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Terminally Toxic: Get Out, Cottagecore, and the Political Aesthetics of the Built Environment

Studio Ghibli's films have left an indelible mark on the world: their whimsical animations, touching coming-of-age narratives, and beautiful renditions of the natural world have paved the way for countless accolades and awards. More recently, however, Studio Ghibli's oeuvre is being held as the mascot for a rising aesthetic labelled "cottagecore," a political as well as artistic ethos for built environments that stage sustainability as coexistent with the peaceful life that Ghibli cinema radiates. But this aesthetic, a trend rising in times of quarantine in real built environments, articulates a worrying shift in perceptions of the built environment that ultimately obfuscate the goals of environmental justice. Cottagecore as an aesthetic relies on rejections of toxic geographies mapped on the body, in the "moment of empathy" described by Nunn, but actually reproduces lived toxic geographies by way of the "grammar of control": signaling access to land as the only meaningful rejection of systems deemed terminally toxic. Alternatively, films such as *Get Out* identify violence as reifying systems of pollution by rendering certain bodies more killable, but offer hope through identifications of relationality of black bodies in all varieties of domestic environments .

Conditions of Death

George Floyd was murdered on May 25th, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His pleas to Officer Derek Chauvin and his other assailants were simple: “I can’t breathe.” Eric Garner and many other victims of police violence, heard or unheard, let the same words fall from their lips before their unjust and untimely deaths. The plea, in the hands of Black Lives Matter protestors as well as anti-fascist protestors, became a proclamation of a state of life; as Professor Julie Sze argues in an interview with climate journal *Grist*, “the phrase ‘I can’t breathe’ points to the embodied insecurity of black lives...Communities of color not being able to breathe — it’s kind of normalized: Black and Latino communities have [much higher rates] of childhood asthma” (Sze).

Health vulnerabilities that affect communities of color, Sze notes, are often “weaponized” against the very victims themselves: “conditions of obesity and hypertension” as well as asthma were used to “sanction” Floyd’s murder, the hyperfragility of the black body postmortem somehow coexisting with the “hyper-dangerous” black body in life (Sze). Sze argues that these instances of individualization ignore the “social and structural problems” that have caused those vulnerabilities, in this context thinking of air pollution as conducive to higher rates of asthma, COVID, and policing. Along these lines, then, the hyper-individualization of black bodies, mapping out their toxicities, is an attempt to obscure the built environment in which the causes of that toxicity fester. We see this again in cultural attempts to hyper-individualize George Floyd: accusations that he was on drugs, that the methamphetamines in his system were to blame for the police actions; labelling him a past criminal and so deserving of a death; indictments of participation in pornography as well as hip-hop music as somehow making him less deserving of life.

In essence, after George Floyd's death, there was an active attempt to map the toxic geographies of black communities, but only insofar as the body of George Floyd and only to create, or conform, to a toxic racial aesthetic. This racial aesthetic, an anti-black aesthetic, refers to the stereotypes that contour Floyd's body as hyper-fragile and hyper-dangerous, (drug-user, asthmatic) but also shape his own cultural productions (pornography and music) under those same stereotypes. This is conducive to the attempt to view Floyd's murder as a product of or associated with sex, drugs, and crime, the dogwhistles of the "inner city" rather than acknowledge structural problems in Minneapolis' built environments. This anti-black aesthetic, in attempting to shape perceptions of the black body, also must reach out to the built environment that manifests itself in the body. If that anti-black aesthetic serves to hyper-individualize the black body in the service of , then what is its relation to the built/urban environment?

Conditions of Life

Attempting to understand the relationship between the body and the built environment, especially as it pertains to communities of color, requires an understanding of the aesthetics (anti-black and otherwise) that enable toxicity to be reproduced, whether by pollution or policing. As this class has taught us, a necessary first step is to think of indigenous ontologies, especially as they relate to the problem of aesthetics in built environments: individualizing the structural problems of the environment onto the body.

Makere Stewart-Harawira argues in *Rethinking Knowledge Capitalism* that the aesthetic process of hyper-individualization is a Western phenomenon: "From an Indigenous perspective, everything is living. This includes inanimate objects that are understood to hold their own

energy... nothing is considered in isolation, rather, all data within the whole system is carefully included” (Harawira 3). By definition, this view bisects hyper-individualization: explicit in Harawira’s argument is an organic connection between the built environment, the inanimate surrounding which has its own energy and relationship with the individual, but also subtly expands argumentative approaches. In thinking, as she suggests, of “inanimate objects,” or built environments, as objects that should explicitly not “be considered in isolation,” we have to consider the social/cultural contexts of built environments themselves as much as we think of the built environment as the spatial context of the individual, or the hyper-individual.

