TERRORIZING AND TERRIFIED: DEPICTIONS OF WHITENESS IN OBAMA ERA BLACK SATIRE

A Dissertation

by

GRACE L. HENEKS

Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Chair of Committee,	Sally Robinson
Committee Members,	Ira Dworkin
	Marian Eide
	Violet Johnson
Head of Department,	Maura Ives

May 2021

Major Subject: English

Copyright 2021 Grace Lee Ellen Heneks

ABSTRACT

This dissertation considers how contemporary satirical works by Black artists levy a substantive critique of white supremacy by exposing the illogic of “post-race” rhetoric popularized during the Obama era. “Post-race” is a belief that the U.S. has moved “beyond” race into a colorblind utopia, free from the cultural baggage of racism and its violent history of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and white power movements. To combat claims of “post-race,” many Black artists took to satire—a genre that lampoons societal ills through humor, irony, and invective to inspire improvement—and exposed “post-race” rhetoric as rooted in racial terror that functions to further entrench white supremacy in American society and its institutions. My readings of Obama era Black satire speak to the invisible norm of whiteness by laying bare its modalities of terror through absurdity, chaos, and horror. First, I contextualize “post-race” America by tracing the development of satire, U.S. race relations, and African American cultural production up through the “post-race” era. Then, I examine several texts against the historical backdrop of white fright—fear of being outnumbered, out-performed, and outshined by a racial other—to expose how this underlying fear continues to maintain white supremacy in the “post-racial” age. Ultimately, I show how Black artists trouble whiteness, disrupting conventional notions of racialized power and privilege to force a reckoning with America’s past. In this way, these artists dismantle the terrorizing and terrified regime of white supremacy.

DEDICATION

To my mom

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisory committee, Dr. Ira Dworkin, Dr. Marian Eide, and Dr. Violet Johnson, for their comments and questions, their encouragement and guidance, throughout the course of the research and writing of this project (and for all the letters of recommendation!). Thank you, especially, to my committee chair, Dr. Sally Robinson for your unwavering support and expertise; you always had a kind word of encouragement or a helpful piece of advice to keep me from giving up.

Thank you to the staff at the Texas A&M University Writing Center for the countless hours of reading and responding to the many drafts of my dissertation. A special thank you to Florence Davies; your expert advice on transitions, topics sentences, and contemporary racism enabled me to become not only a better writer but a dedicated antiracist scholar.

Thank you to the Graduate and Professional School at Texas A&M for the Dissertation Fellowship Award in support of my dissertation. This last year of focused writing has been remarkable. I am truly grateful.

Thank you to Dr. David Gillota at University of Wisconsin-Plattville and the American Humor Studies Association for the Judith Yaross Lee Publication Grant in support of a project that became Ch. V of the dissertation.

Thank you to my friends and fellow graduate students, Deanna Stover, Sally Schutz-Shelton, Fran Thielman, Michaela Baca, Kimmy Clough, Melissa Filbeck, and Jessie Cortez who celebrated my success with me, commiserated when I faced rejection,

and always encouraged me. I am forever grateful for all those times you read my drafts, talked through ideas (even when they were ridiculous), sent calls for papers and other opportunities my way, and watched my dogs when I was out of town at conferences. Ellie, Avery, and I are so lucky to have you in our lives.

Thank you to my parents, Brian Heneks and Christine Weber, who have encouraged me always. I could not have done this without you both. I love you.

Thank you to my late mother, Pamela Heneks. Although you passed away before I had begun graduate school, I know you would have loved seeing me pursue my studies in literature and would have shared in my success. Thank you for encouraging my love of reading from a young age. I miss you and love you.

Thank you to my husband, Rick Blea, who let me drag him to another state so I could get my doctorate. Thank you for introducing me to the strange place that is Texas A&M University and its resident Aggies (Gig em'!). You have been by my side through the thick of it, and I know you are just as happy to see me finish as I am. Thank you for supporting me, celebrating my successes, comforting me when I failed, and of course, helping me care for our two doggos, Avery and Ellie. I love you.

And finally, thank you to Avery and Ellie. I love you, fuzzybutts.

CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

Contributors

This work was supervised by a dissertation committee consisting of Professors Sally Robinson, Marian Eide, and Ira Dworkin of the Department of English and Professor Violet Johnson, history professor and Associate Dean for Faculty in the School of Liberal Arts.

All work conducted for the dissertation was completed by the student independently.

Funding Sources

Graduate study was supported in part by a dissertation fellowship from Texas A&M University.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ABSTRACT ii

DEDICATION iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv

CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES....vi

TABLE OF CONTENTS vii

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION: TERRORIZING AND TERRIFIED: DEPICTIONS OF WHITENESS IN OBAMA ERA BLACK SATIRE 1

Overview of Chapters 12

CHAPTER II THE AMERICAN SUBPLOT: COLSON WHITEHEAD'S POST-RACIAL ALLEGORY IN *ZONE ONE* 25

A Dangerous Allegory 31
Post-Apocalyptic = Post-Racial 36
Zombies as the Post-race Ideal....52

CHAPTER III OCULAR REBELLION: THE SATIRICAL GAZE OF WHITE FRIGHT IN JORDAN PEELE'S *GET OUT* 60

Introduction: Now don't you close your eyes!....60
Eyes Wide Shut 67
"I told you not to go in that house" 76
Staring Boldly Out 86

CHAPTER IV "WHAT RACE PROBLEM?": THE SATIRICAL GAZE OF (WHITE) HISTORY IN *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD* 98

"Evil-Eye": Satire as Weaponized Gaze 103
"Shackled to Fear": White Fright in *The Underground Railroad*....114
"A Useful Delusion": Utopia and White Fright in *The Underground Railroad*....121
"A Southern Novel of White Misery": What Race Problem?....129

CHAPTER V "WE COOL?": SATIRIZING WHITENESS IN *KEY & PEELE* AND *BLACK-ISH* 139

"Oh, he spun!": Key and Peele Make Whiteness Strange 144
"It's almost like we need to keep talking about it": *Black-ish* Deconstructs White Privilege 155
Conclusion: Where do we go from here? 164

CHAPTER VI CONCLUSIONS: SATIRIZING THE SPECTACLE OF BLACK SUFFERING IN *WELCOME TO BRAGGSVILLE* AND *THE SELLOUT* 170

Introduction: The Society of the Spectacle of Black Suffering 170
"Spectacular Disaster": *Welcome to Braggsville*'s #ZombieDickSlap 176
The Sellout: Whispering "Racism" in a Post-racial World 188
Conclusion: Closure? 199

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: TERRORIZING AND TERRIFIED: DEPICTIONS OF WHITENESS IN OBAMA ERA BLACK SATIRE

On July 21, 2008, a controversial cartoon depicting the Obamas appeared on the newest issue of *The New Yorker* magazine. In the cartoon, Barack is dressed in a stereotypical Muslim outfit, including a robe, headscarf, and sandals while Michelle is depicted as a militant 1960s radical with an Afro, a machine gun casually hanging over her shoulders. The couple are exchanging a celebratory fist-bump inside the oval office of the White House while an American flag burns in the fireplace and a portrait of Osama Bin Laden hangs above the mantlepiece. Titled "Fistbump: The Politics of Fear," the artist, Barry Blitt, insisted that the cartoon be read satirically: "I think the idea that the Obamas are branded as unpatriotic [let alone as terrorists] in certain sectors is preposterous. It seemed to me that depicting the concept would show it as the fear-mongering ridiculousness that it is" (qtd. in Pittney). Nevertheless, the cartoon was determined to be a satirical failure, sparking a national debate about satirical intention and its reception. Linda Selzer argues that despite Blitt's intentions, the cartoon not only "reiterated" stereotypes of Black people and Muslims, it also failed to "undercut earlier representations of the Obamas' suspect loyalties" (21). Selzer refers to other representations of the Obamas in the media in which they are depicted as definitively "un-American." For example, due to his association with Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Barack was viewed as an angry Black man who hated America. Similarly, due to his

cosmopolitan background as a Hawaiian-born, mixed race kid who spent time growing up in Indonesia, he was also viewed as representing foreign interests, and his nationality was called into question by a “birther movement” spearheaded by Donald Trump. For these and other reasons, Obama’s election as the first Black president of the U.S. made (white) people anxious, and it is this anxiety Blitt attempted to satirize with “Fistbump.”

I draw attention to Blitt’s cartoon for several reasons. First, Blitt’s use of satire highlights an important cultural move in the Obama era. The Obama era was, in many ways, a highly satirical one, seemingly encouraged by Obama himself in his various speeches, late-night talk show interviews, and appearances on *Saturday Night Live*. Judy Isaksen calls Obama’s propensity for comedy one of his “hallmark characteristics” (7). In 2016, *The Atlantic*’s Dean Obeidallah called Obama “the killer comedian in chief” and stated, “No U.S. President has been a better comedian than Barack Obama” (“Barack”). In 2015, Obama invited Keegan-Michael Key from Comedy Central’s *Key & Peele* (2012-2015) to perform the popular character, Luther, from the show’s “Obama’s Anger Translator” skits at the White House Correspondents Dinner. But Obama’s humor goes beyond simple laughter. His is a satiric mode, or what Isaksen calls “a more edgy comedy style, one that has social purpose” (10). He intentionally strays from the self-deprecating humor of past presidents and uses comedy instead to subvert and even dismantle sociopolitical norms. He wasn’t just a comedian in chief; he was a satirist in chief.

Because of Obama’s own propensity for satire, satire seemed to be everywhere during his presidency, particularly satire that centered race. From ABC’s *Black-ish*

(2014—) and Comedy Central's *Key & Peele* (2012-2015), as well as new films by Spike Lee and Jordan Peele, and dozens of Black-authored satirical novels published between 2008 and 2016, Black artists were emboldened by Obama's presence in the Oval office. They were also responding to the era's propensity for the ridiculous, specifically the rhetoric of "post-race." Believed to be ushered in by Obama's historical election, the "post-racial" era, colloquially called "Obamerica" by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, was marked with feelings of hope and a belief in racial progress. Bonilla-Silva claimed that Obama's "hope liquor" made the country drunk with "delusions of racial harmony" (58). Challenging this common-sense view, Bonilla-Silva contends that Obama's election and presidency was "part and parcel of the 'New Racism'" (57), which emerged in the 1970s and continues to uphold racial inequality in the US. "New Racism" is constituted by several elements: the covertness of racial discourse and racial practices, an avoidance of racial terminology, claims by white people of "reverse racism," eschewal of direct racial references in political matters, the invisibility of mechanisms that produce racial inequality, and the rearticulation of Jim Crow-era racial practices. "New Racism," in other words, makes racism invisible, concealed behind the fiction of a "post-racial" era. Post-racialism was generally defined as a movement "beyond" race: it held that race is no longer a deterrent to achievement and success, that people are seen as only "individuals." Post-racialism claimed to put the ugliness of the past behind us, particularly in the wake of Obama's election. Post-racialism also employed New Racist practices, including covertness, invisibility, and avoidance to perpetuate the myth that the US had moved beyond race and racism into a utopian, color-blind era.

As Bonilla-Silva and other scholars have shown, the idea of a post-racial society was not only patently false, it was a dangerous lie. A movement "beyond" race would allow whiteness to remain unchecked and invisible, to continue to operate as the norm from which all others are judged. Bell hooks best articulates the danger of post-racial thinking. She insists that, "The eagerness with which contemporary society does away with racism, replacing this recognition with evocations of pluralism and diversity that further mask reality, is a response to the terror. It has also become a way to perpetuate the terror by providing cover, a hiding place" (47). Whiteness can continue to remain invisible in this post-racial society, hidden from any probing gaze, all the while continuing to perpetrate violence against non-white populations to maintain its supremacy.

This idea of terror is also invoked in Blitt's cartoon. Aside from its evocative title, the cartoon places fear at the center of the relationship between whiteness and Obama's historic election. Both Michelle and Barack embody a multitude of white anxieties, from Islam to Black radicalism. And as Toni Morrison notes, "The necessity for whiteness as privileged 'natural' state, the invention of it, was indeed formed in fright" (16). Whiteness is not natural; it is "formed" and "invented" against a backdrop of racial terror. Fear, in other words, is the defining feature of white supremacy. In *We Were Eight Years in Power* (2017), Ta-Nehisi Coates corroborates Blitt's message and expounds on this notion of fear. He states:

> The symbolic power of Barack Obama's presidency—that whiteness was no longer strong enough to prevent peons from taking up residence in the castle—

> assaulted the most deeply rooted notions of white supremacy and instilled fear in its adherents and beneficiaries. And it was that fear that gave the symbols Donald Trump deployed—the symbols of racism—enough potency to make him president, and thus put him in position to injure the world. (xvi)

The fear Coates and Blitt's cartoon identifies has a particularly white cast; it is the nascent fear of the unknown racial other, a fear centuries in the making. In *The Post-Racial Mystique*, Catherine Squires notes that this fear is a central part of the "post-racial" era falsely believed to have been ushered in by Obama's election. She states, "the proliferation of this word [post-racial] suggests hopes and fears about race, democratic progress, and multiculturalism—fears that stem from the decades' long 'culture wars,' struggles over the meaning and extent of the impact of civil rights era reforms, and the role of the state in mediating identity politics and redistributive justice" (5). For Squires, the base fear identified by Coates was compounded by more recent events in U.S. history: it has become a fear of being outnumbered, out-performed, and outshined by the racial other. It is a fear provoked by declarations of pluralism and diversity, Black progress and executive power, all of which threaten the racial status quo.

This "post-race" inflected fear, however, is not only exhibited by people like Trump. Fear is both reciprocal and ubiquitous. Sara Ahmed posits that emotions, including fear, work as a "form of capital" (120). That is, fear does not reside in a person or object; rather, it is "produced only as an effect of its circulation" (120). Because it does not reside in subjects or objects, Ahmed claims that fear "binds" communities and people together because of its "nonresidence" (119). Ahmed expounds on racial fear in

particular, and states that “the other is only read as fearsome through a misrecognition, a reading that is returned by the black other through its response of fear, as a fear of the white subject’s fear. This is not to say that the fear comes from the white body, as if it is the origin of that fear (and its author). Rather, fear opens up past histories that stick to the present” (126). The fear exhibited by white people in the Obama era, in other words, worked to differentiate between Obama’s (Black) body and America’s (white) body through past histories of slavery, segregation, and other antiblack oppression in which fear of the other was an integral part. This fear was then reciprocated by Black people in the U.S. as a response to white peoples’ fear, creating an atmosphere bubbling with racial anxiety that would eventually boil over.

Despite Blitt’s astute reading of white fright, the cartoon’s satire nonetheless hinged on reproducing stereotypical images of Black bodies. Whiteness, the supposed subject of ridicule, is nowhere to be found in the cartoon. Janell Hobson’s critique most clearly points out the central problem of Blitt’s cartoon and asks, “Why is it that the black or brown body becomes the vehicle for racial humor when the objects of ridicule—the white people presumably targeted for their racial bigotry—remain invisible in these satirical narratives?” (“Lost”). Instead, Blackness is once again caricatured while whiteness remains hidden and unmarked, its presence only hinted at in the embodiment of white fright in the Obamas. Numerous scholars, theorists, and writers have attended to this invisibility of whiteness within the broader sphere of American culture and society. Merinda Simmons and Houston Baker, for example, call whiteness

an “invisible norm” that dictates a specific set of societal rules and codes of behavior (11). Similarly, Michael Eric Dyson, states that:

> From the very beginning of our nation’s existence, the discursive defense and political logic of American democracy has spawned white dominance as the foundational myth of American society—a myth whose ideological strength was made all the more powerful because it was rendered invisible. After all, its defenders didn’t have to be conscious of how white dominance and, later, white supremacy shaped their worldviews since there was little to challenge their beliefs. (301)

As a foundational part of American society and culture, whiteness has always thrived invisibly as the dominant structure of power. This invisibility is what allows whiteness to maintain its hegemony. While the advent of critical whiteness studies in 1990s helped to expose how whiteness is also an unstable and highly constructed identity category, whiteness continues to thrive as an invisible norm from which all others are judged, especially in the age of “post-race.” Blitt’s cartoon, although commendable in its mockery of white fright, upholds the invisibility of whiteness (and thus white supremacy) at the expense of Blackness. This is its failure.

Blitt’s satirical cartoon and the controversy surrounding its failure to depict whiteness illuminate the central questions animating this dissertation. Each text I analyze probes the “hiding place” of post-racial whiteness by exposing its dialectic of fear through satire. Satire is a useful means of addressing the problem of race in the U.S. because it is a way of seeing, of representing what society values, only to dismantle

those values through mockery and invective, making way for something better. Steven Weisenburger also insists on satire's violent nature: "Contemporary, degenerative satire is itself a discourse of violence. It is a means of exposing modalities of terror and of *doing violence* to cultural forms that are overtly or covertly dedicated to terror" (5-6). In this view, satire becomes not just a way of seeing but a mechanism for violence against what is seen. For Black writers especially, satire became the perfect genre for laying bare the absurdities of "post-race" and the continuing terror of white supremacy.

Despite the proliferation of critical work on Black literature and whiteness studies, only recently have scholars attended to satire's place in the African American canon. Satire is the use of exaggeration, irony, or humor to expose and criticize people or society's stupidity or vices in order to shame them into improvement, and has a rich history in African American culture. Darryl Dickson-Carr, for example, argues that satire was a part of African American culture from the beginning, its central purpose being to lampoon the absurd system of chattel slavery and racism itself. He states, "The ontological condition of most African Americans during the era of chattel slavery alone normally precluded the free and direct expression of the black individual's ideas" and that African Americans "were forced to create various complex coded languages and expressions that allowed for the indirect expression of their frustration" (3). Satiric humor was a part of these codes. Dickson-Carr cites "caustic passages within slave narratives" and "antislavery pamphlets" as some of the earliest African American satire (4), alongside folktales and selected speeches and writings by Fredrick Douglass, David Walker, Frances E. W. Harper, William Wells Brown, and Charles Chesnutt. These

coded languages and expressions also became part of the tradition of Black minstrelsy, a popular tradition among African Americans during the Jim Crow era in which Black performers signified upon the racist caricatures of Blackface minstrelsy performed by and for white people. Black performers distinguished themselves from their white counterparts by "bringing humanity to the caricatures and providing coded messages to their brothers and sisters" (Taylor and Austen 6). These minstrel shows, while they often relied on demeaning and racist stereotypes, always contained within them subversive elements: elements of "liberation" (27) and of "identification" (45). This tradition continued well into the twentieth century, and with the advent of television and the evolution of film technology, also expanded into people's living rooms, with shows like the controversial *Amos 'n' Andy* (1951-1953)—based on a popular radio program—and later, *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977) and the brief but vitriolic *The Richard Pryor Show* (1977). While the latter two shows abandoned the tradition of minstrelsy, Taylor and Austen assert that Black minstrelsy is an "umbilical cord that feeds contemporary performers both the genius and the frustrations of their ancestors (21). We can see elements of this tradition in *Chappelle's Show* (2003-2006) and *Key & Peele* (2012-2015), making Black minstrelsy an integral part of the development of Black satire.

In addition to satirical Black performance, there were also satirical developments in the literary realm, including fiction and essays by George Schuyler, Sutton Griggs, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston. These writers employed satire to critique not only slavery and Jim Crow, but other absurdities of race in the U.S., especially whiteness. In the post-war years, Hughes continued to write satire, most notably his

"Jesse B. Semple" stories, and Ralph Ellison published *Invisible Man* (1952), a landmark novel in Black satire. In the 1960s, American discourse on race was dominated by the Civil Rights movement as well as the rhetoric and actions of integrationists, Black Nationalists and Separatists, and white supremacists. As Dickson-Carr notes, these national debates would inevitably shape approaches to African American art and culture, and satirists "would chafe against the boundaries set by these new approaches" (113). Ishmael Reed is one such example. While he agreed with the larger goal of offering richer and more diverse portrayals of Black life put forth by the Black Arts movement "Black Aesthetic," he chafed against critics who thought satire "irresponsible" (Martin 35). These critics tended to ignore or downplay satire's integral role in African American culture and felt that artists should abandon it, since satiric depiction supposedly perpetuated demeaning stereotypes. Thus the major satirical works of Ishmael Reed, Charles S. Wright, Charles Johnson, and Melvin Kelley, among others, critique the Black Aesthetic ideology alongside critiques of racial absurdity in the U.S., elevating satire to its rightful place in the African American literary canon.

However, as Yogita Goyal notes, it is only in the last few decades that "a self-conscious school of Black art coalesces, pivoting on satire" (108). Often labeled "post-black," "post-soul," or "new black," this newer generation attempts to redefine Blackness in the post-civil-rights era. Emerging from the visual arts world, in an exhibition curated by Thelma Golden in 2001, post-black describes a generation of Black artists born after the civil rights era who are "adamant about not being labeled 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining

complex notions of blackness" (Golden 14). Similarly, post-soul, as defined by Bertram Ashe in his controversial essay in a 2007 issue of *African American Review*, is a label for those writers who came of age after civil rights whose work is characterized by "an exploration of the boundaries of blackness" or "blaxploration" that "trouble" Blackness and ignore calls for racial unity or uplift (611-615). Instead, these writers prefer both internally and externally directed critique and have developed a strong proclivity for satire.

This "post-black" satirical pivot is the focus of this dissertation. Why were Black artists drawn to satire in the age of Obama? What inspired this caustic and often humorous aesthetic? Did Obama's presence in the White House embolden Black artists while simultaneously terrifying white supremacists? Are we to understand D'aron, T. Geronimo Johnson's white protagonist in *Welcome to Braggsville*, as indicative of "post-race" whiteness? Do progressive whites embodied by the Armitage family in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* "cause the most daily damage to people of color" as Robin DiAngelo contends (5)? How does satire allow us to see the effects of white supremacy in the "post-race" age in a way other literature cannot? *Terrorizing and Terrified* seeks to respond to these various questions, examining how depictions of whiteness function in novels, television, and film from the Obama era that satirize the ridiculous claims of "post-race" and the abiding problem of race in the U.S.

Overview of Chapters

I begin this study with an analysis of Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) because of all post-black satirical novels, this zombie-laden text most explicitly presents the strange dichotomy of hope and fright central to the Obama era. Although the novel appears to be just another one of the many zombie apocalypse stories so popular in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, Whitehead actually uses the zombie—a figure born out of the transatlantic slave trade—to trouble the genre's appropriation and increased popularity in the Obama era. This period saw a dramatic rise in the popularity of zombie novels, films, video games, and television shows. According to Daniel Drezner, well more than one-third of all zombie films have been released since September 11, 2001, which he believes is an understatement of the popularity of the undead creature. There has also been an increase in zombie-related books, television shows, and video games, including *Plants vs. Zombies*, the phone app; *iZombie*, the Netflix original series; and the *Resident Evil* franchise. In 2010, AMC aired its first episode of the acclaimed *The Walking Dead* series, adapted from a popular graphic novel series of the same name, which, in 2013, beat all other shows in its time-slot in ratings, including *Sunday Night Football* (Drezner 3). More interestingly, Drezner's data shows a sharp spike in popularity in an already popular genre in 2008 after the election of president Obama and the beginning of the economic recession. Although Drezner does not focus on the sharp increase in 2008, he does point out that there has been "a surge" in the attention paid to zombies since the 2008 financial crisis, and remarks that "the living dead appear to resonate more than other paranormal actors in an age of

uncertainty" (4). While Drezner's insights into the popularity of the zombie as a reaction to uncertainty are significant, he overlooks Obama's presidency as a possible reason for this uncertainty, focusing instead on international politics and the financial crisis. He also defines the zombie as coming out of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), preferring Romero's cannibalistic ghouls to the original zombie/zombi/zambi of Haitian sugarcane plantations. In other words, Drezner ignores racial anxiety as an important factor in the rise in popularity of zombies in the twenty-first century.

Chapter II addresses this oversight. Writing in what cultural studies critic Ramón Saldívar calls the "postrace aesthetic" (1), Whitehead combines elements of postmodernism, genre fiction, and speculative fiction to explore race in the twenty-first century. I argue that Whitehead's novel exposes white racial terror over Obama's presidency which results in attempts to render the U.S. post-racial and to elide historical and contemporary racial violence. *Zone One* seeks to reject post-racialism by imagining the post-racial era as post-apocalyptic. In doing so, Whitehead satirically exposes white racial terror and the violence it seeks to elide through post-racial fantasy. *Zone One* traces "sweeper" Mark Spitz as he clears out "Zone One"—the part of the island of Manhattan south of Canal Street—where post-apocalyptic "reconstruction" is centered after a pandemic kills off most of humanity and turns them into zombie-like creatures known as "skels" (9). Despite the optimism and hope put forth by the interim government American Phoenix, the new society constructed in *Zone One* continues to employ racial stereotypes, thereby bolstering white supremacy, finding the post-apocalyptic world—a world where being white no longer ensures power or protection—

truly terrifying in its equality. America's anxieties regarding race relations following Obama's election are thus projected onto a post-apocalyptic landscape in which race no longer demarcates the powerful and the weak; all are rendered equal in the colorblind eyes of the undead. Whitehead utilizes the zombie as a way to express the fears of white society in a post-racial world.

Like *Zone One*, Jordan Peele's award-winning film *Get Out* (2017) rejects the "post-racial lie" so popular with Obama's election ("Jordan Peele"), showing us racism's terrifyingly real face today, and is thus the focus of Chapter III. The film's seemingly innocuous plot, based loosely on Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), centers on young Black photographer Chris who uncovers a disturbing body-snatching scheme known as the Coagula that renders his and other Black bodies commodities to the wealthy white elite. Due to his perceptive gaze as a photographer and as Black man, Chris escapes their evil scheme. I read the film's conglomeration of genres—horror, satire, and bystander video—alongside the metaphor of the gaze, a central tenet of African American literary tradition, to argue that the film weaponizes a satirical Black gaze to expose the ways progressive whites uphold and perpetuate racism through their fear of being seen as racist. This "fragility" in confronting race helps to elide their participation in a system that both commodifies and robs Black lives (DiAngelo 1). Ultimately, the film's satirical Black gaze lays bare the ways fear is weaponized and contributes to the violence underwriting the color-blind post-racial era's progressive façade.

By paying attention to sight as a mechanism for exposing modalities of terror and for committing violence against hegemonic structures, *Get Out* assaults white supremacy's terrorizing claim on American history and culture. The film's emphasis on looking through Chris's eyes shines a light on reality, making visible the invisible violence of the "post-race" era without the pollution of racialized looking. More importantly, the film becomes an effective force for change because of the way it uses satire, horror, and bystander video together to expose the underlying fear inherent in the "post-race" paradigm, dismantles the paradigm through satirical representation, and restores "the gaze" as an instrument for Black agency.

In Chapter IV, I delve further into the notion of the satirical Black gaze by returning to Colson Whitehead's work with an analysis of his Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel, *The Underground Railroad* (2016). Through an engagement with W. E. B. Du Bois's "The Souls of White Folk" (1910) and bell hooks' "The Oppositional Gaze" (1992), I demonstrate how Whitehead utilizes satire to subvert this white gaze of history. By satirizing various moments in American history to show how white power is maintained through a dialectic of fear, Whitehead's novel claims control over the white gaze by asserting a satirical Black gaze, rendering established (white) history the subject of scrutiny. *The Underground Railroad* thus exposes how an underlying (white) fear of Black liberty and power contributes to the violence committed against Black people throughout history, thereby demanding we take an oppositional look at American history in the ongoing project of emancipation.

Like Jonathan Swift's highly satirical and outlandish travel narrative, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Underground Railroad* follows the fantastical journey of a fugitive slave named Cora as she makes her way to "freedom." Whitehead literalizes the Underground Railroad of the early nineteenth century by depicting actual underground trains, railroads, and conductors who aid Cora in her escape. Cora's travels along the railroad take her to outlandish and often futuristic towns populated by violent white supremacists and progressive whites touting racial uplift. Some parts of Cora's journey seem taken out of history books and nineteenth-century slave narratives while other parts depict life not that much different from our own in the twenty-first century. Much like Swift's Lilliputians, floating islands, and talking horses, the novel merges fantasy and realism with a sardonic tone that characterizes most of Whitehead's work. Through signifyin(g), irony, sarcasm, and vitriol, *The Underground Railroad* becomes an outrageous exploration of the problem of race in the United States in much the same way *Gulliver's Travels* explored the ridiculousness of eighteenth-century English politics. While Cora's gaze allows her to reassert her subjectivity, making white people the subject of scrutiny, Whitehead's satirical gaze allows him to reveal the ways whiteness is "shackled to fear" (Whitehead 179), and exposes how this fear initiates the ideological underpinnings of conforming to and investing in a whiteness that is the foundation of American history.

