

Speculative Satire in Contemporary Literature and Film

Rant Against the Regime

Kirk Combe

First published 2021

ISBN: 978-0-367-62681-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-11049-1 (ebk)

5 Special Topic Rants

CC-BY-NC-ND

DOI: 10.4324/9781003110491-6

The funder for this chapter is Denison University



 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

5 Special Topic Rants

As a distinctive formula for political satire, Rants have the ability not only to challenge the dominant discourse but to zero-in on very particular social sore spots. Such works accentuate the miserable and the awful in our culture to the degree where audiences beg *make it stop*. But Rants don't stop. That's part of what makes them Rants. They push us to terrible extremes of emotions and ideas. Some Rants hone-in so finely on certain social ills, on specific practices of injustice or bigotry or merciless greed, on cataclysmic outcomes wrought by the Regime, that the single-mindedness of their Menippean forewarnings become difficult to bear. This chapter examines three such Rants.

Get Out (2017)

The special topic of Jordan Peele's debut film as a writer-director is white supremacist racism against African Americans. Don't be bamboozled by talk of a "postracial" America following the presidency of Barack Obama. Violent, hateful, and deep-rooted racism perseveres—and not, asserts this film, just among poor and uneducated whites. Wealthy white elites (e.g., Trump) are the particular target of Peele's satire. Observes critic Kelli Weston:

Get Out blatantly engages with black suspicion of white people, or perhaps more accurately with black fear of white cannibalism, a fear that has, naturally, plagued the former ever since her introduction to America. Because for all its contemporary trappings, *Get Out* may well be the most penetrating cinematic depiction of slavery, from the nature of the institution to its far-reaching psychic consequences.

(38)

Peele himself has commented of his film, "The real thing at hand here is slavery ... it's some dark shit"; he has also categorized his movie as "a social thriller" (qtd. in Weston 38). How to classify Peele's film, due to its eclecticism and complexity, is in fact an interesting dilemma. One group of commentators points out how standard Hollywood pigeonholes simply don't accommodate Peele's social messages:

Get Out, seen through the analytics of the flesh, succeeds insofar as it perfectly grasps how expressing the African American condition has always stretched the limits of bourgeois realism: we have always needed horror, sci-fi, fantasy, and other speculative genres to begin to get near the unspeakable truth of slavery and its afterlives.

(After Globalism Writing Group 38)

Peele's more recent film, *Us* (2019), poses the same quandary, perhaps even more so than *Get Out*. Just how do we classify these curious and disturbing filmic texts? In my view, both are Rants. The elements of speculative satire especially are evident in the laser-focused attack of *Get Out*.

One outstanding device of satire in Peele's movie is that of genre invasion. In a film predicated on body-snatching, Peele convention-snatches from the standard plotline of the horror movie, and even more specifically from the mad-scientist horror movie, to apply toward scathing Menippean ends. We see two mad scientists at work in the film, namely, the white, educated, affluent, middle-aged, power couple of Missy and Dean Armitage. Missy (Catherine Keener) is an accomplished psychiatrist and expert hypnotherapist. Her job as an off-kilter genius is to trap unsuspecting young black women and men in "the sunken place," a state of "limited consciousness" where victims exist merely as powerless passengers in a small portion of their brain. There they are able to see and hear what's going on with their body, but not able to do anything about it. Dean (Bradley Whitford) is an eminent neurosurgeon. His unhinged task is then to transplant the brains of rich white people into those stolen black bodies. There, the white people live a new life while the original black owners are reduced to "an audience" without agency. This evil scheme is the intergenerational work, secret society, and financial enterprise of the Armitage family. In a clunky info-video titled "Behold the Coagula," family patriarch Roman Armitage (Richard Herd) explains to victims how they have been chosen "because of the physical advantages you enjoyed your entire lifetime. With your natural gifts and our determination we could both be part of something greater. Something perfect." He describes the "coagula procedure" (meaning the brain transfer operation) they're about to undergo as "a man-made miracle" that "our order has been developing ... for many, many years." This mind-suppressing and body-stealing technology is carefully described in the film, making it a sci-fi *novum*. However, this strange newness is not designed to trigger cognitive estrangement in audiences so much as activate excruciating reminders of entrenched American white supremacy.

The weird science in *Get Out*, then, is not a brave new world to contemplate but a sinister, novel way to enact the racial oppressions of the bad old one. Peele pushes the horror motif of the racialized mad scientist over the top. Missy malevolently controls the motor functions of our hero, Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya), with the mere tap of spoon to teacup. Dean delivers a stock hubristic, mad-scientist monologue while staring into the fireplace:

Fire. It's a reflection of our own mortality. We're born, we breathe, then we die. Even the sun will die someday. But we are divine. We are the gods trapped in cocoons.

White gods only, apparently. When it comes time for the brain transplant itself, the scene is one of full-on Klansman Dr. Frankenstein. Ominous choral music thunders. Two white candles burn ritualistically in the operating room. We're subjected to ghoulish images and sounds of cut-open skull. This send-up of the horror genre would be camp were it not for the fact that Peele deals with the deadly serious subject matter of racism. Underlying the farcical make-believe of the "coagula procedure" is the historical brutality of slavery and white supremacist ideology. These black victims are first interpellated by Missy into obedience; next Dean seizes their bodies to turn them into the absolute property of whites.¹ As a result, while moviegoers—white American moviegoers in particular—superficially enjoy the story-arc thrill-ride of the horror genre, alongside that fun they are forced to confront as well the profound reality of racial hatred and violence in America. Familiar delight ambushes viewers with unnerving instruction, causing audiences to squirm in their cushioned cineplex seats.

A second satiric device used expertly by Peele is that of distortion and exaggeration. As discussed above, the trappings of the horror film are heightened to nearly derisive levels in *Get Out*. Atmospheric music, tension-filled moments, anxiety-producing camera angles, and the like are embellished to the brink of being ham-fisted. But, of course, these are not amateurish mistakes; they are finely calculated prompts alerting us to the filmic manipulation at work in and, indeed, integral to the horror genre. Such movie-making brinksmanship by Peele is the same satiric technique as the mock-heroic, where the conventions of the epic are used facetiously as a way to condemn ingeniously and, thereby, more thoroughly the main target of the satire.² The satirist is not so much concerned with belittling the genre of the epic (or of the horror movie) as she is with using that genre as a vehicle for satiric polemic. The best way to exploit the genre as an instrument of satire is to call the reader's (or the viewer's) attention to the formulaic workings and ideologies of that form. By way of this maneuver, the audience both sees through the genre and, because of it, perceives the satiric target in an even more negative light.³ Such is the case with Peele's distorted parody of horror movies in *Get Out*. He goes the shtick of horror to a degree that focuses our minds all the more keenly on the genuine horror of racism. The most telling device in Peele's exploitation of the horror genre is his implementation of the ingredient cardinal to all horror films: the monster. In *Get Out*, that monster is not vampires or werewolves or space aliens or zombies or killer clowns or whatever other terror the imagination can conjure. The monster is the neoliberal white supremacist—depicted in many forms, in unbearable detail, and with devastating exaggeration.

The White Monster in *Get Out*. Where to begin? For one thing, it is intergenerational, as represented by the three generations of the Armitage

family in the film.⁴ The grandparents display good old-fashioned, old-timey racism from the early- and mid-twentieth century. Not only do they use dated slang such as “doggone” and “funny business,” but their beliefs about African Americans center around black physical superiority/mental inferiority as well as whites needing to caretake blacks, such as when the grandmother assures Chris: “The Armitages are so good to us. They treat us like family.” The gruesome irony, however, is that Grandma and Grandpa Armitage have undergone the coagula procedure and been transplanted into young black bodies. Whenever the next victim is their house guest, such as Chris, they pose as the housemaid, Georgina (Betty Gabriel), and the groundskeeper, Walter (Marcus Henderson). This grisly arrangement makes the Armitage country estate a Gothic sci-fi slave plantation where the accustomed racist binary of white/black remains a constant principle of oppression but its practice has transformed terrifyingly into a weird new physical hybridity. (Behold the Coagula.) The middle generation of Armitages, Missy and Dean, along with being mad scientists, represent limousine-liberal racism. Theirs is a post-1960s seeming acceptance and toleration of racial difference. They say politically correct things (such as Dean declaring to Chris, “I would have voted for Obama for a third term if I could. Best president in my lifetime, hands down”) and they display progressive social attitudes (such as warmly welcoming their daughter’s black boyfriend), but beneath the broadminded veneer lurks bigotry as intense as that of the previous generation. This masked form of racism is signaled early in the movie by Dean’s little tirade about the deer infestation in the area:

I don’t mean to get on my high horse but I’m tellin’ ya, I do not like the deer. I’m sick of it. They’re taking over. They’re like rats. They’re destroying the ecosystem. I see a dead deer on the side of the road I think to myself, that’s a start.