To that end, observing the depictions of conditions of life in built environments is critically important to understanding the toxicity that (re)produces conditions of death. To understand how the aesthetic of urban/built environments informs conditions of life as well as conditions of death, let us turn to the codifiers of that canon: Studio Ghibli.

Cottagecore and Colonial Encounters



(Howl's Moving Castle, Studio Ghibli)



(When Marnie Was There, Studio Ghibli)



(Spirited Away, Studio Ghibli)



(Kiki's Delivery Service, Studio Ghibli)

All of the above images depict the houses of the main protagonists of each Studio Ghibli film. What is immediately apparent, what unifies them all, is their clear connection to the environment; each domicile is wrapped in nature, is cozy and wide at once, offering a “recognition for the environment” as Studio Ghibli director Hayao Miyazaki notes he wants his films to do. ““We don't subordinate the natural setting to the characters. . . . That is because we feel that the world is beautiful. Human relationships are not the only thing that is interesting. We think that weather, time, rays of light, plants, water, and wind—what make up the landscape—are all beautiful. That is why we make efforts to incorporate them as much as possible in our work” (Nippon.com). This aesthetic ethos makes Ghibli films beautiful--each shot captures a tranquility that blends human and nature.

But there is an underlying action to create this aesthetic: Miyazaki describes it as “*Ma*. Emptiness. It's there intentionally.” He refers to a temporal and spatial emptiness here: a shot

that lingers on the houses, a flower, a stream of water, an aesthetic hyper-individualization that provides a sense of peace because of its isolation.

We can see this most crucially in what is perhaps the most culturally-prominent aesthetic of the modern 2000s, that Studio Ghibli has, by the words of its adherents, defined: Cottagecore. “As a concept, it embraces a simpler, sustainable existence that is more harmonious with nature. Aesthetically, it’s a nod to the traditional English countryside style, romantic and nostalgic,” explains architect Davina Ogilvie. These are the reasons for Cottagecore’s popularity: the escapism it espouses, towards a “simpler” existence that is more in tune with nature, free of urban distraction, and for queer and POC adherents of Cottagecore, an inclusive space of their own making, free of the surveillance of the state. The second is nostalgia, an appeal for a “traditional” style of life without the social oppression of the traditional English countryside. Cottagecore, unsurprisingly, has surged in popularity over Quarantine; searches on Tumblr alone show a 150% increase in Cottagecore-related content and queries over 3 months following March’s shutdown. Quarantining forces a comparison between the built environment and the idealized environment, forces a comparison between aesthetics and the way they inform our everyday life, as Harawira might describe their animating “energy.” As Melanie explains, a 15 year-old creator of multiple Cottagecore Tiktoks above 300,000 views, “What if we got so fed up with society that we decided we wanted to move away, and we did move away, we moved away into the forest and we lived in a cottage and we had a little garden and we interacted with animals and both of us dance under the moonlight... and we were both girls.”

That POC and queer communities use Cottagecore aesthetics as escapist fantasy, however, employs the same problem of aesthetic found in built environments: hyperindividualization obfuscating the broader structural and systemic problems. Even as Ghibli

movies and Cottagecore follow the same aesthetic trend, so too does the latter follow the former's key usage of *ma*, or emptiness. The escape espoused by Cottagecore, the escape of the hyper-individual from urban sprawl, that implicit recognition of toxicity that impairs the lived experiences of marginalized communities, itself relies on empty land; empty space that offers a canvas of projection. But the problem is that no land in this settler-colonial country is empty by choice; indigenous groups, throughout history, have been forcibly displaced from their native land that Cottagecore offers to others as a freedom from the problems of the built environment. It reproduces the toxicity of the titular toxic encounter from Neil Nunn's *Toxic Encounters, Settler Logics of Elimination, and the Future of a Continent*, where he argues even moments of empathy reinforce broader grammars of control that produce and maintain geographies through which life and living are systematically compromised" (Nunn 2). Cottagecore, even as it promises solace via a "moment of empathy," a recognition of a queer/marginalized desire for an ecologically sound coexistence, it does so via a "grammar of control," the access and authority over land, the same set of conditions which initially led to reservations and redlining at the hands of settler-colonialists and their spawn (Nunn). We can see this by tracking the popularity of the term "Cottagecore" outside of Tumblr; Google trends shows that the most popular area for the search term Cottagecore is the Pacific Northwest, corresponding to rapid increases in house-buying, land-buying, and corollary fears of gentrification. The people whom that land belongs to, the native people of the Pacific Northwest, do not benefit from these transactions; they live on reservations that are a far cry from Cottagecore's idealist aesthetics.

