



# US POLITICS IN *THE PURGE* FRANCHISE: CHALLENGING THE COLONIALITY OF POWER

LIZBETTE OCASIO-RUSSE  
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY, CORPUS CHRISTI

While the United States has come a long way since lawful slavery and colonial conquest, it's no secret there are still hierarchical power structures that benefit some and oppress others. This is exactly what *The Purge* franchise rages against by sharply commenting on the current sociopolitical state of American society, one that is still characterized by racial and economic oppression rooted in Euro-centered colonialism and US imperialism.

In his essay "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality" (2010), Aníbal Quijano argues that although,

Eurocentered colonialism, in the sense of a formal system of political domination by Western European societies over others, seems a question of the past... if we observe the main lines of exploitation and social domination on a global scale today... it is very clear that the large majority of the exploited, the dominated, the discriminated against are precisely the members of the 'races,' 'ethnies,' or 'nations' into which the colonized populations were categorized in the formative process of that world power, from the conquest of America and onward. (168-169)

That is, though colonialism as a formal system of political domination is technically gone, remnants of its oppressive power structures remain in full operation maintaining those once deemed inferior at the bottom of the international hierarchy of power. This is what Quijano refers to as the "coloniality of power" and what *The Purge* cinematic franchise critiques. Informing the public of the coloniality of power through a popular horror franchise can not only function to unmask social injustice but also empower the affected communities to act against it. In exposing the coloniality of power and representing those most affected by it as resilient, aware, and able to fight back, *The Purge* franchise serves as a disruption to the colonized imaginary.

The popularity of *The Purge* cinematic franchise spanning five films the first of which was released in 2013 has ensured the dissemination of the franchise's



sociopolitical critique, and this popularity can be attributed in large part to producer Blumhouse whose small budget/top grossing model produced some of the most successful American horror franchises and films of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Also adding to the film and commentary's appeal is the fact that the horror genre is especially adept at speaking to contemporary issues because of its use and manipulation of anxiety, fear, and the repressed/uncanny (to borrow a term from Freud), as well as horror's tendency to rely on psychoanalytical theory. According to D. L. White in his essay "The Poetics of Horror: More than Meets the Eye" (1971), "The fears in horror films rise from sociological as well as psychological themes" (137). White claims, "More realistic, more contemporary horror films... can help people deal with such fears, can help both those who make the films and those who experience them to face and... see more clearly not only the nature of the fears brought on by contemporary society but the nature of that society itself" (144). Horror films like those that form part of *The Purge* franchise address contemporary issues such as systemic racism, allowing their creators and consumers to reflect on these issues. *The Purge* franchise is set in a near future where those in power enact unconstitutional legislation that strips American citizens of their rights and compromises their safety all in the name of "progress;" it represents a climate that resonates with recent political developments and very real fears underlying current political discourses. *The Purge* franchise serves as a warning, however hyperbolic, of what the current sociopolitical dynamics in the US could lead to.

Within its first five minutes, the first installment of the film series—James DeMonaco's *The Purge* (2013)—demonstrates the coloniality of power in the US through a radio soundbite that states that the poor cannot afford to protect themselves during the annual, twelve-hour Purge when all crime, including murder, is legal. Only the wealthy can afford to evacuate the country or buy the expensive security systems that supposedly guarantee safety during the Purge. This, of course, is part of the plan: the true goal of the Purge is to get rid of the strata that those in power consider the undesirables of society, the racially and economically oppressed. The Purge was suggested by the fictional New Founding Fathers of America (NFFA), the dominant political party, as a response to a period of crisis due to recessions, a full market crash, debt, multiple wars, and a significant dollar devaluation caused a radical increase in crime and poverty. Clearly, this unethical and unconstitutional solution only benefits the wealthy elite. The Purge is yet another form of subjugating and controlling the "other," it's an extension of colonialism that reflects the inequality and skewed power structures intrinsic to US society.

