

Horror as Resistance: Reimagining Blackness and Madness

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Horror genres in film and literature have a uniquely troubling history in representing disabled bodies and minds. Visible disabilities—scars, disfigurement, blindness, limps, prosthetics—and mental disabilities, especially conditions associated with madness, have been used repeatedly, or rather, excessively, as symbolic shorthand to signify evil, or to signal villainy. Disability Studies scholars have rightly critiqued such spectacularization of disability to invoke horror. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that visual and literary representations of disability are used to evoke intense affective responses. In horror films especially, they suggest, “disabled bodies have been constructed cinematically and socially to function as delivery vehicles in the transfer of extreme sensation to audiences.”¹ Horror genres demonstrate a “repetitious reliance,”² as Mitchell and Snyder put it, on specific disabled bodies and minds, especially the violent psychiatric patient and the monstrous villain.

In recent years, however, some writers and filmmakers have worked within the horror genre to upend stereotypical tropes of disability; instead, they use the intense emotional power and violence of horror to engage in contemporary social critique. Much of my work has investigated discursive processes and representations of mental disability and race; building on these interests, this essay focuses specifically on African American filmmaker Jordan Peele and novelist Victor LaValle to analyze how they grapple with the interwoven representations of madness and Blackness within fictional landscapes of horror. Specifically, I explore how Peele and LaValle situate madness and Blackness in relationship, and how each represents these entities, not as metaphor or narrative prop, but as integral (albeit distinct) patterns in the mosaic of cultural intervention.

In her groundbreaking book, *Black Madness: Mad Blackness*, Therí Pickens provides a map for critically engaging with these categories. She theorizes madness and Blackness—both defined broadly—as having a “complex constellation of relationships...constituted within the fissures, breaks, and gaps in critical and literary texts. Black madness and mad Blackness then are not interchangeable or reciprocal. Rather, they foreground the multiple and, at times, conflicting epistemological and ontological positions at stake when reading the two alongside each

¹ David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, “Body Genres,” 186, italics in original.

² Mitchell and Snyder, 185.

other.”³ Like Pickens, I define madness and Blackness broadly: They have biological and discursive dimensions and are cultural constructs with material histories of their own. From Disability and Mad Studies, madness functions as an identity claim and community affiliation, linking people across cognitive diagnoses—from intellectual disability, learning disabilities, psychiatric conditions, and neurodiversity. While I am invested in the affirming impulses of this definition, I appreciate Pickens’s rejoinder that mad functions simultaneously and potentially as insult,⁴ a reminder that our critical engagement must consider those gaps between pride and put down, as well. Blackness, like madness, also has a range of meaning: It functions “as a racial category, cultural affiliation, and social position.”⁵ This critical cartography is instructive: Representations of madness and Blackness may be focused on specific bodies and minds, but larger systems, structures, and beliefs are crucial to understanding how these categories overlap and push against each other.

Turning to a contemporary Black aesthetic of horror, this essay explores the ways film and literature develop complex relationships between madness and Blackness to stage various social critiques of white racism, police bias, the fantasy of post-raciality, and the voracious violence of white male supremacist ideology. Using Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* as a starting point, I pay specific attention to his use of mental control, which evoke horror and madness, as a masterful critique of white racial power, haunted by histories of enslavement and racial violence. From there, I turn to Victor LaValle’s recent novels, *The Devil in Silver* and *The Changeling*. Both literary works feature monstrous figures, but the metaphorical significance of these characters does not stigmatize mental distress or people of color. On the contrary, the child-stealing troll in *The Changeling* and the murderous patient in *The Devil in Silver* signify resistance to ideologies of white, able-minded privilege. Peele and LaValle use horror to unmask enduring legacies of racial oppression; further, madness, as lived experience or social product, is complexly woven into these fictional landscapes.

Horror functions as a powerful genre to deliver racial social critiques in large part because it relies upon intense emotional delivery. In that vein, Peele and LaValle shock viewers and readers with the insidious violence fueled by the commonplace of white racism. These works evoke pain, fear, rage, and resistance, but ultimately, they push for a deeper recognition of the enduring violence of racism, even among viewers and readers who already embrace racial equality and disability rights. In order to challenge audiences to see race and disability in more complicated ways, these works call forth mourning as process of resistance, and map out

³ Therí Pickens, *Black Madness: Mad Blackness*, loc 240.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, loc 268.

representational geographies where madness and Blackness intertwine to shape new communities and new imaginaries. Renowned poet and writer, Claudia Rankine, provides a powerful framework for my use of mourning as a critical tool. In a recent essay, Rankine meditates on a conversation with a friend who describes “the condition of black life” as one of “mourning,” a description, in an era of anti-racist activism, juxtaposed with the rise of white nationalism, she finds resonant. As she explains:

Anti-black racism is in the culture. It’s in our laws, in our advertisements, in our friendships, in our segregated cities, in our schools, in our Congress, in our scientific experiments, in our language, on the Internet, in our bodies no matter our race, in our communities, and, perhaps most devastatingly, in our justice system. The unarmed, slain black bodies in public spaces turn grief into our everyday feeling that something is wrong everywhere and all the time, even if locally things appear normal. Having coffee, walking the dog, reading the paper, taking the elevator to the office, dropping the kids off at school: All of this good life is surrounded by the ambient feeling that at any given moment, a black person is being killed in the street or in his home by the armed hatred of a fellow American.⁶

Tracing historical legacies of systemic white racism, Rankine notes a difference between the contemporary struggle animated by the Black Lives Matter movement, with earlier racial justice struggles focused on civil rights. Beyond an assertion of rights, Rankine suggests, “a more internalized change is being asked for: recognition.”⁷

Further acknowledging that structures and systems must be transformed, Rankine argues that the more urgent and enduring change, the change that will actually make systemic changes sustainable, is a “rerouting of interior belief.”⁸ Using intensity of effect, these works activate mourning through representations of contemporary racialized violence that is tied to historic legacies of systemic racism. At the same time, Peele and LaValle map new geographies of resistance, spaces where processes of unlearning racism, sexism, and ableism are prioritized. I argue that these works of horror, through their engagement with genealogies of Blackness and madness, participate in this process of “rerouting beliefs;” moreover, within spatial geographies of removal (imposed and chosen), these works offer new imaginaries of resistance, community, and relationality across race and disability.

