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# Black Women Be Knowing: Double Consciousness and the Maid's Tear in *Get Out*

Erik Buckingham

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## ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the 2017 horror film, *Get Out*, portrays the chronic double consciousness of black Americans, especially women, amidst late capitalist liberalism. I focus specifically on a scene midway through the movie in which a black, hypnotized maid simultaneously laughs, smiles, and sheds a tear. This essay discusses double consciousness, body language, clothing and facial expressions in order to illustrate the ambivalent stance that *Get Out* takes toward black women as both empowered and disempowered, arguing against the laudatory critiques of mainstream film commentators who have focused on the emancipatory potential of *Get Out's* narrative.

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Throughout history, black women such as Harriet Tubman have been rightfully regarded as mentally strong and knowledgeable about the human condition. An old African proverb states, “Black women be knowing” (Willis, 2017). We might consider the modern version of that statement to be today’s racially hip “Get woke,” which means to become actively aware within and about the black community’s experience with racial oppression. One particular phenomenon in popular culture where we see the manifestation of “Get woke” is in the popular criticism of Jordan Peele’s 2017 film *Get Out*, in which a white family hypnotizes African Americans and takes over their bodies and consciousnesses.

*Get Out* portrays the vulnerability that accompanies marginalization; however, it also shows the chronic double consciousness—or the mental experience of living within two cultures—of black Americans, especially woman, amidst late capitalist liberalism. I read across the film’s racially ambiguous form, focusing specifically on a scene midway through the movie in which a black, hypnotized maid simultaneously laughs, smiles, and sheds a tear as she denies her own racial oppression. I read this scene with the assistance of Eugenie Brinkema’s theory of aesthetic form in *The Forms of the Affects*, where Brinkema argues that an artifact such as a tear either expresses emotional discourse spontaneously or after a sequence of connected events that convey a mes-

sage regarding the whole (2014). Emotional discourse is addressed in critic Sharice B.'s review of *Get Out*, in which they comment on the maid's ability to overcome trauma and become powerful: "Through adversity and with the very little we are given, black women have resisted political and racist authority, [and] made something extraordinary out of nothing" (2017). In other words, the maid shows that symbols of empowerment still need support. Her mixed emotions suggest that empowerment is a double-edged sword; what empowers us also holds us to the expectation of feeling strong, even when we feel the opposite. To lay out this argument, I will first offer a brief review of double consciousness—an abstract concept of blackness in mainstream white America—and its relationship to shed tears. Following the literature review, I will analyze the role of body language, clothing, and facial expressions—all supporting artifacts in the presentation of the maid's tear in *Get Out*—in order to illustrate the ambivalent stance that *Get Out* takes toward black women as both empowered and disempowered—in contrast to critiques that have focused too long and too hard on the emancipatory potential of *Get Out*'s narrative.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Media coverage of natural disasters reveals the constricting conditions of racism and marginalization. Literary critics Best and Marcus write, "The real-time coverage of Hurricane Katrina showed in ways that required little explication the state's abandonment of its African American citizens; and many people instantly recognized as lies political statements such as 'mission accomplished' " (2009, p. 2). In their analysis, a medium shows only one perspective at first glance; however, recognizing that a text only shows one perspective allows us to envision the other perspectives that exist. As Marxist scholar Frederic Jameson argues, we cannot interpret a text unless we accept that the text "never means exactly what it says" (1981, p. 61). For example, Beyoncé Knowles was able to critique the media's lack of perspective in her music video for "Formation" (2016). "Formation" used visual elements from Hurricane Katrina, such as a sinking car and damaged homes, to comment on why the lack of media coverage of African American communities was unsurprising. These visual elements showed trauma that had begun before the hurricane hit the Black community in New Orleans, as the hurricane arrives at the end of the video. Just as curators used New Orleans' historical context to assemble Beyoncé's video into a narrative about the African American experience, critics comment on African American women's marginalization in history by assembling the visual cues found in *Get Out*.

