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Summer Tariq Elsir April 10, 2024

The White Lie of Post-Racial America: A Fatal Smokescreen

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Abstract

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By Summer Tariq Elsir

This thesis critically engages with the notion of a post-racial United States amidst ongoing racial disparities and injustices. Building upon philosopher Paul C. Taylor's assertion that despite race being a social construct, its enduring impact on Black people and people of color (POC) belies postracialism by necessitating an analysis of race, this study goes further to contend that the true locus of racial inequality is the concept of whiteness, which underpins and perpetuates systemic racial hierarchies. Through an examination of the structural underpinnings of whiteness, the new forms of racism, and a cultural analysis of Jordan Peele's "Get Out," the thesis argues for the necessity of dismantling whiteness as a prerequisite for achieving a true post-racial society. By offering actionable steps towards this goal, the study contributes to a broader understanding of racial dynamics and transformative social changes.

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Preface

A Letter to White America (Inspired by George Yancy's letter "Dear White America")

Dear White America,

I still don't have a driver's license. You might not think it a confession worthy of starting my letter with but receiving that tiny card used to mean a great deal to me. Like any other teenager, I used to believe that obtaining a driver's license would signify the pinnacle of my journey into adulthood—a tangible symbol of newfound freedom and autonomy. Now, I am 23, and the excitement I once used to feel at the prospect of receiving that card has come to be replaced with dread and anxiety. The romanticized vision I once associated with that tiny card cruelly transformed into an elusive illusion, now serving as an ominous invitation to a wicked game of Russian roulette.

After the Sudanese protests of 2018-2020, police checkpoints became arenas of humiliation and fear. The police would incessantly stop cars and taunt those inside until the driver and passengers were able to convince them that they are ignoble citizens who stand with the regime that wrongs them. To avoid arrest and even death, one had to override their dignity in that demeaning interaction and maintain a smile despite the belittling of the police.

And then I arrived in the United States for college, and I was struck by the pervasive ignorance surrounding the realities of life in America. Many of the people I met made light-hearted jokes about Sudan and inquired if I experienced "culture shock" in the supposed "land of the free." That

freedom and liberty they boasted about irked me. They were so blind to the fact that things in America I dare say are just as bad. Maybe even worse. For whilst we fight the system in Sudan, they themselves are a part of the system in America. Whilst people's cars are stopped for their beliefs in Sudan, Black people's cars are stopped for their color in America. And although hard and degrading, in Sudan, people can sometimes circumvent the police by lying about their beliefs, but in America, what recourse do Black people have to avoid their doom? There aren't any right answers to the questions they're going to be asked, or any right dispositions and facial expressions to wear to remind the police that despite not being privileged by whiteness as the transcendental norm, they still deserve to be granted their humanity.

So, no, I still cannot experience true freedom behind the wheel here in the United States either. For that tiny card in America is anything but liberating for people that look like me. That tiny card means a constant self-vigilance, a heightened awareness of the consequences of any misstep. It means you can't afford to make mistakes. It means both hands clenched on the steering wheel where the police can see them. It means a looming sense of dread every time you see blue and red lights. It means "the talk" between Black parents and their children; a talk that tempers the jubilation of Black kids with a sobering dose of reality, reminding them that the card they've just earned shouldn't warrant such excitement, but rather cautiousness and fear. Yet, even then, that tiny card remains the same sinister game of chance that we are forced to play every time we drive in Sudan.

Growing up in Sudan, the concepts of race and whiteness weren't really concepts that I gave much thought to. That's not to say that I lived a life unaffected by them, because I most certainly did not.

However, I did live in Sudan, and so race-based prejudice and discrimination weren't necessarily things I was familiar with. I used to assume that racism is solely confined to explicit acts of racial discrimination and violence. So, every time we traveled, and my light skinned brother benefited from privileges that I did not, I didn't have a word for it. Every time I hated my curly hair and religiously straightened it to look like the white girls on my TV, I didn't have a word for it. Every time my grandfather called me beautiful and smart and then sighed in despair at the diminished value of it because I wasn't born "light" like my brother, I didn't have a word for it. Every time my family friends suggested I use a bleaching cream because I should've gotten my mother's light and fair skin instead of my father's Black and dark skin, I didn't have a word for it. Every time I questioned if my color tainted my worth and my beauty, I didn't have a word for it. I simply thought I was the problem. That's because when you hear this from the ones that are supposed to love you unconditionally, and yet make your skin color the one condition, you find it hard not to believe them.

Eventually, I realized that they grew up being told the same, that they're "too dark," and that they're disappointing because of it. They were held to the expectations of white standards of being, expectations that reflected a historical and ongoing pattern of oppression and marginalization faced by Black people everywhere. So even though there was no overt racial discrimination in Sudan, there still existed a pervasive belief that whiteness is synonymous with beauty, purity, intelligence, and humanity, and as a result, we internalized these societal messages, harboring feelings of inadequacy and a pressure to assimilate into white culture and norms.

I am aware that my words may bear traces of frustration, but I want to emphasize that my sentiments stem from a place of deep concern rather than animosity. I am just simply tired of finding myself profoundly disheartened by the perpetual recurrence of racial injustices that know no end. The relentless cycle of violence against Black people perpetrated by law enforcement, compounded by their dehumanization in the media, is just one aspect of a broader systemic problem that troubles me. Not to mention the persistent social, economic, and political marginalization of Black communities, among other systemic inequities.

The emotions evoked by these injustices—anger, disgust, guilt, loneliness, hopelessness, and exhaustion—have long weighed heavily on me. Initially, I attempted to suppress these feelings, hoping to shield myself from their impact. However, I soon realized that such avoidance only perpetuated the problem. By choosing the easy path, I inadvertently contributed to the very systems I sought to oppose. It became clear to me that confronting these emotions and addressing the underlying issues is not just a moral imperative for me but also an essential duty of everyone fighting for meaningful resistance against anti-Black racism.

So, this letter, and by extension, this thesis is just as much for me as it is for you. I want to ask myself from now on if I am doing enough, if I am holding those around me accountable, and if I am practicing what I preach. Sadly, the truth of the matter is that I have let so much slide in the interest of maintaining peace. And in doing so, I have lost myself. When some of my friends and family members committed acts of racial microaggression or sometimes were even just outright racist, confronting them wasn't easy. I was shut down as soon as it got too uncomfortable for them. Sometimes they'd even turn it around, accusing me of being too dramatic, too sensitive, too

serious. And eventually, I began to believe it. Afraid to be labeled as the one who "can't take a joke," I entertained and embraced a delusion. I convinced myself that what they said wasn't so bad, that the white world we live in isn't so bad.

But it is. It is bad. And you, white America are heavily implicated in this. Black literary figure James Baldwin argues that "we cannot be free until they are free."[1] Meaning, unless you come to terms with your complicity in white systemic power and privilege and understand that both are predicated on nothing but your whiteness and oppression of Black people, you are not truly innocent, and we are not truly free. Racism isn't just confined to shouting the N-word and harboring feelings of hatred toward Black people. It is far more cunning and malignant than that. It can be subtle; it can be hidden, and it can exist in the depths of the subconscious. It manifests in implicit prejudices that pose as anything but. Even when you claim not to "see color" and that "we're all just people," and that "all lives matter" you don't realize that, as Baldwin maintains, "it is this innocence which constitutes the crime"[2] you try to distance yourself from. Espousing the ideal of colorblindness perpetuates the very racism you deny. It dismisses Black people's and POC's struggle and trauma; it dismisses the racial disparities and inequities that continue to exist; it serves as a manipulative tool to disengage from the important conversations. You don't realize that not seeing color doesn't help us, it helps you.

I ask that you develop the courage to accept that you are a part of the problem, to be brave enough to be okay with finding your identity outside of Black oppression and to be good enough to admit

[1] James Baldwin, "A Letter to My Nephew," The Progressive Magazine, December 1, 1962, https://progressive.org/magazine/letter-nephew/.
[2] Baldwin, "A Letter to My Nephew".

that you've been complicit in this crime of racism. Though, two things worry me deeply: 1) What if you don't have an interest in changing a world that suits you so well? 2) How and when will you realize that the "progress" and "change" you keep speaking of is simply disguised as such? You claim so much has changed, and that instead of being appreciative of the "freedom" and "rights" we've earned, we're simply impatient and greedy for more. You fail to see that that is the danger of racism in the contemporary United States. We are fighting an enemy that is apparently inconspicuous to you. I realized this even more in class when a fellow white classmate asked from a place of genuine concern if things would improve even more since so much has already changed "for the better." I remember the professor challenged him and asked something along the lines of "have things actually changed for the better?", and he responded hesitantly, "Well there aren't any slaves anymore, no segregation…" I wanted to laugh at that. I mean he was right. Except he wasn't.