⁶ Claudia Rankine, “The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning,” loc 1607.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., loc 1672.

Part 1: *Get Out* of the Post-Racial Dystopia

Jordan Peele's film sensation, *Get Out*, exploits the horror genre to expose the lie of a "post-racial" society. Peele wrote the screenplay during the Obama presidency, so by the time the film was released in 2017, following the dramatic political mainstreaming of white nationalism through Trumpism and the alt-right, that lie was already dramatically exposed in the United States. Within this milieu, Peele's film provided a cultural catharsis, demanding a direct confrontation with white supremacy and its enduring violence, through horror laced with comedy. The premise of the film has an elegant, terrible, simplicity: Chris (who is Black), goes for a weekend getaway from the city with his girlfriend, Rose (who is White), to meet her parents and stay at their home in a wealthy, rural community. Rose's parents, the Armitages, present themselves as racially progressive, and they welcome Chris with open arms. Beneath the surface, however, this family is masterminding a psychological, surgical slave trade, and Chris has been lured by Rose onto the auction block. Viewers discover that Chris is one of many Black victims that Rose and her brother have lured (by seduction or brute force) to the compound where the family's wealthy, white, aging, and often ailing friends gather to inspect new recruits as corporeal commodities. Ultimately, the new arrival, in this case Chris, is auctioned off to the highest bidder. Rose's mother, a psychologist, uses hypnosis to control the unwitting recruits, and Rose's father, a neurosurgeon, later completes the replacement process, relegating the Black captive to a role of "passenger" in his or her own body.

Although this family business of harvesting Black bodies is meant to push beyond reality into horror, the film gains emotional force by situating Chris within a familiar racialized social context. The opening scene of the film sets the tone of racial precarity and foreboding. Walking late at night, a young Black man becomes lost in a wealthy suburban neighborhood. As he talks on the phone about being confused by the streets, a white car pulls up and stops behind him. He quickly turns to head in the other direction, clearly aware that he may be in danger. Suddenly, a masked person jumps him from behind and drags him to the trunk of the car. We learn later the Black man is Andrew or Dré, and Rose's brother, Jeremy, is his assailant. This scene immediately brings into focus the racialized dimensions of spatial geographies. The neighborhood, an affluent suburban street with large front lawns, tall trees, and expansive homes, reads as a white space. Viewers realize the Black man is both innocent and in danger; his precarity in this neighborhood immediately evokes memories of Trayvon Martin, targeted walking through a "gated" community, and the many other Black people targeted while doing everyday activities such as talking on the phone, driving, running, or making his/her way home. This street may be recognizable as safe for white people, but Black lives are at risk.

Situated in a wealthy, wooded enclave, the Armitage family property and environs are similarly coded as white spaces. On their drive up from the city, Rose hits a deer, and, not surprisingly, the responding officer asks Chris for identification. Rose jumps to his defense, insisting that Chris doesn't have to comply because she was the one driving. In this interaction, Rose seemingly demonstrates her loyalty; notably, she expresses this by extending her white privilege to secure clearance for him to occupy the space. Her father, Dean, plays a similar role when he explains the presence of Georgina and Walter, their Black housekeeper and groundskeeper. Acknowledging how it "looks" for them to have Black servants, he explains that they kept them on after his parents died—because they had been such good caregivers.

As Chris discovers, Georgina and Walter were both seduced by Rose, taken captive, and transformed into vessels now occupied by Rose's grandparents. Yet it is not the presence of Black bodies that troubles Chris, but their robotic behavior, their flat affect. In one conversation with Georgina, as she tries to assure him about the Armitage family, her deeper emotions rise to the surface, and tears begin to roll down her cheek as she says, "No, no, no." She soon recovers herself and assures Chris that the Armitages treat her and Walter "like family." In her position as family member/captive, Georgina begins to expose the benevolent racism and neo-planation within which she and Walter are trapped.

Peele's configuration of contemporary racism through the legacies of captivity and human bondage connects to Christina Sharpe's figuration of living "in the wake."⁹ Sharpe acknowledges the haunting, enduring, and ongoing racial injustice of Black lives marked for immanent death. Sharpe calls for doing "wake work,"¹⁰ which entails resisting erasure of history, defending the dead, and imagining Black futures. For Sharpe, the wake has multiple meanings for understanding Blackness in a racist society. The wake recalls the hold of slave ships and the whitewater wake trailing back toward a lost homeland; the displacement and disproportional impact of natural disasters on people of color; and the resistance to enduring racial oppression. She explains that doing wake work compels us to "think through containment, regulation, punishment, capture, and captivity and the ways the manifold representations of blackness become the symbol, par excellence, for the less-than-human being condemned to death."¹¹ In Peele's horror landscape, Chris is marked for something akin to death, but not as final; his consciousness will be subjugated, but his body occupied. The Armitages envision social reordering through medical colonization. They project a surface image of interracial harmony and progressive integration of (previously) white social geographies; underneath, they are enacting the ultimate post-racial dystopia of white supremacy.

⁹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Sharpe, 21.

