

See the Body Gone

by [Ayslin Exum](#)

I was born with a tremendous hunger in my body.

When I was a child, the Arizona sun lightened my hair and darkened my skin, and I've lived in others' confusion ever since. At lunchtime, herds of white boys relished the slurs in their mouths – the taste of taboo, the sharp notes of that 'r' leaving their tongues. It was an evolved sort of play, like pointing pop guns at one another, playing cowboys. Learning their capacity for cruelty, they wielded words, the power to condemn. The racial epithets, the 'ironic' jokes about Black criminality, stupidity, language, culture, music seemed to glide off their tongues. They weren't just bullies, but also my friends – in high school, even my crushes. And there were the boys who wouldn't make the jokes or utter the slurs themselves, though I could hear *nigger* in their laughter.

Sometimes I would even laugh too. When you realize you are not seen for what you are, the insults don't bruise you; they pass through you as if you were made of air. My performance was not a deception, not a self-betrayal or 'passing,' in the historical sense. I talked about my Blackness frequently. In high school, I was an avid reader of Frederick Douglass and James Baldwin. I loved Black music, Black films. And yet my high school boyfriend would still let those six little letters, n-i-g-g-e-r, flow out when he was with his friends. I felt like a con artist, my high-minded teenage reverence for the Black Panthers and my love for the fiery words of Douglass undercut by my floating through life like a ghost. My peers often saw me as an oddity. Sometimes my Blackness was acknowledged as a permission slip for their jokes, and other times it went utterly unseen. I was the Black revolutionary; I was the Oreo; I was the 'racially ambiguous,' the 'What are you?' I was my light skin, my thin hair, and my big lips all at once. I steeped myself in every contradiction, every hypocrisy. Underneath it, though, was still the satisfaction that came with their ignorance, the powerful freedom of invisibility – a power. I didn't know who I was, but no one else did either.

In these complications, I feel a sort of connection to William Douglas Street, a real-life con artist and the fictionalized protagonist of Wendell B. Harris, Jr.'s 1989 film *Chameleon Street*. Street was a serial defrauder and impersonator, becoming a doctor, lawyer, and Yale student through deception, costume, and fraud. He even scored a tryout for the Detroit Tigers before being outed by the player he was impersonating. Harris's film tracks his journey in an irreverent art-film style, the fast-paced editing and off-color dialogue matching the absurdism of Street's real-life

portrayals. The film's opening reveals the core of our protagonist's struggle as Street, back turned to the camera, undergoes a psychiatric evaluation. His neurosis, the psychologist explains, is that he behaves in complementarity: "That means you intuit what another person needs, and then you become that need" (00:01:02-00:01:18). Street, who is played by Harris himself, responds with a sarcastic non-sequitur, as a chorus of distorted inner voices make demands. One whispers, "Look at him. The chameleon is about to confess." This confession, delivered by his inner voices, involves film's most important prose: "I think, therefore I scam. I think the air is sweet. I know not what I am. I am Chameleon Street" (00:01:28-00:01:53). To be, in Street's mind, is a function of his ability to deceive. Changing the "am" in that classic dictum to "scam" is a cheeky yet powerful commentary on the existential tension of Black being: to be is to perform.

In Street's case, to be is to scam. Throughout the film, he is a sort of ghost, his monologues ignored while his wordlessness is rewarded. At dinner with his wife, Street is approached by a belligerent white man who assumes Street's wife is a prostitute. The interaction reaches a climax as the man yells, "Nigger, get your nasty black hands off of me. . . . Fucking let go!" and splashes a drink in Street's face. Street launches into longwinded diatribe, not on the man's racial epithet, but on his syntactic placement of the word 'fucking,' closing with the condescending jab, "And remember, peckerwood. Profanity is the last refuge of the ignorant, the insensitive, and the illiterate, but if you're gonna use it, and I can see you are, at least get the *fucking* grammar right, moron." Promptly punched in the face, Street is knocked unconscious (00:24:45-00:27:10). In the face of this staunch dehumanization and cruelty, his theatric intellectualism fails him. Street exists to those around him as a body to be punished.

