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Get In and *Get Out*: White Racial Transformation and the US Gothic Imagination

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Abstract: This article examines the Gothic trope of White racial transformation in Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee* (1836) and Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017). These seemingly disparate texts both feature White men who turn Black via supernatural body hopping or experimental surgery. In these texts, Blackness acts as an emotional and material resource for White characters that perversely bolsters Whiteness by escaping it. Little-known outside of antebellum specialisms, *Sheppard Lee* enhances our understanding of race in the Gothic by considering why Whiteness may be rejected in the early nation. Written in the context of blackface minstrelsy, the novel transforms downwardly mobile Sheppard into an enslaved man as a respite from the pressures of economic success. *Get Out* builds on its nineteenth-century precursors by showing the Black body as a desired and necessary vessel for the "post-racial" White American self, who swaps their physical Whiteness for Blackness to extend or enhance their own life, turning Black men into extensions and enforcers of White middle-class culture. In uniting these texts through the lens of critical Whiteness studies, this article argues that White racial transformation is a long-held tradition in the US Gothic that not only expresses White desires and anxieties, but itself transforms in each specific historical racial context.

Keywords: blackface minstrelsy; Robert Montgomery Bird; Jordan Peele; *Get Out*; *Sheppard Lee*; Whiteness; racial transformation; the Gothic; White supremacy

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1. Introduction

The White American Gothic tradition fears and exploits the possibility that White people could become Black.[1] As Toni Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), the American cultural imagination is "haunted" by Blackness—characters or symbols—which provides "the vehicle by which the [White] American self knows itself as not enslaved but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny" (Morrison 1992, p. 52). White writers rhetorically or figuratively refer to Blackness to create the White citizen's Other, who is everything the White citizen fears becoming: irrational, savage, and dependent. In more recent Afropessimist scholarship, the Black figure does not just represent states of unfreedom and subjection but "[has] been ejected from the category of human" itself and removed from the concept of Being entirely (Walcott 2021, p. 7; Warren 2018, p. 5). To encounter Blackness is to therefore encounter the nonexistence against which humanity can be positioned.

The White American Gothic has frequently operated at "a more conservative slant" where an abhorred and monstrous Blackness overcomes containment to threaten the White self (Höglund 2014, p. 4). Black or blackened figures in Gothic writing confront White readers with the terrifying possibility that they will be victims of savage violence, disorder, and corruption. At the same time, White readers vicariously experience Black dispossession, exclusion, and nonexistence through reading common Gothic scenarios of bondage, imprisonment, and subjugation. For example, Edgar Allan Poe's works depict Black figures as brutes threatening White order, and they subject White male characters

to incarceration, exploitation, and manipulation reminiscent of the treatment of African Americans (Forbes 2013; Murray 2021, pp. 97–120).[2] Furthermore, the fear that Whiteness could be contaminated by Blackness is an undercurrent running through many early US Gothic texts. In *Gothic Passages*, Justin Edwards "locate[s] racial ambiguity in the foreground of gothic expression"; both darker-complexioned White characters and Black characters passing as White threaten the supposed certainty and fixity of racial categories and suggest that a repressed Blackness could erupt and (re)claim seemingly White characters (Edwards 2003, p. xxiii). Going beyond these questions of ambiguity, a small but significant corpus of texts features White men and women who cross the color line by literally turning Black using makeup, the supernatural, or scientific experiments; these transformations actualize the possibility that the "me" of the White citizen could temporarily or permanently become the "not-me" Black non-citizen (Morrison 1992, p. 52).[3]

This article examines the trope of White-to-Black transformation in Robert Montgomery Bird's Gothic comedy novel *Sheppard Lee* (1836) and Jordan Peele's satirical horror film *Get Out* (2017). These seemingly disparate texts with remarkably different politics both feature White Americans who turn Black via supernatural body hopping or experimental transplant surgery. On the surface, these texts invert arguments about the Gothic's relationship with Blackness. Rather than representing what the White citizen wishes to avoid, the Black figure is instead desired and occupied for their outsider status or physicality. By featuring White characters not horrified by turning Black, these examples embrace what the Gothic has traditionally desired to separate or contain. However, as this article demonstrates, this taking on of Blackness is still an expression of White control and self-determination, which maintains Blackness as a position of subjection and manipulation. These texts invert the White Gothic terror of becoming the racial Other, but show that these transformations remain in service to White identity politics. For Bird, his protagonist Sheppard, and Peele's White characters, Blackness acts as a creative, emotional, and material resource that perversely bolsters Whiteness by escaping it.

Little-known outside of antebellum specialisms, reading *Sheppard Lee* in a critical Whiteness studies framework enhances our understanding of Gothicized race by considering why Whiteness may be rejected in the early nation. Sheppard's journey into Blackness is not only a leap into Blackness but a leap *out of* Whiteness. Written in the context of blackface minstrelsy, the novel's body-hopping plot transforms downwardly mobile Sheppard into the enslaved Tom as a respite from the pressures of White economic success. Bird's caricatured depiction of Tom renders Blackness a fantasy state that contrasts with the reality of White civic duty, and he transforms a Gothicized encounter with Blackness into a comedic one. At the same time, the prospect of movement from one body into another articulates fears of unstable social hierarchies and a growing free Black population. Ending the transformation with an unsuccessful slave revolt and Tom's gruesome death, Bird seeks to stop Black social mobility and alleviate anxieties of White oppression.

Get Out builds on its nineteenth-century precursors by showing the Black body as a desired vessel for the White American who swaps their physical Whiteness for Blackness via transplant surgery, in order to extend or enhance their own life. Peele and scholars have noted that the film's body horror is clearly resurrecting the histories and legacies of chattel slavery (Keetley 2020; Lauro 2020; Briefel 2021; Corredera 2023).[4] As Maisha Wester discusses in *African American Gothic* (2012), the contemporary Black Gothic is often concerned with a "temporal collapse" where "traumatic and destructive aspects of the past [namely slavery] disrupt the present", either through literal ruptures in time or symbols and rhetoric of chattel slavery (Wester 2012, p. 27). In the second half of this article, I show how earlier US cultures of White racial transformation resonate and break through in *Get Out*, a Black horror satire that resurrects nineteenth-century tropes and politics in its critique of "post-racial" White liberalism. Whereas Sheppard sees turning Black as an escape, Peele's White characters see it as an opportunity to extend Whiteness. In a "post-racial" age, the White Armitage family and their friends can vote for Obama and support interracial relationships, yet through their grotesque experiments, they create a

set of "White" Black Americans, by turning Black men and women into extensions and enforcers of White middle-class culture. Peele's return to nineteenth-century violence and rhetoric demonstrates the persistence of anti-Black exploitation and shows that the White desire for Blackness has not strayed from its anti-abolitionist blackface roots. Unlike Bird, Peele condemns these transformations and turns the gaze back onto White characters, scrutinizing Whiteness and transforming it into the monstrous Other that hides behind a façade of liberalism. *Get Out* rejects liberal ideas that cross-racial empathy and antiracism can be achieved via White racial transformation, instead using body horror to show how an extreme example of leaving Whiteness contributes to White supremacist politics.