While Peele's racial critique functions as the focal point of the film, the horror plot is also driven by disability. As Chris and Rose mingle at the garden party, viewers come to realize that he is in fact the living object of a silent auction. Jim Nelson, the highest bidder, has lost his vision, so his interest in Chris, a successful photographer, is motivated by his desire for Chris's talent and by a generalized desire for cure. As the guests assess Chris, viewers come to understand that the other Black people—Georgina, Walter, Dré (who attends with a much older white woman)—have become shells, occupied by formerly aging, disabled white people. Peele lays out the logic of ableist white entitlement, where enhancement and cure for the white wealthy class depends upon the sacrifice and disposability of Black bodyminds. Disability Studies scholars use the term *bodyminds* to underscore the interrelationship between the physical and the cognitive. But in the Armitage horror, the *bodymind* must be split, with the body preserved, but cognition and agency suppressed. Ironically, in Chris's case, the "buyer" wants his vision restored, and he also wants to possess Chris's aesthetic insight—his creative expression. Nielsen flatters himself, thinking that, as an art critic, he can better appreciate Chris, even as his respect will result in Chris's destruction. The process of dis-possession is a powerful form of hypnosis executed by Missy, Rose's mother. Using the spoon in her teacup, she pushes Chris to a "sunken place," where he is psychically removed from control of his *bodymind*. Visually, Peele represents this as Chris falling into darkness, floating beneath a small window through which he can view the world above him. He can witness and suffer, but he cannot act autonomously or testify to this sunken reality. In effect, the horror story is both racial appropriation and production of madness.

By situating madness (through psychological control of Chris's mind) at the center of this horror story, and by connecting his captivity to legacies of enslavement and oppression, Peele engages in Sharpe's "wake work." In order to address madness and Blackness together, these elements are crucial: exposing historic and contemporary racial violence that contributes to madness and demanding care for mental distress. Simultaneously, madness (both material and metaphorical) can be disruptive to anti-Black racism. As La Marr Jurelle Bruce suggests, madness is imbricated in the Middle Passage, juxtaposed to Reason (capital R), but as such, madness is non-normative, disruptive, and productively disorderly: "Madness, like diaspora, is both location and locomotion, both place and process."¹² As an analytical category, madness calls attention to histories of erasure and violence, the leaky borders of diagnostic categories, and challenges ideas of cure or repair, forging instead an alternative pathway, geography, and process. As Bruce suggests, Mad Studies, incorporated with disability and Critical Race Theories provides a methodology that "listens for ghosts, madpeople, outcasts, and disembodied voic-

¹² La Marr Jurelle Bruce, "Mad is a Place; or, the Slave Ship Tows the Ship of Fools," 306.

es that trespass, like stowaways, in modernity; it perceives the expressive potential in the so-called rants and raves of madpeople.”¹³ This attention to madness and Blackness comes through in Peele’s film, as Chris pushes to connect to the Black “ghosts”—Georgina, Walter, and Dré—who have been relegated to the sunken place. Dramatically, Chris’s awakening takes place when he inadvertently breaks Dré’s hypnosis with a camera flash, and Dré desperately uses the moment to wake Chris up with the ominous warning, “Get out! Get the fuck out of here!”¹⁴

Ultimately, Chris does make a spectacular escape. After being strapped to a chair in pre-operative limbo for two days, he plugs his ears to avoid hypnosis and enacts a cathartic revenge. Killing everyone but Rose and Walter to make his way outside, they overtake him when he crashes the car the end of the driveway. Chris uses the flash to awaken sunken-Walter, who, semi-conscious of his pre-Walter self, shoots Rose, then turns the rifle on himself. At that moment, a police car turns into the drive. This scene becomes the racial mirror and turning point: Rose, lying bleeding on the driveway, lifts her head and gestures toward the car. Time stops. Viewers recognize that Rose, the beautiful white villain, holds the power over a Black man’s life. Peele’s original ending would have delivered the “punch in the gut,” as he states in the directorial voice-over, to any enduring fantasies of post-racialism: The police get out of the car and Chris ends up in prison because the house and all the evidence supporting his version of events are destroyed in the fire. But Peele, recognizing a collective need for levity, went with the more hopeful (arguably less realistic) ending. Instead of the police, Chris’s friend, Rod, steps out of his official TSA security car. Throughout the film, Rod provides comic relief, warning Chris with far-fetched (prescient) conspiracy theories: “white people love to make black people into sex slaves.” His fantastical fears become prophetic, so he is not surprised to find Chris covered in blood with bodies scattered on the drive and the house burning down behind him. Although this provides a collective sigh of relief for audiences, against the backdrop of right-wing conspiracy theories driven by racism and white male grievance—spread not only by fringe groups, but by (formerly) presidential twitter feed—this ending reminds audiences to interrogate which stories of oppression are given validity and which are relegated to the “sunken place” in the contemporary U.S. social landscape.

Part 2: Relational Unlearning and Disrepair

Victor LaValle, an African American author from Queens, New York, grapples with intersections of race and madness in many of his works. Like Peele, LaValle uses horror to shift the focus from “monstrous” villain, or psychopath, to social

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jordan Peele, *Get Out*.

and systemic disorders. In many of his works, LaValle features characters with psychiatric conditions, and he utilizes the horror genre to dramatize the fear, chaos, and occasional comedy produced by madness. Drawing from personal and familial experience with mental illness diagnoses and psychiatric hospitalizations, he depicts his characters with a level of empathy and recognition that forces readers to engage with their cognitive complexity and social insight. Analyzing two novels, *The Devil in Silver* and *The Changeling*, this section investigates LaValle's representations of race and madness, both of which are wrapped up in the processes of growth for the main character: first, chaotic misidentification of and battling with the villain(s); and second, unlearning racism and paternalism through intimate relationships. Crucial to navigating LaValle's literary horror landscapes, however, are the dynamic, often conflicted relationships between characters; in fact, these relationships are critical to processes of unlearning racism and ableism and moving toward Rankine's "rerouting of interior beliefs."¹⁵