On the other hand, his incorporeality, improvisation and deception are always rewarded. For instance, he is accepted at Wayne State Medical School as a surgery resident transferring from Harvard. In his admissions interview, Street takes on the character of the silent genius, expressing interest in the position only after solving a Rubik's cube and placing it on the desk—a performance that causes his white interviewer no discomfort (00:27:40-00:28:29). Harris highlights the gullibility of the white establishment, showing how Street takes advantage of his imperceptibility and silence to grasp at power. But Street is not solely motivated by practicality. According to film scholar Michael Gillespie, the real Douglas Street only made about \$4,000 for all his impersonations, and between fines and prison time, he really did not profit at all (Gillespie 51). This prompts the question, what is the animating force behind his painstaking performances?

It is not the money. It is not the power. It's contempt. We learn throughout the film that Street is a toiling abyss of Black anger. His invisibility is his joy and freedom, but it is also his nightmare. In a 1985 interview, which inspired Harris to make the film, the real Doug Street soberly observes, "The nightmare part of it is there is no me, no Doug

Street in the picture. I'm the sum of my parts, but all my parts are somebody else. Where's me, man?" (qtd. in Gillespie 82). In the film, Harris doesn't tell us where the real Doug Street is – there is no dramatic ending in which he looks into the mirror and finds himself. All we ever have is his anger, his desire to haunt his white compatriots with a show they will never forget. Street's dissociation seems to come from his feeling of formlessness, which is also the source of his power, however transient. To possess it, Street must remove himself from his body, which is routinely stripped of agency. Street is pinned down in two crucial moments: when he is assaulted by a belligerent racist and when he is arrested at the end of the film, his handcuffed body captured in slow motion, a final freeze frame on his smug grin (00:27:10; 01:30:45–01:31:21). Racist violence and the power of the state are all that interact with his 'nasty Black hands.'

Such moments have a long history. Songwriter, rapper, and actor Daveed Diggs speaks to this violent history and its existential consequences with his experimental hip-hop group Clipping, who reveal the grotesque elements of American culture through the lens of horror. Their 2020 song "Pain Everyday," from the 2020 album *Visions of Bodies Being Burned*, we hear the ghosts of Black victims of lynching. In the first verse, Diggs spits:

Death wasn't really the worst part
 Time spent floating above is
 Body done, that's when the hurt start
 They call it passing, that's not it, they lying (0:00-0:13)

Diggs communicates the pain of racialized violence to a culture that shies away from its history. By invoking this spectral, floating apparition detached from Earth, he emphasizes that it is not just the loss of the body that matters. It is the mutilation of one's personhood, identity, and form, both in the act of violence and in how we distort its memory. This kind of death is not a natural 'passing,' but the intentional eradication of human life. What remains for Diggs's narrator, just like Street, is anger. "Pain Everyday" is a call to haunt, a call to make killers and their accomplices remember. "Make one scream until she prays," Diggs commands. (0:38-0:44). This raw motivation is all over the song but is spelled out in the third verse, when Diggs hisses:

All the living sweat in the afterlife
 But ain't nothing after life but the pain from the way you died
 And something reminiscent of hunger
 But if you had a stomach only satiated by making somebody run (1:53-2:05)

These words haunt me, and I wonder if this is the sort of hunger Harris embraces in his portrayal of Doug Street: one so deep it transcends the logic of revenge. Even in private moments, the show must go on. Perhaps the tensest scene in the film comes close to its

ending. Street sits disaffected and frustrated on his couch before pulling a wooden mask off the wall behind him. He dons the mask, pulls out a knife, and calls his young daughter into the room. Street runs the blade up her arm, creeps in circles around her, and cuts his own arm, justifying, "I am so screwed up. I'm so insane." He rests the knife on his daughter's throat, appearing to draw blood, when his wife storms into the room and says, "What do you think you're doing? I'm sick and tired of trying to get these stains out" (01:21:10–01:25:08). The blood was fake. This, too, was just a game. Even Street's most violent impulses, the depths of his pathology, are not real. The wooden mask Street dons is hung next to a map of Africa, tying Street's pretend savagery to the stereotype of African savagery held by whites. As Gillespie puts it, "the mask is a symbol of dispossession and objectification The ritualized play of Street's mimed psychosis parodies the pathologization of a savage continent" (62). Street's disturbing performance transforms a tribal mask into one of Western theatricality. Afflicted and haunted by the stereotypes and prescriptions of Blackness, he becomes a ghost of these inheritances.