In uniting these texts through the lens of critical Whiteness studies, this article argues that White racial transformation is a long-held tradition in the US Gothic that not only expresses White desires and anxieties, but itself transforms in each specific historical context to serve different political ends. Reading *Sheppard Lee* and *Get Out* together shows how the White Gothic fear of turning Black has been inverted and reconfigured to serve both conservative and progressive politics. These two cultural objects show convergences in the US Gothic tradition where White-to-Black transformation is a vehicle both for White Americans to bolster their own identity and for writers and filmmakers to express their fear and anger regarding US racial politics.

2. Critical Whiteness Studies and Taking off Whiteness

Critical Whiteness studies employs three modes of the "critical": one, to draw attention to Whiteness as a site of critique; two, to criticize structures of Whiteness in an antiracist framework; and three, to be critical—both necessary and urgent—for our understanding of how Whiteness operates and dominates today. The initial aim of critical Whiteness studies, as put forward by Black writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, and bell hooks before the field had a name, has been to invert the expectation that Whiteness—and male Whiteness specifically—is the invisible yet expected default position in society against which all other groups stand out, particularly Black people (Du Bois [1920] 2017; Baldwin [1984] 2010; Hooks 1992). But Whiteness is not an absence of identity, and the assumption of being the default position is a form of identity politics itself. To appear as unmarked, when all other groups are marked (by race, gender, disability, sexuality), is still a distinct category. George Yancy isolates Whiteness in *Look, a White!* (2012), arguing that making Whiteness visible "returns to white people the problem of whiteness" so they can recognize the social and material conditions that produce Whiteness as an identity, conditions already visible to—and understood by—non-White groups (Yancy 2012, p. 6).

Whiteness is not an innate biological condition, but a social construct: not simply a phenotype, but as Celine Levine-Rasky writes "a way of 'doing identity'" (Levine-Rasky 2013, p. 18). Whiteness is phenomological; it is a way of being in the world, "an orientation that puts certain things within reach". Specific ways of being that she terms "styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits" become White, for example, the assumption that White people are at home in professional spaces, as Sara Ahmed illustrates through her experience of the university (Ahmed 2007, p. 154). In other words, Whiteness is the practice of personal values and behaviors by people of western European heritage that have come to be identified and maintained as White, including autonomy, industry, rationality, and respectability. In an early US context, Whiteness meant not being a piece of property but nevertheless became a property in itself that White Americans could use to assert their dominance over people of color and enjoy exclusive rights.[5]

Critical Whiteness studies has often focused on the construction and maintenance of Whiteness, but has paid less attention to the reverse, that if Whiteness can be established within or bestowed upon groups, then its loss or removal can be threatened. What do we find out about Whiteness when it is lost, challenged, negated, or taken off? If Whiteness is an identity that operates beyond skin color alone, then it is open to being malleable and shifting. In the nineteenth century, people could be considered non-White even if they were pale-complexioned Europeans: Germans, the Irish, Italians, and Jews gradually

became White through changing attitudes that non-Anglo populations could possess White personal and civic values, whereas poor rural White groups have been described as "not quite white" and "white trash" for lacking respectability or industriousness (Wray 2006).[6] Characters in early US literature could lose their Whiteness by rejecting or failing to uphold the aforementioned "White" values. Blackness acts as both a negative counterpoint to enfranchised White male citizenship and, as I outline further below, a desirable fugitivity from the demands of these White civic values.

Transformations away from Whiteness occur throughout US literature and culture. Recent scholarship on early US literature demonstrates that Whiteness could be taken off, lost, or negated due to environmental changes, cross-racial social relations, and behavioral traits, rendering characters as less than White and reinforcing Whiteness as a social construct that does not always have a stable or straightforward relationship with physical appearance or heritage (Chiles 2014; Fielder 2020; Murray 2021). Despite the fear of losing Whiteness, temporarily leaving Whiteness through acts of rhetoric served progressive politics. In abolitionist writing, readers of White-authored antislavery literature were encouraged to imagine themselves subjected to slavery and racism in order to see a shared civic and emotional connection with currently enslaved Black potential citizens. In Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), the White female reader is directly asked to put herself in the position of the fleeing enslaved mother: "If it were *your* Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader, tomorrow morning . . . how fast could *you* walk?" (Stowe 1998, p. 56). White abolitionists wanted their White readers to "merge through the imagination" with Black men and women in order to take an antislavery position (Castiglia 2008, p. 124). However, in order to come to the realization that everyone was the same, Black or White, Black suffering was transferred onto White observers; their own imagined pain and sense of doing good was privileged and Black people were further objectified, in what Saidiya Hartman notes as "the repressive effects of empathy" (Hartman 1997, p. 19). Putting oneself in the imagined position of unfreedom and discrimination was a rhetorical move that prioritized identification over empathy.

In the twentieth century, White Americans physically turning Black extended abolitionist identification rhetoric as the White observer now became a replacement. Investigative journalism sought to understand and relate the Black experience to White readers by sending White reporters undercover; examples include Ray Sprigle's *In the Land of Jim Crow* (1949) and John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961). In the comedy film *Soul Man* (Miner 1986), a White Harvard student uses tanning pills to take a scholarship reserved for Black applicants. Although initially envisioning an easy life, he eventually apologizes for his fraud after experiencing discrimination and objectification as a Black man himself. More recently, in the FX reality show *Black. White.* (2006), two families undergo lengthy hair and makeup procedures to live as another race, with the intention that the White family would gain an understanding of anti-Blackness by experiencing it themselves. As Alisha Gaines argues in *Black for a Day* (2017), the problem with these endeavors is that they remain exercises in identification rather than empathy, without any serious change in material race relations. White readers and viewers are asked to imagine this discrimination happening to them in order to understand Black experiences and "cure racism", but these endeavors fail "to acknowledge structural inequalities" of racism, and they privilege the White transformer's experience over the community they enter (Gaines 2017, p. 13).