It is not my intention to suggest that the differences between the past and the present are negligible because surely such a statement would be foolish. Instead, I am challenging the notion that Black people were ever truly and fully emancipated by scrutinizing the evolved and transformed relations of power that readjusts, recreates and reproduces the subordination of Black people. Slavery may have ended, but the most hateful remnants of slavery persist today in the form of systemic racism that is deeply embedded and camouflaged in every corner of the United States. And while blatant racism continues to exist, you White America have also resorted to protecting your supremacy in your maintenance of white privilege and your encryption of white vernacular. Prejudice coupled with power is a deadly weapon, but ignorance coupled with power is just as bad. It perpetuates stereotypes and misinformation whilst solidifying the racial Manichean divide between white and

Black. It is a cowardly coping mechanism, a way of shielding your innocence and comfort from any external or internal interventions.

Still, I choose to remain hopeful that it won't always be like this. Maybe a day will come when you finally shed all the layers of your whiteness. Maybe a day will come when we can finally be accepted as we are without having to fight so hard for it.

Introduction

The Organizing Force of Whiteness

In the wake of profound social transformations and amidst the clamor of social and political movements of racial progress and equality, declarations of a post-racial United States have echoed across public discourse, heralding a purported transcendence of race-based discrimination and inequalities. Yet, beneath the surface of this idealized narrative lies a stark reality: the persistent grip of racial disparities and injustices continues to shape the lived experiences of Black people and POCs, defying facile declarations of a post-racial America.

The concept of race and race-thinking proceeds from the observation and recognition of a basic truth about humankind; the human population has for ages comprised smaller groups, and members of each group tend to be—more or less—united by a distinctive repertoire of physiological and cultural traits. However, this basic truth has been warped and weaponized to justify discrimination and birth problematic models of humanity that uphold systems of power and privilege by way of assigning generic meanings to human appearance and ancestry by overestimating the distinctness and size of these groups.[3]

My thesis pulls from the work of philosopher Paul C. Taylor's *Race: A philosophical introduction* where Taylor contends that the concept of race lacks empirical validity and fails to offer meaningful insights into the diverse variations within human populations. He critiques classical racialism, which posits inherent biological and intellectual disparities among racial groups. This

[3] Paul C. Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction* ("Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2022), 37.

approach categorizes humans into discrete types based on visual traits, such as skin color, hair texture, etc. and expects fixed clusters of traits to define each race.[4] However, Taylor argues that the expectation of homogeneous traits within racial groups disregards the multitude of variations present within each race. It's impossible to use biological characteristics to sort people into consistent "races" because people are all so genetically alike. In fact, genetically speaking, there can be more variation between members within the same racial group than variation between members of different racial groups.[5] Traits assumed to be racial like skin color, hair texture, etc. do not correlate in their distribution, which means that they are inherited independent of one another and are thus non-concordant. However, racial traits would have to be concordant in order for biological races to exist.

Therefore, Taylor recognizes race as a social construct. Yet, he posits that the scientific invalidity of racial categories and the failure of race as an empirical concept does not negate the impact of race as a social and political phenomenon. He argues that even though race is not real, it still has real discriminatory, oppressive, and deadly implications on Black people and POC. Thus, he contends that any aspiration towards a post-racial America necessitates a critical examination of race's deleterious implications, using it as a tracking device to trace and uncover its negative implications.

However, while I agree with Taylor's assessment, I believe that dismantling the mechanisms through which race operates requires a deeper interrogation of the underlying force: whiteness.

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[4] Paul C. Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction* ("Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2022), 65.
[5] D. J. Witherspoon et al. "Genetic Similarities Within and Between Human Populations" *GENETICS* 176, no. 1 (2007): 351–359, https://doi.org/10.1534/genetics.106.067355

Rather than merely tracing the negative implications of race, we must challenge whiteness as the backdrop and organizing force that produces precisely the privileges and disadvantages people experience along different racial lines. Whiteness serves as the main structure and framework that gives meaning and importance to race. Therefore, by delving into the foundational elements of whiteness, we may begin to eliminate the ways in which race tracks Black bodies negatively and then eventually start to envision the potential for a post-racial America that is liberated from the shackles of racial inequalities and injustices.

This thesis contends that before we can even entertain the notion of transcending race and being post-racial, we must first reckon with the pervasive influence of whiteness—the silent orchestrator of racial hierarchies and injustices. First, I will explore and interrogate the pillars and structural underpinnings of whiteness to unveil the mechanisms through which racial inequalities are perpetuated and reinforced. Second, I will provide examples illustrating how whiteness generates new models of racism and passively allows race to track Black bodies in a way that renders them problematic. Third, I will give an analysis of how Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* challenges the collective illusion of the elimination of racism in a supposedly "post-racial" America. Then finally, I will provide suggestions regarding actions that can be taken toward achieving a post-racial society.

Poem 1

White…ness
By Summer Elsir

I am nothing
I am everything
A subtle presence, a silent force in every design
An unhinged madness that you undermine
A label worn by every woman and man and child like you
An empty meaning etched to a wicked plan for you
An investment created but diversified to absolve you
I am luck, I am power, I am privilege, I am oppression
I am the bloody tool of transgression
I am denied and refused
I am embraced and used
I am monadic and monologic by default
I am mother to the differential relations and the ugly thought
I am unnamed, unmarked, unstained, unraced
I am the past, the present and the future untold
A story of struggle, of courage, of bold
I am everything
I am nothing

The Pillars of Whiteness

Defining whiteness proves challenging precisely because it manifests in so many modalities. It is a color, a social construct, a culture, a norm, a practice, a position, an epistemology, an ontology, and an ideology that institutionalizes white supremacy and produces an unequal distribution of social, economic, political, material and structural benefits based on race.

According to Philosopher George Yancy, whiteness functions as the "transcendental norm,"[6] establishing the parameters within which various perceptions, norms and categories, denoted by "x," are defined and understood solely in terms of whiteness. This notion aligns with scholar Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks' conceptualization of whiteness as a "master signifier"[7] upon which the

[6] George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 3.
[7] Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian analysis of race*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 20, Kindle.

concept of race and the structure of racial difference is founded. Seshadri-Crooks argues that whiteness actively produces a "logic of differential relations [where] each term in the structure establishes its reference by referring back to the original signifier."[8] Therefore whiteness as the transcendental norm and master signifier sets the conditions for the possibility of "x" because "the system of race as differences among black, brown, red, yellow, and white makes sense only in its unconscious reference to whiteness, which subtends the binary opposition between 'people of color' and 'white.'"[9] Whiteness thus emerges as a meta-narrative that not only defines racial categories but also shapes the broader perception of reality through its normative power. As whiteness is the universal standard—unraced and unnamed—white people enjoy a privileged and powerful position where they are deemed persons qua persons, operating autonomously and individually.

I want to underscore Seshadri-Crooks' phrase "unconscious reference to whiteness" because it highlights the inherent invisibility of whiteness. By establishing itself as the norm and standard, whiteness operates invisibly and surreptitiously, orchestrating and organizing multiple facets of social life without recognition and therefore without resistance. Black literary figure Toni Morrison illustrates the invisibility of whiteness perfectly through a fishbowl metaphor:

> "It is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl — the glide and flick of the golden scales, the green tip, the bolt of white careening back from the gills; the castles at the bottom, surrounded by pebbles and tiny, intricate fronds of green; the barely disturbed water, the flecks of waste and food, the tranquil bubbles traveling to the surface — and suddenly I saw

[8] Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness*, 20.
[9] Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness*, 20.