One of the visual cues discussed among critics of *Get Out* is the "creepy" tear shed by a supporting character in the film, Georgina, the maid, played by Betty Gabriel. The maid's tear in *Get Out* has been regarded by critics overall as highly significant, as this excerpt from *Blavity* suggests:

I think we all can agree that the scene where Georgina cried then laughed then cried...then proceeded to repeat "no, no, no" is the creepiest part of the film. I can see this moment going down in history with the many clas-

sic horror-thriller scenes such as the ax through the door in *The Shining* or Anthony Hopkins' incredible monologue in *The Silence of the Lambs*. (2017)

What the critic describes as “creepy” is precisely the affective response this essay intends to examine. What makes the scene “creepy”? What is the relationship between the unsettling feeling experienced during the maid's scene and blackness in mainstream America?

Furthermore, how can rhetorical theory tie these elements together so that we have a better understanding of the relationship between media, form, and race? Critic Eugenie Brinkema states that western culture encourages tears to be read as windows to a character's interior state. Brinkema highlights this idea: “One first perceived a fact (Lion!), which then excited an emotion (Fear!), which finally led to a bodily affection (Fight!—or, perhaps, flight)” (2014, p. 4). This analysis takes the perspective that tears logically map out the course of emotional expression; tears express internal feelings. As Catherine Leglú writes, “Tears are the expression and representation of a variety of emotions in Western medieval culture” (2000, p. 495). While both Leglú and Brinkema present one perspective, the tear as an external representation of a character's internal state, Brinkema has suspicions that a tear points elsewhere:

Because of these theoretical negotiations, the trajectory of the tear in philosophical thought moves from clarity to cloud, from transparency to suspicion, from the sense that we know what a tear is to the sense that a tear is always anything but itself—even that the tear is a lie. (2014, p. 3)

Unlike the logical progression suggested before, here Brinkema argues that the tear tricks us into thinking that we are seeing a character's internal state. However, Brinkema continues, suggesting that tears sometimes point to elements separate from the character. How, then, do we read a tear that falls but is not cried? Or, put differently, when a black woman sheds a tear that is not a direct expression of her consciousness, what is that saying about the conditions of living for black women in general?

At their most rudimentary, tears invoke emotions in an audience; however, when analyzed in a larger context, tears explain a character's situation to the audience. Leglú recognizes that tears are evocative: “Grief, love and anger are simultaneously performative and introspective” (2000, p. 495-6). While both Leglú and Brinkema see tears as emotional symbols, Brinkema cites Aristotle's *Poetics* to prove that tears provide structure for the incidents in a play: “Tragic fear and pity may be aroused by the Spectacle, but they may also be aroused by the very structure and incidents of the play” (2014, p. 4). Brinkema recognizes that the structure of a play can be analyzed through a tear, but the context for the structure of the play lies in the external elements that work in conjunction with the tear. The tear is no longer a sign of interior emotion when analyzed in a larger, archaeological context.

The tear provides an archaeological context, but it does not advance the plot of *Get Out*. Rather, the tear reveals the symbols before itself and provides a framework for analyzing what comes after the tear. The tear itself “is not expressive of the emotions of a subject, not an external production or an internal state,” argues Brinkema, “It does not speak to either its emissive past or to its judged emotional future, and it is ripped from, and sits only ever so gently on the surface of, the body” (2014, p. 19). In other words, tears resist their own self evidence. Further, formal elements separate from the tear, such as clothing, light, curves, and body language, must be read for their own relation to affect in order to understand the tear’s meaning.

While the tear provides meaning when it is in relation to external elements, it does not provide advanced meaning about the subject in which it falls. This can be seen when “the tear no longer functions as a pointer—to the secrets of the heart, to cathartic release, to interior states—it is no longer possible to regard it as an entry into the knowledge of a subject” (Brinkema, 2014, p. 22). When voided of interiority, Brinkema believes that the tear loses its deeper meaning. It is precisely the shedding of this “deeper meaning” that is accomplished when the maid sheds her tear in *Get Out*. The tear voids the maid’s interiority and deeper meaning in order to express the larger issue of the limits of marginalization of black women during liberalism in America.

