





FIGURE 1. The Cthulhu-esque Jean Jacket reveals its “true” self in *Nope* (Jordan Peele, 2022). Frame grab.

# Nope

## Blackness, the *Informe*, and Cinema

**WILLIAM BROWN**

In the final third of Buster Keaton and Donald Crisp's *The Navigator* (1924), Rollo Treadway (Keaton) goes underwater to try to free the titular ship from the shoal upon which it has run aground. Among other things, Rollo is attacked by an octopus just as Pacific Islanders, performed by African Americans (including noted silent film actor Noble Johnson), board the *Navigator* and abduct Rollo's love interest, Betsy O'Brien (Kathryn McGuire). Not only does the film elide Indigeneity with Blackness, but it also through its editing scheme creates a visual link between Blackness (and Indigeneity) and the *informe* existence of the mollusk cephalopod. Furthermore, the entire plot of *The Navigator* is set in motion when Rollo spies from his window an African American couple in a car having just got married. This spurs Keaton's character to seek marriage with Betsy—who turns him down until he finally kills the octopus and rescues her by hook and crook from the Black islanders (whom Rollo and Betsy understand to be cannibals), at which point she finally accepts his hand.

Fast forward to *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003), and among its many-tentacled stories of white love, we see on Christmas Eve white British prime minister David (Hugh Grant) travel in his chauffeur-driven car with his white secretary Natalie (Martine McCutcheon) to attend a school play featuring the latter's little brother (Billy Campbell), who sits between them dressed as an octopus. It is on this night that we will simultaneously see white film professional Mark (Andrew Lincoln) profess his love for white woman Juliet (Keira Knightley), who has married

his best friend Peter (played by Black actor Chiwetel Ejiofor), while little white boy Sam (Thomas Sangster) plucks up the courage to ask out Joanna (Olivia Olson, who is of Afro-Jamaican descent), for whom he plays drums during a musical number that is part of the play, and who is leaving to head home to the United States that night.

Finally, in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (Sam Raimi, 2022), we see the eponymous superhero Stephen Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) attending the wedding of Christine Palmer (Rachel McAdams) to Charlie (Ako Mitchell), a Black man who otherwise is undeveloped as a character (at least in this film). What happens as soon as Christine and Charlie get married? A giant octopus creature attacks New York, prompting Stephen, his cape, and Wong (Benedict Wong) to do their superhero thing and defeat it—as Stephen spends the film lamenting the loss of Christine, whom he did not care to lose until she married Charlie . . .

Across all three films, we see the elision of Blackness with the cephalopodic—with all three staging the need for white masculinity to claim, or to reclaim, or to lament the loss of, the white woman from the threatening Black man. Furthermore, *Love Actually* adds into the mix the conquest of the Black girl who also has the same name, Joanna, as the white boy's deceased mother. That is, if all three films stage the threat of an *informe* Blackness, the defeat of which forms the basis for the creation of the white, heteronormative couple, then *Love Actually*, perhaps contrary to what many of its viewers believe that the film is saying, also suggests

that the Black woman functions as a stand-in for the mother, thereby suggesting not only that anti-Black violence is a requirement of white human life but also that white Western modernity's Oedipal obsessions similarly hinge upon anti-Blackness.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, if by getting the Black girl Sam will be able to metaphorically bring back his mother, then we can see from this that Blackness is what allows whiteness to (attempt to) conquer death and time. Or, at the very least, that whiteness pursues Blackness for the purposes of staving off both time and death.