> the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world."[10]

The fishbowl metaphor describes both the organizing force and imperceptibility of whiteness. Analogous to whiteness as the transcendental norm/master signifier, the fishbowl—containing both the fish and water—serves as a representation of the contextual framework provided by whiteness. Just as whiteness dictates the norms and differences against which all other races are measured, the fishbowl delineates the parameters within which the fish exists and interacts. However, this functional and organizational principle of whiteness is invisible as a constraint, in the same way that the fishbowl is invisible to the fish. While the fish may recognize the elements within the bowl—such as the castle, pebbles, and fronds—it does not perceive the bowl itself and the way it shapes and frames the water that it exists in. Similarly, while white individuals may identify systems, patterns, and habits within American society, they often overlook the pervasive influence of whiteness in structuring these very systems. Just as the fish are confined within the boundaries of the bowl, white people are constrained by the invisible force of whiteness, shaping their perceptions and experiences without their conscious awareness.

This invisibility allows white people to entertain a delusional claim to innocence. They can distance themselves from racism because they make the mistake of confining the definition of racism to overtly holding prejudiced beliefs and/or engaging in discriminatory actions. However, they fail to realize that overlooking the systemic nature of racism—wherein whiteness operates as a pervasive force that shapes societal norms, institutions, and structures—is itself a function of

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[10] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 23, Kindle.

whiteness. They benefit from and contribute to systems of white privilege and oppression upheld by whiteness and are simultaneously afforded the privilege to deny their involvement in it. This systemic nature of whiteness enables white people, regardless of their individual intentions and actions, to navigate the world with relative ease and advantage compared to Black people and POC. Therefore, claims to innocence from racism on an individual level not only disregards the broader implications of whiteness, but it feeds and perpetuates whiteness so that white people are actively recreating white supremacy and domination on a daily basis.

Furthermore, whiteness, as the transcendental norm/master signifier, has elevated itself to the apex of the chain of being, thereby establishing hegemony and hierarchy across cultural, structural, symbolical and intersectional domains, where:

1) Culturally: It sets the standards for what is considered "normal" and "acceptable" in most aspects of life, including appearance, language, and behavior. As such, it functions as a dominant culture that shapes societal values, norms, and practices.
2) Structurally: It is embedded within societal, economic, and political structures, institutions, and systems, exerting influence and control over resources, opportunities, and power. This structural hegemony is precisely what generates and perpetuates inequalities, privileging white individuals and marginalizing Black people and POC.
3) Symbolically: It is upheld as a symbol of superiority and legitimacy in society, reinforcing racial hierarchies and perpetuating the notion that to be white is to be virtuous, beautiful, clean, civilized, etc. This symbolic hegemony manifests in media representations, cultural

narratives, and historical discourses that valorize whiteness while simultaneously marginalizing and othering Black and non-white identities.

4) Intersectionally: It intersects with other various social categories such as gender, class, and sexuality, and yet still reinforces hierarchical systems of power and oppression. Within these intersections, white individuals often occupy positions of privilege and power, further consolidating their dominance over Black individuals and POC. It's important to note that as Joel Olsen stated "whiteness is not a guarantee of equality among whites but, a form of racial standing"[11] wherein whites as a racial group collectively secure and maintain supremacy across most aspects of social life. Therefore, whiteness does not entail that all whites are treated the same because they most absolutely are not. Differences in treatment persist between women and men, and the working class and middle class, regardless of color but these differences are "subordinated in the interest of white solidarity."[12] Consequently, white women remain divided from and dominant over Black women and women of color, as is the case between the white working class and the Black working class.

Structurally, whiteness operates within a binary form where it continues to be primarily defined by what it is not: Blackness. Critical whiteness studies scholar Ruth Frankenberg asserts that whiteness is a defiant shout of "I am not that Other."[13] Therefore despite its universal power and influence, whiteness is fundamentally predicated on negation. Toni Morrison's concept of Africanism further underscores this dynamic. She describes Africanism as "the vehicle by which

[11] Joel Olsen, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 29.
[12] Joel Olsen, *The Abolition of White Democracy, 29*
[13] Ruth Frankenberg, "The Mirage of an Unmarked Whiteness", in *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, eds Birgit B. Rasmussen et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 75.

the American self [whiteness] knows itself as *not* enslaved, but free; *not* repulsive, but desirable; *not* helpless, but licensed and powerful; *not* history-less, but historical; *not* damned, but innocent; *not* a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny."[14] This elucidates how whiteness relies on the contrast with Blackness to construct its identity and assert its "superiority" and "normativity" within the racial hierarchy.

[14] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark,* 26.

Poem 2

My People
By Langston Hughes

"The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people."

Recreating Jim Crow

I want to start by quoting Black writer Saidiya V. Hartman from *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (Race and American Culture):*

> "The civil and political rights bestowed upon the freed dissimulated the encroaching and invasive forms of social control exercised over black bodies through the veneration of custom; the regulation, production, and protection of racial and gender inequality in the guise of social rights; the repressive instrumentality of the law; and the forms of extraeconomic coercion that enabled the control of the black population and the effective harnessing of that population as a labor force. The ascribed responsibility of the liberal individual served to displace the nation's responsibility for providing and ensuring the rights and privileges conferred by the Reconstruction Amendments and shifted the burden of duty onto the freed. It was their duty to prove their worthiness for freedom rather than the nation's duty to guarantee, at minimum, the exercise of liberty and equality, if not opportunities for livelihood other than debt-peonage. Emancipation had been the catalyst for a transformed definition of citizenship and a strengthened national state. However, the national identity that emerged in its aftermath consolidated itself by casting out the

> emancipated from the revitalized body of the nation-state that their transient incorporation had created."[15]

Hartman's analysis highlights the ways that the concept of Emancipation has been misconstrued, leading many to believe that "Emancipation" actually transcended race and transitioned into an era of "postracialism". While on the surface, the rights granted appear to signal an achievement of equality, they actually serve to obscure a continued but transformed version of control and oppression of Black bodies through other various means. In other words, behind the façade of legal freedoms lay entrenched mechanisms of racial inequality, perpetuated through the societal norms and structures that are upheld by whiteness.

Furthermore, rather than the United States assuming responsibility for upholding and ensuring these rights, the burden was instead placed upon the "freed individuals" to prove their worthiness for freedom. This shift in accountability functioned to absolve the nation of its duty to guarantee liberty, equality, and economic opportunities for all peoples, relegating the newly freed individuals to a perpetual struggle for validation within a system designed to exclude them. Consequently, "the national identity"— the white identity—was able to maintain its supremacy by refusing to fully integrate the freed population into the ideal promises of the United States.

Moreover, whiteness as 1) a transcendental norm/master signifier, 2) a binary structure, 3) hegemonic and 4) hierarchical, makes Black people's exercise of their "civil and political rights" an extremely difficult task. This is because whiteness reconstitutes itself as a site of supremacy, marginalizes Black people, and gives rise to a modern manifestation of Jim Crow, where racism

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[15] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 115.

persists through various mechanisms of reproduction and recreation. Philosopher Frantz Fanon's concept of Blackness as a "fact"[16] and James Baldwin's metaphor of a "fixed star"[17] is powerful in explaining the process of how whiteness operates in recreating systems of oppression and privilege.

In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Frantz Fanon articulates the notion that Blackness transcends mere physical features and color; it is an inescapable and stale reality imposed upon Black individuals from birth. Fanon's assertion that Blackness is a "fact" emphasizes the idea that it is not a self-determined identity, but rather one forced upon Black individuals by societal forces—upheld by whiteness—beyond their control. By calling it a "fact", Fanon connotes Black people's helplessness in trying to determine or change or control the way their identity is perceived. He simultaneously alludes to the stagnancy of Blackness; it is fixed and pre-decided and denied any space or potential to grow and progress. Furthermore, Fanon describes Blackness as a "uniform"[18] that functions to set apart and alienate Black people. As soon as one comes into this world as a Black person, the white fiction of Blackness is imposed, and one fights to self-construct an image or idea of oneself. Within this context, one is faced with an image of oneself that is predestined, so to speak, as a result of their social uniform of Blackness.

Similarly, Yancy echoes Fanon's sentiment by highlighting the pervasive influence of whiteness in shaping perceptions of Blackness. Yancy states that "within the context of white racist America, the Black self is always already formed through discourse, through various practices that

[16] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* trans. Charles L. Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 82.
[17] Baldwin, "A Letter to My Nephew".
[18] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* 86

"confirm" the Black self as ugly, bestial, dirty, and worthless."[19] In other words, both Fanon and Yancy illuminate the entrenched nature of racial identity within the oppressive structure of whiteness, where Black bodies are confiscated, denied agency and autonomy, and instead subjected to a foreign narrative of themselves and their bodies.

