

Bodysnatching as Entanglement; or, You've Been (Relation)shipped

A tentative thesis: the afterlives of globalism that we focus on in this text are also unevenly figured in fractured mass cultural forms. While mass market narratives of the zombie continue to deploy the George Romero–Michael Jackson “Thriller” version of the figure as a shambolic, flesh-eating corpse, some of us understand that the Afro-diasporic origins of the *zombi* lie in Afro-fabulations of enslavement and body snatching. It would be reductive but nonetheless useful to say the mainstream zombie encapsulates white fear of slave insurrection, whereas the Afro-diasporic countertradition encapsulates the fear of enslavement from the perspective of the black, and the fantasy of survival even in living death. And just as the zombie is so doubled and divided, so too is the figure of shipping, as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney remind us in “Logisticality, or the Shipped”:

From the motley crew who followed in the red wakes of these slave ships, to the prisoners shipped to the settler colonies, to the mass migrations of industrialisation in the Americas, to the indentured slaves from India, China, and Java, to the trucks and boats leading north across the Mediterranean or the Rio Grande, to oneway tickets from the Philippines to the Gulf States or Bangladesh to Singapore, logistics was always the transport of slavery, not “free” labor. Logistics remains, as ever, the transport of objects that is held in the movement of things. And the transport of things remains, as ever, logistics’ unrealizable ambition.¹

This double-faced image of logisticality as the “transport of objects” (containing a sense in which *transporting* can mean “holding one rapt”) brings us to Jordan Peele’s darkly comic horror film *Get Out* (2017). In the early days of the Trump administration, this unexpected box office success gifted the black popular zeitgeist with a new catchphrase for this black diasporic countertradition of zombification: the “sunken place.” To spoil

the suspense: the plot concerns a small cabal of liberal-seeming white Americans who turn out to be engaged in body snatching healthy black people and transplanting into their bodies the brains of aging, disabled white people. The black male protagonist Chris is dating the white female Rose, who takes him to meet her parents, a neuroscientist and psychiatrist/hypnotherapist. It turns out she is engaged in serial body snatching of eligible black men—a gendered symbolism that heterosexual black female viewers in particular would find hard to miss. The horror of the film for many black viewers is not (just) that white people might organize science and technology to aid in the theft of black bodies (which is hardly fiction): it is that some remnant of the consciousness of the body-snatched will remain after the transplant. They will be in the “sunken place”: helplessly observing their new lives but powerless to intercede within them.

How is this a metaphor for black upward mobility in an era of revanchist white supremacy? As an African Americanist text, the sunken place cleverly updates both the “double consciousness” that W. E. B. Du Bois wrote of and the paradoxical condition of “invisibility” that the protagonist of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* lamented.² Moving beyond the black male canon, however, the film can also, as we shall see, be seen to diffuse into the popular culture the “zero degree of social conceptualization” through which Hortense Spillers has rewritten the degendered flesh of the captive African in the middle passage.³ *Get Out*, seen through the analytics of the flesh, succeeds insofar as it perfectly grasps how expressing the African American condition has always stretched the limits of bourgeois realism: we have always needed horror, sci-fi, fantasy, and other speculative genres to begin to get near the unspeakable truth of slavery and its afterlives.



Figure 1. From the Twitter account of Jordan Peele, director of *Get Out*, signifying on the appointment of black conservative Ben Carson to Trump’s cabinet

Get Out thus invents a powerful new genre allegory for upwardly mobile black men and women coming of age after the rule of the first black president. Meme culture does the work of disseminating the popular narrative as a folk critique of the present. Ben Carson, Omarosa, and even Kanye West all quickly find themselves polemically assigned to the “sunken place.” It is a satire with bite, calibrated (at least at this point in time) to the national-popular. *Get Out*, in other words, is also a symptom of the clash between the world picture of the globalizing culture industries—the planetary bottom line—and what Denise Ferreira da Silva has termed the “global idea of race.”²⁴ In a first approach, the film resists depicting race as a matter of transparent universal white subjects and affectable black and brown bodies. All races have affectable, vulnerable bodies, and the reproduction of white supremacy occurs not through the subtraction of white people from the scene of biocapital but through an extractive economy in which the lifetimes of the disposable are literally harvestable for the wealthy. But as a financial proposition, at least, the picture seemed to work primarily as a national proposition. Insofar as it scrambles the rules of the Hollywood playbook, its box office success presents a problem as well as an opportunity, because the US culture industries continue to abide by the rule that “foreign” audiences will not pay to watch African American-themed films (this at a time when the American studios are ceaselessly working to break into the Chinese market through coproduction, producing such ersatz scenarios as Matt Damon defending the Great Wall of China). At the level of the national-popular, then, race returns as a domestic affair, even a peculiar institution. This situation is compounded by some grumblings in the black media and blogosphere over the casting of black British or African actors in roles that “belong” to black Americans. The historical and geographic mutability of blackness as a political designation is also regularly up for relitigation on message boards and in think pieces (this at a time when #BlackLivesMatter has proliferated globally, and a South African student movement, #RhodesMustFall, has inspired follow-on actions in the United Kingdom and United States; these political flows, of course, occur at a different scale than multimillion-dollar cinema productions). We are tempted to suggest that the casting of the British Ugandan actor as the American (or Americanized) Chris in *Get Out* works as an ingenious commentary on this contemporary postnational dilemma. The on-screen dynamic between the oddly deracinated protagonist and his best friend Rod—who performs black masculinity in a more recognizably American black working-class idiom—is part of the brilliance of this film in this uneasy present. It allows *Get Out* to deconstruct the national-popular and present blackness as both mercurial and dangerously fungible. This fungibility is further revealed in the implicit class dynamic at play in these two figures, the bohemian

