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## Peele's Black, Extraterrestrial, Naturalistic Critique of Religion

Jonathan D. Lyonhart

Lincoln Christian University, Illinois, jonathanlyonhart@gmail.com

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## Peele's Black, Extraterrestrial, Naturalistic Critique of Religion

### Abstract

While Jordan Peele's films have always held their mysteries close to the chest, they eventually granted their viewers some climactic clarity. *Get Out* (2017) used an 1980s style orientation video to clear up its neuroscientific twist, while *Us* (2019) had Lupita Nyong'o's underworld twin narratively spell out the details of the plot. Yet *Nope* (2022) refuses to show its hand even after the game is over, never illuminating the connection between its opening scene and the broader film, nor a myriad of other questions. As such, critics complained that it stitched together two seemingly incongruent plots without explanation; one where a chimp attacks the crew of a successful Hollywood show, the other where an alien organism haunts a small ranch in the middle of nowhere. In this paper, I will argue that a theological interpretation of *Nope* helps explain some of these mysteries at its center, while revealing Peele's underlying religious critique and its place within his broader oeuvre.

### Keywords

Jordan Peele, *Nope*, black theology, *Us*, *Get Out*, extraterrestrial theology, naturalistic critique

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### Author Notes

Jonathan Lyonhart (PhD, Cambridge) is an Assistant Professor of Theology and Philosophy at Lincoln Christian University, a Fellow at the Cambridge Center for the Study of Platonism at Cambridge University, and a co-host of the Spiritually Incorrect Podcast ([spirituallyincorrectpodcast.com](https://spirituallyincorrectpodcast.com)). He publishes and teaches on a wide range of subjects, including theology, philosophy, and film studies. For more information, see [jdlyonhart.com](https://jdlyonhart.com).

While Jordan Peele's films have always held their mysteries close to the chest, they eventually granted their viewers some climactic clarity. *Get Out* (2017) used a 1980s style orientation video to clear up its neuroscientific twist, while *Us* (2019) had Lupita Nyong'o's underworld twin narratively spell out the details of the plot. Yet *Nope* (2022) refuses to show its hand even after the game is over, never illuminating the connection between its opening scene and the broader film, nor answering a myriad of other questions. As such, critics complained<sup>1</sup> that it stitched together two seemingly incongruent plots without explanation; one where a chimp attacks the crew of a successful Hollywood show, the other where an alien organism haunts a small ranch in the middle of nowhere.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will argue that a theological interpretation of *Nope* helps explain some of these mysteries at its center, while revealing Peele's underlying religious critique and its place within his broader oeuvre. Specifically, Peele critiques the *transcendent* spectacle of wrathful, cloud-dwelling deities who demand sacrifice and cause 'us and them' division and dominance, pointing us instead to an *immanent* and naturalistic world of human relationships, equality, and flourishing.

Religion is a constant yet often unnoticed humming in the background of Peele's films.

The script for *Get Out* begins with a quotation from Romans 12:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

While this verse did not end up in the final cut of the film, its presence in the original script is certainly indicative of Peele's intentions for the film, with black individuals *sacrificed* by having their minds literally *transformed* and *renewed* according to the *will* of their white 'masters' or self-proclaimed gods. The aging white family in the film hijacks the bodies of young black men and

women in order to surgically transfer their own consciousness into them, thereby achieving immortality and god-like status. As articulated by Dean Armitage (Bradley Whitford) near the film's climax: "Even the sun will die someday. But we are divine. We are the gods trapped in cocoons." In the director's commentary, Peele reveals that the Armitage family are descendants of the Knights Templar, and they use this medical procedure as a technological equivalent to their religious search for the Holy Grail and immortality: "I've got a whole mythology and lore about how they are descended from the original Knights Templar... this whole operation that they've perfected is a way of channeling the original Holy Grail's immortality."