While *Sheppard Lee* and *Get Out* share with these progressive White racial transformations the privileging of White feelings over Black experience, they reject the genre's (flawed) aspiration for cross-racial empathy. Neither Sheppard nor the Armitages want to know how it feels to be Black in order to tackle racism. Instead, Bird and Peele draw on US cultures of racial performance in which a caricatured and demeaned Blackness was inhabited for White gain. Blackface minstrels—as I discuss further in relation to *Sheppard Lee*—poached Black creativity and voices to aid their careers as White entertainers. For example, a later minstrel such as Al Jolson utilized his successful Black performances to shed his less-than-White Eastern European Jewish identity and enter mainstream US

culture. Paradoxically, turning Black made minstrels Whiter. Both *Sheppard Lee* and *Get Out* feature White characters who live as Black but have no regard for Black happiness, health, or life. Although *Sheppard Lee* is in part a slave narrative, Bird puts forward an anti-abolition and segregationist argument that is more interested in the economic and civic constraints placed on White men, and he employs blackface and race science tropes of Black men as lazy and childish. Likewise, the Armitage cult in *Get Out* want to live as young Black men and women, yet their violent means reduce Black people to their physical attributes and disavow their personhood. In each case, Black transformation prioritizes White feelings and serves as an emotional and material resource for White transformers to enact their desires: escaping the market economy, or taking another's physicality and youth. In US literature and culture, White racial transformation can take place via makeup, rhetoric, behavior, or kinship: the Gothic carries out this taking on of Blackness to the extreme. The exaggerated supernatural possibilities of body hopping and medical experiments in *Sheppard Lee* and *Get Out* spectacularly bring to light the sinister desire to leave Whiteness in order to exercise Whiteness and control Black bodies.

3. "What Had Become of Me?": White-to-Black Transformation in *Sheppard Lee*

Author, playwright, and doctor Robert Montgomery Bird repeatedly blurs and crosses the borders of Whiteness in his novels. In the late 1830s, Bird wrote a trio of racial transformation novels—*Sheppard Lee* (1836), *Nick of the Woods* (1837), and *The Adventures of Robin Day* (1839)—each of which makes political statements on racial tensions in early national America, and more specifically, White male desires to maintain social and economic power. In *Nick of the Woods*, a peaceful Quaker on the Kentucky frontier transforms into "The Jibbenainosay" who speaks fluent Shawnee, dresses in "Indian garments", and scalps Native Americans to avenge the murder of his family. Bird positions his "extreme metamorphosis" into a Native American as a result of this familial trauma (Bird [1837] 1967, pp. 342, 34). He frames Nick's revenge as an Indigenous act to show how far he has fallen from Christian Whiteness due to the Native violence inflicted upon him. In *Robin Day*, peripatetic Robin darkens his skin with tobacco and speaks an invented language to masquerade as a Hindu "Injun" mystic in an attempt to avoid prosecution for deserting the army during the War of 1812 (Bird [1839] 1877, p. 193). In between free Whiteness and enslaved Blackness, Robin occupies a racially liminal position that shows the stratification of race in the early nation and the precarity of poor itinerant White men.

While these latter two texts of the trio involve changes in appearance and behavior, they are cosmetic and social transformations within the traditions of historical romance and picaresque. Through a Gothic plot of reanimating the dead and spirit possession, the supernatural *Sheppard Lee* is much more experimental in imagining that a White man can live as a Black man for several months through a transfer of identity, and by suggesting that a merged racial interiority may be possible. Down-on-his-luck New Jersey landowner Sheppard enters and resurrects the bodies of five White men after his own accidental death—a gouty businessman, a scheming dandy, a miserly moneylender, a do-gooder Quaker, and a delusional plantation owner—but it is when he occupies the happy and childish enslaved Tom that he finds what Christopher Looby calls "his nearest approach to inner contentment" (Looby 2008, p. xxxvii). This transition clearly indicates Bird's anti-abolitionist stance that slavery is enjoyable and provides the most problematic yet fascinating invention of the novel: that a White man resides somewhere underneath the character of Tom, and that this White male citizen could identify with and enjoy enslavement, which challenges expectations of industrious and autonomous Whiteness. Rather than offering cross-racial solidarity, Bird's novel employs the loss of Whiteness to mock White male identity expectations, while seeking to protect White male social, legal, and economic privileges from the threat of Black progress in the new nation.

Sheppard Lee draws on several intersecting cultural forces in the 1830s, including medical and scientific experimentation, which returns in *Get Out*.[7] The most prominent cultural context for the novel is blackface minstrelsy: "the representational foundation" for

Sheppard's racial transformation (Doty 2016, p. 133). The hybrid-voiced minstrel, a White man claiming to speak as Black, directly influences Bird's imagination of overlapping and merging racial selves. *Sheppard Lee* draws its conflicting racial stereotypes of lazy yet cunning and childish yet violent Black men from raucous minstrel lyrics and performances, and both forms share the same racial politics in which enslaved Blackness acts as an escape from the economic and civic pressures on White working men. Bird transplants into *Sheppard Lee* the minstrel's performance of a Blackness aware of its underlying Whiteness. Whereas Doty views blackface as influencing Bird's satire on antebellum theories of embodiment to "reveal a more complex, ambivalent interaction between literature and medicine", I contend that Bird's ridicule is much more sweeping (Doty 2016, p. 153).[8] The result of a blackface-inspired plot is a novel that temporarily rejects White civic values by depicting a White experience of Black enslavement as a respite from the expectations of industry, autonomy, responsibility, and property ownership. Like the early blackface minstrel, Bird employs the imagined Black body as a creative resource to critique Whiteness but not demolish it or racial hierarchies.

On the 1830s stage, blackface performers both fortified and transgressed racial boundaries by claiming to speak as Black while advertising their Whiteness. Performers such as Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice were hugely popular for their portrayals of extravagant Black character runaway Jumping Jim Crow.[9] In "simultaneous[ly] drawing up and crossing racial boundaries", minstrels exaggerated African American appearance and speech to mark racial differences, but their performances repeatedly acknowledged they were a White man inhabiting Blackness (Lott 1993, p. 6). In "Jim Crow" (c. 1837), Rice explicitly reveals this hybrid voice to his audience, introducing himself as "My name is Daddy Rice, as you berry well do know,/And none in de Nited States like me, can jump Jim Crow", before moving into Jim's autobiographical song (Lhamon 2003, p. 131). In Rice's songs and plays, Jim Crow is a trickster figure, wheeling about multiple locations, outwitting both White and Black characters and inhabiting both abolitionist and anti-abolitionist positions.[10] More than simple caricature, the freewheeling minstrel simultaneously frightened White audiences with the possibility of African American violence or miscegenation, while attracting and fascinating them with his athleticism and fugitive potential.