While this essay focuses primarily on Jordan Peele's recent *Nope* (2022), it opens with these investigations into historical and ongoing white Western cinema for various interweaving reasons. First, to establish the link between Blackness and not just animality but a *formless* animality that, through its very formlessness, is alien and threatening—an alien threat that has its most clear literary manifestation in H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu, an octopoid-cephalopodic-molluscan monster that has been read as an expression of the author's own anti-Blackness.<sup>2</sup> Second, from an early narrative feature to the multistranded "network narrative" of *Love Actually* to the full-blown multiverse narrative of the recent *Doctor Strange*, the films chart a shift from spatial imperialism (Rollo and Betsy effectively invade a Pacific island, with Honolulu being their intended destination) to a temporal imperialism (the multinarrative film as being an expression of homogeneity and simultaneity in a "globalized"—that is, uniformly capitalist—world) to what we might call an ontological imperialism (conquering not just

## ESTABLISHING THE LINK BETWEEN BLACKNESS AND NOT JUST ANIMALITY BUT A FORMLESS ANIMALITY THAT, THROUGH ITS VERY FORMLESSNESS, IS ALIEN AND THREATENING

this space-time but all space-times). Why? For the purposes of establishing whiteness as the measure of existence, and deviations from whiteness as soft, other, threatening, but also outside of space-time—or in the realm of *désêtre* or *being*.<sup>3</sup> Finally, if such nonbeing is characterized by Frank B. Wilderson III as the experience of “objective vertigo,”<sup>4</sup> then we might propose, via an etymological sleight of hand, that the wormlike tentacles of the Cthulhoid-octopus monster function as “wormholes” into this vertigo, not least because the *ver* in vertigo comes from the same root as *ver*, the French word for “worm,” a *ver*/worm that we see at work not only in the multiverse but also in the vernacular, as we shall discuss in due course. For the time being, though, the point to make clear is that these anti-Black tropes in classical and contemporary cinema establish what Calvin L. Warren terms an “ontological terror” toward Blackness, especially as it threatens white masculin-

ity, an ontological terror that prompts quests across the multiverse (across numerous ontologies) in order to “put right” the white order that Blackness otherwise throws into chaos—even as that white order is founded specifically upon anti-Blackness, as the work of so many so-called Afropessimist and similarly aligned thinkers makes clear.

While Peele’s *Us* (2019) might more obviously suggest a “multiversal” logic, in that it portrays doppelgängers coming to encounter each other after an underground government cloning experiment is abandoned, *Nope* nonetheless explores the relationship between Blackness and the *informe* Cthulhoid other, most particularly in the shape of Jean Jacket, the alien creature that looks primarily like a flying saucer (and that is mistaken for a spacecraft for much of the film) before emerging as a jellyfish-like and tentacular monster hungry for human and other animal flesh (fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, *Nope* offers up a complex meditation on the role of visual media, perhaps especially photography and film, in the construction of the relationship between Blackness and formlessness/*l’informe*, suggesting that these media, as *forms*, are built upon the supposedly “formless”/*informe* other (much as the visible cinematic image is premised upon the black frames that appear invisibly on-screen in between each of the projected images that viewers do see).<sup>6</sup> But first, let us look at the film.

### Spectacular Blackness

*Nope* tells the story of siblings Otis Jr., or OJ, and Emerald (Em) Haywood, played respectively by Dan-

iel Kaluuya and Keke Palmer, who have inherited the stud farm of their father, Otis Sr. (Keith David), as well as Haywood Hollywood Horses, a family wrangling business for the movies. Otis Sr. is killed by a coin that falls from the sky and pierces his skull—supposedly a freak accident, the coin is actually matter excreted by a giant monster, potentially from outer space, that is lurking around the Agua Dulce area where the Haywoods are based and feeding off various life-forms, including humans visiting Jupiter's Claim, a nearby Wild West theme park run by Ricky "Jupe" Park (Steven Yeun). As explained during a meeting between OJ, Emerald, and Jupe, who uses the former's horses as part of his Wild West show, Ricky was a child actor on at least two (fictional) television shows: the highly successful *Kid Sheriff*, in which he played Li'l Jupe (hence his nickname), and *Gordy's Home*. The latter was a show about a chimpanzee living with an American family that was canceled after the animal playing Gordy (and performed in motion capture by Terry Notary) attacked and killed various cast and crew members during filming. The incident is briefly featured during the film's opening moments before being revealed in flashback while Jupe prepares for his new show, in which he attempts to control the alien monster, whom OJ and Emerald will come to refer to as Jean Jacket. The name was taken from a horse that Otis Sr. gave to Emerald as a child, which the character never really rode because it was co-opted into the shooting of *The Scorpion King* (Chuck Russell, 2002), from which it was later excised as the filmmakers favored camels over horses (or so OJ tells us).