In Chapter V, I examine the relationship between whiteness and "post-race" and the consequences this relationship has on Black subjectivity in two key television shows of the Obama era: Comedy Central's *Key & Peele* (2012-2015) and ABC's *Black-ish* (2014—). Focusing my analysis on the sketch "Apologies" from *Key & Peele* and select

scenes from two *Black-ish* episodes, I argue that in the post-racial era, progressive white people remain complicit in white supremacist terror through a fear of being labeled racist. *Key & Peele*'s "Apologies" satirizes the ways white people shut down potentially productive conversations about race in the U.S. in their attempts to demonstrate that they are not racist. In doing so, they silence Black voices and perpetuate a terrorizing whiteness. *Black-ish* takes white privilege as its satirical target, demonstrating a similar issue with white peoples' inability to talk about race. While "Apologies" works to reduce liberal whiteness to its more laughable aspects, *Black-ish*'s satirical representation of white privilege is juxtaposed with its groundbreaking effort to make space for conversations about race in the U.S. Unlike other Black sitcoms that have come before it, such as *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) or *Family Matters* (1989-1998), *Black-ish* is not simply a show about a family who happens to be Black. Rather, the family's Blackness is central to the show's narrative tension. The show also allows us to witness the transition between the Obama era's post-racial ideology to the hyperracial Trump era and the ways white supremacy must constantly reinvent itself. Ultimately, both *Key & Peele* and *Black-ish* expose how white supremacy is not only the realm of explicit racists like neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, or the alt-right, but exists everywhere, in banal—often silly—daily experiences. Therefore, it becomes crucial to talk about the way whiteness functions in everyday life. By creating spaces that foster conversations about race, both shows work against the U.S.'s "post-race" allegiance to white supremacy.

I conclude with a discussion of Paul Beatty's novel *The Sellout* (2015) and T. Geronimo Johnson's novel *Welcome to Braggsville* (2015), which were published in the aftermath of Eric Garner's death at the hands of police in 2014. Garner's death, like countless other Black men and boys murdered by police, was captured on video by a bystander and subsequently went viral, inspiring protests across the U.S. Viral videos of Black death have become increasingly more common with the ubiquity of camera phones, intensifying the significance of video footage in the African American community's pursuit of justice. From Rodney King's brutal beating and arrest in Los Angeles in 1991 to Floyd, Arbery, and Taylor's deaths in 2020, documenting police brutality and other antiblack violence is central to the Black experience in the U.S., and became increasingly commonplace in the Obama era. Viral Black death, however, is not a new phenomenon. We can trace its roots to the spectacle of lynching, made public by antiracist activists like Ida B. Wells and various newspapers across the Southern U.S. As a journalist, Wells challenged the lynching narrative by publishing disturbing photos of the shooting, dismembering, burning, and hanging of Black bodies to prove lynching happened, forcing America to look at itself and eventually condemn the practice. Wells lay the groundwork for contemporary forms of visual activism, including Darnella Frazier's viral video of George Floyd's death in 2020.

I argue that Beatty and Johnson's novels satirize the ways this visual activism relies on what I refer to as the spectacle of Black suffering. In order to challenge the pervasive and inherent racial inequalities that exist in the U.S., activists utilize images of suffering Black bodies like those found in viral videos, lynching postcards, and

famously, Emmett Till's open casket. These images, they argue, force white Americans to *see* racial injustice, making them unable to deny the continued brutality of racism in the U.S. Both Johnson and Beatty's novels satirize the spectacle of Black suffering through its ironic embrace. In *Welcome to Braggsville*, Johnson's characters plot and stage a mock lynching at Braggsville's annual Civil War Reenactment as a form of social protest. But when the lynching becomes real, the hyper-visible horror of the crime they commit ties them historically to the very brutes whose actions they wish to repudiate. Ultimately, Johnson censures "performative wokeness" and "virtue signaling" by exposing them as fearful empty gestures that render the actual Black subject all but invisible. In *The Sellout*, the protagonist Me (or Bon Bon or the Sellout) reinstates slavery and segregation to save his hometown from obliteration. In doing so, Me embodies the Black picaro—an essential figure in African American satire—to expose the racist logic underpinning American whiteness: that Black existence is only reaffirmed through the spectacle of its suffering.

By looking at depictions of white fright in African American satire produced in the Obama era, *Terrorizing and Terrified* aims fill the gaps in scholarship on African American satire, Black writing on whiteness, and the Obama era. Given the current political climate, where overt displays of racism are rearing their ugly heads, an analysis of contemporary whiteness and hegemonic white supremacy must be central to our understanding of race in the U.S. today. Michael Tesler notes that despite claims of ushering in the post-racial era, "the election of Barack Obama may well have been the watershed to another of America's periodic hyperracial political eras" (9). Indeed,

Donald Trump's disastrous presidency has startlingly confirmed Tesler's argument and suggests that we are doomed to fail as long we are unwilling to address the continuing domination of white supremacy and its attendant fright.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. “Affective Economies.” *Social Text*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2004, pp. 117–39.

Ashe, Bertram D. “Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction.” *African American Review*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2007, pp. 609-623.

Blitt, Barry. “Fistbump: The Politics of Fear.” *The New Yorker*, 21 July 2008, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/07/21.

---. Interview with Mary Louise Kelly. “‘I’m Just Trying To Make Myself Laugh’: ‘New Yorker’ Artist Shares His Cover Stories.” *NPR.org*, October 20, 2017, https://www.npr.org/2017/10/20/558777025/im-just-trying-to-make-myself-laugh-new-yorker-artist-shares-his-cover-stories.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. 5th edition, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*. One World, 2017.

“Controversy over *The New Yorker*’s Cover Illustration of Obamas.” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/14/world/americas/14iht-york.3.14484322.html.

Dickson-Carr, Darryl. *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*. U of Missouri P, 2001.

DiAngelo, Robin J. *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Beacon, 2018.

Drezner, Daniel W. *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*. Revived edition, Princeton UP, 2015.

Dyson, Michael Eric. "Giving Whiteness a Black Eye: An Interview with Michael Eric Dyson." *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America*. Interviewed by Ronald E. Chennault, Edited by Joe L. Kincheloe, Shirley R. Steinberg, Nelson M. Rodriguez, and Ronald E. Chennault. St. Martin's, 1998. pp. 299-328.

Golden, Thelma. *Freestyle*, exhibition catalogue. Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001.

Goyal, Yogita. "Post-Black Satire." *Runaway Genres: The Global Afterlives of Slavery*. New York UP, 2019, pp. 105-140.

Hobson, Janell. "Lost in Translation." *The Hooded Utilitarian*, January 2015. https://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2015/01/lost-in-translation/.

hooks, bell. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. H. Holt and Co., 1995.

Isaksen, Judy L. "The Power of Obama's Racio-Rhetorical Humor: Rethinking Black Masculinities." *Howard Journal of Communications* vol. 28, no. 1, 2017, pp. 6–19.

Martin, Reginald. *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetics Critics*. MacMillan, 1988.

Obeidallah, Dean. "Barack Obama, Comedian in Chief." *The Atlantic*, April 30, 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/04/barack-obama-killer-comedian-in-chief/480441/.

Peele, Jordan. "Jordan Peele on the 'Post-Racial Lie' That Inspired *Get Out*." Interview with Rebecca Keegan, *Vanity Fair*, 30 Oct. 2017. https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/10/jordan-peele-get-out-screening.

Pitney, Nico. "Barry Blitt Defends His New Yorker Cover Art of Obama." *HuffPost*, 21 July 2008. *www.huffpost.com*, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/barry-blitt-addresses-his_n_112432.

Selzer, Linda F. "Barack Obama, the 2008 Presidential Election, and the New Cosmopolitanism: Figuring the Black Body." *MELUS*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2010, pp. 15–37.

Simmons, K. Merinda. "Introductions: The Dubious Stage of Post-Blackness—Performing Otherness, Conserving Dominance." *The Trouble with Post-Blackness*, edited by Houston A. Baker and K. Merinda Simmons, Columbia UP, 2015, pp. 1-20.

Squires, Catherine. *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the 21st Century*. New York UP, 2014.

Taylor, Yuval and Jake Austen. *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop.* Norton, 2012.

Tesler, Michael, and David O. Sears. *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America*. U of Chicago P, 2010.

Weisenburger, Steven. *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*. U of Georgia P, 1995.

Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*. Doubleday, 2016.

---. *Zone One*. Anchor, 2011.

CHAPTER II

THE AMERICAN SUBPLOT: COLSON WHITEHEAD'S POST-RACIAL ALLEGORY IN *ZONE ONE*[*]

When Barack Obama was sworn in as the 44th president of the United States, many people declared that the U.S. had become a post-racial[1] society. The conservative radio host Lou Dobbs, for example, said in 2009 that "We are now in a 21st-century post-partisan, post-racial society that is being led by those who are racial and those who are partisan" (The Lou Dobbs Show, November 12, 2009).[2] The novelist Colson Whitehead echoed these statements in a 2009 satirical op-ed for the *New York Times*. Mocking the idea of a post-racial society, Whitehead claimed that in "officially" becoming one, the U.S. had "eradicated racism forever" (par.1). As the self-declared Secretary of Post-Racial Affairs, Whitehead asserted that people of color simply suffer from a "branding problem," and coined a new politically correct term for people of color: "People Whose Bodies Just Happen to Produce More Melanin, and That's O.K. or PWBJHTPMMATOK" (par. 4). He joked that his next official action would be to tackle popular culture, including revising Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) by replacing an

---

[*] Reprinted with permission from THE COMPARATIST. Vol. XXXXII. Copyright © 2018 by the Southern Comparative Literature Association. Used by permission of the University of North Carolina Press.

[1] Though the various authors I reference use "postracial" and "post-racial" interchangeably, I will be using the hyphenated version "post-racial" to emphasize Stephanie Li's notion of "tacking on" the prefix "post-" and how it does not mean that a society has moved passed its social ills.

[2] In addition, MSNBC's Chris Matthews declared in 2010 that "[Obama] is post-racial by all appearances. You know, I forgot he was Black tonight for an hour" (MSNBC.com), indicating that post-racial beliefs are non-partisan.

angry and hostile ghost with a more "Casper-like one," and re-imagining Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing* (1989) to include a group of multi-cultural hipster Brooklynites who host a block party on a hot summer's day. By erasing all semblance of race as a meaningful category of identity in American culture, Whitehead pretended to promise that we could continue to live in a post-racial world where race no longer matters.

Whitehead's hyperbolic op-ed helps to illustrate the folly of the notion of a post-racial society and makes clear that, despite the 2008 election of its first Black president, the U.S. is not free from racism, racial injustice, or oppression. Though his article is meant to be humorous,[3] there nonetheless remains an undercurrent of criticism leveled at those in the U.S. who have adopted post-raciality as a fact—a population Eduardo Bonilla-Silva identifies as "colorblind" racists (262). Bonilla-Silva explains that most white people would rarely identify themselves as racist; rather, they see race as an irrelevant factor in the U.S., declaring that "they don't see color, just people." The concept of colorblindness helps white people justify racial inequality, allowing them to believe that the higher levels of incarceration for Black men or residential and school segregation have nothing to do with race. Instead, white people link these glaring disparities to personal choice or "natural" inclinations to remain within distinct racial or ethnic communities.

Colorblindness dismisses what people of color in the United States have always known, and what poet Langston Hughes gives voice to when he declares, "America

---

[3] In an email exchange with me in March 2017, Whitehead stated that the entire piece was "a joke."

never was America to me;" or more significantly, "There's never been equality for me, / Nor freedom in this 'homeland of the free'" (Hughes 5, 15-16). Nearly eighty years later, racial inequalities continue to exist, despite the desire of white people to believe the U.S. has moved beyond them. In fact, as Stephanie Li points out in *Signifying without Specifying* (2012) the use of "post-" denotes this wish:

> The urge to identify "post-" moments of social development reflects a desire to be done with the complicated legacies of oppression and inequality that still plague our nation. This totalizing gesture implies that fulfillment of liberty and justice for all, the promise of an ideal America at last made true, as if the wrongs of any nation can be neatly surmounted with a prefix. (4)

Here, Li argues that tacking on the prefix "post-" to the concept of race indicates a conflation of race and racism so that the "end of race" signifies the end of racism too. Therefore, as discourse on race becomes irrelevant, a means of effective change also becomes irrelevant. Li, like Bonilla-Silva, claims that this conflation of race and racism is just another "iteration of the misguided aspiration for 'color-blindness'" (3), and a way to both ignore and erase the legacy of race in America and its enduring influence on social and political life today. Li's use of the word "plague" to describe legacies of inequality and oppression draws attention to the way in which these problems stubbornly persist despite efforts at inoculation through assigning a "post-" prefix. Thus, the popularity of assigning "posts-" to the ills of American society does not mean that the country has moved past those ills but rather continues to struggle with racial inequality and prejudice.

Whitehead takes up this plague metaphor in his zombie apocalypse novel *Zone One* (2011). Writing in what cultural studies critic Ramón Saldívar calls the "postrace aesthetic" (1), Whitehead combines elements of postmodernism, genre fiction, and speculative fiction to explore race in the twenty-first century. In an interview with *Publisher's Weekly* in 2011, Whitehead explains how these seemingly disparate literary genres develop into a zombie apocalypse novel. He divulges his love for horror movies growing up, especially George Romero's early zombie films and their divergence from the racist stereotypes perpetrated by Blaxploitation films popular at the time:

> George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead* were the first two movies to have a really strong Black protagonist ... and for me, growing up in the era of Blaxploitation, the very rational antimaterialism of *Dawn of the Dead* was something. And the takeaway of *Night of the Living Dead* is that here's a Black man on the run from a crazed white society, and for me that's sort of a subplot to the American story. (qtd. in Schulman 131)

Zone One engages with Whitehead's analysis of Romero's original *Dead* trilogy, demonstrating what he identifies as the American subplot. Set in a post-apocalyptic New York City, the novel traces "sweeper" Mark Spitz as he clears out "Zone One"—the part of the island of Manhattan south of Canal Street—where post-apocalyptic "reconstruction"[4] is centered after a pandemic kills off most of humanity and turns them into zombie-like creatures known as "skels" (9). Parallel to Mark Spitz's narrative is the

[4] Whitehead's use of the term "reconstruction" is a direct reference to the era after the Civil War, which I discuss later, particularly in terms of its failure.

narrative of the interim government, American Phoenix—a government that supplies the survivors with a false sense of hope for a better future by providing the illusion of safety and security in the present. But as a Black man rendered anonymous by a racist nickname and residing in New York City, Mark Spitz lives the American subplot and resists American Phoenix's triumphal propaganda, showing instead that the reality of a post-apocalyptic (and post-racial) America isn't post-anything. Mark Spitz rejects American Phoenix's post-apocalyptic narrative, preferring instead to focus on his own not-so-post-apocalyptic survival.

More specifically, I argue that *Zone One*'s two narrative threads are an allegory for post-racial America. I begin by tracing Whitehead's engagement with allegory, both as a traditional literary device and as postmodern theorists have delineated it upon its resurgence in American literature after World War II. Second, I trace the long history of the zombie, a figure whose racial past has been erased by Hollywood whitewashing practices. The zombie as it exists in *Zone One* is not symbolic of a single concept, but rather, as Jessica Hurley conveys, the zombie becomes a multi-dimensional symbol, representing a myriad of meanings: "because it embodies the history of whitening, it cannot be limited to a two-dimensional symbol, but always brings with it its own history: a history of racialized slavery, and a history of how that history is suppressed in America by a whiteness that longs ... to be guiltless and alone" (318). Hurley speaks to the ways the zombie's obscured racial past makes it an ideal metaphor for post-racialism, which also works to obscure the racialized past of the U.S. and the dominion of white supremacy. Third, I track protagonist Mark Spitz's movements as he sweeps Zone One

and read him as a Black everyman whose survival becomes allegorical for the lived experiences of Black men in the U.S. today. Spitz focuses on survival in a zombie infested urban center even after the apocalypse has been declared finished in the same way that Black men survive in the U.S. after Obama's election ushered in the mythical post-race era. Despite many perceived advancements in race relations in the U.S., Black men continue to be regarded as expendable. Therefore, merely walking down the street is often a matter of life and death. Similarly, Spitz's daily encounters with zombies show that he is also trying to survive, keeping him from believing that the apocalypse is finished. Finally, I read the narrative thread of American Phoenix as allegorical for Obama's 2008 campaign and presidency, when considered by the media as proof that the U.S. is at last post-racial. Obama's hopeful campaign slogans led many to believe that change was on the horizon, particularly in terms of racial equality. American Phoenix uses almost identical slogans and buzzwords as Obama's campaign to foster feelings of (audacious) hope and progress in its survivor camps. In fact, the other survivors believe so thoroughly in American Phoenix's reconstruction endeavors, they are shocked when the walls surrounding Zone One break and the zombies infiltrate the city once again, proving to all that the world is not post-apocalyptic but is in fact still apocalyptic. Therefore, Whitehead's use of allegory exposes the farcical notion of a post-racial U.S. for what it is: dangerous and irresponsible.

A Dangerous Allegory

Allegory, as it has traditionally been understood, expresses truths and generalizations about human existence by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions. In other words, allegory "exists not in and of itself but to reveal a higher order of things" (Longxi 213). Characters represent larger concepts and plots deliver real-world issues and occurrences that cannot be explained or understood otherwise. *Zone One* uses traditional notions of allegory while also engaging with Fredrick Jameson's notion of allegory as symptomatic of "a generalized sensitivity, in our own time, to breaks and discontinuities, to the heterogeneous (not merely in works of art), to Difference rather than Identity, to gaps and holes rather than seamless webs and triumphant narrative progressions, to social differentiation rather than to Society as such and its 'totality,'" (167-8). Whitehead's use of allegory in *Zone One* thus points to an exploration of this sensitivity to various breaks and discontinuities in the U.S at the time of its publication.

In 2011, the world was situated in an era of "post-"s: not only did the election of Obama usher in the so-called post-race era, but the collapse of the global financial markets led to a recession and the post-boom era, the post-9/11 "war on terror" escalated in violence, and the post-revolutionary backlash from the Arab Spring reverberated throughout the Middle East. Further, Whitehead was not alone in his sardonic views of "post-racial" America. Although media pundits, bloggers, and political commentators uncritically welcomed the beginning of a post-racist America, many writers and scholars signaled instead the inauguration of a post-Civil Rights era in contemporary America. Journalist Touré's, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*? (2011), and professor of literature

Kenneth Warren's *What Was African American Literature?* (2011) both demonstrate in various ways, that since the Civil Rights movement, obvious expressions of racism and segregation give way to covert but nonetheless equally harmful expressions. In addition to Whitehead, Touré, and Warren, a myriad of other writers has explored this era of "post-"s, mainly as it relates to racial formation in the U.S., including Percival Everett, Paul Beatty, T. Geronimo Johnson, Dexter Palmer, and Darieck Scott.

In other words, post-racialism and post-racist beliefs and critiques proliferated during Obama's 2008 campaign and presidency. Catherine Squires argues that this proliferation of the post-racial "suggests hopes and fears about race, democratic progress, and multiculturalism—fears that stem from the decades' long 'culture wars,' struggles over the meaning and extent of the impact of civil rights era reforms, and the role of the state in mediating identity politics and redistributive justice" (5). Squires sees the post-racial discourse as not just a desire to move beyond race, but a desire to be healed of racism and all it entails. However, by conflating race and racism, as Squires and Whitehead imply post-racialism does, we become blinded to the continuing effects of racism and the abiding legacy of race in the U.S. As Thomas Holt notes, "post signals its ambiguity: different from what preceded it, but not yet fully formed or knowable" (23). "Post-" does not signal a movement beyond; it merely marks ambiguity and uncertainty about what is to come.

For example, affixing the "post-" prefix to the challenging times leading up to Obama's presidency in no way indicates that, for example, the events of September 11th, 2001 never took place or no longer matter, nor that the economic recession did not

happen and did not cost millions of people their livelihoods. Nevertheless, the desire to "get over" race (specifically for Black people to "get over" it) underscores popular understandings of the post-racial and implies that, unlike other "post-"s, the post-racial is perceived as a valid conception of the U.S. after Obama. Whitehead's novel reflects this geopolitical and historical uncertainty the U.S. was experiencing in 2011, and as Saldívar notes, "insists on the urgency of the matter of race in the twenty-first century" (3). Saldívar further explains how Whitehead, along with a few other contemporary writers, creates a "new aesthetic to deal with the meaning of race in our supposedly postrace era" (3), in order to explore the ambiguity signaled by the "post-". It comes as no surprise that Whitehead, a renowned literary stylist famous for blending unconventional genres with the literary—such as noir and realism in *The Intuitionist* (1999) or speculative fiction and slave narrative in *The Underground Railroad* (2016)—utilizes the zombie, a creature whose forgotten racialized past makes it an ideal allegorical tool for politicized post-racial ideology and practice.

Despite the zombie's Haitian origins, the zombie apocalypse genre is largely dominated by the (white-washed) U.S. film industry. In a 2008 interview with Mariana McConnell for Cinema Blend, George Romero—considered by many to be the "Godfather" of zombie cinema—claimed that he got the idea for his *Dead* series from Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954), a post-apocalyptic novel in which a plague reduces humanity to hordes of undead vampire/zombie creatures and a sole survivor

struggles to find a cure.[5] Romero consistently remarks that he never originally labeled his monsters "zombies," opting instead for the term "ghouls," expressing an understanding of the true origins of zombies: "When I did *Night of the Living Dead* I called them ghouls, flesh eaters. To me back then, zombies were just those boys in the Caribbean doing the wet-work for Bela Lugosi" (par. 30). Lugosi's film, *White Zombie* (1932), directed by Victor and Edward Halperin, was the first zombie film ever produced in the U.S. Itself inspired by William Seabrook's sensationalized travel narrative *The Magic Island* (1929), White Zombie stars Bela Lugosi as evil (white) voodoo master Murder Legendre who uses his powers of mind control to turn his rivals and the woman he desires into zombies. The film divorces Vodou[6] from its origins in slave culture, making it a source of terror instead, and the zombie becomes a means of sexual control rather than as a potent metaphor for slavery.

The zombies of Seabrook's travel narrative, like the zombies under Lugosi's control, bear little resemblance to George Romero's cannibalistic ghouls or to what we know today as the zombie. Because the popularity of Seabrook's travel narrative dovetailed with Hollywood's monster film boom (both *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* came out in 1931), the zombie, like Dracula and Frankenstein, was embraced by Hollywood and U.S. popular culture and has since been altered, adapted, and altogether detached

---

[5] Interestingly, the most recent film adaptation of *I Am Legend* (2007) depicts a Black man (Will Smith) in the lead role and seems to register as a post-racial allegory in a similar way as *Night of the Living Dead* and *Zone One*.

[6] The spelling "voodoo" is now generally avoided when referring to the Haitian religion, both to avoid confusion with Louisiana Voodoo which is a related but distinct belief system from Haitian Vodou, as well as to avoid the negative connotations and misconceptions associated with voodoo in popular culture.

from its Caribbean roots. Zombies have since been featured in hundreds of subsequent films, various TV shows, videogames, novels, plays, and emojis. Yet as George Romero's comment suggests, the zombie's Haitian origins are effaced in most of these productions. Furthermore, the zombie often becomes metaphorical, representing instead a multitude of societal ills including consumer culture as in Romero's film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), globalization in Danny Boyle's film *28 Days Later* (2002), or cell-phones in Stephen King's novel *Cell* (2006). More recently, scholars have attended to the zombie's origins in Haitian slave culture, including Amy Wilenz, Kyle Bishop, and Sarah Lauro. Publications such as *The Atlantic*[7] and *NPR*[8] have even published articles detailing the zombie's long, tumultuous history in Haiti.

Historically, the zombie first appeared in Haiti in the 17th century, when the country was still known as Saint Domingue and was under French rule. The zombie developed out of the various religions of the African slaves forced to work in the sugarcane fields. Slavery in Saint Domingue was particularly brutal, and half of the slaves were killed within a few years. When slaves died, it was believed that dying would release their souls back to Africa where they would be free. Though suicide was common among these slave populations, those who took their own lives were thought to instead be condemned to the plantations for eternity, trapped in their dead bodies. After

---

[7] See Mariani, Mike. "The Tragic, Forgotten History of Zombies." *The Atlantic*, 28 Oct. 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/10/how-america-erased-the-tragic-history-of-the-zombie/412264/.
[8] See Gandhi, Lakshmi. "Zoinks! Tracing The History Of 'Zombie' From Haiti To The CDC." *NPR.Org*, 15 Dec. 2013, https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/12/13/250844800/zoinks-tracing-the-history-of-zombie-from-haiti-to-the-cdc.

the Haitian revolution in 1804, the zombie became part of Haitian culture and the Vodou religion, with many Haitians believing zombies were corpses reanimated by Vodou sorcerers, known as bokors. These bokors were said to use zombies as free labor and to carry out nefarious tasks. According to Sarah Lauro, the zombie became a sort of fragmentary representation for the anxieties over slavery, mixed with religious and occult emblems of various West African cultures. This occult figure is the zombie represented in *The Magic Island* and *White Zombie*, but it has since been excised from the American zombie narratives most people know today.

Post-Apocalyptic = Post-Racial

Just as the zombie's violent origin—which is rooted in the horrors of slavery—has been obscured by decades of whitewashing practices, post-racialism pretends that racism is dead and equality has arrived, obscuring the racialized violence happening today, all of which is undergirded by white supremacy. Aware of the zombie's Haitian roots and its appropriation by white culture, Whitehead recognizes this racialized past of the zombie and uses its metaphorical powers to remark upon and ultimately reject the narrative of a post-racial America. In a clearly deliberate move on Whitehead's part, *Zone One* at first seems unconcerned with race. Character names are nondescript and everyone has an ashy-gray hue due to the disposal of skel corpses by burning, rendering skin color seemingly irrelevant. And yet, despite the apparent non-existence of racial identification in the novel, racism permeates the text. Spitz remarks that though much of the city is overrun by zombies, "it was still hard to get a cab, for example" (80). Spitz's

comment points to the common real-world problem of Black men—including Barack Obama[9]—being unable to get cabs as easily as others due to racial discrimination, a phenomenon known as "hailing while Black."

Moreover, in the days following the outbreak, three important cities are destroyed in the novel: Oakland is firebombed, St. Augustine is nuked, and Birmingham is annihilated. Not only do Oakland, St. Augustine, and Birmingham have large Black populations, but they are also sites in which important historical moments of Black history took place. The Black Panther Party was founded at Merritt College in Oakland; St. Augustine was one of the pivotal sites of the Civil Rights Movement from 1963-64; and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in Birmingham. Birmingham was also the location of the Sixteenth Street Baptist church bombing in 1963 where four Black girls were murdered. It is no coincidence that these three cities are destroyed, and that the island of Manhattan—a predominantly wealthy (white) island—remains largely untouched and used as the center of reconstruction. The implication is that the former cities were major causes of the apocalypse, and now that they have been annihilated, the apocalypse is over and the world is now in a post-era. In other words, killing off the "problem" as W.E.B Du Bois termed it, is a verifiable way to move beyond race (1). This violent notion is confirmed by the novel's bleak urban setting which is regularly described as smeared with ash that turns the city into "a gray

---

[9] See Rodriguez, Meredith. "Obama Had Trouble Getting Cabs in Chicago, First Lady Says." Chicago Tribune, December 18, 2014. http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-obamas-racism-talk-20141217-story.html.

hush on the best of days, but introduce clouds and a little bit of precip and the city became an altar to obscurity" (Whitehead 9). Characters in the novel are similarly described, such as Gary, Spitz's sweeping partner: "Gary had a granite complexion, gray and pitted skin" (27). People are no longer black or white; they are all gray, covered in the ashes of cremated corpses, an overwhelming image that combines racial allegory with death. In other words, this mythical post-racial reality is reached by the elimination of millions of people, just as the post-apocalypse in *Zone One* is reached through the extermination of zombie-skels. Hurley indicates that many Americans believe the U.S. population will eventually become so mixed as to be all off-white, therefore achieving the much-desired state of post-raciality. She states, "the contemporary U.S. is deeply invested in the fantasy of a postracial nation in which Americans will apparently be off-white enough to be interesting but light enough that there will be no more Black people" (313). Like Whitehead's ashy gray people, Hurley's analysis demonstrates the inherent violence such longing creates: a post-racial world is a world without Black people. Just as the zombie mythology is white-washed, so is Whitehead's post-racial, post-apocalyptic setting gray-washed.

This ashy grayness extends to all aspects of the novel and its characters, including Spitz who, in true allegorical fashion, is the epitome of the everyman. Described as an "average Joe," Spitz's story appears unremarkable: "He was their typical, he was their most, he was their average .... His aptitude lay in the well-executed muddle" (11). Spitz's averageness extends to all aspects of his life, making him an ideal everyman. Even his name—Mark Spitz—is a nickname, rendering his true identity

anonymous. Whitehead deliberately withholds Spitz's racial identity until the end of the novel to illustrate colorblindness as naïve and impractical—removing Spitz's racial identity does not remove racism or racists beliefs in this world. Readers learn through a flashback scene, that Spitz and his fellow sweepers were surrounded by zombies, and the only escape was to jump from the bridge into the river below. Spitz refuses, shoots his way out of the horde, and receives the nickname Mark Spitz—an actual white Olympic swimmer who won seven gold medals in the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich—because the other sweepers believe he cannot swim. Readers learn that Spitz is Black only after he explains that his nickname is because of the "Black-people-can't-swim thing" (287), a lingering stereotype of Black people from the Jim Crow era that helped to justify segregation of public swimming pools and beaches. Critical race scholars term Mark Spitz's nickname as "hate speech," and his acceptance and adoption of it "internalization" or "false consciousness," linking hate speech "to the social-construction-of-race hypothesis, pointing out that concerted racial vilification contributes to social images and ingrained preconceptions of people of color as indolent, immoral, or intellectually deficient" (Delgado and Stefancic 155). Spitz's nickname implies that race and racism continue to function and to matter in a "post-" world.