The control over land, then, is what allows for the creation of aesthetics surrounding conditions of life and death in built environments. In many ways, we might think of aesthetic as expressing a certain authority over land (Cottagecore) or denoting a certain lack of authority,

such as the 1972 Broken Window Theory, which suggested that crime in urban environments was reproduced by aesthetic signs of crime: graffiti, litter, and broken windows. Aesthetic authority and lack thereof is implicitly racialized; the sustainable, inclusive aesthetic of Cottagecore can only be attained through an economic and social mobility, as well as an authority to claim land, that is taken from disproportionately black redlined communities as well as indigenous groups on reservations. Inversely, the hyper-individualization that allows for Cottagecore as a personal escapist fantasy based on identity while avoiding its settler-colonial overtones is weaponized against hyper-individuals in urban/built environments who are seen as contributing to, or the causes of, toxic aesthetics per the Broken Window Theory.

Get Out...or Stay?

Jordan Peele's 2017 debut *Get Out* depicts the weaponization of aesthetic against the black body in its alternate hyper-fragility and hyper-danger by way of revealing the racialized aesthetic authority that constructs built environments. The movie introduces us to soon-to-be kidnapped Andre Hayworth, walking through a wealthy, green, trimmed neighborhood with well-lit mansions flanking both sides of the street. His subsequent kidnapping occurs after a car tails him while he's walking; he mutters, "Not today. Not here. You know what they like to do motherfuckers out here." His awareness of the hyper-individualization of the black body stands out particularly because of, or in spite of, his built environment: the wealthy, white population, despite its neighborhood passing the Broken Windows Theory, is opposed to him, and the scene's cold music and mounting horror portrays the built aesthetic not as whimsical and opulent but as hostile and foreign. We feel the racial authority over the land that is hidden even as it is

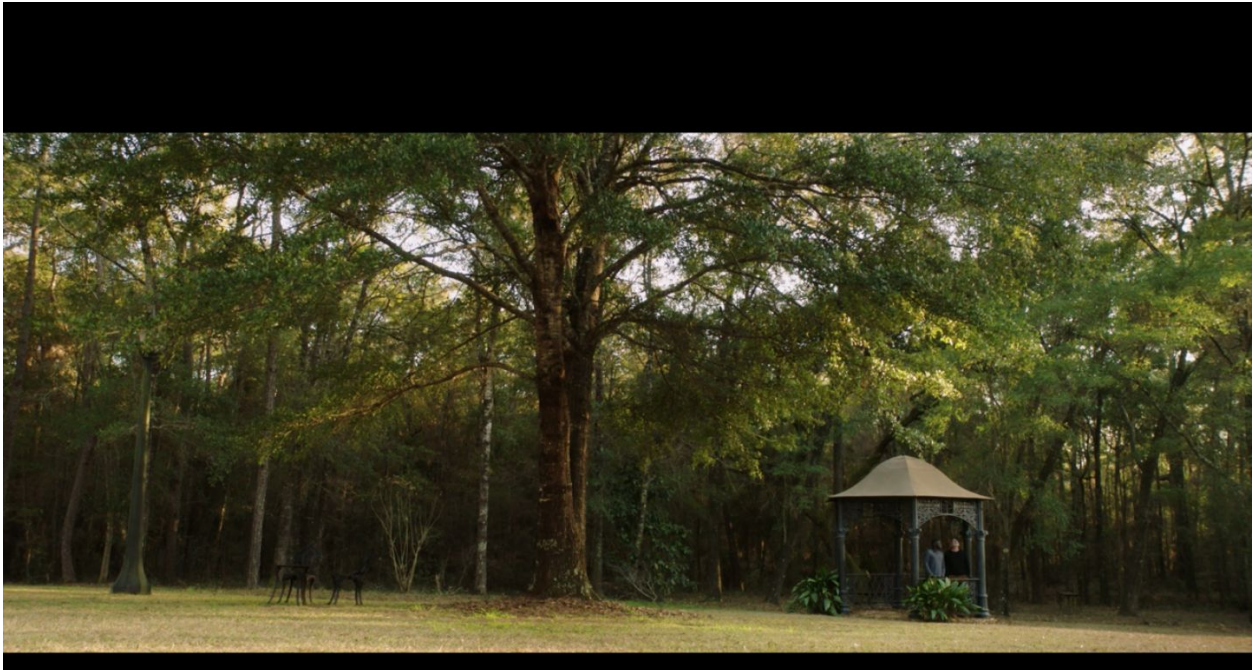
expressed by the built aesthetic, wherein a crime is committed and enabled by its surroundings despite a lack of litter and graffiti.