LaValle's *The Devil in Silver* is a cross between Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*—a 21st century horror story set in an underfunded state mental hospital (aptly called New Hyde) in Queens. In an NPR interview about the novel, LaValle describes a haunted feeling he remembers from visiting family members in state hospitals as a child: "I have a very intimate knowledge of the world of the mentally ill and of life inside ... public hospitals, and the way people are treated in there and the way that they try to survive." *The Devil in Silver* gives shape to haunting childhood imaginings of the psychiatric ward. LaValle depicts the unique horrors of New Hyde through the experiences of Pepper, a middle-aged white man who is put on a 72-hour hold after a scuffle with three off-duty police officers. More a result of the officers' laziness than his madness, Pepper ends up in a locked psychiatric ward—a brief admittance that extends indefinitely. Reminiscent of Kesey's Randle McMurphy, Pepper doesn't officially "belong" in the hospital; however, his journey becomes one of affiliation with other patients, even with the violent Devil at the center of the novel¹⁶.

A violent, horrifying creature ultimately identified as Mr. Vesserplein, this figure is a patient who has survived for years in solitary confinement. Housed within a "repurposed" stairwell, he regularly escapes to violently attack, and even kill, other patients on the ward. Readers first encounter the Devil when he attacks Pepper in his room. After a botched escape attempt, for weeks, Pepper is heavily medicated and tethered to his bed. Late one night, Pepper watches in disbelief as a ceiling tile is removed and a quasi-mythic figure descends into his room. LaValle's description

¹⁵ Rankine, "The Condition," loc 1672.

¹⁶ I use this term to acknowledge the language used in the novel, not to attribute specific characteristics to this figure.

highlights the animalistic: He has feet like “horseshoes,” a massive head, “covered in matted fur.”¹⁷ Although frail looking, the man proves to be shockingly strong; he rips Pepper’s restraints, throws him to the floor, and stomps on his chest, breaking several ribs. More shocking than the attack, however, is the staff response—or lack thereof. When they finally respond to Pepper’s screaming, they calmly lead the man away and treat Pepper as if he has simply had a nightmare, attending superficially to his wounds and dismissing his reaction as overwrought and inappropriate—even though he has broken ribs and is bleeding through his clothes.

On the surface, the figure of the Devil fits into common horror tropes, into Mitchell and Snyder’s “narratives of...pathology.”¹⁸ However, after the attack, equally horrifying is the staff’s refusal to acknowledge or address the danger that the Devil poses or the terror he rightly evokes in patients. Mr. Vesserplein is, after all, torturing people on the ward. The material reality of his attacks is crucial, because, within the hospital, patient testimonies are disregarded. Inhabiting a state hospital, a mad place, causes one to be, in Margaret Price’s words, “obliterated as a speaking subject.”¹⁹ The material, the mad, and the metaphorical are on slippery ground in the psych ward. Regardless of diagnosis, Pepper realizes how easily his words, his fears, and his truth can be dismissed or ignored because he occupies the geographic space of the mental hospital. Madness defines him; his narrative is no longer validated, no longer his own.

Realizing the staff and doctors at New Hyde will not address the Devil, Pepper and three other inmates, Loochie, a teenage African American girl, Kofi, a middle-aged Ugandan immigrant, and Dorry, an older white woman, plot a mini take-over to exact revenge. They secretly stop taking their medications and launch a surprisingly effective revolt, where they lock the two on-duty staff members in a conference room. Soon, however, the plan falls apart in spectacular fashion. The nurse ultimately calls the police, who enter amid a chaotic struggle. Loochie is fighting fiercely but being overpowered by Mr. Vesserplein. In the tumult, Kofi comes to her aid with a handful of syringes; however, at the last moment, Dorry turns on Kofi to protect Vesserplein. At this fateful moment, the police run in, guns drawn:

An old white woman fighting off an armed black attacker? That’s not a difficult equation to solve. You can do it at home, without a calculator... One of the officers ran forward and tackled the old woman out of the way. The rest fired on the crazed man. Then the cops fired forty-one shots. The assailant was hit nineteen times.²⁰

¹⁷ Victor LaValle, *The Devil in Silver*, 103.

¹⁸ Mitchell and Snyder, 186.

¹⁹ Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability in Academic Life*, 27, italics in original.

²⁰ LaValle, *The Devil*, 209-10.

In this instant, when Kofi is gunned down by the police, the source of horror in the novel shifts. The specific details LaValle depicts—fired upon forty-one times, hit nineteen times—reference another infamous police shooting from 1999. Amadou Diallo, an unarmed West African man with no criminal record, was gunned down in the doorway of his Bronx apartment by the New York City police. The officers misidentified Mr. Diallo as a rape suspect, and when he reached for his identification, officers assumed that he was reaching for a gun and subsequently opened fire. Like many of the high-profile killings that have taken place more recently, the killing of Diallo set off massive protests across the city; also, like too many cases, the officers were ultimately acquitted.