Enlisting the help of recently single home security expert Angel (Brandon Perea) and cinematographer Antlers Holst (Michael Wincott), OJ and Em attempt to capture images of Jean Jacket in order to make money—and before the rest of the world finds out that Jupe and some forty other people were eaten by it after having mysteriously vanished from Jupiter's Claim. In this endeavor they are effectively successful, although Antlers also allows himself to be eaten by Jean Jacket when seeking an even better shot than the one he captures in the Haywoods' home valley, as Jean Jacket then pursues Em to Jupiter's Claim, now a crime scene, and from which Em releases into the sky a giant inflatable cowboy that Jean Jacket mistakes for edible prey. The cowboy causes Jean Jacket to explode, but not before Em has also managed to take a photograph of the alien monster using the Winkin' Well Photos camera hidden at the bottom of a well in the theme park.

As mentioned, Jean Jacket's final appearance is akin to a giant jellyfish and/or cephalopod, while its ability both to change shape and to camouflage itself as what appears to be a cloud mimic the shape-shifting and chromatophoric abilities of various octopuses and cuttlefish, which can similarly blend into their backgrounds. Furthermore, when Em solicits Antlers for his help in filming the monster, the latter is sat in front of a Steenbeck in his home, watching footage of various animals, including an octopus on the attack against a crab (fig. 2). Indeed, we see the octopus at precisely the moment when Em explains, somewhat opaquely, to Antlers that he can help them



FIGURE 2. Antlers Holst watches an octopus hunt a crab in *Nope* (Jordan Peele, 2022). Frame grab.

in finding the “impossible shot” (Em does not say that this shot will be of an alien, but Antlers seems quickly to work it out, later turning up on their farm unannounced in order to go to work).

Now, not only does this moment explicitly introduce a cephalopodic component into the film, it also links the “impossible shot” to the history of cinema itself. For a key component of the Haywoods’ backstory is that they are descended from Alistair S. Haywood, who is supposed to be none other than the Black jockey who is riding on the horse in Eadweard Muybridge’s renowned Plate 626, which was reput-

edly created by Muybridge for Leland Stanford in order to demonstrate that horses did indeed have all four of their hooves off the ground at once when galloping. That is, the “impossible shot” sees the birth of cinema entangled inextricably with race and animality, as well as the use of the medium to investigate the aerial capacities of animal life. While the earliest Muybridge plate featuring a galloping horse comes from 1878, when the horse Sallie Gardner was ridden by a G. Domm, believed to be Gilbert Domm, a stock manager on Stanford’s farm, the plate actually used in *Nope* is from around 1883 and was subsequently