(Andre Hayworth is kidnapped. Peele, Get Out, 2017.)

This implicit contrast between black bodies and the built environments they inhabit is continued in the upstate New York brownstone that black protagonist Chris Washington and his girlfriend visit under the guise of the former meeting the latter's family. Their drive from the urban city to the rural woods echoes Cottagecore's "moment of sympathy," or escapism from the built environment. And Chris' relation with the built environment is fraught as well; in a later scene with his girlfriend's mother, we learn that Chris' mother died in a hit and run where the driver ran off, and the mental scene of Chris' childhood is bleak, rainy, and slightly cramped, the room in the busy city where rampant crime and apathy caused his mother to die.

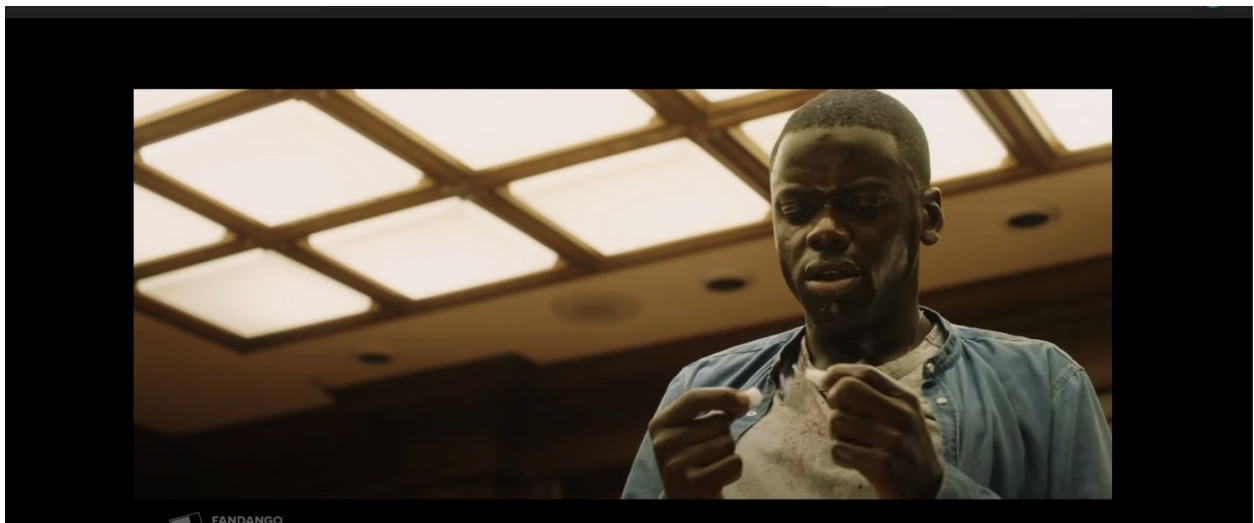
Contrast this with the scenes of the house he is introduced to:



It is rural, out in the woods; traditional style architecture; free, with plenty of open land; in many ways, an expression of Cottagecore. Being in America, the land is indigenous land; potentially Lenape or Oneida. The aesthetic here speaks to sustainability and inclusivity, but the reality is closer to a structural subjugation of aesthetics for white benefit, what Nunn might refer to as a

“grammar of control.” As the movie goes on, we learn that Chris’ girlfriend, and indeed her whole family, trap black bodies under the guise of a safe, welcoming, familial aesthetic and then literally subsume into the background as body transplants for older, ailing, white relatives. The result is black bodies under white minds; the black psyche is sublimated into the background, into the environment, the sunken space.