In finding autonomy and agency within human property, the minstrel ridiculed the tenet that White male citizens possess the highest and truest freedom. An anti-establishment character, Jim Crow had more freedom than White men, who were expected to adhere to social norms of having a job, providing for their family, and contributing to the economic and political wellbeing of the nation. He dared audiences to "identify with a white man's embodied desire for blackness" (Lhamon 2003, p. 35). Most provocatively, in "The Original Jim Crow" (1836), Rice ironically teases, "I'm so glad dat I'm a niggar,/An don't you wish you was too". With both Rice and his audience aware that the minstrel's Blackness is an act, Jim boasts that White men "would spend every dollar,/If dey could be/Gentlemen ob color" to access his life of leisure, such is its desirability (Lhamon 2003, p. 98). However, Jim Crow dared audiences to desire Blackness, but not to live as either free or enslaved real Black men. As Doug Jones Jr. argues, Northern minstrelsy depended on ongoing chattel slavery to provide bodies for White performers to mimic. Invested in "black performance and political material, not black men", minstrelsy utilized the Black male figure as a creative resource to articulate desires to escape the constraints of Whiteness, yet enact White physical and political freedoms by controlling and containing performed Blackness, and subjugating real African Americans (Jones 2014, p. 66).

These contradictory political messages of the enslaved Black man shape Bird's portrayal of Blackness in the Virginia section of *Sheppard Lee*. At the end of Book 5 of the novel, a group of anti-abolitionists kidnap Sheppard's Quaker incarnation from Philadelphia and threaten to lynch him. In order to escape, he wills himself into the body of an enslaved man who died during the chase. When waking up as Tom, at first, Sheppard is well aware that he is a White man inside a Black body. Looking in the mirror, Sheppard examines his new body: a "mop of elastic wool" for hair; skin the shade of "ebony" or "smoked

mahogany"; broad red lips "of immense magnitude"; white eyes "as wide as plain China saucers" (Bird [1836] 2008, pp. 331–32). As Doty identifies, this description of Tom is taken from the minstrel's costume (Doty 2016, p. 147). These demarcations of racial appearance fed performances of blackface; illustrations of Rice show him with the same appearance as Tom, and Sheppard's "smoked mahogany" skin is an analogue for the burnt cork used to darken the minstrel's face. Bird's choice to use blackface costume reinforces Blackness as an imaginary state and extracts it further from the concrete realities of enslavement.[11] In viewing his new body, Sheppard reflects a mixture of curiosity and revulsion. On first seeing his new appearance, Sheppard fears a life of brutality and cruelty and "could think of nothing but cowhides and cat-o'-nine-tails, that were to welcome me to bondage": the unfreedom and subjection that the US Gothic tradition associates with Blackness. Later, divorced from this fear of violence, the Black body is captivating rather than captive; Sheppard recalls "having peeped at [my face] a dozen times or more, my ideas began to alter, and by-and-by, I thought it quite beautiful" (Bird [1836] 2008, pp. 332, 342). Like the spectacle of Rice's grotesque blackening, the Gothic horror of Sheppard's transformation is terrifying yet becomes fascinating for the antebellum reader, as Bird's narrative moves from the familiar experiences of White Philadelphia to the alien condition of Southern chattel slavery.

In Sheppard's transformation into Tom, race directly influences mental condition. Tom's lack of memory is a key example of this influence. Each transformation in the novel can be read as a wave, with the peaks at the start and end of each incarnation where Sheppard remembers his original self, and the troughs where he takes on the behaviors, memories, and speech of his new identity. For example, when becoming Skinner the moneylender, Sheppard observes "I became, as I have mentioned repeatedly before, the subject of every peculiarity of being that marked the original possessor". The body is a "mould" that retains the spirit of Skinner and then shapes the spirit of Sheppard (Bird [1836] 2008, pp. 212, 200). However, in the case of Tom, there are no memories to take on. Sheppard/Tom cannot even remember his own past, later finding himself unable to account for his unique ability to read an abolitionist pamphlet; he is demarcated from Sheppard's previous incarnations, who retain their memories to shape Sheppard. Sheppard posits, "perhaps my mind was stupefied–sunk beneath the ordinary level of the human understanding", preventing him from understanding he is enslaved (Bird [1836] 2008, p. 341). This explanation stems from an understanding of "the Ethiopian Race" as ranking far below "Caucasian" intellect, an idea prominent in early US race science such as the work of Samuel George Morton, Bird's "warm personal friend" and later colleague (Foust 1919, p. 123). Morton's claim in *Crania America* that Africans were "flexible" and could "yield to their destiny, and accommodate themselves with amazing facility to every change of circumstance" is manifest in Tom's presentism, as Sheppard claims, "I could not have been an African had I troubled myself with thoughts of anything but the present" (Morton 1839, p. 7, 87; Bird [1836] 2008, p. 341). The White writer sees Black Tom as evacuated of any sense of self, but this emptiness still functions as a mold in the novel due to Bird's plot mechanics that the body can hold and transfer identity: Tom's body has paradoxically remembered that he has no memories, imprinting onto Sheppard his racialized amnesia.

As the section progresses, Sheppard claims that he is sunk below Tom's sunken consciousness, unable to surface and realize he is a free White man. However, these claims are undermined as he starts to identify with the enslaved experience, including sentences where he is linguistically both Black and White. One day he recollects, "I found myself, for the first time in my life, content, or very nearly so, with my condition, free from cares, far removed from disquiet, and, if not actually in love with my lot, so far from being dissatisfied, that I had not the least desire to exchange it for another." (Bird [1836] 2008, p. 341) The repeated my and I of this sentence could refer to both men but the past tense of "found myself" indicates that Sheppard is not making a comparison in the present, when he writes his narrative, but at the time of which he is thinking. Sheppard asserts that Tom has no memory of his own life or Sheppard's lives, and Tom should have no comparison to make. Whereas, Sheppard's life and previous White transformations have

left him dissatisfied and in search of more exchangeable bodies to inhabit. He is present within Tom, even if he is not aware of this at the time, and so "my life" refers to his life as Sheppard, while "my lot" and "my condition" refer to Tom's enslavement.

In writing his own slave narrative for this part of his autobiography, Sheppard finds enslaved Blackness to be an emotional resource, one that offers respite from the pressures of economic success and civic conformity, which Bird paints as the true oppression of early US society. Bird's novel dares the middle-class White reader to identify as the disenfranchised and evacuated Black man and go against the axiom of citizenship tied to White social markers. Personal selfhood and citizenship were frequently figured in the language of property ownership in the early US, but Sheppard is happier in the opposite situation, as a piece of property without the worries of a citizen (Sklansky 2002, p. 37). Throughout the novel, Sheppard is a slacker who has no desire for the exertion of paid work, instead seeking treasure, inheritance, and marriage to secure prosperity. However, in Philadelphia, he is plagued by the stresses and "disquiet" of his transformations—the brewer has a nagging wife, the dandy is pursued by debt collectors, the moneylender's sons keep chasing their inheritance—that cannot be separated from the market economy and its pressures (Bird [1836] 2008, p. 341). Tom acts as a fantasy for Sheppard, Bird, and White readers to release themselves from these constraints; this minstrelized image of carefree Blackness is more compelling for Bird than the Gothic image of bound and suffering Blackness that he previously invokes.

