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Cinematic Possessions: Colonialism, Horror, and Documentary

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Abstract

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In a world of increasing complexity and abstraction, how do we as film spectators, critics, theorists, and/or filmmakers engage responsibly with a rapidly expanding corpus of media? This thesis addresses the ethical dimensions of filmmaking and spectatorship through a primarily post-colonial lens of possession while examining *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017), and *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990). Possession is understood through two intertwined perspectives: first, as a narrative trope within horror and documentary films, in which possessed figures and characters relay otherness for the spectator; and second, through questions of language and translation in relation to power structures and the oppressed. Given the prominence of identity, subjectivity, and positionality in the discourses surrounding issues of representation, the possession framework attempts to facilitate a greater understanding of the relationship of these issues to colonialism, as well critical theories of race, gender, and sexuality. Although the question of ethical representation and spectatorship has no single definitive answer, this project pursues self-reflexive practices of theory that counter the passive perpetuation of oppressive ideologies.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Certainly, when spectators watch a blockbuster, they may be expecting thrills, love, interesting turns or, simply speaking, a story that is appealing enough. It seems more difficult, though, that, blinded by the fascinating features inherent to film language, both at technical and narrative levels, they pay any attention to the accuracy with which all the social and cultural groups are represented there; unless, obviously, they feel directly identified to one of them.

This is precisely what makes Hollywood so powerful, not only when it comes to represent American or ultimately Western society, but also those Others who have been systematically represented throughout history in its productions.

- Gelado & Sangro Colón

In this project, I focus on the multifaceted significance of the term *possession* as a means of analysis and critical engagement with film, focusing on the horror and documentary genres. More specifically, this thesis is concerned with the way that film interacts with coloniality. From a post-colonial theoretical vantage point, the project explores the pervasiveness of the colonial mentality, especially as it is concerned with global capitalism.

The primary conceptual "circles" of my approach to *possession* encompass notions of the supernatural/fantastic in relation to spectator belief as encouraged by the qualities of film as a photographic (i.e. "realist") medium. *Possession* here also refers to language—both cinematic and vernacular. Understanding *possession* in its relation to spectator belief and the spectrality of photographic media primarily concerns the issue of representation and how this connects with the curious liminal space cinema occupies between the real and imaginary, life and death, presence and absence. In this sense, *possession* deals with issues of fragmentation, abstraction, and the subconscious internalization of the way that the film occupies the mind of the spectator and how it plays off of social constructs and ideologies covertly, as well as the relationship between the intangibility of the world onscreen and abstract ideals and aspirations, as well as notions of possession in a colonial and capitalist sense.

The second sense of *possession* for this project brings language into the context of the cinematic medium and representation of Otherness, alongside language in the context of colonial occupation and the way it is resisted. In a broad sense, the relationship between cinema and language correlates to the notion that filmmaking is an act of translating reality to represent the world onscreen[1]. In the framework of *possession*, however, the dynamic between translation and representation corresponds to that of language and film as spaces to resist and/or submit to colonization (sometimes both simultaneously). In the context of this project's examination of film, the discussion of language becomes one of translating identity (especially of identities that fall into the realm of Otherness) as it informs the ethics and act of representation. *Possession* in the sense of language also leads to discussion of colonial subjectivity and how it relates to the objectification or appropriation of the Other.

This project interrogates a handful of "possession films" in order to open up post-colonial critique to a wider range of films and genres. I have included the horror and documentary genres by analyzing *The Exorcist*, *Get Out*, and *Paris is Burning*, as these two genres heavily rely on representations of Otherness as a genric convention. Analyzing these films, their various possessions, and subsequent representations of Otherness lead to issues of ethical representation, subjectivity, and the role of language within each film as they attempt to subvert (neo)colonial ideologies and hierarchies. My exploration of these two genres and the selected films, therefore, relies on such work as Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's critique of post-colonial subjectivity and representation in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (particularly as she discusses her own positionality as an intellectual reflexively) and texts by Bliss Lim, bell hooks, and Judith Butler, who are all instrumental in analyzing subjectivity and its relationship to language for the possession framework.

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[1] Not in the sense that that is the purpose of cinema, just that the camera captures aspects of our reality and constructs a new, hybrid "reality" in order to make a film, and the onscreen world is characterized by its artificial construction (which is to say, it doesn't merely imitate reality).

Project Genesis & Theoretical Groundwork

This thesis was initially animated by Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* (1983) and Jean Rouch's *Les maîtres fous* (1955) and, in particular, the response of each film(maker) to the ethnographic tendencies of the documentary genre and its practices. Both films take on the colonial violence perpetrated by ethnographic filmmaking practices, as well as the issues of objectification and appropriation that often arise from this mode of "capturing" the Other and Otherness. Rouch's short "ethnofiction" centers on the Hauka movement and the ritual of possession that is often interpreted as a satirical performance of British colonialism and its pageantry. As a display of supernatural possession of African people by the spirits of their European colonizers, the film and Rouch's theorization of *cine-trance* (where the spectator is no longer just themselves, only influenced by their experience in watching a film as Rouch describes fusion with the camera[2]) inspired the first notion of *possession*. Similarly, the second mode of *possession* stems from Minh-ha's theorizing regarding ethical storytelling/representation and the role of language (and meaning-making) in film as demonstrated by *Reassemblage*.

These two filmmakers and the aforementioned films summon the ethnographic violence of filmmaking practices that originate from or otherwise promote colonial methods of the identification and normativity. One of these modes of violence is what Spivak refers to as *epistemic violence* which inflicts harm through providing explanatory discourse about a subject[3]. Minh-ha's work in *Reassemblage* parallels Spivak as it pertains to translation, the role of the translator, and the voice of hybridity. For Minh-ha, the storyteller should grapple with the issue of mistranslation and misinterpretation theoretically and in practice, resulting in her notion of "speaking nearby" the story's subject rather than "speaking about" the subject. This is one of the central points for Minh-ha's practice of filmmaking in order to avoid

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[2] This is explored through *The Exorcist* and *Get Out* as each film takes on the collective engagement with Otherness facilitated by the possessions manifesting onscreen – especially as this relates to the entombment of social anxieties in the horror genre's representations of the Fantastic/supernatural.
[3] Spivak contextualizes this violence through an exploration of the two meanings of the term *representation* (in a legal sense, and in the sense of art/philosophy) in relation to memory and the law on pages 34-37 in "Can the Subaltern Speak?".

appropriating someone else's story by making sense of it or explaining it for an audience. In *Reassemblage*, she makes several key decisions that challenge the traditional modes of interpretation and assigning meaning that would facilitate epistemic violence. The voiceover narration in the film refrains from explaining the images onscreen that would prescribe Minh-ha's interpretation for the viewer. The structure of the film as a montage of shorter shots that vary in focal distance contradicts the tendency of wide, long shots traditionally accompanied by a voice-of-God narrator that seems equally omnipotent. Moreover, Minh-ha does not provide subtitles (except for of her narration) that translate what the Senegalese spoken by the women in her film. By refusing to translate their speech, Minh-ha suggests to the audience that it is not her role to translate the lives of these women for our understanding; ultimately, this gesture asks the spectator to question their expectations of her to do so.

In an interview with Erika Balsom (aptly titled, "There is No Such Thing as Documentary"), Minh-ha describes her method of "speaking nearby" as a way of documenting what she films without asserting the authority of knowledge. In other words, her filmmaking practice is characterized through a certain lack of knowledge (or resistance to ascribing it) about her subjects, which reflexively draws attention to both her and the spectator's relationship/interaction with the women onscreen. This reflexivity also harkens back to Minh-ha's refusal to act as the translator of the women's experience of the world, as she works to establish a reciprocal, horizontal relationship to the community the film is "about" rather than an authoritative, vertical one. The film asks the spectator to be uncomfortable, even unsatisfied, but also encourages them to interrogate that feeling and its source.

Simultaneously, the title references the montage structure of the film and encourages the spectator to examine the fragmentation and artifice of not just filmic construction but the colonized world at-large. By disrupting the constructed nature of the film and the dimensionality of the people onscreen reflexively, Minh-ha avoids the exotification and objectification of the documentary's subject that often occurs when ethnographic projects rely on the supposed "neutrality" of the camera. Rather, she prompts the spectator to view themselves as the Other (just as she is) and to pay attention to the abyss between and within each

of us as individuals. Again, Minh-ha explores this gap through language, namely the impossibility of translation without (mis)interpretation. Minh-ha embraces the nonsensical and confusion stating, "Confusion can tell us we are no longer satisfied with something that we were previously comfortable with and can be a tool that is very nurturing and rejuvenating if we do not try to escape from it. Nonsense, blanks, holes, and gaps could be manifestations of confusion but they also open up new possibilities if we don't try to fill them with the preknown and the familiar."[4] Minh-ha's relationship to the ambiguity of significance prefaces my later discussion of *Paris is Burning* in relation to language and Judith Butler's remarks on the ambivalences of subjectivity.

As for Rouch's *Les maîtres fous*, the mode of challenging epistemic violence differs significantly from Minh-ha's in spite of some of their theoretical commonalities. Part of this difference originates from Rouch's interest in what he refers to as *ciné-trance* which he describes as analogous to being possessed by the camera: "instead of using the zoom, the cameraman-director can really get into the subject. Leading or following a dancer, priest, or craftsman, he is no longer himself, but a mechanical eye accompanied by an electronic ear."[5] It is this notion of the filmmaker's trance in which they are no longer themselves that contributed to the first sense of *possession* at work during spectatorial belief. Many films—particularly commercial and/or narrative—seek to enrapture spectators in such a way that their doubts are temporarily suspended. In addition, this first sense of *possession* also refers to the way in which social constructs and ideologies can begin to shape an individual's reality, a point to be explored in the first chapter. In its controversial reception on both sides of the colonial issue, *Les maîtres fous* reflects the ambiguity of each of the films' undertaken by this project in their ability to effectively challenge or at least call social institutions and norms into question. This also demonstrates the way in which, even when filmmakers intend to criticize hierarchy and oppressive ideology, the film may still reinforce (colonial)

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[4] Trinh T. Minh-ha, "'There is No Such Thing as Documentary': An Interview with Trinh T. Minh-ha," interview by Erika Balsom. *Frieze*, no.199 (Nov.-Dec. 2018). https://www.frieze.com/article/there-no-such-thing-documentary-interview-trinh-t-minh-ha.

[5] Jean Rouch, "The Camera and Man," in *Ciné-Ethnography*, ed. by Steven Feld (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 24-46, 39.

institutions, even if the filmmaker and the subject collaborate in making decisions for the project. For this reason, I expanded my analyses of *Get Out* and *Paris is Burning* to include discussion of their reception in relation to the way the film attempts to challenge the conventions colonial representations of Otherness. Looking at the reception of each of these films also promotes the exploration of language and the sociolinguistic analogy for the respective films.

Subjectivity, Language, and the Other

As Lim's discussion of temporality in *Translating Time* suggests, language is one of the ways in which multiple, coexistent temporalities are set aside in order for meaning to be transcribed and conveyed between individuals and across generations and cultures. Although language is such an integral part of the human experience, be it written or spoken, it is often taken for granted—or at least, one often takes for granted their own inherent knowledge of language and the languages they speak. This thesis does not explore in-depth whether language itself is the origin of subjectivity and identity or if language emerges after the recognition of the self. However, it is important to understand how subjectivity functions in language in order to understand the way in which possession as a framework can address issues of (neo)colonialism, specifically through the exploration of its manifestations in the following chapters.

Furthermore, understanding the linguistic construction of subjectivity in this context orients the overall conversation about filmic representation and resisting or challenging oppressive hierarchies for/by people its standards exclude. In doing so, one can begin to examine the source of stigma and hierarchy and who/what is afforded privilege. Not only is this analogy of language relevant to theoretical concerns—the analogy serves as a site to discuss stigmatization, appropriation, and privilege through the treatment of different forms of the English language. In other words, putting these three films into conversation with the sociolinguistic of different American Englishes/dialects illustrates how cultural hierarchies permeate all aspects of a society (sociocultural level) in a more concrete and tangible manner

than the construction of subjectivity (sociocognitive level). The consideration of the sociocognitive level of linguistic subjectivity also demonstrates the parallels between linguistic theory and film theory regarding the act of spectatorship.

Similarly to Minh-ha's concerns about the violence of representation (especially of Otherness), Sundar Sarukkai's "The 'Other' in Anthropology and Philosophy," examines notions of the Other in anthropology and philosophy as they are (or are not) ethically driven, with subjectivity as a key aspect of the construction of the Other. Importantly, Sarukkai's definition of the anthropological Other and its origins most closely align with my idea of the *colonial Other/Otherness[6]*, as well as the way many of the filmmakers and theorists I have drawn on seek new understandings of the Other. Sarukkai explains that when anthropology developed, its primary purpose "was a process of 'inventing the human other' in order to develop a theory of humankind," and that this anthropological Other, though occasionally broken down into the fossil, savage, black, and ethnographic Others, "is basically epistemological. It is based on the notion of perceived differences and is a cognitive process…[the growth of which] show inherent ideas of domination."[7] As such, this difference-based anthropological Other "has forsaken the responsibility of the subject towards the other"[8] for Sarukkai in the same way that Minh-ha is concerned about in the context of ethnographic filmmaking.

Sarukkai's elaboration of the philosophical Other takes on the question of what constitutes subjectivity directly and confronts the violence of reducing the Other to an object of knowledge for the subject to constitute their sense of self around: "The deeper problem here is one of representation. The other is represented, and perhaps even constituted through, this representation in the way of the subject. It is the process of representing the other which subsumes it into the intelligibility of the subject and negates

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[6] In the context of this thesis, the *colonial Other/Otherness* refers to the construction of primarily racially informed difference, as well as the development of patriarchy and the privileging of ways of knowing associated with European masculinity as reinforced by the spread of imperialism and the establishment of hierarchy on the basis of the perception of biological difference as it informs sociocultural difference from European standards.

[7] Sundar Sarukkai, "The 'Other' in Anthropology and Philosophy," *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, no.24 (1997): 1406.

[8] Sarukkai, "The 'Other" in Anthropology and Philosophy," 1406.

its identity"[9]. Sarukkai continues to discuss the Derridean notions of *trace* and *difference*, as well as deconstruction in general, which ties into the way this project interacts with Spivak and her approach to subjectivity, but here, I want to introduce the comparison of John W. DuBois' *stance triangle* model of linguistic subjectivity and objectivity.