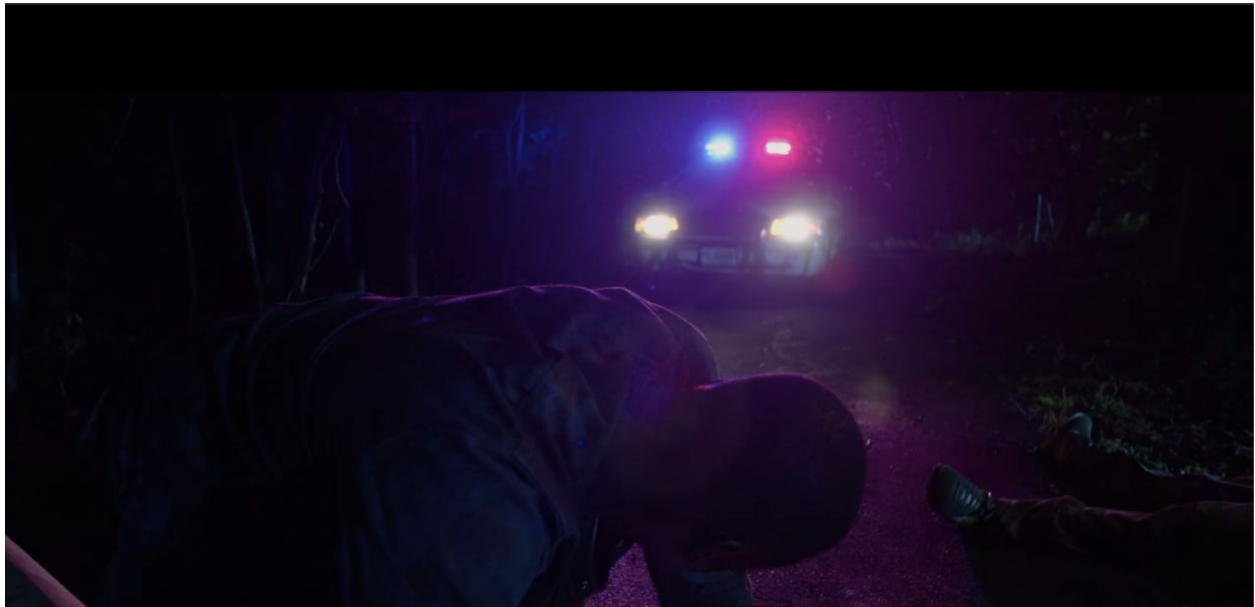
As we’ve seen in the past, the answer to the “moments of empathy” that disguise languages of control, in the same way aesthetic hides the racial contouring of the black body, is relationality: an acknowledgement of the life of inanimate objects, their histories and data. It’s only through this, engaging with the architectures of his surroundings, that Chris is able to brutally escape the clutches of the insidious family.



His very escape is enabled by the cotton chair that he is tied to to be brainwashed; the picking of cotton, and use in his ears, reflects a longer engagement between cotton and black bodies in domestic environments, where again black bodies are bent to serve white minds. These attempts at reframing the basic aesthetics and backgrounds of the domestic environment, in cases such as interacting with other black people in the sunken place, reflect Chris’ recognition of aesthetic’s role in hiding hyper-individualization. In the objects and the objectified bodies around him, Chris

is able to note the relationality of black bodies to the “traditional” built environment, just as Jordan Peele intended the movie to be a “allegory for slavery.”

Perhaps the crowning moment of hyper-individualization in *Get Out* comes from its final scene, where a police car pulls up on Chris strangling his racist, homicidal girlfriend in the driveway. Though the car is revealed to be driven by a friend of Chris’ who helps him escape, the initial moment drives home a unified point about every built environment:



That the immediate hyper-individualization of the black body is not limited by the built environment even as it is not caused by the built environment. It stems from Nunn’s “toxic encounter”; the moment which establishes the grammar of control, of racialized aesthetic authority, in this case, the presence of a black male body above a white woman in front of the police. It is these individual encounters, not, as Cottagecore implies, the built environment itself, that reproduces toxicity. The presence of the police speaks to an authority over the land by the state to which Chris immediately accepts, raising his hands in the air, while his girlfriend immediately assumes the position of innocence, and thereby control.

We are meant to understand here that the conditions of death do more than hyper-individualize black bodies; rather, that black bodies are always individualized under the aesthetics that reflect and claim authority over the land, and that the conditions of death are attuned to those individualizations. It is a form of wastelanding; the construction of a “floating signifier” of the black body as well as their built environment, which reifies the conditions of their death. It is a terminal toxicity that permeates the aesthetics of every built environment (Voyle 2).

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