Further, Brinkema writes that a tear “does not drop, but folds” (2014, p. 22). This suggests the tear does not convey any deeper meaning about the interior state. Instead, the tear fails to avoid creating a deeper meaning because it is used in conjunction with clothing, body language, and a smile, thus signifying the conflicting external states of the maid.

## DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE TEAR THAT FOLDS

The maid’s tear points to a marginalization and a double consciousness. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, sociologist and activist W. E. B. Dubois states: “The Negro is...gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (1903, p. 198). His analysis of the status of African Americans suggests that blackness can only be defined through a definition of whiteness; thus, a double consciousness emerges. Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe uses the metaphor of “the wake”—as in the wake of a ship—to name the paradox that African Americans cannot run from the marginalized space that they are put into because of the pressures that they put onto themselves: “To be in the wake is also to recognize the ways that we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to overwhelming force though not only known to ourselves and to each other by that force” (1999, p. 16). In other words, the wake prohibits African Americans from overcoming racial barriers because conservative African Americans are seen as a force against African American advancement. This extends into the twenty-first century, with the idea that African

Americans only receive praise for their progress once white people overcome their own prejudices; thus, black progress is defined by white progress (Rock, 2014). Critic Cassie Da Costa uses both DuBois and Rock's arguments to say, "Good-intentioned, liberal-minded micro- and macro-aggressions are not explained away or forgiven, and kind-eyed white people, and white viewers, cannot remain hazily removed from their daily acts of ignorance and violence" (2017). She emphasizes that aggressions are not explicitly explained in *Get Out*; instead, surface elements such as the maid's tear show the difference between whiteness and blackness. I do not assume unconscious cues from the film to read the maid's double consciousness; rather, *Get Out* must be read for its differing visual cues that symbolize whiteness and blackness in different contexts.

The maid's tear creates suspicion about whether the maid believes her own thoughts. As Brinkema writes, "The trajectory of the tear in philosophical thought moves from clarity to cloud, from transparency to suspicion" (2014, p. 3). This suspicion is the result of the maid's continuous smile followed by an eventual tear and scowl. Furthermore, the maid is set in the middle of the frame. This technique is used sparingly by filmmakers in order to emphasize significance. The maid considers her identity as important yet conflicting on an individual level. Actor Betty Gabriel observed about her character, Georgina, stating that "She's a white woman in a black woman's body" (Hope, 2017). While racial confusion happens on an individual scale, it also occurs on the societal level. Culture critic Alyssa Rosenberg argues, "We see black people, who turn out to be white people who are trying, and largely failing, to act convincingly black" (2017). The maid's denial that she is being marginalized reflects the elite liberalist idea that our society is above racism and oppression; that is, it is an unconscious fantasy to deny the existence of both.

The tear is intimately related to the unconscious fantasy that haunts race. As Brinkema states, "The unconscious fantasy produces abundant tears that are sudden and seemingly without cause; thus, tears no longer require the mediation of judgement or conscious processing" (2014, p. 14). But the maid's tears are caused by her internal struggle, as seen in her opposing smile.

The maid's tears are not spontaneous; they reflect the years following slavery when liberals detached from its aftermath. Unlike those post-Civil War liberals, the maid cannot detach herself from the emotional turmoil that racism inflicted on her. Despite the actor's seeing the maid's tear as a secret, it does not necessarily reveal anything about her unconscious mind (Hope, 2017). Brinkema seeks to debunk the "mystery" that lurks around tears, writing, "The tear that does not fall but sits thickly next to the eye without revealing its source or its embodied secret: whether it was secreted at all" (2014, p. 2). The maid's tear is a paradox that has distracted critics into thinking that it cannot be read on the surface.