In "The Stance Triangle," Dubois defines stance as, "a linguistically articulated form of social action whose meaning is to be construed within the broader scope of language, interaction, and sociocultural value,"[10] and creates the stance triangle as a model for assessing how the stance act manifests and functions between speaker(s) and recipient(s). Likewise, this thesis examines films as a social act with social effect in terms of how possession manifests in its various forms throughout each film, where the social act/effect is tied to the mechanisms of neocolonialism.

Like the creation of significance in film is a collaborative act from production to exhibition and the construction of Subject and Other, DuBois' demonstrates that the act of stancetaking is only possibly through cooperation between the speaker and the interpreter[11]. Essentially, *stance* is established through contextualization of an utterance, subjectivity and intersubjectivity as they relate to *evaluation*, *positioning*, and *alignment*. Briefly, *evaluation* refers to the stancetaker's orientation to the stance object as having some quality or value; *positioning*, situates "the social actor with respect to responsibility for stance and for invoking sociocultural value"; and *alignment* calibrates the relationship between two stances and stancetakers by implication.[12] I will provide a more thorough explanation of implicit alignment and intersubjectivity in analyzing *Get Out* and *Paris is Burning*, but for now, my interest in this topic lies in the relationship between subjectivity and positioning as DuBois states, "Despite popular

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[9] Sarukkai, "The 'Other' in Anthropology and Philosophy," 1407.
[10] John W. Dubois, "The Stance Triangle," in *Stancetaking in Discourse: Subjectivity, Evaluation, Interaction*, ed. Robert Englebretson (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 139-182, 139.
[11] The speaker and interpreter also demonstrate how this model complements the questions posed through the possession framework. Just as the speaker and interpreter swap positions (especially as more people become involved in the linguistic interaction), my model of possession is interested in the ambivalence of possession. Where this ambivalence/ambiguity relates to the way in which individuals are entangled in a web of *possessing* and *being possessed*, which I will elaborate further later on.
[12] DuBois, "The Stance Triangle," 143.

conceptions of subjectivity as a purely internal, solipsistic state of the individual psyche, we see from the evidence of stancetaking that the presence of a subjective element in no way precludes the presence of an objective element as well. In the end, subjectivity prove meaningful only when subject and object are defined in relation to each other."[13]

(50) *I evaluate something, and thereby position myself, and thereby align with you.*
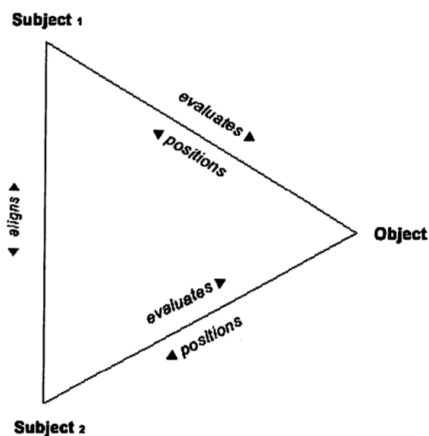

Figure 1. The stance triangle

[14]

In short, the stance triangle highlights the importance of intersubjectivity as well as the existence of an object that exists independent of the subject, but without which linguistic subjectivity cannot be demonstrated. That subjectivity relates to epistemic or affective evaluations of an object which in turn positions the subjects and then indicates the alignment of the two subjects. Importantly, the object is not determined by the evaluation the subject places on it, but rather the subject is determined by its evaluation of the object. This construction is strikingly similar to the idea of the *colonial subject* and *colonial Other*, wherein the notion of the *colonial subject* is that their evaluation of the colonized individual determines that the *colonial Other* is a sub-human object, however this ignores the notion of *intersubjectivity* wherein the *colonial Other* is both a subject in the model of the triangle positioned by their relationship to the *colonial subject*'s translation of the Other as the *object* of the stance triangle. However, this still does not

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[13] DuBois, "The Stance Triangle", 157.
[14] DuBois, "The Stance Triangle", 163.

answer the question of what it means to be (what Butler calls) a subjective *I* outside of one's relationship to an *object* or the notions of subjectivity and identity that inform the status assigned to one's body and its perceptions often before birth.[15]

Using this analogy also casts a light onto the false dichotomies that persistent (neo)colonial ideologies construct in the minds of participants in communities rooted in/affected by said ideologies.[16] The power language has over individual and cultural minds is not the only thing that gave rise to colonial arrogance and greed (though it's worth noting that English is now widely regarded as the "language of global capitalism" and as such, the most privileged of the lingua franca). However, I find it particularly compelling that the subject and their identity – at least, in a non-linguistic sense of the words – are similarly restricted in the cultures that most predominantly colonized the world. That is to say, that the most privileged identity a subject can have in one of these cultures revolves around the standards of heteronormative, white patriarchy.[17]

Another pillar of this thesis' mode of analysis comes to the forefront through how the films of Rouch and Minh-ha relate to the analogy of the stance triangle, chiefly the way that each filmmaker illustrates the immense complexity of the task of translation/signification and interpretation as a

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[15] This also relates to the discussion in *Bodies that Matter* of materiality, and grasping at this idea of possession in the sense of ownership of property – all of these really spectral and intangible concepts that aren't even really defined, and the notion of Derridean Trace that Sarukkai uses in discussing philosophical others.

[16] Again, I should point out that there is a certain "chicken or the egg" dynamic between the realization of subjectivity and language. A dynamic that also raises questions about whether or not colonization was unavoidable if the way language construes the subject is one that requires and object by which that subject's subjectivity is defined.

[17] Judith Butler discusses this rigid policing of subjectivity at length in her book, *Bodies that Matter* in a chapter on Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning* in addition to this idea that one's subjectivity, identity, and their consequences are designated before one can even understand what that means. Without delving too deeply into her discussion at this moment, Butler's take on subjectivity and language stems parallels my earlier discussion of language and temporality (where language exists outside of and as a confluence of temporalities & collectively decided, ever-evolving meanings across temporal settings). Basically, I am drawing off of the same notion of ambivalence (of subjectivity from a more strictly linguistic perspective) as one application of *possession* where the ambivalence of *possessing X* or *possessed by X* contributes to blurring the boundaries between *colonizer* and *colonized*.

collaborative act, especially when the interpreter (spectator) expectations do not align with that of the speaker (film and/or filmmaker).

Alone, this possibility of misinterpretation is neither positive nor negative – it simply is the possible outcome of any communication where produced utterances can be flawed, experiences and understanding vary, or auditory processing causes two people to hear different things. Without the possibility of misinterpretation, there is not going to be any interpretation of communication at all because no variety of language or pronunciation, or experience would make every utterance exactly that same as the other. We would lose the ability to fully communicate, and this is precisely why heterogeneous spectatorship becomes necessary to critique film and media as a whole in a manner that generates productive discourse. This becomes relevant in the discussion of meaning in relation to the influences of dominant ideology, particularly as it concerns the emergence of reason during the Enlightenment.

Furthermore, this illumination of the collaborative nature of conveying significance, the likelihood of miscommunication, and constructing subjectivity in film through the analogy of the stance triangle and the works of Minh-ha and Rouch also highlights the value of using (socio)linguistic methodology and/or theory when considering individual films and film as a broader concept. For instance, the origins of the sociolinguistic concentration of linguistics emerged from a need identified by linguists to combat linguistic prejudice and discrimination by demonstrating that all forms of linguistic systems are equally rule-governed and complex regardless of their position in the social hierarchy of language forms. In spite of these good intentions, with the lack of diversity in the sociolinguistics field, as well as the fact that linguists are still human beings who make mistakes and do bad research, the field became almost as bad about perpetuating linguistic myths as the non-linguist public.

Ironically, a field that attempts to describe the rapidly evolving structures and uses of language and how speakers interact with one another and their language itself has been rather sluggish in its response to changing needs of speakers and to the increasing need for diversity in academia, especially a

field like sociolinguistics. Walt Wolfram critiques himself and his fellow linguists for their practices

within the study of AAL/AAE[18]. One of the main issues identified by Wolfram is the abundance of

studies of AAL/AAE dialects solely in their comparison to surrounding EAE dialects. This will be

elaborated in my discussion of *Get Out* and its reception, but for now suffice it to say that linguistics, too,

needs to improve its reflexivity and self-accountability and as one of the valuable things about combing

fields through this framework – they can inform one another. Finally, this comparison to sociolinguistics

also ties in with the idea of the *organic* versus *traditional intellectual* as according to Machiko Ishikawa's

citation of Gramsci in "The Paradox of Representation."[19] With *traditional intellectual* referring to

generationally inherited specialty positions including (teachers, priests, etc.), Ishikawa notes Gramsci's

criticism of the privilege of these sorts of intellectuals to identify themselves as separate from dominant

social groups to the detriment of the former:, "This sense of entitlement results in these intellectuals

abrogating any responsibility to change the social and political system from which they benefit. On the

contrary, their ideology essentially functions to justify and consolidate the hegemony of the ruling

group"[20]. *Organic intellectuals*, on the other hand, are viewed by Gramsci as specialists that are actively

committed to changing minds and doing the legwork to ensure that progress is being made. "[U]nlike

traditional intellectuals who 'seems more or less to remain in place, doing the same kind of work year in

year out," organic intellectuals are 'always on the move and make.' Because of this incessant movement,

which Gramsci regards as a willingness to embrace social and political change…these intellectuals to

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[18] AAL/AAE stands for African American Language/African American English (where EAE stands for European American English). The reason I have chosen to refer to this array of linguistic systems in this manner really just concerns issues within the sociolinguistics field that came to a head during the Oakland Ebonics controversy with a misinterpretation of a linguistics term that has different connotations outside the discipline (regarding the probable genetically different origins of EAE and AAL/AAE dialects and their features. Also, I think AAVE is still fairly commonly used to describe the linguistic system in a more general context, but it is no longer used in sociolinguistics because of how "vernacular" perpetuates the misconceptions within the discipline.

[19] Machiko Ishikawa, "The Paradox of Representation," in *Paradox and Representation: Silenced Voices in the Narratives of Nakagami Kenji* (Cornell University Press, 2020): 53-90.

[20] Ishikawa, "The Paradox of Representation," 65. Not only does this occur within the linguistics community as many linguists assume their expertise exempts them from any possibility of wrongdoing and ensures that they automatically know better than any non-linguist speakers of a language. This is also a key aspect of the concept of whiteness in Chapter 1.

create a counterhegemony for the subaltern group"[21]. This idea of the *organic intellectual* also

complements Spivak's call to the intellectual to create new platforms and modes of advocacy for the

subaltern. While this advocacy remains to be seen, the accountable/culpable intellectual is an underlying

theme throughout this project's analyses.

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[21] Ishikawa, "The Paradox of Representation," 65.

Chapter 1 – Horrific Possessions: Horror, Race, and Colonialism

Mythology itself set in motion the endless process of enlightenment, by which, with ineluctable necessity, every definite theoretical view is subjected to the annihilating criticism that is only a belief, until even the concepts of mind, truth, and, indeed, enlightenment itself have been reduced to animistic magic.

- Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

This first chapter draws on the temporal critique established by Bliss Cua Lim in *Translating Time* as a way to converse with the narrative possessions that occur in *The Exorcist* and *Get Out* and their relationship to the racialized Other. Instrumental to Lim's critique is the connection between the Fantastic and film genre as the two contribute to the inherent temporal plurality that manifests in films within a genre. Beginning with an exploration of Lim's temporal critique, this chapter establishes the inseparability of the two films' narrative possessions from colonialism's ideological possession of the (Western/American)[22] horror genre's representations of Otherness. This chapter also establishes the horror (and, later, documentary) genre as a site for projecting and confronting the unknown Other and the anxieties its uncertainty produces. Moreover, analyzing the language use in each film serves as a method of understanding the mechanism of translation involved in representing the Other in the context of horror.

In addition, this chapter addresses the fearful dynamic in the context of the horror genre as a space for the dominant culture to reinforce its narratives about the Other it has subjugated. In this context, horror provides a controlled environment to ease colonial anxieties, but this space is a double-edged sword. The horror genre also opens up a space in which the dominant ideology can be disrupted, similarly to the way that documentary filmmaking can interrupt the colonizing efforts of ethnographic practices.

Even attempts to challenge and subvert colonial narratives are susceptible to perpetuating the very biases they seek to undermine. For instance, an Indian anthropologist studying Indian culture can

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[22] From this point on, I will be referring to Western/American horror genre generally as the *horror genre* from here on out because my body of films is restricted to the genre as it emerged from film industries rooted in or developed under the influence of colonialism.

contribute to the maintenance of the anthropological other because of how deeply ingrained colonial

ideologies are ingrained into the anthropological approach (which itself originated from a western

tradition).[23] This possibility exemplifies how colonial ideologies persist throughout all aspects of the

cultures involved in colonial occupation (colonizer *or* colonized). In the same fashion, photographic

technology and filmmaking practices are rooted in the colonial ideologies from which they originate,

where whiteness is the default lens through which representation is created and interpreted. The reception

of Jordan Peele's *Get Out* exemplifies how the centrality of whiteness in film spectatorship continues to

reinforce colonial power structures even in moments of progress and among conversations about

improving representation of minorities in media.

Colonial Other, the Fantastic & Temporal Critique

> *The time of history is one in which heterogeneity is translated into homogeneity in order to govern unsettling, radical difference.*
>
> - Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time*

Before delving into the analytical depth of the modes of possession in each horror film, this

section contextualizes aspects of colonial possession as related to the colonizer as Subject[24] through the

construction of colonial Otherness/the colonial Other. Specifically, as this Other is represented in colonial

narratives and the horror genre as a site for the establishment of interactions/how one relates to Otherness.

In Gelado and Sangro Colón's piece on the representation of Otherness in Hollywood, they dissect the

role of these representations at the level of their sociocultural significance throughout the historical

landscape of the United States between the 1960s and the late 1990s. Their focus on representations of

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[23] Sarukkai, "The 'Other' in Anthropology and Philosophy," 1406.

[24] I will explore the notion of subjectivity further in the second chapter as well. This introduction of the term here merely prefaces the later discussion of constructing subjectivity within a (neo)colonial society because of the inseparable origin of this sense of subjectivity to this concept of Other (as each is understood in terms of its difference from the other).

