



Lesley Thulin // In the director's commentary for *Get Out* (2017), Jordan Peele evokes the literary tradition of British Romanticism to describe what it's like to be Black in America. "This movie is sort of meant to be my take on *Frankenstein*," he explains. As an updated Gothic captivity narrative that incorporates a version of the "mad science" Mary Shelley first introduced in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), *Get Out* substitutes the Black photographer Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya) for the white female ingénue, and his white girlfriend Rose Armitage (Allison Williams) and her family, who masquerade as a bunch of "woke," upper-middle-class Obama supporters, for the archetypal Italian villain.

More to the point, *Get Out* exchanges Victor Frankenstein for the Armitage family, the pioneers of an elaborate bodysnatching procedure, and the creature for the Black victims they abduct or lure home. But for Peele, the speculative plot is grounded in ordinary racism. "In many ways, the African

American experience is this country's *Frankenstein* monster," he observes in the commentary, again recalling Shelley. Drawing a parallel between the United States' origins, founded on the labor of stolen bodies, and those of Frankenstein's creature, animated and cobbled together from parts of corpses, Peele suggests that monstrosity describes a particular orientation to the world—one that prevents someone from feeling at home in their own body.

If Shelley's novel and Peele's film are analogous texts, then what happens when we interpret them according to the same critical framework? So far, critics have paid relatively little attention to *Get Out* through the lens of disability studies—a field of inquiry that literary scholarship has increasingly applied to Shelley's novel, from Mark Mossman's "Acts of Becoming: Autobiography, *Frankenstein*, and the Postmodern Body" (2001) to Fuson Wang's "The Historicist Turn of Romantic-Era Disability Studies, or *Frankenstein* in the Dark" (2017). Attending to physiological impairment through a cultural and political—rather than medical—context, this field examines disability as a social construct.

In *Get Out*, disability serves as one of the motivations for—and the primary result of—the Armitage family's Coagula procedure, which transplants the brains of elderly or ailing white patients into physically healthy Black bodies. Auctioning off extended longevity at the expense of the Black body, the Armitages and their coterie fetishize the Black body for its "frame and genetic makeup." In an inversion of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century freak shows that exhibited Black bodies as grotesque spectacles, the Armitage family fusses over Chris at their annual party, rendering his body an object of pleasure for white viewers. One of the guests notably touches Chris's biceps, marveling at his strength, and then proceeds to ask a lewd question about his genitalia, further objectifying him.

Although the Armitages' white clients gain an entirely new body after the procedure, only a vestige of the victim's "self" remains. When Chris realizes that he unwittingly became the Armitages' latest commodity, his highest bidder, a blind art dealer and failed photographer, explains the medical process to him. From his hospital bed in the Armitage basement—a rough equivalent for Frankenstein's charnel houses—Jim Hudson (Stephen Root) tells Chris, "A sliver of you will still be in there, somewhere—limited consciousness. You'll be able to see and hear what your body is doing, but your existence will be as a passenger."

Reducing their victims to a "sliver" of themselves, the Armitages inflict the same sort of physical trauma and cultural erasure that slavery imposed on the Black body. That is to say, they render it a site "where the battered flesh (disability) was transformed into the prime commodity of exchange in a violent conflation of profit and pleasure" (Erevelles 146). Post-Coagula, Chris will become an empty vessel—a body in the service of white agents. Not only will he host Jim's brain, but he will also satisfy Jim's desire for his "eye," or the artistic talent that Jim was unable to cultivate.

Invoking the trope of blindness to indicate Jim's occluded moral insight, Peele figures disability in a way that Susan Sontag would find demoralizing. However, Peele troubles a similar metaphor for a supposedly non-racist perception of race. Denying that he shares his peers' wish to be "stronger,

faster, cooler” or their attitude that “Black is in fashion,” Jim adopts the guise of “colorblindness”—what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva identifies as “the superficial extension of the principles of liberalism to racial matters that result in ‘raceless’ explanations for all sort of race-related affairs” (Bonilla-Silva 1364). Although Jim assures Chris, “I could give a s— what color you are,” his participation in this transaction belies his racism, as he enters a contract that will effectively enslave Chris. To use Saidiya Hartman’s description of a slave’s relationship to history, Chris will find the past “untranslatable in the current frame of meaning,” as he becomes “castigated into the abstract category of property” (Hartman 74). The procedure will mutilate Chris’s brain, disabling his memory, identity, and autonomy.

It is important to note, however, that it would be reductive, at best—and racist and ableist, at worst—to conflate Blackness with disability. As Nirmala Erevelles reminds us, the effort to understand race in conjunction with disability requires great care; considering these categories of identity “analogous to each other” is “often fraught with violent and oppressive overtones” (Erevelles 145). In other words, the formula that race is like disability, or *vice versa*, enacts the very kind of exclusion that this clumsy gesture purports to resist. As Erevelles points out in just one example of the dangers of this outlook, the historical conflation of non-white races and people with disabilities suggests a particular evolutionary outlook that could “justify discrimination based on embodied difference from a mythical norm” (145).

Get Out cautions against this kind of reading of race’s relationship to disability, as the mythical norm to which the Armitages subscribe couples the supposed superiority of the Black body with that of the white brain. From the perspective of the Armitages, physical disability breaks with its damaging historical association with non-white races. Instead, they align disability with the white body—but to an equally destructive extent, as this association recirculates racism against Black Americans. From the perspective of the Armitages’ victims, on the other hand, the film does not render Blackness as a kind of disability. Rather, it suggests the literally and figuratively disabling effects of racism—not race itself.

If the “African American experience” is, as Peele says, America’s *Frankenstein* story, *Get Out* asks us to trace that narrative from the nation’s inception to the present day. As long as race is part of the conversation about disability, the film urges the viewer to historicize the latter in the same way as the former. Although race seems to take a backseat in disability-studies readings of *Frankenstein*, *Get Out* dispels the notion that we can consider these categories as either completely discrete or interchangeable. While we should be wary of disability studies’ tendency to regard “whiteness as its constitutive underpinning,” we must also keep Erevelles’s injunction in mind (Bell 275). Disability cannot serve “as a master trope of disqualification that one should escape rather than embrace” (Erevelles 147). And for Peele, neither should Blackness.

Works Cited

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Photo courtesy of Universal Studios.