In "A Letter to My Nephew", Baldwin states that "the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar, and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations."[20] Baldwin's concept of a "fixed star" refers to how Blackness is organized by the white gaze, reduced in a procrustean manner to what Fanon calls a "fact," by way of which whiteness can inversely establish itself as the unraced, disembodied, and transcendental norm. The metaphor of the "fixed star" also describes how Black people function as a fixed star in the white world, always providing a sense of direction and acting as a navigational device through which white people can locate themselves and their positions of power. Thus, white people's relatively elevated and hierarchical position, privilege, and power is only made possible because of the fixed position of Blackness.

Therefore, the process and mechanism of recreating and perpetuating the systems of anti-Black oppression and discrimination are achieved through the confiscation of the Black body and the relegation of Black people to the "fact" and "fixedness" of Blackness.

In *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, Yancy describes the confiscation of the Black body through what he calls the "elevator effect":

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[19] George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes,* 178.
[20] Baldwin, "A Letter to My Nephew".

> "Well-dressed, I enter an elevator where a white woman waits to reach her floor. She "sees" my Black body, though not the same one I have seen reflected back to me from the mirror on any number of occasions. Buying into the myth that one's dress says something about the person, one might think that the markers of my dress (suit and tie) should ease her tension. What is it that makes the markers of my dress inoperative? She sees a Black male body 'supersaturated with meaning, as they [Black bodies] have been relentlessly subjected to [negative] characterization by newspapers, newscasters, popular film, television programming, public officials, policy pundits and other agents of representation.' Her body language signifies, "Look, *the* Black!" On this score, though short of a performative locution, her body language functions as an insult."[21]

Yancy describes how as soon as he steps foot into the elevator with a white woman, the space becomes a site of an onslaught of whiteness where the white woman sees him in a way that is not in accordance with the way he sees himself. Whiteness as 1) the transcendental norm/master signifier, 2) a binary structure, 3) hegemonic and 4) hierarchical, generates meaning and knowledge—a racist episteme–that is imposed onto the Black body. The exclamation, "Look, *the* Black!" epitomizes this process of distortion and violation inflicted upon the Black body by virtue of this racist episteme that others him and militates against his autonomy and individuality. This racist episteme, constructed by the pillars of whiteness, generates "a logic of differential relations"[22] that governs the Black body through the dialectical opposition of the white self and the Black other. Therefore, in the elevator, Yancy's body is not Yancy's body, it is just any *Black*

[21] George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes,* 20.
[22] Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness*, 20.

body—confiscated by the white gaze that reduces him to the "uniform" of Blackness and the "fact" of Blackness as the diametrical opposite of whiteness. He is therefore immediately seen by the white woman as a threat and a criminal.

Whiteness as hegemonic and as the transcendental norm allows the white gaze here to emerge as the main and dominant narrative as it attempts to exert its control over the perception that Black people have of themselves, a perception that is contrary to white gaze. This evokes Yancy's "double consciousness"[23]—a state of twoness — a dual self-perception where he is both aware of how he perceives himself and how he is being perceived through the white gaze. Yancy notes that this pervasive influence of whiteness is consolidated through various channels such as media representation, educational curricula, and institutional practices, where the white perspective imposes its biases and stereotypes onto the collective understanding of what it means to be Black. Furthermore, by dictating the terms and logic through which the Black body is understood and evaluated, the white gaze denies agency and self-determination to Black individuals, working against their ability to define themselves on their own terms.

Similarly, Michelle R. Dunlap's *Retail Racism: Shopping while Black and Brown in America* emphasizes the reality of race and white supremacist structures in shaping Black and brown people's lived experiences within such mundane places as shopping stores. For example, Yvette, an African American woman interviewee in her early fifties, discusses the challenges and complexities involved in her shopping-while-Black experiences. She says:

[23] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), xiii.

> "The store personnel would move in the same direction I was, but I never knew what was really going on. But at this store, when you walk in the door—it is as if there is a sign posted saying you are being watched. They don't just stand there and watch you. Instead, sometimes they will walk around fixing things, or dust, or something like that. I'm sure it happens in other stores too, but it just doesn't stand out. I think as Black people we become numb to it. We can tell ourselves that it doesn't matter for so long that we lose feelings about it. When my nephew and I go into the store to get things for his hair […] we watch them watching us. It's like we almost make a game out of it. He has to get used to it because he used to resent it when he first realized that they were doing it. He used to say things like "Dang man, why are you watching me like that?" Now we just have to prepare ourselves for it. We just go in, get what we need, and get out."[24]

Yvette and her nephew, much like Yancy within the context of the elevator, are being profiled and confined according to racist ideological frames of reference that posit the Black body as criminal a priori. The store personnel monitors and watches them because their "guilty" Black bodies as the diametrical opposite of "innocent" white bodies preclude the presumption of innocence.

This presumption of Black criminality is further demonstrated where Dunlap states that her young relative has "personally observed that one store at which she used to shop employed a locked, glass showcase to store their section of Black haircare and grooming products, while the mainstream haircare and grooming products were not stored in locked, glass showcases."[25] This is an instance where the store personnel didn't even have to *see* the Black body, because their racist episteme

[24] Michelle R. Dunlap, *Retail Racism: Shopping While Black and Brown in America* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 260.
[25] Michelle R. Dunlap, *Retail Racism,* 274.

already equipped them with their "knowledge" of what the Black body is: a threat, a felon, a thief, a lawbreaker. Yancy states that "Blackness functions metaphorically as original sin. There is not anything as such that a Black body needs *to do* in order to be found blameworthy."[26] Therefore, the Black body is sentenced without a committing a crime. This so called "knowledge" relayed by the white racist episteme "destines" Black people to a violent and fixed mode of being such that other alternatives, narratives and possibilities of Black people being any other way are rendered suspect.

This view of Black individuals as a priori criminals is also upheld by the legal system, producing a *new* Jim Crow that continues to underwrite the institutionalization of anti-Black racism. Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow Racism: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, explains how "mass incarceration has nullified many of the gains of the Civil Rights Movement, putting millions of Black men back in a position reminiscent of Jim Crow."[27] She draws many important parallels between mass incarceration and Jim crow, including:

1) "Legalized discrimination"[28]: Many of the discriminatory practices that relegated African Americans to a subordinate status during Jim Crow are still in effect today, disproportionately affecting the Black population who have been labeled as felons after arrest. For those branded with this mark, they face a lifetime of legalized discrimination, as once they are released from prison, they are thrust into a "parallel social universe," akin to the oppressive conditions of Jim Crow, where discrimination legally permeates nearly

[26] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow Racism: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 132.
[27] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow Racism*, 132.
[28] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow Racism*, 132.

every facet of social, political, and economic life. This legalized discrimination effectively hinders Black individuals' attempts to integrate into mainstream white society.

2) "Closing the courthouse doors"[29]: The parallels between mass incarceration and the injustices of Jim Crow extends to the apex of the U.S. legal system—the Supreme Court. Historically, the Court has exhibited a consistent pattern: initially endorsing racial caste systems, then later responding to societal shifts by not eliminating them but adjusting them. In contemporary times, McCleskey v. Kemp[30] serves a similar function, with the Court safeguarding the prevailing system of mass incarceration by closing the courthouse doors to claims of racial bias. This effectively shields new racial castes systems from scrutiny. Thus, as Alexander notes, the sentiment expressed by the Supreme Court in 1857 "[the Black man] has no rights which the white man is bound to respect"[31] still remains true to an astonishing degree today, especially for Black individuals who have been labeled as "felons."
3) "Racial segregation"[32]: Mass incarceration achieves racial segregation by distancing and ostracizing Black people who have once been in prison from mainstream society. Alexander highlights the "period of invisible punishment"[33] that describes an array of criminal sanctions that are imposed on Black individuals even after their release. She emphasizes that "these sanctions are imposed by operation of law rather than decisions of a sentencing judge"[34] and thus it is embedded in the law itself rather than enforced by judicial discretion. This creates a framework that sets Black individuals who have once

[29] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow Racism*, 133.
[30] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow Racism*, 134.
[31] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow Racism*, 134.
[32] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow Racism*, 134.
[33] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow Racism*, 129.
[34] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow Racism*, 129.