Otherness is primarily concerned with the way different eras vilify the Others they created as stand-ins for the threat posed to the socioeconomic order of the United States. Gelado and Sangro Colón remark that depictions of the Other created in this context are not representative of the diversity of the people and places outside of the US or even of the people that make up American society. Rather, these representations serve as a site onto which spectators can project their ideologies and the consequential fears, needs and fantasies (of Otherness) produced by these ideologies and their hierarchy.[25]

In the context of constructing the colonial Subject versus the colonial Object, the Other becomes the basis for the Subject's identity through a hierarchical distinction wherein the Subject confirms its superiority by designating the Object (Other) and its differences from the subject inferior: "Hence, a dialectical portrayal of the Otherness, even more so if it comes in simplistic and vilifying terms, is a useful tool for reaffirming where the self stands…In the end, it seems the ultimate aim of the utilization of the Other is making us all feel that, as Dorothy had to say in *The Wizard of Oz*, 'there's no place like home'(or, in other words, there is no Other better than us)".[26] As this suggests, the colonial Other becomes decidedly evident in the horror genre, especially those films which fall into the realm of postmodern horror[27] as is the case with *The Exorcist* and *Get Out*. This proclamation of Otherness and colonial subjectivity seems discouragingly absolute understood through these terms, but using the possession framework to analyze these two films and their more self-aware representations of Otherness facilitates an alternative possibility – a means of the representation of Otherness as a way to resist or, at the very least, draw attention to the problematic nature of villainous Otherness.

This interrogation of these representations of Otherness in horror film is rooted in Lim's understanding of genre in relation to the fantastic and the temporal critique: "Perhaps the quintessential

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[25] Roberto Gelado Marcos and Pedro Sangro Colón, "Hollywood and the Representation of the Otherness: A Historical Analysis of the Role played by Movies in Spotting Enemies to Vilify," *Index Comunicación* 6, no.1 (Feb. 1, 2016), 11-25, 15.

[26] Gelado Marcos and Sangro Colón, "Hollywood and the Representation of the Otherness," 13.

embodiment of the fantastic narrative, the ghost is above all a revenant, a figure of return. Genre,

likewise, is a formal, social, industrial contract to repeat and to return and, as such is always temporally

diverse, involving the unmooring and entanglement of the 'old' with the 'new' and with versions yet to

come"[28]. To understand what this description of genre sets up in terms of the possession framework as an

analytical framework for horrific representations of Otherness, we must recall *possession* in the first

sense, then establish what Lim means by *temporally diverse* by understanding the framework of the

temporal critique.

In the first sense of *possession*, the term refers to supernatural and mystical traits sometimes

assigned to the medium and the function of representing the Other as a *possessing* entity (rather than a

possessed entity) is realized in the context of colonialism. Gelado and Sangro Colón introduce the idea

that effective[29] Otherness depends on the assumption of the spectator that, rather than the film/filmmaker

sculpting some new reality confined to the diegesis of the film, films reflect a reality that already exists in

the world[30]. In other words, the photographic quality of the film implies the indexicality of the narrative in

the real world regardless of whether the spectator consciously disbelieves or recognizes the film's

artificiality. This transference between the artificial and the real contributes to filmic representations of

Otherness being unconsciously internalized by spectators and fused with their reality to some degree[31].

In combination with Lim's idea of genre as a "ghost" in its own right – a returning social, formal,

and industrial contract shaping representation fusing past and present – *possession* within the horror genre

is haunted by its previous iterations in its evolution. Iterations rooted in the anxieties of temporally

distinct social contexts than the contemporary and future moments which blur the anxieties and their

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[28] Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2009), 192.

[29] That is, Otherness that helps reaffirm the self, and often an Otherness with consequences a spectator carries with them beyond the confines of the theater (or the viewing of the film).

[30] Gelado & Sangro Colón, " Hollywood and the Representation of the Otherness,"14.

[31] This theoretical phenomenon is not unlike the way in which we perceive language, and in particular the speakers of variant dialects. As our biases about language based on its representation in media or our personal experience, often lead to categorizing people (and assigning them traits) based on the way we interpret their language use as positive or negative. Likewise, these assessments can occur at the level of the individual and systemically.

manifestations as Otherness together. These iterations harken back to a collective anxiety that is no longer contemporaneous to the most recent evolution of the genric trope – a collective anxiety which is paradoxically rooted in the reality created by the original representation of the fear for the purpose of confronting the anxiety in a controlled, fictional context that reinforces its fictionality. Future iterations of the trope (especially the uncritical) lengthen the lifespan of the anxiety in all its artificially constructed reality into the ever-changing "present" moment with its own needs and anxieties. Put differently, the representative manifestation of fear/anxiety through Otherness in the horror genre does not necessarily prove a cathartic confrontation allowing spectators[32] to confine social anxieties to their original context. Rather, there is a tendency to further remove the audience from the source of the anxiety manifest as an onscreen Other as the sociocultural context of the genric contract shifts incessantly[33]. Thus, tension arises between the assumption that horror allows for the safe confrontation of a perceived Other causing anxiety in the real world within the confines of a theater with few consequences, and the way in which the representation of Otherness as a source of horror or evil inadvertently carries over from fiction to reality.

Moreover, the distance from the ideological source of anxiety also makes it easier to obscure the way in which those ideologies continue to, in combination with the homogenous, linear notion of the passage of time, shape sociocultural hierarchies in a contemporary moment. In *Translating Time*, Lim explains this notion of temporality through the development of Modern Time Consciousness alongside the emergence of imperialist capitalism. This awareness of time parses up days into distinct and standardized parts measured in even smaller standardized increments (hours, minutes, seconds…) that ensured people could synchronize their schedules according the demands of the new economic system[34]. Meanwhile, this linear temporal framework contributed to the development of the Western historical

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[32] Or the genre, for that matter.

[33] The ideological source of the original anxiety is also distanced and abstracted – a decontextualization that makes it difficult to recognize that such a distant source context could still influence & make the threat of Otherness reality.

[34] Lim cites Bergson among others, as she describes how duration became more spatial than temporary under this new system, as way to explain the development of the concept of "having time" marking its commodification early on under capitalism. Along with this idea of "having time" the ability of the common man to own property was also popularizing – same curious notion of ownership over something somewhat intangible, and only made vaguely tangible by its fragmentation.

account as linear and fragmented as well. Dividing the past into distinct periods and naming them retroactively in accordance with European sociocultural happenings gave rise to new connotations of the past that also limited the events of the past and their effects to the past – separate from the present and future of progress and of secondary importance: "As a scientific form of knowledge, historiography gains authority over the temporal unknown – a past that is irretrievably lost – by conquering the primitive space of folklore magic and superstition".[35]

Lim's account goes on to describe the Enlightenment, marked by the rise of scientific methodology and reason, as characterized as the maturation of the West/Europe leaving behind superstition, myth, and the dominance of organized religion as knowledge authority. These unscientific modes of belief and thought became less valuable, even regarded as childish. However, Lim characterizes the reminiscence of these simpler times as fond despite the air of condescension for those whose beliefs still aligned with the less scientific.

The next issue this developing cultural movement faced, was that this historical account and moment of sociocultural change was limited to a handful of European countries. This soon led thinkers and scholars to the task of accounting for the other people and cultures of the world within their new framework. Fortunately, this need to translate the diversity of the world outside Europe emerged alongside the need for natural resources and new sources of labor to fuel the growing demands of capitalist industrialization, and the "discovery" of the New World. Imperial Europe decided two birds be killed with one stone – colonial violence and the slave trade were justified by establishing a unified Other racially distinct from the unified colonial Subject:

This homogenization of the concept of Otherness also facilitates colonial control by separating colonized people from their language and culture forcing them to assimilate to western social constructs.

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[35] Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 2.

As a result, colonized people (who were not violently eradicated) are required at penalty of death to translate themselves into the colonial language. Consequently, colonialism begins to occupy the minds of its victims as well as their physicality, strengthening the hold of this possession. Though racial difference was a product of this formation of Otherness, race served more as a signifier of the traits assigned to the people colonized by Europe. But how does this chronicle of homogenous temporality relate to Otherness as represented in genre films centuries later? From this physical and cultural occupation, colonizers began to fear what would happen if their power or authority was challenged by the colonized cultures, especially if the colonized people started to act violently using the colonizer's tools against them (to be further discussed through *The Exorcist* in relation to Fanon).

Here, the Fantastic becomes the key to connecting Lim's discussion of genre and temporality to this project's notion of possession. During the Age of the Marvelous and in the excitement of "discovering" the New World, the "fabulous human races of the New World" were categorized along with creatures of folklore, holy and supernatural relics as marvels and wonders, as fantastic, and yet to be disenchanted[36]. By stripping the people of Africa, India, and the Americas of any identity markers aside from their distance from whiteness, colonial Europe disregarded the cultural diversity and knowledge of the peoples they colonized and exploited as childish and primitive[37] largely due to their association with the superstition that was seen to have plagued Europe before the Enlightenment. The Other, through the association with the fantastic, became an object to be decoded and exploited by colonizers for the way that Otherness takes up a space of ambivalence with regard to the Enlightenment era dichotomy of enchanted versus disenchanted. As such, the colonial narrative, the cultural/historical account of the Other documents the epistemic violence of being enchanted and disenchanted by the colonizers rather than detailing the brutality of colonial occupation[38].

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[36] Lim, *Translating Time*, 22.

[37] Note how Sarukkai explains this idea of the other, "Consistently, the other stood for an inferior human and was even understood in the paradigm of the native children against the adult west" (1406).

[38] However, the colonized people and cultures falling into this category of Other are not so easily understood by the colonizer. As a result, Otherness remains a threat to colonial institutions yet to be realized.

The infatuation with reveling in enchantment (and its promise of new scientific knowledge) and somewhat conflicting desire to disenchant the mysterious natural phenomena translating them into definitive quantification through science are essential elements of the possession framework's comparison of horror and documentary. Documentary films provide the satisfaction of knowledge – definitive and 'true' – about a previously unknown Other, while horror films allow spectators to engage with the fantastic Other – at once portrayed as malevolent and erratic, devoid of reason, but fictional and, therefore controllable, non-threatening, safe. Furthermore, this construction (and the hierarchy of value assigned to documentary versus horror genre films) implies that violence is the result of a lack of knowledge and control over someone or something, and not associated with the act of seeking out knowledge to counteract the violence of the Other that remains misunderstood[39].

Consequently, the association of people determined racially Other with the fantastic and supernatural in its unknowability carries that message that this Otherness (the distance from whiteness as the privileged default) is the source of all malevolence because it is unknown – impossible to rationalize through homogenous, scientific abstraction. Even when whiteness perpetrates violence (in a colonial context or in cinematic representation), that violence can be justified because it is "rational" regardless of the fact that scientific reason and written history that characterize the privileged forms of knowledge in (neo)colonial are superior only by social convention.

With this context in mind, I turn now to analyzing the possessions in *The Exorcist* and *Get Out* as they relate to the idea of racialized Otherness, and how representing this Other in the context of a fantastic narrative can challenge coloniality. These analyses also examine the way each film asks the spectator to interact with the way conventions of genre are used or ignored in their respective representations of Otherness.

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[39] This is one way in which whiteness distances itself from the source of the problems white supremacy has created. It also sets the stage for my discussion of *Get Out* as it relates to the reception of the film and the centrality of white "exceptionalism" as many spectators refuse to interrogate their whiteness, claiming instead that they're. "one of the good ones" in a manner not unlike that which Ishikawa mentions in "The Paradox of Representation".

The Exorcist

This section analyzes *The Exorcist* as a horror film in two parts in order to fully explore its modes of possession. The film relies on two primary sources of horror to demonstrate how Regan and her mother are traumatized by her demonic possession, the horror of which extends to all those who encounter the possessed child in one of these spaces; either through the supernatural/magical space where the demon clashes with the authority of the Church, or the space of medicine and psychiatry as they try to diagnose Regan's condition. Between these realms is an interloper, Father Damien Karras. Father Karras, Regan, and the demon Pazuzu anchor the analysis of the dynamics of positionality that emerge from the film's possession. Analyzing the characterization of each character's proximity to the violence of the two realms of horror as established by the cinematic language and dialogue of the film in this way helps address the multiplicity of these possessions.

While *The Exorcist* undoubtedly reinforces the colonial perception of racialized evil, as a demon of ancient non-Western origins wreaks havoc in modern, heavily white-coded Georgetown, the film also draws on issues of gender and the victimization of a young girl to complicate the audience's perception of the calculated violence of white male authority. The film itself functions as almost two horror films in one: first, the violence of Regan's demonic possession towards Regan herself and those surrounding her, and second, the violence of the attempts to rid her of the demon scientifically/medically and through the rite of exorcism. Two figures in the film are caught between these worlds of violence: Regan herself, and Father Damien Karras.

Demonic Possession & Racialized Violence

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon presents colonial modernity as a world divided into two distinct zones: a white zone wherein humanity prospers and that contains most of the resources, and an "Other" zone to which the Black, the Colonized, the Slave are confined.[40] One of the staples of the horror genre is the violation of the norm, a violent disruption of a normally safe and peaceful environment. Often times, the space disrupted aligns with Fanon's "white zone," while the disruptive entity is almost always racialized even when it is supernatural. This is precisely what happens in *The Exorcist*, as Pazuzu interrupts a variety of "white zones" from the affluent neighborhood where Regan and her mother, Chris, reside to the hospital, and ultimately, of the white body and mind. In the context of *The Exorcist*'s demonic possession, this issue of the monstrous Other becomes inseparable from the notion of the demonic standing in for an inverted colonial possession. This inverted colonial possession is also inherently raced because of the construction of the colonial Other from Lim's account, tying the race of indigenous people to the fantastic (as explained at the beginning of this chapter).

In the case of spiritual or demonic possession, there is a monstrous Other as well as Other stemming from the dominant group. To clarify, Adkins describes the monstrous as a "symptom of humanity" not a mere conflict of morality, but "an imaginary space in and through which we are continuously able to choose between containing and calcifying our humanity, or reconstituting it in radically new ways…without the multifarious and unstable category of the monstrous, the human would cease to exist as such, since there would no longer be any threat against which to define the normalizing and homogenizing category of 'human.'"[41] If we accept the Other as the symptom of the Same, "the evidence of identity-construction in the Same and, perhaps more importantly, the functional space in

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[40] Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 40. Similarly, Poll's analysis of "the geographies of horror" uses this same notion of Fanon's to describe how Peele's film inverts the construction of horrific settings, where the anxiety the spectator sees is that of someone from the "Other" zone being wary of the danger posed to him by his presence in the white zone.

[41] Roger A. Adkins, "The 'Monstrous' Other Speaks: Postsubjectivity and the Queering of the Normal" (dissertation, University of Oregon, 2010), 10, scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/10875.

which that identity is – negatively- constructed. To the extent that we can label as a 'monster' anything that would challenge the notion of humanness, the monstrous is a symptom of the human."