The plot of *The Purge* (2013) argues for resistance to oppressive power structures. The plot represents this through the persecution of a Black, supposedly homeless man (Edwin Hodge) that is harbored by the affluent James Sandin (Ethan Hawke) and his family. A gang of privileged, White individuals soon arrive at Sandin's doorstep



demanding that he give up the man because “he is nothing but a dirty, homeless pig” who defended himself when they attempted to rightfully execute him (00:34:26); in their eyes, the homeless man only exists to fulfill their need to purge society from “inconvenient” individuals. The intent of the Purge is evident in their treatment of the man, to eradicate those people considered inferior by the White, wealthy elite. This echoes oppressive and unethical theories of racial inferiority that were created to oppress the “other” during the process of colonization and Western imperialism. Through this plotline, the film criticizes the coloniality of power that allows for racial and class-based oppression to persist.

The film installments that follow show people organizing against the Purge and the NFFA thus arguing for the need to confront and dismantle oppressive power structures rooted in colonialism. By the time the Purge happens in the second film—DeMonaco’s *The Purge: Anarchy* (2014)—a resistance group including none other than the houseless man from the first film (or “Bloody Stranger,” as he’s credited) has already organized and is planning to fight back. Carmelo Johns, a Malcolm X-type of character, is the leader of this resistance and, ultimately, the salvation of the anti-purgers that end up being auctioned off as human prey. In the third film—DeMonaco’s *The Purge: Election Year* (2016)—the “Bloody Stranger” is finally named as Dante Bishop, and resistance turns to activism. Bishop, with the help of multiple volunteers, establishes a secure emergency service center and shelter for those who cannot afford to protect themselves during the Purge. One of the presidential candidates, Senator Charlie Roan, is a staunch advocate for the elimination of the Purge, pointing out that “more low-income people are killed during the Purge than anyone else. The money generated from the Purge lines the pockets of the NRA and insurance companies” (00:06:57). The result of this opposition to the NFFA is a murder attempt on Senator Roan; one that, though unsuccessful, gets her and her security stranded outside on Purge night. It’s thanks to Bishop and a shop owner and employee from a low-income neighborhood that Senator Roan can survive the night.

The fourth film—Gerard McMurray’s *The First Purge* (2018)—takes us back in time to the Purge’s trial run before its nationwide implementation. It’s conducted as an experiment contained to Staten Island, New York; an interesting choice considering that the area is known by New Yorkers as the “Forgotten Borough.” The film focuses on the activity in Park Hill, a predominantly Black and Latinx low-income neighborhood where people must decide whether to stay for the hefty prize of \$5,000—plus extra for further participation in the Purge—or leave and ensure their safety. Evidently, most of the impoverished inhabitants decide to stay because of the economic incentive. One of the protagonists, Nya (Lex Scott Davis), explains, “They have monetized and incentivized murder... wealthy areas are already clearing, but the NFFA knew that we, the impoverished, would stay if there was monetary gain... this is another way of keeping Brown and Black people down” (00:09:14). Essentially, what



the NFFA has done is legalize the mass genocide of low-income minorities, rendering extrajudicial practices “legal” for a limited period of time. It is Dmitri (Y’lan Noel), the neighborhood’s big drug lord, that saves the day when he discovers mercenaries disguised as civilians have been hired to make it look like people are participating in the Purge. Dmitri exclaims, “The NFFA been putting all this shit [weaponry] in the streets... hoping that we’d off each other... and we didn’t... now they’re stoking the fire in another mother-fuckin’ way... There’s a lot of good people out there we are going to have to protect now...” (01:07:17). Not only did the targeted civilians from low-income minorities not satisfactorily participate in the Purge but the neighborhood was also saved by the people the experiment was meant to eradicate.