The tear is central to Brinkema's idea that crying is structured like a language. Brinkema argues,

Once the tear is unlinked from emotion, from expression, from interiority, from subjects—even from life and vitality—it is liberated to be read for the exterior structures it takes; the ultimate culmination of the tear placed under suspicion is the dehiscence of tear from sure recuperable substance. (2014, p. 21)

When viewing things from this framework, the analysis of the tear detaches from the assumptions the audience might make about tears' inferiority and emotional expression. The maid's double expression separates her tear from her smile. This separation reflects film critic Alissa Wilkinson's argument that *Get Out* depicts the colonization of experiences: "*Get Out* draws on the visceral experience of being objectified or colonized by another consciousness" (2017). The maid's tear and smile represent two different beings; that is, her white façade smiles while her black identity cries.

A "twoness" presents an important struggle between their privileged white façade and their silenced black identity. W.E.B. Dubois highlighted this conflicting racial identity in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (1903, p. 2-3)

Just as black voices have been silenced or erased by white privilege, the maid's black identity was silenced by white colonization. The maid's black identity, specifically, cannot communicate through any method other than a tear, as suggested in Lathrop's argument that the tear is the only testimony that the maid can give (2017). The tear is the black identity sacrificing itself to the white façade, which critic Jones describes as, "What Whiteness does to the black mind and psyche, but most of all, the desire to be white and what must happen to the black parts of yourself in order to make that journey" (2017, p.17). The maid's tear symbolizes the black parts of herself that the maid must give up in order to shout, "No, no, no, no, no" when the man across from her accuses her of blindly believing everything that the white family, or elite liberalism, has convinced her and her black peers to think.

The maid's tear can be distinguished as part of her black identity because the tear does not give a character power or privilege: "The tear is no longer a privileged sign of emotionality" (Brinkema, 2014, p. 10). In Brinkema's theoretical framework, emotionality cannot be linked to symbols of privilege. The maid's black identity lacks power or privilege while she is under the hypnotism of the racist family, as seen in their inability to contemplate their hypnosis. Contrary, the maid's white façade smiles while she wears a collared white shirt under a sweater. Furthermore, she wears expensive-looking jewelry and sports a hairstyle similar to that of Jackie Kennedy. The maid's façade, according to actor Gabriel, is "the worst kind of assimilation" (Hope, 2017).

The maid's assimilation into white society masks her black identity, thus causing her double consciousness to work against itself.

While the use of a tear can be detached from power and privilege, *Get Out* depicts the tear as black denial of modern racism. This is evident when the maid sheds the tear after arguing with a black man across from her. The black man wears modern clothing and is found checking his phone. This man represents the material success of African Americans that the maid has failed to achieve in her life despite her assimilation into white society. Additionally, the man has more than she has, despite his resistance of complete assimilation into white society. This can be seen when Gabriel recognizes that the maid represents years of enslavement under white society: "There are members of our country that have assimilated so much, in a very right-wing conservative way and I go, wow, sister girl, why do you believe these things and say these things and support these politicians?" (Hope, 2017 p. 21). In other words, the maid denies modern racism even though she is marginalized. Though the tear can be read separately from the person's emotions and situation, "When interpretation finally takes place, the tear does not signal a deep longing or private expression of the heart, but an unconscious fantasy ambivalently expressed as a symptom" (Brinkema, 2014 p. 14). This tear is not an expression of emotion; rather, it shows the maid's reality. This reality contradicts the maid's unconscious fantasy that the racist family means well.

*Get Out* relates the maid's feeling of empowerment directly to her body language. Social psychologist Amy Cuddy argues that when we feel powerless, we close up and wrap up our bodies, that closed body language relates to a lack of power (2015). On the other hand, visual critic Anjelica Sanders argues that the maid is "the black woman who recognizes the powers that be, who knows what is in store for the black man in America, but who is paralyzed by her inability to save him before danger hits" (2017). While she argues that the maid represents a symbol of power, the maid's body language suggests a lack of power as she stands in the doorway with her hands folded in front.