With this in mind and being aware of the ways in which coloniality structures the Other as subhuman, the reoccurrence of colonial fears of possession and the representation of this in cinema occurs in part because of the way in which coloniality does not confront the Other within the Same and assigning that monstrous Other to an anthropological Other as discussed in the introduction. The monstrous has a dark pull, but it is something undesired and associated with the "savage" within the institutions of coloniality which could prevent full engagement with the monstrous and Other though the imaginary space they offer in the same way that temporal homogeneity parses up and mistranslates aspects of the Other and reality.

The Western horror genre as a whole has been "shaped by white filmmakers, dominated by the racial imagery of white people and marketed to white audiences"[42] in a very colonial fashion wherein white protagonists are victims of a racialized Other. In *The Exorcist*, this ideal manifests in the violence exerted over Regan, a vulnerable girl introduced to the audience in one of the whitest social settings possible – the upper middle class household. How then does this narrative about a vile Middle Eastern demon with ties to mythicized Africa possessing an innocent white child complicate the inherent coloniality embedded in the horror of the exorcism? In order to tackle this question, we first must understand what colonial fears this type of horror and many others depend on.

Importantly, the colonial historical narrative tends to gloss over the violence directed towards indigenous cultures in the name of progress and civilization - boasting its own superiority whether spiritual or technological – ignoring the trauma colonization inflicts upon the colonized. However, such aggression is underscored (or perhaps fueled by) by intense anxiety rooted in the fear that the colonized

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[42] Ian Olney, *Euro Horror: Classic European Horror Cinema in Contemporary American Culture*, (University of Indiana Press, 2013), 183.

will begin to use the colonizers' own tools against them. Kevin Wetmore draws on Fanon's work to discuss colonial possessions in *The Exorcist* where the aforementioned Fanonian tension manifests in the invasion of a European American body (in this case, that of a young white girl) by an African spirit.[43] Although the demon possessing Regan seems to be from Iraq initially, we later learn that Father Merrin exorcised the same demon from a child in Africa decades prior.

Kevin Wetmore's "Colonial Possessions: A Fanonian Reading of *The Exorcist* and its sequels" establishes this relationship between colonialism (specifically the colonization of the African continent) and the exorcism film by examining the horror of white people being possessed and the emergence of the "Evil African" trope from the trope of the "Evil Arab".[44] I will not discuss the latter much beyond its role in emphasizing the foreign-ness of the possessing entity and the demon's associations with a time before Western rationality and civility as that is the primary extent to which the film relies on the trope. However, the former is much more pertinent in spite of the similarly minimal attention it is given by the actual narrative. Wetmore's analysis, as much of my own, focuses on the Fanonian tension of colonial violence wherein the colonizer uses violence to terrify and subdue the colonial subject and justifies such violence by dehumanizing the indigenous peoples and presenting them as the ultimate and quintessential evil, primitive and uncivilized.

Another way existing scholarship directly engages with colonialism and possession occurs through Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. Though this text does not deal with representations of possession in the media as much as it addresses the actual issue of possession for people living under colonial rule in Algeria, Wetmore's presentation of Fanon's work reveals the way in which these colonial structures and questions of subjectivity and identity become embroiled in the possessed characters of the western exorcism films: "The self-displacement that colonialism engenders, argues Fanon, is represented by a

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[43] Kevin J. Wetmore, "Colonial Possessions: A Fanonian Reading of *The Exorcist* and Its Sequels." *Social Research* 81, no. 4 (2014): 883-96, 886.
[44] Wetmore, "Colonial Possessions," 885.

violent distancing of one's own identity and an actual violence toward others. These two elements constitute many of the afflictions ascribed to the possessed characters in Western exorcism films: they are not themselves, but someone else, and they threaten those around them with violence"[45]. These two elements, though possibly reflective of the Western perception of the colonially possessed Africans, hold a complicated position in terms of their ability to accurately represent the ailments of the possessed Africans. This sort of representation of possession attributes the source of the colonial violence to the colonized people rather than the colonizing power that disrupted their way of being in the world in the same way that colonialism circumvents the blame or guilt for violently exploiting these people and their homes by painting colonial occupation as an opportunity for advancement.

Wetmore sums this convoluted hypocrisy up stating, "the response from American popular culture [in times of crisis] is to embrace the supernatural and explain evil in the world through demonic presences. African cultures, conversely… release the supernatural and instead engage the political reality of the situation. Yet, in that same American popular culture, Africa is presented as a place of superstition from where demons come…yet it is the rational West that reacts with demons in times of crisis"[46]

Wetmore closes by establishing that "The horror of exorcism films is that an African or Middle Eastern entity has ownership and control over the body of a Western individual. The horror of colonialism is that the imperialist state has ownership and control over the bodies of all of the indigenous people. Exorcism offers a means by which the racial Other entity might be expelled; but only armed rebellion, itself a form of exorcism, can purge the colonizer from the colony and end possession"[47]. While Wetmore makes a valid point here and in his broader discussion of *The Exorcist* and its sequels as films about the horror resulting from colonial possessions from the perspective of the colonizer's fear of insurgence, the text fails to connect this motif of the colonial possession to the broader context of the horror genre and its

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[45] Wetmore, "Colonial Possessions," 887.
[46] Wetmore, "Colonial Possessions," 887.
[47] Wetmore, "Colonial Possessions," 895.

conventions. In addition, the text does not delve far into the tension between the world of science and the world of religion in the context of a (neo)colonial society like the United States, and the relationship to a racialized Other inflicting gendered violence. Furthermore, the idea that armed rebellion is the only way to banish the colonizer seems a little reductive. In response, the rest of the work of this chapter and the discussion of *The Exorcist* bases the exploration of possession as it pertains to colonialism as well as the conventions of the horror genre on dissecting the different tensions of race, gender, and knowledge systems to fully understand the impact of colonial possessions on the colonizers and colonized. Thus, taking up *possession* as a space for subjugation as well as the various forms of resistance it facilitates.

Medical Objectification & Gendered Violence

Regan, possessed by the demon, also becomes an object of *possession* the neurologists and psychologists brought in by her mother to determine the cause of her ailments. These men simply cannot believe that Regan's condition is not going to be remedied by the scientific method, and thus, Regan is regarded as a specimen. Although she is not treated poorly, her odd behavior and the baffling physical ailments she suffers become something for the doctors to disenchant. In their attempts to do so, Regan's mother (Chris) also becomes the victim of the epistemic violence committed against her daughter as what Chris says from the beginning – that this is not her daughter – is written off by doctors and psychiatrists who cite the "crazy things that happen to the mind when something is wrong with the body". Even when Chris tries to tell the doctors that Regan cannot possibly have moved the bed off the ground especially with both of them on it, the doctors are dismissive – either Regan was in some adrenaline-charged state or Chris was probably exaggerating because of her fear. For the doctors, Regan's afflictions must be tied to some disruption of her body's usual function. Indeed, their dismissal of Chris as hysterical is gendered, but also rooted in the Enlightenment's move away from the idea that nature could have any agency of its own, "Enlightenment has always regarded anthropomorphism, the projection of subjective properties onto

nature as the basis of myth. The supernatural, spirits, and demons are taken to be reflections of human beings who allow themselves to be frightened by natural phenomena."[48]

This objectification of the girl and her supposed illness is solidified by several key moments of the film where Regan, though possessed at the time, clearly demonstrates that she is still present in her corrupted body. One such moment occurs early in her medical examination where she is shown naked in an operating room, strapped down shielded from the doctors by a thin, papery sheet as they tap into her carotid artery and inject radioactive imaging fluid to monitor her brain activity. At this instant, her innocent vulnerability is fully displayed as she grimaces, squeezing her eyes shut and whimpering as blood spurts and begins to pump through a monstrous machine. From the observation deck, her mother wrings her hat in her hands and watches helplessly, unable to comfort her daughter in the coldly ambivalent room full of strangers. Ultimately, the test's results, as all other invasive and prodding medical investigations in the film, are fruitless. Unable to identify what could be causing Regan to behave so unlike herself, the authority and rationality of scientific is impotent in the face of the raced Other, and the calculated violence it exerts in an effort to combat this force and assimilate the entity and Regan's own experience to something that fits the Western rationality of the world does nothing but worsen the possession's hold.

This worsening of her condition following the attempts at medical/psychiatric intervention is eerily similar to that which Fanon observed in the asylums in Algeria. Fanon is critical of the asylums which served to alienate patients from society even more, while exacerbating their condition and marginalized them even more – he worked to shift from the asylum system to the hospitalization system

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[48] Horkheimer and Adorno, "The Concept of Enlightenment,"4. Ironically, this dismissal of projecting subjectivity onto nature stemmed from the impulse to control, assert one's own dominance over knowledge and nature as a means of grappling with the fear of the supernatural and inexplicable. This also reflects the lack of value placed on the affective and emotions as they are falsely construed as being less reliable because they are irrational (even though emotions are usually caused by something and can actually allow us to empathize with one another – clearly, that is not valued enough to have encouraged the doctors to believe what Chris told them). This is to say, that by ignoring the possibility of the supernatural, the doctors ensured their own authority being overwhelmed by the demon possessing Regan, which reflects how scientific reason and capitalist/colonial abstraction and decontextualization ensure their own vulnerability to Otherness and being challenged from within.

which would allow patients to work with professionals on their conditions but also maintain contact with the outside world (patients are less likely to be exploited in asylum and not as culturally dislocated because the asylum is just a concentrated form of colonization. North African Syndrome "challenges the axiomatic thinking in medical discourse that pain comes from a lesion, and that once the right diagnosis is made a cure becomes possible. The pain experienced by the patients, albeit psychosomatic, is not feigned; it is a manifestation of a tormented existence; it is occasioned by their exploitation and cultural dislocation, as well as by the tissue of negative stereotypes that inflict them in their body and soul. For Fanon, it is not just a question of diagnosing the symptoms but of removing these patients from an insufferable pain."[49] This syndrome is also tied to the pathologizing of the behaviors and expressions of the Other[50] wherein, "The root cause of the problem lay not just in the therapeutic milieu but in the broader context of Algerian society – in its history, culture, and politics." [51]

With this in mind, the horror both Regan and Chris experienced in the attempt to understand what was wrong also takes on an inherently gendered violence that coincides with the primarily racialized violence of the demonic possession. In their attempts to diagnose Regan, to produce a rational explanation and course of action to tackle the increasingly erratic and supernatural, the doctors bring in psychiatrists and psychologists, and infinite specialists from among these fields. However, these efforts remain ineffective largely because of its homogenous approach, which is to say the scientific reason cannot account for the supernatural problems. Hence, violence occurs twofold as Regan and her mother fall victim to the compulsion for doctors and medical science to first, establish a hierarchical relationship between the doctor and patient in which the doctor can pick and choose the symptoms and information provided by patients is important to his diagnosis. In the film this dynamic is also inherently worsened by

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[49] Azzedine Haddour, *Frantz Fanon, Postcolonialism and the Ethics of Difference* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 139-140.

[50] E.g. the overdiagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia for African Americans in the mental healthcare system now – confusing of fear of the government and law enforcement based on systemic injustice related to racism in these institutions.

[51] Haddour, *Frantz Fanon, Postcolonialism and the Ethics of Difference*, 142.

misogyny and Chris not being taken seriously. Secondly, in their attempts to disenchant Regan's condition, the doctors are dismissive of the benefits of other solutions (even initially hesitant to hand Regan over to a psychiatrist until their exhaustive tests yield nothing). This raises the question, if the doctors had encouraged Chris to seek out alternative solutions from the beginning, rather than making her feel crazy for even wanting to try, could Regan have been saved earlier? At the very least, it seems that she would've been spared some of the trauma of the hospital and maybe the doctors could have saved face, too.

Notably, however this tension between the authority of the Church and the authority of science in *The Exorcist* and the disruption of each by a racialized demon reveals the way in which the horror genre and its conventions are haunted by the social anxieties of the past. In the first section of this chapter, the dominance of a homogenous temporality and homogenous mode of knowledge through Lim's temporal critique dismisses the fantastic and supernatural as scientifically invalid and inferior ways of understanding the world and cultural history, but not before making the association between racialized people and cultures and the supernatural. Furthermore, the epistemic and physical violence of colonialism assert dominance in the sense that they maintain oppressive hierarchies as do scientific knowledge and its infallibility as the way of knowing within this system.

This seems like a contradiction to the prevalence of religion and religious justifications of colonialism, but as the dominant Christian religion is monotheistic, the Enlightenment permits its existence because it does not pose as much of a threat to the domination of Western thought, as it further unifies the members of colonial societies. The idea of an omnipotent singular God is similar to the reason that emerged out of colonialism – it can only be questioned by its participants, and acts as a different mode of belief for those Europeans (and now Americans) to follow that still ultimately creates a unified belief in the hierarchies of colonial capitalism.

Even as the scientific and religious clash in this context, the integrity of the power of this knowledge remains unshaken because of a shared, subconscious identification with whiteness even as the privilege of this ideal is not equally applied to those made to identify with it. The only thing that truly has the potential to overwhelm these institutions is the recognition of their fallacies and atrocities, which are most visible in the inability of science to definitively refute the validity of other knowledge systems/the existence of the supernatural and the history of genocidal violence and exploitation of people that fall outside of the realm of whiteness. For this reason, the alignment of the Church in the film with the notion of the supernatural and as an institution at odds with the institution of medical science is superficial. Here, the Fanonian tension that Wetmore emphasizes as the reason *The Exorcist* is a colonial possession film, but my analysis takes this a step farther to examine the perpetuation of gendered violence towards white women as the site of this kind of horror. This extension of Wetmore's analysis into the broader context of this project's sense of also seeks out the reason why possession films of the horror genre, especially *The Exorcist* and its demonic possession destabilizing the authority of science and the Church are so often repeated and reiterated.

Gender, Race & Magic

Another byproduct of the two horror narratives of the film is the relationship between the female body and the colonized body as each pertains to the threat they pose to the colonial patriarchal capitalism (and the dominance of the white male's ability to reason). By exploring the trope of gendered violence in relation to *surplus women*, this project also contextualizes the haunting, spectral aspects of the horror genre's representations of Otherness as manifestations of cultural anxieties (even as those are individually experienced by spectators and their relationship to social conditioning).

In Karen Beckman's *Vanishing Women*, the fears tied to these bodies are explored as it dates back to Victorian England and the notion of *surplus women* that emerged around this time. This discussion also

ties into the first sense of *possession* and how this sense encompasses the way in which film spectators, colonizers, and the colonized are often subconsciously driven by deeply ingrained fears and anxieties as side effects of hierarchical and authoritative social institutions. Furthermore, Beckman's figure of the *vanishing woman* connects the spectrality of film as a photographic art (as it simultaneously facilitates belief and disbelief) to the spectrality of colonization and language encompassed by *possession* in this first sense through an exploration of bodies that exist but are dispensable.