It is thus no coincidence that the name of the cult's deceased patriarch was Roman and his wife's name was Marianne, pointing the finger directly at the Roman Catholic Church and the cult of Mary.<sup>3</sup> Roman subsequently refers to the procedure as a "man-made miracle," and to his group as an "order," before uttering the phrase, "Behold, the coagula." 'Behold' is, of course, a term stylistically associated with scripture and medieval Christendom, while 'coagula' means congealed liquid, and is used primarily in reference to blood, which is foundational to the eucharist and to Christian thought in general. Additionally, in the scene preparing for the surgery, a monkish chant plays in the background, with Peele confirming in his director's commentary that that this surgery was a "ritual... and there is this religion aspect." Likewise, when Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) escapes and comes upstairs, the grandmother is singing one of the 'hymns' of the Red Alchemist society,<sup>4</sup> while Jeremy Armitage's (Caleb Landry Jones) knight helmet is subsequently seen on the car seat, reiterating the medieval Christian roots of their cult.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Peele confirms in the director's commentary that the lion's head in Rose's (Allison Williams) room is symbolic of Christ as the lion of Judah (Revelation 5:5).<sup>6</sup>

Religion remains an equally strong undercurrent in Peele's second film. *Us* begins with the stark image of rabbits in a cage, foreshadowing the raw culinary provisions of the underworld as well as pointing directly at the central Easter metaphor of the story. Peele writes, "The main connection to me was Easter. [*Us*] is a dark Easter of sorts," in which Red [Lupita Nyong'o] is the messiah who is rising from the hole in which she was left for dead.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, the core of the film is set 33 years (the age of Jesus when he died) after the opening scene in the city of Santa Cruz (which is literally 'Saint of the Cross'). The crucifixion symbolism suggests that someone must always suffer in order for others to survive and thrive, as is central to the gospel narrative where Jesus suffered in our stead. As Peele writes:

One of the central themes in *Us* is that we can do a good job collectively ignoring the ramifications of privilege. I think it's the idea that what we feel like we deserve comes at the expense of someone else's freedom or joy... The biggest disservice we can do as a faction with a collective privilege, like the United States, is to presume that we deserve it and that it isn't luck that has us born where we're born. For us to have our privilege someone suffers.<sup>8</sup>

'Tis a dark Easter indeed. In order for some to dine on popcorn and candy, others must feast on rabbits underground beneath the carnival. For some to live, others must die; for some to be free and untethered, others must be enslaved, chained, and tethered (the 'Teathered' is Peele's name for the underworld's inhabitants). Similarly, in order for the Merlin (a Christian, Arthurian figure) theme house to later be built, it must replace the Shaman house that Red originally stumbled upon in the film's opening, representing the colonial takeover of native Shaman religion, culture, and land by Euro-Christian colonizers.<sup>9</sup> This motif is clearly intentional, for Peele also makes another reference to Native displacement and fetishization when Dahlia (Elizabeth Moss) comments on how "beautiful" a Native headdress looks, while herself wearing and sitting on stylized fabric clearly appropriated from non-Western cultures. In fact, the very name Dahlia comes from a flower appropriated from its Central American context and given in the West as gifts

during the Victorian era. Thus, taking this oppressive zero-sum narrative and turning it back on the oppressors, the underworld inhabitants in *Us* seek to rise up, kill, and replace their overlords, as well as appropriate their lives and homes. And, just like historical Western colonizers, they do so believing they have God on their side. As Red says,

We were born special... God brought us together that night... Years later, the miracle happened. That's when I saw God. He showed me my path. You felt it too... The Teathered saw that I was different, that I would deliver them from this misery. I found my faith.

Additionally, *Us* is bookended by a scriptural reference to Jeremiah 11:11: "Therefore thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will bring evil upon them, which they shall not be able to escape; and though they shall cry unto me, I will not hearken unto them." This reference is reiterated when a clock reads 11:11 PM the night their underworld twins come for them, as well as later when a man in the underworld has 1111 carved on his head. In turn, the father's (Winston Duke) name is Abraham, and the shadow girl is born laughing, directly referencing the story of Abraham and Sarah, when they laughed at God's promise (Genesis 18) and so named their son Isaac, which means 'laughter.' One might also see here a contrast between the chosen son, Isaac, and the cast out son, Ishmael, as indicative of both the overworld and underworld pairings in *Us* as well as the contrast between white Christianity descended from Isaac and black Islam descended from Ishmael (as epitomized by, say, the Nation of Islam).