> been convicted of crimes for failure by excluding them from society and subjecting them to endless legal discrimination that denies them employment, housing, education, and public benefits.

The New Jim Crow refutes the notion that we are "post-race." Instead, the text demonstrates how White America has transformed the institutionalization of racism through other means. The transformation outlined here is the shift from the overtly discriminatory practices of Jim Crow—de jure segregation and explicit racial exclusion laws—to more covert forms of discrimination embedded within institutional structures that reinforce racism through policies that disproportionately impact Black individuals.

The systemic operation of racism and the creation of a new Jim Crow is also evident in police encounters where, all too often, they culminate in the brutalization and murder of the Black body. George Floyd is one among countless Black victims whose lives were mercilessly taken away by the police. His tragic death in 2020 continues to emotionally impact me. Perhaps it's because, despite the presence of bystanders, they were rendered helpless, merely documenting the harrowing sequence of events from Floyd's anguished cries to his final breath. Or perhaps it's the heart-wrenching call for his "Momma," or the desperate pleas of "I can't breathe" or the sheer barbarity and monstrosity of a white officer kneeling on his neck, persisting even as Floyd loses consciousness, and remaining there for a staggering one minute and twenty seconds after paramedics arrive. Or maybe it's the chilling reminder of the United States' purported postracialism that is starkly contradicted by these recurrent atrocities.

One wonders how the very people meant to protect and uphold justice are capable of not just doing the opposite but actually believing wholeheartedly that their exorbitant force and ruthless actions

are the only *right* response. Despite his cries, pleas and suffering, not a second of hesitation or doubt or even sympathy passes the police officers' faces. What is it about the Black body that prevents the police officers from recognizing its humanity? I find the answer in Yancy's response to Eric Garner's—a Black man—murder by the police. He explains:

> "'Racism pervades white perception, structuring what can and cannot appear within the horizon of white perception.' In the case of the white police officers' perceptions, it is not a passive process, but a process of interpellation, a process of hailing Garner's body as a problem body. It is a process of racist ascription through a visual technology that "knows" the Black body well in advance. Seeing Garner's body outside that store was 'not a simple seeing, an act of direct perception, but the racial production of the visible, the workings of racial constraints on what it means to 'see.' Indeed, on this score, hearing is also not a passive site, but the racial production of what is hearable and worthy of response. So, 'the visual [or audible] field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic, and forceful.'"[35]

Yancy delves into the conceptual framing of how whiteness shapes perception. He contends that racism is not just an individual bias, but a pervasive societal force that structures and determines what is seen, heard and respected by white people. The police officers are not passively perceiving Black bodies but actively engaging in a process—a racist logic, a racist history, a racist episteme—that frames Black bodies as problematic. Hence, the act of seeing and reacting to a Black body is

[35] George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes,* 4.

not "neutral" but rather loaded with a white epistemic arrogance filled with preconceived notions and biases perpetuated by the pillars of whiteness.

Yancy asserts that the reactions of the police officers expose a "historical continuity [..] that speaks to the perpetuation of the white racist imago of the Black body, where there is an attempt to ontologically truncate the Black body into the very essence of criminality, danger, and suspicion. Hence, Black bodies must be *stopped*, frisked, imprisoned, suffocated, shot dead in the streets."[36] Therefore, the presumption that the Black body is "guilty" even before it acts is precisely an active practice of whiteness.

However, if you ask the police officers who killed Floyd and Garner, the store personnel that monitored Yvette and her nephew, and the white woman in the elevator that tensed up in the presence of Yancy's Black body, if they are racist, they most probably will reply with a firm and decisive "No!". That is because whiteness also operates at the level of the subconscious where it will produce racist responses, reactions, and feelings but simultaneously obscure itself as the source.

Others may not have these explicit responses, reactions, and feelings and so they will believe that they are not racist. However, they don't realize that to be white, one is invested in the ontology of whiteness. Part of what I mean here is that to be white is to be dependent on the binary structure of whiteness where you *are* what you are precisely because of what you *are not*: Black. Hence, their privilege and power as a white person in American society are conditional on the very reality of racism/anti-Blackness. White activist Peggy McIntosh says, "My Schooling gave me no training

[36] George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes,* 4.

in seeing myself as an oppressor…".[37] She states that "[She] did not see [herself] as racist, because [she] was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of [her] group, never in invisible systems conferring racial dominance on [her] group from birth."[38] Thus, she was taught that she is an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. By being taught that a racist is someone who has a mean attitude, holds racist beliefs, deploys racist language or entertains a certain kind of racist ideology, she was granted the privilege to distance herself from any accountability or responsibility concerning her white privilege and how it relates to the perpetuation of racism.

McIntosh calls white innocence into question by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege which she describes as an "invisible package of unearned assets."[39] Three of the many white privileges she lists are:

1) "I can go shopping alone most of the time, fairly well assured that I will not be followed or harassed by store detectives."[40]
2) "Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance that I am financially reliable."[41]
3) "If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race."[42]

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[37] Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies,* College Arts Association (1988): 2. https://www.collegeart.org/pdf/diversity/white-privilege-and-male-privilege.pdf
[38] Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege,* 9.
[39] Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege,* 1.
[40] Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege,* 3.
[41] Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege,* 3.
[42] Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege,* 4.

These privileges highlight the binary structure of whiteness, where because she is *not* Black, but white, she is trusted not to steal anything in stores, she is assumed to be financially reliable and "honest", and if she is stopped a traffic cop, she can easily assume that she isn't being stopped because of the color of her skin.

McIntosh claims that these privileges among countless others make her complicit because they work to systemically control other groups, among them Black people. They confer dominance and power based on the color of her white skin. She acknowledges that such privileges are predicated on both the structure of whiteness and the discrimination against Black people and POC and notes the dangers of these privileges in the way they give "license to some people to be, at best, thoughtless and, at worst, murderous."[43] This reflects how white people are afforded the opportunity to reap benefits conditional on the disadvantages of another group, under the guise that such benefits are earned by virtue of one's own racially neutral actions.

She states that this obliviousness is also a process that helps to perpetuate and maintain the "myth of meritocracy"[44]—the belief that it is true for all individuals that one earns what one works for. White privilege contradicts the idea of meritocracy because white people earn advantages and privileges not because they have worked for it, but by virtue of being white. I therefore think of white privilege as a travelator—a moving walkway that transports people as they stand still—that is designed only for white people. White privilege is similar to the travelator in how it gives white people an advantage over Black people and POC; white people aren't getting to their destination

[43] Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege,* 6.
[44] Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege,* 5.

faster because they are better or faster than the others, but it is because of the help of the travelator that excludes others.

Mindlessly enjoying white privilege or as McIntosh calls it an "invisible package of unearned assets"[45] further concentrates the power and control of white supremacy as it widens the gap between white people and Black people in every aspect of life. However, those unearned assets can instead be used to dismantle the system of white privilege to reshape the power structures to be more inclusive. There is no fast and direct course of action, but by beginning with acknowledging one's privilege and role in the system of race and whiteness, many small steps can be taken towards weakening that system.

[45] Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege,* 1.

Poem 3

Excerpt From
American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin
By Terrence Hayes

"Even the most kindhearted white woman,
Dragging herself through traffic with her nails
On the wheel & her head in a chamber of black
Modern American music may begin, almost
Carelessly, to breathe n-words. Yes, even the most
Bespectacled hallucination cruising the lanes
Of America may find her tongue curls inward,
Entangling her windpipe, her vents, toes & pedals
When she drives alone. Even the most made up
Layers of persona in a two- or four-door vehicle
Sealed in a fountain of bass & black boys
Chanting n-words may begin to chant inwardly
Softly before she can catch herself. Of course,
After that, what is inward, is absorbed."

The Myth of Postracialism in *Get Out*

Get Out is an incredible film that brilliantly encapsulates the Black experience in a supposedly post-racial America. It explores the attitudes of 'woke' white liberals towards Black people in a manner that unveils the more subtle forms of racism and the ways in which they manifest in contemporary US society. The film creatively utilizes rich dialogue, imagery, symbolism, and characterization to address real issues of race in relation to white ignorance, colorblindness, and complicity. Through the interactions that unfold between the Black protagonist Chris and the white Armitage family and their guests, the film posits the "fact" of Blackness in direct contrast to "whiteness" as the "transcendental norm" and reinforces the phenomenon of double consciousness where Black people struggle to navigate through a world where the white perspective attempts to monopolize and dictate the perception of the Black identity.