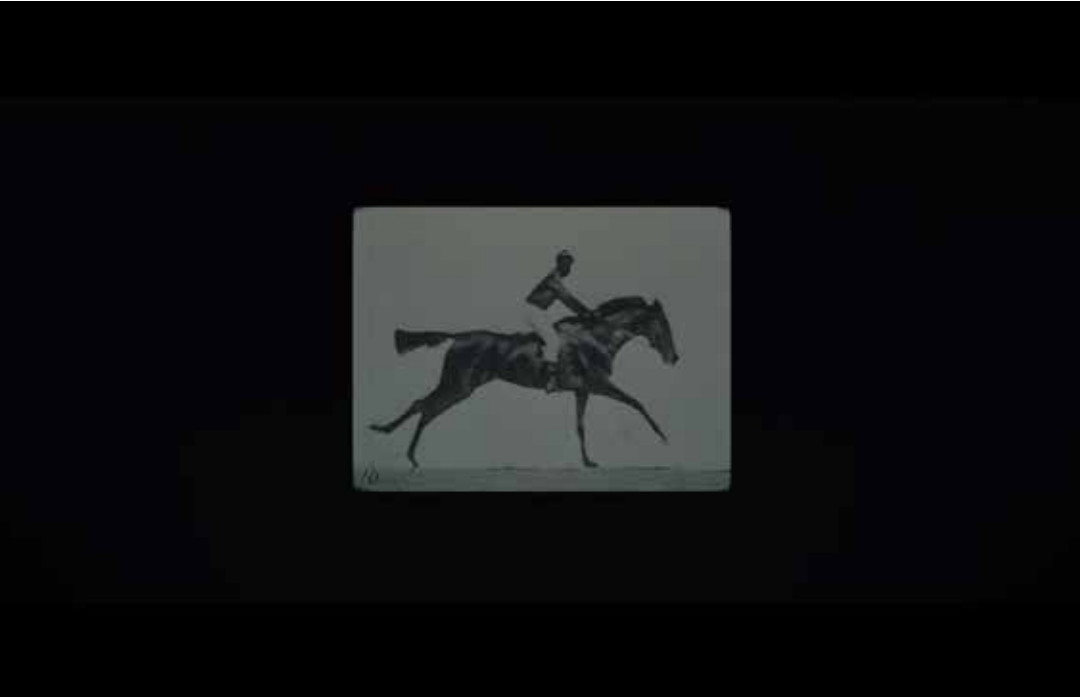


FIGURE 3.  
Eadweard  
Muybridge's  
Plate 626  
plays on a  
loop inside  
Jean Jacket  
in *Nope*  
(Jordan  
Peele, 2022).  
Frame grab.

published in 1887 in Muybridge's *Animal Locomotion*.<sup>7</sup> The jockey in these images is visibly Black (as opposed to the 1878 images, in which we see Domm only in silhouette) but also unnamed, while the horse is identified as Annie G. This would suggest, then, that the history of the medium of film is dependent on unidentified Black labor that is placed lower than the animal in the hierarchical imagination of a white supremacist society.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, when Antlers attempts to capture the alien on film, it is OJ on horseback who draws the creature out, in the process restaging the Muybridge

moment and reaffirming the use of the medium for capturing now alien (as opposed to "simply" animal) life, once again elided visually with Blackness.<sup>9</sup> More than this, after the film's opening on the set of *Gordy's Home*, which is followed by a second prologue moment in which we see Otis Sr. being killed by the falling coin, during the opening credits we track slowly along the purple, tunnellike entrails of Jean Jacket toward a black rectangle that eventually shows to us the famous Muybridge plate (fig. 3). That is, Jean Jacket has "cinema" at its core, as if *cinema itself* were the monster on-screen. We might see this affirmed by



the film's opening reference to Nahum 3:6: "I will cast abominable filth at you, make you vile, and make you a spectacle." Read through an understanding of "spectacle" as a key component of cinematic culture, this biblical verse suggests that the spectacular creature, spectacular Blackness and spectacular cinema alike induce vertigo in audiences, but one where the subjective vertigo of the (white) cinematic spectator is dependent on the "objective vertigo" of Blackness described above; the "impossible" of cinema is not just the possible of Blackness but the actual, lived experience of Blackness.

### **In the Hold of the Spaceship**

Jonathan Jacob Moore has recently suggested that the absence of Black folk in accounts of UFO (or, as per the updated parlance identified by *Nope*, UAP) abductions is linked to the Middle Passage, in that Black humans are effectively excluded from alien abduction because it already happened. What is more, white "alien abduction narratives cohere only because of the constitutive, psychosocial disorientation of Black nonbeing"—a "coherence" that Moore links to Wilderson's distinction between subjective and objective vertigo.<sup>10</sup> That is, "the alien abduction phenomenon is an experientially inaccessible domain for the Black nonsubject" while also functioning as an expression of how anti-Blackness is central to the white subject.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Moore identifies the testimony of Barney Hill, author of the only high-profile case of claimed alien abduction involving a