Thus, religion is clearly on Peele's mind, and *Nope* is no exception. *Nope* likewise begins with scripture, quoting the words of Nahum 3:6, "I will cast abominable filth upon you, make you vile, and make you a spectacle." Overtly religious references continue to be sprinkled throughout the film, such as Emerald (Keke Palmer) wearing a 'Jesus Lizard' t-shirt, the four horses of the apocalypse who serve as chapter headings, an abundance of what the script calls 'bad miracles,' scenes filmed in front of a Mexican church bearing Jesus' name, and Exodus references to the

“mountaintop.” Further, as seen from Peele’s other films, special attention needs to be paid to character names, including Angel (Brandon Perea), the dead father (Keith David) called Otus—which is a derivative of the divine, Norse all-father ‘Oden’—and Jupe (Steven Yeun) which is an abbreviation for Jupiter, the Romanized term for the Greek god, Zeus.

This latter name, Jupiter/Zeus, holds the spiritual secret to much of the film. Jupiter’s Claim is a theme park where a seeming ‘alien’ (heretofore referred to as Jean Jacket) regularly descends to *claim* a horse’s life as a sort of sacrifice.<sup>10</sup> Jean Jacket has a claim upon creation and, like Jupiter/Zeus, demands animal sacrifices and satisfaction with blood, as driven disgustingly home by the bloody scene of red bathing the ranch from above. In turn, Jupiter/Zeus commonly manifested in ancient mythology through animals, such as bulls or swans, in order to accomplish his will or seduce human women. This immediately elucidates why Peele included the chimp attack in the opening scene, and why the praying mantis so conveniently blocked the camera’s view at the ranch. Jean Jacket was working through the animals (albeit in a way that is itself never explained) just like Zeus worked through bulls and goats. Through the chimp attack, this ‘god’ gained its first follower (Jupe), who then made sacrifices to Jean Jacket more directly for years to come.<sup>11</sup>

Yet as the film goes on, we realize this seemingly divine alien is actually just a brute animal. As OJ<sup>12</sup> realizes, “It’s alive man, it’s an animal, its territorial.” Thus, what the ancients mistook as Zeus/Jupiter or Yahweh is actually just an advanced cryptid (i.e., animals yet to be proven to exist, such as Sasquatch or Chupacabra).<sup>13</sup> We can now glimpse why Peele considers this his biggest film;<sup>14</sup> he is attempting to simultaneously explain away the origins of religion and alien sightings in one fell swoop. What the religious have mistaken for divine intervention and others have mistaken for extraterrestrial encounters, might simply be an unknown organic creature

on *this* planet. Thus, similar to the anthropocentric twist in the climax of *Interstellar* (2014, dir. Christopher Nolan), no higher explanation is needed. As Peele states in the Blu Ray special features: “What if it’s really just an eating machine?... something that is essentially a giant crab. Something that doesn’t give a fuck. It just wants to devour.” What if the thing we derive our meaning from, the divine source we imagine staring back at us in the clouds, is really just a nihilistic eating machine with no other designs for our lives than to devour and destroy? What if the God we think watches over us and answers our prayers, in Peele’s words, actually “doesn’t give a fuck” about us? The theological richness and extra-terrestrial Otherness that one anticipates in the rising action of the first half of the film is thus succeeded by a hollowed out, flattened, naturalistic climax, for as Peele states: “The largeness of the horror [makes it] simply and literally maddening if one were to be able to comprehend that, you know, all that stuff communicates this emptiness. Jean Jacket is basically something that we’re krill to.” Thus, the secret that underlies and unites both the chimp attack and the ranch happenings is not only deeper than gods and aliens, but actually usurps and replaces them as explanations for religious and extraterrestrial encounters, providing a simpler alternative that need not postulate anything beyond ourselves and other natural creatures. Not only is a natural explanation for the film’s events provided, but Peele is trying to postulate a genuine theory to explain the entire history and origin of religion in the real world beyond the film (he even commissioned faux scientific articles on the plausibility of such an organism, which were published alongside the release of the film).<sup>15</sup>

This groundedness—in contrast to the metaphysical or extraterrestrial—is central to Peele’s vision, as he notes that “an animal... felt oddly more grounded to me than the alternative.” In turn, the hope that one might have in a future heaven, or the sense of significance one might get from futuristic explorations of the final frontier of space, are traded in for a *grounded*, earthy vision



of significance in the here and now. As Keke Palmer (who played Emerald) states in the Blu Ray special features regarding the film and her role:

It's about the spectacle. It's about the thing that we have, all of us have, in chasing something outside of ourselves or focusing on somethings that's far outside of ourselves, so much so that we don't realize what we have around us that is worth appreciating until it's too late. You look back and you realize that everything you should have been paying attention to was actually closer to you than all these other things you were trying to pursue. The love you were looking for, the validation you were looking for, the security you were looking for, it was always there, it was within you, and usually, you know, at home, with your family.