As the story evolves, we come to understand that deer in *Get Out* are a symbol for black people. Thus, African Americans in Peele’s film are scapegoated and othered—that is, monsterized—by white power in the usual ways. At the same time, as we’ve seen above, their bodies are perversely desired by whites, so much so that they have become fetishized commodities for purchase. Various aspects of monstrosity, then, comes at us thick and fast in *Get Out*. In the end, however, what we witness through the medium of horror is the White Monster monsterizing its black victims. This provoking objective correlative forces our reexamination of American social order, exposing the discipline exerted by white supremacy as arbitrary, brutal, self-serving, and nothing even remotely approaching “Truth.”

The youngest generation of Armitage, brother and sister Jeremy (Caleb Landry Jones) and Rose (Allison Williams), embody two different Millennial manifestations of racism. Jeremy appears to be an outright white nationalist, simultaneously belligerent and craven. Like his grandfather, he regards black men as physically advantaged but intellectually deficient. As a member of the secret “order” mentioned by his grandfather in the “Behold the Coagula”

video, Jeremy also sees black men as threats to be bested and adversaries to be destroyed. Drunk and rambling at the family dinner table, Jeremy starts to chest-pound at Chris while supposedly talking sports. He tells Chris that: “With your frame and your genetic make-up if you really pushed your body ... I mean really trained, you know, no pussy-footin’ around ... you’d be a fucking beast.” When he discovers that Chris took jiu-jitsu lessons as a kid, Jeremy treats the information as some kind of challenge to his white manhood. Focusing weaselly, frat-bro eyes on Chris, Jeremy white-mansplains to him: “The thing about jiu-jitsu is strength doesn’t matter, right? It’s all about this. [Points to his head.] It’s a strategic game, like chess. It’s all about being two ... three ... four moves ahead.” His implication is, of course, that white men are smarter than black men. During the climactic sequence when Chris does battle with all the White Monsters of the Armitage household, he will out-smart Jeremy—that is, be two, three, four moves ahead of him—when the young white supremacist has him in a jiu-jitsu chokehold. In a film packed with telling racial details and inversions, it’s one of many gratifying moments.

For her part, Rose enacts her younger-generation racism contrariwise to Jeremy. Instead of directing hatred toward black men, Rose pretends to love them. Chris is not the first black man she has procured then lured home to be prepared for consumption by whites. Her real passion, then, is appropriation. While seeming to love African Americans and their culture, Rose is really only interested in using them for her own gain. This attitude and behavior reflects the race-relations phenomenon identified by bell hooks in the 1990s as “eating the Other.” Hooks theorizes how race and ethnicity in American culture have “become commodified as resources for pleasure” (23; see also Weston 39). In particular, black culture—music, fashion, sports, attitudes, language—has been embraced by the dominant white culture (especially youth culture) as trendy and cool (and lucrative), but mainly in ways where “the Other can be continually exploited, and that such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the *status quo*” (22). A large part of this ingesting of the exotic dark Other is sexual and involves breaking American taboos against miscegenation. Notes hooks: “the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other” (23). This approach to racial difference sums up Rose’s white supremacist ploy. She has no more regard for Chris than any other consumer item that gives her pleasure and brings her status. Meanwhile, according to hooks, the black Other is devoured and erased:

Currently, the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualization.

Such an eradication is clearly what the Armitage family has in mind for Chris. Rose, like her limousine-liberal parents, personifies the type of white supremacist monster that is likely the most sinister to black people: the racist who pretends to accept and even to admire you. Similar to Martin Luther King, Jr. in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Peele warns black audiences that it is preferable to deal with outright bigots who openly express their racial hatred—because at least with them you always know where you stand—than it is to deal with furtive liberals who feign their impartiality and support—because when push comes to shove you’ll abruptly discover, to your peril, that they only ever made a show of having your back.

Along with its being intergenerational, a second attribute of the White Monster in *Get Out* is its ubiquity, its inescapability, its terrifying reach and power as the dominant ideology. Peele drives home these points by way of satiric exaggeration. Whiteness is everywhere in the film. However, Peele denormalizes white upper-middle-class culture by constantly calling the viewer’s attention to it with myriad farcical and cringeworthy details. To point out but a few: Dean and Chris discuss progressive politics while standing in a gazebo; all the rich, old, country-club-type white guests at the Armitage weekend event; Jeremy takes a swing at Chris with a lacrosse stick; the décor of the Armitage house is Pottery Barn chic; they have carrot cake for dessert; the basement rec room is straight out of Whitebread Hell—heavy wood paneling, dartboard, ping-pong and foosball tables, hardy pile carpeting, overstuffed leather chair, backgammon and other board games, a bocce ball set (one of which Chris uses to stave in Jeremy’s skull), a trophy deer head hung on the wall above a vintage TV-stereo console. In other words, that which is revered in American society as the accoutrements of wealth and prestige is sardonically transformed by Peele into menacing particulars of the White Monster. We see with new eyes white discourse as not a chronicle of special achievement and justified entitlement but as a practice of violent oppression and abuse. Spike Lee, at the end of his acerbic racial satire *Bamboozled* (2000), delivers a devastating and enraging montage of racist stereotypes leveled against blacks by white popular culture, thereby exposing the distorted “truth” about blacks contrived by insidious white ideology. Throughout *Get Out*, Peele returns the favor: by caricaturing and monsterizing white supremacists, he reveals the hyped-up “truth” about whites propagated by the guile of white power. Nowhere is this satiric pulling-back-of-the-curtain more trenchant than in Peele’s creation of the primary monster of his deadly serious, tongue-in-cheek horror flick: the Monstrous White Girl.

With the character of Rose, Peele renders topsy-turvy hundreds of years of white supremacist narrative about the perilous relationship between white women and black men. *Get Out* reverses all racist rhetoric upon which thousands of lynchings of black men in America were predicated: the murderous lust of black men for white women. Black men in this movie are the victims and the prey. Their predator is an attractive young white woman who is single-minded and ruthless in the hunt. Rose comes across as sociopathic, in fact, in her white supremacy. The moment her seduction performance of

Chris is at an end, she transforms from an affable, untailed, liberal-minded white girlfriend into an anal-retentive Bond villain. Her phone conversation with Chris's worried best friend, Rod (Lil Rel Howery), is particularly chilling. Dressed now in a stark white turtleneck with her hair pulled back into a prim and austere ponytail, Rose shows no emotion on her face while her voice fakes helplessness, confusion, and concern. Deadpan, she whimpers to Rod: "Wait ... you haven't seen him? ... Oh my God!" Rose is polished and cunning in covering her tracks for the kidnapping of Chris. Rod suspects her subterfuge and attempts to record the phone call in order to catch Rose in a lie. Rose is one step ahead of him, though, and redirects their conversation by brazenly accusing Rod of wanting her for himself: "Rod, just stop. ... I know why you're calling. ... I know you think about fucking me, Rod." Flustered by this groundless accusation, Rod panics and hangs up, cursing, "Shit! Ga! ... She's a genius!" Rod was not about to become Rose's next quarry. Wearing an expression of cold triumph, Rose turns to look at her White Monster family, who has been watching her phone conversation with pride and approbation. Ironically, when Rod goes to the police to lay out his theory about the Armitage family abducting and enslaving black people, he is ridiculed by detectives—all people of color. In particular, Detective Latoya (Erika Alexander), scoffs: "Oh, white girls. They get you every time." In this horror scenario, however, racial cliché has become fact. This white girl *does* get the black man every time. Peele recasts the character of Rose from being the traditional object of black temptation and lust into being the lethal agent of white power. In the process, Rose is transformed as well from the horror film trope of "the final girl" into that of the undying monster.⁵

The most unnerving-cum-mordant depiction of Rose as the Monstrous White Girl occurs while Chris is in the process of fighting his way out of the Armitage home. During this sequence of extreme violence, we cut to Rose in her bedroom upstairs, sitting calmly cross-legged on her bed with earphones in listening to the song "Time of My Life" from the film *Dirty Dancing* (1987). Not only is that movie very white, but the song lyrics, in this situation, could not be more ironic: "Now I've had the time of my life / No, I never felt like this before / Yes I swear it's the truth / And I owe it all to you..." Again, Rose is dressed fastidiously in white and beige. On her laptop, she's searching for her next young black man victim. Rose appears to have a basketball player in mind this time. Behind her on the wall, over her headboard, are photographs of her past ten victims. Recalling the deer head in the rec room, these pictures are hung like trophies and signal that the bed and sexuality are the environs of her hunt. Topping the caustic and embellished traits that Peele gives to this wicked white girl, however, is Rose having at hand a small bowl of Fruit Loops along with a glass of milk. While searching the internet for the next body to snatch, she selects a single Fruit Loop, bites it in half with care, then chews meticulously. She washes that down with three strictly measured sips of milk through a straw. Thus, we have the monster at the heart of *Get Out*: a neurotic and soulless serial temptress whose obsessive purpose is the seduction and consumption of black men. Rose is a racist Siren whose song lures

African-American men into believing that social equality is available to them. To their horror, these men find themselves instead abducted, packaged, and sold to white masters. Rose is an embodiment of the white supremacist orthodoxy upon which America is founded and under which people of color suffer to this day. She represents the *lie* of the American Dream: you can be anything you want to be—so long as you're white.