While Spitz's nickname reveals the myth of the post-racial, so too does Spitz's sweeping duties. His daily struggle for survival within a hostile environment keeps him from believing in a "post-" narrative articulated by American Phoenix or its "Pheenies"—Spitz's disparaging term for believers of American Phoenix's optimism campaigns. He states at one point: "the plague is the plague, though. I don't see a reason

to believe it's finished" (270). While Pheenies wax hopeful, buying into the narrative that the apocalypse is over, Spitz remains cautious, his daily sweeping duties proving, to himself at least, that danger lurks behind every locked door and around every corner. As he sweeps a building with his co-workers Kaitlyn and Gary, Spitz gets tackled by "the Marge"—a zombie in a "candy-pink dress suit"—as he attempts to kill the other zombies in a human resources office (20). Spitz's takedown causes him to have a flashback to a time when he saw an old man get pinned and then devoured by a horde of zombies, his attention elsewhere. After witnessing such a horrific event, he remarks, "Let them pin you and you were dead. Let them pin you and there was no way to stop them from ripping off whatever pitiful armor you'd wrapped yourself in, stuck your hopes to" (24). For Spitz, the useless armor and hope work in much the same way: neither will protect him from the violent streets of Zone One. Spitz suggests here that staying "woke" is the only effective means of ridding the world of zombies, and in fact, once he realizes he is about to be pinned down, he comes out of his reverie and he wakes up (25).

Mark Spitz's "woke" journey for survival allegorizes the real fear faced by Black men on the streets. However, despite events in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 and Baltimore, Maryland in 2015 (in which young, unarmed Black men were killed by police officers who were later acquitted of charges or never indicted at all) post-racial beliefs continue to permeate the media, long after Barack Obama's presidency. Like Spitz, who "kept his eyes open and watched his environment for cues, a survivalist even at a tender

age" (11), Black men must be taught how to survive in America.[10] Spitz's narrative of survival is allegorical to most Black men in America, who cannot focus on larger issues plaguing the nation and must focus on their daily survival in a hostile setting. In his article regarding the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in 2012, Richard Purcell states, "For those who thought the election of President Obama finally marked America's transcendence into a postrace era or let alone a postblack one, the tragic shooting of Martin should put such naïve idealism to rest" (155). The violent realities of what it means to be a Black man in America returned to the forefront of American consciousness with Martin's death and have continued to be reinforced with subsequent shootings of young Black men since. Spitz's survival in post-apocalyptic New York depends upon his ability to ignore that "naïve idealism" put forth by American Phoenix, because, "If you weren't concentrating on how to survive the next five minutes, you wouldn't survive them. The recent reversals in the campaign had not swayed him to optimism, nor the ... latest hope-delivery system sent down from Buffalo" (32). Spitz's reality differs widely from the narrative put forth by American Phoenix, just as Obama's mythical post-raciality does not reflect the realities faced by young Black men in America today.

While Mark Spitz and his fellow sweepers do the dangerous and monotonous job of wiping out the stragglers left after the U.S. Marines' initial cleanse, American

---

[10] A simple Google search brings up hundreds of articles written by Black men and women on being taught or teaching their sons about what it means to be a Black man in America. See "Dead or in Jail: The Burden of Being a Black Man in America" by Wilbert L. Cooper for Vice.com, August 4, 2015.

Phoenix inculcates into the survivors a false narrative of hope and progress. With the use of catchy slogans, buzzwords, and images of children growing up in the survivor camps, American Phoenix's optimistic decrees become the overarching, "national" narrative of the post-apocalyptic world. Not coincidentally, the interim government's catchphrase "We Make Tomorrow!" resembles Barack Obama's 2008 campaign slogans "Yes, We Can!" and "We are the Ones We've Been Waiting For." [11] Obama derived his campaign slogans from the famous phrase "Sí Se Puede"—created by the United Farm Workers (UFW) co-founder Dolores Huerta during Cesar Chavez's hunger strike in 1972 boycotting Arizona legislation that prohibited strikes of farm workers during harvest season—connecting his campaign platform to race and labor movements in the U.S. and abroad. Obama's inclusive campaign rhetoric exhibited by these slogans incorporated a rhetorical pragmatism that negotiated uncertainty, generated knowledge based on human interest, and expressed individualism while simultaneously fostering community building, according to Keith Jenkins and Grant Cos. Using various campaign speeches, Jenkins and Cos prove that Obama reminded the people, "that 'he' was not in this battle alone; transforming America would require the efforts of all Americans" (191). American Phoenix, like Obama, uses inclusive rhetoric as an attempt to bring its citizens together through shared interests in safety, security, and survival in order to aid in reconstruction endeavors.

[11] The latter slogan comes from the poem "Poem for South African Women" by Black writer June Jordan commemorating a South African women's protest of apartheid on August 9, 1956. The line later became the title of a collection of essays by Alice Walker in 2007.

These campaigns of hope employed by both American Phoenix and Obama are constantly branded to encourage more survivors to aid in the reconstruction efforts. As Whitehead notes in his op-ed that post-racial people of color suffer from a branding problem, so too does American Phoenix believe in a rebranding of post-apocalypse. During the early part of the reconstruction efforts, the government "agreed on the wisdom of rebranding survival. They maintained a freakish menagerie of specialists up there ... and what did these folks do all day but try and think up better ways to hone the future" (98). Survivor camps are named "New Vista," "Bubbling Brooks," and "Happy Acres," and merchandise is manufactured with American Phoenix's snazzy logo (99). American Phoenix aims to put a positive spin on reconstruction, to propagate heart-warming stories and images to illustrate their success in rebuilding the country, starting with New York City. Mark Spitz's boss notes the simple genius of this rebranding effort when he states, "The symbolism. If you can bring back New York City, you can bring back the world" (121). American Phoenix's rebranding project enables survivors to hope, and in their hope, aide the government in its reconstruction of the city and therefore bolster its power.

Like American Phoenix, the Obama brand was similarly crafted to foster feelings of hope, and it did so through images and stories. After George Bush's calamitous "war on terror," Obama embodied the ultimate liberal hero, advocating an end to the war, equality for women, the LGBTQ community, and people of color. Obama's heroic image was also carefully constructed. David Hoogland Noon notes that Obama was often represented as a comic book hero during his 2008 campaign and argues that these

images "were consistent with a broad set of assumptions that Americans hold about the power and authority of the president" (432). As Mark Spitz sarcastically notes, "A society manufactures the hero it requires" (53). Similarly, American Phoenix manufactures its own superheroic image using stories of survivors to foster feelings of hope. At the end of every day, the sweeper teams sit around their Lieutenant to hear the Nightly News, a name for the announcements and messages coming from American Phoenix directors in Buffalo. These messages revolve around an increase in food supply, resources, and often contain inspiring individual survivor stories. On the whole, "It was all positive, in line with the trend of late" (43). American Phoenix appropriates a story about triplets who survived a rough birth while their mother does not. These Tromanhauser Triplets, as they are called, become central to American Phoenix's narrative of hope because they represent new life in the face of utter devastation, much like the interim government's symbol, the phoenix. Mark Spitz notes that "To Pheenies, these babies were localized hope, and they needed the Triplets to pull through" (52). The Triplets become symbolic of the hopeful future provided by American Phoenix's reconstruction efforts in the same way Obama's campaign used various stories of ordinary citizens involved in the campaign efforts—from students and soldiers to farmers and teachers [12]—motivating other Americans "to become the change they desired in America" (Jensen and Cos 191).

---

[12] Jenkins and Cos give many examples of Obama's usage of personal stories of his campaign workers, including Ashley Baia, a young, 23-year-old white woman who organized his campaign in Florence, South Carolina, whom he refers to in his famous "A More Perfect Union" speech in 2008.

The emphasis on American Phoenix's rebranding efforts heightens the allegory: Staci Zavattaro claims that Obama "and his campaign team were so adept at building a brand and an image that Obama was named Advertising Age's Marketer of the Year for 2008" (123). However, Zavattaro notes the risk of Obama's branding politics and the trend of the branded leader. She states that "As a productized brand, the president becomes a simulation for a leader, as people zero in on the rhetoric and imagery. This slip into hyperreality could be precarious. If, for example, future campaigns employ the Brand Obama model, perpetual presidents will feed into the simulation of an ideal image rather than an ideal leader" (124). Like Obama, American Phoenix becomes a brand, crafting its image as a phoenix rising from the ashes to bring safety and security to its citizens, downplaying the precarity of their situation to Pheenies.

American Phoenix's work to rebrand survival becomes central to their mission to move beyond apocalypse. Their rebranding efforts ease the survivors' lives with morale-boosting merchandise, propaganda, and buzzwords: "what greater proof of the rejuvenation of the world, the return to Eden, than a new buzzword emerging from the dirt to tilt its petals to the zeitgeist" (66). Buzzwords are a pivotal tool used by American Phoenix to aid in reconstruction efforts. According to Spitz, they prove that life is going back to the way it was before. Even Whitehead's op-ed calls upon this buzzwording of American discourse, recalling how "journalists employ Google searches to lend credence to trend articles" as he compares "recent hits on the word 'postracial' with those of a previous year. There have been more than 500,000 online mentions of postraciality this year, opposed to absolutely zero in 1982" (par. 2). "Post-racial" was 2009's buzzword,

and, I would argue, the buzzword for all the years of Obama's presidency. American Phoenix employs buzzwords in a similar fashion, including "PASD"—and acronym for Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder—to indicate that the United States is now situated in a "post-" moment. The teams in Buffalo create brochures about PASD to educate survivors as well as acknowledge their condition. Spitz's sarcastic comments about American Phoenix's buzzwords imply that, like the media's attachment to "post-racial," these efforts are superficial and meaningless. America is no more post-race than Spitz's America is post-apocalyptic. American Phoenix's public relations team's use of buzzwords implies that, like the Obama administration, it is attempting to promote and encourage hope in its reconstruction endeavors. Ultimately, however, these rebranding efforts feel like empty promises to Mark Spitz, echoing similar critiques of the emptiness in the Obama "super-brand" ("Naomi Klein on Climate Debt"). As we see in the end, Zavattaro's claim about the risks involved in political branding results in cataclysmic consequences in *Zone One*, proving the futility of American Phoenix's reconstruction efforts and the fiction of the "post-" in post-apocalyptic.

In the face of American Phoenix's reconstruction and rebranding efforts, Mark Spitz continues to resist its optimistic campaigns, insisting that "hope is a gateway drug" (222), referencing another of Obama's 2008 campaign slogans, "Hope." Spitz's comparison of hope with drugs highlights his pessimism for reconstruction while also hinting at a deadlier, dangerous future to which a belief in "post-"s leads. He does not "want to get too invested" in the Tromanhauser Triplets or "spare any [feeling] for these cubs," preferring instead to see them as he sees the increasing food supply: "New life in

the midst of devastation. Corn, babies" (51). Comparing babies to the corn harvest or to cubs becomes a way for Spitz to remove the humanity from the triplets and therefore their power as a symbol of hope. Without that hope, he can discount the deadlier promise of a country that has survived an apocalypse and is now past the danger.

Like American Phoenix's empty promises, the narrative of race perpetrated by the media after Obama's election according to Delgado and Stefancic, goes something like this:

> Early in our history there was slavery, which was a terrible thing. Blacks were brought to this country from Africa in chains and made to work in the fields. Some were viciously mistreated, which was, of course, an unforgivable wrong; others were treated kindly. Slavery ended with the Civil War, although many Blacks remained poor, uneducated, and outside the cultural mainstream. As the country's racial sensitivity to Blacks' plight increased, federal statutes and case law gradually eliminated the vestiges of slavery. Today, Blacks enjoy many civil rights and are protected from discrimination in such areas as housing, public education, employment, and voting. A Black president occupies the White House. The gap between Blacks and whites is steadily closing, although it may take some time for it to close completely .... Most Americans are fair-minded individuals who harbor little racial prejudice. The few who do can be punished when they act on those beliefs. (Delgado and Stefancic 46)

Delgado and Stefancic's narrative expresses the colorblind American's beliefs regarding racism in the U.S.: that some Americans believe themselves to be beyond racism and

racial discrimination, pointing to Obama as signifying this progression. Delgado and Stefancic's narrative critiques the average white American who see the average Black American as equal. Further, with emancipation, the Civil Rights Movement, and Obama's election, Blacks are believed to have access to the same opportunities as whites do, and that if people of color are subjected to any inequality, it is their fault, their choice, and that all racist acts are now legally punished. This is the sort of justification that underlies colorblindness and post-racial beliefs. Post-racial ideology employs colorblindness in order to erase Blackness as a meaningful category of identity; by denying acceptance of Blackness, post-racial ideology further imbeds racism into American society. Delgado's and Stefancic's narrative of race shows both the optimism and naïveté of the colorblindness inherent in post-racial ideology so crucial to Obama's heroic administration.

This post-raciality and colorblindness also depend upon forgetting the past. For example, Bonilla-Silva states that "modern racial ideology does not thrive on the ugliness of the past or the language and tropes typical of slavery and Jim Crow" (265) and explains that today there are other ways of calling racial minorities slanderous names (like a nickname, perhaps?), and for justifying minorities' treatment in post-Obama America. As stated earlier, Whitehead takes this a step further in his satirical *New York Times* op-ed when he states that Toni Morrison's Pulitzer-prize winning *Beloved*, a book very much concerned with America's past, should be changed to reflect our new world. He sarcastically argues that a post-racial world no longer has use for

angry ghosts depicted in novels about slavery, because the past is no longer important, and should therefore be forgotten.

Zone One also confirms the ridiculous nature of "post-" thinking when Mark Spitz ponders the pamphlets on PASD to emphasize "post-"ness as a pathology. Survival in an apocalyptic wasteland becomes so mentally and emotionally damaging that most survivors are diagnosed with PASD—a disorder similar in nature to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder most commonly associated with veterans. PASD is sarcastically called the "past" by sweepers and other survivors (69). The disorder is linked to their remembrance of their lives before the zombie plague wiped out most of humanity. Their attempts at forgetting their pasts create the symptoms, nightmares, and erratic behavior associated with PASD. James Baldwin states in his short essay collection, *The Fire Next Time*, that "the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past. To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought" (333). Baldwin, speaking to both Black and white Americans, returns to this notion of the past frequently in his works. He argues that in order for any real change to take place, the past needs to be accepted as part of American history and culture. Similarly, in the novel survivors are literally ill due to the attempt at forgetting their past, illustrating that any attempt in *Zone One* to ignore Baldwin's advice results in psychological trauma.

Whitehead suggests that despite the best attempts at moving forward and rebuilding the world, the old beliefs continue to take hold and racist practices remain. As

the sweepers, lieutenants, and team leaders self-segregate in the makeshift mess-halls propped up in the old noodle houses and restaurants of Chinatown, the irony is clear. Spitz even notices that as the officers spread out across Manhattan killing skels, "gentrification had resumed" (35). American Phoenix is also interested in collecting demographic data from the sweeper teams, an effort Spitz believes will "deliver end dates and progress and the return to life before" (42). Essentially, the segregation in the mess hall, the gentrification process of Manhattan, and the demographic data collection indicate that despite its best efforts at reconstruction, American Phoenix's tacking on of the "post-" prefix does not signify any actual progress. And what is even more telling is American Phoenix's consistent use of the term "reconstruction" (9), a barefaced reference to the era after the Civil War and the emancipation of the slaves from 1865 to 1877, hinting at American Phoenix's failed attempt at a post-apocalyptic, "post-racial" utopia.

Like American Phoenix's attempts, historian Eric Foner calls Reconstruction a failure, particularly for African Americans. He states, "for blacks its failure was a disaster whose magnitude cannot be obscured by the genuine accomplishments that did endure" (604). Foner attributes the failure of Reconstruction to several key issues. First, the increasing demands of the northern poor "helped propel the urban bourgeoisie to the right." This led to "the growth of bourgeois class consciousness" (517-18). Second, "The erosion of the free labor ideology made possible a resurgence of overt racism that undermined support for Reconstruction" (525). Foner confirms Du Bois's argument in the resurgence of overt racism in *Black Reconstruction* (1935), a central, long

overlooked, text of Reconstruction. Du Bois's book departed significantly from contemporaneous readings of the failed post-Civil war era propagated by the racist Dunning School, which downplayed the efforts of African Americans in Reconstruction. Divided by race, poor Southern whites and the formerly enslaved could not unite against the upper-class whites; instead, poor whites developed an allegiance to whiteness and racism continued to assert itself. Du Bois declares: "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery" (30). Nicole Etcheson sees the primary reason for the failure of Reconstruction as the states' inability to suppress the violence of Southern whites when they sought reversal for black gains. Whitehead's signaling of Reconstruction throughout the novel indicates that, like the era after the Civil War, American Phoenix's attempts will also fail. In fact, Whitehead implies that any attempts to reconstruct society while leaving untouched the larger problems of racial inequality and injustice underwritten by white supremacy will result in failure.

Whitehead drives home his racial allegory when he unveils Mark Spitz's racial identity at the same time that Ms. Macy—one of American Phoenix's "public relations" directors—divulges American Phoenix's failed reconstruction when the walls of Zone One fall. Just as Mark Spitz's racial identity is unveiled, so too, is it revealed that American Phoenix instills a false sense of security into its survivor-citizens, covering up the reality that Zone One is far from safe. We quickly learn just how good the public relations team is at American Phoenix when Ms. Macy declares, "You have no idea how far we are from normal, do you? .... I'm too good at my job .... This is PR .... It'll be years before we're able to resettle this island. We don't even have food for the winter"

(311). Ms. Macy acknowledges the failure of the survivor camps in Buffalo and the misguided belief that some of the undead are harmless, indicating that the world is no more post-apocalyptic than America is post-racial.

Zombies as the Post-race Ideal

The collision of Spitz's narrative of survival with American Phoenix's "post-" narrative in the final pages signifies that any attempt at post-racial thinking is a farce, and that survival only works when reality is transparent rather than idealized. Gary and Kaitlyn, the two other sweepers on Mark Spitz's team, help to establish how American Phoenix's denial of danger and overemphasis on hope is actually doing harm. Gary lets down his guard just long enough to get bitten and Kaitlyn—an optimistic Pheenie who believes in American Phoenix's reconstruction propaganda—succumbs to the horde that breaks through the wall protecting Zone One. Meanwhile, as Spitz attempts to escape Zone One, he notes that:

> Every race, color, and creed was represented in this congregation that funneled down the avenue. As it had been before, per the myth of this melting-pot city. The city did not care for your story, the particular narrative of your reinvention; it took them all in, every immigrant in their strivings, regardless of bloodline, the identity of their homeland, the number of coins in their pocket. Nor did this plague discriminate; your blood fell instantly or your blood held out longer, but your blood always failed in the end. They had been young and old, natives and newcomers. No matter the hue of their skin, dark or light, no matter the names of

their gods or the absences they countenanced, they had all strived, struggled, and loved in their small, human fashion. (303)

Here, Whitehead illustrates that the plague does not discriminate, nor do the zombies it creates. The zombies do not have PASD, or racist nicknames, and they do not self-segregate. These zombies truly exist in a post-racial state, and they are the only image of fully realized post-raciality in the novel. The zombies are not individualized; instead, the zombies are condensed into a single entity: the horde. Here, Spitz demonstrates that the only way for New York City and America to truly become a post-racial "melting pot" is to die of the plague and come back a zombie—and in doing so, to give up any identity but "undead."

Unfortunately for Mark Spitz, the only way to belong to this diverse group in which skin color is not a means for discrimination is to become a zombie. Spitz survives long enough to realize this and to understand how effective American Phoenix's public relations team is at concealing the truth about the zombies overtaking Buffalo and New York City (311). Ultimately, Spitz commits suicide by zombie horde. Whitehead's dark and subversive ending shows us that racism is too entrenched in American culture to belong to the past even after an apocalyptic event. As Ramón Saldívar argues, "Whitehead proposes that it may well be necessary first to imagine the end of the world before we may imagine the historical end of racialization and racism" (13), a sentiment echoed by other Black writers, including Coates and Baldwin. Saldívar's claim stresses the importance of Whitehead's unconventional ending.

As deeply unsatisfying as the ending is, it is also incongruous with the apocalyptic genre whose texts usually end with the survivors making their way to a purported government established safety zone or centralized survivor outpost. In other words, most apocalypse narratives end with the survivors surviving or, as in the case of the famed *The Walking Dead* graphic novels and television series, never ending at all. *Zone One* ends with Mark Spitz acknowledging the fact that there is no escape as he surrenders to a sea of zombies, "embrac[ing] radical narrative closure as an alternative to futurist narratives of crisis" (Sorenson 560). By embracing narrative closure, Whitehead insists that movement beyond race is a movement beyond humanity. For example, Spitz's surrender comes right after a conversation with Gary who has just been bitten, and the sudden realization that bigotry, racism, and inequality, the real plagues, still exist and will continue to exist:

> Would the old bigotries be reborn as well, when they cleared out this Zone, and the next, and so on, and they were packed together again, tight and suffocating on top of each other? Or was that particular bramble of animosities, fears, and envies impossible to re-create? If they could bring back paperwork, Mark Spitz thought, they could certainly reanimate prejudice, parking tickets, and reruns. (Whitehead 288)

Spitz's comparison of bigotry and prejudice with commonplace parking tickets and reruns suggests that for him, all of those things are normal, everyday occurrences. Bigotry is not unusual in his world, before or after the apocalyptic event. In fact, that bigotry will continue even after Spitz is dead. Spitz's suicide damns him to this location,

just as the slaves were damned to the plantation in Saint Domingue. As an everyman, Spitz illustrates the continual, never-ending cycle of the suffering of Black men.

Spitz's acceptance of his fate hinges on the fact that the only way to move beyond race is to die and rise again. This is a particularly poignant realization when read in the context of the growing list of Black Americans killed, most at the hands of police officers, among them Oscar Grant III, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Jonathan Ferrell, John Crawford III, Kimani Gray, and Stephon Clark. These men and boys do not get to come back to life. Thus, the figure of the undead zombie exhibits death as the ultimate leveling field: if we are to become post-racial, we will not even know it. *Zone One* indicates that to fully understand post-raciality we must recognize that no assignment of a "post-" to a word makes that thing past. In *Zone One*, Whitehead uses a historically racialized trope that America has appropriated (and whitewashed) as its own—the zombie—to both understand and come to terms with the dominant society, not to assimilate, but rather to speak to the ways in which post-racial thinking hurts everyone. Michael Tesler notes that despite claims of ushering in the post-racial era, "the election of Barack Obama may well have been the watershed to another of America's periodic hyperracial political eras" (9). Indeed, Donald Trump's presidency startlingly confirms Tesler's argument and suggests that we are doomed to fail as long we are unwilling to address the continuing legacy of race and racism in the U.S.

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. "Fire Next Time." *Baldwin: Collected Essays*. Edited by Toni Morrison, Library of America, 1998.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. 3rd edition, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009.

Delgado, Richard, Jean Stefancic, and Ernesto Liendo. *Critical Race Theory*. New York UP, 2012.

Dobbs, Lou. "Dobbs Calls on Listeners to Rise Above 'Partisan and Racial Element that Dominates Politics'." *Media Matters for America*, 12 Nov. 2009. https://www.mediamatters.org/video/2009/11/12/dobbs-calls-on-listeners-to-rise-above-partisan/156917.

Du Bois, W.E.B. *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. Harcourt, 1935.

---. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Revised edition, Dover, 1994.

Etcheson, Nicole. "Reconstruction and the Making of a Free-Labor South," *Reviews in American History*, vol. 37, no. 2, June 2009, pp. 236–42.

Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*. Revised edition, Harper Perennial, 2014.

Gandhi, Lakshmi. "Zoinks! Tracing The History Of 'Zombie' From Haiti To The CDC." *NPR.Org*, 15 Dec. 2013,

https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/12/13/250844800/zoinks-tracing-the-history-of-zombie-from-haiti-to-the-cdc.

Gerodimos, Roman, and Jákup Justinussen. "Obama's 2012 Facebook Campaign: Political Communication in the Age of the Like Button." *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2015, pp. 113–32.

Holt, Thomas. *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-First Century*. Harvard UP, 2000.

Hughes, Langston. "Let America Be America Again." *Présence Africaine*, vol. 59, 1966, pp. 3–5.

Hurley, Jessica. "History Is What Bites: Zombies, Race, and the Limits of Biopower in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*." *Extrapolation*, vol. 3, 2015, pp. 311–33.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke UP, 1991.

Jenkins, Keith and Grant Cos. "A Time for Change and a Candidate's Voice: Pragmatism and the Rhetoric of Inclusion in Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign." *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 54 no. 3, 2010, pp. 184–202.

Lauro, Sarah J. *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death*. Rutgers UP, 2015.

Li, Stephanie. *Signifying without Specifying: Racial Discourse in the Age of Obama*. Rutgers UP, 2012.

Longxi, Zhang. "Historicizing the Postmodern Allegory." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1994, pp. 212–31.

Mariani, Mike. "The Tragic, Forgotten History of Zombies." *The Atlantic*, 28 Oct. 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/10/how-america-erased-the-tragic-history-of-the-zombie/412264/.

Matthews, Chris. "MSNBC's Matthews On Obama: 'I Forgot He Was Black Tonight.'" *Real Clear Politics*, Jan. 27, 2010, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2010/01/27/msnbcs_matthews_on_obama_i_forgot_he_was_black_tonight.html.

McConnell, Mariana. "Interview: George A. Romero on *Diary of the Dead*." *Cinema Blend*. 2008. https://www.cinemablend.com/new/Interview-George-Romero-Diary-Dead-7818.html. Accessed 20 June 2017.

"Naomi Klein on Climate Debt: Why Rich Countries Should Pay Reparations to Poor Countries for the Climate Crisis." *Democracy Now*. 23 Nov. 2009. https://www.democracynow.org/2009/11/23/naomi_klein_on_climate_debt_why.

Noon, David Hoogland. "Barack Obama and the Myth of the Superheroic Presidency." *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2016, pp. 432–54.

Purcell, Richard. "Trayvon, PostBlackness, and the Postrace Dilemma." *Boundary 2*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2013, pp. 139–61.

Rodriguez, Meredith. "Obama Had Trouble Getting Cabs in Chicago, First Lady Says." *Chicago Tribune*. December 18, 2014. http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-obamas-racism-talk-20141217-story.html

Saldívar, Ramón. “The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative.” *Narrative*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1–18.

Schulman, Martha. “My Horrible ‘70s Apocalypse.” Rev. of *Zone One*, by Colson Whitehead. *Publisher's Weekly*, vol. 258, no. 29, 2011, p. 131.

Sorensen, Leif. “Against the Post-Apocalyptic: Narrative Closure in Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*.” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2014, pp. 559–92.

Squires, Catherine. *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the 21st Century*. New York UP, 2014.

Tesler, Michael, and David O. Sears. *Obama’s Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America*. U of Chicago P, 2010.

Whitehead, Colson. “The Year of Living Postracially.” *The New York Times*. 3 Nov. 2009. https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/04/opinion/04whitehead.html.

---. *Zone One*. Anchor, 2011.

Zavattaro, Staci M. “Brand Obama.” *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, vol. 32, no. 1, March 2010, pp. 123–28. https://doi.org/10.2753/ATP1084-1806320108.

CHAPTER III

OCULAR REBELLION: THE SATIRICAL GAZE OF WHITE FRIGHT IN JORDAN PEELE'S *GET OUT*

You can ask a white person to see the world through the eyes of a black person for an hour and a half. —Jordan Peele, *New York Times* interview

Often their rage erupts because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that they think will make racism disappear. They have a deep emotional investment in the myth of sameness even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think. —bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*

Please don't lump me in with that, you know, I could give a shit what color you are. No, what I want is deeper. I want your eye, man. I want those things you see through. —Jordan Peele, *Get Out*

Introduction: Now don't you close your eyes!

In mid-November of 2017, Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) was submitted for Golden Globes consideration in the "musical or comedy" category. The Black community took to Twitter to express their exasperation at the generic mislabeling of a film that satirically exposes the horrifying realities of being Black in America. Peele also had things to say about his film's mislabeling and tweeted at the height of the controversy, "It's a documentary." Days later he clarified his sardonic tweet and released a statement which said, in part:

> The reason for the visceral response to this movie being called a comedy is that we are still living in a time in which African-American cries for justice aren't being taken seriously. It's important to acknowledge that though there are funny

> moments, the systemic racism that the movie is about is very real. More than anything, it shows me that film can be a force for change. At the end of the day, call "Get Out" horror, comedy, drama, action or documentary, I don't care. Whatever you call it, just know it's our truth. (qtd. in Morris)

Peele's exasperation with the film's categorization stems from the U.S.'s continuing failure to *see* racism and its societal effects. Written during Obama's presidency but set in the early moments of Trump's, this "post-race" optical failure remains central to the film's exploration of twenty-first century racism. "Post-race" is a belief that the U.S. has moved "beyond" race into a colorblind utopia, free from the cultural baggage of racism and its violent history of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and white power movements. In several interviews, including those with *Vanity Fair* and the *New York Times*, Peele calls the early Obama years "the post-racial lie" ("Jordan Peele"). Although "post-race" was used prior to Obama's historic election, the term became a buzzword in the years leading up to and after his 2008 election, characterizing the era's avoidance of race-related issues. Race was avoided because, as Colson Whitehead puts it in a satirical op-ed written one year into Obama's presidency, "Fifty-three percent of the voters opted for the candidate who would be the first president of African descent, and in doing so eradicated racism forever" ("A Year"). A Black man was now the world's most powerful man. Clearly racism is a thing of the past, right?