Black person, as reflecting the "libidinal relationship between the starship's technics and the slave ship's terror."<sup>12</sup>

While *Jean Jacket* does not, according to what *Nope* shows us, abduct or consume any Black humans, the screaming that we hear from people inside the monster, from people compacted within its weird, plastic-like interior, stages their being "held" in captivity. In its elision of Blackness with *Jean Jacket*—following on from Muybridge's elision of Blackness with the equine (or even his placement of Blackness below the equine, at least as far as naming the subjects in his proto-films is concerned), there is a sense in which the screams that escape from *Jean Jacket* take the shape of "the hold," as handed down via intergenerational trauma to OJ. Furthermore, as Blackness has been rendered a spectacle onscreen from Muybridge onward, Peele's film would seem to suggest that the medium itself functions as a (continuation of the) "hold," a means of capturing Blackness even as it is in its anonymity deprived of its humanity (unlike whiteness on-screen, the very cinematization of which is part of its constructed humanity).

As Nicole Shukin has pointed out, early film stock was made from animals, while Muybridge's work is not so much a celebration of the horse as a heralding of the horse's demise in the face of the motor vehicle.<sup>13</sup> Blackness is, to use the terminology of digital filmmaking, also "rendered" into the material of/for cinema, with Blackness not so much being replaced but rather being continuously destroyed for the cre-

ation and perpetuation of a white cinematic society (like the horse has supposedly been replaced despite its clearly persisting in *Nope*).

If one of the operations of whiteness is to objectify and essentialize Blackness, then *Nope* has to first contend with these forces in its effort to present a formless cinematic Blackness. Blackness as octopus/jellyfish, Blackness as Cthulhu, Blackness as horse, Blackness as cinema, and Blackness also as possibly chimpanzee, given the slaughter of the cast and crew on the set of *Gordy's Home*, cannot but recall similar cinematic outbreaks of animal violence that are, as James Snead argues of *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933), "coded black."<sup>14</sup> In fact, the film connects Gordy the chimp to Jean Jacket, in that Gordy's violence is set off by the popping of a balloon on the set of *Gordy's Home* while Jean Jacket similarly seems to be angered when coming into contact with inflatable devices, including the "skydancers" that the Haywoods use to detect Jean Jacket's presence (since Jean Jacket causes electronic devices to stop functioning, they deflate) and the aforementioned cowboy inflatable at Jupiter's Claim (fig. 4). Furthermore, Jean Jacket as hold, Jean Jacket as return and possibly even revenge of the slave ship and its human cargo, Jean Jacket as spectacle. Both Blackness and Jean Jacket become multivalent signifiers—in each case essentialized by the anti-Black gaze of Western modernity. But we might ask: What is the formless, Cthulhoid mollusk if not, precisely, multivalent as a result of its very form-

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lessness? That is, the antagonism that seems to exist between Gordy/Jean Jacket and plastic is not so much because of their differences but because of their similarities. Indeed, as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson argues, Blackness is constructed in the white Western imaginary as not so much sub-, super-, nor even simply "human" but rather as all three at once, and in this way as *plastic*.<sup>15</sup> And so Blackness and Jean Jacket are similarly revealed as "plastic" in *Nope*. And as the horses featuring in Muybridge's early cinema, the material of which is made up of rendered horseflesh, are preserved by the very medium that promises a world without them, so is cinema itself, then, a "plastic" material, itself a "Cthulhoid" medium in which Blackness is held for the purposes of constructing whiteness.