The film engages with Fanon's idea of Blackness as a "fact" where Chris is constantly denied his individuality and is stripped of the chance to introduce himself outside of his Blackness. Throughout the film, Chris is racially stereotyped, either in a way that lionizes/fetishizes him or in a way that demonizes him. There are instances of veiled microaggressions where members of the white Armitage family and the white guests at the party attempt to connect with Chris and show him that they don't see color, only it backfires to show him the exact opposite. The father's comment about voting for Obama a third time and the old white couple, Gordon and Emily, claiming to "know" and "love" Tiger Woods — though an obvious effort to relate to Chris — serves to ostracize Chris because it carries an underlying presumption that they couldn't possibly relate or connect over anything else. It also comes off as an inauthentic and forceful attempt to appear accepting as it is a refurbished version of the classic "I have Black friends," a microaggressive phrase that wrongly presumes proximity or association to Blackness immunizes them from being racist or anti-Black. The conversations demonstrate their inability to have a natural conversation that doesn't revolve around Chris's Blackness as it emphasizes how they see Black first before seeing Chris as a person.

Moreover, other instances that stereotype and demonize Chris play out during his interactions with the white police and Rose's brother Jeremy, both of whom reduce Chris to the "fact" of his Blackness. Jeremy claims that Chris's "genetic makeup" can turn him into a "beast" even after Chris showed no interest in UFC explaining that it's too "brutal" for him. It is here that Chris, consciously or not, challenges the racist assumption that to be Black is to be violent. Jeremy's disregard for Chris's dislike for fighting and his persistence in Chris's potential based on his "genetic makeup" highlights Jeremy's preconceived racist notions of Chris based on his Blackness.

He subscribes to the aggressive and violent narrative that is portrayed of Black men in the media and society by assuming that Chris enjoys fighting. Jeremy even goes as far as to try and put Chris into a headlock despite Chris's multiple protests. This overt and disrespectful dismissal of Chris's objections coupled with an overbearing resolve to get Chris to engage in a physical fight reflects Jeremy's racially fixed and false view of Chris as a Black person. Jeremy denies Chris his individuality, his humanity, and his respect as a human being by paying no heed to his feelings and his wishes, and instead trying to force him to be what he thinks Blackness means or should be: physical, loud, tough, rough, an assailant. This attempt to fit Chris into a procrustean bed — where Black identity is denied any individuality and is instead forced into conformity— is shown once again during Chris's interaction with the white police. The white police officer needlessly asks Chris to show his ID despite Rose being in the driver's seat, clearly racially profiling him. This exchange again emphasizes Blackness as a "fact" because when the police officer sees Chris's "uniform" of Blackness, he immediately sees a "threat", a "criminal", a "lawbreaker". This is a perfect illustration of what Fanon meant by "sin is Negro as virtue is white."[46]

This relates to what Yancy calls "whiteness" as the "transcendental norm" in *Black Bodies, White Gazes*. Whiteness according to Yancy is unnamed, unraced, and unmarked—it is the standard, the background against which non-whiteness is deemed different or deviant. Blackness in relation to that whiteness is also considered the antithesis because a Black body is defined only in relation to that norm. This introduces a racial Manichean divide — a dualism that posits two elements as opposites — between white people and Black people. Whiteness is standard, pure, and virtuous, whereas Blackness is different, deviant, and sinful. Yancy's "Elevator Effect" captures the

[46] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* 106.

implications of this norm and by extension, the judgment and violence that is communicated through the white gaze. The "Elevator Effect" addresses the reality of white microaggressions and the procrustean, narcissistic, and ethically solipsistic nature of the white gaze. The "elevator" is a commonplace site but within the context where Black and white bodies are present, the situation is racially charged, it is suddenly politicized and racialized, as is the case with the Armitage's party (Chris and the white guests), the dinner table (Chris and Jeremy), and the street (Chris and the white police officer). Yancy writes "The corporeal integrity of my Black body undergoes an onslaught as the white imaginary, […], ruminates over my dark flesh and vomits me out in a form not in accordance with how I see myself."[47] Yancy describes how his Black embodiment is violated and how the white gaze attempts to impose a racist description that is not endorsed by himself. In the film, it doesn't matter how Chris views himself because in relation to the white gaze he is a priori Black and all that socially and historically entails from that —according to the white brother, Jeremy, Chris is a fighting machine, to the white police officer, Chris is a criminal, and to the white guests, Chris is different, a subhuman, a slave.

At the party, there's a relatively large number of white characters that blend in a throng of racially "unnamed" and "standard" individuals, and their apparent fascination with Chris's Black body not only highlights whiteness as the norm but it accentuates the social subtext of racial ostracism in the film as Chris is viewed as "different" than them. This fascination plays out in a sequence wherein Chris meets different white guests at the party. There, Chris is both physically and sexually objectified throughout his interactions with the guests. One white woman touches and prods Chris before suggestively looking down and asking, "Is it better?" referring to the myth of

[47] George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes,* 19.

the hypersexual and hypertrophied penis of the Black man. The white woman does not only disrespect Chris by violating his personal space, but her crude question also exoticizes him and upholds a stereotype of Black men being more primitive, hypersexual, and sexually pleasing. Another white couple asks or more so demands Chris to show him his "form" at golf. It is blatantly clear that he isn't treated like one of them, but rather he is treated like a specimen for them to ogle, prod and investigate. His body is fetishized and subjected to all sorts of stereotypes with him being labeled as sexual and athletic.

Another white man at the party objectifies Chris by claiming that "Black is in fashion." This view of Black skin as fashion—a trend or style—both dehumanizes and commodifies Chris. Here the white man not only fails to see Chris's human identity as a Black man, but he also fails to see his struggles and battles as a Black man. He perpetuates the "fact" of Blackness and denies the Black experience because his perception of "Blackness" is frighteningly similar to his perception of a stylish outfit, whereby the Black body is made analogous to clothing that he can admire for pleasure. This claim of Black being in "fashion", lacking awareness of history and racial struggles, strengthens the notion of Black marginalization in the film by diminishing Chris to a racially stereotyped Black body that can be looked at for the mere purpose of selfish indulgence and commodified appraisal for the "benefit" of white people.

Get Out also pivots on the subject of white silence when we later come to learn that the comments made at the party are not genuine attempts to interact with Chris but a way to assess him for the auction. The game of silent bingo turns out to be a slave auction where Chris's Black body is being sold to the highest white bidder. As Kimberly Nichele Brown argues, the silence during that scene

is meant to reflect the other "covert forms of racism"[48] and emulate "white silence in the face of racist oppression."[49] The film shows that the most hateful remnants of slavery persist today in the afterlife of slavery in the form of systemic racism that is deeply embedded and camouflaged in every corner of American society. Silent racism pervades the structural framework of white American institutions; education, housing, healthcare, the criminal justice system, employment, politics, and everything else is constructed and assembled in a manner that generates endless systemic benefits in relation to being white and not being Black. White silence in that scene paints silence as one of the drivers of systemic racism, perpetuating stereotypes and misinformation whilst solidifying the racial Manichean divide between white and Black.

White silence is a loud protest to the emergence of a new norm where whiteness is no longer the transcendental norm. It is an implicit objection to Black excellence and empowerment. James Baldwin states that "the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar, and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations."[50] White silence in *Get Out* is a defensive mechanism through which white people bind Black people back to their "fixed" position and back to the "fact" of Blackness. The "fixed star" analogy explains how white people find their identities through the reduced societal position of Black people. So, if the fixed star ceases to be fixed and begins to move, meaning that if Black people resist and move outside the lines that white people drew for them, then white people will feel an unfamiliar sense of loss and disorientation and will have to discover who they are outside

[48] Ashe, Bertram D., and Ilka Saal, eds. *Slavery and the Post-Black Imagination*. University of Washington Press, 2020, 114. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvthhdqx.