Get Out rejects the "post-race" fantasy so popular with Obama's election and shows us racism's terrifyingly real face today. The film centers on Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya), an attractive young Black photographer who takes a weekend trip

with his white girlfriend Rose Armitage (Allison Williams) to meet her parents, Dean (Bradley Whitford), a surgeon, and Missy (Catherine Keener), a psychiatrist. The seemingly innocuous storyline, based loosely on Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), quickly unravels as Chris uncovers a disturbing body-snatching scheme known as the Coagula, that renders his and other Black bodies commodities to the wealthy white elite. Unlike previous victims, Chris manages to escape their evil scheme due to his perceptive gaze as both a Black man and a gifted photographer, two factors with significant ties to Black history, horror, and the film's conglomeration of genres.

Upon its initial release, *Get Out* was marketed as a horror flick, with Peele taking inspiration from such classic films as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Stepford Wives* (1975), and *Halloween* (1978). In an interview with NPR's Terry Gross, Peele stated that a horror film about race "hadn't been touched … since *Night of the Living Dead* 50 years ago" ("*Get Out*"). As a "genre connoisseur" (Jarvis 101), Peele plays with horror's tropes and alludes to these and other classic films throughout *Get Out* to suggest that racism creates similar feelings of terror; racism stalks Black men as they navigate primarily white suburbs and forces Black people to comply with white patriarchal society or die. Hence, the reality Peele's tweet claims to be exposing—systemic racism and the continued injustices faced by the Black community—is rendered just as horrifying as women forcibly turned into fembots, escaped psychokillers, and evil supernatural forces coupled with murderous insanity, making Peele's emphasis on "real" and "truth" especially disturbing. Noël Carroll states that in viewing horror, "our

attention is focused, usually relentlessly, on the physical plight of characters harried by monsters. Ordinary moral concern for human injury is never far from our minds as we follow a horror fiction. Thus fear is the métier of the horror fiction" (158). Fear is largely the point of most horror films—it's why we go and see them. In *Get Out*, however, fear is not just for cheap thrills. Instead, the fear Chris feels (and the audience by extension) is central to Peele's larger point about race in the U.S. But the film explores other fears. The Armitages, as progressive whites who "would have voted for Obama a third time," are terrified of being seen as racist. Chris's gaze only compounds this fear as he looks upon (and photographs) the family's servants, housewares, and plantation-style home. Much like body cam footage in recent police brutality cases, Chris's gaze exposes the ways fear is weaponized and contributes to the violence underwriting the color-blind post-racial era's progressive façade.

By emphasizing white fright through sight, *Get Out* is not just another horror film, but a more ambitious attempt at documenting the insidious violence of progressive whiteness, substantiating Peele's tongue-in-cheek claim that the film is a documentary. Peele's invocation of the documentary genre further highlights the significance of video footage in the African American community's pursuit of justice. From Rodney King's brutal beating and arrest in Los Angeles in 1991 to George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police officers in May 2020, documenting police brutality and other antiblack violence is central to the Black experience in the U.S. Known as "counter-surveillance," this phenomenon "extends the panoptic eye of power . . . but it also enables those who are normally the object of surveillance to turn the lens and reverse its

power" (Fiske 127). Peele's tweet about *Get Out*'s documentary nature points to the work the film accomplishes: weaponizing an oppositional Black gaze to dismantle the "post-racial lie," a lie that upholds racism and antiblack violence. Counter-surveillance is not without its limits, as Lyndsey Beutin observes. Tracing the histories of policing, discourses of visual objectivity, and Black criminalization and social control in the U.S., Beutin demonstrate how the convergence of these histories produces "racialization as a way of seeing" (10). This historical formation, Beutin argues, or "The ability to see the tortured black body as a threatening weapon—simultaneously hyper-human and dehumanized—is the product of centuries of American history and policy that have understood black bodies as inherently threatening to the social order and have treated, controlled, and surveilled them accordingly" (10). Consequently, some counter-surveillance, particularly police body cameras, often serves to legitimize modern policing, rather than dismantling its powerful gaze. Possibility for resistance exists within video counter-surveillance, however. George Floyd's murder was captured, not by a body cam, but by a bystander's camera phone. Similarly, it is through Chris's camera phone that Coagula victims are liberated. Chris photographs Andre to show Rod, while Darnella Frazier filmed Floyd's murder because "the world needed to see what I was seeing" (Xiong and Walsh). Bystander footage, unlike body cam footage, galvanizes communities and has the potential to change public sentiment. Likewise, *Get Out*'s possibility as a "force for change" stems from the film's mass appeal as a classic popcorn movie, thereby allowing it to reach a wide audience and confront public sentiment about twenty-first century racism. More importantly, the film's gaze shifts;

instead of viewing Chris from an outsider's perspective (or a cop's body cam), audiences view the events from Chris's perspective, thereby inhabiting the racialized body, if only for an hour and a half.

Although truthful and imbued with the histories of policing, video footage, and social control, Peele's tweet was also meant to be satirical (if Peele's comedy background is any indication). This satirical quality also saturates the film which, when combined with the horror and documentary genres, makes sight an even more crucial metaphor in the film and its larger sociopolitical mission as a force for change. After all, as John Clement Ball declares, "Satire, with its objectifying, disparaging gaze and its deliberate misrepresentations, is a form of othering—of representational violence" (297). Satire is itself a way of seeing, of representing what society values, only to dismantle those values through mockery and invective, making way for something better. Steven Weisenburger also insists on satire's violent nature: "Contemporary, degenerative satire is itself a discourse of violence. It is a means of exposing modalities of terror and of *doing violence* to cultural forms that are overtly or covertly dedicated to terror" (5-6). In this view, satire becomes not just a genre of sight but a mechanism for violence against what is depicted. In *Get Out*, the Armitages—the archetypal progressive white family—are violently executed by Chris, a discerning Black man whose powerful gaze is the ultimate tool for "punching up" against the formidable bastion of whiteness (Ball 300). Through its own disparaging gaze, Peele's satirical documentary horror film exposes the fear at the heart of progressive, colorblind, post-racial whiteness embodied

by the Armitage family and their party guests to dismantle the hegemonic structure of white supremacy it affirms.

Therefore, what is most effective about the film as a force for change is the way it uses these three genres together to expose the underlying fear inherent in the "post-race" paradigm, dismantles the paradigm through satirical representation, and restores "the gaze" as an instrument for Black agency. And, because the film's events are viewed through Chris's eyes, the lens of power is reversed. It is no coincidence that Chris is a photographer. We are first introduced to Chris through his art. Before the audience even sees Chris, they catch glimpses of his photography, black and white prints that decorate his apartment, while Childish Gambino's "Redbone" ("Now don't close your eyes") plays in the background. As Lenika Cruz observes, "in its first minutes *Get Out* has already established that Chris's profession—he is basically a trained observer—will be crucial to the rest of the story. What he notices, and doesn't notice, will take on a life-or-death importance" ("The Meaning of Eyes"). Chris's gaze—with all the historical baggage from which his gaze stems—is weaponized, assaulting progressive whiteness and its post-racial lie. More importantly, the film's satirically inflected gaze, I argue, exposes the ways progressive whites—which Robin DiAngelo declares, "cause the most daily damage to people of color" (5)—uphold and perpetuate racism through their fear of being seen as racist. This "fragility" in confronting race helps to elide their participation in a system that both commodifies and robs Black lives. Further, because both satire and horror are not typical "indexical representation[s] of truth" like video footage (Beutin 8), and instead are more concerned with "the violation, problematization, and transgression

of our categories, norms, and concepts" (Carroll 152), Peele's satirical horror is not undermined as counter-surveillance by racialization as a way of seeing nor does it seek to re-legitimize the racist state. Rather, *Get Out*'s emphasis on looking through Chris's eyes shines a light on reality, making visible the invisible violence of the "post-race" era without the pollution of racialized looking. Bell hooks posits that "all attempts to repress our/black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: 'Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality'" (*Black Looks* 116). In other words, Chris's gaze (and *Get Out*'s as well) is ocular rebellion.

Eyes Wide Shut

In her famous study of horror films, Carol Clover insists that "Horror privileges eyes because, more crucially than any other kind of cinema, it is about eyes" (167). More specifically, horror emphasizes looking relations, from the act of watching horror films to the camera's voyeuristic viewpoint, like in films such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and *Halloween* which use the camera's positioning to heighten the audience's terror. Horror films encourage, and in fact thrive, on our desires to gaze at the transgressive images on screen. In *Get Out*, we observe only what Chris does, and so inhabit the "eye on the defense [rather] than an eye on the offense" (Clover 191). Chris's gaze, however, acquires an even higher significance as a historically inflected metaphor for Black agency against the oppressive white gaze. As a central tenet of African American literary tradition, the metaphor of the gaze is utilized by a multitude of Black

artists, including bell hooks and W.E.B. Du Bois. For example, hooks states that, as an effective strategy of white supremacy, Black slaves "could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving, as only a subject can observe, or see" (35). To deny Black peoples' subjectivity, whites reinforced looking relations that forced Black people to avert their gaze, relegating them to solely objects of a white gaze. When Dean notices Chris's repeated glances at Georgina (Betty Gabriel) and Walter (Marcus Henderson) upon his arrival to the Armitage estate, he exhibits fear at being seen as racist. Dean articulates his fear regarding appearances and states, "I know what you're thinking: white family, Black servants. It's a total cliché." Dean further explains that Georgina and Walter helped care for his dying parents, and now they are like family. "But boy, I hate how it looks," he demurs. Dean's efforts to placate Chris (and later Rose's own efforts after a strange family dinner), cause Chris to doubt himself. In the interview with Gross, Peele stated that as a contemporary American Chris "inhabits a dominant post-racial social paradigm, the first commandment of which is 'It Is Not About Race.'" Peele told Gross that "Part of being black in this country, and I presume being any minority, is constantly being told that … we're seeing racism where there just isn't racism" ("*Get Out*"). Peele articulates how Black people are forced to unsee what they know to be true, another way of averting their gaze and stealing their agency. Chris is labeled paranoid, his racialized insight is rejected by the white family, maintaining white supremacy (and its ensuing violence) as an invisible subtext.

Just as hooks conceptualizes Black subjectivity as a function of the gaze, W.E.B. Du Bois also characterizes whiteness in terms of vision. In "The Souls of White Folk,"

Du Bois states of white people, "I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage . . . I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious" (55). Du Bois's emphasis on sight turns his gaze into a weapon as white people become scared, "embarrassed," and "furious" by his ability to see in and through them (55). Du Bois recognizes whiteness for what it is, and sees that whites, far from being superior, are human, just like the African Americans they so often denigrate. His gaze is a source of power, exposing how white people, who despite having all the privileges their whiteness bestows upon them, remain frightened of the Black gaze.

Peele takes up horror's obsession with eyes and sight and combines it with Du Bois' and hooks' theories of the gaze to examine the "post-race" era's undercurrent of white fright. Told through Chris's perceptive gaze, *Get Out* centers the Black experience rather than making it peripheral or short-lived as in typical horror films. Further, through Chris's friend Rod Williams (Lil Rel Howery), the experiences of the Black horror film audience are written into the film itself. Rod, already chary of Chris's decision to meet Rose's parents, reacts to Chris's presence in a hostile white environment the same way audiences react to horror films: "Rod is basically everyone in the theater who's screaming at the screen," Howery said in a *New York Times* interview. He further clarified his statement and said, "There are not too many roles where you represent the voice of the audience. I've seen so many horror films where I yell at the screen like, 'Oh, come on, man!' Rod, from the beginning of the movie, is like, 'Look, this is what it is.'"

(qtd. in Fretts). Rod embodies the horror movie audience, and more specifically, he embodies the Black horror audience member who regularly watches the Black character die first in horror films. Howery also links Rod's embodiment to the agency of the Black gaze. He sees what is happening from the moment Chris leaves for the weekend. For that reason, Rod's appearance at the end confirms that there is power in looking. His looking saves the day.

Rod is also the locus of the film's funniest moments, thereby generating much of the film's satirical tone. Unlike other horror films which often combine humor with gore to generate laughs, such as the *Scary Movie* franchise (2000-2015), *Eight Legged Freaks* (2002), and *Krampus* (2015), *Get Out* employs elements more akin to those described by Jonathan Swift in his horrifying satirical essay "A Modest Proposal" (1726). Much like Swift's "trap" to get readers to feel sympathy for the Irish while detesting the narrator, the film traps audiences into seeing racism in a "post-race" setting, among liberal white people in a suburb of one of the most liberal cities in America. The film eases audiences into the Armitage's gruesome world with an innocuous meeting of the parents. When Chris and Rose arrive at the Armitage estate for the weekend, nothing in particular seems amiss. Unlike Katherine Hepburn's open-mouthed horror at meeting Sydney Poitier in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the Armitages are friendly and easy-going about their daughter's interracial relationship. So when Dean Armitage attempts to bond with Chris, referring to Chris as "my man" and his relationship with Rose as "this thang," these two microaggressions, though cringeworthy, seem well-intentioned. Chris takes this behavior in stride, awkwardly laughing at Dean's missteps to be polite. As the

film progresses, the racist assault of Chris's body becomes more and more obvious until the chaotic final scene when Chris violently escapes the Coagula scheme. *Get Out* thus outrageously mocks the "post-race" U.S. in much the same way "A Modest Proposal" lampooned heartless attitudes towards the poor, and in particular, British policies toward the Irish.

Just as Swift mocked the British politics of his day, Peele confronts the contemporary U.S. racial politics of his own. In other words, satire is always political. It is a genre whose primary purpose is to criticize through humor, irony, caricature, and parody, a genre that Daryll Dickson-Carr argues "is nothing if it does not aggressively defy the status quo" (1). It is a genre that "corrupts," as Weisenburger posits. He further argues that satire "deconstructs 'history' as a cover-up or sanctification of endless victimization, and it reinterprets the political order as a conspiracy of accommodations of power" (145). This kind of satire, what Weisenburger calls "degenerative satire," is a violent discourse purposefully directed at hegemonic power structures. Lisa Guerrero says that "while social critique remains a major element of the work being produced by black satirists in the twenty-first century, they are also essential knowledge makers around the failures of the post-race myth and the shifting precarity of black subjectivity in a nation ostensibly beyond race" (269). In *Get Out*, however, Peele does not just produce knowledge about the failure of the "post-racial lie" but enacts violence towards liberal white people and their perpetuation of "post-race" discourse. Through absurd and exaggerated depictions of whiteness, the film reveals "racism as the rotten but definitive core of American cultural politics" (Dickson-Carr 32). The film also demonstrates how

fear is a central component of racism, weaponized by the white characters to perpetuate the post-racial lie and maintain their supremacy.

More specifically, satire is a lens, a way to gaze upon contemporary political narratives traditionally constructed for and by white people. Melinda Rabb argues that the satirist is a "purveyor of confounding hidden truths, a restless malcontent who rakes the filth from dark corners" and "uncovers" secrets to "flash them before the readers' eyes" (326). Similarly, Dickson-Carr argues that satire "by definition, resists . . . attempts [to be controlled]; it wishes to skewer sacred cows and roast them in *full sight* of those who either venerated or vilified them previously" (275; emphasis added). Both Rabb and Dickson-Carr emphasize vision/sight as a main component of satire. In *Get Out*, Peele takes the horror genre's obsession with eyes and sight and injects it with Rabb and Dickson-Carr's definitions of the satirist and hooks' and Du Bois' theories of the gaze to weaponize what I call a satirical Black gaze. By paying attention to sight as a mechanism for exposing modalities of terror and for committing violence against hegemonic structures, Peele assaults white supremacy's terrorizing claim on American history and culture. Satire is a lens through which to see through liberal whiteness's performative charade in the "post-race" age. Through what Edward Bloom notes as "ironic incongruity" between the "superficially ludicrous" and the "fundamentally serious" (39), the film encourages laughter, certainly, but it also highlights the absurd (and often terrifying) lengths white people will go to appear not racist.

Although this incongruity between the serious and the absurd is interwoven throughout the film, the cold open highlights this relationship and clarifies the film's

satirical purpose: to dismantle the "post-race" era and its undercurrent of white fright. The film opens with a young Black man, Andre King (LaKeith Stanfield), walking in a wealthy suburb at night. He is clearly lost and is talking to a friend on his cell-phone to clarify directions to a party. Although the friend seems unfazed by his anxiety, Andre recognizes his precarious situation, especially when a white car pulls up alongside him. The song "Run Rabbit Run" (1939) by British songwriters Noel Gay and Ralph Butler—declared "perhaps the whitest song in the world" by Zadie Smith—emanates from the car stereo ("Getting"). The song was originally composed to mock Germans during World War II and retains a comic, jokey quality. The song's upbeat sound juxtaposes with the dark suburb and Andre's increasing fear, rendering the whole scene chilling. As Andre turns to go the other way to avoid the car, he mutters, "I'll just keep on walking. Don't do nothing stupid. Not today, not me. I know what they like to do to muthafuckas out here, I'm gone." Despite his alertness, Andre is kidnapped anyway by the unknown driver wearing a Knights Templar helmet. After Andre is stuffed into the car's trunk, the unknown man gets into the car and drives off, while the song plays on. This opening scene sets the tone for the entire film, immersing the audience into the experience of what it is like to be Black man walking alone in a predominantly white neighborhood. This scene becomes even more chilling when we remember Trayvon Martin, who was shot and killed by George Zimmerman for doing the exact same thing in 2012. Martin's death also catalyzed the Black Lives Matter movement, confirming—despite advancements made in the White House—that post-racialism is not just a lie but a

deadly one. In the director's commentary, Peele mentions Martin's death as inspiring this chilling opening scene, making racism "the monster" figure in this horror film.

Just as Du Bois and hooks challenge the "phantasy" of whiteness with their respective gazes (Du Bois 59), Peele develops a weaponized gaze to challenge the "post-race" paradigm through strategic camera positioning. While Andre is stuffed into the car's trunk, the camera's voyeuristic placement at a distance from the car reminds us of antiblack violence documented in bystander videos, such as George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery's murder. The camera's placement shines a light on the brutality of Andre's abduction, while also confirming Du Bois and hooks' argument that there is power in looking. In this moment, we all watch Andre's abduction, knowing full well he is not a criminal but that his blackness made him a victim anyway. Peele takes control of the gaze to break down the system that keeps Andre and others like him from finding justice. The camera's powerful gaze will return again to liberate Andre from the sunken place when Chris takes his picture at the Armitages' garden party. Hooks calls this gaze an "oppositional gaze," and asserts that "In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating 'awareness' politicizes 'looking' relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist" (116). Just as Peele' insightful gaze draws attention to the possible agency within video footage of antiblack violence, he also uses invokes the power of cameras at various moments throughout the film, thereby emphasizing his satirical objective to dismantle the "post-racial lie."

Just like his curated camera angles, all elements in Peele's films are carefully chosen, reflecting his interests in depicting societal ills through horror, a genre that,

despite being considered low-brow by critics, conscientiously combines music, setting, and décor to create feelings of terror in its audiences. In the cold open, Peele includes four distinctive songs to bring out attention to the film's satire, horror, and social commentary. In addition to "Run Rabbit Run," which unnerves us through its incongruous jauntiness juxtaposed with Andre's violent kidnapping, our feelings of terror are heightened by the next two musical embellishments, further inculcating audiences into Peele's terrifying world and the terrifying reality of the U.S. The first is a haunting violin screech made most famous by Bernard Herrmann's score for *Psycho*. The violin screeches are not quite as rapid or high-pitched as Hitchcock's famous shower scene, but combined with the camera's voyeuristic position, this scene suggests that we are onlookers, watching this violence take place and not intervening. We are at once both complicit and forced to watch. Peele insists that complicity is violence and that we must get out of our roles in perpetrating such violence. We can no longer be onlookers.

As this scene cuts to the opening credits, with "Get Out" in big blue letters against a forest backdrop, a Swahili song "Sikiliza Kwa Wahenga" plays. Michael Abels, who composed the song, was instructed by Peele to create something new with "Black voices with a sinister sound that's not voodoo. Maybe something that almost sounds like a disembodied or a satanic negro spiritual" (Peele, *Get Out*). Although written and sung in Swahili, the lyrics provide a haunting warning to Chris: "Brother, listen to your ancestors. Run! You need to run far! (Listen to the truth)" (Gayo). By layering whisper and chanting sounds and intermingling them with a repetitive plucking

string instrument, the song's ominous quality amplifies our feelings of fear even though we don't yet know what (who?) we are scared of. Neil Lerner says that "of all the cinematic genres, horror gives music a heightened responsibility for triggering feelings of horror, fear, and rage" (viii). Although music is important to other film genres, it acquires additional power in horror films to assist in the production of terror in its audiences. Further, music emphasizes the generic qualities that structure the film. In *Get Out*'s cold open, the music is at first disarmingly hokey ("Run Rabbit Run"), much like satire, then terrifying with violin screeches that invoke classic horror films, ending with the alarming "Sikiliza," a song that speaks to the collective memory of Black people: "The voices in the song are the voices we carry — the history books we read, or the elders in our communities or the countless videos of police brutality that serve as haunting reminder to stay awake and attuned to the ways white supremacy reinvents itself everyday" (Gayo). With Childish Gabino's "Redbone" opening the next scene of the film, Peele suggests it is important to "stay woke," a sentiment he expresses in the director's commentary. Therefore, the cold open's soundtrack illuminates the ways genre functions in the film and thus its overall purpose as a force for change. Staying woke, after all, means keeping your eyes open.

"I told you not to go in that house"

Prior to Chris and Rose's arrival at the Armitage estate, they hit a deer and file a report with the local police, allowing Rose to perform her own level of "wokeness." By aggressively questioning the cop's desire to see Chris's I.D. even though he was not

driving, Rose appears as a social justice warrior for the Black community. This performance, however, is only to eliminate any traces of Chris's whereabouts, thereby making him more convenient prey for the Coagula. Rose's performance in this scene is a microcosm of Peele's satirical endgame: dismantling the "post-racial lie" through an exposure of liberal white fright. Rose can refute any claim that she is racist because she defends Chris against a racist white cop, all the while covering up her family's hyper-racist scheme to steal and enslave his body for their own immortality. This encounter also serves as a warning to the audience that, unlike typical horror films in which the cops signal rescue from the monster/psychokiller, Chris is on his own as he enters the Armitage home.

Additionally, the Armitage's plantation style home, its real Southern locale, and its overbearing presence as it fills the frame when they drive up, makes Chris seem tiny by comparison and reminds us of the danger he is in. The camera angle gives wide coverage of the estate and the initial interaction between Chris and Rose's parents. The house takes up the entire frame, and faint greetings are heard as we stare at the house, with the plucking stringed-instrument refrain from "Sikizila" playing ominously in the background. The house, as Cammie Sublette argues, "looks like it was pulled from the pages of *Southern Living*" (88). The house epitomizes neoclassical plantation style architecture used in the American South. Sublette notes how "whiteness is written into the architectural features, interior design, and location of [these] houses" (83). With its white columns and large front veranda, complete with rocking chairs and white framed windows that seem to stare out, the house embodies antebellum affluence, complete with

Black servants, Georgina and Walter, who serve them iced tea on the back porch and trim the hedges, respectively. Further, although the film's events take place within driving distance of New York City, the actual filming took place in Fairhope, Alabama. Therefore, through the house's actual southern location and its overbearing antebellum influence, the film's satirical target—white liberals who declare they aren't racist—are subtly tied to the history of slavery and racism, despite fervent declarations otherwise.

The home's interior is just as evocative, full of gleaming hardwood floors, bannisters, and doorframes, as well as antique paintings and a beige color scheme. The kitchen embodies American homemaking's "classic" archetypes with its copper pans embossed with roosters, plants in wicker baskets, and shiny stone surfaces. Georgina, with her yellow rubber gloves and maid uniform, fits right into the scene of domestic pretense. Friendly but slightly *off*, she stares and smiles at Chris for too long, as if there is a glitch in her wiring, much like the fembot behavior in *The Stepford Wives*. The camera returns to frame her eyes which are open wide, taking in Chris with broad smiles and eerie cheerfulness. Her uncanny presence heightens the film's tense mood, making this meeting of the parents even more uncomfortable. Nevertheless, Dean tries to make Chris feel more at home by offering to give him a tour. As we follow Chris and Dean throughout the house, we see a setting that is startlingly unspecific, beige, and although vaguely homey, Chris never feels quite at ease, and neither do we as we listen to Dean talk about the home's objects. "It's such a privilege to be able to experiences another person's culture," he says as he shows Chris around, foreshadowing the physical

appropriation of Chris's body later in the film while also continuing to highlight Dean's well-intentioned but cringeworthy insistence that he is not racist.

While the Armitage home exemplifies liberal whiteness's seemingly benign nature, the Armitage family best embodies the fear at the heart of "post-race" liberal whiteness. Played by Bradley Whitford and Katherine Keener, who Peele describes as the "liberal elite god and goddess," Dean and Missy exemplify the liberal white archetype. Both actors are famous for roles that personify liberal politics, including Whitford's portrayal of White House Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman on *The West Wing* (1999-2006), and Keener's portrayal of Harper Lee in *Capote* (2005). Dean's gregarious demeanor pairs with Missy's reserve as she quietly watches Chris the way any mother would observe the person dating her daughter. Dean's persistence in demonstrating to Chris that he is not racist through his curated collection of cultural artifacts from his travels, his insistence that "he would have voted for Obama a third term," and his dislike of "how it looks" for having Black help, helps him deny the racist implications of his whiteness (Peele). He upholds what George Yancy calls a "dualism" of whiteness. Dean sees himself as a "good white," distancing himself and his family from the "bad whites": those Southern, "white trash," KKK, neo-Nazi, out-loud racists. Nevertheless, Yancy states that as long as "whiteness constitutes an ensemble of power relations that places whites in positions of advantage and power (that is, puts them in potential and actual positions of power in virtue of their whiteness) vis-a-vis nonwhites, whiteness will never be innocent" (14). In perpetuating the dualism of whiteness, Dean mutes the claim that racism exists anywhere whiteness does, that whiteness is not

innocent, but remains a synergistic system of property and terror. In the director's commentary, Peele stated that the intent behind the initial meeting between Chris and the Armitages was to "poke fun at the liberal elite" instead of the more obvious racist "red state crowd." With Dean's continued exhortations about Obama, poking fun at the liberal elite is also a way to dismantle the myth of the "post-race" era and its purported hero.

The defensiveness exhibited by the Armitages and other liberal white people works to maintain the racial status quo which, in the Obama era, became linked to notions of white fragility and guilt, post-racialism's two primary tenets. DiAngelo claims that white people are "socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority" and so "become highly fragile in conversations about race" (2). Moreover, DiAngelo states that responses to these charges, from anger, fear, guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal work to reinstate "white equilibrium"; white fragility, she argues, is consequently a powerful means of "white racial control and the protection of white advantage" (2). Fear about being seen or called out as racist threatens white superiority; fear shuts down conversation and quells change, thereby maintaining white supremacy as invisible subtext. Because white people fear being seen as racist, satire, through its political and irreverent nature, is the perfect genre for laying bare this modality of terror. By exposing whiteness, including liberal-progressive-"I voted for Obama"-whiteness as terrorizing, *Get Out* satirically renders truth out of horror.

The satire of whiteness that *Get Out* offers, however, does not stop at poking fun at the liberal elite for their clumsy missteps and Obama worship, but demonstrates how

the desire to own and consume blackness and the Black body makes white people murderous and erases Black life. In "Eating the Other," bell hooks discusses ways racial and ethnic cultural differences are appropriated and commodified in the service of white supremacy. She employs a rhetoric of consumption, and calls ethnicity a "spice" that will liven up the "dull dish" of mainstream white culture (*Black Looks* 21). She says that despite the seemingly progressive nature of the mainstream's embrace of cultural and racial difference, there remains an over-riding fear that "cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate—that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten" (*Black Looks* 39). Similarly, the Coagula scheme—where a white person's brain is transplanted into a Black person's body—Black people are relegated to "passengers" or the "audience" as Jim Hudson tells Chris, trapped in the sunken place, and forgotten (Peele). Therefore, the Armitage family and its commodification of Black bodies, while satirically depicted as an outrageous body-snatching plot, nevertheless represents the real terrorism of white supremacy as it preys on Black people.