photographer Chris and the blue-collar TSA officer Rod, a dynamic that grants Rod's eleventh-hour rescue of Chris a nostalgic aura—the dramatic rescue serves as a nod to the kind of cross-class solidarity that once prevailed within black communities in America. It's the cinematic equivalent of “I got your back” and as such is uncannily prescient of what it will take to survive in a period in which, as another meme puts it, we are all headed to the sunken place.

But to say *we* here is to elide precisely the biopolitical caesura between black and white that *Get Out* insists upon. It also, quiet as it's kept, disseminates a radical intelligence—a common countersense—about black individuals who mistakenly conflate their individual success with collective gains. In this sense, the sunken place is a biocapitalistic updating and sci-fi literalization of the familiar in-group epithet “Oreo” (black on the outside, white on the inside). And yet, by fabulating an incredible theory of mind in which a white brain could take over a black one while leaving the black consciousness intact and floating somewhere in inner space, it also recalls the deep, perhaps fatal, sympathy behind the invective. Black on the outside, black on the inside.

Here it suggests a potential comparison to the Wachowskis' ongoing Netflix series *Sense8*, which contains an equally fantastical premise. In this heterotopian scenario, some individuals possess a genetic mutation that permits them to telepathically share thoughts, feelings, experiences, and even skills across indefinite distances. Groups of individuals, that is to say, are born into small “clusters” (so far in the series these groups are not larger than a dozen individuals): individuals of different races, nations, genders, sexual orientations, and class backgrounds, but born at the same time and thus linked by the mysterious tether of their neurodivergence. Like many contemporary science fiction narratives, the premise of *Sense8* is almost deliberately convoluted and takes the form of a shaggy dog story that keeps fans hooked in hopes that dedicated viewing will supply the secret decryptor ring to explain the violent interconnectedness of this world.

If we take just the series opening—a kaleidoscope of “we are the world” clips of “life on earth” that would not be out place in an NGO or Davos PowerPoint presentation, montaged over suspense-laden music—we can grasp the degree to which the series works, from within the belly of the corporate entertainment beast, to create a new sympathetic projection of interconnectedness. Its weapon of choice is libidization: sexy bodies become the idiom through which the world is made lubriciously available to itself as spectacle. The eroticization of the world picture proceeds inevitably and self-consciously from the standpoint of the overdeveloped world—the series lacks a single protagonist, but one, the transgender hacker Nomi, is widely seen in fan communities as a stand-in for the sib-



Figure 2. Nomi and Neets, entangled

ling creators of the series, both of whom have come out in recent decades as transgender women. Self-consciously reworking established notions of the “male gaze,” the show tries to offer eye candy for everyone. If a generation ago, free love seemed premised on sameness (the class and racial sameness of the hippie commune, the white sameness of gay male clone culture, the gender sameness of lesbian separatist cultures), *Sense8* promotes a promiscuity of difference. Ready-made for conversion into GIFs and memes, the show is almost unwatchable unless you are already skilled in the dark arts of “shipping”: the fan practice of building parafictional worlds in which, most famously, Kirk and Spock are secretly gay lovers.⁵ Sensate Nomi and her “normal” girlfriend Amanita present a short circuit of such a shipping practice. The show models the fandom it seeks, and the search for your OTP (one true pair) updates and generalizes a feminized world of love and ritual for a violently unequal, unstable, and interconnected world.