[49] Ashe, Bertram D., and Ilka Saal, eds. *Slavery and the Post-Black Imagination*. 114.
[50] Baldwin, "A Letter to My Nephew".

of their white privilege and outside the discrimination and dehumanization of Black people. This is reflected perfectly in the movie when we observe the white grandmother, Marianne Armitage, react to Chris's resistance as he becomes empowered and defies the fixed position to which the Armitage family desire to restrict him. Marianna Armitage, who occupies the Black maid's body, starts to malfunction and fall apart—crying, smiling and shouting—and this mirrors the fall of whiteness as it loses its power, privilege, and psychic control.

Friedrich Nietzsche's analysis of the slave revolt in values is also useful for analyzing how the white gaze reduces Black people to the "fact of blackness." Nietzsche states that "While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is "outside," what is "different," what is "not itself"; and *this* No is its creative deed."[51] This is best illustrated through the scene where Rose's father, Dean, claims that his father "almost got over it" when he lost to the Black runner, Jesse Owens, in the qualifying rounds for the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The word "almost" foreshadows the evil works of the Armitage family — the slave auctions and the lobotomies they perform to take over Black bodies. This relates to Nietzsche's views on slave morality as an articulation of "ressentiment"[52] because slave morality begins by denying and rejecting what is different. That's how it becomes creative in a vengeful and spiteful way. Dean's father doesn't get over his loss to a Black man, he resented it to the point that he created a destructive surgical method for separating Black people from their own bodies. That is a great example of what Nietzsche means when he explains how slave moral ideals separate people from their own possibilities because of this desire for revenge. The irony in *Get Out* is that

[51] Friedrich Nietzsche, On *The Genealogy of Morals,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 36.
[52] Friedrich Nietzsche, On *The Genealogy of Morals,* 36.

it's the presumed "masters" that are trying to auction the "slaves" that are expressions of this slave morality.

The whole discourse of justification that the Armitage family deploy for the violent procedure is an articulation of that "No" to what's different. It reflects that "ressentiment" of feeling like one was denied or one isn't good enough. Jim Hudson's excuse for taking over Chris's Black body is "I want [that] eye," and Dean's father's excuse for taking over a Black body is to be "faster." When the Armitage family and the white guests take over Black bodies to possess what they consider desirable characteristics and features, they are attempting to limit Black people and their potential by confining them to the "fact of blackness." White greatness in the film is conditional on Black people's lesser position; to be faster, smarter and better is only achievable by taking away from Black people and exploiting Black bodies.

However, despite their depraved and racist intentions, the Armitage family and Jim Hudson try to deny the role of racism in their actions. Hudson is a character that attempts to distance himself from racism by making the colorblind assertion that he doesn't care what color Chris is. His fascination with Chris centers around his photography—a skill he perceives as non-racial. However, Chris is most likely sought after due to his gift of "second-sight"[53]— which grows out of his double consciousness as a Black man, where he is able to not only see himself through the eyes of others but also see a different side to white people. This is because Chris understands the impact of the structure of whiteness on both white identity and Black identity. Thus Chris sees the world and captures it in a way that Hudson could never understand or replicate. The fact that

[53] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* xiii.

Hudson is separating Chris' Black identity from his art is itself racist and his deliberately denying any accountability in his partaking in the erasure of authentic Black voices is the perfect example of how deceiving and dangerous colorblindness can be.

Chris's double consciousness is apparent throughout the whole film in his interactions with the Armitage family and the white guests at the party where he is hyperaware of the ways that he is being perceived. His double consciousness is the reason he seems so uncomfortable during the party because it signals to him that he is being judged against the norm of "whiteness." The film also portrays this concept brilliantly during the hypnosis scene. Yancy speaks of this "double consciousness" in the elevator when it is only through the white woman's gaze that he becomes "hypervigilant of [his] embodied spatiality."[54] This relates to the hypnosis scene because the "Sunken place" is a metaphor—a physical manifestation of double consciousness. In the "Sunken place," Chris witnesses reality at a remove. He can observe, but he is not in control. This alludes to the hegemony of the white gaze because Chris is fully aware of his reflection but only in the eyes of "white" others. This paralysis and lack of control speak to his inability to take control of his identity and his narrative. It also relates to the confiscation of the Black body where Missy doesn't ask for permission; she forces the hypnosis onto Chris, literally confiscating his control and consciousness. This relates to how double consciousness confiscates the Black mind and body where the Black person takes a backseat and ultimately internalizes and ruminates over the white gaze and how it is that he is being perceived. The idea of double consciousness is also very similar to what Nietzsche meant by slave morality, especially insofar as he considers it victorious. Whiteness as the "transcendental norm" perpetuates and underwrites racist prejudices which

[54] George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes,* 31.

Yancy and Fanon describe through detailed descriptions of the ways in which the Black body suffers. This "fact" of Blackness and the labels that are attached to that fact where Blackness is according to Yancy "inferior, uncivilized and ugly"[55] all serve to reduce Black people and separate them from creative possibilities. To explain, the brain procedure was meant to imprison Chris in the "Sunken place" and prevent him from honing his creative skill as a photographer and exercising his agency.

In short, *Get Out* is an impactful film that portrays a realistic picture of the Black experience in the US. The film communicates what it means for Blackness to be a "fact" and delivers the message of how white silence is complicit in the crime of racism. The film emphasizes the subtlety of racism through the microaggressive comments and the metaphor of the "Sunken place." Racism is no longer solely expressed in explicit and violent forms, which is shown by the overly accommodating behavior of the Armitage family. Furthermore, the film depicts whiteness as the transcendental norm and discusses the phenomenon of double consciousness as a result of that norm to push the audience to take accountability and to be more aware of how prevalent racism and its effects are.

[55] George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes,* 20.

Poem 4

Elliptical
By Harryette Mullen

"They just can't seem to . . . They should try harder to . . . They ought to be more . . . We all wish they weren't so . . . They never . . . They always . . . Sometimes they . . . Once in a while they . . . However it is obvious that they . . . Their overall tendency has been . . . The consequences of which have been . . . They don't appear to understand that . . . If only they would make an effort to . . . But we know how difficult it is for them to . . . Many of them remain unaware of . . . Some who should know better simply refuse to . . . Of course, their perspective has been limited by . . . On the other hand, they obviously feel entitled to . . . Certainly we can't forget that they . . . Nor can it be denied that they . . . We know that this has had an enormous impact on their . . . Nevertheless their behavior strikes us as . . . Our interactions unfortunately have been . . ."

The Spectrum of Justice

In this final section, I won't attempt to give an exhaustive list of solutions to the problem of whiteness. I firmly believe that every sincere effort or action taken toward combating racism and whiteness holds significance, regardless of its scale. Nevertheless, these efforts, particularly those initiated by white individuals, are often impeded by a simultaneous adherence to the cliches and stereotypes associated with whiteness. Therefore, I intend to focus here on addressing the barriers that stand in the way of implementing effective solutions.

The hesitation and stalling in discussions about race today pose a significant obstacle toward real progress. It obstructs genuine conversations and impedes meaningful learning opportunities. Harryette Mullen's poem *Elliptical* reflects the futility of ongoing conversations about race. While the speaker's identity remains ambiguous, the poem is reminiscent of the subtle forms of white racism commonly found in "polite" conversation and/or official discourse meant to justify existing racist power structures. It reflects the confusion, hesitation, and conflict we often encounter when trying to communicate on the subject of race.

Mullen highlights two main issues in the poem: arrogance and privilege. By suppressing their real thoughts and decorating their contempt with polite language and genteel terms, the speaker evades uncomfortable truths to maintain the bubble they've grown accustomed to. Therefore, because the speaker is never willing to finish their sentence, admit ignorance or learn from the perspective of another, they remain in the same elliptical cycle, never truly making a difference. This is a process of what philosopher Alison Bailey terms "privilege-evasive"[56] white scripts, which involve the ways in which white people perform scripts that preserve their "white innocence."

One of the many actions that can be taken toward forming a dent in the framework of whiteness is engaging in a process of self-criticism. Through reading, self-reflecting and having real conversations about the structures of power and whiteness, white people might come to what Cynthia Kaufman calls a "critical consciousness"[57] where one begins to see their own position and role in these structures. This self-criticism and critical consciousness enable white people to confront and resist repetitive patterns that reflect and perpetuate entrenched and hidden systems of racial domination.

This process of self-criticism is, however, not an easy one. There are certain actions—disguising as efficient when they are simply performative—that one must be wary of. These are the actions that work with an understanding of repair that is merely restorative rather than transformative. They can be categorized as 1) confessional, 2) noblesse oblige and 3) metaphysically comfortable.