Unsurprisingly, Jim Hudson, a blind guest at the Armitage's garden party, desires Chris's body for his eyes. After Hudson explains the Coagula to Chris while he is shackled in the basement, Chris asks why the group has chosen Black people as their host bodies. Hudson answers, "Who knows? People want to change. Some people want to be stronger … faster … cooler. But please don't lump me in with that; you know I could give a shit what color you are. No, what I want is deeper. I want your eye, man. I want those things you see through" (Peele). Hudson, like Dean earlier, disavows charges

of racism despite his violent seizure of Chris's Black body. Hudson insists that he is not consigning Chris to the sunken place because he is Black, but because he has a "good eye." As Michael Jarvis declares, "Hudson compulsively evinces the central fear/refrain of post-racial whiteness: he does not know about those other folks, but he is not a racist" (104). Like Dean, Hudson upholds the dualism of whiteness that makes any racist charge from Chris appear as paranoia, confirming Peele's statement to Gross that "Part of being black in this country, and I presume being any minority, is constantly being told that . . . we're seeing racism where there just isn't racism" ("*Get Out*"). However, as the Coagula scheme's chosen victims show us, racism remains.

Hudson's purported colorblindness extends to everyone[13] who attends the Armitage cocktail party/auction that weekend, further implicating white liberals in the larger satirical milieu. Chris becomes the party's focus, answering awkward questions, nodding politely, and looking bewildered and uncomfortable. From the comments made about "knowing Tiger [Woods]" to the sexualized groping of Chris's bicep during a discussion of his good looks and sexual prowess, the (not-so)microaggressions of well-meaning white people are linked to slavery, or, as Glenda Carpio posits, "brazenly invoke[e] the auction block" ("Virtual Roundtable"). As the camera zooms out from

---

[13] On the director's commentary, Peele outlines the lore of the Red Alchemists, a secret society in which the Armitage family and their guests belong. According to Peele, the Red Alchemists are descendants of the Knights Templar, and "believe they are destined for immortality and deity status, and over hundreds of years they have worked to figure out through science a way to achieve the power of the Holy Grail." Peele links the Red Alchemists to this history via a Knights Templar helmet that Jeremy wears to kidnap Andre as well as a tapestry that we glimpse in the basement as Chris escapes. This link to medieval history also signals the long history of white supremacist terrorist organization like the KKK and the alt-right who fetishize medieval history as the height of "white greatness" (Kaufman).

Dean as he silently requests bids from guests with bingo cards, we see Chris's portrait beside him and quickly understand the auction's purpose. Ominous cello music intensifies this eerie scene's dramatic irony as well as the uneasy conversation between Chris and Rose that is cut into the auction scene.

When Chris becomes too uncomfortable with the over-the-top racialized commentary and gawking, he politely excuses himself to take photos, retreating into his camera to regain his feelings of control. Chris's camera, which is always slung about his neck, acts as a shield, allowing him to both observe and escape. It is also through his camera lens that Chris first observes another Black man at the party: Andre, who now goes by Logan. Logan is oddly dressed and his movements and expressions are reminiscent of Georgina's robotic behavior. However, it is through his eyes, which are glassy and empty, that Chris knows something is wrong. His feelings are confirmed when he takes Logan's picture to send to Rod for identification. The camera's flash triggers a transformation in Logan, whose deadened expression turns to fear and his nose begins to bleed. He then lunges at Chris, screaming "get out! Get out of here!" (Peele). Only later does Chris realize the truth about Andre/Logan. This scene once again reminds us of bystander video footage and photography's powerful possibilities. The camera literally frees Andre from the sunken place, a place of abjection and powerlessness.

More importantly, the sunken place satirizes slavery's horrors, both in its historical context as well as its modern analog—mass incarceration. When Missy first hypnotizes Chris, sending him to the sunken place, he appears to be free-falling into

space. There is nothing to grasp onto, he is shoeless, and he is voiceless. The only sounds the audience hears are an ominous harp, underwater sounds, and Missy's voice. In the *Los Angeles Times*'s 2017 Envelope Director's Roundtable, Peele revealed the sunken place's inspiration:

> The sunken place is this metaphor for the system that is suppressing the freedom of Black people, of many outsiders, many minorities. There's lots of different sunken places. But this one specifically became a metaphor for the prison-industrial complex, the lack of representation of Black people in film, in genre. The reason Chris in the film is falling into this place, being forced to watch this screen, that no matter how hard he screams at the screen he can't get agency across. (qtd. in Howe)

Peele emphasizes two oppressions Black people face in the U.S.: lack of representation on screen and the prison industrial complex, both of which adversely affect Black populations more intensely than white populations. The sunken place then, articulates the fears and anxieties of oppressed populations who are silenced, who have been denied agency, and who feel trapped or stuck in a place of inaction. Chris's time in the sunken place is made even more horrifying as he looks out and sees the Armitages scheming over his body. Although he can still see what is happening, he is now powerless to assert any agency—like someone watching a horror movie.

Whether the sunken place is a metaphor for slavery, mass incarceration, or the Black audience of a horror film, its depiction makes several things clear: to enter the sunken place, Chris and others like him must focus on their perceived failings. In Chris's

case, he fails to help his mother when she needed him, which is alluded to in several flashback scenes from Chris's childhood. Similarly, Black Americans are often forced by a white-dominated culture to focus on their perceived failings. Because in the post-racial world racism no longer bars people from achieving success, any failure is individual, not societal and certainly not systemic. Chris, like the millions incarcerated, are in the sunken place because they have failed, not because the system is against them. Further, because Chris lacks a family (his mother died, his father abandoned him), he is the Coagula's ideal candidate. Just as enslaved people were brutally disconnected from their families, making them easier to control, Chris's nonexistent family makes him a perfect victim because no one will trace his whereabouts.

Therefore, the film's central metaphor of sight challenges the post-racial refrain mentioned by Peele: "It is Not About Race." Because, as Chris's tear-filled gaze shows us, it is. In the film's violent finale, this gaze becomes the center of several frames (and was also featured in the film's major promotional materials in 2017). After Chris discovers several photos of Rose's previous victims and Chris's horrifying fate is made clear, he is once again hypnotized and shackled to a chair in the basement. Like the rest of the colonial nightmare of a house, the basement "is a dramatic illustration of aesthetic and social arrest" (Walber). Styled like a homey 1950s game room, complete with wood paneling, a ping pong table, and dart board, the basement embodies the Armitage's entire mission: to freeze their lives in immortality. The dated television set from which Chris is forced into the sunken place via Missy's teacup as a form of "pre-op" also suggests that this room has been unchanged for decades. Only the lamps— evocative of

metal shackles worn by slaves at auction—hint at the Armitage's cultish machinations. Like many horror films from the 1970s that inspired *Get Out*, the basement is terrifying because it is ordinary in its suburban chic, and suggests that violent white supremacy can exist everywhere, not just in the South, but in liberal elite suburban homes too. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Victor Ray put this plainly when they claim that "symbolic diversity without progressive social movement politics gives us white supremacy in blackface" (178). Thus, when Rod tells Chris at the film's end, "I told you not to go in that house," we cannot help but nod in derisive laughter.

Staring Boldly Out

Through a satirical examination of a white family's violent conspiracy to attain immortality through a symbolic embrace of the other, Peele insists on race and racism's continuing importance in a "post-racial" U.S. From the film's cold open where Andre is stalked while navigating a white suburban neighborhood, to Chris's interaction with a white police officer on his way to the Armitage estate, Peele never lets the audience forget the violent reality of being Black in "post-race" America. Catherine Squires notes that fear is a central part of the "post-racial lie": "the proliferation of this word suggests hopes and fears about race, democratic progress, and multiculturalism—fears that stem from the decades' long 'culture wars,' struggles over the meaning and extent of the impact of civil rights era reforms, and the role of the state in mediating identity politics and redistributive justice" (5). But this fear has a particularly white cast; it is a fear of

being outnumbered, out-performed, and outshined by a racial other. Ta-Nehisi Coates confirms this notion of white fright when he states:

> The symbolic power of Barack Obama's presidency—that whiteness was no longer strong enough to prevent peons from taking up residence in the castle—assaulted the most deeply rooted notions of white supremacy and instilled fear in its adherents and beneficiaries. And it was that fear that gave the symbols Donald Trump deployed—the symbols of racism—enough potency to make him president, and thus put him in position to injure the world. (xvi)

Fear, from the way it operates in the horror genre to the way it functions in the characters themselves is the key to unlocking the "post-racial lie" at the heart of *Get Out*'s satire. Further, the depictions of the Armitages and the party guests illustrate that fear is, as Sara Ahmed posits, "a circulation of signs" that works to "differentiate between white and black bodies" by opening up "past histories that stick to the present" (126). In other words, the fear Chris feels is a result of the fear the Armitages and their guests feel about Chris, all of which is tied up in the histories of enslavement and supremacy. In the post-racial age, that fear is compounded by declarations of pluralism and diversity, Black progress and executive power, all of which threaten the status quo. Peele's dismantling of the "post-racial lie" allows him to expose the ways fear is weaponized by white people to uphold that status quo. Only instead of committing explicit racialized violence as a response to fear like in the Jim Crow era, the Armitages work in secret, taking Black bodies to perpetuate the myth that they are not racist, all the while reinscribing systemic racism through enslavement.

Peele's dismantling of the "post-racial lie" finds its most explicit embodiment in the film's final scenes. As Chris makes his way out of the basement, he uses surrounding objects—and objects associated with elite whiteness—to make his escape. For example, to avoid the sunken place, Chris pulls cotton from the armchair he is chained to and sticks it in his ears, effectively keeping him from hearing the hypnotic teacup projected onto the old television set. Cotton, the cash crop grown and processed by slaves, reminds us that slavery is not just a thing of the past but reverberates today in white suburbia. Additionally, Chris hits Jeremy's head with a bocce ball, a classic backyard sport commonly associated with "yuppies" or upper middle-class white people. Chris then makes his way down the basement corridor, itself full of objects announcing the Armitage pedigree, including a medieval tapestry and mounted deer heads, the latter of which Chris uses to stab Dean. Chris then makes his way upstairs and slices Missy's throat with an antique letter opener, another item associated with status (and very little practical use). These artifacts of whiteness are turned into weapons, confirming Jonathan Metzl's bold claim that "Americans are then, literally *dying of whiteness*" (9; emphasis in the original). Metzl states that this is because "white America's investment in maintaining an imagined place atop a racial hierarchy—that is, an investment in a sense of whiteness—ironically harms the aggregate well-being of U.S. whites as a demographic group, thereby making whiteness itself a negative health indicator" (9). As a physician, Metzl looks at the ways poor and working-class white people vote against their own self-interests to preserve whiteness atop the racial hierarchy, making whiteness an actual public health issue. Metzl concludes that whiteness is "an illness of the mind,

weaponized onto the body of the nation" (16). In *Get Out*'s final moments, Peele satirizes Metzl's claim as the Armitages are literally killed to death by their own whiteness as they attempt to spread into the bodies and minds of Black people like Chris.

The chaotic final scene, while fairly routine in the horror genre, is also an important feature of satire, making the film's generic amalgam even more important to its work as a force for change. Alvin P. Kernan describes the "satiric scene" as "always disorderly and crowded, packed to the very point of bursting. The deformed faces of depravity, stupidity, greed, venality, ignorance, and maliciousness . . . stare boldly out at us . . . The scene is choked with things . . . Pick up any major satiric work and open it at random and the immediate effect is one of disorderly profusion" (254). Dickson-Carr argues that in Black satire, these chaotic scenes install, subvert, then reinstall racism as "the agent of ideological and political irrationality and chaos," and says that the scenery "is but a pale imitation of the senselessness of racism" (32). The Armitage estate is choked full of things and crowded with people, making the chaotic ending both inevitable and essential to dismantling the "post-racial lie" and its attendant fears.

Although *Get Out* ends on a somewhat happy note,[14] with Rod and Chris driving away from the smoldering Armitage estate, the film hits close to home. Despite declarations that the U.S. had entered a mythical "post-race" era, race continues to be an important category of analysis, racism is as pernicious and as steadfast as ever, and

---

[14] In the director's commentary, Peele tells the audience that he first shot the movie with the idea that Chris would be arrested and imprisoned for killing the Armitage family, further substantiating the sunken place as a metaphorical prison industrial complex. After Trump's election, Peele rewrote the ending, stating "the world had shifted...People needed a release and a hero which is why I changed the ending and had Rod show up in the end."

white supremacy remains the predominant ideology of our time. Further, with the recent barrage of video footage, including George Floyd's brutal murder by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin and the violent stalking and murder of Ahmaud Arbery by Travis and Gregory McMichael in Georgia, we are never far removed from the spectacle of Black death. As a result, the film's insistence on the power of the gaze suggests that as spectators of antiblack violence, we can also enact change. Indeed, after the footage of George Floyd's death went viral, protests erupted, confederate symbols were removed, and calls for defunding the police exploded nationwide. The police officers responsible for Floyd's death were arrested and Minneapolis City Council voted unanimously to defund the police in favor of a new public safety model (Romo). The swiftness with which these changes occurred demonstrates that there is power in looking. Rod's appearance at the end of the film—as the conduit for horror film spectator—further suggests the power of the gaze as he becomes the hero. Jarvis says this of *Get Out*'s final moments: "Only in a narrative text can white supremacy be reduced to assailable proportions, be made immanent in killable bodies, and be vanquished with finality. Only in the horror film can some horrors end; so, here, it does" (108). The film's real strength as a force for change comes not just with its status as a horror film, as Jarvis claims here, but with film's addition of satire. After all, satire is not just another film genre with strict aesthetic conventions, but a sociopolitical phenomenon that produces tangible effects in

the present, as the 2015 terrorist attacks at *Charlie Hebdo* demonstrate.[15] Unlike *Charlie Hebdo*, however, *Get Out*'s disparaging gaze "punches up" (Ball 300), targets the U.S.'s most foundational structure—white supremacy—and comes from its historically most oppressed minority. *Get Out* is not just a horror movie. It is ocular rebellion.

[15] On January 7, 2015 Saïd and Chérif Kouachi forced their way into the offices of French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* where they shot and killed 12 people and injured 11 others. The motive for the attacks was said to be the magazine's regular lampooning of the Prophet Muhammad.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. “Affective Economies.” *Social Text*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2004, pp. 117–39.

Ball, John Clement. “Capital Offenses: Public Discourse on Satire after *Charlie Hebdo*.” *Genre*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2017, pp. 297–317.

Beutin, Lyndsey P. “Racialization as a Way of Seeing: The Limits of Counter-Surveillance and Police Reform.” *Surveillance & Society*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2017, pp. 5–20.

Bloom, Edward. “Apotropaic Visions: Tone and Meaning in Neoclassical Satire.” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1974, pp. 35–52.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, and Victor Ray. “When Whites Love a Black Leader: Race Matters in Obamerica.” *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2008, pp. 176–83.

Carpio, Glenda. *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*. Oxford UP, 2008.

Carpio, Glenda, et al. “Virtual Roundtable on ‘Get Out.’” Public Books, 23 May 2017. www.publicbooks.org, https://www.publicbooks.org/virtual-roundtable-on-get-out/.

Carroll, Noël. “Horror and Humor.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 57, no. 2, 1999, pp. 145–60.

Clover, Carol. “The Eye of Horror.” *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Princeton UP, 1992, pp. 166–230.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*. One World, 2017.

Cruz, Lenika. “The Meaning of Eyes and Cameras in ‘Get Out.’” *The Atlantic*, 3 Mar. 2017. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/03/in-get-out-the-eyes-have-it/518370/.

DiAngelo, Robin J. *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Beacon, 2018.

Dickson-Carr, Darryl. *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*. U of Missouri P, 2001.

Du Bois, W.E.B. *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*. 1935. Oxford UP, 2007.

---. *Souls of Black Folk*. Dover, 1994.

---. “Souls of White Folk.” 1910. *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, Edited by David Roediger, Schocken, 1998, pp. 184-199.

Fiske, John. *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change*. U of Minnesota P, 1996.

Gayo, Loyce. “Sikiliza: There Is More to the Swahili Song in ‘Get Out.’” *Medium*, 17 Mar. 2017. *medium.com*, https://medium.com/@loycegayo/sikiliza-there-is-more-to-the-swahili-song-in-get-out-79ebb1456116. Accessed 18 June 2020.

Guerrero, Lisa. "Can I Live? Contemporary Black Satire and the State of Postmodern Double Consciousness." *Studies in American Humor*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2016, pp. 266–79.

hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. South End, 1992.

---. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. H. Holt, 1995.

Howe, Elena. "Seven Directors 'Weaponize Storytelling' to Stand Against Hatred and Violence." *Los Angeles Times*, 30 Nov. 2017, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/la-en-mn-directors-roundtable-20171129-story.html#nws=true.

Howery, Lil Rel. "The 'Get Out' Star Who's Giving T.S.A. Agents a Good Name." Interview with Bruce Fretts, *The New York Times*, 27 Feb. 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/27/movies/get-out-lil-rel-howery-tsa-rod.html.

Jarvis, Michael. "Anger Translator: Jordan Peele's *Get Out*." *Science Fiction Film & Television*, vol. 11, no. 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 97–109.

Kaufman, Amy S. "A Brief History of a Terrible Idea: The 'Dark Enlightenment.'" *The Public Medievalist*, 9 Feb. 2017, https://www.publicmedievalist.com/dark -enlightenment/.

Kernan, Alvin P. "A Theory of Satire." *Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism*. Edited by Ronald Paulson, Prentice-Hall, 1971, pp. 249-277.

Lerner, Neil. "Preface: Listening to Fear/Listening with Fear." *Music in the Horror Film: Listening to Fear*. Edited by Neil Lerner, Routledge, 2010, pp. vii–xi.

Metzl, Jonathan M. *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland*. Basic Books, 2019.

Morris, Wesley. "Jordan Peele's X-Ray Vision." *The New York Times*, 20 Dec. 2017. *NYTimes.com*, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/20/magazine/jordan-peeles-x-ray-vision.html.

Peele, Jordan, director. *Get Out*. Performances by Daniel Kaluuya, Bradley Whitford, Catherine Keener, and Lil Rel Howery, Blumhouse/Universal, 2017.

---. "*Get Out* Sprang from an Effort to Master Fear, Says Director Jordan Peele." Interview with Terry Gross, *NPR.org*, 15 Mar. 2017. https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/03/15/520130162/get-out-sprung-from-an-effort-to-master-fear-says-director-jordan-peele.

---. "Jordan Peele on a Truly Terrifying Monster: Racism." Interview with Jason Zinoman, *The New York Times*, 16 Feb. 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/movies/jordan-peele-interview-get-out.html.

---. "Jordan Peele on the 'Post-Racial Lie' that Inspired *Get Out*." Interview with Rebecca Keegan, *Vanity Fair*, 30 Oct. 2017. https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/10/jordan-peele-get-out-screening.

Rabb, Melinda. "The Secret Memoirs of Lemuel Gulliver: Satire, Secrecy, and Swift." *ELH*, vol. 73, no. 2, 2006, pp. 325–54.

Romo, Vanessa. "Minneapolis Council Moves to Defund Police, Establish 'Holistic' Public Safety Force." *NPR.Org*, 26 Jun. 2020, https://www.npr.org/sections/live-

updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/06/26/884149659/minneapolis-council-moves-to-defund-police-establish-holistic-public-safety-force.

Smith, Zadie. "Getting In and Out: Who Owns Black Pain?" *Harper's Magazine*, July 2017, https://harpers.org/archive/2017/07/getting-in-and-out/.

Squires, Catherine. *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the 21st Century*. New York UP, 2014.

Sublette, Cammie M. "The House That White Privilege Built: Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and the Haunting Legacy of Plantation Slavery." *Horror Comes Home: Essays on Hauntings, Possessions and Other Domestic Terrors in Cinema*, Edited by Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, McFarland, 2019, pp. 83–94.

Walber, Daniel. "The Furniture: *Get Out*'s Beige House of Colonial Horrors." *The Film Experience*, 29 May 2017. http://thefilmexperience.net/blog/2017/5/29/the-furniture-get- outs-beige-house-of-colonial-horrors.html.

Weisenburger, Steven. *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980.* U of Georgia P, 1995.

Whitehead, Colson. "The Year of Living Postracially." *The New York Times*, 3 Nov. 2009. https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/04/opinion/04whitehead.html.

Xiong, Chao, and Paul Walsh. "'World Needed to See,' Says Woman Who Took Video of Man Dying under Officer's Knee." *Star Tribune*, 26 May 2020. https://www.startribune.com/world-needed- to-see-says-woman-who-took-video-of-man- dying-under-officer-s-knee/570774152/.

Yancy, George. "Introduction: Fragments of a Social Ontology of Whiteness." *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, Edited by George Yancy, Routledge, 2004.

CHAPTER IV

"WHAT RACE PROBLEM?": THE SATIRICAL GAZE OF (WHITE) HISTORY IN *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD*[*]

In his 2009 *New York Times* article "What to Write Next," Colson Whitehead satirizes the contemporary publishing market by offering a list of descriptions for various genres aspiring writers can reference in the creation of their next books. He states: "I recently published a novel, and now it's time to get back to work. If you're anything like me, figuring out what to write next can be a real hassle. . . . To make things easier, I modified my dartboard a few years ago. Now, when I'm overwhelmed by the untold stories out there, I head down to the basement, throw a dart and see where it lands. Try it for yourself!" Whitehead considers thirteen other so-called genres, listing them and their descriptions with unabashed sarcasm and irony. Although he has since written novels in the very genres he lampoons, including an "Allegory" one (*Zone One* in 2011) and one "About A Little Known Historical Fact" (*The Nickel Boys* in 2019), Whitehead nonetheless writes scathingly about the contemporary publishing market, particularly for Black writers such as himself ("What"). Stephanie Li claims that Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016) belongs to the genre of the "Southern Novel of Black Misery" (Li 5), or novels that "investigate the legacy of

[*] Reprinted with permission from "'What Race Problem?': The Satirical Gaze of (White) History in The Underground Railroad" by Grace Heneks. 2020. *MELUS*, vol. 45, no. 4, pp. 133-154. Copyright 2020 by *MELUS*.

slavery that still reverberates to this day, the legacy of Reconstruction that still reverberates to this day" (Whitehead, "What"). By using a "historically irresponsible" metaphor of the underground railroad (10), Li argues that Whitehead "teases readers with violence that his fantastic railroad neatly curtails" in order to "satisfy the generic expectations of the reader" (5). She concludes that Whitehead "fulfill[s] his own satire" in *The Underground Railroad*, and "adheres to the very protocols that he lampoons" (19) in the *New York Times* article, making this novel puzzling and problematic.

I assert that Whitehead extends his satire to *The Underground Railroad* and that the novel belongs to the genre "Southern Novel of White Misery," or "Southern Novel." Whitehead describes this genre with a single question: "What race problem?" ("What"), mocking long-held beliefs in the racelessness of whiteness and the absurd dichotomy between "black" and "white" novels. While "Novels of Black Misery" must contend with the history of race in the United States, "Novels of White Misery" pretend that race is not a problem, or at least not a problem for white people. By considering the novel a satire, despite Whitehead's declaration that it is not ("Colson Whitehead: Oprah"), I aim to answer Li's question: "What are we to call this puzzling text?" (1). Her struggles with classifying the novel stem from Whitehead's writing gimmick, something Li calls "genre trouble," or the ways he mixes up genres in order to subvert them (1). While she classifies the novel as a predictable "Southern Novel of Black Misery," if we instead view it as a "Southern Novel of White Misery" with satirical intent, the political ramifications of the novel become clear: "What race problem?" is answered with a resounding echo of "whiteness."

Published on the cusp of a racial upheaval, *The Underground Railroad*'s interrogation of whiteness is remarkably apropos. In 2016, public discourse on race in the United States had begun to boil over. Several events leading up to 2016 stand out, including the election of Barack Obama to the presidency in 2008, the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement after the murders of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and numerous other black citizens by law enforcement, as well as Donald Trump's hate-filled rhetoric during his presidential campaign. Although Obama's presidency seemed to many people to mark "the symbolic culmination of the black freedom struggle" (Gates, Introduction 2), this historic moment of promise for black Americans ended when Trump was elected shortly after Whitehead's novel was published. Instead of the post-racial utopia falsely believed by many to have been ushered in by Obama's presidency, it appeared as though the United States was entering a hyper-racial era reminiscent of post-emancipation, Jim Crow America instead.

Whitehead's novel assaults this hyper-racial transition period between the Obama era and the Trump era with satirical vitriol. Unlike his white predecessors, Trump was elected because of his whiteness, not because of his abilities as a leader. Ta-Nehisi Coates argues: "Trump truly is something new—the first president whose entire political existence hinges on the fact of a black president. And so it will not suffice to say that Trump is a white man like all the others who rose to become president. He must be called by his rightful honorific—America's first white president" (344). Coates demonstrates how Trump's election happened, not because of an angry white working class, an often-convenient scapegoat, but through an unabating allegiance to whiteness

and the fears and anxieties of white people in a supposedly post-racial world. Coates further emphasizes the role fear played in Trump's election:

> The symbolic power of Barack Obama's presidency—that whiteness was no longer strong enough to prevent peons from taking up residence in the castle—assaulted the most deeply rooted notions of white supremacy and instilled fear in its adherents and beneficiaries. And it was that fear that gave the symbols Donald Trump deployed—the symbols of racism—enough potency to make him president, and thus put him in position to injure the world" (xvi).

Coates elucidates on the history of whiteness as it was constructed and maintained by fear throughout history, with the white working class always troubling its symbolic and social order. "By focusing on that sympathetic laboring class," Coates states, "the sins of whiteness itself were, and are still being, evaded" (353). Whitehead's novel makes the sins of whiteness—not just working-class white people—the target of its fantastical satire, highlighting how fear works to maintain white supremacy and impart violence on black people.

By bringing critical discourse on whiteness into conversation with African American satire, I demonstrate how Whitehead's most commercially successful novel engages in both traditional and postmodern forms of satire to trouble our assumptions about the function of historical fiction in a post-truth era. If, as K. Merinda Simmons claims, white supremacy is maintained through the construction of whiteness as an "invisible norm" (11), then *looking* becomes a way for black writers to reveal whiteness

as a performative charade, constructed in much the same way as any fictional narrative. Simmons further states: “[S]o many scholars of identity and race leave untroubled the dominant category—in this case white hegemony—that they are attempting to subvert by strategically essentializing other marginalized voices. In other words, we should take pains to view whiteness (any mode of ‘dominance,’ for that matter) as itself a constructed and highly contingent space” (2-3). Whitehead satirizes various moments in American history to show how white power is maintained through a dialectic of fear. Whitehead’s novel claims control over the white gaze by asserting a satirical black gaze, rendering established (white) history the subject of scrutiny. Through an engagement with W. E. B. Du Bois’s “The Souls of White Folk” (1910) and bell hooks’ “The Oppositional Gaze” (1992), I demonstrate how Whitehead utilizes satire to subvert this white gaze of history. When, in our contemporary post-truth moment, facts are ignored or repudiated—when reality looks disturbingly similar to “fake news”—and when the US president is a former reality television star with a nostalgic desire to “make America great again,” satire emerges as a way to throw the ridiculous into sharp, biting relief. *The Underground Railroad* exposes how an underlying (white) fear of black liberty and power contributes to the violence committed against black people throughout history, thereby demanding we take an oppositional look at American history in the ongoing project of emancipation.

“Evil-Eye”: Satire as Weaponized Gaze

Unlike “Southern Novels of Black Misery” which often utilize fantastical elements for their “liberatory possibilities” (Li 2), such as ghosts in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and time travel in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), *The Underground Railroad* employs elements more akin to those described by Jonathan Swift in his well-known satire *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), a comparison Whitehead himself makes in multiple interviews.[16] Like Swift’s speculative travel narrative, Whitehead’s novel follows the fantastical journey of a fugitive slave named Cora as she makes her way to “freedom.” Whitehead literalizes the Underground Railroad of the early nineteenth century by depicting actual underground trains, railroads, and conductors who aid Cora in her escape. Cora’s travels along the railroad take her to outlandish and often futuristic towns populated by violent white supremacists and liberal whites touting racial uplift. Some parts of Cora’s journey seem taken out of history books and nineteenth-century slave narratives while other parts depict life not that much different from our own in the twenty-first century. Much like Swift’s Lilliputians, floating islands, and talking horses, the novel merges fantasy and realism with a sardonic tone that Whitehead identifies as “deadpan and matter-of-fact” (“Imagining”). *The Underground Railroad* thus becomes an outrageous exploration of the problem of race in the United States in much the same way *Gulliver’s Travels* explored the ridiculousness of eighteenth-century English politics.

---

[16] Whitehead has compared *The Underground Railroad* (2016) to Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) in interviews with *NPR*’s *Fresh Air*, *BookPage*, and *PBS*.

Although Li recognizes this outrageous nature of Whitehead's work, she suggests that the novel's fantastical representation of antebellum slavery is dangerous to our present racial turmoil. She insists that the novel offers "a dangerously performative conception of history, an inexplicably moral protagonist, and a happy ending that panders to audience appetites involving tales of black suffering" (4). Li's critique raises many significant points about the problematic nature of historical fiction, particularly when issues of race are involved. However, I contend that Whitehead is in fact signifyin(g) on the very sort of mainstream reader identified by Li. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., signifyin(g) "is a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least and (re)doubled upon ever closer examination" (*Signifying* 44). Signifyin(g) plays with the established meaning of words and images to mock or ridicule, much like a funhouse mirror that distorts images, doubling them into terrifying and often humorous displays. If we consider that Whitehead is playing with established literary genres and their tropes to signify on his readers, then the novel's most troubling moments become productive places to reflect on our own assumptions about the function of historical fiction today.