Bird's portrait of idyllic plantation slavery enacts a common argument in anti-abolitionist writing that the White working man had a harder life than the enslaved Black one, and that the truly oppressed were White working men, from menial and manual laborers all the way to middling businessmen such as Sheppard's earlier transformations. In *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991), David Roediger writes that "Chattel slavery provided White workers with a touchstone against which to weigh their fears and a yardstick to measure their reassurance" (Roediger 1991, p. 66). Enslaved Black labor was a point of contradistinction for White workers; the language of slavery they used to describe themselves as "wage slaves" or "white slaves" articulated a belief that they suffered economically, yet were still racially superior and the only ones deserving of legal and political rights (Roediger 1991, pp. 65–74). Like abolitionist writing that asked White Americans to imagine being enslaved, the language of "white slavery" also privileged White feelings, but unlike this antislavery literature of identification, these rhetorical moves disavowed any attempt at empathy. While White workers used the language of slavery to emphasize their drudgery, they refused collaboration with real enslaved populations.

Sheppard's Black transformation demonstrates White desires to exist outside the market-driven pressures on individual men, and a "punching up" against White respectability politics, while at the same time presenting African Americans as a threat to White social and political freedoms and "punching down" against their potential social mobility (Jones 2014, p. 51). Ending this slave narrative portion of the novel with an unsuccessful violent rebellion and Tom's gruesome death, Bird seeks to limit Black social mobility and alleviate fears of White oppression and Black rule. Sheppard vigorously rejects Sheppard/Tom's sudden belief that "I was born to be a king or president" as "sentimental notions" and "stupid ambition". The image of a Black president is troubling enough for many antebellum White readers, but the prospect of a Black king threatens the entire democratic foundation of the nation when the enslaved wish to become masters themselves. Sheppard/Tom's aspiration that he has the freedom to be a "great personage" poses the threat of radical social fluidity through Black suffrage and economic gains (Bird [1836] 2008, p. 357). This fictive containment of Tom's social mobility and prospective Black governance allay Bird's personal anxieties over emancipation. In his personal notes, he is concerned over rises in the Black demographic and social mobility, exclaiming that by 1900, Black Americans could number "at least 10 of 66 millions!!" (Bird 1840). Firmly segregationist, in one letter to his brother, Bird calls for "no negroes in the country" and formulates a plan for a Black colony west of the Rocky Mountains, putting up physical barriers to replace existing legal

ones (Bird n.d.).[12] With such an aversion to sharing the commons with Black people, in *Sheppard Lee*, White-to-Black transformation can only be temporary in order to prevent the dissolution or overturning of racial hierarchies: the revolt ends in executions, and Sheppard jumps into the body of a nearby slave owner, which reinforces the hierarchy Sheppard/Tom has sought to upend.

In the novel's neat conclusion, Sheppard returns to his original body, his finances have been rescued, and he does not revisit the politics of abolition. His message at the end of the novel when he returns to his body—"to make the best of the lot to which Heaven has designed me, and to sigh no longer with envy at the supposed superior advantages of others"—is an appreciation of a stable identity and a fixed social position, which acts against Sheppard/Tom's aspirations of legal freedom and political rights (Bird [1836] 2008, p. 415). Sheppard's earlier enjoyment of slavery challenged the civic ideals of property, industry, and autonomy, but these tenets return once his privileged social position has been re-established. He moves back into his old self just as the blackface performer easily washes off the burnt cork and returns to their free White self. A novel that radically suggests a possible merged racial interiority returns to both its social and physiological borders. The Gothic terror of being enslaved becomes a comedic fantasy that in turn expresses White anxieties of both economic pressures and radical social mobility. Bird's Gothic experiment depends on a fantasy Blackness as an emotional and creative resource to critique White civic reality, yet the novel contains any unruly Blackness to secure White self-possession and superiority.[13]

4. "Black Is in Fashion": White-to-Black Transformation in *Get Out*

Peele's *Get Out* returns the history of White-to-Black racial transformation to its violent early nineteenth-century roots of using Black bodies as creative, emotional, and material resources: in this case, medical resources that can extend or improve the quality of White life. Young African American photographer Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) and his White girlfriend Rose (Alison Williams) travel to upstate New York to meet her family—neurosurgeon father Dean (Bradley Whitford), hypnotherapist mother Missy (Catherine Keener), and college student brother Jeremy (Caleb Landry Jones)—and to enjoy the family's annual party. After the family and their friends act increasingly overtly interested in Chris's presence, it is revealed they are a cult who kidnap young Black men and women before transplanting the brains of older White people into their bodies in a process called the Coagula. Chris is their next intended victim, with three existing victims encountered at the house: Andre, who the viewer sees kidnapped at the start of the film (revealed to be a cult member addressed as Logan); Georgina (revealed to be the Armitage grandmother Josie posing as the domestic help); and Walter (revealed to be the Armitage grandfather and cult founder Roman posing as a groundskeeper).

Aware of its nineteenth-century inheritances, the film is laced with references to chattel slavery before the shocking revelation. Chris's friend Rod worries he has been kidnapped into slavery just by visiting a White middle-class home ("white people love making people sex slaves and shit"); Jeremy comments on Chris's physique when trying to initiate a playfight at dinner ("with your frame and your genetic makeup . . . You'd be a fucking beast"); and an older female friend at the party ogles Chris and squeezes his arm as if appraising goods (Peele 2017). When Chris is put up as prize for the cult to win, the "hunt" or bingo game mirrors a slave auction; Chris is represented by a photograph of himself, and the auction block is replaced with the steps of a gazebo.[14] Through this rhetoric and symbolism, and the ensuing plot of Chris's escape, the film can be viewed as "a way to talk about slave revolt without talking about slave revolt" (Lauro 2020, p. 149). Peele also draws on the long slavery and post-slavery history of Black men and women routinely having their health compromised or bodies stolen for medical research, from medical graverobbing throughout the nineteenth century to supply anatomy lessons to the 1951 theft of Henrietta Lacks' cells for cancer research. Peele takes this history of violence one step further, where

the Black body is not just a repository of potential medical knowledge but a resource to be consumed and occupied in itself, just like in minstrelsy or Sheppard's body hopping.