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[56] Alison Bailey as quoted in George Yancy, "Race and the naming of Whiteness" in *On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 61.
[57] "Belonging and Social Change: A Critique of the Politics of Wokeness," Cynthis Kaufman, January 21, 2019, https://cynthiakaufman.net/2019/01/21/belonging-and-social-change-a-critique-of-the-politics-of-wokeness/.

Barbara Applebaum notes that although awareness and self-criticism are indispensable, confessional actions, such as public self-disclosures of acknowledging one's complicity, can counterintuitively reinforce whiteness by positing the white individual as the "good white" and in turn absolving oneself of complicity, when these confessions and public assertions of awareness in reality "do not redeem one from complicity that is ongoing."[58] That is not to say that one should not confess, but it is to emphasize that the work should not stop at confessions because that is simply a start to a long journey of work, rather than the end of it. Also, it is important that confessions don't function as processes that seek absolution as if the latter washes the complicity clean.

On the other hand, nobly obligatory acts prompted by a notion of white moral agency often recenter whiteness by perpetuating a soteriological white savior narrative and repositioning the white person as a "savior figure" and "morally righteous" rescuer rather than someone who truly acknowledges their white complicity and how it perpetuates racism. In other words, acting out of a sense of *noblesse oblige* can serve as a preemptive jump to action that evades genuine self-criticism. While problematic, the impulse toward such actions is understandable given the weight of self-criticism or self-interrogation. However, it is nonetheless solipsistic in the way it recenters white agency and allows the white individual to escape the necessary critique of one-self and their whiteness.

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[58] Barbara Applebaum, "Being White, Being Good: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy," *Lexington Books/Fortress Academic,* 2010. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/emory/detail.action?docID=500762. *181.*

Philosopher Sarah Ahmed's discussion of her white students who persistenly ask her, "but what can white people do?" perfectly captures the complexity and danger of such acts. She writes that these acts:

> "can be both a defense against the "shock" of hearing about racism (and the shock of the complicity revealed by the very "shock"); it can be an impulse to reconciliation as a "re-covering" of the past (the desire to feel better); it can be about making public one's judgment ("what happened was wrong"); or it can be an expression of solidarity ("I am with you"). But the question, in all of these modes of utterance, can work to *block* hearing; in moving on from the present towards the future, it can also move away from the object of critique, or place the white subject "outside" that critique in the present of the hearing. In other words, the desire to act, to move, or even to move on, can stop the message getting through."[59]

Ahmed's use of the word "block" here emphasizes a real obstruction to challenging systemic racial oppression. In order to join alliances with POC who suffer under systems of racial oppression, one has to *listen* to them to understand the ways one has and continues to be complicit. Therefore, one must be cautious and critical about the "effectiveness" of white forms of "resistance" to whiteness, examining if there is a repositioning of white moral authority involved and questioning 1) if it is protecting their moral innocence and "the social system on which such innocence is based"[60] and 2) if it is obstructing sincere and genuine engagement and work toward justice.

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[59] Sarah Ahmed, "The Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 164–165, quoted in Barbara Applebaum, "Being White, Being Good: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy," 5-6.
[60] Barbara Applebaum, "Being White, Being Good, 6.

In challenging white people to truly engage in resisting their whiteness, philosopher Alison Bailey cautions against what she calls being "metaphysically comfortable."[61] Being metaphysically comfortable is a way in which white people remain secure in their whiteness. It is indicative of a situation where white people supposedly fight toward the establishment of racial justice, but they continue to be limited by their own insulation and protection of their white identity. Bailey highlights white fragility in this concept of metaphysical comfort when she explains that even white people who are privilege-cognizant—who acknowledge how their whiteness is an asset for every aspect of their life—may still maintain actions or modes of being that maintain their comfort, innocence, goodness and privilege.[62] This metaphysical comfort is an evasion of the deep critical work of self-reflection and antiracism.

Much like noblesse oblige acts, metaphysically comfortable acts can consolidate white goodness and innocence and allow oneself to fight whiteness in ways that don't threaten the ontology of whiteness, its being. They can still heavily engage with antiracist work, support racial injustice movements, and post about the ways their white privilege makes them complicit, but they can do all this in "safe ways"[63] by recentering the attention and conversation back to their "good deeds," and taking "minimal emotion risks"[64] where they are not fully delving into themselves and their identities as white. These actions are once again preserving white privilege and white identity as a whole.

[61] Alison Bailey as quoted in George Yancy, "Race and the naming of Whiteness" in *On Race,* 61.
[62] Alison Bailey as quoted in George Yancy, "Race and the naming of Whiteness" in *On Race,* 62.
[63] Alison Bailey as quoted in George Yancy, "Race and the naming of Whiteness" in *On Race,* 62.
[64] Alison Bailey as quoted in George Yancy, "Race and the naming of Whiteness" in *On Race,* 62.

Bailey suggests that one should be doing the opposite; instead of holding the white self together, one ought to make it "fall apart."[65] She adopts Gloria Anzaldúa term '*nepantla*' to describe an "*unstructured* liminal space that facilitates transformation."[66] She writes:

> "[Nepantla] describes a moment or span of time when our beliefs, worldviews, and self-identities crumble. *Nepantla* is messy, confusing, painful, and chaotic; it signals unexpected, uncontrollable shifts, transitions, and changes. This is something you feel with your heart and body. It's a precognitive response to the fear of losing your ontological bearings that slowly works its way up into your head. Eventually you surrender. The old worldviews, beliefs, perspectives, and ontologies that once grounded you are but memories, and you find yourself working on a new epistemic home terrain."[67]

My sense is that by challenging whiteness at the core of what Bailey calls being metaphysically comfortable, that is, without using, manipulating and/or protecting whiteness, perhaps white people and the systemic structure of white privilege and white power can begin to completely shift and radically transform an old order and system of whiteness into something that is fully changed rather than reconstructed.

[65] Alison Bailey as quoted in George Yancy, "Race and the naming of Whiteness" in *On Race,* 62.
[66] Alison Bailey as quoted in George Yancy, "Race and the naming of Whiteness" in *On Race,* 63.
[67] Alison Bailey as quoted in George Yancy, "Race and the naming of Whiteness" in *On Race,* 63.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have endeavored to explore intricate dynamics surrounding the concept and structure of whiteness and its far-reaching implications within contemporary American society. Through an in-depth analysis of the concepts of race and whiteness, pulling from the works of philosophers such as Paul C. Taylor, George Yancy, Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks and Frantz Fanon, and critical insights from Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* and texts from Michelle Alexander, Michelle R. Dunlap, Sarah Ahmed and Alison Bailey, I sought to unpack the multifaceted nature of whiteness and the complex interplay of social structures, power relations and injustices inherent in the concept of whiteness.

By exploring the pillars of whiteness, I have engaged in an examination of the foundational structures, beliefs, attitudes, and systems that uphold racial hierarchies, racial oppression, and racial inequality. Moreover, I have examined how whiteness operates as a normative standard and a system of white power and privilege, one that creates and sustains a barrier to racial justice, emphasizing its pervasive influence in shaping social, political, and economic structures that negatively impact the lives of Black people.

Furthermore, through an analysis of *Get Out*, I illuminated the subtle yet profound manifestations of racism embedded within supposedly progressive white spaces, exposing the fallacy of postracialism, and underscoring the enduring legacy of racial hierarchies in the United States. By dissecting the interactions and the social-spatial practice of the collective illusion of being "post-race" within the film, from racial microaggressions to explicit acts of racial violence, I

demonstrated how whiteness operates as a transcendental norm, relegating Blackness to a site of marginalized otherness.

Finally, I examined strategies for dismantling whiteness, based not on providing solutions but on delineating how various barriers must be addressed if we are to truly think critically about the nature of such solutions. I emphasized the importance of white self-criticism and overcoming the barriers to genuine and transformative action. By interrogating white privilege-evasive scripts, nobly obligatory and metaphysically comfortable actions, I highlighted the barriers that impede progress toward change and racial justice. Through Anzaldúa's concept of '*nepantla'*, "an unstructured liminal space"[68] of transformation, I proposed a radical reimagining of whiteness that necessitates the dismantling of its ontological foundations.

[68] Alison Bailey as quoted in George Yancy, "Race and the naming of Whiteness" in *On Race,* 63.

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