Beckman explores the relationship between the female body and the colonized body in the context of the fears associated with gendered and raced bodies in Victorian England, British colonialism, and the popularization of magicians emerging from the colonization of India. Importantly, the female body and the raced body are seen by the Englishman as threats to their institutional power, especially as the development of photographic media allows these bodies to take up visual space more widely than ever before. The Industrial Revolution occurring at this time also contributed to the fear of overpopulation as urban areas boom and poverty and crime run rampant, and it is easy to blame the woman (newly visible as she is) for these emerging issues.

Similarly, the woman also presented an economic threat to men at this moment which was not unlike the threat of American women in the 1970s during the emergence of Second Wave Feminism. In response, there is an attempt to make these women "disappear" in order to preserve the image of the male authority and magic acts centered around the literal disappearing woman become exceedingly popular as the white male magician gains control over the presence of the feminine under the guise of harmless entertainment.[52] With this in mind and in spite of the different social anxieties manifest in *The Exorcist*, the masculine impulse to control the visuality of women remains ingrained in this film's narrative. Regan's amnesia, the film's closing on Father Dyer watching as Regan and her mother are driven away from the site of supernatural disturbance, and even the film's title referring not to Regan's experience but

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[52] Karen Beckman, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, and Feminism* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2003), 33-4, 42-6.

the masculine response indicate an attempt to preserve the masculine authorities and institutions in the film (even though I believe that the film is in some ways challenging their impulse to control).

However, in spite of the prevalence of gendered discourse in the film's narrative, the racialized aspects of the magic shows explored by Beckman and embedded in Western colonial perceptions of colonized cultures are essential to understanding how colonialism manifests in the horror genre. More specifically, the possessing demon of *The Exorcist* is canonically raced (even if we never truly see it) and perpetuates the classic trope of the violation of a vulnerable white, female body tracing back to British colonialism and the emergence of modern slavery.

Even though in later performances of the vanishing woman act consist of a male European magician calling for the woman's disappearance, the origins of these stage magic performances are rooted in the performances of Indian magicians(known as *fakirs*) witnessed by the British colonizers. According to Beckman, "Britain did not want its surplus women, but longed for a disappearance that would not have to deal with the materiality of the body or the violence inherent to disappearance. In short it wanted magic,"[53] and this is precisely what the replacement of fakirs with European magicians allowed. Another essential part of the success of such acts consists of the projection of the European male desire to possess (have at their disposal and control) the "surplus" women/female bodies onto the figure of a raced, male colonized body. It primarily involves the projection of violence/violent desires to oppress/subdue the newly visible woman onto the colonized male – in this case, the projection of the impulse to rape from the Englishman onto Indian men. This relates to an increase visibility of women in the world as women entered the workforce during industrialization, and the new liberties promised by financial independence. In the context of *The Exorcist*, this can explain the reason that Regan became the host of the demon as her mother was an independently wealthy and successful woman divorced from Regan's father.

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[53] Beckman, *Vanishing Women*, 35.

Moreover, Beckman's criticism of the Englishmen who participated in the plundering of Indian villages and raped the women in these villages while projecting that violence onto the Indian men they encountered echoes Spivak's analysis of this occurrence wherein she details the way in which these women of colonial India were silenced by the complicit oppression of the domestic patriarchy as well as the imperialist one. Nonetheless, when the practice of sati was banned, "the abolition was historically regarded by the West as a 'case of white men' gallantly 'saving brown women from brown men'" while also critiquing the male nativists who defended the practice because the women wanted to die/were enlightened, which Spivak calls out as the weaponization of subjectivity[54] to make the women scapegoats through the same category of justifications as the West. Finally, Spivak closes this discussion critiquing nativist thought as "'nothing but a parody for lost origin.' In other words, she points out that nativist discourse is merely the essentialist assumptions that native cultures remain unchanged in spite of the violent impact of colonial rule."[55] By projecting such violence onto colonized men, racialized and gendered violence of the Englishman toward colonized women (and men as a means of defending European women) is permitted. In some cases, there is also an allowance for violence against European women if said woman has been compromised by the violent colonized male.

The Exorcist exhibits this permissibility of violence against white women for the greater good of white male sovereignty through the racialized threat posed by Regan's possession (wherein the demon is ultimately traced back to Africa after the film's opening in Iraq). More support for the roots of this way of representing demonic possession in Beckman's discussion of surplus women concerns the association of the racialized demon with sexual violation in one of the film's more disturbing scenes. This scene being one in which the possessed Regan somehow obtains a crucifix. The demon begins to yell obscenities at

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[54] Wherein women in colonial India are made out to be subjects choosing to participate in the rite of sati by Indian men as a response to the Western reduction of the same women to objects – here, the women are stripped of their autonomy to make a decision about whether to participate in sati because either way they will contribute to their own oppression (either in participating to show solidarity with Indian men's defense of their 'choice' to participate or be seen as betrayers of their culture by siding with the Western attempts to ban the practice).
[55] Ishikawa, "The Paradox of Representation," 80-81.

Chris, her assistant, and several of the doctors supervising Regan's care. While hurling these profanities at the horrified audience (in the film and the spectators of it) from the mouth of a previously gentle and innocent child, the demon proceeds to violate Regan with the crucifix splattering blood across her mother's momentarily stunned face. However, the religious implications of the sexually explicit act in this coupled with the context of this film in colonialism seems to foreshadow the film's disagreement or at least dissatisfaction with the conventions of this violence as punishment – Regan is violated both by the demon and the Church that violently cast the demon out of its way.

The success of Regan's mother as an actress, as well as her status as a divorcee represented the threat to white heteronormative patriarchy that was emerging during the 60s and 70s. As such, the film seems to punish the mother and daughter as surplus women in the sense of Beckman's surplus women, while also justifying the trauma that the two underwent during their attempts to be recognized by the medical field and the Church. However, the film does not seem convinced of its own means of justifying the violence experienced by Regan and her mother at the hands of these institutions of the heteronormative white patriarchy. There is at least the possibility of reading this representation of violent, demonic Otherness in the same way that the possession and madness of the Hauka in *Les maîtres fous*, where the filmic representation may intend to be a commentary against the dominant narrative of justifying the oppression on the basis of race and secondarily on gender, but the context of its viewing by an audience conditioned to view these representations of racialized Others as the justification of their exploitation. Additionally, this lack of conviction is embodied in the film by the figure of Father Damien Karras as he is caught between worlds both as his own wavering faith in the Church combined with his work in psychiatry positions him between the authority of white male science and religion. Karras is also suspended between his ancestral home (Greece) as he cares for his immigrant mother and his life in the United States. It comes as no surprise then that Karras also unifies the use of language as both a mechanism of horror and establishing associations between that horror, its source, and the ideologies they interact with.

For instance, one of the diagnostics of demonic possession is the possessed's sudden knowledge of a foreign language or speaking in tongues implying that the demonic possession may well be an inverted colonial possession. Interestingly, Regan does not speak Latin or reversed English until Chris asks Damien to come help Regan. Even more compelling, is the demon's connection to Damien through his mother's death. Not only does his mother only speak Greek, but as an immigrant she also has ties to the superstition of the old world and the earlier days of the Church. The film's least conventional use of cinematic language also clings to Damien's presence as he dreams about his mother calling out to him and unable to hear his responses as he shouts to her before the face of the demon flashes across the screen. Though this does suggest the connection of the disorienting dream sequence is instead tied to the demon, similar occurrences almost always start with or transition to Damien's presence onscreen.

Indeed, the film almost seems to be suggesting Karras somehow summons the demon perhaps suggesting that Pazuzu takes not of his emotional vulnerability and his wavering faith in the institutions of the two realms of horror as an open invitation to fully destabilize the isolated priest. When understood this way, Damien's suicide at the end becomes even more ambiguous. Did the demon succeed in destabilizing him driving him to madness, or was the act, as the film seems to suggest, a final act of defiance as the demon's violence convinces Karras of the necessity of the institutions he began to doubt?

Overall, the film's ambiguous ending and the overlapping possessions as the source of horror in the film indicate that the film seeks to problematize the social institutions within the film. Initially, the demonic possession may appear to justify the violence Regan is subjected to by the medical practitioners and the Church's exorcism. However, by connecting these two institutions through the figure of Father Karras, the film reveals something more sinister about the institutions. As Beckman indicates with through the notion of surplus women, the stereotype of the wild, hypersexual Indian male in pursuit of European women became a figure onto which the violent, sexually charged fantasies of the colonizing European man could be projected. In this manner, the European man could justify violence against Indian men while suppressing the independence of European women and reducing them to sexual objects

through their identification with the stereotype of Indian men (as a means of circumventing the sexual repression that coincided with the move away from physical desires toward intellectually driven reasoning). Recalling Beckman's analysis of the later popularity of the magic trick wherein a magician makes his female assistant disappear (and the figure of the magician's origin in the fakirs of India) was another way for European men to grapple with the desire to magically return to a time before women entered into public spaces during industrialization. Here, there is also an indication of the beginning of the fetishization of the Other that begins to occur as a result of colonial constructions of subjectivity.

By reading the film's two possessions as extensions of these colonial projections onto the Other, the possessions call the authority and singularity of the Church and the diagnoses of the medical field. The primarily white male authorities within the Church as well as the medical world could be read as projecting their desires onto the demon possessing Regan in the same way that the vanishing woman trick and the sexually violent colonized male emerged out of the fascination with oppressing the colonial Other as well as the infatuation with becoming that Other that resulted from the repression of sexual desires/physical pleasures and the rejection of the fantastic from the Enlightenment before the age of colonialism. Understood in this way, the scene with the demon forcing Regan to mutilate herself with the crucifix represents her rape, not by the racialized Other, but instead by the Church, just as the violence the demon inflicts upon Regan is exacerbated by the doctors' tests and attempts at diagnosis.

The vanishing woman trick manifests at the end of the film – Regan remembers nothing, and she leaves with her mother presumably never to be heard from again. Regan's amnesia is the closest to non-violent elimination of surplus women at the root of the appeal of the figure of the vanishing woman. While there has been a violent disruption of the patriarchal order, for Regan it is almost as if nothing happened; however, the threat posed by Chris' independence is only deferred as she is driven out by demonic violence and the inability of science or religion to help her. Finally, Father Karras' death at the hands of the demon represents the way in which dissent and the questioning of authority is punished as a means of preserving institutional authority. However, the film does not allow his death to create a real

sense of preservation. Instead, Damien's suicide leaves the threat of the demon unresolved and renders the institutions vulnerable to criticism. With the demonic possession being associated with the anxiety of covert infiltration by an outside antagonist, Damien's precarious position between science and religion as well as the foreign and domestic establishes him as a scapegoat for the inadequacies of the institutions of scientific knowledge and religious belief originating from the fragmented whole of each. The death of Father Karras following his status as the source of dissent within both of the institutions he navigates thus becomes symbolic of the self-destructive tendency of their systems of belief and notions of Otherness.

Get Out: The Inversion of Otherness?

> *The repetition and frequency of commercial master narratives, genres, and cinematic techniques are restrictive, specifically to the detriment of people of color, because they minimize and ignore diverse perspectives of concepts such as horror and terror. This triggers interpretations that may differ due to historical black experience in the United States and throughout the world. An inability to generically classify a film not only complicates its meaning for audiences but also thwarts cinematic precedent, which in turn severely reduces any opportunity for alternative perspectives of terror or horror.*
> -Monica White Ndounou, *Breaking the Chains of History and Genre*

This section begins analyzing *Get Out* as it conforms or breaks with the conventions of the horror genre to explore how the film challenges horrific representations of the Other. First and foremost, the question arises – what is it a horror movie about? Then, the question of how this film creates that horror. Likewise, this chapter explores the reception of *Get Out* as the film's popular and critical reception relates to spectatorship. Like *The Exorcist*, *Get Out* is about possession, however its possessions are much more grimly calculated than demonic possession. The film offers a vision of the objectification and commodification of black bodies by oppressive institutions backed by white supremacy as a horrific spectacle. This spectacle rips away the comfort of the conventionally "safe" established by previous horror films and seemingly opens a rift for spectators, as the young black male protagonist, Chris Washington, is ruthlessly

manipulated and antagonized by the family of his white girlfriend, Rose Armitage. In order to understand the relationship between *possession* and race in this film as well as the "rift" the film creates, this half of the chapter begins with *Get Out*'s reception.

The Reception

In spite of radically challenging the centrality of whiteness to the horror genre and its depictions of Otherness, *Get Out*'s reviews were marked by whiteness. In a film where the entire focus is on a black protagonist and the danger he faces in navigating a white setting, white critics reviewing the film still find a way to center whiteness in their reviews of the film while distancing themselves from the problematic elements of whiteness that the film draws attention to. Part of this stems from the way in which all film genres typically have conventions built around white protagonists, but clearly this issue is not resolved by replacing the white casts with predominantly black casts. For one, Ndounou describes genre in relation to race by providing a historical account of genre designation, "Racial genre labels only apply to films with nonwhite casts, thereby reinforcing whiteness as the norm. In other words 'black' is treated as a genre while white is not."[56] Ndounou expands, stating that films with non-white casts and directors are much more likely to be considered representative of all of the members of the group(s) they represent. Additionally, that poor critical reception or even poor representation in a film with a white director and writers and non-white cast often reflect poorly on members of that group in real-life. Ndounou attributes this tendency to the establishment of a master narrative of cinema, especially as it is concerned with genre films, wherein the mainstream mode of storytelling and representation encompass all of the identities and ways of interacting with Otherness that matter.

In the context of *Get Out*, a mainstream horror film centered on the horror of white antagonists obsessed with possessing black bodies from the perspective of a young black man made vulnerable, a rift arises as the film challenges racialized representations of Otherness as horrifying in the genre which in

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[56] Ndounou, "Breaking the Chains of Genre and History," 132.

turn produces a rift for white spectators as the film does not cater to the white gaze. The rift created by the film is rooted in spectatorship, particularly the way in which theorists like Laura Mulvey have described spectatorship as informed by the white male gaze. The dominance of this form of spectatorship establishes the context for the emergence of what bell hooks refers to as *the oppositional gaze*. This rift between the conventional mode of spectatorship and the challenge *Get Out* poses to that method of gazing opens up potential for the film's appropriation and assimilation to the dominant narrative of normative whiteness, but it also opens up the potential for transgression and progress. Which potential is realized, however, relies on the individual spectator's receptivity to disruption as much as it relies on the intention of the film to disrupt[57].