Thus, according to the film, instead of looking up, we should be looking around to one another. Instead of looking for some higher meaning from beyond, we should find it down here on earth. Instead of seeking fame and fortune in the outside world, Emerald should return to the ranch and her brother. Instead of staring wide eyed at the clouds in hope of encountering inbreaking 'Otherness' we should rather embrace the recognizable smile and knowing warmth of friends and family. Instead of waiting for gods and heaven, enjoy the fleeting moment here and now with fellow mortals on earth. Instead of scavenging the universe for alien life or a new home in the galaxy (in the vain of Elon Musk or *Interstellar*) we should be looking to this planet, for it already has everything we need for significance and sustainable life. Indeed, the television show ("Gordy's Home") at the film's opening takes place in Cape Canaveral—where the Space Shuttle Challenger blew up in 1986—with the fictional mother playing an astronaut with the last name Houston, suggesting the television massacre may have been a form of cosmic punishment for looking up and colonizing the stars. Peele's this-worldly vision is further witnessed in what can only be described as an immanentized beatific vision in the film's climax, when Jean Jacket unfurls its infinitely regressing folds, suggesting that the natural world already holds all the wonder we need and explains all the religious awe we once felt.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Peele's prior sociological critiques of

religious oppression in *Get Out* and *Us* have now metastasised to an ontological critique of transcendence in both its interstellar and religious forms. Make way for his most holy *Immanence*.

Yet these sociological critiques, while less upfront than in *Get Out*, are still very much present in *Nope*, which focuses heavily upon dominance narratives and interactions. *Nope* begins with a television show domesticating and taming a chimp by placing a party hat on him for a birthday scene,<sup>17</sup> which *Nope* producer Ian Cooper referred to as a symbol of “ownership [and a] dismissal of its natural habitat and rights.” In fact, Cooper goes on to say that the film’s only “real villain is humanity’s instinct to think they can put a party hat on a wild animal.” The chimp—who, as I have argued, is somehow channelling Jean Jacket in a manner similar to Zeus with a bull—therefore rises up against its oppressors. The chimp spares only the young, submissive, and unthreatening Jupe, who does not look the chimp directly in the eyes but only through the veil of the table cloth, and who places his hand lower than the chimp’s in their under-the-table fist bump (in contrast to commercials for the show, which have Jupe’s hand higher).<sup>18</sup>

This parallel between eye contact and power continues throughout the film, with OJ noting in regards to Jean Jacket: “I don’t think it eats you if you don’t look it in the eye.”<sup>19</sup> This suggests another religious connection to the temple veil as well as to Exodus 33:20 when God says, “Thou cannot see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.” For Peele, looking someone directly in the eye challenges and asserts dominance over them, and he subsequently parallels this to capturing and exploiting someone using the ‘eye’ of a camera. While Jean Jacket seems to be the villain, the whole time OJ and Emerald have actually been trying to capture him on film (to get their “Oprah shot”) in order to exploit him for wealth and fame. As Peele confirms, “I think the soul of the film is about representation in itself... this idea of spectacle-ization and exploitation.”<sup>20</sup> It is no coincidence, then, that Antlers Hoist (Michael Wincott), as the only white person present

in the climax, is also the only character who feels entitled to face the creature head on. He declares that the others do not “deserve the impossible,”<sup>21</sup> destroying their film reels then heading “up the mountaintop” to directly glimpse the face of ‘God’ like Moses.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, the white characters in *Get Out* consistently maintained eye contact (this unbroken eye-contact was part of what made the mentally hijacked black characters seem so eerily white) while Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) constantly looked down or away, revealing the inherent power dynamics at play. (Some studies even suggest that Caucasians look others in the eye more often than other demographics in power/conflict situations.<sup>23</sup>) As such, while *Nope* seems less explicitly about race than Peele’s other films, it is nonetheless exploring the deeper power relations that led to white dominance in society and religion, as well as the subtle body language that accompanies and reinforces those relations. *Nope* may also gesture toward a critique of power relations between the gay community and traditional religion/society, with Emerald coded as homosexual,<sup>24</sup> and multiple cryptic allusions made in the film to *The Scorpion King* (2002) set in the city of Gomorrah,<sup>25</sup> which God smited for sodomy in Genesis 19.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Peele implies that claims to directly see God or to know his will shall ultimately dissolve into power-plays to control and oppress others.