In the final showdown with Chris, Rose proves to be, as well, the monster-that-will-not-die (just yet). Even after being shot by the black man trapped in the sunken place inside of Walter, she's still reaching for her rifle. When Chris takes the gun from her, she plies her seduction tactic one last time, telling him, "Chris ... I'm so sorry ... I love you ... I love you." Justified in his rage, Chris begins to strangle her. At this remarkable moment in the film, Peele presents viewers with the antithesis of white supremacist dogma: not the black man beast attacking the innocent white woman, but the innocent black man desperately defending himself against the white woman beast. The damsel in distress is, in fact, the dragon; the dragon is, in effect, the damsel in distress. To make clear this state of affairs, Peele has a strangely triumphant smirk come to Rose's face as Chris strangles her. It's as though generating in Chris this violent reaction to her is the monstrous trick Rose wants to play on black men—that is, she looks to spur black men into being the racist stereotype whites have of them as lusting uncontrollably, and sometimes murderously, after delicate white womanhood. When Chris breaks off his stranglehold, Rose's expression turns to disappointment, as if she's failed to turn Chris into the universal Black Thug whites expect. A moment later, when Rose thinks a police car has pulled up, she deftly switches into white victim mode, calling out weakly, "Help ... help ... help me." At that moment, we think all is lost for Chris. The Monstrous White Girl has won. Surely, the racist cop from early in the film has arrived, and he will interpret this scene of carnage in typical white police officer fashion. In a plot-twist of genius, though, Rod steps out of his Airport TSA vehicle, fulfilling his role not only as Chris' loyal sidekick but becoming now Chris' knight in shining armor. Chris staggers to the car and climbs in. Rod sizes up the scene for a few moments, then delivers the best line of the film: "I mean, I told you not to go in that house." Notably, Chris and Rod ignore Rose altogether. The pair leave her to die in the middle of the road, while she watches her erstwhile victims drive away.

Finally, via the Menippean satiric persona of Chris, the moviegoer experiences the injustice, violence, and terror of racism. Chris is wholly sympathetic as a protagonist. We identify with and root for him as he negotiates first the oddity then the sophisticated barbarity of the Armitage estate. As noted above, Peele gender bends typical horror conventions by making Chris function as the "final boy" of the movie—unfortunate racial pun unavoidable in this case. Moreover, in Chris' heroic fight against the white monsters, audiences are exposed to a range of social issues characteristic of a Rant. In the silent auction for Chris, for example, we witness slavery revisited neoliberal style. To be sure, as in the American past, whites buy blacks as property. In this situation, more specifically, rich old white men look to buy and occupy Chris'

young black body in a new and extreme form of accumulation by dispossession. What is more, wealth inequity nearly as much as race drives this outrageous crime. Although Chris looks to be solidly middle class, he possesses nothing like the money of these affluent couples who are the Armitages' weekend guests. Perhaps as a way to signal that race is not the only factor in this 21st-century act of enslavement, Peele includes one Japanese bidder for Chris. Chris' interactions with the man who eventually buys him, blind art dealer Jim Hudson (Stephen Root), likewise confirms that neoliberalism works alongside racism in this transaction. When these two chat prior to the auction, Hudson comments on the "ignorance" of the wealthy white party guests and says of them, "They mean well, but they have no idea what real people go through." He refers, of course, to the social detachment of extreme privilege enjoyed by the 1%. Hudson also relates that he is an admirer of Chris's photography: "You have a great eye. ... You've got something. The images you capture—so brutal, so melancholic. It's powerful stuff." Other than Rose, Hudson is the only white person in the film Chris connects with authentically. Expressing empathy for Hudson's blindness, Chris tells him, "Shit ain't fair, man." In what will turn out to be an ominous retort, Hudson answers, "Oh, you got that right. Shit ain't fair." Not only is Hudson anticipating Chris' pending betrayal by all the white people around him, but he refers as well, plausibly, to the wealth and power gap between rich and not-rich. That is to say, Chris is about to be ambushed by the double bind of racial *and* economic injustice in America. The nonracial motivation for Hudson's purchase of Chris is confirmed when the two speak again, this time just before the coagula procedure while Chris is a prisoner in the rec room. Over the old TV console, Hudson tells his acquisition: "I could give a shit what color you are. No, what I want is deeper. I want your eye, man. I want those things you see through." It's cold comfort to know that Hudson is not a racist, but instead a classist—blind money, so to speak. In true neoliberal fashion, this rich man regards his fellow human as a thing to be bought and used for parts, as an economic object in a marketplace as opposed to a whole person with a life to live. In this way, *Get Out* defines for us the hegemonic adversary needing to be battled: not just racism but neoliberal white supremacy. The film blows the whistle on the ersatz utopia promised by our current-day ruling ideology. Well-heeled white Americans are rebuked for their hypocritical disregard for democracy. In post-Marxist terms, the movie targets the hegemonic articulations of Democrats and Republicans alike for their imposition of a liberal-conservative discourse that restricts the advantages of democracy to the moneyed and predominantly white few.

All of this is a lot of politicality for a horror movie—but not for a Rant. Film critic Mary Elizabeth Williams writes of Peele's story:

This isn't a facile fable about the very real evils of racism, one in which the villains are typical mouth-breathing rednecks. By focusing the storyline on a particular form of racism—the kind that's often disguised as peculiar envy—"Get Out" reveals something more insidious."

In her review, Williams goes on to discuss how “the film delves into the deep damage wrought from white insecurity, from its frustrated aspirational bigotry.” Even more than deriding unselfconfident whites who wish they could run faster or have larger copulatory organs, *Get Out* explores a phenomenon fundamental to society: hegemonic ideology. Peele devises an extraordinary finale where white audiences are inveigled into cheering for what they have been ideologically conditioned to hate and fear most: a young black man doing violence to a rich white family. Were one to watch Chris’ killing spree inside the Armitage house without the benefit of knowing the horror plotline leading up to it, one might imagine the sequence an unusually macabre home invasion and car theft. After all, in countless ways overt and subtle American whites are taught to believe that young black men inherently are threats to the status quo. Out of lust and poverty and a brute nature, so the doctrine goes, young black men are ever eager to rape and steal from and kill white people. Especially terrifying to whites is the idea of this violence occurring in their suburban enclaves, where they have intentionally retreated so as to be well removed from this troublesome mixed-race unrest. How amazing is it, then—if one stops to think about it—to have cineplexes full of suburban white people thrilled and relieved to see Chris impale Dean with a buck antler and stomp Jeremy to death? Through the magic of genre invasion, Peele momentarily suspends the dominant racist ideology disciplined into whites so that they see Chris not as a threatening black marauder, but as an innocent victim courageously fighting back against powerful and immoral forces. Thus, the more insidious thing revealed by *Get Out* is the awful power of ideology to shape our worldview as well as the extraordinary measures it takes to goad our rethinking of those implanted mindsets. Yet even as Peele exposes the lie of racist attitudes, he is heedful of them. Chris’ killing of Missy is not graphically depicted. In what might be taken as an image of inverted rape, Missy stabs Chris through the hand with a letter opener as they struggle. Almost reluctantly, Chris then kills Missy—off-camera—with that same weapon. It makes sense for Peele to avoid, as much as possible, the deep cultural taboo against black men harming white women. As noted above, Chris purposely stops himself from killing Rose. To preserve his protagonist as the heroic final (black) boy of this social thriller, Peele engineers maximum audience sympathy for Chris during his harrowing escape from the clutches of the (white) monsters. Likely aiding white viewers to experience empathy for Chris is the fact that the Armitage family is filthy rich—not particular fan favorites of the economically challenged 99%. All racial groups in America are subjected to financial injustice.