The emergence of the oppositional gaze for hooks is inseparable from the incompatibility of the black female spectator with the representations onscreen that project and are projections of the white (male) gaze and its "violent erasure of black womanhood."[58] Hence, the oppositional gaze as tied to issues of race and gender explores a form of spectatorship that hooks introduces in an attempt to fill the gap left by film theorists like Mulvey and Metz – the absence of black womanhood in cinematic representations, as well as film theory. According to hooks, "the 'gaze' has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally…To stare at the television, or mainstream movies, to engage its images, was to engage with its negation of black representation. It was the oppositional black gaze that responded to these looking relations by developing independent black cinema;"[59] as with language and cinema itself, the act of gazing is a tool of the oppressor that the oppressed adopt as a means of resistance[60]. As Hollywood has become more receptive to diversifying, it has also become possible for black filmmakers

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[57] In the same way that a film that intends to disrupt hierarchies of representation can actually perpetuate oppressive systems, a film that is not intended to disrupt these hierarchies can turn them on their head – the ambivalence of interpretation and the potentially massive scope of spectatorship ensures this fluidity.

[58] Hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 251.

[59] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 248-249.

[60] By appropriating the tools used to suppress and efface their subjectivity and identity outside of the context of their proximity to whiteness, the resistance of oppressed and marginalized groups suggests to some extent that the act of appropriation is itself somewhat "neutral" in that it has potential to be violent and authoritative, as well as violently anarchistic, liberating.

to create mainstream representations of black people that are not strictly confined to a racial genre. However, this representation remains limited as only a handful of black filmmakers receive the industry's attention. The gaze encouraged is still primarily white and phallocentric which is now masked by the illusion of progressivity attempting to squash the subversive potential of mainstream, diverse representations of blackness.

Indeed, Poll quotes Victoria Anderson's statement that the reviews of *Get Out* were almost more frightening than the film itself as so many of them merely described the film as a "satire of white liberalism" completely unaware of their own complicity in that same liberalism.[61] However, it is important to refrain from characterizing the film's impact and interpretation through the persistence centralized whiteness in such reviews lest this analysis of the *possessions* in *Get Out* fall into a similar dismissal of the film's disruption of the master narrative of horror. Taking this notion from Ndounou and putting it in conversation with Lim's description of genre as a site of temporal diversity raises the question of *Get Out*'s genre designation – why is it that the film is perceived as a horror (sometimes horror-comedy) rather than falling into a racial genre?

This question seems best answered by the way it is so easily overtaken by whiteness, which overlooks Chris and his traumatic experiences, as white critics move quickly to distance themselves from the evil and oppressive whiteness in the film. Firstly, it is easy to distance oneself from whiteness you partake in when that whiteness is only defined as the absence of race and the individuals within the category are allowed to have complex identities as a result of not being policed (as Butler would say) in their performance of their identity as harshly as raced individuals. Furthermore, Lim's idea of genre as an embodiment of temporal diversity and conventions applies, but it also applies to the interpretation of genre films. Since the master narrative limits the perspectives of terror and horror that appear, even when a film that represents a different type of horror from the perspective of a person of color and acted by

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[61] Poll, "Can One 'Get Out?'", 72.

people of color (in this case Peele's film as it challenges the historical slavery narrative in films), the

discussion of that film in comparison to other films of the genre is already predisposed to be tied to a

comparison of white narratives to, in this case, a black narrative perspective. This is especially

problematic for reviews and spectating *Get Out* because of the way the horror genre is so focused on the

anxieties and fears of whiteness. Even as *Get Out* engages with a lot of the underlying issues of

Otherness, the horror comes from being the Other. Since whiteness is never Other, the film is most likely

going to be taken less seriously as horror and more likely to be considered comedic. In a genre where it is

convention for non-white characters to be dispensable when they aren't monstrous makes it all the easier

for white spectators to overlook the film and its telling of the protagonist's trauma – after all, the

spectacle of black and brown pain is already commonplace.

Nevertheless, the analysis of the film's reception does not stop with yet another criticism of the

white gaze from a critical white spectator talking obliviously over the voices of people of color about the

value of the film based on the reviews of other white spectators. The compulsion to distance oneself from

malevolent whiteness as portrayed in *Get Out* is not inherently rooted in ill-intent, rather it is a product of

being white in a system built out of white supremacy. In this sense, the above criticism of the film's

reception is intended to demonstrate the way in which even praise of the work of black creators can be a

tool for suppressing black voices and an act of epistemic violence. Here, Wolfram's plea for better

practices, specifically as they relate to the study of stigmatized dialects and features like those of

AAL/AAE where they are studied in comparison to surrounding EAE dialects, but also as languages and

dialects are often objectified and exoticized by linguists leading to oversimplification and poor research

habits that yield bad data enforcing more stigma in the end[62]. In addition, Wolfram calls on linguists to

advocate for the field, and make it easier for the speakers of all forms of language and dialects to access

the field and become linguists if they want, so that sociolinguistics in particular can continue to evolve in

a way that does the work the field originally set out to do. This is the same notion that Ndounou advocates

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[62] Wolfram, "Sociolinguistic Myths in the Study of African American English."

for in Hollywood, diversity at all levels, and further reinforces the necessity of transgressive spectatorship regardless of identity.

As hooks examines the criticism of Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust*, finding that the criticism of white male critics in particular was especially negative prompting the claim that, "Clearly, the impact of racism and sexism so overdetermine spectatorship – not only what we look at but who we identify with – that viewers who are not black females find it hard to empathize with the central characters in the movie. They are adrift without a white presence in the film [*Daughters of the Dust*]."[63] In *Get Out*, there is white presence, but not one with which alignment is encouraged. Although the distancing of oneself from one's whiteness either by dismissing the film altogether or using appreciation of the film as a marker of "wokeness" can both reinforce the centrality of whiteness, both are defensive reactions to being confronted by a narrative of horror that challenges the dominant mode of cinematic spectatorship.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on analyzing the film's form and content as it relates to *possession* and the oppositional gaze. This analysis is concerned with the modes of spectatorship encouraged by the possession framework and the oppositional gaze as they can facilitate reactions from privileged spectators[64] that resist defensiveness. Much like Minh-ha's *Reassemblage, Get Out* asks spectators to be uncomfortable and not to run from this discomfort, but rather, confront the uncomfortable feelings brought up by the horror and the source of that discomfort.

Subversive Horror in *Get Out*

Jordan Peele's *Get Out* is undoubtedly a horror movie about slavery in the age of freedom. Poll's account of the film describes how it does not confine slavery in America to a

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[63] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 263.
[64] Particularly, spectators privileged by race and/or gender Identity.

past, bygone era, but rather as " a national institution, practice, and affect that continues to shape and structure the present"[65] just as the film shows black people in the present. Hence, Poll posits the film as, quite possibly, the most radical of the movies about slavery in the last ten years by calling attention to Ava Duvernay's statement about how there are more historical representations of black people than contemporary ones in film and that projects about black people in the past are much more likely to be funded. Comparing DuVernay's observation to Sarukkai's *fossil other* and Lim's explanation of the association of the knowledge and culture of other races being associated with the past and the primitive, this trend is not surprising – the construction of the racialized Other is only useful as long as it allows European (neo)colonialism and capitalism to profit off of their labor or by appropriating their culture.

Furthermore, this idea of the default representation of slavery as confined to the past and a specific region complements Lim's construction of the colonial historical account. Therefore, the film's depiction of modern-day slavery and a world of segregation challenge the way that the American historical narrative facilitates the perpetuation of racial discrimination and violence by conditioning Americans to believe that the fight for equality and civil rights ended with the end of slavery and segregation. The dominance of this narrative also contributes to the traditional function of horror, "In its dominant form, the genre works because White people fundamentally imagine a world without horror. Yes, such can happen, but it only happens 'over there,' distant from the everyday ontology and experience of Whiteness. African Americans, in contrast, are keenly aware that the world is pervaded with horror and are constantly vigilant for signifiers of such."[66] Through this logic, Poll notes that a black horror movie following the genre's dominant conventions would be an oxymoron, however, *Get Out* leans into Chris' awareness of the

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[65]Poll, "Can One Get Out?", 72.
[66] Poll, "Can One 'Get Out'?",69.

possibility of imminent danger as a source of suspense. Chris is suspicious, but not enough. Even as Chris is aware of his vulnerability, he still trusts Rose and doesn't truly believe that anything will happen to him while she's with him. These small reassurances quickly slip away, as Chris becomes increasingly concerned, less by the behavior of the white people around him – he expects microaggressions – than he is by the interactions he has with the three other black people he encounters there.

These early interactions point to two key elements of the film are revealed through Chris' anxiety and his inability to locate its source – Chris' relationship to the white femininity embodied by Rose as well as his connection to photography. The next two sections explore these two motifs as they relate to hooks' oppositional gaze as well as the broader ambivalence of possession in challenging colonialism. Beginning with this film's portrayal of white femininity, Chris' faith in Rose speaks to hooks' discussion of the black male gaze being definitively different from than the black female gaze: "In their role as spectators, black men could enter an imaginative space of phallocentric power that mediated racial negation. This gendered relation to looking made the experience of the black male spectator radically different from that of the black female spectator."[67] *Get Out* appears acutely aware of this difference in spite of the almost complete absence of black women in the film, as Chris' relationship to Rose as the ideal of white femininity is a form of possession itself – wherein Chris is blinded by his existence in that imaginary phallocentric space with Rose at his side saying all the right things. Though his race is not entirely negated, his relationship with Rose begins the process of isolating Chris – throughout the film, he is only seen talking to Rod or taking photos with his camera outside of his time with Rose and her family. This portrayal of white femininity contradicts the possession

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[67] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 250.

of Regan in *The Exorcist* quite strongly. Whereas Regan is the innocent victim, Rose is the calculating infiltrator using her embodiment of the white feminine beauty standard to support her innocent façade.

The relationship of the protagonist to his camera also complements the senses of *possession* taken on by this thesis. In one of the most alarming interactions of the film, Chris meets Logan on the patio of the Armitages' home. Dressed in clothes befitting a much older man, Logan's placidity combined with his odd mannerisms and apparent discomfort talking to Chris prompting him to take a second look. Following their brief interaction, Chris attempts to take a photo of him to send to Rod (his best friend), when the flash goes off snapping Logan/Andre out of his trance-like state, running over to Chris shaking him imploring him to *GET OUT* as the Armitage's pull him away assuring Chris that he just needs a nap and everything is fine. The flash of his phone's camera as the trigger that confirmed something was truly off is especially interesting because of the way in which the camera has been regarded as being able to reveal hidden parts of reality not visible to the naked eye, but also as it speaks to the use of phone cameras to record instances of police brutality. And, as so often happens, the evidence revealed by the camera is brushed off. He is still unnerved but he is no better able to figure out what is going on. Chris is effectively trapped in a pre-Sunken Place surrounded by the Armitages, Georgina, and Walter who eerily foreshadow his impending enslavement. However, a large factor contributing to his inability to pinpoint the source of danger is due to the fact that he has been ensnared for months – ever since he started dating Rose.

However, in the wake of Logan/Andre's flash induced outburst, Chris is approached by Jim Hudson, a blind man who talks to him about his photography sharing his admiration an complimenting his eye (which he assures Chris is something he can always tell someone has

even if the photos have to be described to him). Though his interest seems genuine, and it is, it is not out of appreciation so much as it is Jim's desire of appropriation by physically occupying his body. This leads to Poll's troubling conclusion that, "If Chris' wokeness is announced and exemplified by his aesthetic practices – specifically his photography – then it is troubling that his aesthetics can be appropriated by Whiteness."[68] This appropriation of his aesthetics is telling of the reception of the film itself as well as so many reviews paint the film as a satire calling out white privilege and white entitlement.

In his desire to take Chris' eye for himself, Jim is driven to become one with Chris as a physical possession, he is infatuated with the thought of getting that ability back to the point that his desire to appropriate Chris' talent as a sick manifestation of ciné-trance. This desire to take his body also reflects that race is indeed a social construct build to disempower people of color to facilitate total exploitation – whiteness as an institution built out of violence is not intent on preserving its own culture and aesthetic, rather it is constantly seeking out a way to redefine itself to secure its dominance and power through the appropriation of other aesthetics. To some extent this compulsion is an extension of the tension between the desire to disenchant and gain the satisfaction of knowledge, while also wanting to return to the "simpler" more mystical times and seeing the racialized Other as the perfect site for this return either through the appropriation of cultural practices or the occupation of non-white bodies. This desire to occupy the Other, to even become the Other mirrors another key element of Horkheimer and Adorno's view of the Enlightenment and the film calls this critical attention to this compulsive fetishization of Otherness (here, as well as through the desire of the Armitages to take up residence in black bodies).

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[68] Poll, "Can One 'Get Out?'", 85.

Language of Horror and Marginality in *Get Out*

In "Choosing the Margin as a Place of Radical Openness," hooks describes the motion between margin and centre and the necessity of that movement of marginalized people, and the restrictions of entry into the centre – always in a service capacity. Navigation of the centre is an understanding of how the centre views one as a member of the margin, and the understanding of both the margin and the centre that produced marginality as a site of "radical possibility, a space of resistance" the "nourishes one's capacity to resist."[69] In the Armitage home Chris is restricted to the margin as a site of repression more specifically of deprivation as tension between him and Rose mounts along with Chris' suspicions as Rose gets frustrated with him, pulling away. As a result, Chris initially shakes off his anxieties, convincing himself that Rose is right – he's being irrational. His isolation here is a product of his welcoming into the Armitage home, welcomed into this "centre" as Other. Hooks describes how she was welcomed into the space of a predominantly white university as 'other' where "the talk about the 'other' is also a mask, an oppressive talk hiding gaps, absences…annihilates, erases. No need to hear your voice when I can talk better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice."[70]

This idea of marginality in relation to language also reflects the way in which Poll presents the geography of horror in the film through Fanon's theorization of the geography of colonial modernity and first Andre, then Chris are exposed to the "threat of violence everywhere for a young Black man lost in a geography of Whiteness,"[71] both isolated, but Andre is lost in a deserted suburb at night, whereas Chris is surrounded by people but similarly trapped with no way out of this "white zone". Here, the horror stems, not from the disruption of the sanctity of a

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[69] hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 20.
[70] hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 22.
[71] Poll, "Can One 'Get Out?'", 76.

white zone, but from the horror of the zone and the institutions it stands for, especially in the

case of white liberalism within the film and its false promise of a post-racial society. Indeed, all

of the Armitages are excellent performers, while they expertly lure Chris into their home where

Rose, his only confidant, beings to pull away from him as the rest of the family wears away at

Chris with microaggressions. In relation to Chris' entrapment in this white space, bell hooks'

writing on marginality is particularly relevant and reveals the way in which Chris is in the

Sunken Place before he is officially introduced to it by Mrs. Armitage. Starting as early as his

entry into the Armitage home, Chris' entrapment in this white zone is marked by the language

used by Rose's father on the tour.