### The Cinematic Informe

On the advertisement shoot where the Haywoods meet Antlers for the first time, OJ awaits a late Em-



FIGURE 4.  
An inflatable  
cowboy  
provokes  
Jean Jacket in  
*Nope* (Jordan  
Peele, 2022).  
Frame grab.

erald with his horse Lucky. Celebrity Bonnie Clayton (Donna Mills) arrives on set, is introduced to OJ, and repeats his name in disbelief: “OJ?” “Otis Jr.,” OJ explains, only for Clayton to offer up a “huh.” If the animal must be wrangled, Clayton’s response to OJ’s name, which suggests she has summoned to mind the image of a murderous Black man, would suggest a similar need for Blackness to be “wrangled” in the white Western imaginary. And if OJ asks those on the set not to look Lucky in the eye—a motif that will return when OJ understands not to look Jean Jacket in the eye—then Gordy’s attack on the cast of his TV show notably culminates in a gaze from the ape toward the camera, written in Peele’s script as “Gordy

stops and looks under the table at us. He sees us [and not just Jupe].”<sup>16</sup> The footage of animal attacks that Antlers edits, meanwhile, also features a range of animal eyes looking at the camera/audience (fig. 5). If *Nope* offers to us a sense that the objectified and essentialized other can gaze back at us, then what sort of gaze does *Nope* itself offer to us—above and beyond these gazes that feature within its diegesis? That is, if *Nope* involves the objectified, essentialized, and/or “plastic” animal other looking back, then does the film itself use its own objectifying and essentializing (white supremacist) medium in order to subvert the very processes of objectification, essentialization, and plasticization through which anti-Blackness and cin-



FIGURE 5.  
An animal eye  
looks back  
at Antlers  
Holst from his  
Steenbeck in  
*Nope* (Jordan  
Peele, 2022).  
Frame grab.

ema both operate? If *Nope* risks invoking essentialization as a white supremacist technology (including the essentialization of the formless), then it does so strategically in order to turn such processes on their head, as we shall see.

When Emerald leads Jean Jacket to Jupiter's Claim, she ends up taking its image with the Winkin' Well Photos device, an image that will supplement the footage captured on Antlers's hand-cranked cameras, one of which remains with Angel while another is swallowed up by Jean Jacket along with Antlers—perhaps to be spat out and its footage thus to be recovered.<sup>17</sup> Notably, the photographic image of Jean Jacket is captured from below ground. With

Peele's earlier *Get Out* (2017) in mind, it is as if the image of Jean Jacket, then, is what we see from the "sunken place" of Blackness as subjugated by whiteness in a white supremacist world (fig. 6). In other words, the view that we get from *Nope* is a view of Blackness and animality not as captured by whiteness's rendering of Blackness as animal, as spectacle, as nonhuman. Rather, it is a view of formlessness, from Blackness, much as OJ and Em perform "seeing each other" when they finally confront Jean Jacket. It is perhaps inevitable that such a view must come not from a cinematic but from a photographic device pushing at the limits of the medium of cinema while also pushing back at the limits of photography as a



FIGURE 6. The view from the “sunken place”: Jean Jacket captured on film by the Winkin’ Wells Photo camera in *Nope* (Jordan Peele, 2022). Frame grab.

medium that cannot be discussed “without a consideration of racial formations,” because not only are whiteness and Blackness alike “made” through the medium of photography but “the making of photography is [along with cinema] mediated by the dynamics of whiteness and Blackness.”<sup>18</sup>

The photographic image of Jean Jacket, perhaps like Peele’s film as a whole in its “plasticity” and in its Blackness, is what Warren might term a hieroglyph, in that it “*means* even though it is indecipherable,” an idea that Warren links to the work of Hortense J. Spillers, Christina Sharpe, and Georges Bataille.<sup>19</sup> In-

deed, if we read *Nope* as a view from Blackness/from the “sunken place,” then it can begin to suggest “communication of the non-sense sign as an operation of black care” (OJ and Em “see” each other, thus demonstrating care in a world that otherwise does not).<sup>20</sup> That is, *Nope* appropriates plasticity and formlessness in order to (dare I say it) “wrangle” Black care out of, or into, an anti-Black world. *Nope* uses formlessness against itself, much like Peele’s cinema must be a counter-cinema if it is not to render Black life spectacular.<sup>21</sup>