LaValle's decision to re-animate Diallo's shooting within the novel is significant. He implies that the disposable bodyminds and violent logics—almost expected and so easily concealed in the confines of the locked ward—are mirrored by the racism and saneism in society. In this way, LaValle shifts the source of the horror from the monstrous body of the Devil to the monstrous, state-sanctioned violence enacted upon people of color with mental disabilities. In an analysis of Tim Burton and Stephen King, Melinda Hall argues that selected works of horror offer social critiques of able-bodied/able-minded privilege, and actively resist the construct of disability/disfigurement as horror. As Hall suggests, specific works in the genre push audiences to recognize instead, "what is horrifying is society and its rigid cruelty. Exclusion, cruelty, and normalization are posed as threat and elicit audience dis-identification."²¹

LaValle enacts such a reversal by switching the lens from the Devil to the tragic predictability of Kofi's death. The horror, suddenly, is the breathtaking speed between the entrance of the police and Kofi's execution; the horror is the media coverage, which repeatedly projects images of Kofi, his hair and clothes in disarray, as mad and dangerous. The horror is the necessity of LaValle's fictive memorialization of Amadou Diallo—his reminder to readers of the everyday violence and danger—where any Black person could be misidentified as "suspect." Claudia Rankine captures the embodied/emotional pain of this deadly repetition in *Citizen—A Lyric*: "And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description / In a landscape drawn from an ocean bed, you can't drive yourself sane—so angry you can't drive yourself sane."²² The blurring of sanity and madness is essential to this racial intervention. As Pickens points out, in Black literary traditions, "madness surfaces not only as pathology or as part of a holy fool tradition, but also as a viable alternative

²¹ Melinda Hall, "Horrible Heroes: Liberating Alternative Visions of Disability in Horror," para 14.

²² Rankine, *Citizen—A Lyric*, loc 513.

to engagements with white racism even if it does not result in increased agency.”²³ This expansive understanding of madness and its endless folding into Blackness reminds readers of the disruptive, yet elusive nature of the term.

While Kofi’s death and the mistreatment of patients unmask the madness of carceral systems, LaValle is also interested in how patients develop relational networks within the confines of New Hyde—not only to survive, but to gain perspective and insight. After Kofi’s death, Pepper becomes more reflective of his own biases and sense of entitlement. As a white man accustomed to brash action, he begins to question how his brashness impacts other people. As he develops more intimate connections with other patients at New Hyde, he realizes he “belongs” there as much (or as little) as any of them, not based on diagnosis, but on affinity. Notably, his reconciliation with madness works in tandem with confronting internalized racial biases. Pepper’s “rerouting of interior beliefs”²⁴ initiates in mourning Kofi’s death, but deepens through reciprocal friendships with Loochie, a Black teenager, and Sue, an undocumented Chinese immigrant. I trace these relationships because through them, Pepper reorients himself to confront able-mindedness or sanism and to challenge internalized white racism as well as simplistic, toxic expressions of masculinity.

This rerouting of belief becomes shaped by his experience at New Hyde, especially as Pepper shifts from fighting the situation to becoming part of small community of friends. The representational geography of the “undercommons,” articulated by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney is useful in understanding Pepper’s transformative relationships. Moten and Harney describe the undercommons as a fugitive space, an underground of subversive intellectuals, of refugees. The undercommons sustains a philosophy of abolition, “not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons.”²⁵ While Harney and Moten occasionally use “crazy,” “delusional,” or “broken,” metaphorically, they resist traditional definitions of these terms as well as the imperative of fixing people described this way. The undercommons is a space of disrepair—of not seeking treatment or cure, but seeking pathways, connections, and improvisation. Through disorienting and reorienting relationships, Pepper, Loochie, and Sue inhabit spaces of the undercommons, even within the institution. Within this frame, Pepper’s relationships with Loochie and Sue might be read as relations of disrepair, as relationships that emerge through madness, acknowledging mad spaces and experiences, but that do not attempt to fix or repair traits labeled broken or disordered. Instead, these relationships challenge and support transformation, evoking critical reflection and reorientation of belief.

²³ Pickens, loc 483.

²⁴ Rankine, “The Condition,” loc 1672.

²⁵ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, 40.

Pepper develops a deep friendship, almost a father role with Loochie, and a romantic relationship with Sue, and both women challenge him to confront his white, male, able-minded privilege. Still a teenager, Loochie has already been in the state hospital system for six years, and Pepper both pities and respects this history. Early on, Loochie confronts Pepper for acting like he's "not one of us"²⁶ because Pepper doesn't have a psychiatric diagnosis. He realizes, however, that resisting being identified as mad creates a false, or undesirable, barrier between people he cares for and himself; as well, his being a patient within the system of New Hyde makes him "one of them." The medico-carceral structures of power act upon him regardless of a diagnosis. This sinks in when he asserts his right not to take his medications. The nurse responds, "But refusal is taken as a sign that your illness is in control of you."²⁷ He points out that his refusal may indicate that he is feeling well, but she counters, "If you was healthy, you wouldn't refuse!"²⁸ This catch-22 reminds Pepper of past conversations he had with Black co-workers about police harassment. When they complained about the sheer number of times they were stopped and searched by police, he would dismissively say, "If you had nothing to hide, you wouldn't say no"²⁹ to being searched. After being caught up in the psychiatric system, however, he realizes that he is now marked as a person who needs oversight. Being a patient at New Hyde allows him to draw a parallel between the treatment of mad people and people of color in the United States: "This wasn't about an infraction, but dictating a philosophy of life: certain types of people must be overseen."³⁰ Pepper hadn't been forced to understand white, able-minded privilege before, but the reality of his previous entitlement comes into sharp relief as he stands at the nurse's desk at New Hyde.