As a vital component of satire, signifyin(g)—along with irony, sarcasm, and vitriol— becomes a key mechanism for Whitehead to uncover the truth about white fear throughout history. Darryl Dickson-Carr says that "As the literary genre whose primary purpose is to criticize through humor, irony, caricature, and parody, satire is nothing if it does not aggressively defy the status quo" (*African American Satire* 1). That is, satire is always already political. Yogita Goyal argues that satire, particularly satire written by

African American authors, can offer new ways of understanding both the past and the present beyond established representations that emphasize "melancholic attachment or the narrative of healing or getting over" (111). She states that "Segregation and slavery can be revived easily—and farcically—because the social divisions and inequality they generated have not been dealt with in any meaningful way" (127). Like Dickson-Carr, Goyal sees satire as a productive means of challenging the status quo and addressing continuing racial inequalities. In recent years, scholars of African American literature such as Derek C. Maus, James J. Donahue, and Bertram D. Ashe demonstrate how black writers have also taken to satire to critique prevailing notions of what it means to be black. These writers, Ashe argues, "trouble blackness" and "hold it up for examination in ways that depart significantly from previous—and necessary—preoccupations with struggling for political freedom" (614). Whitehead, like many of his contemporaries, including Paul Beatty, T. Geronimo Johnson, James Hannaham, and Mat Johnson, uses satire to critique established discourse and norms that so often pigeonhole black writers. More importantly, these writers' satirical depictions of slavery and segregation remind us of the inequalities that still plague our nation.

Unlike other post-soul or post-black writers, Whitehead does not just critique essentializing notions of Blackness or "black" literature, but instead offers a probing critique of whiteness, as well. For Whitehead, satire becomes a type of lens: a way to gaze on historical narratives traditionally constructed for and by white people. Melinda Rabb argues that the satirist is a "purveyor of confounding hidden truths, a restless malcontent who rakes the filth from dark corners" and "uncovers" secrets to "flash them

before the readers' eyes" (326). Similarly, Dickson-Carr argues that satire "by definition, resists . . . attempts [to be controlled]; it wishes to skewer sacred cows and roast them in *full sight* of those who either venerated or vilified them previously" ("Afterword" 275; emphasis added). Both Rabb and Dickson-Carr emphasize vision/sight as a main component of satire. In addition to the fantastical imagery reminiscent of Swift, Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* also invokes a powerful metaphor of the gaze to convey hidden truths about US history and its problem with race.

For Whitehead, the gaze takes on an even higher significance as a historically inflected metaphor for African American agency against the oppression of the white gaze. As a central tenet of African American literary tradition, the metaphor of the gaze is utilized by a multitude of black writers, including bell hooks and W. E. B. Du Bois. For example, hooks states that, as an effective strategy of white supremacy, black slaves "could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving, as only a subject can observe, or see" (*Killing Rage* 35). To deny the subjectivity of black people, whites reinforced looking relations that forced black people to avert their gaze, relegating them to being solely objects of a white gaze. Cora's grandmother, Ajarry, whose gaze allows her to witness the "peculiar institution" and its central role in American culture and economy, underscores this relationship between the white gaze and black subjectivity. When Ajarry is on one of many auction blocks, she notes the "gawkers" and "onlookers" as well as the buyers and sellers who turn her body into a commodity (Whitehead, *Underground* 5). These onlookers assert their white gaze on Ajarry, objectifying and dehumanizing her in the process.

Just as hooks conceptualizes black subjectivity as a function of the gaze, Du Bois also characterizes whiteness in terms of vision. In "The Souls of White Folk," Du Bois states of white people: "I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. . . . I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious." Du Bois thus weaponizes his gaze as white people become scared, "embarrassed," and "furious" by his ability to see in and through them (55). He recognizes whiteness for what it is and sees that whites, far from being superior beings, are human, just like the African American they so often denigrate. He employs the gaze to respond to the "phantasy" of whiteness (59): the idea that whiteness is an invisible marker of privilege and power. Du Bois sees right through this performative charade.

Whitehead takes up Rabb's and Dickson-Carr's definitions of the satirist and combines them with hooks' and Du Bois's theories of the gaze by weaponizing what I call a satirical black gaze. In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead assaults the system of white supremacy and its terrorizing claim on American history and culture by paying attention to sight as a mechanism for exposing modalities of terror and of committing violence to the dominant structure of white supremacy. Satire becomes a lens through which to view whiteness throughout history. Unlike Swift, whose satire was intended to inspire reform through laughter, *The Underground Railroad* is not funny. Instead, Whitehead's novel comments on American history by means of what Steven Weisenburger calls "degenerative satire." Writers of degenerative satire assert that there

is violence in established historical narratives—or any privileged discourse or norms—and so they must find new ways to tell stories that assault the authority of established "facts." Although Weisenburger asserts that degenerative satire is distinctive from earlier, "generative" forms of satire, the purpose of which is to mock society's failings with the aim of shaming it into improvement, Whitehead's novel suggests that both objectives are possible. Although satire is often assumed to be coterminous with humor, its purpose extends beyond simple diversion and is not always funny. Instead, as Edward Bloom notes, any laughter prompted by satire "is the result of a reader's sensitivity to an occasion notable for ironic incongruity between what is superficially ludicrous and fundamentally serious" (39). Incongruity between the ludicrous and the serious is a central tenet of Whitehead's work, particularly *The Underground Railroad*, a novel that places skyscrapers and subways alongside antebellum slave markets and cotton gins to remark on how white supremacy exists in all times at once and is always highly ridiculous and extremely dangerous.

Although this incongruity between the serious and the absurd is interwoven throughout the novel, when Cora is placed in a new job at the Museum of Natural Wonders in their "living history" exhibit, this relationship allows the novel's satirical purpose to become clear: to uncover the problem of race. In this scene, Cora is tasked, along with a few other black women, to perform as a slave woman, a slave on a ship, and an African in a jungle scene. Cora realizes the museum's living history exhibit contains only living black people while the rest of the displays contain white dummies and taxidermized animals, demonstrating how whites construct the narrative of slavery into a

narrative of Blackness. Sadhana Bery, who writes extensively on living history museums and reenactments, states:

> For reenactments of slavery to be emotionally gratifying for contemporary whites it is necessary that white acts during slavery, other than those by 'good whites,' be made invisible. . . . White constructions of slavery as the history and domain exclusively of blacks result in whites never having to acknowledge that slavery is a foundational part of white heritage and a principle producer of white wealth. The whiteness of slavery has been marginalized, deflected, disguised, minimized, or simply made invisible. (166-67)

By using white dummies instead of real white people, the museum maintains the invisibility of whiteness and its integral role in slavery. This invisibility also allows for the willful deceit of white power as it rewrites history to accommodate the sense of its own gaze. The museum can continue its project in disseminating emotionally gratifying history to its white patrons. Nevertheless, while Cora inhabits the three scenes, she continues to question the veracity of their displays with sarcasm, another tenet of Whitehead's satire. She asks the dummy white sailor, "Is this the truth of our encounter?" already knowing the answer: "[N]obody wanted to speak on the true disposition of the world. And no one wanted to hear it. Certainly not the white monsters on the other side of the exhibit at that very moment. . . . Truth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren't looking, alluring and ever out of reach" (116). The museum displays do not offer a true account of American history as Cora knows it but a sanitized version for the white patrons who frequent the museum.

By including a "living history" exhibit, Whitehead demonstrates that history, particularly the history of race and racism in the United States, is manipulated, constructed, and erased. Cora's role in the exhibits also shows how the past is not fixed or dead but malleable and restless, making her a perfect mouthpiece for Whitehead who, as an author of historical fiction, constructs his own version of history to challenge mainstream narratives and their (white) gaze of history.

Just as Du Bois challenges the "phantasy" of whiteness, Cora (and by extension Whitehead) also develops a weaponized gaze to regain agency. While at the living history museum, Cora decides to retaliate against the "dumb, open-jawed stares of the patrons" at the museum by selecting one patron per hour to "evil-eye" (125-26). She fiercely stares down her chosen patron until they break their gaze with her: "She picked the weak links out from the crowd, the ones who broke under her gaze. The weak link—she liked the ring of it. To seek the imperfection in the chain that keeps you in bondage. Taken individually, the link was not much. But in concert with its fellows, a mighty iron that subjugated millions despite its weakness" (126). Cora's choice to pick out "weak links" as she calls them allows her to assert agency over the entire system that keeps her and others like her enslaved. Her desire to break the chains of bondage through looking echoes and confirms Du Bois's and hooks' argument that there is power in looking. Cora understands her power as she thinks, "It was a fine lesson . . . to learn that the slave, the African in your midst, is looking at you too" (126). Cora's evil-eye draws attention to the fear felt by many whites in the face of black liberty and power. In this moment, Cora refuses to play the roles she has been assigned: slave or primitive. She decides to take

control of the gaze to break down the system that keeps her confined. Hooks calls Cora's kind of gaze in this moment an "oppositional gaze" and asserts that "In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating 'awareness' politicizes 'looking' relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist" (*Black Looks* 116). Just as Cora's insightful gaze draws attention to the constructed nature of history in the museum, she also uses it at various moments on her journey, thereby emphasizing Whitehead's satirical objective to explain the problem of race.

Like Cora's questioning of the exhibit's authenticity, the novel's satirical exploration of historical representation uncovers the violence wrought on the history of black people in the United States, a history that is so often covered up or invalidated. Similar to Swift, who provides four different critiques of English history in *Gulliver's Travels*, Whitehead structures the novel by providing readers with four states of American "possibility" that act as doubles of one another (68), further entrenching the novel in the signifyin(g) tradition. The novel alternates between short chapters named after characters ("Ajarry," "Ridgeway," "Stevens," "Ethel," "Caesar," and "Mabel") and longer sections named after geographical locations ("Georgia," "South Carolina," "North Carolina," "Tennessee," "Indiana," and "The North"). The novel begins in "Georgia" and ends in "The North," which act as mirrors of one another. While Cora is circumscribed to the strict borders of the Georgia plantation—"To escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible"

(8)—"The North," with its nebulous title, is undefined and without boundaries, making Cora's "freedom" ambiguous and, ultimately, impossible.

This pessimism regarding Cora's fate stems from the novel's sardonic tone and is a hallmark of much of Whitehead's work. Reminiscent of Swift's flat tone in "A Modest Proposal" (1729), the prose remains detached and emotionless throughout much of *The Underground Railroad*. In a lengthy passage in the first section that describes Ajarry's early life as an object of exchange, Whitehead refers to her as "another asset liquidated" (5), and calls out the American "quirk" that "people were things": "A young buck from strong tribal stock got customers in a froth. A slave girl squeezing out pups was like a mint, money that bred money. If you were a thing—a cart or a horse or a slave—your value determined your possibilities" (6-7). Bloom argues that obvious vitriol and emotion in satire "are less evocative than the contrived banality of, say, a modest proposal for consuming infant flesh. Ironically flat, the notion is horrifying because its ordered, mathematical—even self-effacing" (44). Whitehead's ironically flat tone heightens the horror of chattel slavery just as Swift heightened the horror of consuming infants. Ajarry and others like her are reduced to livestock, bred and held captive just like cattle, ordered and systematic. Adam Kelly also makes note of the language in "Ajarry," contrasting Whitehead's mathematical prose with Toni Morrison's "heightened and poetic register" that she brings to the story of slavery in *Beloved* (23). Kelly notes that Whitehead uses the "apparently neutral language of the market, a language of price and exchange" to more powerfully emphasize the horror and alienation of slavery (23). Whitehead's flat tone, characteristic of so much satire, assaults the

system of chattel slavery created and organized by white supremacy with derisive irony, a hallmark of satire, thereby emphasizing its dehumanizing effects with Swiftian force.

The Underground Railroad does not just stir the political pot but does violence to dominant cultural production. Weisenburger asserts that contemporary satire "is itself a discourse of violence. It is a means of exposing modalities of terror and of *doing violence* to cultural forms that are overtly or covertly dedicated to terror" (5-6). *The Underground Railroad* becomes a mechanism not only for uncovering history but also for undoing that history. Weisenburger notes how this postmodern form of satire "subverts" authority (6), "levels" the ordinary (143), "deconstructs" history (145), and "turns on feelings" of "revulsion and abject horror" (143). Satire's pessimistic tendencies are taken to an extreme in contemporary culture, especially in *The Underground Railroad*, whose sardonic protagonist calls out the truth as she sees it. For example, when the slave patroller Ridgeway kills Jasper, a fellow captured fugitive, calling him an "unexpected expense," Cora sarcastically spits back, "You go on about reasons. . . . Call things by other names as if it changes what they are. But that don't make them true. You killed Jasper in cold blood" (220). By calling out Ridgeway's murder, Cora deconstructs an entire system that turns people into commodities. Cora's anger towards Ridgeway confirms Weisenburger's insistence that satire is a discourse of violence. Satire does not just assault the reader's sight, as both Rabb and Dickson-Carr posit, but commits violence against dominant structures of global supremacy. While Cora's gaze allows her to reassert her subjectivity, making white people the subject of scrutiny, Whitehead's satirical gaze allows him to reveal the ways whiteness is

"shackled to fear" (Whitehead, *Underground* 179), and exposes how this fear initiates the ideological underpinnings of conforming to and investing in a whiteness that is the foundation of American history.

"Shackled to Fear": White Fright in *The Underground Railroad*

As a "Southern Novel of White Misery," *The Underground Railroad* has a lot to say on the topic of whiteness, particularly in the ways it is systematically constructed and maintained. Toni Morrison argues that fear is a central component of whiteness. She states: "The necessity for whiteness as privileged 'natural' state, the invention of it, was indeed formed in fright" (16). Although white fear is exhibited throughout the novel, its most virulent iterations takes place in North Carolina and Tennessee, Cora's second and third stops on her journey to freedom. North Carolinians combat their fear of reciprocity by outlawing all black people from the state. All black people, as well as anyone found aiding fugitive slaves, within the state's borders are lynched. Before Cora takes refuge in the attic of reluctant railroad station operators Martin and Ethel, Martin takes her to see the ironically named "Freedom Trail" (153)—a road lined with thousands of lynched bodies—to demonstrate North Carolina's attitude towards black people.[17] This road, according to Martin, leads all the way to the border of North Carolina to serve as a warning. As Cora looks at the bodies hanging from the trees, it occurs to her that, "Fear drove these people, even more than the cotton money. The shadow of the black hand that

[17] A colleague pointed out that the Freedom Trail in Boston, Massachusetts, contains no representations of African American history, suggesting that Whitehead also might be satirizing the US tourist industry.

will return what has been given. . . . And because of that fear, they erected a new scaffolding of oppression on the cruel foundation laid hundreds of years before. . . . The whites were right to be afraid. One day the system would collapse in blood. (172) Here, Cora witnesses the atrocities committed by whites as a reaction to terror. She sees pregnant women, children, and hundreds of men in various states of decomposition along the Freedom Trail, all put there because whites fear retaliation. The lynching ritual serves as North Carolina's "final solution" to the problem of race: extermination.[18]

Whitehead turns the regularity of lynching into a violent clock, allowing Cora to mark time in her attic refuge/prison while also satirizing the lackadaisical attitude toward racial violence in the United States. In an interview with Terry Gross for NPR's *Fresh Air*, Whitehead also stated that he wanted to demonstrate the "banality of evil" in this novel ("Colson Whitehead's Underground Railroad"). Children play under the lynching scaffolding, the state establishes lynching quotas, and everyone takes part in the festival. Evil becomes so routine, no one—except for Cora—feels horrified at the sight of such regular violence. When Cora is discovered and Martin and Ethel are punished, the entire town participates in a stoning reminiscent of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" (1948), a satirical tale that exposes the evils of conformity. Just as Jackson's story ends with "The children had stones already. And someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles. . . . [A]nd then they were upon her," Whitehead concludes the stoning of Ethel and Martin with, "Two more children picked up rocks and threw them at the couple. . . . The town

---

[18] Whitehead has compared North Carolina's white supremacist state to Nazi Germany in almost every interview, including those with *CityLab*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *NPR*'s *Weekend Edition*.

moved in and then Cora couldn't see them anymore" (188). By making such a clear connection to Jackson's story, complete with the flat, ironic tone that made Jackson's story so horrifying to readers upon publication, Whitehead reconfigures the satire to articulate how racial violence and oppression are byproducts of conforming to and investing in whiteness.[19] The townspeople believe in the weekly lynching ritual because it allows them to keep their fear of retaliation at bay. Cora's observations lead her to conclude that white people are "prisoners, like she was, shackled to fear" (179). Laura Dubek notes that Whitehead's work in this moment is "not only as revisionist slave narratives but also as allegorical narratives about the making of a (white) nation" (70). Martin and Ethel must die so that white power can survive. Whitehead's articulation that each state Cora visits is a "state of possibility" are made clear in this moment: the possibility of how best to tackle the problem of race in the United States. North Carolina's people fail to reckon with the actual problem of unwavering, unending, and unyielding white supremacy.

Whitehead derides readers' emotional responses to Ethel's stoning by following the event with a chapter on her past. In this chapter, Whitehead provides readers with an account of Ethel's life. With a childhood desire to become a missionary in "dark Africa, delivering savages to the light" (191), Ethel's motivations for caring for Cora are steeped in white supremacist ideology, particularly the belief that presupposes white people as

---

[19] When Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" was published in 1948 in the *New Yorker*, the magazine received a "torrent" of angry letters from readers "baffled" by the story (Franklin). Readers were shocked and appalled by the ironic tone and the unsettling ending, so much so, that Jackson received hate mail.

superior and black people as primitives. Ethel characterizes slaves and the Africans she hopes to convert as "heathens" and "savages" in need of civilizing (191). Whitehead juxtaposes Ethel's supercilious beliefs against the barbaric lynching ritual and stoning. While she believes in the superiority of her own whiteness, she is savagely murdered by those she believes to be civilized. While she dreams of becoming an "instrument of civilization" (191), her father regularly rapes the woman he enslaves as a housemaid, further demonstrating the savagery of the white race. Ethel is implicated in her own stoning just as Mrs. Hutchinson in Jackson's story fully participates in the ritual. Both women conform.[20] Ethel dies because she shirks from the moral implications of her investment in whiteness. When Martin tries to justify Ethel's behavior and states, "You understand she's scared to death. We're at the mercy of fate," Cora sarcastically responds with, "You feel like a slave?" Martin further tries to justify his wife's behavior ("Ethel hadn't chosen this life, Martin said"), and Cora states with full irony characteristic of Whitehead's satire: "You were born into it? Like a slave?" (168). In other words, by satirizing Ethel's fate Whitehead exposes how fear works as a modality of (white) terrorism. Ethel dies because of her own white supremacist ideology and the violence on which it rests.

The fear Cora witnesses in North Carolina is taken to its satirical endpoint in Tennessee. As a funhouse mirror image of North Carolina, Tennessee shows how black

---

[20] In a statement made by Whitehead regarding a controversial SAT test question that required students to write an essay from the perspective of Ethel, Whitehead condemned Ethel as a "racist coward who shrinks from moral responsibility" (qtd. in Lou and Griggs).

extermination as a solution to the question "What race problem?" results in the end of the entire human race. In Tennessee, Yellow Fever has broken out and a wildfire has decimated the countryside, making the state an apocalyptic wasteland.[21] According to John Marr and John Cathey, Yellow Fever—a disease originating in Africa, making its way to the New World via the transatlantic slave trade—is steeped in the history of both slavery and slave rebellion. Marr and Cathey argue that Haitian independence in 1804 was achieved not only through the heroic struggle of African slaves led by Toussaint Louverture and his successor Jean-Jacques Dessalines but also through the rapid transmission of Yellow Fever among French soldiers (80). Although there is considerable debate among historians about the epidemic's actual effect on the fight for independence, Whitehead's reference to it given the fear surrounding black liberty confirms Cora's belief that white people were shackled to fear and that, ultimately, the system would "collapse in blood" (172).

Cora's sardonic gaze on the death and destruction allows us to witness the future of a (white) America terrified of addressing the race problem, or more specifically, the white problem. Although Whitehead does not point to any specific reason for Tennessee's condition, Cora remembers it as "Indian land" although "She never learned history proper, but sometimes one's eyes are teacher enough" (206). Cora gazes on Tennessee's apocalyptic landscape and sees God's wrath; Tennessee is being punished

---

[21] According to Michael Oldstone, Yellow Fever originated in Africa and was carried over to South America via the slave trade in the seventeenth century, further suggesting that Tennessee's apocalyptic landscape is due to slavery. Many reviews of the novel have compared the scenes in Tennessee to Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), including reviews by Juan Gabriel Vásquez, Thomas Pletcher, and Colette Bancroft, further highlighting the apocalyptic landscape of Whitehead's novel.

for its various sins, including Native American removal and slavery, both of which are referred to in Cora's brief stint in the state. Tennessee demonstrates how the synergistic relationship between whiteness and Blackness makes North Carolina's lynching policies deadly to all. According to George Yancy, "White 'superiority' thrives vis-a-vis black 'inferiority.' Whiteness is parasitic upon blackness" (14). Whitehead makes this relationship clear throughout the novel, articulating at various points how the United States would not have become an economic powerhouse without the cotton industry and how the cotton industry would not have thrived without slave labor. Slavery was a key driver of the formation of American wealth, and according to Edward Baptist, "more than $600 million, or almost half of the economic activity in the United States in 1836, derived directly or indirectly from cotton produced by the million-odd slaves—six percent of the total US population—who in that year toiled in labor camps on slavery's frontier" (322). Baptist outlines just how integral the cotton industry and slaves were to the global success of the United States. Tennessee's landscape suggests that, if we play into the fear of whiteness, everyone loses: "If Tennessee had a temperament, it took after the dark personality of the world, with a taste for arbitrary punishment. No one was spared, regardless of the shape of their dreams or the color of their skin" (Whitehead, *Underground* 216).

Whitehead uses Tennessee's apocalyptic backdrop to comment on white supremacist ideology, further implicating whiteness as the cause of all the misery. When Ridgeway takes Cora to dinner, dressing her up in clean clothes and wooden shoes, he proceeds to teach Cora about the "American imperative" over dinner (222): "It means

taking what is yours, your property, whatever you deem it to be. And everyone else taking their assigned places to allow you to take it. Whether it's red men or Africans, giving up themselves, giving of themselves, so that we can have what's rightfully ours" (221). Ridgeway tells Cora that "the American spirit" called him to "conquer and build and civilize. And destroy what needs to be destroyed. To lift up the lesser races. If not to lift up, subjugate. And if not subjugate, exterminate" (221-22). As soon as he defines the American Imperative, the next words out of Cora's mouth, and the words that directly follow the words "American Imperative" are "I need to visit the outhouse" (222). By placing Ridgeway's ideology directly before Cora's request for the bathroom, Whitehead mocks white supremacy through the humor of bodily functions, and he does not let it go. While Cora uses the outhouse, Ridgeway continues to spew his racist beliefs. Whitehead, in another brilliant moment of satirical mockery, writes: "Maybe everything the slave catcher said was true, Cora thought, every justification, and the sons of Ham were cursed and the slave master performed the Lord's will. And maybe, he was just a man talking to an outhouse door, waiting for someone to wipe her ass" (223). In this moment, Whitehead equates Ridgeway's racist diatribe with Cora's excretions, satirizing white supremacist ideology by calling it shit.

Whitehead continues to deride Ridgeway and the white supremacist ideology for which he stands through the puzzling character of Homer. As a "little colored boy, about ten years old" wearing a "tailored black suit and stovepipe hat" (187), whose "queer smile discomfited strangers" (200), Homer's presence alongside Ridgeway is disconcerting. Dubek claims that Homer is "a trickster-in-the-making," a "potentially

subversive" "signifying monkey" who observes Ridgeway to become versed in the "ways of white folks" (76-77). As he writes down Ridgeway's thoughts and keeps track of Ridgeway's finances, Homer is constantly winking or smiling at Cora, staring at her with secret knowledge, his winks suggesting that agency continues to lie in the gaze. While Ridgeway may think he has a faithful companion in Homer, his subversive presence as a writer and watcher proves to be a delusion. In these instances, Homer becomes a conduit for Whitehead himself, writing down (white) history disseminated by Ridgeway and rearticulated through an oppositional black gaze, which both he and Cora share. Homer reappears in Cora's life, winking to her during her more hopeful moments, to remind her of the delusory nature of freedom and utopia in a world ravaged by white fright.

"A Useful Delusion": Utopia and White Fright in *The Underground Railroad*

Because utopia began as a satirical genre with the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia* in 1516 (Courtemanche 229), Whitehead's two iterations of utopia, both in South Carolina and Indiana, are satirical by virtue of their utopian nature. South Carolina, Cora's first stop on her journey along the Underground Railroad, announces its utopian sensibilities the moment Cora steps off the underground train and into the sunlight: "She looked up at the skyscraper and reeled, wondering how far she had traveled" (70). This anachronistic skyscraper becomes a beacon of progress for the town, its "remarkable edifice" serving as a "monument to [Cora's] profound change in circumstances" and a signal of the town's attempts at racial uplift (87). Cora is, for the first time, paid for her

work, free to walk around town without being stopped by patrollers, and given free healthcare and an education. Cora savors “the provision for colored education” as she remembers how Connelly, the overseer at the Randall plantation, “once put out a slave’s eyes for looking at words” (96). Reading becomes a central motif in both iterations of utopia; while Cora learns to read in write in South Carolina, in Indiana, she gains access to an entire library of black-produced knowledge, able to read at her leisure. Reading, like the gaze, grants Cora agency to continually challenge the confines of (white) history and its backdrop of fear.

Just as working in the living history museum allows Cora to read the misrepresentation of American history told by the exhibits, learning to read grants Cora the ability to gaze critically at the true reasons for South Carolina’s utopian qualities. When a drunken Dr. Bertram divulges to Sam, a barkeeper by day and station operator by night, the secret sterilization and syphilis experiments being perpetrated at the new hospital in town, Sam alerts Cora. The experiments are Whitehead’s nod to the Tuskegee Syphilis Study conducted between 1932 and 1972, the purpose being to observe the natural progression of untreated syphilis (with the patients being told they were being treated for the disease when they were not). That Whitehead chooses to include this racist study in a seemingly progressive South Carolina demonstrates his satirical purpose with this “state of possibility,” something Dr. Bertram emphasizes when he tells Sam the reasons for the experiments and sterilization:

> America has . . . bred so many Africans that in many states the whites are outnumbered. For that reason alone, emancipation is impossible. With

> strategic sterilization—first the women but both sexes in time—we could free them from bondage without fear that they'd butcher us in our sleep. The architects of the Jamaica uprisings had been of Beninese and Congolese extraction, willful and cunning. What if we tempered those bloodlines carefully over time? (122)

To combat the fear of being one day outnumbered by enslaved Africans and the possibility for retaliation, South Carolina has solved the problem of race through sterilization and eventually extermination, wrongly identifying the problem of race with black people.

While in South Carolina, the utopian measures are a performative charade for more sinister measures of sterilization against the perceived threat of black liberty, Indiana's utopian measures are an attempt to insulate black liberty from white fear and are thus an impossibility. The utopian landscape of Indiana is much less outlandish, containing no anachronistic skyscrapers or elevators. The utopia created in Indiana rests in simple daily banalities white people take for granted. For example, Cora exults in "her own room. Another unlikely gift from Valentine farm after all her prisons" (242). Cora equates her previous experiences in other states of possibility to prison, articulating how white fear, no matter its manifestation, is a mechanism of racial control. After Cora's long journey, she recognizes how white fear works to control every aspect of her life, and so, despite Valentine farm's utopian world, Cora cannot trust it: "She had given herself too easily to the false promises of South Carolina. Now a bitter part of her refused the treasures of the Valentine farm, even as every day some blessing part came

into bloom" (251-52). Like the protagonist Mark Spitz in Whitehead's allegorical zombie-apocalypse novel *Zone One*, Cora cannot trust declarations that she is safe from trouble even after she is told that her former enslaver, Terrence Randall, has died. Indiana's black utopian community works much like Fredric Jameson argues all utopias work: "[N]amely, that its deepest vocation is to bring home, in local and determinate ways, and with a fullness of concrete detail, our constitutional inability to imagine utopia itself, and this, not owing to any individual failure of imagination but as the result of the systemic, cultural, and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners" (153). The novel suggests that Cora's inability to fully believe in Valentine farm stems not from her lack of imagination but from her experiences as a prisoner, both physically and mentally. Therefore, the satire in Indiana stems from the impossibility of Valentine farm even existing: "Cora had come to cherish the impossible treasures of the Valentine farm so completely that she'd forgotten how impossible they were. The farm and the adjacent ones operated by colored interests were too big, too prosperous. A pocket of blackness in the young state" (Whitehead, *Underground* 276). As a pocket of prosperous Blackness in a land of white fright, Valentine farm's impossibility is a self-fulfilling prophecy; it should not exist and therefore it will fail.