Like Warren, Aria Dean and Joseph Richard Winters suggest the relevance of Bataille for contemporary Black thought.<sup>22</sup> And if we turn directly to Bataille and his own (brief) writings on *l’informe*, we shall read how

a dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.<sup>23</sup>

As Bataille effectively identifies, formless(ness) is the

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required term that will bring to each thing its form (in addition to the eight-legged spider, the formless might also amount to an octopus or jellyfish). Here, more specifically, Blackness functions as the formless plastic out of which white Western modernity is built, constitutive thematically and formally of cinema, the Spillersian “flesh” from which “legible” white bodies emerge.<sup>24</sup>

At the end of her essay on Bataille and Blackness, Dean hopes that “wedging this Bataille thing into Black art discourse . . . might inspire other Black artists and scholars to reassess our practices—and everyone else to pursue an absolutely counter-modernism and all its hypothetical *counter*-legacies from a true and decisive limit point . . . a notion of Black art that luxuriates in its outside-the-world-ness.”<sup>25</sup> While it camouflages itself within a cloud of mainstream appeal, *Nope* might also proffer to us a counter-mod-

ernism, even a countercinema, that luxuriates in the alien, even as it also is in keeping with Martine Syms's demand that "outer space will not save us from injustice," and that "we are not aliens."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Syms calls in her "Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto" for "an emotionally true, vernacular reality," and even though *Nope* is far from "mundane" in its tale of a killer Cthulhoid alien, it is indeed vernacular (or "informal"), as made clear by the film's very title.<sup>27</sup>

The word "nope" is uttered various times in the film, but most particular by Emerald and OJ, with the latter linking "nope" to Jean Jacket when he tries to explain the creature to his sister: "What's a bad miracle? Hmmm? They got a word for that? Nope." The word also is spoken by the mother (Jennifer Lafleur) in *Gordy's Home*, in reference to the father (Andrew Patrick Ralston), who has bought for Gordy a watch that he will not know how to use because he cannot tell time: "Somehow you'd think that a man who can send a rocket into space would be able to manage a halfway decent birthday present. Nope."

The conquest of space and time is the goal of whiteness, which relegates Blackness to outside of both, and thus outside of the time-based medium of cinema. Blackness lies in negative space and negative time, in the hold that is "of no time at all on the map of no place at all," and the view from there is not just to be expressed in the negative "no," but it must positively be reworked into the vernacular/informal "nope."<sup>28</sup> This vernacular thus functions like the formless earthworm that Bataille describes above, creating

and going through wormholes outside of space and time, in the nonplace and nontime of *being*, where *informe* Blackness functions as the source of all form, the plastic flesh from which cinematic (white Western) modernity renders its existence. Not just negative, but positively negative. "Nope." ■

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## Notes

- 1 This sentence paraphrases King, *Black Shoals*, 20.
- 2 Houellebecq, *H. P. Lovecraft*, 103.
- 3 On *désêtre*, see Wynter, "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory." And on *being*, see Warren, *Ontological Terror*.
- 4 Wilderson, "Vengeance of Vertigo."
- 5 CalTech engineer John O. Dabiri and UCLA marine biologist Kelsi Rutledge both consulted on the design of Jean Jacket, and both have testified to how the creature was modeled upon jellyfish, squids, cuttlefish, and octopuses. For Dabiri's account, see Stefansky, "Inside the Eerie UFO Design." And for Rutledge's, see Davis and Flatow, "Surprising Animal Science."
- 6 Doane, *Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 172.
- 7 On Gilbert Domm's identity, see Vadala, "Philadelphia's Weird

Connection." And on the use of Plate 626 in *Nope*, see Han, "From a Murderous Affair."

**8** For more on this in relation to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), see Jackson, "Losing Manhood," 115–28. It is perhaps also notable that while Muybridge credited his horses but not (all of) his Black riders, Peele's film credits its head wrangler, Bobby Lovgren, but not the horses involved. See Coulter, "Jordan Peele's *Nope*."

**9** The opposition between alien and animal is perhaps removed when we consider a recent article in which numerous scholars collectively argued that octopuses, squid, and cuttlefish are all a result of Panspermia, or the arrival on Earth of (proto-)life forms from outer space, since they are reputedly too complex in their construction to have had the time to evolve uniquely on Earth. See Steele et al., "Cause of Cambrian Explosion."