While *Get Out* relates body language to empowerment, the maid's tear blurred critics' understanding of their power. Brittany Willis suggests that the scene where she sheds a tear shows that black women can crack under pressure and that black women become vulnerable under certain circumstances (2017). This argument reveals the maid's vulnerability, or emotional disclosure. Black studies scholar Jason Silverstein emphasizes this: "People assume that, relative to whites, blacks feel less pain because they have faced more hardship" (2013). This experience of hardship relates to Du Bois' idea of the double consciousness because critics are relating their own sensations, or affect, to the scene even though no surface elements point to that effect. Double consciousness' effect can be seen when black studies scholar Terrill states, "Double-consciousness results from a longing to join with others in a civic culture that is characterized by contempt, pity and strife, so that Du Bois recognizes citizenship as a mode of engaging with self and others that is embodied, enacted and rife with affect—it is a sensation" (2015, p. 26). Du Bois' "sensation" blinds critics into thinking that the scene is about

introspective aspects of the maid. While many critics read their own vulnerability in the maid's tear, those critics neglect how the tear works with other elements in the scene where the maid cries. The maid's tear works with body language to express historical significance, similar to Brinkema's idea that crying is like a language (2014, p. 2). Willis' argument could be true because the maid may not be able to use her words to express their vulnerability, as seen when she states, "No, no, no" (2014). The tear controls interpretation of the maid's symbolism, or, "The girl sobs not as a loud profession but in order to remain silent" (Brinkema, 2014, p. 17). The tear as a symbol of silence relates to the history of African Americans in the United States at large. This is similar to when Sharice B. argues:

For decades, black women have been dubbed as the most powerless, least protected and the most mocked/belittled group of women in America. Through adversary and with the very little we are given, black women have resisted political and racist authority, [and] made something extraordinary out of nothing. (2017)

Resistance, in the form of protests by African Americans, has been long remembered as peaceful, such as Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her bus seat and Colin Kaepernick's choice to kneel during the playing of the national anthem. But that preferred memory of peace can often cover a history of violent resistance to power. Just like words relate with each other to convey meaning in a sentence, the maid's tear and body language relate to each other to convey both historical vulnerability and the power of African Americans in the United States even if their power is nothing more than a brief disruption in the grammar of white privilege.

*Get Out* does not use the frame to show the maid's body language when she cries, and this limits if we can judge the maid as vulnerable or not. Willis states that the maid is vulnerable in the scene where the maid cries (2017). Brinkema justifies Willis' statement by stating, "It seems an unaccountable pleasure which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy" (2014, p. 5). If tears created pleasure in the scene where the maid cries, then Willis' statement would be an accurate description of the scene. On the other hand, the scene fails to show the maid's full body language, which would have put the tear into context.

*Get Out* uses body language to convey when black women lack or have power, placing the tear in the later context. Body language is twofold: it works chronically and in the moment (Cuddy, 2015). This is similar to Brinkema's argument that a tear either folds chronically or drops in the moment (2014). The maid is vulnerable when the tear falls, but her body language suggests that the tear is folding into a broader context (Willis, 2017). When the maid walks into the room, she stands with her hands folded in front, suggesting a feeling of vulnerability. Further, the maid is placed in the right third of the frame. If the maid symbolized empowerment, she would be in the middle of the frame and would have her hands on her hips, a pose that suggests empower-

ment and strength (Rhimes, 2015). The maid's body language in this scene suggests a lack of power. Further, the maid is not crying and smiles. If a tear symbolizes the maid's black identity, then the happy expression in the doorway is a white façade. In *Get Out*, the maid's closed body language and lack of tears work against each other, thus signifying that black people who exemplify white liberal ideas mask their own black identities.

*Get Out* later places the maid in a power position while a tear is on her face, thus allowing body language and the tear to work chronically. The maid's head is in the center of the frame and her shoulders are back. Furthermore, a tear streams down her face. When analyzing this scene, Sanders states that the maid's position in this scene reflects the external struggles of black women in America (2017). But the maid's body language and tear reflect an internal struggle with being a black woman during white liberalism, not the maid's struggle with black men. While she states that the maid represents the worst kind of assimilation, the portraying actor also believes that the maid is a white woman inside of a black woman's body (Hope, 2017). The maid's placement in the center of the frame puts her in a position of power. If black women are expected to be seen as empowered, then this position suggests that the maid is in a black woman's body. However, the maid's placement and body contradict her clothing, which does not match the dresses found during indentured servitude or slavery.