Pepper's romantic involvement with Sue provides additional insight into his privilege. Sue emigrated from China with her sister as a young girl, but never gained U.S. citizenship, and her undocumented status is moving her toward forced release from the hospital to an immigration hearing. Pepper is frustrated by being powerless to help, but Sue challenges him to stop fantasizing about rescuing her: "Your dream is about what *you* want to do, not what *I* need."³¹ Sue and her friends also model an undercommons form of resistance or mad pride. Late at night, in the main room, the three women clip magazine and news articles—putting together an archive of stories about mad people. In effect, they are doing wake work,

²⁶ LaValle, *The Devil*, 92.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁸ LaValle, *The Devil*, 142.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 261, italics in original.

remembering forgotten people, mad folk who have died, escaped, or done something newsworthy. Some stories feature people from New Hyde; for example, they have Kofi's obituary, and those of other former patients. Pepper calls their project a "kind of war memorial."³² (247), which captures the spirit of their labor.

Intertwined with his reckoning with madness and white racism, his relationships with Sue and Loochie challenge him to expand his limited, patriarchal notions of masculinity. Before New Hyde, Pepper saw his role with women as a protector, but Sue and Loochie push back on his misguided benevolence. They demand that he show up for them, not that he fix their lives or rescue them. A conversation between Pepper and Loochie's mother captures this tension. Pepper asks how she could have let Loochie live in a hospital for so many years, saying he would do anything for Sue—including dying for her. Loochie's mother, however, challenges that sentiment: "Men always want to die for something. For someone. I can see the appeal. You do it once and it's done...But it takes a lot of courage to live for someone, too" (342). Rather than abandoning Loochie, Pepper realizes she has done everything, painful as it has been, to keep her daughter alive. Pepper learns from and is transformed by these women; his drive to rescue them shifts to a more interdependent relationship and tenacious belief in their power and insight. Near the end of the novel, when several patients attempt an escape, he and Loochie find an actual way out, but at the moment of decision, Pepper realizes that she does not need him to protect her, so he pushes Loochie to escape on her own. Instead of running away, Pepper returns to protect the Devil from other patients in a violent struggle that brings renewed media attention to New Hyde. Ultimately, after helping to liberate Loochie and to bring public scrutiny upon the hospital, especially its treatment of the Devil /Mr. Vesserplein, Pepper begins to embrace a new role within the hospital: a willing denizen of the undercommons, one of the mad people, a friend to new arrivals, and guardian of lost histories.

Part 3: *The Changeling*: Destruction or Deliverance

LaValle's most recent novel, *The Changeling*, published in 2017, uses the horror genre to construct a mythic landscape in which two juxtaposed familial histories expose worldviews in violent opposition: one based on a warped white patriarchal ideology that sacrifices (selected) children to maintain order; the other born out of resistance—grounded in a fierce matriarchal drive to protect these targeted young lives. The novel centers around Apollo Kagwa and Emma Valentine, whose infant son Brian is stolen and replaced by a changeling—the offspring of a troll. Familiar figures in folklore, changelings are replacement creatures left by fairies, trolls, or other mythic beings as replacements for stolen human children. In many stories,

³² LaValle, *The Devil*, 247.

the changeling becomes sickly, aggressive, troublesome, even feral. Disability scholars have suggested that changeling myths may have emerged to explain the onset of disability, specifically autism. In LaValle's novel, however, the mythic becomes literal, and Apollo and Emma are forced to navigate the horrors of "one ugly fairy tale"³³ to find their infant son.

The first half of the novel traces Apollo's history, with the courtship of his parents, Brian West from Syracuse and Lillian Kagwa who emigrated from Uganda in her mid-twenties. Brian and Lillian soon marry and have a son, Apollo, but their happiness is short lived; when Apollo is four, Brian West disappears, never to be seen again. Apollo's mother, who reclaims the name Kagwa for herself and her son, raises the child on her own. Growing up, Apollo reads voraciously, becomes increasingly enamored with books, and eventually builds his own business as a rare and used book seller. Years later, his business leads him to Emma Valentine, a librarian in the Fort Washington branch of the New York Public Library. Emma impresses Apollo immediately, as she calms a distressed homeless man with kind, firm direction. Petite in stature, Emma's insight and strength are all the more striking. Within a few years, Emma and Apollo marry and welcome baby Brian into their family.

Initially, Apollo and Emma experience the excruciating joy, fatigue, and separation anxiety of most new parents, but after six months, a serious rift has emerged between them. Since returning to work—after a mere six weeks—Emma has been receiving texts from Apollo with pictures of Brian, pictures Apollo couldn't have taken. The first shot captures Apollo loading a rented van with Brian buckled into his car seat on the driveway behind his father. The image is haunting. She wonders who took it, why it was sent, but when she asks Apollo, the text and image have vanished, and they can't find the picture on Apollo's phone. The texts continue to appear and disappear, tormenting Emma; she knows someone is watching, even targeting Brian, but Apollo thinks she is delusional. The final straw is a picture of Brian in the backseat of a Zipcar that Apollo is driving, as if someone was standing at the back window of the car. "GOT HIM,"³⁴ the text reads. This text also disappears from her phone, and when she tries to convince Apollo that Brian has been stolen, he questions her sanity. She explains further that she has found other mothers online whose children have also disappeared, been replaced, but he grows furious: "On the message board? I'm so happy a bunch of stir-crazy mothers offered suggestions about fixing our family. But the answer is simple. You're what's

³³ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 259.

³⁴ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 118.

wrong with our family, Emma. You. Are. The. Problem. Go take another pill.”³⁵ Madness is hurled as an insult, a dismissal, a disavowal of Emma as Brian’s mother.

Soon after this, Emma takes desperate action, solidifying the belief that madness has pushed her over the edge. She chains Apollo to the steam pipe in the kitchen, beats him with a hammer, and kills the baby. This, at least, is what happens on the surface. However, this fatal act shifts and splits the narrative arc of the novel. Emma, having really destroyed the troll’s offspring, disappears to search for Brian; Apollo, believing the unreal, initially hunts for Emma to exact his revenge, but as he comes to understand that Brian has been offered as sacrifice, he helps Emma destroy the actual monsters in this ugly tale. Their separate paths ultimately lead them back together: Emma finds her way to the mythic monster—an actual troll holding Brian captive; Apollo, finds the troll’s human counterpart, William Wheeler, who has constructed an online platform for his own familial legacy of white racist violence, projecting horror and human sacrifice in the form of a dystopic, pay-per view reality show.