This hegemonic dominance is also at work in the character of Jupe, who forgets his initial powerlessness as he grows older, and so begins to own and sell the creature for capitalistic entertainment and spectacle at his amusement park.<sup>27</sup> As OJ states, “[Jupe] got caught up trying to tame a predator.” Jupe stops bowing his eyes before the Other,<sup>28</sup> and begins to try to dominate and domesticate it, looking directly into the creature’s eyes right before he is devoured.<sup>29</sup> (Note that Mary Jo Elliot, who was disfigured in the opening monkey attack, has her veil<sup>30</sup> blown up by the wind and so also gazes directly at the creature immediately before being devoured.<sup>31</sup>) Jupe and his theme park are thus reminiscent of televangelists who cease to bow their eyes before the infinite

mystery of God and instead try to own and repackage it for purchase. This comparison was likely on Peele's mind, for the same year that *Nope* came out he and Kaluuya also co-produced *Honk for Jesus, Save Your Soul* (2022), a satirical attack upon megachurch millionaire pastors who sell out their faith for fortune and spectacle. Perhaps we remake God in our own power-hungry image. In revealing that Jean Jacket is merely an alpha male asserting his dominance—and who takes anyone looking him in the eye as a challenge to that dominance—Peele exposes what the object of our religious devotion has so often devolved into: a brutish, wrathful, insecure, all-powerful dictator, as hinted at in the film's opening quotation from Nahum 3:6: "I will cast abominable filth upon you, make you vile, and make you a spectacle."

This theological reading of *Nope* has thus helped weave together the seemingly disparate elements of the film, including the elusive relationship between the chimp attack and the broader story. Our desire to capture, dominate, film, and exploit is echoed in millionaire preachers peddling God, as well as in the myriad social hierarchies we participate in, making sure we don't look the wrong person or race in the eye. Peele has created his most ambitious work yet, providing an alternative and naturalistic account of religious experience, thereby replacing (and/or critiquing) the Greek gods as well as the Judeo-Christian Creator God with a hungry, territorial, alpha creature. While his previous films provided a primarily sociological critique of religion, he has now coupled these insights with a broader critique of any sort of heavenly-mindedness and transcendent or theological metaphysic. Of course, while the thrust of Peele's work may lean toward an anti-religious, earthly naturalism, he is a smart enough filmmaker to leave the viewer a little ambiguity. Maybe this is what the vertically standing shoe in the opening scene is all about; perhaps the shoe performs a function similar to the spinning top at the end of *Inception* (2010), letting the audience

decide for themselves if the shoe will remain upright, indefinitely held in place by the supernatural, or if this is all a naturalistic coincidence and the shoe will eventually—randomly—tip over.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., “The film opens and continues to reference the bloody scene of a talk show where a chimp went wild and killed everyone, and “Nope” goes back to this scene often throughout the film as if it’s scratching the surface of what actually happened in the world that set off this string of events. But all I got from it was the shock value of the horror, and little for the story and how it connects... I never got a sense of what Peele wanted this film to be, outside of mildly shocking and thrilling. The worst thing a film critic can leave a theater with is confusion over what the package delivered was supposed to mean or imply. I left “Nope” in exactly this state.” D. Buffa, “Unnerving and Detached, Jordan Peele’s ‘Nope’ is a Jumbled Mess of a Movie,” <https://doseofbuffa.com/2022/07/22/the-film-buffa-unnerving-and-detached-jordan-peeles-nope-is-a-jumbled-mess-of-a-movie/>. See also M. Brunson, “View from the Couch,” <https://thefilmfrenzy.com/2022/10/28/view-from-the-couch-halloween-edition-4/>.

<sup>2</sup> Part of the confusion arises from Peele’s propensity to have each detail have multiple overlapping meanings. For example, the car lot inflatable dancers are given four separate interpretations by Peele in the Blu Ray special features to the film: (1) They represent the desecration of the environment (2) they symbolize the lost souls of the exploited, (3) they are a detection system, (4) they represent the exploitation of beauty.