By way of the character of Chris, then, Peele pushes many social commentary buttons. In Chris, we see someone struggling against ethnic domination, against exploitation by the rich, and against the imposition of an identity position that subjects him to pernicious authority. We likewise see an oppressed racial group, that of blacks generally and of young black men particularly, engaged in social antagonism with the hegemon. Chris’ fight to survive the Armitage house of horrors is symbolically a fight for equal recognition as well as an act of agonistic pluralism. Peele’s political message is clear: wealthy white

people are unfit to run society; more voices from more identity positions need to be heard. Chris meets violence with violence in this combat against the Regime, destroying the oppressive apparatus of the Coagula group as well as thwarting the warped possessive individualism of its devotees. With regard to satiric praise in *Get Out*, commended most is brotherhood among young black men. Converse to portraying anything like formulaic black-on-black violence, that is, the stereotype of young black men—“thugs”—mindlessly killing one another in gangland turf-wars, this movie features young black men having each other’s back. As we’ve seen, Rod goes to extraordinary lengths to rescue Chris from the white monsters. Similarly, Rose’s earlier victim, now shackled inside of Walter, tricks and shoots the Monstrous White Girl both to help Chris escape and to end his own nightmarish captivity. In the signature moment of the movie, when Andre (LaKeith Stanfield) is roused out of the sunken place by the flash on Chris’ phone, he vehemently warns Chris: “Get out! ... Get out of here! Get the fuck out of here!” Each of these acts is a demonstration of heroic concern for others that stands in stark contrast to the anti-social greed displayed by all white characters in the film. African-American brotherhood reclaims the moral high ground in Peele’s movie. Moreover, this core message is directed at black viewers as a warning against the dominant false orthodoxy of whites. Critics have noted that framing the storyline of *Get Out* is a chorus singing “Sikiliza Kwa Wahenga,” a Swahili phrase meaning “listen to (your) ancestors”; other lyrics of the song translate loosely as “something bad is coming. Run” (Pulliam-Moore; see also Weston 37). If the special topic and target of this Rant is avaricious white supremacy, the behavior recommended as, if not a corrective, at least a safeguard is black solidarity hand-in-hand with a renewed vigilance against everpotential white malice. Peele pulls no punches in his horror movie portrait of white privilege. White American racism is excoriated from start to finish as evil.

“Men Against Fire,” *Black Mirror* (season 3, episode 5, 2016)

Arguably, any *Black Mirror* episode could be analyzed usefully as a Rant. The series is premised on imagining the problematic-to-adverse effects of developing technologies on human society in a near-future setting. Many episodes focus on a single topic of sociopolitical concern. For example, “Fifteen Million Merits” (season 1, episode 2) examines the fraud of reality talent contest TV shows as a way to distract the public from miserable jobs and lives. “Nosedive” (season 3, episode 1) envisions popularity on social media as the organizing principle for class structure. Every *Black Mirror* episode features an intriguing sci-fi *novum* presented in an exaggerated social situation as a way to jolt viewers into inspecting our current cultural and technological circumstances and where we might be heading. For this chapter, I look at one episode in particular, “Men Against Fire,” as a special topic Rant scrutinizing the dangers of neoconservatism, and in particular the militarism central to that credo.

Along with militarism, neoconservative polity features religiosity and primacy. These two elements will be considered first. As set out in Chapter 2,

neocons adhere to the doctrine that America must spread its societal beliefs and conception of government around the world, primarily by means of an assertive application of overwhelming military force. Although “Men Against Fire” is set in a nebulous future ten years after some kind of global war, and although the regime in charge is unexplained by anything other than a stylized “V” insignia, the soldiers we follow are clearly Americans and the military force in which they serve is clearly the descendant of the U.S. military. Their theater of operations is Europe, more specifically Denmark, and their mission is to seek-and-destroy feral, humanoid creatures called “roaches.” We discover, however, that these roaches are not strange creatures at all but humans who have been designated as genetically inferior. One of these ill-fated people, Catarina (Ariane Labeled), explains the truth of the matter to the soldier-protagonist of the story, Stripe (Malachi Kirby):

Ten years ago it began. Post-war. First, the screening program. The DNA checks. Then the register. The emergency measures. And soon everyone calls us creatures. Filthy creatures. Every voice. The TV. The computer. Say we ... we have sickness in us. We have weakness. It’s in our blood, they say. That our blood cannot go on. That we cannot go on.

In fact, what’s taking place is a worldwide eugenics/genocide program where millions of people are being hunted and killed by the military. This agenda is unashamedly verified and endorsed by the government official, Arquette (Michael Kelly), who deals with Stripe. During their extended conversation in the prison cell, Arquette explains to the morally conflicted soldier:

Do you have any idea of the amount of shit that’s in their DNA? Higher rates of cancer, muscular dystrophy, MS, SLS, sub-standard IQ, criminal tendencies, sexual deviances. It’s all there. The screening shows it. Is that what you want for the next generation?

With this eugenics policy, “Men Against Fire” reimagines both neocon tenets of religiosity and primacy: the eradication of roaches has become the dominant belief system imposed on the world. We see it in conflict with traditional religions when Stripe’s squad commandeers the farmhouse of Parn Heidekker (Francis Magee), who is suspected of harboring roaches. In effect, squad leader Medina (Sarah Snook) proselytizes this new, anti-roach religion to Heidekker while her soldiers rifle his house. At first, she acknowledges his Christian faith and convictions, telling him:

Cross on the wall there. You got principles. Think all life is sacred. And I get it. I agree. All life is sacred, so you even got to protect the roaches. Right? It’s not their fault they’re like that. They didn’t ask for this. I get it. We get it.

But then Medina preaches the new orthodoxy to Heidekker, a devoutness spread by the gun:

The shit in their blood that made them that way, the sickness they're carrying, that doesn't care about the sanctity of life, or the pain about who else is going to suffer. ... Every roach you save today you condemn God knows how many people to despair and misery tomorrow. You can't still see them as human. Understandable sentiment, granted, but it's misguided. We gotta take them out if humankind is gonna carry on in this world. That's just the hard truth. Gotta make sacrifices.

This religious zeal for blood-purity finds expression in the warrior's code for this military force: "Strong and Pure." Similarly, in the prison cell, Arquette reassures Stripe, "You ... you're protecting the bloodline. And that, my friend, is an honor." For Stripe, however, this ideology has been peeled from his eyes. He replies, "There's no honor here. Just killing. Lying and killing." His words summarize well the fervor and bare knuckles of neocon self-righteous belligerence.

Neocon primacy is replicated accurately in this *Black Mirror* episode as well. Early on, we learn that the military force we watch is on foreign soil and seemingly in the latter stages of a multinational operation. One trooper, Lennard (Kola Bokinni), complains, "Yo, how many roaches we got left out here? A couple a thousand? A couple a hundred if that? I mean back home we had millions, man. It only took two years to get shit back on track." As the facts of the situation unfold about who these roaches actually are, we come to realize that an American military has murdered—swiftly and efficiently—millions of Americans in a zealous campaign for genetic purity. That same military is now overseas carrying out that same fanatical mission. In Europe, however, the extermination process doesn't seem to be going as smoothly. Lennard also gripes about locals, such as Heidekker, who protect roaches: "Out here you got rustic fucks throwing 'em scraps. Man, it's no wonder it's takin' so long to mop shit up." Indications are, then, that this "V" regime emerged victorious from the global war ten years prior, that it stems from the former American state, and that it is currently engaged in a unilateral and international military action to enforce its doctrines around the globe. In short, this dystopian future holds up a (black) mirror to current-day neocon beliefs in American exceptionalism. Exactly like neocon thinking, this autocratic regime looks to preserve and extend an international order that accords with its principles and its material interests; it regards itself as a benevolent power liberating the world with its Manichean view that moral/genetic purity represents Good on earth, and thus acts as the deterrent to all Evil; it maintains as well that only its actions can provide peace and security to the world, and thus must have unconditional free reign around the globe. Fictionalized and distorted into this near-future authoritarian state, then, is the neocon Pax Americana, complete with its doctrine of "peace through strength" which means, really, preemptive military intervention abroad. Moreover, this despotic government reflects and exaggerates the authoritarian, right-wing drift of the Trump movement in the United States as well as the nationalist, anti-immigrant movements across the European Union. Like those neo-Nazi factions, the "V" regime espouses the fascist principle of racial—now expanded to species—"purity."