The fifth installment of the franchise—*The Forever Purge* (2021)—returns us to the present where the Purge that had been eliminated by Senator Roan after her presidential victory at the end of the third film has been reinstated, and one night a year is no longer enough for Purge supporters. The film opens with romantic partners Adela (Ana de la Reguera) and Juan (Tenoch Huerta) illegally crossing from Mexico to the US in search of a better life, the American dream. Four minutes into the film after Adela and Juan successfully enter the US, the opening credits roll with fictional news voiceovers commenting on the influx of illegal immigrants into the US. The opening credits end with the question, “is the [American] dream still alive?” (00:04:13) immediately establishing the focus of the film’s critique: the fallacy of the American dream. After sirens announce the end of the annual Purge, Adela, Juan, and Juan’s employer Dylan (Josh Lucas)—a wealthy white rancher—are horrified to discover the purging has not desisted. Forever Purgers take to the streets preaching about the purification of the US and their desire to rid the country of any “foreigners” clearly referring to immigrants and people of color. Anyone who does not support the Forever Purge is killed. The protagonists spend the rest of the film trying to find safety and, eventually, must cross the border into Mexico when the NFFA and the military fail to pacify the Forever Purge spreading across the US like a virus. Suddenly, Mexico is the land of salvation and the US is the land of broken dreams and uncontained violence from which citizens must flee. The film closes the same way it opens except the fictional news voiceovers comment on the millions of “American Dreamers” illegally crossing over into Mexico seeking refuge (1:34:39). This role reversal between Mexico and the US is key to the film’s commentary. By presenting Mexico the way the US has historically presented itself—as the land of possibilities and salvation—and the US the way it’s historically characterized Mexico—a land of violence and corruption the people of which are a threat—the film’s creators argue that the American dream is dead and perhaps only ever existed for a select, privileged few. The final shots of the film show the US on fire recalling philosopher, activist, and scholar Cornel West’s warning in the introduction of *Race Matters* (1993): “Either we learn a new language of empathy and compassion, or the fire this time will consume us all” (8). That is, if hatred



continues to dictate policy and social interactions, the consequences of that hatred will destroy the US the same way the NFFA were destroyed by their own [hateful] creation.

*The Purge* franchise employs hyperbole to get its point across, but the events that lead to the Purge are not hyperbolic. Recession, war, economic crisis, and rising crime and poverty rates are all things Americans are currently suffering and yet, social injustice persists through processes like redlining and voter suppression measures like Senate Bill 1<sup>1</sup> in Texas. *The Purge* franchise argues that the disenfranchised can and should challenge the status quo established by Euro-centered colonialism and U.S imperialism thus serving as a wake-up call from the mind-dumbing matrix that is the coloniality of power in the U.S. In exhibiting resistance to social injustice, *The Purge* films instill and support the idea of political dissent that actively works to encourage the underprivileged, eradicate elitism, and disrupt the coloniality of power.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- DeMonaco, James, dir. 2013. *The Purge*. Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2013. DVD
- DeMonaco, James, dir. 2014. *The Purge: Anarchy*. Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2014. DVD.
- DeMonaco, James, dir. 2016. *The Purge: Election Year*. Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2016. DVD.
- DeMonaco, James, dir. 2018. *The First Purge*. Universal City, CA; Universal Pictures, 2018. DVD.
- Gout, Valerio G., dir. 2021. *The Forever Purge*. Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2021. DVD.
- Quijano, Anibal. 2007. "Coloniality and modernity/Rationality." *Cultural Studies* 15(3): 168–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353>
- Ura, Alexa. 2021. "Gov. Greg Abbott signs Texas voting bill into law, overcoming Democratic quorum breaks." *Texas Tribune*, September 21, 2021. <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/09/01/texas-voting-bill-greg-abbott/>
- West, Cornel. 1993. *Race Matters*. Boston: Beacon Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Alexa Ura in her article for the Texas Tribune, "SB 1 makes up Republicans' third attempt to pass a far-reaching law that restricts how and when voters cast ballots . . . It specifically targets voting initiatives used by diverse, Democratic Harris County, the state's most populous, by banning overnight early voting hours and drive-thru voting — both of which proved popular among voters of color last year."



White, Dennis L. 1971. "The Poetics of Horror: More than Meets the Eye." *Cinema Journal* 10(2): 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1225234>

SUGGESTED CITATION: Ocasio-Russe, Lizbette. 2022. "US Politics in *The Purge* Franchise: Challenging the Coloniality of Power." *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published November 7.