and violence inflicted on Black people. The thinking also continues to drive the racially prejudiced belief among many, that Black people, just by virtue of their Blackness, are more likely to perpetrate crime. At the end of the movie, after escaping his captors, Chris is hunched over Rose in the darkness with his hands around her neck, fighting the impulse to strangle her. In this moment, a police siren blares and the camera shifts to Chris' face where the lights from a police car are reflected on his skin (1:38:24–1:38:27). The power of this moment is the palpable, universal awareness that Chris has not yet escaped the dangers of being a young Black man. Chris' Blackness is still his biggest problem in this moment and the subtext is the likelihood that he will be seen as the problem simply because he is Black. Fanon's description of his own experience with—and as—"the Black problem" highlights this moment so poignantly. He describes the moment that a young girl pointed at him and said, "Look, a N*gr*!... Mama, see the N*gr*! I'm frightened" (Fanon 69). Fanon interprets this encounter saying, "I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors… I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships…" (69). Part of the genius

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of *Get Out* is the way in which it so clearly and simply spotlights the unjust product of the systemic and fundamental prejudices that define and perpetuate the pernicious so-called "Black problem" in American society today.

The tension in *Get Out* is finally resolved when Chris is met not with opposition from law enforcement, but with a sense of his own belonging; it is his best friend, an officer with the TSA, who has responded to Chris' disappearance and tracked him down to save him.

Perhaps in answer to Haney López' assertion that few people seem to know what race is, we can begin by acknowledging that "race" began as just a word. Some will point out that it is a four-letter word, and still others will say that all of us living today merely inherited the word "race." But take it a step further and consider the origins of the word itself. The first person to utter the word "race," simultaneously separated "us" from "them;" "White" from "Black;" "civilized" from "savage;" "master" from "slave." These oppositions are chained together—the imbued superiority of the one necessarily implying the inferiority of the other. As captives in the prison house of language, each of these oppositions seem natural to us, and yet in reality, they are merely man-made constructs. What is at stake for social justice when we take these man-made oppositions for granted: us v. them; White v. Black, etc.? Is real social justice possible if we do not stop to question the systems that perpetuate the opposition?

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Student Biography

Kathleen Ditty Simmons is a senior majoring in English at Sam Houston State University. She lives with her husband and three young children in southeast Texas. When Kathleen attended Literary Criticism and Theory class in spring semester 2022, she was intrigued by the many theories and theorists discussed, and this sparked an interest in the ways our understanding is shaped by the conventions of language. She was inspired to begin her own research on the ways that language created and perpetuated theories about "race" in American culture. This spark led Kathleen to participate in the Undergraduate Research Symposium, examining the intersection of language and "race relations," guided in her research by Dr. Michael Demson, a professor in the Department of English. Kathleen Ditty Simmons graduated in the summer of 2022 and plans to pursue graduate studies in English Literature and Creative Writing at Sam Houston State University.