As awful as is the ideology driving this repressive authority, the primary target of “Men Against Fire” as a speculative satire is the means by which such beliefs are put into action—militarism. These near-future soldiers are in fact cyborgs. They have been implanted with some manner of brain–computer interface technology called “MASS.” This technology enhances considerably their basic military capabilities: communications, tactical coordination, mission intelligence, targeting, and the like. With such augmentation, vital information appears before their eyes, an enemy can be reconnoitered by way of real-time drone camera feeds, assaults are planned using 3D projections of terrain maps and building blueprints. These are more skillful combatants because of MASS. They are also more proficient killers. Along with enabling enhanced interaction with military hardware, MASS alters the reality soldiers perceive in ways that ease the psychological burden of taking human life. Specifically, we discover that although the so-called roaches are in fact ordinary human beings, Stripe and the other soldiers experience them, by way of MASS, as “animals” and “monsters.” To the soldiers, roaches have sharp, pointed teeth, broadened and flattened foreheads and noses, and they shriek and howl ferociously and incomprehensibly. These soldiers, then, sincerely believe that they are killing some kind of dangerous, subhuman, misshapen creatures—not people. As Catarina describes the situation to an unbelieving Stripe after his MASS programming has been disrupted: “You see me as I am. ... Your implants ... your Army implants ... They put it in your head to help you fight. And when it works, you see us as something other.” In this way, MASS accomplishes in the virtual realm the aim of much modern war propaganda, namely, the rhetorical transformation of enemies and outsiders into animals, vermin, insects, and the like threatening to invade, overrun, infest, and infect the homeland.⁶ While this digital mind-manipulation of soldiers is appalling in itself, more unnerving is the idea that civilians know it takes place and are generally fine with it. When learning the awful truth of his situation, Stripe wrestles to understand this crucial point:

Stripe: The villagers ... huh? The locals ... they ... they ain't Army ... got no MASS in their heads. They're scared of the roaches. They hate the fucking things.

Catarina: Everybody hates us.

Stripe: But what the fuck do they see? Huh? Fuckin' civs ... when they look at a roach, what do they see?

Catarina: What you see now. They hate all the same because it's what they've been told.

For civilians, the usual channels of propaganda and ideological indoctrination are used by the state to instill fear of and hatred toward this selected enemy. For soldiers, however, something more certain and technologically advanced has been added: cybernetics. MASS *makes* soldiers see the enemy as nonhuman threats to civilization needing to be exterminated. Thus, in “Men Against Fire,” we observe the hallmarks of neoconservative militarism. In order to sustain a worldwide preeminence and the ability to act singly, the “V” regime retains

a massive, state-of-the-art military capability and the political will to use it. Obviously, such readiness and advanced weaponry (now featuring cyborg, mind-controlled troops) requires sustained high levels of defense spending. Alarmism and threat-inflation look to be in use as the way to justify these exorbitant military expenses. Moreover, whereas in the 20th and 21st centuries Communism and the War on Terror were used as vague, neverending, external threats to American and Western European society, in this dystopian world the genetic blight of so-called roaches serves as the excuse to militarize the state. In sum, the neoconservative imperative of maintaining and using overwhelming military power dominates the near future in this episode of *Black Mirror*, and the horrors of that false orthodoxy are laid open to our inspection.

The first 46 minutes of “Men Against Fire” are painful to watch. It’s hard to witness Stripe, a good and forthright young man, come into the awful knowledge that, as he tells Raiman (Madeline Brewer) just before she knocks him out, “None of it’s true.” Where this Rant becomes excruciating to deal with, however, is over its last 14 minutes. The dénouement of the episode shows us how Stripe is ensnared outright by the Regime. Most of the finale takes place in a blank-white military prison cell where Stripe is being held. Stripe’s panoptic cell, however, is far more extensive in its disciplining techniques than this one small room. MASS is not only an advanced weapon of war; it is an irrevocable instrument for the control of citizens. Whether an Army psychologist or a government official, Arquette incarnates the modern state in his long conversation with Stripe. It has become clear that a roach device introduced a virus into Stripe’s MASS implant, shutting down its normal functions and thereby exposing Stripe to the veracities of his soldiering mission. For this reason—smiling, concerned, fatherly—Arquette begins the interview with: “Stripe, we owe you an apology. We didn’t spot the fault in your MASS. I got you a coffee.” During their talk, Arquette is never deceptive, always open and honest with Stripe about exactly what’s going on. As the hegemon, Arquette can afford to be candid. He’s holding all the cards—especially in the form of a small remote that controls Stripe’s MASS. Part of Arquette’s apology to Stripe involves a lesson in human behavior and military history. Instructs Arquette:

Humans ... you know we give ourselves a bad rap, but we’re genuinely empathetic as a species. I mean, we don’t actually really wanna kill each other. Which is a good thing ... until your future depends on wiping out the enemy. ... Many years ago, I’m talking early 20th century, most soldiers didn’t even fire their weapons. Or if they did they would just aim over the heads of the enemy. They did it on purpose.

At this point, we arrive at the crux of this *Black Mirror* episode. More than militarism, the special topic of “Men Against Fire” is precisely what that title signals: the problem of getting soldiers to kill one another.

The episode title is taken directly from a famous book by World War I veteran and World War II combat historian S. L. A. Marshall titled *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command* (1947). In it, Marshall states that

during World War II, no more than a quarter of troops actually fired their weapons in battle, even when under threat, due to an innate reluctance to kill another human being. Arquette cites these very statistics and explains this military dilemma to Stripe as it occurred during the two World Wars of the 20th century. He also explains how the military set out to solve the problem: “So we adapted. Better training. Better conditioning. Then comes the Vietnam War and the shooting percentage goes up to 85. Lot of bullets flying. But kills were still low.” Here, Arquette draws from the work of another well-known military historian, Dave Grossman. In his influential study, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (1995), Grossman reports this improvement in the firing rates of U.S. soldiers.⁷ However, accompanying the increase in a soldier’s ability to shoot and to kill is an emotional and moral toll on the soldier. Admits Arquette of the Vietnam veteran: “Plus the guys who did get a kill, well, most of them came back all messed up in the head. And that’s pretty much how things stayed until MASS came along.” MASS, then, represents the technological breakthrough for which the Army has been waiting. The military could mentally discipline and physically condition troops into firing their weapons at a high rate, albeit not hitting their targets as much as command would like. But what the military could not do, before MASS, was overcome the psychological trauma troops frequently suffer as a result of killing and of the wartime experience. Now, however, with MASS, all that has changed, and Arquette is inordinately proud of this leap forward in martial power:

You see MASS, well that’s the ultimate military weapon. It helps you with your intel, your targeting, your comms, your conditioning. It’s a lot easier to pull the trigger when you’re aiming at the boogeyman. It’s not just your eyes, though. Takes care of your other senses, too. You don’t hear the shrieks. You don’t smell the blood and the shit.

Stripe has been this ultimate military weapon: a neurologically enhanced, technologically adroit, ideologically sure, emotion- and moral-free killing instrument. In effect, when MASS is functional, Stripe is a first-person-shooter videogame avatar that does its killing in the *real* world. All MASS-enabled soldiers are. That’s why they eagerly engage in “roach hunts” to compete with one another for the number of “kills” they can rack up and the rewards they can earn in the form of MASS-induced sex dreams at night. The virtual world walks now in our physical world. These soldiers are kids in an arcade—of global politics. As such, they are the absolute tools of the neoliberal/neoconservative hegemony.

In its dystopian projections, “Men Against Fire” condemns many aspects of present-day American militarism: global foray by overwhelming force, advanced weaponry used for unsavory aims, dehumanization in any number of forms, runaway military spending, official propaganda masking morally wrong policy. Yet, in the end what this episode denounces most is the destructive American popular sentiment of “support the troops.” This mawkish, feel-good

commonplace enables civilians to hide from themselves not only the brutal realities of combat and of military service, but the fact that this onerous service is performed nowadays by an infinitesimal portion of the American population culled disproportionately from the underclass.⁸ Even more seriously, empty mantras of “support the troops” and “thanks for your service” allow the political leadership to manipulate the citizenry—purlblind civilian and spellbound soldier alike. Such manipulation is exactly what’s taking place in “Men Against Fire.” In his final attempt to justify MASS, Arquette tells Stripe:

Don’t feel bad about doing your job. The villagers won’t do it. The folks back home won’t do it. They don’t have MASS. MASS lets you do it.