Peele creates a work of critical Whiteness studies, critiquing the construction of White identity and its dependence on Black ownership. While its plot centers on leaving Whiteness, *Get Out* is ironically a film about White desire and power that fuels a supremacist horror. White transplantation in the film makes permanent the "love and theft" that Eric Lott identifies in blackface minstrelsy, where Black culture is desired and then stolen and inhabited through makeup (Lott 1993). Unlike blackface, however, the Black body in *Get Out* cannot be removed and White insiders live through their Black "cocoons" (Peele 2017). White men and women give up their social standing and own bodies in order to possess and control what they desire: the good health and skills of younger Black men and women. Before the operation, Chris's intended transplant recipient Jim says to him via video link, "some people wanna be stronger, faster, cooler"; the Armitage grandfather and cult founder Roman wants to run fast again (the audience is told he lost to Jessie Owens at the 1936 US Olympic trials); the Armitage grandmother Josie wants to be young and beautiful again; and blind gallery owner Jim wants Chris's artistic talent (Peele 2017). Black men and women act as the "cocoons" for this White cult to fully realize their desires. As Glenda Carpio incisively points out, the cult is "so invested in the black body that they practice racism without prejudice" (Carpio 2017). They possess Black bodies while espousing positive yet reductive views of Black beauty, athleticism, and creativity and never outwardly stating anything negative. Although admired for their skills and talents, Black men and women are seen as disposable enough in White society that they can be kidnapped without notice, and furthermore, due to the nature of the experiment, no one could report them as missing, as their bodies are alive and well. Like Sheppard's transformation and blackface minstrelsy, a new Black identity is taken on without empathy for Black lives.

In turning White characters Black, Peele makes a double move that speaks to White supremacist anxieties over demographics yet shows leaving Whiteness as another strategy bolstering Whiteness. At a surface level, the Coagula experiment is a science-fiction enaction of the Great Replacement narrative: the White supremacist conspiracy theory that White populations will be outnumbered and oppressed by non-White groups. Michael Feola outlines that this fear "rests at the macrodemographic level" in White supremacist rhetoric, which highlights the "'enhanced reproductive rates' of cultural newcomers" versus "the declining birth rates of the white population" to spur White Americans into reactionary resistance (Feola 2021, p. 535). *Get Out* makes *micro*demographic changes: outwardly, there are three fewer White people in the Armitage cult who the wider society assumes to have died of old age or illness (Logan, Josie, Roman), while three younger Black people (Andre, Georgina, Walter) take their places. However, under the Coagula process, there are three fewer Black people, who are kept subdued in "the sunken place" as White transplantees control their bodies. As Jim explains it to Chris, "[his] existence will be as a passenger" in his own body, unable to overpower his body's new White driver and only rarely surfacing due to shock or stress, for example, when Chris's camera phone flash rouses Andre from under Logan to plead "get out . . . get outta here!" (Peele 2017). Whereas Sheppard in *Sheppard Lee* is sunk and overwhelmed by the bodies he enters, Chris will be sunk within his own body. This privileging of a White mind over a Black one and the imprisonment of a Black mind compounds reading the film as a story of slavery as Chris is threatened with a loss of autonomy and self-determination. Perversely, through leaving Whiteness, Whiteness is extended as it invades, overwhelms, and enslaves a Black man. The Coagula demonstrates the White supremacist desire that "the dominance of the white subject *must be carried into the future*, no matter the demographic and cultural shifts that are underway in the space of the nation" (Feola 2021, p. 542). The Armitages even make these demographic and dermatological changes to themselves while still maintaining White power. They are so invested in their White power and control of others that they will on the surface reduce the number of White people if Whiteness can continue in Black bodies.

We can see the extension of Whiteness in the three successful transplantees: Andre/Logan, Josie/Georgina, and Roman/Walter. They use dated vocabulary and wear country club or military clothing, and they shun "urban dialogue" or gestures such as a fist bump, instead maintaining a respectable White self that unnerves Chris as completely alien (Peele 2019, p. 97). Like the contented slave of proslavery politics, on the outside, Logan, Georgina, and Walter appear to be Black men and women all happy in their position, and in primarily White company. When asked about his life as a Black man, Logan responds, "well, well, I find that the African American experience for me has been, for the most part, very good . . . the chores have become my sanctuary" (Peele 2017). In this group, Logan speaks as the minstrel with a double voice: on the outside, he talks of being Black, while to those in the know, he admits he is a White man enjoying his new body and being a homebody. However, unlike minstrelsy, the White transplantees create Black men and women who have no desire to disrupt or speak out against White respectability politics and who instead become part of the White genteel group. Differing from *Sheppard Lee*, where free civic Whiteness and enslaved imaginary Blackness are held in opposition, in *Get Out*, a White man such as Logan becomes the model Black man: pleasant, polite, respectable, servile, disavowing racism, and comfortable with White people. Racism seems to have been overcome in this group but only because they have molded Black men and women into extensions of White selves.

With a plot revolving around subterfuge and disguise, *Get Out* benefits from a second viewing. Multiple lines and gestures can be re-read as admissions of White colonization once the viewer knows the reveal, such as Logan's double-voiced experience of being Black in America, or Dean explaining that he "keep[s] bringing souvenirs back" from African trips (Peele 2017). However, Peele also asks his audience to pay close attention on their first watch to what Chris experiences in the open: Black life in "post-racial" liberal America. Interviewed in *The New York Times*, Peele stated the film "ask[s] a white person to see the world through the eyes of a black person for an hour and a half" (Zinoman 2017). His call for a White audience to take on a Black gaze resonates with bell hooks's argument that "black people watch white people with a critical 'ethnographic' gaze" (Hooks 1992, p. 167). Rather than ask his White viewers to imagine the film's violence happening to them, like the texts of White identification that I discussed earlier, Peele instead wants them to experience true empathy by seeing a different perspective that draws attention to White liberal politics and behaviors. Vanessa Corredera rightly notes that Chris experiences "microaggressions" as termed by Derald Wing Sue: everyday slights and snubs that include objectification and the singling out of someone's race (Corredera 2023, pp. 288–90; Sue 2010, p. 3). At the party, Chris encounters the awkward ignorance and disturbing objectification of the older party guests: bringing up Tiger Woods because he is another Black person they know; feeling his muscles and asking Rose whether sex is better with a Black man; and questioning him about being Black unprompted. These microaggressions demand a microscopic lens that closely attends to what is being said and done and the impact on Chris, in order to show the White viewer what they may normally overlook. Chris is seen as a passive absorber of each of these White gestures; in each of these scenarios, he is quiet, agrees, does not know what to say, or tries to leave.