In considering language in the film as a source of horror, a way of encoding a subtle

message that something is wrong, this quotation about being welcomed as Other perfectly

demonstrates the early language use as a marker of horror in the film as Rose's dad gives Chris a

tour of the house. He begins by showing off the "eclectic" array of items from all the countries

he's been to as he proclaims himself a traveler who "can't help but bring back souvenirs!"

casually boasting his commodification of other cultures as tourist destinations rather than

someone's home. They then move down the hall and he begins to tell the story of his grandfather

losing to Jesse Owens at the Olympic Trials calling it his "claim to fame," as if his father's loss

is what allowed Jesse Owens to show up Hitler at the Olympics. Then the basement door, "Ah,

that's the basement. We had to seal that up – lots of *black* mold down there" with enough stress

on the word and a lingering gaze as if to let Chris know he hadn't overlooked his race. As the

tour wraps up, they head towards the kitchen and the camera slowly pans over the room settling

on Georgina as Mr. Armitage says, "My mother loved the kitchen, so, uhh… we keep a piece of

her in there now" as if he's lost his train of thought then claps his hands and turns to the double

doors to the patio proudly announcing "the piece de resistance… [pausing to weirdly lick his lip]…the field of play!" as he gestures to the backyard. Upon first watch, the tour has a forced tension, one that could easily be attributed to the awkwardness of meeting a significant other's father, but in revisiting the scene the odd stops and comments, and even just the way Rose's dad says a few words and the slightly lingering camera serve to establish an undercurrent of tension just beyond what might be expected for the social situation.

Chapter 2 – *Paris is Burning*: Gender, Colonialism, and Documentary

> *We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and centre. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and centre and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole.*

> \- bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness"

Whereas the first chapter is concerned with a colonial sense of possession similar to Fanon's as it relates to the horror genre and demonic possession (and its haunting by deeply ingrained anxieties) in the context of race, this second chapter closely examines the documentary *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990) and develops the discussion about possession and language begun last chapter. While the previous chapter also dealt with language, it was contextualized in analyzing language use as it contributes to the creation of horror, and what it can reveal about racial hierarchies inherent to Wester horror and its consumption. The chapter also briefly touched on the sociolinguistics analogy established in the introduction in relation to *Get Out* which will be elaborated on in this chapter. However, this second chapter addresses language as a structural framework for Livingston's documentary in terms of the second sense of *possession*. That is, *possession* as it relates to cinematic language and practice, and the ability of this language to oppress and resist oppression, depending on the manner in which the colonizer's language is taken up.

Central to this analysis of *possession* in *Paris is Burning* are the issues of ethical representation and non-appropriative/objectifying filmmaking practices in the portrayal of marginalized communities and identities. From this, the issue of translating identity arises, particularly through performance of identity dictated by the constraints of the colonial language and notions of subjectivity. This chapter facilitates the exploration of this mode of *possession* by orienting a large portion of the discussion around the discourse between bell hooks and Judith Butler. Beginning with their specific responses to Livingston's film, the analysis also delves into the broader bodies of their work, with emphasis on bell

hooks' construction of marginality as a space born out of the navigation of marginalized people through spaces designated by the colonizers.[72]

This chapter also puts the work of hooks and Butler into conversation with Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" primarily through her discussion of the role of the translator, voice of hybridity, and epistemic violence as they apply to *Paris is Burning*. As a result, the possession framework draws attention to Livingston's positionality as the filmmaker, taking a closer look at her practices and their consequences(within and in the reception of the film) for the black, Latino, gay, and transgender individuals that shape the subculture depicted. From Spivak's notion of epistemic violence, the examination of Livingston's practices employs the concept of transparency and the "voice of hybridity" in order to articulate this documentary as a possession film in its own right.

Subjectivity, Language & Gender

Though somewhat controversial in its reception, this film is regarded as one of the canonical films providing representation of the queer community surrounding the drag balls of New York City in the late 1980s. *Paris is Burning* confronts issues of gender, class, and race in terms of identity and the performances of identity at these balls. The film received praise for offering thoughtful insight into the underrepresented community of black, Latino gay and transgender individuals, while being criticized for the colonizing filmmaking practices employed by Livingston that often reinforce racist and sexist institutions. The question that emerges from this mixed reception concerns *who* the film is actually for. Is the documentary for the individuals within it, to give them a platform to share their stories with the world? Or, is the film for a heteronormative audience? Perhaps, it is for Livingston herself. While this

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[72] Chapter 1 also dealt with this concept of marginality in *Get Out*, noting the way in which many privileged individuals wish to gain access to the space that hooks describes in the film's narrative. However, this chapter will focus on the way this manifests in the film's production, as well as in the portrayal of many of the drag ball participants' desire to surrender their marginality to simply exist as they wish to exist in the world.

chapter does not necessarily provide a definitive answer about the film's intended audience and interpretation, this mode of questioning introduces the concerns of theorists bell hooks and Judith Butler as they respond to this documentary.

For bell hooks, Livingston's depiction of this subculture appropriates and objectifies in a way that makes the material more digestible for white audiences. Livingston does not challenge whiteness, but instead depicts the drag ball community as almost a celebration of the ideals of heteronormative whiteness. For hooks, *Paris is Burning* is just another example of a white person/filmmaker getting credit for "recognizing people of color and giving them a voice by portraying them onscreen,"[73] when in reality the film just appropriates the image and feeds into the shallow understanding of complex issues of race and gender that passes as progressive. This is much the same issue that emerged out of the reception of *Get* Out, wherein representation of minorities is considered to be enough in the effort of diversifying the industry while continuing to assume that all of the people who look like those in the one diverse film are equally represented.[74] Furthermore, hooks draws attention to the way that the film's failure to challenge whiteness likely resulted from Livingston's failure to account for her own whiteness and the inherent act of translation she would be doing which is obscured by the neutrality of the camera making it easier to believe the film would be giving a voice to the voiceless so to say: "since so many of the black gay men in the film express the desire to be big stars, it is easy to place Livingston in the role of benefactor, offering these 'poor black souls' a way to realize their dreams"[75]. As such, the film to hooks is nothing more than a spectacle of black and brown pain. This hierarchical relationship between filmmaker and the objectified documentary subject is precisely what Minh-ha's concern was in filmmaking practices that are not self-aware and that "speak about" rather than "nearby."

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[73] bell hooks, "Is Paris Burning?" in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 153.
[74] An idea fundamentally rooted in the homogenization of the identities of people belonging to a racial minority or other marginalized group that occurred in the formation of the colonial Other from preceding chapters.
[75]bell hooks, "Is Paris Burning?", 153.

Structurally, the film functions almost as a dictionary of the terms created within the drag ball community, defined by its members as a way for Livingston and her camera to enter their world and shape their stories. Although these different concepts are defined by members of the community, combined with the way in which the camera and Livingston are positioned as mere observers the resultant message seems to be that this is not an act of translation. Livingston's film obscures the way in which the members of this community are called to explain themselves to Livingston a white woman and outsider in spite of her sexuality, and the later audience that the filming implies. Even Livingston herself fails to realize the role that her whiteness plays in the dynamic created (however inadvertently) and presents the film as an objective window into this world rather than one informed by the relationship her whiteness conditions.

This dynamic speaks to Judith Butler's discussion of interpellation and subjectivity in a chapter of her book *Bodies that Matter* entitled "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion," and something that hooks' analysis of Livingston's relationship to the film and how it is characterized by her treatment in interviews about making the film in her book *Black Looks* with "Is Paris Burning?": "Livingston does not discuss her interest and fascination with black gay subculture. She is not asked to speak about what knowledge, information, or lived understanding of black culture and history she possessed that provided a background for her work or to explain what vision of black life she hoped to convey and to whom. Can you imagine that a black woman lesbian would make a film about a white gay subculture and not be asked these questions?"[76]. The answer is no, I certainly cannot, even now. In fact, I don't think there has been a documentary made by a black woman about anything wherein her knowledge and her ability to make the film would not be questioned.

Rather coincidentally, here again is this notion of *possession* and ownership. Yet again it becomes abundantly clear that Livingston's whiteness is all the background she needs to construct her "vision of

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[76] Hooks, "Is Paris Burning?", 151.

black life." After all, the construction of whiteness from colonialism as the default and race being

assigned to non-whiteness to denote inferiority refers back to the original idea of blackness in particular

as the physical property of whiteness. Why would the narrative of black lives be any different in a society

still informed by these underlying ideologies? This notion of speaks to Butler's idea of one's existence

and identity having meaning and value assigned to it before one even knows what that is and that one

cannot control. However, while Livingston has as little control over the conditions that existed prior to her

that established the position of her identity and its privileged whiteness, neither did the black and Latino

queer people the film portrays. For this reason, hooks takes issue with the fact that Livingston, regardless

of her lack of choice in the privilege assigned to her existence, chooses to make the film in a way that

does not in the very least acknowledge her privileged position. If anything, Livingston's privilege

(racially and in terms of her education) should also make it more possible for her to interact with her

privilege and to challenge the system without fear of her identity/agency as an individual being

questioned or stripped away from her.

What I mean here is that Livingston's status as a (cisgender) woman and a lesbian, while they are

not privileged identities on their own, are distanced from her whiteness. Which is to say, as a white

person she has the option of identifying more with her gender or sexuality as they relate to her existence

and her experience and inform her spectatorship/perspective more than her status as a white person

because whiteness is the default. Therefore, in a white supremacist social structure her personhood is

confirmed by the perception of her race before it is challenged by her gender or sexuality while the people

in her documentary are first viewed as racially Other. Then, as racially Other, the other markers of their

identity only solidify their lack of personhood in a world of heteronormative whiteness. Their personhood

is not even a question, it simply does not exist. Compare this to the reception of *Get Out*. Even as a film

with a diverse group of people collaborating to produce its representation of blackness in a white world,

the aesthetic and significance of the film are hijacked by white spectatorship and evaluation by white critics and viewers who distance themselves from the evil whiteness that appears in the film[77]

The chapter continues highlighting Livingston's avoidance of difficult questions digging herself a deeper hole for hooks as she explains her credibility "by the intensity of her spectatorship, adding, 'I also targeted people who were articulate, who had stuff they wanted to say and were very happy that anyone wanted to listen,'[78] which echoes the above paragraph about the credibility of white spectatorship to review *Get Out* as a call for white people to check themselves and their privilege and effectively erasing the black protagonist's experience and trauma (after all, it's merely a plot device to educate white audiences, right?). As hooks acknowledges Livingston's open criticism of Madonna's appropriation of vogueing and its systemic consequences of removing the practice from its cultural context, the filmmaker does not acknowledge or seem to recognize that this appropriation had already taken place, the moment that *Paris is Burning* occluded the way its representation of the queer people of color is informed by whiteness.

In both cases, attention is drawn to the idea that whiteness is the default state of personhood for a human being, and as such, instead of being made up of *white people* with *white bodies*, whiteness is made up of people with bodies. Moreover, whiteness is the absence of race rather than race being the absence of whiteness because of the way in which race becomes a means of objectifying non-white people – race is something for a person to *be* and *have*[79], while *to be white* is aligned with *being a person*. Not only does the white gaze inherently and violently decontextualize culturally specific practices for its own benefit harken back to the beginning of Europe's global occupation and the origins of colonial possessions, but this liminal space of *whiteness* itself as it originated from this context speaks back to the notion that,

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[77] Helped, no doubt, by the norm of white protagonists and racially coded, monstrous Otherness deeply embedded in the horror genre.

[78] hooks, "Is Paris Burning?", 151.

[79] In the sense that people assigned racial determiners were and continue to be an object for whiteness *to have* control over, *to have* knowledge of as established by the association of race with the fantastic from Lim wherein the "fabulous races of the New World" were natural phenomena to be disenchanted.

"Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters," and, "On their way to modern science human beings have discarded meaning."[80] The formation of the belief in knowledge as power stemming from the Enlightenment's movement toward science, reason, and subsequent abstract quantification/ demystification promotes one way of knowing and being. Under colonialism, the violence of reducing the world to this singularly valuable understanding was inflicted on people and cultures associated with nature and mysticism, and thus originates the modern social construct of race. But what does this have to do with discarding meaning?

First, meaning is discarded by the elimination of all other ways of knowing the world besides the reality established by Western scientific reason for no other reason than the societal belief that this reason transcends the subjectivity of individual perception of reality (that truth lies in 'objectivity' which is supposedly not artificially constructed by the human mind). Then came the time to dominate the global intellectual, economic, and cultural space which required that other cultures outside of Enlightenment Europe be understood by translating them into the colonial narrative which is impossible because the culture and its people existed prior to and outside of their domination by this discourse. Therefore, there is no adequate or equivalent construct within this knowledge system that can translate a holistic understanding because *holistic* requires multiplicity and collaborative meaning making(see discussion of Otherness and Lim in chapter 1). This one-sidedness thus represents the replacement of a variety of mythologies with a singular mythology that ensures its power and singularity through several forms of violence. Hence, there is only possibility for mistranslation and misinterpretation because the white heteronormative patriarchy established out of this context loses sight of its own status as a mass of social constructs.

This social construction of truth is essential to Judith Butler's understanding of subjectivity, and the way in which acknowledging the social construction of gender or sexuality rather than

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[80] Horkheimer and Adorno, "The Concept of Enlightenment," 2- 3.

gender/sexuality as the product of some scientific truth actually threatens the sovereignty of science because of the singularity of its validity.[81] The meaning of these concepts of gender, race, and sexuality when their basis in scientific evidence and fact is only determined by socially manufactured and enforced differences whose validity is equally destabilized as the belief in the objective infallibility invoked by terms like "reason" and "basic biology" becomes just as irrational as the Enlightenment made superstition out to be. In this sense, the faith put into scientific notions of reason move away from meaning because of the way in which colonial subjectivity only exists as a result of the power of the violence of knowing the Other through convenient and scientifically insignificant traits. This can be illustrated by the ideas of the construction of subjectivity (linguistically) as it relates to stancetaking through the model of DuBois' *stance triangle*[82] in the ways that ethnographic documentaries and their appropriative tendencies negate the *subjectivity* and autonomy of the documentary's subject through a relationship between filmmaker, camera, and film subject that reduces the people and cultures onscreen to objects the filmmakers possesses knowledge of and conveys to the spectator.