Arquette pitches the brain implant as some kind of beneficial and enabling gift from the military that allows Stripe, without too much harm to himself, to perform an honorable and necessary duty to the state—a responsibility that regular civilians are unable and, more to the point, unwilling to do. Stripe, however, is not buying this bureaucrat deceit. He understands now how the Army has turned him into a device of “lying and killing.” He further understands that the civilian population approves and permits his neurological–psychological–ideological subjugation under the control of MASS. Far from supporting the troops, civilians enslave them. Their professed good wishes along with the supposed largess of the state are in fact a hoax. As viewers of this *Black Mirror* episode, the same critical reexamination of our own social order should be hitting us. We are being goaded into uncomfortable realizations of our own. Foremost among these is that if the general population is relieved to be able to shirk military service, then we should not be surprised when the state exploits the powerless and the voiceless to fill its military ranks. Slogans such as “Be All You Can Be,” “Army of One,” “Army Strong,” “Warriors Wanted” (actual recruiting catchphrases) as well as “Strong and Pure” and “Protecting the Bloodline” (fictive mottos of this episode) serve multiple purposes. They lure recruits with calls of patriotic duty and adventure coupled with promises of personal and social betterment. At the same time, they assuage the guilt of civilians with the hope that, if these troops survive the military relatively unscathed, at least they will have served a righteous cause and been given the opportunity for a bit of upward mobility. All of these assurances and outcomes, of course, are problematic. In the cautionary Menippean tale of “Men Against Fire,” advances in computer technology have been brought to bear on this vexing situation. For the fictional “V” regime, MASS is a panacea. Not only does it make its soldiers lethal, but it also renders irrelevant all of the troublesome personal and social issues facing America today with regard to its all-volunteer force. In this near-future setting, soldiers kill without conscience and civilians sleep easier at night confident that they’re doing right by their troops. Their heroic defenders of freedom are not being subjected to the mental and emotional turmoil of war. Their troops are living a happy and rewarding virtual reality while doing the dirty work of the nation. MASS provides a win for everyone—but particularly for the power brokers running this modern state.

The authorities of “V” appear to be wholly unencumbered in pursuing their ideological agenda of eugenics.

When the roach computer virus peels MASS away from Stripe, he is savvy and strong enough to want nothing more to do with this cynical state business. He rejects the neoconservative militarism into which, digitally, he has been indoctrinated. Stripe is not so lucky, however, when it comes to escaping the neoliberal state. Stripe has suffered dividuation in that a portion of his total being—basically, his physicality—has been appropriated for military service. The Army only needs his body for the purpose of turning it into an automaton. Stripe’s thinking and feeling mind, as we see, only interferes with this new form of computer-guided military duty. What is more, this fracturing of Stripe’s individuality looks to have been an act of predatory dividuation. In the “consent video” Arquette shows to Stripe, we watch enlistee Stripe—a naïve, under-educated, working-class youngster—nonchalantly apply his thumbprint to an agreement he obviously does not fully comprehend. The agreement is not only for him to allow the implantation of MASS, but that he be programmed to forget that he agreed to it. Says the voice of the unseen Army recruiter: “It’s kinda like hypnosis. ... Part of what you’re agreeing to is not realizing you’ve been put in this state. ... You won’t recall this conversation.” The phenomenon of interpellation works in much the same way—we absorb many cultural practices and beliefs unwittingly—yet it fixes an ideology nowhere near as firmly in the citizen as does MASS. A person’s cultural beliefs and assumptions about the world can change with experience; with MASS, the soldier’s worldview is altogether in the hands of authority. Once it becomes clear to Arquette that he won’t be able to coax Stripe back into military service, in good neoliberal fashion he holds Stripe to this contract. In a decidedly less congenial tone of voice, Arquette advises Stripe:

No one lied to you. ... You agreed to have your MASS implant put in ... set up. Every soldier does. We can’t just embed it and feed you a dream. Your mind would reject it. You have to accept it. Willingly. That’s exactly what you did.

Obvious questions are begged here. How freely did Stripe actually enter into this contract? Was he sufficiently informed to comprehend all of its ramifications? Did he have other realistic, living-wage employment options available to him? The answers to all of these questions clearly tilt in favor of the state. Stripe is a ragdoll, a debt-laborer, amid neoliberal forces. Just like America’s Army today, this military of a dystopian near-future is an all-volunteer outfit laden with socially disadvantaged young people who have been misled and pushed into a condition of, in practice, debt peonage. As Stripe’s neoliberal boss, Arquette sternly gives his indentured employee two options. Neither one is particularly optional. The first is for Stripe to agree to have his MASS reset and programmed so that he forgets all of these recent unpleasant events. He will revert to being an unaware killing machine. To that option Stripe adamantly

replies: “I ain’t havin’ this MASS shit! No more no way!” Option two, then, is for Stripe to be kept in a prison cell watching, via his MASS-controlled mind, a perpetual loop of how he really killed those roaches—meaning the people he was made to murder in the farmhouse. With his remote, Arquette gives Stripe a taste of what that permanent incarceration would be like. Stripe is horrified to experience the undistorted killings he carried out, screaming finally, “Make it stop!” Arquette has Stripe over a barrel—the barrel of workplace abuse in the extreme. Like all neoliberal workers, Stripe is only free to lose: no options offered by management ever work in his favor. Equally, the dispossession of Stripe’s individual agency means the accumulation by his superiors of their political and, no doubt, economic aims. The wealthy and the powerful take all while Stripe is dissevered and obligated into oblivion. As Stripe recovers from writhing on the floor in emotional agony, Arquette gallingly places a compassionate hand on the soldier’s back, renewing his kindhearted display. Arquette speaks softly:

We can make that go away. This conversation goes away, too. All of it. But you gotta say the word. Just say the word, Stripe, and it all goes away. ... Just say the word.

Maybe the cruelest lie of all in the neoliberal state is the illusion of individual choice and free will.

A brief coda at the end of the episode drives home painfully all these modern outrages. A blank-faced Stripe is shown riding in an official SUV. He’s coming home to Mayfield, a rural community with grain silos, farm windmills, and a church steeple dotting the landscape. By the road signs, we see that Max’s Diner features Daily Specials for \$5.00. A large billboard displays the giant “V” insignia beside a young family cavorting on a sunny beach somewhere. They look to be savoring their genomic wholesomeness. Further down the road, a property owner flies the “V” flag, likely as a sign of pride and support. Patently, we are in small-town (onetime) America. Lest we’re in any doubt about Stripe’s economic status, the SUV drops him off in front of a dilapidated house in a rundown neighborhood. The house looks abandoned, boarded-up and covered with graffiti, to include a conspicuous dollar sign. What Stripe sees, however, through his MASS-clouded eyes is a freshly painted, immaculately landscaped abode with banners hung on the front porch reading Welcome Home. In soft focus and enriched colors, Stripe’s dream-girl emerges from the house—smiling, inviting, overjoyed to see him. The tears rolling down Stripe’s cheeks and the smile that slowly comes to his face—while in reality he stands by himself in front of an empty dump—signal that Stripe said the word to Arquette. What other “option” had he? And, by the way, MASS also solves the problem of expenditures for veterans benefits of any kind. There’s no need to provide health care, psychological counseling, job training, or any other assistance to reentering civilian life when the state simply and cost-effectively can feed its vets a wonderful dreamlife.

“Late,” *The Handmaid’s Tale* (season 1, episode 3, 2017)

The special topic of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, novel or television series, is the oppressive extreme of patriarchy. Or of hyperreligious patriarchy. Or of hypocritical American evangelical Christian patriarchy. All labels apply. When discussing Atwood’s novel in Chapter 3, I state that it’s impossible for readers to miss the many shocking cruelties of both patriarchy and religiosity depicted in those pages. Far from grace abounding for sins (Romans 5:20), neoconservative thuggery abounds in the Republic of Gilead. I note as well, however, that it is less evident in the novel how Offred, and all women, are likewise the victims of neoliberal economics working in partnership with fundamentalist Christianity. While the repression of liberal-conservative discourse is equally engrained in Gilead, its functioning is not foregrounded in the book. In the expanded narrative world of the television series, though, such background details of the novel can become more fully realized and quite poignant pieces of the storyline. Such is the case for the economic disenfranchisement of women in Hulu’s production of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In the episode titled “Late,” the third of ten instalments for the first season of the show, considerable backstory is related as to how the architects of Gilead seized power from the federal republic of the United States of America. Highlighted in this early episode is the Draconian economic dispossession of women that led to their ensuing commodification, in particular, the expropriation of their reproductive bodies. To close the present Chapter, I focus on these fiscal aspects of this Rant.