On the surface, the Armitages are a respectable and educated liberal family. Dean apologizes for the optics of having Black servants ("I know how it looks") and follows it with the claim "I would have voted for Obama for a third time if I could" (Peele 2017). He fulfils clichés of the liberal in presenting himself as not racist: a self-awareness of what could be seen as racist, and a defense against that racism to show himself in support of racial equality. In his *New York Times* interview, Peele argued, "This movie is about the lack of acknowledgement that racism exists . . . there are still a lot of people of think: We don't have a racist bone in our bodies. We have to face the racism in ourselves", qtd in (Zinoman 2017). The Armitages and their friends live in a world where the worst thing you can be called is a racist. Even when Chris faces the macroaggressive violence of the Coagula, Jim reprimands him for thinking he is a racist: "please don't lump me in with that . . . I could

give a shit what color you are." (Peele 2017) This color blindness is another form of violence glossing over clear, targeted exploitation. The film depicts Gothicized White supremacist violence but its target is a liberal White America that disavows racism taking place. Outside the body horror plot, Chris is already being used by the White progressive father to prove his lack of racism, and for older friends to exoticize: these awkward encounters are a small horror movie in themselves. Underneath the façade of liberalism is the violence of the experiment but the façade is a form of violence itself, to which Peele repeatedly draws the audience's attention before revealing its monstrous underbelly.

5. Making Whiteness Monstrous in *Get Out*

Get Out is part of a long history of African American culture that returns the gaze onto White people by making Whiteness a Gothicized site of critique. Early African American writing depicts White supremacy as a monstrous terror. Maisha Wester argues early Black Gothic texts are an "inversion of the typical gothic color scheme" in portraying White villains and Black heroines, disturbing "the gothic genre's more fundamental ideologies" that Whiteness is innocent and Blackness evil, as discussed in the introduction (Wester 2012, p. 30). The Black Gothic tradition disrupts White American identity as the desirable pinnacle of civilization, which Morrison outlines in *Playing in the Dark* by transforming Whiteness into something ugly, undesirable, and savage. "Ethiop" (William Wilson) writes one of the first Black Gothic texts, in which the narrator comes across a historical manuscript titled, "Year 4000. The Amecans, or Milk White Race" (1859). This speculative document imagines the rise, fall, and disappearance of the Amecans, describing a race with

> *milk white skin*, and their faces were like the chalk of foreign hills, yea like unto the evil spirit; and their hair was long and straight and uncomely; . . . And their faces were long and narrow, and their noses sharp and angular, and their nostrils thin; so also were the lips of their sunken mouths, . . . They had sharp white teeth. (Ethiop 1859, p. 175)

The Amecans are very white, and very ugly. Reversing the Gothic gaze that frequently makes Blackness terrifying and inhuman, Ethiop makes Whiteness monstrous and grotesque: the Amecans are vampires, gorging on exploited Black labor. This Whiteness has degenerated into something less than human; the White Amecans are an amalgam of mineral and animal with their chalky skin, hard features, and piercing teeth. The milky whiteness of their skin should denote purity but is soured by their physical grotesqueness, cruelty, and greed. White skin and European features mark both Amecan and Amer*i*can moral degeneracy in trading Black people as human property.

Rose is the vampiric Whiteness at the heart of *Get Out*, and Peele closely scrutinizes and inverts her White feminine identity. She confounds audience expectations that she would join Chris in his escape and be the "Final Girl" who survives a horror movie's violence. As David Greven succinctly puts it, "Rose is the non-Final Girl in that she does not slay the monster but *is* the monster" (Greven 2021, p. 201). Rose's role is to lure Black boyfriends and girlfriends to the family home so they can be transplanted. Once this role has ended with Chris, her physical appearance drastically changes. Unaware that Chris is starting to escape, she sits on her bed, hair pulled away from her face, wearing masculine clothing, snacking on dry Froot Loops cereal, and drinking from a separate glass of milk—a common White supremacist taunt against lactose-intolerant Asian populations (Figure 1). Serendipitously, her outfit of a button-down white shirt and beige chinos matches the apparel of young White men at right-wing rallies such as Unite the Right in Charlottesville, which took place six months after the film's release. In "this beautiful, psychotic image", Rose is defeminized and desexualized; she is no longer the cool carefree progressive woman Chris knows but instead a reactionary adolescent in "stunted animation", Peele qtd in (Yamato 2017; Peele 2019, p. 181 n. 3). She sits on her childhood bed, her feminine features replaced with a gaunt skeletal face as she searches online for young Black athletes.

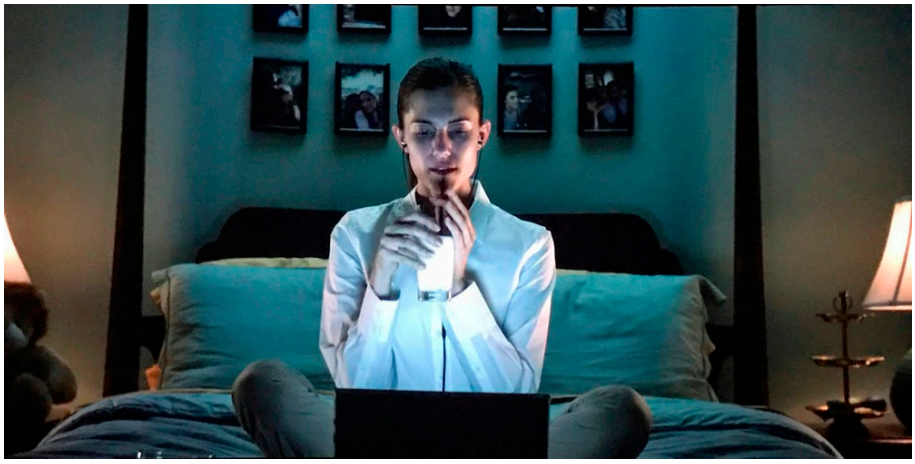

Figure 1. Rose Armitage (Alison Williams) as White supremacist predator at the end of *Get Out* (Peele 2017).

Rose's defeminized appearance here reflects the Armitages' asexual project: unlike most White supremacist projects, which are focused on White women reproducing White children, the Coagula involves transference, sustaining White life through inhabiting Black bodies. The White woman is centered, not as a site of reproduction but procurement; Rose is a hunter and her trophies (selfies with Black victims) line her bedroom wall. The glass of milk has clear maternal connotations, but like in Ethiop's text, this milk has lost its wholesomeness and sustenance. Rose's role is not to be a mother; her procreative role is to support the creation of Coagulated White men and women, and her soft and cool femininity is only to attract victims. Rose is another vampire, preying on Black men and women to take part in this asexual reproduction and sustain White lives. As Richard Dyer writes, vampirism "is often ascribed to those who are not mainstream whites" such as Jews, gay men, immigrants, and Southerners in order to distance White society from the destructive "libidinal need" of the vampire to simultaneously feed and reproduce (Dyer 1997, p. 210). However, through the scene's visuals, which emphasize Rose's Whiteness, Peele firmly returns the vampiric project of Black exploitation to its Anglo-American roots.