Both Mingo and Lander, two central leaders of the black community, articulate the impossibility of Valentine farm hours before it is burned to the ground and raided by

an angry and scared white mob.[22] Mingo states: "We have accomplished the impossible" while recognizing the precarity of their situation at the same time: "You think the white folks—just a few miles from here—are going to endure our impudence forever? We flaunt their weakness" (283-84). Meanwhile, Lander calls Valentine farm a "delusion": "Who told you the negro deserved a place of refuge? Who told you that you had that right? Every minute of your life's suffering has argued otherwise. By every fact of history, it can't exist. This place must be a delusion, too. Yet here we are" (285). Both Mingo and Lander confirm the impossible, delusory nature of Valentine farm, highlighting the satirical nature of the place's very existence. Lisa Guerrero says the impossibility of a black utopia is also its tragedy and argues that "This is the point of black satire in the twenty-first century" (275). Whitehead's utopia demonstrates the impossibility of a place like Valentine farm in relation to its placement in a white community, a microcosm for the nation. The surrounding white community feels threatened by a "black stronghold in their midst" (Whitehead, *Underground* 279): "[T]he specter of colored rebellion, all those dark angry faces surrounding them, had stirred white settlers to leave the south. They come to Indiana, and right next door is a black nation rising. It always ended in violence" (249). Valentine farm represents a similar perceived threat to the outnumbering of whites in South Carolina. Thus, when a white mob attacks and destroys Valentine farm, murdering indiscriminately and setting fire to

[22] Mingo and Lander are often compared to other black leaders, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Booker T. Washington, and Frederick Douglass. See Tyrone Simpson and Nihad P. Farooq, for examples.

the library, both Cora and the reader are exasperated, but not surprised. After so many states of possibility, Cora understands that "in the world there were no places to escape to, only places to flee" (257), in the ongoing project of emancipation.

Cora's inability to imagine utopia and the delusory nature of Valentine farm makes Whitehead's engagement with satire cynical rather than amusing. We are not supposed to laugh at Cora's plight as once again she is recaptured by Ridgeway. Guerrero says that contemporary black satire "gives voice and legitimacy to black rage" and a "form to the black subject in a time and place that have rendered all aspects of black life to be invisible, unimaginable, or wholly impossible" (276). Whitehead denies readers any hopeful ending for Cora, fully articulating his own rage at her never-ending pursuit of freedom. While Li argues that "Whitehead's underground railroad struggles to signify" (3), If we understand the ways satire functions to articulate black rage in a post-racial era, then the underground railroad trope's emptiness works by signifyin(g) on its (white) mainstream readers as an act of black rage. While the trope of underground railroad provides moral comfort to white people through representations of white hero abolitionists, in actuality, according to Kathryn Schulz, "the Underground Railroad was perhaps the least popular way for slaves to seek their freedom." Instead, Schultz claims that those who fled generally headed South toward Spanish Florida or Mexico, or to Native American and Maroon communities. Whitehead never intended for Cora to find freedom via the Underground Railroad. Freedom in this novel, like utopia, is a delusion. Whitehead satirizes the Underground Railroad to signify on mainstream (white) readers

caught up in the myth of benevolent whiteness and the empty promises of their favorite trope.

As if Cora's rage with her never-ending pursuit of freedom was not enough, Whitehead chooses to insert a brief chapter on Mabel, Cora's mother, and her tragic end just as Cora is recaptured by Ridgeway. While Cora believes that Mabel abandoned her on the Randall plantation and escaped North, readers learn that Mabel never makes it out of the Georgian swamp. Instead, she is bitten by a cottonmouth and perishes, never to be found. Whitehead's placement of Mabel's chapter after the delusory utopia of Valentine farm makes Cora's entire journey to freedom satirical; she will not get to freedom, just like her mother. Freedom is a delusion. Weisenburger notes that degenerative satire "turns on feelings of antipathy[,] . . . revealing behind its placid mask the extraordinary, monstrous edge of experiences situated well beyond norms. It may not, even in its classical texts (like *Gulliver's Travels*), locate any paved roads back to normality" (143). While we might think that Cora's ambiguous ending is happy as Li suggests (4), given Cora's journey through two utopian failures, any happiness is going to be short-lived.

Whitehead's novel suggests that, despite advancements, black people are still making their way to freedom—a freedom he grants neither Cora nor the reader. The novel ends with Cora escaping the clutches of Ridgeway once and for all, while "The slavecatcher whispered his address and the black boy recorded his words. . . . Into the tunnel that no one had made, that led nowhere" (303). Coined from Ancient Greek οὐ (ou, "not") and τόπος (tópos, "place, region"), utopia is nowhere. Nihad P. Farooq suggests that Whitehead's vision of utopia rests on the idea of "necessary and perpetual

movement" that enables a "structural revolution and change" (87). When Cora exits the tunnel and meets a fellow fugitive slave, she decides to make her way west with him in a moment of "collective belonging *in motion*" (95). Although Farooq's suggestion—utopia in perpetual motion—allows for a hopeful reading of Whitehead's novel premised on Cora's ability to keep running, the novel resists such a reading. Cora doesn't "want to run anymore" (Whitehead, *Underground* 267). In reading *Gulliver's Travels*, Caesar recognizes that perpetual motion is Lemuel Gulliver's whole problem: "[H]e kept forgetting what he had. That was white people all over: . . . make a home then keep straying" (235). Manifest destiny and Ridgeway's American Imperative confirm that perpetual motion is only utopian for white people. For Cora and other African Americans, the utopia of perpetual motion is nothing but an exhausting delusion.

Through satire, Whitehead allows Cora to bear witness to the greatest delusion, one that continues to dog us: what race problem? *The Underground Railroad* explores the nature of white American identity and power, how it must constantly (re)create itself by appropriating, denying, and suppressing alternative histories. Becky Thompson and Veronica Watson write that "White ideology provides flattering, nostalgic renderings of white history in place of nuanced, multicultural retellings of American history that would demand critical thinking and questioning from teachers, students, and citizens" (240). Cora's story demands that we gaze critically at the way history is produced and disseminated. If there are any hopeful readings of the novel, it is in Dubek's reading of Homer. She states: "[W]ith Ridgeway's death in the last chapter, Homer is free to use the stories in his notebook in whatever fashion he sees fit. Perhaps the ten-year-old

bookkeeper and scribe will, like the writer who created (and named) him, turn these stories on their head" (77). By writing "A Southern Novel of White Misery," Whitehead similarly expose the terrifying truths of the American race problem as an undying allegiance to whiteness.

"A Southern Novel of White Misery": What Race Problem?

In April 2019, Colson Whitehead visited Texas A&M University to speak about *The Underground Railroad* as part of their Brazos Valley Reads initiative, a community effort organized by the university's English department with support from various other groups in the community and university, including the Texas A&M Women's Club and the Glasscock Center for Humanities Research. Hundreds of people attended Whitehead's lecture, and the general local response to his novel seemed overwhelmingly positive.

In the weeks leading up to the event, the committee received several emails from disgruntled members of a local book group, calling out the novel as "offensive, certainly very raw. Offensive in the thought that it only fuels current racial tensions" ("Seeking").[23] Coming from an all-white book group from a predominantly white community (sixty-four percent white according to the most recent census data), the emails demonstrated an alarming amount of white fragility. Robin DiAngelo claims that white people are "socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority" and so

[23] Due to the nature of the emails, I have chosen to keep the identity of the sender and their book group anonymous and have reflected that choice in my bibliography.

"become highly fragile in conversations about race." DiAngelo states that responses to these charges, from anger, fear, guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal, work to reinstate "white equilibrium"; white fragility, she argues, is consequently a powerful means of "white racial control and the protection of white advantage" (2). The defensiveness exhibited by progressive white people works to maintain the racial status quo, which, in the contemporary moment, despite declarations otherwise, continues to be white supremacy.

While *The Underground Railroad* may seem like "the most predictable, and certainly the most generic of [Whitehead's] six novels" (Li 5), it nonetheless remains a powerful means of addressing our contemporary racial turmoil. When white readers continue to deny, avoid, or become angry about novels that depict with irony and rage the horrors of American history, another novel about the Underground Railroad is just what the world needs. This novel is more than the railroad: it depicts, through speculation and fantasy, the lingering systemic injustice embedded in this nation's very founding. The novel tells us that, even when Whitehead uses fantasy to depict historical events, the end result is still bent toward tragedy. Even in speculation, black people remain tools of white fear and hate. It is a pessimistic but honest novel. As a "Southern Novel of White Misery," *The Underground Railroad* fulfills its generic category, exposing through satire how whiteness must be *seen* as the cause of white—indeed all—misery. As Langston Hughes suggested almost a century ago in "Homesick Blues" (1926), "To keep from cryin' / I opens ma mouth an' laughs" (72), Cora, and Whitehead

by extension, satirically gaze on the souls of white folks to keep from sinking into history's (white) miseries.

Works Cited

Ashe, Bertram D. "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction." *African American Review*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2007, pp. 609-623.

Bancroft, Colette. "Review: Whitehead's 'Underground Railroad' an Unforgettable Journey through Slavery." *Tampa Bay Times*, 25 Aug. 2016, www.tampabay.com/features/books/review-whiteheads-underground-railroad-an-unforgettable-journey-through/2290908.

Baptist, Edward E. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. Basic Books, 2014.

Bery, Sadhana. "Making Whiteness in Reenactments of Slavery." *The Construction of Whiteness: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Race Formation and the Meaning of a White Identity*, edited by Stephen Middleton et al., UP of Mississippi, 2016. pp. 150-80.

Bianculli, David. "Colson Whitehead's 'Underground Railroad' is A Literal Train to Freedom." *NPR*, 8 Aug. 2016, www.npr.org/2016/08/08/489168232/colson-whiteheads-underground-railroad-is-a-literal-train-to-freedom.

Bloom, Edward. "Apotropaic Visions: Tone and Meaning in Neoclassical Satire." *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1974, pp. 35-52.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*. One World, 2017.

Courtemanche, Eleanor. "Satire and the 'Inevitability Effect': The Structure of Utopian Fiction from *Looking Backward* to *Portlandia*." *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 76, no. 2, 2015, pp. 225-46.

DiAngelo, Robin J. *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Beacon, 2018.

Dickson-Carr, Darryl. *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*. U of Missouri P, 2001.

---. "Afterword: From Pilloried to Post-Soul: The Future of African American Satire." *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity After Civil Rights*, edited by Derek C. Maus and James J. Donahue, UP of Mississippi, 2014, pp. 269-80.

Dubek, Laura. "'Fight for It!': The Twenty-First-Century Underground Railroad." *The Journal of American Culture*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2018, pp. 68-80.

Du Bois, W. E. B. "The Souls of White Folk." *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*. 1920. Humanity Books, 2003, pp. 55-74.

Farooq, Nihad M. "'A Useful Delusion': Valentine Farm and the Flight for Freedom." *Articulating Race and Utopia*, special issue of *Utopian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2019, pp. 87-110.

Franklin, Ruth. "'The Lottery' Letters." *The New Yorker*, 25 June 2013, www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-lottery-letters.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. Introduction. *Barack Obama: A Pocket Biography of our 44th President*, by Steven J. Niven, Oxford UP, 2009, pp. 1-4.

---. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford UP, 1988.

Goyal, Yogita. *Runaway Genres: The Global Afterlives of Slavery*. New York UP, 2019.

Guerrero, Lisa. "Can I Live? Contemporary Black Satire and the State of Postmodern Double Consciousness." *American Satire and the Postmodern Condition*, special issue of *Studies in American Humor*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2016, pp. 266-79.

hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. South End, 1992.

---. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. H. Holt and Co., 1995.

Hughes, Langston. "Homesick Blues" [1926]. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad, Vintage, 1994, p. 72.

Jackson, Shirley. "The Lottery." *The New Yorker*, 26 June 1948, www.newyorker.com/magazine/1948/06/26/the-lottery.

Jameson, Fredric. "Progress versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?" *Science Fiction Studies*, vol, 9, no. 2, 1982, pp. 147-58.

Kelly, Adam. "Freedom to Struggle: The Ironies of Colson Whitehead." *Open Library of Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2018. pp. 1-35.

Li, Stephanie. "Genre Trouble and History's Miseries in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*." *MELUS*, vol. 44, no. 2, Summer 2019, pp. 1-23.

Lou, Michelle and Brandon Griggs. "State Test Required 10th Graders to Write from a Racist Point of View." *CNN*, 4 Apr. 2019, www.cnn.com/2019/04/04/us/massachusetts-test-racist-underground-railroad-trnd/index.html.

Marr, John S., and John T. Cathey. "The 1802 Saint-Domingue Yellow Fever Epidemic and the Louisiana Purchase." *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*, vol. 19, no.1, 2013, pp. 77-82.

Morrison, Toni. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1989, pp. 1-18.

Oldstone, Michael B. A. *Viruses, Plagues, and History*. Oxford UP, 1998.

Pletcher, Thomas. "Two Takes on Sin." *Medium*, 29 Sept. 2017, medium.com/@tpletcher/two-takes-on-sin-1c0932948be2.

Rabb, Melinda. "The Secret Memoirs of Lemuel Gulliver: Satire, Secrecy, and Swift." *ELH*, vol. 73, no. 2, Summer 2006, pp. 325-54.

Schulz, Kathryn. "The Perilous Lure of the Underground Railroad." *The New Yorker*, 15 Aug. 2016, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/08/22/the-perilous-lure-of-the-underground-railroad.

"Seeking further reflections from the committee on query from book group on matter of 'raw' and 'offensive' aspects." Received by Brazos Valley Read committee, 15 Mar. 2019.

Simmons, K. Merinda. "Introductions: The Dubious Stage of Post-Blackness—Performing Otherness, Conserving Dominance." *The Trouble with Post-Blackness*, edited by Houston A. Baker and K. Merinda Simmons, Columbia UP, 2015, pp. 1-20.

Simpson, Tyrone. "Review of *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead." *Callaloo*, vol. 40, no. 2, Spring 2017, pp. 183-86.

Thompson, Becky and Veronica T. Watson. “Theorizing White Racial Trauma and Its Remedies.” *The Construction of Whiteness: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Race Formation and the Meaning of a White Identity*, edited by Stephen Middleton et al., UP of Mississippi, 2016. pp. 212-33.

“U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: College Station City, Texas; Bryan City, Texas; United States.” *United States Census Bureau*, July 2019, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/collegestationcitytexas,bryancitytexas,US/PST120219.

Vásquez, Juan Gabriel. “In Colson Whitehead’s Latest, the Underground Railroad is More than a Metaphor.” *The New York Times*, 5 Aug. 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/08/14/books/review/colson-whitehead-underground-railroad.html.

Weisenburger, Steven. *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*. U of Georgia P, 1995.

Whitehead, Colson. “Author Colson Whitehead on ‘The Nickel Boys’ and Fantasy vs. Realism.” Interview by Jeffrey Brown, *PBS*, 16 July 2019, www.pbs.org/newshour/show/author-colson-whitehead-on-the-nickel-boys-and-fantasy-vs-realism.

---. “Colson Whitehead: Oprah, American History and the Power of a Female Protagonist.” Interview by Stephenie Harrison, *BookPage*, 12 Aug. 2016, bookpage.com/interviews/20269-colson-whitehead-fiction#.Xw8mRyhKg2w .

---. "Colson Whitehead Takes American History on a Wild Ride." Interview by Tanvi Misra, *CityLab*, 23 Aug. 2016, www.citylab.com/commute/2016/08/colson-whitehead-underground-railroad-nyc-slavery/496586/.

---. "Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*." Interview by John Burnham Schwartz, *Wall Street Journal*, 8 Aug. 2016, www.wsj.com/articles/colson-whiteheads-the-underground-railroad-1470671964.

---. "Colson Whitehead's Underground Railroad is a Literal Train to Freedom." Interview with Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, 8 Aug. 2016, www.npr.org/2016/08/08/489168232/colson-whiteheads-underground-railroad-is-a-literal-train-to-freedom.

---. "Imagining the Underground Railroad as an Actual Train System." Interview with Jeffrey Brown*, PBS NewsHour*, 3 Aug. 2016, www.pbs.org/newshour/show/imagining-underground-railroad-actual-train-system.

---. "New Novel Takes 'The Underground Railroad' Beyond the Metaphor." Interview with Scott Simon, *Weekend Edition Saturday*, 6 Aug. 2016, www.npr.org/2016/08/06/488969873/new-novel-takes-the-underground-railroad-beyond-the-metaphor.

---. *The Nickel Boys*. Doubleday, 2019.

---. *The Underground Railroad*. Doubleday, 2016.

---. "What to Write Next." *The New York Times*, 29 Oct. 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/11/01/books/review/Whitehead-t.html.

---. *Zone One*. Anchor, 2011.

Yancy, George. "Fragments of a Social Ontology of Whiteness." *What White Looks Like: African American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, edited by George Yancy, Routledge, 2004, pp. 1-19.

CHAPTER V

"WE COOL?": SATIRIZING WHITENESS IN *KEY & PEELE* AND *BLACK-ISH*

In season one, episode six of Comedy Central's *Key & Peele* (2012–2015), Jordan Peele declares that white people are terrified of being called racist. Keegan-Michael Key nods in agreement and states, "Racist is the n-word for white people." Key and Peele proceed to pantomime a scene in front of the audience in which any charge of racism towards a white person is met with an immediate apology and subsequent acquiescence to any request. Although the humor in this exchange rests on Key's hyperbolic declaration, he nevertheless demonstrates the very real level of offense white people take at being called racist. More recently (and repeatedly), Donald Trump declared that he was "the least racist person there is anywhere in the world" after renewed accusations following his verbal attacks on congressman Elijah Cummings in July 2019. Given Trump's penchant for exaggeration and denial (not to mention outright racism), this statement, while ridiculous, was not surprising. Robin DiAngelo claims that white people are "socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority" and so "become highly fragile in conversations about race" (2). Moreover, DiAngelo states that responses to these charges, from anger, fear, guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal work to reinstate "white equilibrium"; white fragility, she argues, is consequently a powerful means of "white racial control and the protection of white advantage" (2). Fear about being seen or called out as racist threatens white superiority; fear shuts down conversation and quells change, thereby maintaining white

supremacy as invisible subtext. The defensiveness exhibited by Trump and other white people thus works to maintain the racial status quo, making Key's declaration not only funny but a disturbing reality.

Therefore, because white people fear being seen as racist, satire, through its political and irreverent nature, is the perfect genre for confronting such ridiculous behavior and exposing its dark underbelly. The use of satire in the Black community to critique issues of race in the U.S. also dates back centuries. In fact, as Daryll Dickson-Carr notes, slavery's horrors required the enslaved to use humor and satire to cope with the unspeakable (1). Steven Weisenburger asserts that "satire is itself a discourse of violence. It is a means of exposing modalities of terror and of doing violence to cultural forms that are overtly or covertly dedicated to terror" (5). This capacity is notably evidenced in the works of comedians such as Richard Pryor, Dave Chappelle, Wanda Sykes, and more recently, Keegan-Michael Key, Jordan Peele, and Anthony Anderson. These comedians use satire to expose racism's perniciousness while also "affirming [Black Americans'] humanity in the face of its violent denial" (Carpio 5). As the modalities of white supremacist terror change over time, Black artists follow suit, creating new ways to critique racial paradigms in the U.S. Until recently, that racial paradigm was touted by some as "post-race," a fantasy that is generally defined as a movement "beyond" race. "Post-race" holds that race is no longer a deterrent to achievement and success, that people are seen as only "individuals." Post-racialism claims to put the past's ugliness behind us, particularly in the wake of Barack Obama's historic election in 2008. Post-racialism employs what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva refers to as

“New Racism” practices which are constituted by several elements: covert racial discourse and racial practices, an avoidance of racial terminology, claims by white people of “reverse racism,” eschewal of direct racial references in political matters, the invisibility of mechanisms that produce racial inequality, and the rearticulation of Jim Crow-era racial practices. “New Racism,” in other words, makes racism invisible, concealed behind the fiction of a “post-racial” era.

While few would label the Trump era “post-racial,” new racist practices continue to function today, in collaboration with more explicit manifestations of racism. In light of this, scholars such as Jonathan Rossing, Derek Maus, and Lisa Guerrero explicate how humor and, more specifically, satire, can create spaces for productive conversations about race, racism, and white supremacy. In his analysis of Stephen Colbert’s work, for example, Rossing demonstrates how Colbert’s use of satire is significant because he forces a discussion of post-racialism on the national stage while at the same time using his privileged status as a white, heterosexual male in a position of power “productively against itself” (56). Colbert’s satire affirmed a race consciousness for the post-racial era by mocking white victimhood and fragility against the backdrop of Obama’s election and presidency, work he continues to do today. More importantly, Rossing demonstrates how the proliferation of popular television programs through streaming services and social media makes television particularly apt for fostering conversations about race and racism, conversations that are sorely needed today.

Despite an influx in critical work on late-night comedy and satirists such as Stephen Colbert, particularly in the ways they critique whiteness, there has been little

examination on contemporary Black satirists' addresses of whiteness. This lack is odd considering that Black people have been critiquing white people for centuries. W.E.B. Du Bois called whiteness a "public and psychological wage" that gave poor white people a valuable social status because it marked them as "not-black" (*Black Reconstruction* 573). He went on to argue that "whiteness" was "compensation" for citizens otherwise exploited by a capitalist system that served a few at the expense of the rest. More recently, scholars and writers have attended to the way whiteness continues to be regarded an invisible norm, a neutral center from which all "others" are judged. George Yancy asserts that while white people "are more than happy to proclaim their moral superiority, divulge their love of black folk, hide behind their power of self-definition, I feel my blackness defined beyond my control, slipping away from me, stigmatized as dangerous from birth . . . I am simply an instantiation of universal blackness (read: evil)" (14). While the black body is always already codified, whiteness thrives in invisibility. Still further, bell hooks points to a dialectic of terror at work in contemporary constructions of whiteness. She states, "The eagerness with which contemporary society does away with racism, replacing this recognition with evocations of pluralism and diversity that further mask reality, is a response to the terror. It has also become a way to perpetuate the terror by providing cover, a hiding place" (47). Hooks recognizes that naive "post-racial" notions masked an increased allegiance to white supremacy as a response to their own fears about the loss of power and privilege in a multicultural society. Ta-Nehisi Coates confirms this notion of white fright when he states:

> The symbolic power of Barack Obama's presidency—that whiteness was no longer strong enough to prevent peons from taking up residence in the castle—assaulted the most deeply rooted notions of white supremacy and instilled fear in its adherents and beneficiaries. And it was that fear that gave the symbols Donald Trump deployed—the symbols of racism—enough potency to make him president, and thus put him in position to injure the world. (xvi)

"Post-race" rhetoric and its attendant ideologies provided fertile ground for Trump's Amerikkka to flourish. Thus, an analysis of the ways whiteness functions in the Obama era becomes crucial to understanding the U.S.'s ongoing racial crises.

This chapter takes up the need to explore Obama era whiteness by examining two key television shows of the period: Comedy Central's *Key & Peele* (2012-2015) and ABC's *Black-ish* (2014-present). Focusing my analysis on the sketch "Apologies" from *Key & Peele* and select scenes from two *Black-ish* episodes, I analyze the relationship between whiteness and post-raciality as well as the consequences this relationship has on black subjectivity in the twenty-first century. I argue that in the post-racial era, progressive white people remain complicit in white supremacist terror through a fear of being labeled racist. *Key & Peele*'s "Apologies" satirizes the ways white people shut down potentially productive conversations about race in the U.S. in their attempts to demonstrate that they are not racist. In doing so, they silence black voices and perpetuate a terrorizing whiteness. *Black-ish* takes white privilege as its satirical target, demonstrating a similar issue with white peoples' inability to talk about race. While "Apologies" works to reduce liberal whiteness to its more laughable aspects, *Black-ish*'s

satirical representation of white privilege is juxtaposed with its groundbreaking effort to make space for conversations about race in the U.S. Unlike other Black sitcoms that have come before it, such as *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) or *Family Matters* (1989-1998), *Black-ish* is not simply a show about a family who happens to be Black. Rather, the family's blackness is central to the show's narrative tension. The show also allows us to witness the transition between the Obama era's post-racial ideology to the hyperracial Trump era and the ways white supremacy must constantly reinvent itself. Ultimately, both *Key & Peele* and *Black-ish* expose how white supremacy is not only the realm of explicit racists like neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, or the alt-right, but exists everywhere, in banal—often silly—daily experiences. Therefore, it becomes crucial to talk about the way whiteness functions in everyday life. By creating spaces that foster conversations about race, both shows work against the U.S.'s "post-race" allegiance to white supremacy.

"Oh, he spun!": Key and Peele Make Whiteness Strange

No other show in the Obama era satirized post-racial whiteness better than *Key & Peele*. The show debuted January 31, 2012 at the end of President Obama's first term in office and only weeks before Trayvon Martin's murder by George Zimmerman. Unlike the show's predecessor, *Chappelle's Show* (2003-2006), which debuted two years after the 9/11 attacks, *Key & Peele* entered an entirely different racial landscape. For Dave Chappelle, the invasion of Iraq that launched the War on Terror shifted discussions of race to discussions of religion and ethnicity, patriotism and terrorism. As Lisa Guerrero

notes, “This shift did not have a marked impact on how the public imagined black Americans except in the ways that the perceived social threat of urban blackness was ‘upstaged’ by the perceived threat of encroaching Muslim terrorists” (*Crazy* 134). The perceived threat of foreign terror highlighted the base fears, desires, and stereotypes at work in American racial politics, creating the ideal backdrop for Dave Chappelle to critically (and humorously) explore the broader histories, ideologies, and systems that shape them.

When *Key & Peele* debuted, the U.S. had entered a “post-racial” era, misguidedly believed to be ushered in with Obama’s presidency. The discourses of “post-race” and the highly symbolic nature of Obama’s presidency produced another monumental shift in U.S. racial politics. According to Guerrero,

> [Obama] was seen as the absolution of white racial sins and as the deliverance of black equality; he was seen as too black by some, and not black enough by others; he was seen as exemplary by many working- and middle-class black people, as elitist by a cross-section of white people, and as out of touch by many in poor communities of color . . . Throughout it all, to another section of the country his blackness represented the same threat that blackness always had. (*Crazy* 135)

Obama’s presidency was important in changing the racial landscape because he signified so many things simultaneously: hope, threat, elitism, blackness, progress. Because so many found Obama’s presence in the White House threatening, his election prompted a rebirth in aggressive race-based stereotypes, racist behaviors, and violent racist acts.

Michael Eric Dyson sums it up perfectly when he states, “No single person better embodied black progress, and therefore scared white terrorists more, than Barack Obama” (256). This fear becomes central to the satirical work produced by Black artists in the twenty-first century, including Key and Peele, who poke fun at white fright through exaggerated depictions of white people attempting to “be cool” with the presence of Black people.

With the exception of the last season, each episode of *Key & Peele* is punctuated with short stand-up routines in front of live audiences. Directly following their brief stand-up interlude about white fragility mentioned earlier is the skit “Apologies.” In this skit, two unidentified Black men played by Key and Peele are sitting at a bar drinking beers and discussing the popular television show *Game of Thrones*. As they converse, several white people walk by, notice them, and proceed to interrupt their conversation to show how “woke” they are. By attempting to enact anti-racist sentiments, however, the three white people interrupt, silence, and stereotype the two men. The skit transforms white denial into an absurdity by exposing their underlying anxieties over Black existence. These people feel the need to enact non-racist attitudes by working to “be cool” with their presence. In doing so, these white people employ microaggressions, slang, and vernacular that, despite good intentions, communicate prejudice. Ultimately, white performance in this skit demonstrates how racial anxiety maintains white supremacist structures and ideologies. However, the skit also does the important work of making whiteness “strange,” a term Richard Dyer emphasizes in his landmark study *White* (1997): “White people need to learn to see themselves as white, to see their

particularity. In other words, whiteness needs to be made strange" (4). By making whiteness strange, Dyer asserts, whites can be "dislodge[d]" from their supreme position of power, while also "undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world" (2). By making whiteness strange, Key and Peele undercut white authority, making it laughable and powerless instead.

The hilarity of "Apologies" comes primarily from the performances of Key and Peele who are forced to awkwardly navigate conversations with fragile white people. Still more hilarity ensues as the white people embody several common stereotypes. The first person (Carla Gallo) to interact with Key and Peele satirizes whiteness by using a common stereotype of contemporary white womanhood: the (drunk) Valley Girl.

> Drunk Girl: Oh my god I can't believe he just did that.
>
> Peele: What?
>
> Drunk Girl: Served me before you guys. I'm really against that. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry about everything.
>
> Key: Oh, it's fine. We have drinks. [holds up beer]
>
> Drunk Girl: No. No. It's been a hundred years of not fine. I mean twenty years ago you guys wouldn't even have been allowed in here."
>
> Peele: Twenty years? That would be 1992.
>
> Drunk Girl: You're both really beautiful.