**10** Moore, "Starships and Slave Ships," 151.

**11** Moore, "Starships and Slave Ships," 154. For the purposes of this article, the white encounter with the alien is akin to the encounter with Cthulhu and/or the formless octopus in the trio of films invoked at the outset: it is a formless monster that allows form (as whiteness) to come into being as such.

**12** Moore, "Starships and Slave Ships," 144.

**13** Shukin, *Animal Capital*, 91, 119.

**14** Snead, *White Screens, Black Images*, 8.

**15** Jackson, *Becoming Human*.

**16** Peele, *Nope*, 2.

**17** *Nope* shows us the footage of Antlers's camera as he is consumed by Jean Jacket, with sprocket holes appearing on the side of the frame at the moment of being swallowed. It is as if the medium must make itself felt at this moment because *Jean Jacket* is also the medium, as implied by the opening credit sequence discussed above.

**18** Beller, *Message Is Murder*, 100. Shawn Michelle Smith presents a similar argument specifically in relation to Muybridge, use-

fully pointing out that the latter's work is not yet cinema and thus is somewhere in between the two media of photography and film. For Smith, Muybridge's work, like photography in general, has the potential to make one "aware of invisible worlds and ordinary blindness." What the racial, sexual, and classed aspects of Muybridge's work reveal, though, is that hegemonic whiteness is ordinarily "blind" to Blackness in the sense of not recognizing it as fully human. Not only is the jockey of plate 626 unnamed, but Smith also notes how Muybridge introduces measurement grids only when he photographs Ben Bailey, "the only African American in Muybridge's locomotion studies." As Smith says, "The introduction of the black body brings with it the anthropologist's measuring technique." See Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*, 77, 83.

**19** Warren, "Black Care," 40.

**20** Warren, "Black Care," 45.

**21** Consider Daniel Kaluuya's understated performance as OJ, almost his shyness in front of the camera. Emerald may seek attention in her "side hustle" as a performer, but she will grow in this film from being in front of the camera to being behind it, while OJ is reluctant to be seen.

**22** See Dean, "Black Bataille." See also, among others, Winters, "Between Ecstasy and Abjection."

**23** Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 31. We might suggest here that the shoe that stands randomly on its end during Gordy's attack on the television sound stage, and which becomes a key if opaque ("hieroglyphic"?) detail in the film, stands for a kind of random formlessness: none of this makes sense. There is certainly something going on at this moment in terms of the film's exploration of gravity, or a defiance of which might be key to multiverse travel. But the space to explore this is not here.

**24** See Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." Notably, in her engagement with Herman Melville's infamous scrivener Bartleby, Kara Keeling draws upon Giorgio Agamben to suggest that this queer sort who "would prefer not to" is a "new creature," while also quoting Gilles Deleuze, who says of Bartleby that he is a "new, unknown element . . . the mystery of a formless, nonhuman



life, a *Squid*" (Keeling, *Queer Times*, *Black Futures*, 51). Bartleby is cephalopodic/"squidlike" because he "upends Western humanism's categories" (51), being practically incomprehensible to and indescribable for the narrator, Bartleby's employer. Bartleby's perplexing bizarreness, his very indescribability, means that he is for Keeling comparable to the Black American—and it is perhaps no surprise that Keeling segues from her analysis of Bartleby to an exploration of the work of Sun Ra. For, if Bartleby and the Black American are both squids, and if octopuses, squids, and cuttlefish do indeed originate from beyond our own planet, and thus are in some senses literal aliens (see note 9, above), then we can see how Sun Ra's Afrofuturism further combines the infinite malleability and the alienness of the octopus in order to suggest that Blacks are from another planet. See also Brown, *Navigating*, 35–36.

25 Dean, "Black Bataille."

26 Syms, "Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto."

27 Syms, "Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto."

28 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 279. See also Gillespie, *Film Blackness*, 130.

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