If it's contempt that animates Street and Diggs's spectral narrator, that contempt must arise from somewhere. Turning to the opening words of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, I see a clear source of inspiration for Harris: "I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind" (Ellison 1). Street's hunger, contempt, and constant boredom come from the fact that he cannot write past Ellison's first line. "I am Chameleon Street" is almost a direct allusion to "I am an invisible man," but Street as performed by Harris never openly declares his substance. Rarely does he fight the assumption of his formlessness, nor does he resist the impulse to assimilate to all the contradictory poles of Black stereotypes. Instead, he throws up his hands.

The closing credits, which serve as an extension of the film's themes, clearly show Harris's refusal to craft a neat ending. A montage of the film's characters disjointedly retells the traditional fable of the frog and the scorpion: the frog promises to carry the scorpion across a raging river, but the scorpion still stings him as they cross, dooming them both to drown. The film's characters, framed head-on against a stark black background, repeatedly ask "Why?" The soft music stops. Street appears on screen, cigarette smoke obscuring his face, and indifferently replies, "Well, because it's my character" (01:31:22–01:34:37). That final image of Street is backlit, making his face nearly indecipherable in the harsh lighting and cloud of smoke around him. Harris leaves us with a limitless impression of Street, equal parts powerful and horrifying. His body, though imprisoned in shadow, cannot be contained by one description or diagnosis.

Though there is hunger, a longing for shape and form, the forms consistently available to the Black body only serve to debase and limit. And so Street's nightmare is also his resistance. Like Diggs's ghostly narrator, his defiance of the body is strength; it is revenge. But this interpretation feels almost unsavory remembering Diggs' question in "Pain Everyday." He laments in the chorus, "The body hurts, see the body gone / So who body makes up for all the wrongs done to bodies?" (00:45–00:52). We see the bodies gone—Street's body is ephemeral and obscure on our screens. We hear the mumbling voices caught on EVP recorders, a ghost hunting tool, that make up the sonic environment of "Pain Everyday"—a reference to the restless victims of America's appalling history (2:07-2:10).

For years, I've had my screens flooded by white allies and racists alike posting videos and pictures of Black death—mutilated, shot, uncomfortably material, unbearably real. When I used to look in the mirror, I would place my fingers on my face, almost expecting them to crack through as if my skin was made from wafer paper. I confess to my laughter, to my disappearance into the background, my failure to resist, to understand the vitality coursing within me. In the face of this violence, Harris tells us something so important: no matter how scary it is, you are not only a body; you may morph, perform, and make art that's strange and hard to pin down.

To some degree, the near invisibility of Harris as a filmmaker is a testament to this message's subversive power. Harris, after the release of *Chameleon Street*, was in many ways ignored by the film industry. Despite winning the Grand Jury Prize at the 1990 Sundance Film Festival, the film could not secure a significant endorsement from anyone—critics, producers, distributors, or audiences. Critics called the film contrived, nonsensical, and derivative of impersonator narratives like *Zelig* (Gillespie 73). The film's existential and nuanced racial themes were ignored, and *Chameleon Street* was not considered a constitutive part of Black cinema for years. It was too coarse and weird—simultaneously a comedy, a psychological thriller, and a sleek art film. *Chameleon Street*, in all its evasiveness and irreverence, rebels against the idea of Blackness as a monolithic category or even as a reality of the body at all. And thus, it was not seen. It faded into such invisibility it can be found uploaded to YouTube by Gillespie, titled simply "Wendell's Dream."

The film industry likewise refused to see Harris, one critic writing, "He has much of what it takes to be an interesting filmmaker—sophistication, intelligence, originality and wit. Now all he has to do is learn how to make movies" (Hinson qtd. in Gillespie 71). And so, like the character he plays, Harris's dream became a nightmare. Black filmmakers in our culture are asked to make Black movies—films that describe and explain social realities and racial politics. White directors are never held to the same standard to speak to a monolithic 'white experience.' Critics did not seem to notice the

layered themes about the performative nature of race – they wanted Harris to perform in the ways they could comprehend, the ways they were willing to see.

I wonder what Black art could be if it was not so often limited and labeled. I laugh when I think of my teenage self, gripping a Zora Neale Hurston novel, wondering if I was Black enough. If my experience was adequate, authentic, real. When the boys shouted slurs and mockingly imitated rappers, I didn't know if there was anything I could be except invisible. I wish I'd had Harris's art then: to speak to all my contradictions and to turn insecurities into ideas. Art is not a body. A film is not a body. And if we live, are loud, and accept our myriad inconsistencies to create and explore, we are not just a body, either, no matter what our country, politicians, or police try to tell us.

Works Cited

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