Instead of the “we” of “it’s a small world after all,” then—a “we” that is interdicted at any rate by both Afro-pessimist and intersectional insistence on the specificity and incommensurability of black experience—*Sense8* shifts its address toward the “you” of networked value extraction—or, rather than *you*, as Wendy Chun argues in *Updating to Remain the Same*, the *YOUs*, a plural second-person pronoun that puns on the Marxist category of use value. “Networks,” Chun writes, “are based on *YOUs* value: a series of interconnecting and connected *YOUs*. Since *YOU* in its plural mode still addresses individuals as individuals, networks are very different from communities, which create a new identity, a ‘we,’ from what is held in common.”⁶ In the idiom of *Sense8*, the cluster is a small network in the process of becoming a potential community. But its audience remains a network, massified into an extractive economy of distributed attention, liberal universal imaginaries, and utopian strivings.

We have suggested that the genre into which *Sense8* falls is neither utopian nor dystopian but heterotopian. A heterotopia, Michel Foucault notes,

is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the theater brings onto

the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another; thus it is that the cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space, but perhaps the oldest example of these heterotopias that take the form of contradictory sites is the garden.⁷

C. Riley Snorton has brilliantly reimagined this conception of heterotopia for black trans critique.⁸ We learn from his reminder that Samuel Delany's heterotopias are always on the thinnest precipice atop death worlds. Much as the sunken place in *Get Out* seems to allegorize double consciousness, invisibility, and the body–flesh distinction in black studies, the remote hyperempathy of *Sense8* illustrates each of these three aspects of a heterotopia. Like a theater, each sensate's immediate surroundings is a stage on which a whole series of other places can appear before them; like in the cinema, digitized clips of the series can recombine into memes, GIFs, and fan fictions; and, lastly, like the garden, each sensate is a rare and precious biological specimen that a rapacious evil entity, the Biological Preservation Organization (BPO), is hotly pursuing, prospecting their brains and bodies for some unspecified dark design.

In the main body-snatching narrative of the first season, Nomi, the white transgender digital hacker, is kidnapped by the BPO and must be rescued by her “normate” black girlfriend, Amanita. In contrast to the gothic horror of interracial relationship in *Get Out*, *Sense8* presents the Nomi/Neets bond as transcending divisions of gender, race, and sexual orientation. But the one is as much a polemical allegory of our present moment as the other. *Sense8* is an allegory of the necessity and impossibility of establishing an affective map of what is going on in the world today and how to feel about it. And it is as or more paranoid as *Get Out* about the bioprospecting designs of global capitalism (subplots include how the traffic in both legal and illegal drugs constellates pharmaceutical executives in India, HIV in Kenya, petty criminals in Berlin, and deejays in Iceland).

In a montage sequence from the first season, the Icelandic DJ Riley takes a break from her subplot to take a long drag on her e-cigarette and vape and space out to the awesomely anthemic, totally cheesy nugget of 1990s Californiana: “What’s Up?” In not quite perfect synchronicity, elsewhere the sullen German Wolfgang, who has just completed what feels like the successful arc of a diamond heist, is persuaded by his more animated bestie, Felix, to sing the same song in a karaoke bar. As his coerced and ungainly voice strains under Linda Perry’s booming contralto, the other members of the cluster feel themselves drawn into this catchy refrain. Some are embarrassingly sincere in their enthusiasm (the Kenyan *matatu* driver); some look like they are trying to brush away an annoying earworm (the Chicago cop); all are entangled, by this case of spooky action

at a distance, into a momentary convergence that leaves Kala, the Indian pharmaceutical worker, embarrassingly singing in English, a language we are given to understand she does not usually speak.

Both *Get Out* and *Sense8*, then, are allegories of collaboration, in the double sense of that term: as cooperative work and as sleeping with the enemy. One is comically pessimistic; the other is jubilantly schizoid. Both share in the neuro-obsessions of the moment: the world is a brain, the brain is a screen, and the world picture is possibly a simulation. The cyberutopian retronym for this reality—the here and now under erasure—is *meatspace*. From a transaesthetical black perspective that draws from black feminist revisions of modernity, we propose to rewrite this as *flesh space*: as Hortense Spillers says, the flesh is “that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.”⁹ We are in incommensurable relation. We are **relationshipped**.

Notes

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See “How This Text Was Written” (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. Moten and Harney, *Undercommons*, 92.
2. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*; Ellison, *Invisible Man*.
3. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*.
4. Da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.
5. For more on “shipping” and captivating speculative captivity narratives, see Nyong’o, “Shipped and the Bereft.”
6. Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same*, 27–28.
7. Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 25.
8. Snorton, “Ambiguous Heterotopia.”
9. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67. On black transaesthetics, see Stallings, *Funk the Erotic*.

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