After Emma’s disappearance, newly immersed in the horror story that has become his life, Apollo unearths irreconcilable worldviews—each tied to familial lineages: William Wheeler and his Knudsen family line, contrasted to the Kagwa/Valentine line. William Wheeler insinuates himself into Apollo’s life as a rare book buyer, but he is actually lying and manipulating, hoping his search for Emma will lead Wheeler to his wife. Wheeler tells Apollo his wife, like Emma, has murdered his daughter; however, Wheeler has actually sacrificed his child to the troll, and his wife has gone into hiding to protect their other children. Apollo ultimately discovers, through Wheeler’s father, Jorgen, that the family has an historical contract with the troll: In order to protect a Norwegian sloop carrying dozens of immigrants in 1825, his ancestor, Nils Knudsen, made a pact with the monster—the sacrifice of a child for protection on the voyage. Nils sacrificed his own child, but as years passed, the Knudsen men performed their “service” to the troll by selecting other children for sacrifice. Apollo listens to this story in Jorgen’s den, where photographs of the victims are displayed: “These other boys and girls—black and brown, yellow, white, and red—a roster as varied as the general assembly of the United Nations.”³⁶ Jorgen explains that immigrants were readily available in the early years, defending the “tough choices”³⁷ made by his forefathers. When his time came to feed the monster, he would look for children “without protection,” justifying his cruelty as a process of identifying “castoffs.”³⁸

³⁵ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 119.

³⁶ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 365.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 366.

Through this metaphor of the troll, this lineage of sacrifice, LaValle lays out a settler colonial, patriarchal, white supremacist mindset that must be sustained to feed the monster. This destroyer ideology depends upon two key elements: first, the assumption that some lives are disposable, and second, that those who resist must be branded as the actual threat. The Knudsen family, in their self-preserving pact with the monster, assume power over the selection process. They accept the troll's demand for a sacrifice, and in so doing, perpetuate the ideology that their survival depends upon the death of a child. And while the images of sacrificed children represent multiple ethnicities and nationalities, Jorgen explicitly deploys white male grievance to justify marking other (non-White) people's children as disposable. Referring to the social burden his son has had to endure, Jorgen asserts an all too familiar trope, "There was a time in this country when a man like him could be sure his children would do better than he had done. Once that was the birthright of every white man in America. But not anymore. Suddenly men like my son were being passed over in the name of things like 'fairness' and 'balance.' Where's the justice in that?"³⁹ This grievance mentality too easily pits white people against people of color. As Juliet Hooker points out, white grievance promotes an understanding of social change and democratic process "as a zero-sum game in which gains by other groups are experienced as losses by the dominant group, [and in this schema] white losses become magnified while black losses are rendered invisible."⁴⁰ The Knudsens have internalized this belief system, and the troll becomes the mechanism to destroy the evidence, rendering the loss of life invisible.

While all of the Knudsen have blood on their hands, Jorgen's son, the man who stole Brian, takes the pact with the troll to a new level—into the digital, virtual age. The man Apollo comes to know as William Wheeler uses the online moniker Kinder Garten (a twisted distortion of a term meant to protect children) to sell video access of the troll. Not only does Kinder Garten exploit his family's pact with the troll to prop up his own sense of power, he also transforms kidnapping and killing of infants into an entrepreneurial enterprise. Using his technological expertise, he sets up a camera in the troll's cave and creates an online community of spectators, eager to pay handsomely to witness the sacrifice.

Crucial to the success of his monstrous start-up venture is sowing conflict, confusion, and even a sense of madness among the parents of stolen children. Through texts, posts, pictures, and then erasure of digital evidence, Kinder Garten exposes the horrible truth of the abductions to mothers, but a lie to fathers. Many mothers, like Emma, resort to killing the changeling, and go into hiding with their

³⁹ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 369.

⁴⁰ Juliet Hooker, "Black Protest/White Grievance: On the Problem of White Political Imaginations Not Shaped by Loss," 486.

children. Fathers, lacking material evidence, come to believe their spouses have postpartum depression or other diagnoses. Ultimately, like Apollo, believing their wives have become murderers, fathers are driven to their own forms of trauma and madness. Kinder Garten exploits those feelings of betrayal in men, not just in fathers, but other men who feel aggrieved, to build an online community of perverted, misogynistic wrath: “We are Kinder Garten. Ten thousand men with one name.”⁴¹

The mothers, as Emma discovers, have found one another, and in seeking the truth within an unreal landscape, in forming a community of support, they represent a collective resistance, an undercommons of refugees. Further, these women embody an opposing ideology, based on an unyielding protection of children, and resistance to cruel exploitation of the vulnerable. Before finding Emma and Jorgen, Apollo finds this community of women, who have taken up residence on an island in the East River. The leader of the community, Cal, helps him see that his rage against Emma has been misplaced. Similar to Pepper’s shifting orientation in *The Devil in Silver*, Apollo has to shift his understanding, and this “undercommons” community exposes him to the lies he has been fed by Kinder Garten. On their island refuge, Cal explains that Apollo had been tricked by a surface illusion: “The Scottish called it glamer,” Cal said. “Glamour. It’s an old kind of magic. An illusion to make something appear different than it really is.”⁴²

Indeed, his interaction with Cal and with the community shifts Apollo’s perspective, especially his single-minded rage against Emma. He spends the day watching over a young girl, Gayl, who has become attached to him. The simple acts of feeding her breakfast, of playing, of being needed, restore a sense of hope. He begins to see these women not as villains, but as unwavering, fierce protectors. Emma’s final words to him, “You don’t see, but you will,”⁴³ come back as a haunting mantra. As he begins to see the truth under the “glamer/glamour,” Cal’s explanation of their collective seems more credible:

People call us witches,” Cal said quickly. She grabbed Apollo’s hand. “But maybe what they’re really saying is that we were women who did things that seemed impossible. You remember those old stories about mothers who could lift cars when their kids were trapped underneath? I think of it like that. When you have to save the one you love, you will become someone else, something else. You will transform. The only real magic is the things we’ll do for the ones we love.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 277.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 314.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴⁴ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 283.