While the tear falls, the maid also continues to smile, an expression not commonly found within black empowerment visuals. Visuals related to black women's empowerment such as Beyoncé's "Formation" video do not show women with hard smiles. Rather, these women have serious expressions and open body language. The maid's body language matches that of an empowered black woman, but the clothing and smile does not. The tear allows us to use *Get Out's* contrasting visual elements to decide that the maid is a black woman on the inside, but the maid's internal and external race is only a preoccupation. That is, Gabriel and Sanders fail to recognize the limits of empowerment within racial marginalization (Hope, 2017; Sanders, 2017). Brinkema emphasizes this when they state, "All crying, then—even the cathartic kind—is crying at a remove" (2014, p. 5). In the case of *Get Out*, the maid is removed from herself when standing in the doorway. Black women are chronically labeled as empowered, but *Get Out* portrays the momentary struggle of being empowered. *Get Out* wants viewers to decide what race the maid is internally and externally, but the maid's body language, smile, and clothing give viewers the choice to see the maid's race differently depending on the context.

If *Get Out* only used clothing, framing and body language, it would not give viewers insight into the historical struggle of being a black woman during liberalism; however, the maid's tear gives viewers several visual elements that contribute to interpretations of the maid's race. The viewers are able to put the maid's clothing, body language, and framing into different historical frameworks, depending on whether or not the tear is shown with those elements. Brinkema views the tear as an independent element, stating:

In the sense of both substance and corpus, the tear no longer has a body. In this exteriorizing of the tear, in place of the wet pointer to some other scene hidden in the soul, the tear points only ever and again to itself and to itself as an exteriority that has form. (2014, p. 22)

The tear works in conjunction with other elements—such as the maid’s outfit, position in the frame, and smile—to create an identity separate from the maid’s body. However, the scene in which these visual elements are laid is a rhetorical device that weighs all items equally (Lanham, 2003, p. 29). The audience is unable to identify which items are the most important, thus audiences such as the critics for *Get Out* choose some items as more important than others based on their own experience with a double consciousness. While the tear allows us to further separate items such as the maid’s clothing, smile, and body language, it lacks introspective information that would allow for a proper analysis of the maid as black or white in certain situations.

## CONCLUSION

While the maid’s tear in *Get Out* was read by critics as symbolic of the maid’s introspective identity crisis, closer attention to the maid’s clothing, body language, and smile complicate those critics’ analyses. The tear is, in fact, more than a tear. While many critics saw the tear in *Get Out* as a tear that had been dropped, and could therefore be read symptomatically, I have argued that the tear folds into a historical context about both personal and collective race identification in the United States. The tear, then, does not express a unilateral command for black Americans—black women especially—to “get woke” but, rather, suggests *Get Out*’s ambivalent, but by no means disinterested, positioning of black women as simultaneously empowered and disempowered. In this brief conclusion, I will consider one major implication of the preceding reading, which is that a seemingly minor misunderstanding of racial consciousness in a film becomes an alibi for a cultural narrative of violence and exclusion toward people of color at large.

Race identification remains an issue in America, as evident when Barack Obama addresses race in ways that echo W. E. B. DuBois and mainstream critiques of *Get Out*. In his memoir *Dreams from My Father*, Obama searched for some telltale sign for his “true race” but only found a troubled heart, mixed blood, and divided soul (2004, p. xv). Obama points to a deeper truth beyond racial identification: that race, at least black race, is fundamentally a double consciousness. In being black, one is always defined in and against whiteness, thereby never being entirely free of it, never truly “woke.” Blackness and whiteness are neither distinct, nor easily defined by popular emotional elements such as the tear because, rhetorically, racialized tears are always shed by both a white and a black consciousness simultaneously.

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