Rose's monstrosity is an extreme example of the real violence meted out by White women against Black men and women. Rose not only performs progressive antiracist womanhood but its underbelly: White female tears and White female victimhood (Hamad 2019). She is an example of what Emily Ruth Rutter calls "ally betrayal" where White people perform antiracist solidarity with Black people "only to deceive and exploit them, shoring up a White supremacist social order" (Rutter 2023, p. 28). As Rutter notes, after Rose hits a deer while driving to the house, she intervenes when a state trooper attempts to racially profile Chris ("you don't have to give him your ID . . . that's bullshit") (Peele 2017). This action gives the audience the impression that Rose will protect Chris from any family violence because she willing to put herself between a Black man and potential police violence. Later, claiming to lose her car keys—a ploy to get Chris to remain in the house—Rose cries as he shouts at her, a visage she quickly and easily swaps for a face of calm composure when she shows the keys and reveals her participation in the cult. Rose inverts the expectation that to remain composed is a performance to hide one's feelings. Here, her composure is not a mask but the reality, just as her cool calculating role as a hunter is her true self rather than the softness, care, and humor she displays as Chris's girlfriend. Even at the end of the movie when Chris escapes, Rose reverts to the racist stereotype of a vulnerable White woman facing Black male violence. Thinking the police have arrived, she calls out weakly "help, help" from the ground in the hope she can paint Chris as the aggressor and have him arrested, despite him acting in self-defense (Peele 2017). Away from the Coagula, Rose is still a threat to Chris's safety. She is another example of Peele using a Gothic trope to draw attention to anti-Black racism in contemporary America, just as the film's body horror

is an extreme example of the objectification Chris experiences as a Black man in White society. Peele deconstructs the image of the vulnerable White woman threatened by the blackened monster, instead showing the White woman as the monstrous predator herself, and furthermore one who performs vulnerability as part of her predation. Society is not full of Armitage cults, but Peele tells us there are Roses—including those who seem to be the most outwardly liberal and progressive White Americans—who will manipulate gendered White identity to escape responsibility and endanger Black men and women.

6. Conclusions

In uniting these seemingly disparate texts—a White-authored Gothic comedy and a Black-authored satirical horror—I have shown tropes of White racial transformation to have a long history that includes serving White supremacist aims and antiracist critique of those aims. Both Bird and Peele utilize White-to-Black transformation despite their opposing politics, evincing this trope as a potent means of addressing race in the US that reappears and transforms to suit specific political moments. Turning the figurative language of slavery into total physical racial transformation, Bird offers an escape valve from the pressures of White male citizenship and the market economy, while at the same time embodying—literally putting into a body—fears that White men could be oppressed and lose their valued social position. Bird employs the imagined Black body as a creative and emotional resource to critique White values but not White power. In *Get Out*, body horror violently resurrects the history of Black exploitation by again making real the White desire to inhabit and control Black bodies, and a White liberal elite perversely bolster White power by discarding their own bodies. Unlike Bird's White supremacist novel, Peele's film is a work of critical Whiteness studies itself, which returns the gaze to White America as an ongoing source of violence, objectification, and manipulation, and makes the White woman and white liberals monstrous. The film enters the Black Gothic canon, which carries out its own racial transformations and inverts assumptions of color and character. Reading these cultural objects together reveals how Whiteness is potently expressed in places through the literal loss of Whiteness and brings to light continuing White supremacist ideologies and resistance to them, both of which powerfully find form and fulfilment in the US Gothic imagination.

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Notes

1 Passages from this article on *Sheppard Lee* originally appear in Hannah Lauren Murray's *Liminal Whiteness in Early US Fiction* (2021). Throughout this article, I capitalize White/ness, following the lead of many scholars in Black studies. I am conscious that capitalization appears in the language of White supremacist groups. Nevertheless, capitalization here focuses attention on Whiteness as a significant social construct deserving of critique, rather than a default position that today maintains its power through invisibility.

2 These figures include the Tsalal islanders in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) and the orangutan in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841). Scenes of White male subjugation include graverobbing in "The Premature Burial" (1844) and medical experiment in "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845).

3 For the most canonical examples, see Ormond in Charle Brockden Brown's *Ormond* (1800), George Stevens in Frank Webb's *The Garies and their Friends* (1857), the eponymous trickster in Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man* (1857), and Tom Driscoll in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894).

4 Peele told an audience at *Get Out*'s Brooklyn premiere that "the real thing at hand here is slavery", qtd in (Harris 2017).

5 This self-ownership enabled European Americans to take ownership of African Americans as human property, and to colonize land belonging to Native Americans. See (Harris 1993, pp. 1721, 1718; Moreton-Robinson 2015, p. 52).

6 For studies of non-Anglo-European groups becoming White in America, see (Ignatiev 1995; Brodkin 1998; Jacobson 1999).

[7] The plot centers on Sheppard reanimating recently deceased corpses, and one night, he resolves to head to a medical school "and help myself to the best body I could find", referencing the well-known trade in bodies for medical education (Bird [1836] 2008, p. 232). After his literary career, Bird taught medicine at Pennsylvania College and endorsed the theft of bodies to support anatomical studies. In one lecture, he bemoaned that a lack of protective legislation meant that the anatomist was "in almost constant fear of the *penitentiary*" for their illegal procurement (Bird 1841, p. 17). At the end of the novel, Sheppard is horrified to find that a German doctor has embalmed his original body for a mummification experiment; Sheppard's "sorrow and affliction" that this exploitation could happen to him drives him to reanimate his own body (Bird [1836] 2008, p. 406).

[8] Due to Bird's medical training at Pennsylvania College, many scholars attend to scientific questions of mind/body dualism and racial embodiment in the novel. For more on the influence of Bird's study on *Sheppard Lee*, see (Murison 2008; DeRewal 2014; Rebhorn 2015; Altschuler 2016).

[9] W. T. Lhamon Jr. provides a thorough biography of the performer's career in his introduction to Rice's works (Lhamon 2003, pp. 1–90).

[10] For example, in "The Original Jim Crow" (1836), he mocks the pretentions of Black freemen and literally strikes out against the respectability politics to which both Black dandies and the White middle classes ascribed, "beating a Jarsey niggar,/In de street de oder day" (Lhamon 2003, p. 97). At the same time, in 1835 plays *The Virginian Mummy* and *Bone Squash Diavolo*, enslavers are outwitted by cunning Black manservants or succumb to comic deaths (Lhamon 2003, pp. 159–209).

[11] With thanks to one of my anonymous readers for this phrasing.

[12] In another segregationist letter to a friend, an anxious Bird declares that the possibility of Black suffrage in Pennsylvania "sharpens my desire to be off" to another state (Bird 1837).

[13] For a longer version of this argument on *Sheppard Lee*, see (Murray 2021, pp. 71–95).

[14] For a close reading of slavery's visuals in the film, see (Lauro 2020).

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