As Apollo reorients to Cal's explanation of Emma's actions, he falls into a realm of madness—in the sense that the mythic and his heretofore accepted reality suddenly split and interchange; this is madness with disorienting and reorienting potential, its unexpected pathways exposed.

For Apollo, the new path leads to Emma, and with a fierce resolve he brings from the undercommons, from Cal's community of refugees, he comes psychologically ready to share her burden. When he finds her encamped outside the cave of the troll, she is luminous, powerful, a protective witch; however, she is also broken, frail, and wasting away. She explains this power as the magic of the ordinary, not a supernatural mystery: "I wasn't able to do it because I was so powerful, I was able to do it because I had no other choice. I had to do it alone, so I did. But now I don't have to do it alone. At least I hope I don't. We could be stronger together."⁴⁵ And they are stronger. Like the final act of Peele's *Get Out*, LaValle provides his characters a well-earned revenge. Apollo kills Jorgen, Emma kills Kinder Garten, and they burn the Knudsen house, with its legacy of murderous destruction, to the ground. Most important, they rescue Brian and destroy the troll by luring him into the sun; in this act, they destroy the pact and legacy of sacrifice.

In the destruction of Kinder Garten and the monstrous ideology he serves, LaValle suggests a necessary resistance to a lineage that preserves power through white male grievance, and a logic that constructs "outsiders" as disposable or replaceable. This ideology can be destroyed, but it also easily endures in hidden spaces because people continue to feed its voracious appetite—with prejudice and fear. The resistant worldview insists upon exposing this ideology to the light. This is also a process of peeling back the veneer of "glamer." As Apollo realizes, "The world is full of glamour, especially when it obscures the suffering of the weak."⁴⁶ The competing lineage includes those driven by justice, who direct their power toward protecting the vulnerable. As Marian Wright Edelman states, "What children need is somebody who will bite any hand that hurts them." Resisting the monsters (people, beliefs) that would sacrifice, replace, or destroy others requires determination, bite, and sustaining relationships.

On the surface, the horror genre seems a poor fit with Disability Studies—especially when looking for transgressive or complicated representations of madness and Blackness. However, in this analysis of Jordan Peele's *Get Out* with Victor LaValle's recent literary horror, we see examples of horror as social criticism. Peele and LaValle exploit and amplify the blurry boundaries of madness, insisting that seeming realities on the surface are shrouding important realities, and elements of madness must be integrated or navigated to expose the truth. Moving beyond

⁴⁵ Ibid., 415.

⁴⁶ LaValle, *The Changeling*, 384.

horror tropes that conflate disability and madness with “monstrous” bodyminds, these works use figurations of the monstrous to expose human cruelty and systems of violence, especially those supported by legacies of ableism and white racism.

While these works of horror use expected elements of the genre, by connecting characters’ immediate danger to historic inequities and systems of injustice, viewers and readers are invited to more deeply invest in the character’s survival, as well as the social transformation needed to eradicate such threats. In *Get Out*, the Armitages aren’t simply an evil, cruel family; they embody the horror of white supremacy and elitist privilege taken to its dystopic, yet logical extreme. In rooting for Chris, audience members are expelled (with him) to the “sunken place,” a representational geography akin to Moten’s and Harney’s “undercommons,” spaces haunted by white racial violence and historic oppression, but also spaces of insight and resistance. Yet even as Chris escapes, he is still enmeshed, as are we all, in the legacies of racial oppression and violence that props up the Armitage’s façade of respectability.

LaValle’s works also connect his characters’ struggles to historic inequities and destructive belief systems: the structural violence of institutions; systemic racial injustice; and toxic patriarchal power. In his novels, horror is not gratuitous or forensic violence, but a representational geography. LaValle enjoys placing characters in horrifying situations, then tracing how they might negotiate pathways through various dangers—sometimes internal, more often relational, socio-political and structural. He uses grotesque imagery and monstrous figures, but these are not reduced to disability; instead, madness and physical difference are braided into an understanding of characters and their relations with each other. In an interview, LaValle stresses that having compassion for his characters is elemental to his approach:

I always tell my writing students that you shouldn’t write about people you don’t like. By this, I mean you shouldn’t write about people if you can’t empathize with them. When I say this some folks think that means they should only write about the people they already love. But what I mean is that they should love more people.⁴⁷

LaValle’s tenderness toward characters and attention to their deepening relationships is a hallmark of his literary horror. For Peele, astonishing viewers into a transformative compassion drives his work as well. With a lens to social critique, these works of horror exploit fear, shock, and intensity to force readers and viewers into a disorienting landscape—into more complicated representational geographies of madness and Blackness. These works invite audiences to become more

⁴⁷ LaValle, quoted in Frances, 954.

invested in a “rerouting of interior beliefs,”⁴⁸ a reorientation that engages with race and madness as inseparable elements in an internal, relational struggle toward disability and racial justice.

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⁴⁸ Rankine, “The Condition,” loc 1672.