<sup>3</sup> It should also be noted that Kubrick’s *The Shining* holds dozens of similar religious references, including very intentional uses of religious names. Peele has regularly described *The Shining* as one of his favorite films, as well as articulating in his director’s commentary that it helped inspire *Get Out*.

<sup>4</sup> Peele reveals in the director’s commentary that this is a hymn. He is very intentional with his use of music, and often conceals entire plot points within the lyrics. Note the secret Swahili lyrics in the intro to *Get Out* warning Chris not to go to his girlfriend’s house.

<sup>5</sup> Peele confirms the religious implications here, stating in the director’s commentary that the black helmet used at the beginning and ending of the film is a reference to the Christian Templars.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Teutsch connects Peele’s use of the lion to this scene in Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man*: “Son, after I’m gone, I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy’s country ever since I give up my gun back in Reconstruction. Live with your head *in the lion’s mouth*. I want you to overcome ’em with yeses, undermine ’em with grins, agree ’em to death and destruction, let ’em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.” Italics added. M. Teutsch, “Stuffed Lion in ‘Get Out’?,” <https://interminablerambling.com/2017/03/28/stuffed-lion-in-get-out/>

<sup>7</sup> N. Brooks, “Jordan Peele’s *Us* Made Its Main Antagonist Jesus,” <https://www.cbr.com/red-jesus-symbolism-jordan-peepe-us/>.

<sup>8</sup> K. Gardner, “Jordan Peele Drops New Information About the Mythology Behind *Us*,” <https://www.themarysue.com/jordan-peepe-us-bonus-features/>

<sup>9</sup> This point about white colonialism in *Us* has been noted elsewhere as well. See E. Scott, “The Native Imagery of Jordan Peele’s *Us*, Explained,” <https://www.vulture.com/2019/03/the-native-imagery-of-jordan-peepe-s-us-explained.html>.

<sup>10</sup> This explains why Jupe paused when OJ (Daniel Kaluuya) asked later about buying the horses back, for Jupe knew they were already dead and devoured.

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<sup>11</sup> Which might explain why Jupe is not saddened by this event but seems to almost boast in it, having an entire side room that commemorates the show and the attack (including a *Mad Magazine* satirizing it). This was not a tragedy but a moment of almost religious devotion and conversion. The trauma haunts him, but in the same way as Stockholm Syndrome.

<sup>12</sup> Note that OJ wears a Malcolm X hat, which the costume designer explains is, “from a costume designer I know, who has a son who has his own line of clothing, and it's called David and Goliath. So there's some little biblical echo going on, but very, very subtle.” C. Cruz, “The Hidden Meaning Behind the Clothes in *Nope*,” <https://ew.com/movies/hidden-meaning-behind-clothes-nope-alex-bovaird-interview/>.

<sup>13</sup> Adding to this cryptid interpretation is the naming of one character ‘Nessie’ as well as the scene where Jean Jackett’s body floats away after perishing, which is a common trope in cryptozoology. For example, in order to explain how Sasquatches could exist without leaving rotting corpses lying around for us to find (and thereby finally prove their existence), cryptozoologists often suggest that Sasquatches bury their dead.

<sup>14</sup> Peele states, “It’s a bigger adventure than I’ve ever tried to tell.” See E. Shapera, “Nope Explained,” <https://collider.com/nope-explained-jordan-peelee-movie/>.

<sup>15</sup> See H. Ober, “How a UCLA Fish Scientist Helped the Alien in Jordan Peele’s *Nope* seem Terrifyingly Real,” <https://newsroom.ucla.edu/stories/kelsi-rutledge-jordan-peelee-nope-alien>.

<sup>16</sup> In the Blu Ray special features, the lead musician on the film confirms that this spiritual aspect of wonder was intentionally part of the film’s aesthetic, “There’s a miraculous, almost spiritual part... In this film you’ll hear the voices depicting awe and wonder.”

<sup>17</sup> Peele consistently uses animal imagery to display dominance. E.g., in *Get Out*, the deer killed earlier in the film appears to reappear with its head mounted on the wall in the scene where Chris is tied up and the surgery explained to him for the first time. Additionally, in *Nope*, the character Antlers receives a phone call while watching animals fight, and he later exerts his dominance in facing Jean Jacket on the mountaintop (and, of course, has the powerful and animalistic name Antlers).