The Hulu series amplifies alarmingly the viciousness of the Gilead regime. What only can be described or alluded to in the novel finds depiction on screen, and the series-makers shy away from nothing in the way of disturbing moments, events, and images. Viewers see executions, torture, ceremonies of pious rape, blazing guns of martial law, terrorism by police state discipline and control, various kinds of degradation at the hands of fanatical authority, and above all else the desperately private and isolating misery of bondage. All of these acts are carried out “under His eye,” meaning in the name of the irate Old Testament God. The stripping away of women’s economic rights numbers among these depictions of stark violence by the usurping zealots. In the novel, those events are described by Offred’s narrative voice in Chapter 28, over roughly ten pages (223–233). They are telling details that add to our understanding of the sexism and rancor of the Gilead ruling elite, but they come across as finer points nonetheless, recalled sparingly and far after the fact. In the series episode “Late,” however, these incidents are brought vividly to life as key memories for Offred (Elisabeth Moss) impacting her political awakening and furthering her bloody-minded determination to survive and to resist the Gilead theocracy. In voiceover at the start of the episode, Offred comments bitterly on her former life as June Osborne:

Now I’m awake to the world. I was asleep before. That’s how we let it happen. When they slaughtered Congress we didn’t wake up. When they blamed terrorists and suspended the Constitution, we didn’t wake up then

either. They said it would be temporary. Nothing changes instantaneously. In a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you know it.

During the episode, the cautionary tale Offred plays back in her head is the string of events leading up to the financial disempowerment of women. She sees now how once that vital bit of oppressive control had been put into place, the fundamentalist faction could commence its outright hostile takeover of the state. Thus, the crux of Offred's political warning—that is, the gradually heating bathtub—is the erosion of women's rights, principally the economic wherewithal of women. These were the pivotal incremental changes that led to the death of democracy in the dystopian world of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Evangelical Christian sexism, then, is the false orthodoxy being blamed and against which we are being forewarned. In the 1980s, when Atwood wrote her novel, she was battling such dogmata in the form of the Reagan presidency and the anti-Equal Rights Amendment movement of Phyllis Schlafly. Currently, such right-wing anti-woman tenets and policy exist, likely even more dangerously, in the Trump administration, the Supreme Court, and the Republican-controlled states passing malicious and unconstitutional anti-abortion laws in an effort to reverse *Roe v. Wade*. The Menippean targets of the television series, of course, involve our current cultural and political moment. Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* has become something of a feminist and anti-Trump protest movement in its own right. In covering the events of the novel, Season 1 makes trenchant observations about the sexism of American conservatism in general, notwithstanding the show's being scripted and in production prior to the 2016 election. Seasons 2, 3, and 4, however, offer original storyline created after Trump's controversial election and therefore level criticisms aimed more frankly at the goings-on surrounding the misogynistic, impulsive, and boorish president. At a time when the rights of women blatantly are being chipped away at by Trump's minions, this television series sensationalizes the patriarchal threat immediately at hand as well as dramatizes the dogged solidarity required to push back against it.⁹ At the heart of this confrontation is the matter of women as autonomous social agents.

If one of the primary goals of the Sons of Jacob coup d'état is to seize and control the reproductive rights of women, rendering women as defenseless and as dependent on men as possible are crucial preliminary steps in that plan. In Offred's flashbacks, we see exactly this strategy taking place. The first is her recalling an unpleasant encounter at a coffeeshop when she and her good friend, Moira (Samira Wiley), had finished a jog. When buying coffee, June's credit card is denied. The young man behind the cash register is not only unhelpful and unsympathetic, he's asinine and rude to the two women. Apparently commenting on their being dressed in tight-fitting running garb, the lout snaps at them: "Fucking sluts. Get the fuck outta here." In hindsight, Offred realizes how this was an early sign not only of her coming bankruptcy but also of sexist men emboldened by the aggressive reassertion of old-style male chauvinism. Later, when June is at her workplace and on a long hold trying to call her credit card company, armed and black-clad

paramilitary goons invade the floor of her office building. Under obvious duress, the boss, Roger (Michael Caruana), gathers the employees together to make an announcement:

Ladies, you should all know that I feel really sorry about this. It isn't my decision. I don't have a choice. I have to let you go. I have to let you all go. ... You can't work here anymore. It's the law now. ... I don't have a choice. They gave me ten minutes, please just ... just pack up your things.

Upset and confused as they are forced to leave the building under the intimidating glare of the armed men, one woman wonders, "Why'd they send the army?" Another woman answers, "I don't think that's the army." June offers, "I think that's another kind of army." Once more, Offred marks this as a moment when she and the general population allowed rights and liberties, albeit perforce, to slip away instead of standing up to oppressive power.

Later still in the episode, in a prolonged flashback, Offred remembers the definitive moment when, in her apartment, she and Moira discover that their economic legs have been cut out from beneath them. Getting off a phone call, Moira reports, "Sounds like they just froze any account with an F on it instead of an M." When June protests that, "I have four thousand dollars in that account. They can't just take it," Moira replies, "We made it easy. All they needed to do was just push a few buttons." Moira also reports that "there's a new law: women can't own property anymore." Again, June is incredulous: "Wait! *What?* Are you fucking serious?" Moira has not only the latest developments in the situation, but the keener political insight into what is actually taking place. She tells June:

Luke can use your account. They'll transfer the money to him. Or that's what they're saying. Husbands or male next-of-kin. You know, they needed to do it this way. All the bank accounts and the jobs all at the same time. You imagine the airports otherwise? They don't want us leaving. You can bet on that.

The control of fertile women's bodies has been the high-priority play of the Gilead takeover all along, and Moira sees those tactics now falling into place. When June naïvely repeats the official lies that the imposition of martial law had been to protect the populace and facilitate the capture of the terrorists who massacred Congress, Moira scoffs, "Maybe there never were any terrorists." None, that is, but the Sons of Jacob themselves. At this point, the overthrow of the United States is all but complete. June's husband, Luke, enters the room at this moment. After hearing all the bad news, he reassures the women, "Well, we'll figure it out. This can't last." He also offers comfort to his now penniless spouse by saying, "Come on. You know I'll take care of you." Understandably, Luke's well-meaning but victimless calm sets off Moira. Reacting to Luke's patronizing readiness to "take care of my wife," Moira fumes:

My *wife*? She doesn't belong to you. No, no, no, she isn't your property and she doesn't need you to take care of her. You see, that's where all of this comes from. You want to take care of us because we're weak, right? Because we're less than. ... *"I'll take care of your money. I'll take care of your body."* You know, you're the fucking problem, you know that?

Moira is correct in that men cannot experience patriarchy as a threat unless somehow they are set in open defiance to it. Otherwise, they can always remain safely complicit no matter what they think of the sexist ideology itself. In due course, Luke will be one of these men to challenge the Gilead patriarchy, and Moira knows that he is, at heart, a good guy. Still, his mansplaining and supercilious offhandedness as a reaction to women being rendered economic non-entities needs slapping down.¹⁰ More to the point of the episode, Luke's blasé reaction to the tightening grip of Gilead confirms Offred's hard realization: people living comfortably in the bubble of a seemingly safe democracy are slow to wake up and loathe to admit that authoritarian control is on the rise. This admonition applies to self-governing citizenry worldwide, but particularly in today's America. The Sons of Donald, after all, are busily working to curtail or revoke not just the rights of women, but as many individual and communal rights as suits their traditionalist agenda.