The idea of whiteness from hooks also gets at the question posed by Butler of subjectivity and performance, especially as it relates to the idea that Butler adds nuance to hooks' refute of the film as subversive. Rather than subscribing to the notion that hooks' criticism lacks the nuanced awareness of interpellation and the social construct of subjectivity that Butler explores through the documentary, hooks' criticism seems to emerge from the awareness of this rigidity of subjectivity and identity from her own experience in navigating the social spaces as a black woman. Hooks' rejection of the film, therefore, seems to be more of a refusal to passively and graciously accept whatever representation that heteronormative whiteness is willing to make or promote as progressive. While hooks' refusal to accept such an appropriative film as the model of progressive representation makes sense and is upheld by this project's interrogation of positionality and its effects on representation, this response does lack some

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[81] Compare this to the discussion of the horror genre's infatuation with demonic and spiritual possessions, as a way of punishing the threat posed by a sort of "class consciousness" of gender.
[82] See pages 8-10.

nuance with regard to the value of the space created by the drag performances that Butler elaborates on through the ambivalence of subjectivity.

Ambivalence, Translation, and Performance

Paris is Burning exemplifies the fundamental issue of translation and its perpetuation of epistemic violence. As mentioned previously this has a lot to do with the structure of the film, namely, the observational style camerawork and the division of the film into different sections wherein a word is presented and then defined. This final section includes an overview of bell hooks conceptualization of the space of marginality, as well as Butler's discussion of performance and ambivalence with regard to two sections of the film – Categories, and Realness – and what is said about these two topics by Dorian Corey. In the previous section of this chapter, the violence perpetuated by this translation of a subculture of queer people of color is translated through Livingston as a white spectator for the consumption of white audiences, especially in the way that hooks describes the film as a display of pageantry that celebrates the ideals of white, heteronormative, capitalism. The film, as a translation of drag balls through Livingston bell hooks discussion of discourse about the "Other" and her experience being welcomed as such (especially as it pertains to what Livingston herself said about the process of gathering these interviews in the previous section): "Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk." [83]

In this article, published a year before the release of *Paris is Burning*, hooks may as well be talking about the film as she discusses language and counter language, discourse on the Other, and marginality as a space from lived experience. One where there is room for resistance and repression. The

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[83] hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 22.

essay begins by discussing language as a place of struggle and resistance, "The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle,"[84] and the adoption of counter language is a reclamation of the language of the colonizer that is altered made unique and imbued with the action of resistance.[85] In the context of the film, there is a translation from counter language to the dominant language that results in a loss of meaning because of the loss of marginality in that Livingston's voice is informed by her whiteness first. Compare this then to Spivak's notion of the *voice of hybridity* in Ishikawa's "The Paradox of Representation," where she describes the act of translating as "a project that must paradoxically consider both the necessity and the impossibility of representation"[86] .

Here, the problem, again, is Livingston's film's lack of reflexivity and accountability for portraying a culture or people (especially marginalized) responsibly through, "the voice of a hybrid who assumes an 'irreducible cultural translation' in their identity to be *both* the colonial subject and the Eurocentric economic (and intellectual, in Spivak's case) migrant. This position demonstrates Spivak's hybridity as both a privileged writer and as the West's other."[87] This idea of the voice of a hybrid also fits into hooks' position and the counter language of the space of marginality: "'To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body… We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both…Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and centre and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole.'"[88]

This marginality creates a fluidity and a fluency in the areas of the centre and this requires an act of translation of the self and of the codes of these different realms, speaking to the way in which the colonizer equips the colonized with tools for resistance and the ability to navigate the segregation of the

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[84] hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 16.
[85] hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 16.
[86] Ishikawa, "The Paradox of Representation," 66.
[87] Ishikawa, "The Paradox of Representation," 67.
[88] hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 20.

world – yes, this is a burden, but it is also a place of solidarity and resistance. Hooks brings up the struggle of the mind that truly resists colonization as one that "struggles for freedom of expression" often begins in the midst of one's own community and family but warns against romanticizing the margins as a space "pure" and free from the oppressors, but that they are complicated spaces that ultimately can be used (and in a way their exist does defy the attempts to strip the marginalized of their culture) to nourish resistance. In conversation with *Paris is Burning*, it is somewhat surprising that hooks takes such a strong stance against the drag balls as "not taking drag seriously" when the community, despite the appropriation of the words and images, does seem to be engaging with a variety of issues through their performances even if there are ways in which the balls reinforce the heteronormative white capitalism – there is still an interrogation of the designation of these labels and to whom they are designated.

This review of the film loses the fluidity and movement of hooks' earlier constructions of marginality and the oppositional gaze as places of simultaneous resistance and oppression that should not be left behind, and, for all the criticism of Livingston's ignorance of the weight of her whiteness, hooks does not account for her lack of access to queerness as a marginal space. For all of the similarities between marginality and the oppositional gaze as places of understanding identity as an act or performance, this idea of "taking drag seriously" lumps queer men and trans women of color into the same category as heterosexual black male comedians using drag to mock black womanhood in order to secure their status in relation to whiteness. Here, the totality of the dismissal of *Paris is* Burning's subversive potential in hooks' "Is Paris Burning?" is solidified by the implication that there is a "right way" to celebrate and represent black womanhood. Though the review's criticism of Livingston's white privilege is completely valid, hooks' reply suggests that there is still some form of more valid 'performance' as well as denying the trans women of color in this film access to that ideal (even if hooks' ideal lies outside of whiteness). Furthermore, while hooks' dissent is no doubt important, she does the same thing she accuses Livingston of by denying the nuance of this representation of performance - the

same type of nuance that hooks' calls for through the idea of intersectionality in feminist efforts[89]. In doing so, hooks demonstrates that marginality can be used to distance oneself from any form of privilege – though whiteness is the default in this case, the heteronormative patriarchy established in the Western world enforces strict binaries for expressions of gender and sexuality that are privileged over gender non-conformity. Moreover, these layers of identity and expression reveal just how multifaceted marginality is (as a space or identity), as well as the ambivalence of privilege in relation to the complexity of marginality as Otherness.

Judith Butler responds to hooks' dismissal of the documentary's potential for subversion with a discussion of ambivalence of drag speaks to the broader ambivalence of subjectivity. In turn, this ambivalence of drag reflects the ambivalence of possession that occurs from the existence of subjectivity and the myth of possession outside of the context of heteronormative white patriarchy that emerged as colonialism and the Enlightenment contextualized its origins. As the segment of *realness* begins, it is defined as the ability to blend and one of the emcees of the ball begins, "When you're gay you monitor everything… the way you look, how you dress, how you talk, how you act. 'Did they notice me? What did they think of me?' If you pass to the untrained eye and not give away the fact that you're gay," this is one of the pivotal moments of the film for Butler as it points to the grounding of gender in performance and perception as based in ones understanding of their identity as a subjective *I*. In this section of the film, the drag performances of *realness* are not satirical nor are they entirely celebratory of wealthy white, heteronormative ideals. Rather, the performance of *realness* in this setting celebrates the performances of the normative within a space of marginality and the fluency of the ball walkers in queerness and non-queerness and their ability to navigate both places. To some degree, the celebration of these performances

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[89] By focusing solely on issues of racism and gender in a binary sense, hooks overlooks her lack of proximity to the individuals' queerness. Similarly, this thesis has been a work-in-progress of ensuring that my own positionality as well as my analysis of positionality (of identities) in the films reflects both the positive and negative aspects of possession & the way in which possession itself has been appropriated by coloniality. I have done this by attempting to balance the analysis of each films' subtext and the spectator's identity with those onscreen with formal/textual analysis of the films as they establish potential for subversion to whatever degree possible taking into account the multitude of independent variables involved at each stage of producing, exhibiting, viewing, and interpreting every film for each spectator/filmmaker.

is the celebration of survival – just as hooks describes marginality as a space for nourishing resistance despite its isolation.

The notion of interpellation, of being called a name and called into existence establishes boundaries and connotations of one's sense of self, but these boundaries also allow for resistance through the possibility of violating that which aims to violate through the resignification of terms.[90] In *Paris is Burning* this occurs through the reconstruction of the familial structure (as well as through the performance of *realness*), not as one for the purpose of fueling heteronormative capitalism, but one that directly goes against the purposes of that structure to produce the next generation's labor force. From this, Butler moves on to discuss the ambivalence of the construction of the self and how, much like hooks' space of marginality, is not always determined by social constructions but at the same time there is no subject prior to these constructions. This is also a key aspect of the genre film as with the two horror films from the first chapter, and the way in which genre constitutes the film but the film is also constituted by the spectator and the medium itself.

As for drag, it is also ambivalent, "drag is a site of certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes," and in the film, one of the key demonstrations of this ambivalence emerges through Dorian Corey's interview about categories. Dorian describes how the categories originated as a way to allow everyone to participate that wanted to, but as they have evolved and gotten more specific there is a lot of tension and disagreement – what Dorian refers to as nitpicky, "That's the one thing I find faulty with the balls. After they've laid down the little categories, then they try to become a stickler for exact interpretation. Merely a point to discredit the constant. Like in the Olympics where the Russian judge brought up the fact the American Coach stepped onto the floor mat and disqualified the contestant. Just as nitpicky as a ball." Here, the categories that

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[90] Judith Butler, "Gender is Burning," in *Bodies that Matter* (Abindon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 84.

were supposed to boost participation end up resulting in exclusion and intense rigidity in a space where, even if attempting to perform the rigid standards of heteronormativity, there was originally this notion of fluidity – not unlike hooks' idea of marginality. Furthermore, this speaks to the policing of identity or the performance of identity in heteronormative that the balls in *Paris is Burning* emerged out of, but this occurrence Dorian describes just further illustrates the way in which subjects cannot exist without their constructions, but also are not always formed by these constructions. Yes, the balls can build a sense of solidarity while sometimes devolving into a competitive tantrum, however, even as a space of isolation and oppression the emphasis of performance in this space has a paradoxical way of removing the necessity of translating one's identity to the rest of the community. Furthermore, the ball walkers engage with their own objectification of themselves, making a spectacle of their performance of *realness* as a state of being X. True realness is rooted in the belief that you are X, not that you are performing that belief. By understanding that identity is only as real as the performance of that identity, this sets up Butler's plea at the end of the chapter (which is especially important considering the scope of marginality as a spectrum).

Butler implores the reader to interrogate their understanding of their identity and the sociocultural/sociocognitive factors that inform their subjectivity. In doing this, Butler hopes that embracing the performative nature of identity allows for a proliferation of fluidity and freedom of expression as a means of breaking down the hierarchies enforced by rigid policing of identity. Butler's notion of the ambivalence of subjectivity also speaks to the analogy of the stance triangle and this notion that the existence of the object positions and constitutes the linguistic subject especially as it relates to the colonial subject and the rigidity of the colonial subject versus object. Similarly, as this project comes to an end it is this ambivalence of subjectivity emulates the broader theme of possession and the way in which we are possessed by the ambivalent relationship to the constructions that form but that does not remove agency so much as it conditions the circumstances of agency. In terms of this project's exploration of the infatuation of cinema with *possession*, this notion of ambivalent subjectivity goes back

to the question of colonialism and how we each carry that with us. How we are positioned by our circumstances, but also how we interrogate that positionality.

Conclusion

This project of analyzing possession in horror and documentary began as a means of grappling with the relationship of language, cinema, and the reinforcement of ideologies and hierarchies under (neo)colonialism. The idea of possession as a framework has developed from that starting point, and now, at the end of this thesis, the framework is still very much a work in progress. Which is to say, the end product is a document of progress towards a better understanding of how to develop this framework in order to move towards more ethical representations that facilitate productive discourse that destabilizes hierarchies of knowledge and ways of being. That being said, this project is the groundwork of a much larger array of projects for the future, but here are a few things that we do know.

The analysis of *The Exorcist* and *Get Out* introduced two key elements to the discussion of possession and its ambivalence; *The Exorcist* helped contextualize the idea of Otherness as represented by possession in horror and documentary, while *Get Out* established the idea of the *oppositional gaze* and the multiplicity of marginality. Furthermore, *Get Out* and its possessions suggest a possibility of appropriation as resistance in the sense that marginality and oppression exist on a spectrum – even those who are held up as the ideal are restricted in their expression of identity to some extent and this restriction informs the enforcement of harsher standards on those who differ. However, there is potential for some form of an oppositional gaze to be taken up by people outside of the black female spectator. For instance, Peele uses Chris to and directs his own gaze at him through the camera – from the position of a black man in the US onto a representation of a black man in the US. This gaze is still oppositional because of the way it engages with the horror genre, as well as the way in which it challenges white spectators to navigate the film from a foreign perspective (hence, the various reactions of white critics and the focus on the film's reception among white audiences).

Importantly, this pursuit of challenging your own gaze as a spectator and the various privileges it affords can allow for a better understanding of the various possessions we are each subject to. By focusing on the tensions between Butler and hooks' reactions to *Paris is Burning*, Chapter 2 points to one of the fundamental issues surrounding ethical representation and discourse – positionality and the way in which one acknowledges and interacts with their position as a spectator or participant in critical discourse. This issue of translation is inseparable from the issue of subjectivity and identity, specifically as each relates to the ambivalence of possession. It is indeed the ambivalence of subjectivity that stems from an interrogation of the positionality informing one's identity that is a key factor contributing to the autoimmunity/self-destructive tendency of post – Enlightenment Western socio-economic institutions. Besides *possession* as a focal point, the primary connection between the way in which this thesis calls on ambivalence of various concepts is that ambivalences engender movement and fluidity.

In the context of academia, recall the introduction of Gramsci's *organic intellectual* in the first portion of this thesis – the key differentiation between the *organic* and the *traditional intellectuals* is the willingness of the organic intellectual to embrace the incessant motion of navigating positionality as it relates to the interpretation and formation of discourse. Lastly, this exploration of the multiplicity of *possessions* in film is engaged with movement towards the dissolution of false dichotomies established through coloniality. Mainly, this refers to an effort to complicate the understanding of our subjectivity in the sense that we are both subject and object in our own eyes as well as the eyes of others. In isolation, neither is necessarily negative, but through understanding our own possessions (in the sense that we are possessed as well as possessors) can help understand the intersubjectivity and objectification through the way we identify and allow others to identify. In the context of the films, the representations of *possession*

served as sources of provocative discomfort, and by understand what and why the discomfort is provocative (and how that is affected by ones identity in comparison to that of others) can allow for more critically collaborative modes of spectatorship that challenge the collectivity that is encouraged by neocoloniality.

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