<sup>18</sup> This negotiation of power through placing one’s hand over or under another’s was popularly established—and with monkeys specifically—in *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011).

<sup>19</sup> OJ’s epiphany here is also framed by the Corey Hart song *Sunglasses at Night* playing in the background, which reaffirms the need for something to mediate our glimpse of Jean Jacket, just like the table cloth did for young Jupe. The eye contact theme also shows up in the green screen scene with the horse, when OJ requests the actors, “don’t look him in the eyes please.” The horse subsequently kicks when he sees his own eye reflected in a mirror.

<sup>20</sup> This is driven dramatically home by the TMZ motorcyclist in the climax, who, as he lays dying, is crying out: “Did you get that on camera... are you filming this?!” All the while, OJ is shouting “shut your eye, shut your eye!” referring not only to his physical eyes, but also symbolically to his camera, as well as to his shiny helmet, which looks like a glaring eye from above. On an unrelated note, it might perhaps be of import that the motorcyclist, upon finally being raptured up into Jean Jacket’s gullet, cries out “Oh god! Oh god! Oh god!”

<sup>21</sup> Note that while the line reads “we do not deserve the impossible,” the character then precedes to climb the mountain and tries to personally glimpse the impossible anyway. Thus, while he has made a broad statement of ‘we’ about humanity in general—which presumably included himself as well—he nonetheless sees himself as some sort of exception. His actions nuance his words.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Jacket’s appearances often seem to cause a pillar of fog and smoke, which is also reminiscent of the book of Exodus. And, like in Exodus, no one can directly glimpse the face of God without dying.

<sup>23</sup> See Fugita, Wexley, and Hillery, “Black-White Differences in Nonverbal Behavior in an Interview Setting,” in *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, July 2006, 4(4):343 – 350.

<sup>24</sup> This is more explicit in the deleted scenes, with Emerald catcalling a passing female. Peele seems to regularly sprinkle lesbian relations into his broader sociological critiques. For example, Rose Armitage (Allison Williams) uses same-sex relations to lure in Georgina (Betty Gabriel) in *Get Out*.

<sup>25</sup> OJ previously worked on the set of *The Scorpion King* and wears multiple memorabilia items from the shoot. Additionally, Emerald lost her childhood horse to the needs of that film shoot.

<sup>26</sup> In the midst of all these power hierarchies, the film crucially has OJ and Emerald re-establish mutual respect, with OJ gesturing from his eyes toward Emerald in the climax in order to indicate that he 'sees her' as an equal, with no dominance.

<sup>27</sup> As Jupe announces at the beginning of the show: "Welcome to the Star Lasso show... Remembering to avoid flash photography... Now sit back, stay in your seats, and enjoy the star lasso experience... They're giving us a real show today." Peele confirms in the special features of the Blu Ray that Jupiter's Claim is meant to be a satire of America's economy. Further, the film's costume designer Alex Bovaird states: "The inspiration was slightly Willy Wonka, because you don't spend an awful lot of time in Jupiter's Claim. But we lent into this idea that he is this Willy Wonka character taking you into his world, that he's trying to be the star of his own world still, because he was this failed child star. We tried to play with the idea of this arch Americana, but subverted, because he's not a white guy." See C. Cruz.

<sup>28</sup> We do not want the Other to remain genuinely Other. Rather, we want to tame and domesticate it for our comfort and purposes, or ignore it when it won't be tamed and domesticated. A perfect example of this, showing Peele's thought process, comes from a *Key and Peele* skit titled "God Visit's a Prayer Group." God appears to a prayer group, who fall at their knees in ecstasy and praise. Then God tells them to sell all their possessions and give to the poor. Once they realize God is serious about this, they subsequently cry out "Ghost! It's a ghost!" and run out of the house.

<sup>29</sup> Note that he previously wore sun glasses when he went to visit them at the ranch, presumably because he knew this was the creature's territory.

<sup>30</sup> Thus, both Jupe and Mary Jo previously glimpsed God through the veil but now dare to look upon him directly, making the Exodus 33:20 reference all the more explicit.

<sup>31</sup> One wonders if Peele also meant the critique to be turned back upon the watching eye of God, criticizing the idea that we are always being caught on the omniscient lens of the Lord. This might make sense of Jupe saying he has always felt like someone is watching or viewing him.

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