Offred's final flashback in "Late" depicts the point at which push came to shove for the citizens publicly opposing the new and restrictive theocratic laws. June and Moira are in the front lines of an energetic protest rally, face-to-face with a row of ominously well-equipped riot police. Passions are raw, and protesters shout obscenities and wave signs bearing slogans such as "Enough is Enough," "Human Rights = Women's Rights," and demands to restore "Democracy." What these demonstrators don't know is that finally the decision has been made by the zealous brotherhood to drop its charade of noble intentions. The imposition of martial law was never going to be temporary, nor did this evangelical splinter group ever mean to restore the Constitution of the American republic. Instead, this criminal faction has gained enough leverage now to establish its own rule by way of an iron fist. With no warning, the police open fire on the crowd with automatic weapons, killing protesters wantonly. In the panic to flee the onslaught, June and Moira take cover, ironically enough, in the same coffeeshop where earlier their harassment as women began. Now, however, instead of being badgered by a conservative twerp, they watch tracer-bullets whiz by, cringe as people are gunned down in the street, and cover when explosives shatter the storefront windows. For June/Offred, it is a racking moment of knowledge-too-late. The Republic of Gilead has arisen, and democratic principles play no part in its authority.

Absolutely basic to this repressive state, moreover, is its slow removal of personal liberties and agency to the point where a new oppressive normal is established and then concretized into permanent restrictive practices and powers. In this method, the Gilead state mirrors the neoliberal state, the former's treatment of women specifically matching exactly the latter's

disempowerment and abuse of workers generally. A Handmaid is a woman valued only for her active ovaries, similar to the bare commodity of labor used for whatever rudimentary function an owner has need. The whole person, possessing certain inalienable rights, is of no interest and in fact considerably inconvenient to the Commander/employer making use of the Handmaid/worker for his own purposes. Thus, the minimalization of human rights and civil protections, particularly in the areas of labor, voting, education, and the economy, is exceedingly useful for turning people into toiling things. In Gilead, all women have become categories of commodity, labeled and color-coded for their particular utility. Handmaids wear red and bear children for the ruling class. Wives wear blue or turquoise and oversee the households of Commanders. Marthas work as cooks and housekeepers in those households, wearing green. Aunts wear brown and are responsible for the training (brutalizing) and managing (terrorizing) of Handmaids. Econowives are lower-class women who perform a variety of menial jobs while wearing gray. Jezebels are sex workers in the secret brothels of the Commanders, these women being costumed in a variety of revealing outfits. Women who openly defy the patriarchy of Gilead are designated as Unwomen and, when captured, sent to the Colonies where they work until dead cleaning up toxic waste. None of these women are paid for their work, nor can they handle money or own property, nor are they allowed to read. All of these functions of the Gilead state compel the dividuation of women from persons into productive parts. All of these enforced roles for women, even that of Wives, feature absolute wealth and power inequity compared to men. Workplace abuse, to say the least, is at an extreme for most of the women of Gilead. Given that, by Gilead law, they owe their financial existence to men, women are in the inescapable position as well of being debt-laborers trapped in debt peonage. The entire organization of Gilead, then, is designed for male accumulation by way of female dispossession. The most egregious and dystopian occurrence of this exploitation, needless to say, is that of the rape and forced childbearing undergone by Handmaids, followed by the abduction of the child by the fundamentalist Christian state. Throughout this fatherland, Foucauldian panoptic surveillance ensures Deleuzian identity control. Current-day Republican Party ideology is not far removed from these goals.

Woven into the flashbacks of “Late” is the contemporary and wretched story of Emily (Alexis Bledel). As Ofglen, Emily has been the shopping companion of Offred, and in the previous episode these two Handmaids managed to establish a private and rebellious bond. At the beginning of episode 3, however, Offred is alarmed to discover that Ofglen has been taken into custody by the Eyes, the Gilead secret police. A new Ofglen—a different woman—has been substituted in. For the rest of the episode, viewers follow intermittently Emily’s moving through the criminal “justice” system of Gilead. It’s not a happy path. Emily has been labeled a “gender traitor” because she’s a lesbian; she’s been charged with “gender treachery” because she’s been discovered having a sexual affair with a Martha. Gagged by leather muzzles, the two terrified women are hauled before a kangaroo court where, in under a minute of lawyer

and judge citing twisted scripture, sentencing is passed. The Martha is to be hanged—something Emily will be forced to watch—but the Handmaid, due to her viable ovaries, is “sentenced to redemption.” In Gilead, few things sound more menacing. Emily’s redemption is an involuntary clitorrectomy. After this female genital-mutilation surgery, she wakes in a hospital ward, confused by where she is and what’s happened to her, to find her crotch bandaged over. The heinous Aunt Lydia (Ann Dowd) enters to explain events to the repackaged Handmaid:

The stitches will come out in a few days. I know this is a shock for you, Emily. You can still have children, of course. But things will be so much easier for you now. ... You won’t want what you cannot have. Blessed be the fruit, dear.

“Late” ends with a series of close-ups on Emily as shock, disbelief, agony, and rage come across her face. She has been reduced thoroughly to a baby-making thing. Her scream of outrage is as a person left both object and abject. No matter what the special topic of a Rant—racism, militarism, patriarchy—we find visible in it the dehumanizing functioning of the Regime. Neoliberalism puts profit over people. Neoconservatism punishes those who resist.

Notes

- 1 Critics have noted how this combination of manipulating black minds and taking custody of black bodies figures aptly the colloquial concepts of the “Uncle Tom” or the “Oreo”—that is, race betrayers who are black on the outside but white on the inside. Comments Weston of Peele’s elaborate invention of the sunken place: “It is the more generous term, for it suggests not duplicity, but brainwashing or conditioning beyond the perpetrator’s control. Such is the impact of *Get Out*, a film that has provided new language for thinking about race simply by considering the essence of black anxiety” (38). The After Globalism Writing Group similarly observes of Peele’s sci-fi *novum*: “by fabricating an incredible theory of mind in which a white brain could take over a black one while leaving the black consciousness intact and floating somewhere in inner space, it also recalls the deep, perhaps fatal, sympathy behind the invective. Black on the outside, black on the inside” (40).
- 2 Think of how Thomas Shadwell is excoriated by Dryden in *Mac Flecknoe* or how Pope takes to task rival poets, prime ministers, and kings of England in *The Dunciad*.
- 3 In order to skewer a rival playwright, Dryden concocts an elaborate mock-coronation of Shadwell being crowned king of the realm of Nonsense. As a royalist, Dryden intends no disrespect toward or criticism of the trappings and traditions of monarchy; rather, he employs those grand things as a means to represent Shadwell even more low and ridiculous.
- 4 The name Armitage comes from Middle English meaning “hermitage,” which stems from the Old French “ermitage.” If Peele is naming characters with such significance in mind, the isolated Armitage estate can be seen as a white enclave looking to remain separate from the larger multiracial world.

- 5 In her study of gender in modern horror films, Carol J. Clover coins the term “final girl” to describe the stock character, especially in slasher films, who faces off against the monster or psychopathic killer at the end of the movie. This character often possesses special qualities the audience is meant to identify with and to admire.
- 6 See, for example, the study by Steuter and Wills, *At War with Metaphor: Media, Propaganda, and Racism in the War on Terror*. While the tropes of animal, insect, and infection are used routinely in the west nowadays to characterize so-called terrorists, Trump and other rightwing fear-mongers likewise use these terms to vilify immigrants and other, in their view, undesirable groups.
- 7 For an overview of the studies by Marshall and Grossman, as well as a reading of this *Black Mirror* episode from the standpoint of its demonstrating a “weaponized perspective” and a “submission to machinic vision,” see Roger Stahl’s book, *Through the Crosshairs* (150–151).
- 8 For this current state of affairs with regard to the U.S. military, see Jennifer Mittelstadt’s *The Rise of the Military Welfare State*. See as well Andrew Bacevich’s study, *Breach of Trust*, as well as Beth Bailey’s *America’s Army*.
- 9 For the television series critiquing the age of Trump, see as well articles by Heather Hendershot and by John Duncan Talbird. Hendershot in particular comments: “*The Handmaid’s Tale* obviously resonates strongly with many viewers as an allegorical, science-fictional response to the Trump administration; the five Emmys, two Golden Globes, and Peabody Award that the show has won after only one year not only nod to the program’s high quality but also acknowledge it as a valuable response to dire current events” (18). Both Hendershot (20) and Talbird (121) comment as well on the effective use of flashbacks in the series, and in particular in the episode “Late.” With regard to Margaret Atwood’s relationship to the series, she is not involved but neither is she disapproving of the additions to her premise (see Brown).
- 10 Not long before Atwood wrote *The Handmaid’s Tale* in 1985, American women economically were restricted by law from such activities as keeping a job when pregnant, reporting sexual harassment in the workplace, getting a credit card, and getting a divorce with a reasonable degree of ease. See the article in *Ms. Magazine* by Natasha Turner titled “10 Things That American Women Could Not Do Before the 1970s.”