The Valley Girl, popularized by films like *Clueless* (1995) and *Valley Girl* (1983), is a stereotype depicting upper-middle-class, (usually) white women characterized by a colloquial California dialect, ditziness, airheadedness, and materialism. This stereotype,

while innocuous and silly in those earlier films, becomes oppressive in the *Key & Peele* skit, as she effectively stifles all conversation taking place between the two men. As soon as she stands between them, both men quickly trail off into silence as they become uncomfortable by her random presence, especially since there are other places to stand at the bar. While she pretends not to notice them, they feel immediately uncomfortable with her proximity. What she does not understand is her own privileged position in relation to theirs. Ruth Frankenberg (1993) writes that "given male dominance within white culture, the 'protection' or 'salvation' of white women and their supposedly civilized sexuality has been the alibi for a range of atrocities from genocide and lynching to segregation and immigration control" (76). For that reason, her presence terrorizes the two men because traditionally protecting white women was the alibi for white terrorist behavior—i.e., lynching, raping, castration, and torture. Her presence makes them uncomfortable because historically their lives matter less than her "purity." And it is her word against theirs.

She makes them even more uncomfortable when she accuses the bartender of serving her first before them, projecting her white guilt onto the bartender and denying her own culpability in the terrorizing aspects of her whiteness. However, when they try to respond, she interrupts them, forcing them to continue remaining silent while she tells them how unracist she is ("I'm really against that"), her Valley Girl behavior heightening the absurdity and humor of the interaction. Key and Peele satirize white femininity through stereotyping to highlight the ways white women, even well-meaning ones, can become terrorizing. By insisting that the bartender has purposefully served her

before them, and in her exoticization of their blackness ("You're both really beautiful"), she attempts to dispel the notion that she is racist and instead is sympathetic to their struggles. Her constant interruptions, however, become a silencing mechanism, and when Peele attempts to confront her historical "facts," she effectively shuts down the conversation and leaves. Meanwhile, Key demonstrates his own discomfort by averting his gaze when she walks up to them and trails off and becomes silent. While she may think she is "woke" by approaching the two men and acknowledging their presence, history has taught them that whiteness—and white femininity in particular—is terrorizing.

While the first interaction uses the Valley Girl stereotype to satirize white femininity as terrorizing, the next two interactions satirize common stereotypes of white men who appropriate Black cultural phenomena, including fashion, hairstyles, behavior, and speech patterns. After the drunk girl leaves, Key and Peele are harassed by a drunk man (Ryan Hansen) in a Tribe Called Quest shirt and a hemp necklace. Just like the drunk girl, this guy rudely interrupts the two men, shutting down their private conversation:

> Tribe Shirt Guy: [To the bartender] Give me another lager. [To Key and Peele] Spilled my last one on my Tribe shirt. Can you believe that? But whatevs. Got this thing in '93. Midnight Marauders tour. Check that out. It's everywhere. Ah, man.
>
> Peele: Who's your favorite member of Tribe?

Tribe Shirt Guy: Smoke. Smoke Smoky. Know what I mean? Love him, dude. He's more behind the scenes but he was like…alright. Good. See you guys around though. [Forces Key to fist bump him and then Peele] Cool One mo, one mo, one mo, come on son, boom. [Peele fist bumps him; the guy spins and walks away].

Key: Oh, he spun. He spun.

Peele: Second person to not wait for their drink, by the way.

Tribe Shirt Guy bases his interaction with Key and Peele on an assumption that they both listen to the same music (hip hop) and that they all participate in or understand hip hop culture, slang, and mannerisms (fist bumping, voice inflections, vernacular, etc.). In other words, his attempts at being "cool" with the two men hinges on common Black male stereotypes, making his attempts at appearing not racist, in fact racist.

In addition to subscribing to common Black male stereotypes, Tribe Shirt Guy also engages in a long-standing sociohistorical practice of white supremacist terror: cultural appropriation. While cultural appropriation is often a subject of controversy (is it appropriation or appreciation?),[24] its "wrong," as Erich Matthes suggests, is nonetheless

---

[24] In an article for *The Independent*, David Barnett highlights the problematics of cultural appropriation. While some aspects of cultural appropriation are benign and have given us things like Rock n' Roll, curry houses, and high fashion, other aspects remain sinister. He notes that a key feature in the more troublesome aspects of cultural appropriation is the way in which "dominant" cultures appropriate others. Power, therefore, determines whether a specific instance of cultural appropriation is innocuous or not. See Barnett, David. "Cultural Appropriation: Sometimes It's so Blatant It Smacks Us in the Face, Other Times It Can Be a Total Minefield." *The Independent*, 19 May 2018, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/cultural-appropriation-term-prom-dress-political-correctness-blackface-performance-costume-a8356526.html.

"rooted in imbalances of power" (1003). Matthes argues that cultural appropriation manifests continuing inequality and injustice and thus contributes to the violence committed against Black people. Hooks says that cultural appropriation and commodification of the Other turns ethnicity into a spice, "seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (*Black Looks* 21). However, hooks also asserts that there is a danger in this appropriation and commodification: "The over-riding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate—that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten" (39). Thus, cultural appropriation, despite declarations of "appreciation," is cannibalistic, and is simply another way to perpetrate violence against Black people. Not only is Tribe Shirt Guy's cultural appropriation problematic for its commodification and cannibalism, he has absolutely no idea who or what A Tribe Called Quest is. Therefore, he is wearing the shirt simply to convey his "coolness," not to support a musical group he admires. Instead of being cool, however, Tribe Shirt Guy's strange behavior makes him laughable, particularly when he exits the conversation by spinning, a move that heightens the hilarity of the skit, thereby reducing whiteness—performative, fetishistic whiteness in particular—to absurdity.

While Tribe Shirt Guy "appreciates" hip hop culture, the last person to interrupt the two men is with a white man with dreadlocks (Ken Marino), pushing the boundaries of appropriation to their most offensive[25] and hilarious. When Dreadlocks sees the two

---

[25] There have been several recent instances in which white people are critiqued and even attacked for wearing dreadlocks. For example, in 2016, pop singer Justin Bieber received backlash for sporting

men he immediately walks up and puts his hands on the back of their seats, once again making the two men feel uncomfortable and silencing them:

> Dreadlocks: Ahh I need a drink. I just finished *Amistad*. I saw it three times and I'll see it a hundred more times. Because like, I'm happy to do it. If that's what those guys went through, I'm happy to sit through it 300 more times or whatever, you know, it takes.
>
> Key: Yeah, it's pretty intense.
>
> Dreadlocks: Yeah, see my thing is, I don't think one person should own another person. Period.
>
> Key: I'm glad that that's what you got from that movie.
>
> Dreadlocks: [talking over Key and Peele] I don't care when it happened. It should never happen. It should never occur. But like I'm preaching to the choir, you guys know what I'm talking about.
>
> Key and Peele: Yeah, we *really* do.
>
> Dreadlocks: [talking over Key and Peele] I'm like, why did anyone ever do that? Girl, no you didn't! No you din-it! I'm ashamed.
>
> Key: You know what? It's really probably ok because you weren't there.

---

dreadlocks. He defended them, stating, "It's just my hair." However, he shaved his head only a month later. That same year, a Black woman called out a white male student at San Francisco State for wearing dreadlocks and a physical altercation ensued. See Grinberg, Emanuella. "Dreadlocks on White Folks: Things to Consider." *CNN*, 1 Apr. 2016, https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/31/living/white-dreadlocks-cultural- appropriation-feat/index.html. See also Ogunyinka, Taiwo. "Dreadlocks Are Not OK for White People to Have. Period." *The Tab*, 5 Apr. 2016, https://thetab.com/2016/04/05/dreadlocks-white-people-83996.

Dreadlocks: Ok, well we can come up with excuses all day. All day.

Peele: Let's not do that. Let's just not do that.

Dreadlocks: Bottom line, we cool? Right? Alright. We kickity-coo! Alright. Four more years.

Dreadlocks compares his *Amistad* (1997) viewing with slavery, immediately working to assuage his white guilt in front of the two men. *Amistad* is one of countless award-winning white savior films produced in the last few decades. These films contribute to the fiction of the "good" white, which is constructed as not racist, sincere, and with strong leadership abilities, all the while erasing the agency of nonwhite people. Jamie Schultz argues that these good whites are "fictions" because they ignore the "enduring legacy and continued presence [of] white dominance and racial prejudice and discrimination in America" endemic to a post-racial society (207). *Amistad*, like so many white savior films, is simply a product of a society unwilling to address the realities of a white supremacist society and instead relies on myths and stories that make white people feel good about their whiteness, something Key and Peele reenact ("you weren't there"), so that he will leave them alone. Dreadlocks can appear antiracist for watching the film, mitigate his white guilt, and rest assured that his status as a white male remains unchallenged.

In addition to his *Amistad* reference, Dreadlocks also attempts several times to use African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) vocabulary, voice inflection, and its grammatical characteristics to show that he is also "cool," enacting verbal blackface as a result. Dreadlocks appropriates Black English in a stereotypical manner, making his

attempts to be cool racist instead. Phrases such as "girl, no you didn't!" and "we cool," pepper his interaction with Key and Peele. While there is certainly an argument to be made here about cultural appropriation similar to what the Tribe shirt guy enacts, what's more insidious about this exchange is that Dreadlocks only talks this way with the two black men; he does not use AAVE with the bartender. This only serves to alienate Key and Peele who have already been repeatedly harassed and alienated. Neither Key nor Peele uses AAVE in this skit. Dreadlocks does not actually care about Black people or the centuries of injustice Black people have faced in the U.S; rather, he has exploited their "cool" culture for his own gain.

After so much ridiculous behavior from white people, Key and Peele find overt racism easier to deal with than the colorblind racism performed by the three white people who interrupted them. The skit ends with the bartender coming up to Key and Peele and telling them, "If it makes you guys feel any better, black people make me really uncomfortable," to which both Key and Peele, with visible and audible relief, respond with "Thank you!" The bartender's declaration of racial anxiety shatters the façade of post-race, laying bare its racist subtext. Instead of exploiting Key and Peele's presence to assuage his white guilt and perpetuate a terrorizing whiteness, the bartender dispenses with the new racist practices and admits to being uncomfortable, distilling centuries of white supremacy into one statement. The bartender's admission of discomfort is refreshing to Key and Peele who, based on their calm demeanors throughout, experience routine harassment similar to what we witness in the bar. So, for someone to admit they are uncomfortable opens up the possibility for an actual

conversation. Although the skit ends before we see any conversation taking place, the implications of the bartender's statement are ironically hopeful.

"It's almost like we need to keep talking about it": *Black-ish* Deconstructs White Privilege

Whereas the satire of "Apologies" plays with racial stereotypes in order to make whiteness strange, the satire of *Black-ish* rests on deconstructing white privilege and affirming Black subjectivity in the twenty-first century. When the show launched in 2014, the twenty-four-hour news cycle was fixated on the events in Ferguson, Missouri where protests erupted after 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot and killed by white police officer Darren Wilson, who was later acquitted of all charges. Similar instances of police brutality were increasingly brought to light in the years leading up to and after the events in Ferguson, giving rise to the Black Lives Matter movement and other racial protests around the country, disrupting much of the post-race rhetoric so popular during the Obama era. At the same time, major TV network ABC advertised the fall season with new shows as well as new seasons of already popular ones, including Shonda Rhimes' hit shows *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005–), *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC, 2014–2020), and *Scandal* (ABC, 2012–2018). As Christine Acham observes, "The lineup was as official a declaration as a network could give that one black woman—Shonda Rhimes—had become the most powerful showrunner on television" (48). Known as "Shondaland," this three-hour block of TV, full of powerful Black female leads and inclusive casts, created a dichotomy with the news footage of Ferguson

and acted as a microcosm for the post-racial era. While ABC touted a three-hour post-racial world every Thursday night, the footage of Ferguson disrupted that fantasy.

Black-ish dives more deeply into the "Shondaland" trademark of inclusivity by making the Black identity of the Johnson family crucial to the show and its satire. Based loosely on the life of the show's creator, Kenya Barris, *Black-ish* focuses on an affluent black family, the Johnsons. Andre "Dre" Johnson (Anthony Anderson) is an executive at an advertising agency, Stevens and Lido, and his wife, Rainbow "Bow" Johnson (Tracee Ellis Ross) is a doctor. They have four children (a fifth child comes later), and Dre's aging and divorced parents live with them. Dre grew up poor in Compton, whereas his children are growing up wealthy in a predominantly white suburb of Los Angeles. In the show's pilot episode, Andre voices his disapproval at the younger generation's cultural hybridity (hence the title of the show) after he receives a job promotion to "Senior Vice President: Urban Division." Andre thinks his kids are losing their black identity and so do not understand the daily and often subtle racism or injustices they will face as they grow up. The show becomes a way for him to teach his kids (and his coworkers) about both the joys and agonies of being Black in America and, through strategic voiceover narration, the audience gets to listen in.

The show's effort to make space for conversations about race in the U.S. is juxtaposed with the satirical representation of white privilege. Through the characterizations of Mr. Leslie Stevens (Peter Mackenzie), Dre's boss and one of the CEOs of the advertising agency; Josh Oppenhol (Jeff Meacham), a fellow ad man; and Connor Stevens (Nelson Franklin), the boss's psychopathic son who gets the job through

nepotism, white privilege is exaggerated to hilarious degrees. However, the show never villainizes these characters. Instead, Andre—and to a lesser and more ridiculous extent Charlie (Deon Cole), Andre's only Black co-worker for the first few seasons—use them as springboards for productive discussions around white privilege and the realities of being Black in America.

Although performances of white privilege happen in almost every episode of the show, I will focus my analysis on episode twelve, "Lemons" from season three of *Black-ish* (2017) and episode two, "Gap Year," from season five (2018), along with references to other moments throughout the first five seasons that satirize white privilege. In "Lemons" everyone reacts to the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Each member of the Johnson family finds different ways of coping while Dre's co-workers spend weeks debating and lamenting the election. In "Gap Year," Dre is perplexed about his oldest son Andre Jr.'s (Marcus Scribner) decision to take a gap year before attending college. As with most of his problems, Dre brings his troubles to his co-workers and boss before making a decision. These interactions between Dre and his co-workers, known as "brainstorming sessions" by the show's creators (because technically they are supposed to be designing ad campaigns for their clients), unravel the discrepancies between Dre's life as an affluent black man and his white co-workers. Andre's revelations regarding his co-workers' white privilege acts to "break the spell" as Du Bois puts it: "when the black man begins to dispute the white man's title to certain alleged bequests of the Fathers in wage and position, authority and training . . . then the spell is suddenly broken" ("Souls" 186). In exposing the "phantasy" of whiteness through absurd depictions of white

privilege ("Souls" 187), *Black-ish* works to dismantle white supremacy's power. Each of these episodes satirizes white privilege through exaggeration, irony, and humor in order to reduce white privilege and the abiding influence of white supremacy to absurdity.

In her seminal essay on white privilege, Peggy McIntosh calls white privilege "an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks" (10). White people, she argues, are taught not to recognize white privilege and to remain "oblivious" to the "invisible package of unearned assets" they carry around everywhere they go (10). She lists the daily effects of white privilege in her life and the list is substantial, with twenty-six bullet points, including things like "I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group" and the more insidious "I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them" (11). McIntosh demonstrates how white privilege works—often to the disadvantage of nonwhite people. Racism and white privilege are corollary; they are two sides of the same coin.

The relationship between racism and privilege is explored throughout *Black-ish*, often with laughable results. For example, when news of Donald Trump's election becomes all anyone can talk about, Dre tries to restore order to his workplace, "the cartoonish walls of Stevens and Lido" (Barris), where his boss and co-workers have evaded work for two months to debate the particulars of the election. They even have a white board reading "Whose fault is this?" with different demographics written down and crossed out as they argue, including "The gays," "the lateen-ohs," "the blacks," and "white women." They argue about who to blame for Trump's election, each person

putting in their opinion and, more importantly, listening to one another. Unlike the white people in "Apologies," each person contributes to the conversation and no one is ignored. When Daphne Lido (Wanda Sykes), Dre's other boss, lists "white women" on the white board, she respectfully asks Lucy (Catherine Reitman), Dre's only white female coworker what she thinks. Lucy admits to having voted for Trump. While everyone around her is visibly and audibly upset by this news, some ridiculously—Daphne needs to be held back to keep from kicking Lucy, while Lucy hilariously gets into a Karate stance to defend herself— they do not attack her. Instead, they ask her why. Each person in the room brings a different perspective to the election, everyone is allowed a voice, and everyone is heard. By confronting white fragility and privilege head on, *Black-ish* picks up where *Key & Peele* left off while maintaining much of the light-hearted hilarity that made both shows so popular.

White privilege is further satirized in this scene when the category "white men" is noticeably absent from the whiteboard of blame. When Lucy actually starts to defend herself and states, "Look, I'll admit. I don't think Donald Trump is a great guy," Mr. Stevens says, "no. He is the devil. And I should know." Dre hears this and responds with "what?" to which Stevens pretends he didn't say it and responds "hmm?" to Dre's question. This exchange happens fast, and only Dre seems to have caught Stevens' comment. This is another instance where Stevens knows he is the most privileged person in the room. He's rich, white, straight, and male, embodying the "white devil" for the post-racial era. He acknowledges his own position as similar to that of Donald Trump. Ironically, Stevens does not vote for Trump, even though, logically he would benefit the

most from Trump's proposed policies. Instead, he votes for Hillary, not because he likes her, but because he despises Trump who to him does not embody the ideal Republican "like Mitt Romney." Mr. Stevens embodies the perfect archetype of the Obama era-Trump era white male: he is intelligent but also casually racist, benefitting from systemic white privilege, a system he continues to recreate as CEO. Stevens proudly boasts that he did not vote for Trump and blames others for the election, further entrenching his position of dominance while assuring himself that he is not racist because he did not vote for Trump.

As the conversation quickly devolves into a yelling match between Lucy and Daphne, Trump voters and Hillary voters, Dre breaks out into a laugh. Although his co-workers find his laughter puzzling, his laughter stems from a long tradition in African American culture: laughing to keep from crying. Dre's laughter is a coping mechanism referred to by writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston (the former even titled a book of stories *Laughing to Keep from Crying* (1952)). It is a strategy the Black community turns to in times of crisis or injustice, a way of turning lemons into lemonade, hence the title of the episode. However, Dre's laughter causes Mr. Stevens to accuse Dre of not caring about America. Affronted, Dre proceeds to give a speech that AV Club critic Ashley Ray-Harris imagines "nearly every black person in America wanted to shout on November 9th" ("Black-ish Got Trump"). With Billie Holiday's rendition of "Strange Fruit" playing in the background, Dre's speech demonstrates how the outrage Stevens feels is something Black people feel all the time. He argues that he

loves America even if it does not love him back. Before angrily walking out, Dre tells Mr. Stevens,

> I'm used to things not going my way. I'm sorry that you're not and it's blowing your mind, so excuse me if I get a little offended because I didn't see all of this outrage when everything was happening to all of my people since we were stuffed on boats in chains. I love this country as much, if not more, than you do, and don't you ever forget that.

Dre's eloquent speech articulates the clear discrepancy between his experiences and his white co-workers. While they have only just begun to feel disempowered with Trump's election, Dre has always felt this way. Dre is used to feeling scared when the polls elect another white man. In this moment, all satire dissipates as Dre's anger takes center stage. The juxtaposition of Dre's angry speech with the exaggerated white male privilege performed by Stevens serves as a clarifying moment. As Megan Garber notes in an *Atlantic* article published shortly after the episode aired: "It is art that achieves the neatest of tricks: It expresses anger while also insisting on empathy" ("Lemons"). More importantly, we do not look at Mr. Stevens with animosity. Rather, due to his over-the-top performance of white privilege, we, like Dre, laugh to keep from crying. Mr. Stevens is not evil, he is hilariously out-of-touch, his privilege blinding him to the daily injustices faced by Black people in the U.S. In other words, this is a conversation he still needs to have with Dre so that he can understand, even just a little, what his privilege means.

In “Gap Year,” the need for conversations about race is ironically mentioned by Mr. Stevens. When Dre tells his co-workers about Junior’s decision to take a gap year, Mr. Stevens tells him gap years are “great. For us” as he points to himself and Josh, the two white men in the room, and then says, “but not for you guys,” pointing to Dre and Charlie. He then goes on to tell Dre that “according to a recent study, if [Junior] does [take a gap year], he’s going to be homeless.” Dre looks confused and Mr. Stevens picks up on this confusion and looks pleased. He proclaims excitedly that, “Oh, this is outstanding. For the past five years, I’ve been an unwilling party to you ‘droppin’ knowledge.’ Well guess what, now it’s my turn, and spoiler alert! What I’m about to tell you has nothing to do with slavery.” Mr. Stevens then proceeds to give a lecture in the exact same way Dre has been for the previous four seasons, complete with animated sequences dramatizing key points. He says that:

> Rich young white males are more likely to stay well to do while rich young black males are more likely to become poor than they are to stay rich. There are a variety of potential causes for this: imbalanced incarceration rates, employment bias, and discriminatory housing policies, to name a few. But really, it all stems from institutional racism reaching back into America’s past. As a slave-holding—dammit! Slavery affects everything. It’s almost like we need to keep talking about it.

Mr. Stevens’ pompous attitude towards Dre and the realization that “all roads lead to slavery” despite declarations otherwise creates a moment for the audience to laugh at white privilege and white peoples’ inability to *see* race. Dre responds to Mr. Stevens’

lecture by summarizing the main point: he cannot let Junior take a gap year because despite all the work he has done to become successful, his son, as a black man, is still not secure. Mr. Stevens nods in agreement and states, “No gaps in the resume. You do not want to give an excuse for me and my brethren not to hire him.” In this moment, Mr. Stevens not only acknowledges that white privilege exists, but that he—as a wealthy business owner—is complicit in systemic racism. He absurdly tells Dre that he would not hire Junior if he had a gap in his resume, something he would not do to a white man (Josh, Dre’s co-worker, took a gap year). The satire in this exchange highlights the absurdities of post-racism. As the show progresses, Mr. Stevens becomes more and more aware that white privilege exists as the other side of racism. He watches the news, he listens to Dre’s lectures, and he recognizes how his whiteness (and his maleness) affords him many advantages that his Black or female employees do not receive. In effect, Mr. Stevens, like so many well-meaning progressive white people, continues to uphold the status quo despite knowing inequalities exist, in a true post-racial fashion. However, instead of simply laughing to keep from crying, Mr. Stevens is rendered absurd and Dre becomes the voice of reason, even when he too acts ridiculously. Through exaggerated behaviors like boasting about his white privilege, hiring his psychopathic son, and openly admitting to giving his white male employees preferential treatment, the satire breaks down Mr. Stevens’ white privilege into absurdity. He becomes easy to assault with laughter, giving power to Dre’s rage and making impotent the whiteness Mr. Stevens represents, if only in the fictional realm.

Conclusion: Where do we go from here?

Through an engagement with satire, both *Key & Peele* and *Black-ish* dramatize post-racial relations between Black and white people. Each show situates conversations of race in a post-racial context where the realities of racism still disproportionately affect people of color. Through strange and exaggerated performances of whiteness, each show reinforces the ubiquity of racial identity and makes race something everyone does, including white people. Each show also highlights the ways in which white people experienced genuine anxiety over supposed shifts in racial hierarchy with Obama's election and the ways whiteness must be continually reaffirmed as the norm from which all others are judged.

Because as we have seen in the Trump era "whitelash,"[26] white supremacy stubbornly persists. By exploring the ways whiteness weaponizes post-racialism, each show elucidates the need for productive conversations about race in the supposedly post-racial U.S. While *Key & Peele* depicts the hilarious yet troubling ways white people shut down conversations of race for fear of being labeled racist, *Black-ish* deconstructs white privilege through exaggeration, irony, and absurdity. In so doing, the show makes possible actual conversations taking place between Black and white people. These conversations are often hilarious and often fraught but they are ones in which everyone gets a chance to speak and be heard. The "brainstorming sessions" in *Black-ish* are an example of what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls a "cosmopolitan conversation" (44).

---

[26] A term used by CNN political commentator Van Jones moments after the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

These conversations allow for the engagement with the experiences of others. They do not need to lead to consensus and often they do not; often they lead to discomfort or anxiety. However, they can also lead individuals to view their own ethnic positions from a new perspective. As audiences of these conversations, we also see a little of humor involved which can ease some of the discomfort. In an interview with NPR's Rachel Martin shortly after "Lemons" aired, Barris said:

> We sort of calmed down and we were like, you know what? We have to talk about things that people might not want to talk about openly. But we have to dig in deeper and stay later and have more real conversations and argue amongst ourselves more and really bring our emotions to the surface and really say things that people want to hear . . . We have to do that more. We have a responsibility. It's not just TV for us anymore. ("Black-ish Creator")

With the proliferation of TV shows through streaming services like Netflix and Hulu, TV, Barris asserts, has both the responsibility and the ability to do this kind of work. More importantly, through humor, those tough conversations become a little easier to have, because as a socially-shared affective experience, humor can be a form of resistance to prevailing systems of power. Through humor we develop communal consciousness and solidarity; by laughing we redraw, challenge, and occasionally dismantle traditional boundaries of identification. Humor becomes an equalizing force, an antidote to the larger social and political ruptures within the U.S. today.

Works Cited

Acham, Christine. "*Black-ish*: Kenya Barris on Representing Blackness in the Age of Black Lives Matter." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 71, no. 3, Mar. 2018, pp. 48–57.

"Apologies," *Key & Peele*, season 1, episode 6, directed by Peter Atencio, aired on Comedy Central, March 6, 2012. http://www.cc.com/video-clips/3nl2ly/key-and-peele-apologies.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Making Sense of Cosmopolitanism: A Conversation with Kwame Anthony Appiah." Interview with Joshua Yates, *Hedgehog Review*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2009, pp. 42–50.

Apple, Michael. "Foreword." *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America*. Edited by Joe L. Kincheloe, Shirley R. Steinberg, Nelson M. Rodriguez, and Ronald E. Chennault. St. Martin's, 1998. pp.

"'Black-Ish' Creator Kenya Barris Says Show Will Take New Direction Post-Election." *NPR.Org*, 13 Nov. 2016, https://www.npr.org/2016/11/13/501904251/black-ish-creator-kenya- barris-says-show-will-take-new-direction-post-election.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. 5th edition, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

Carpio, Glenda. *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery.* Oxford UP, 2008.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*. One World, 2017.

DiAngelo, Robin J. *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Beacon Press, 2018.

Dickson-Carr, Darryl. *Spoofing the Modern: Satire in the Harlem Renaissance.* U of South Carolina P, 2015.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*. 1935. Oxford UP, 2007.

---. "Souls of White Folk." 1910. *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, edited by David Roediger, Schocken, 1998. pp. 184-199.

Dyer, Richard. *White*. Routledge, 1997.

Dyson, Michael Eric. *The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America*. Houghton Mifflin, 2016.

Frankenberg, Ruth. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. U of Minnesota P, 1993.

Garber, Megan. "'Lemons,' the Latest 'Black-Ish' Episode, Is Art for the Age of Trump." *The Atlantic*, 13 Jan. 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/01/black-ish-lemons-is-art-for-the-age-of-trump/512978/.

"Gap Year," *Black-ish*, season 5, episode 1, directed by Gail Lerner, aired on ABC, October 16, 2018. https://www.hulu.com/watch/3c43e506-4231-4955-b059-7c8d792de027.

Grinberg, Emanuella. “Dreadlocks on White Folks: Things to Consider.” *CNN*, 1 Apr. 2016, https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/31/living/white-dreadlocks-cultural-appropriation-feat/index.html.

Guerrero, Lisa. “Can I Live? Contemporary Black Satire and the State of Postmodern Double Consciousness.” *Studies in American Humor*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2016, pp. 266–79.

---. *Crazy Funny: Popular Black Satire and the Method of Madness.* Routledge, 2020.

hooks, bell. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism.* H. Holt., 1995.

---. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. South End, 1992.

“Lemons.” *Black-ish*, season 3, episode 12, directed by Kenya Barris, aired on ABC, January 11, 2017. https://www.hulu.com/watch/30893525-3c0c-49a4-847c-7a8d695681d2

Matthes, Erich Hatala. “Cultural Appropriation and Oppression.” *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 176, no. 4, Apr. 2019, pp. 1003–13, doi:10.1007/s11098-018-1224-2.

McIntosh, Peggy. “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” *Peace and Freedom Magazine*, 1989, pp. 10-12.

Metzl, Jonathan M. *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America’s Heartland*. Basic Books, 2019.

Ogunyinka, Taiwo. “Dreadlocks Are Not OK for White People to Have. Period.” *The Tab*, 5 Apr. 2016, https://thetab.com/2016/04/05/dreadlocks-white-people-83996.

Ray-Harris, Ashley. "Black-Ish Got Trump and Made Lemonade." *AV Club*, 12 Jan. 2017. https://tv.avclub.com/black-ish-got-trump-and-made-lemonade-1798190230.

Rossing, Jonathan P. "Deconstructing Postracialism: Humor as a Critical, Cultural Project." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 36, no. 1, Dec. 2011, pp. 44–61, doi:10.1177/0196859911430753.

Schultz, Jaime. "*Glory Road* (2006) and the White Savior Historical Sport Film." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2014 2014, pp. 205–13.

Weisenburger, Steven. *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*. University of Georgia Press, 1995.

Yancy, George. "Introduction: Fragments of a Social Ontology of Whiteness." *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, edited by George Yancy, Routledge, 2004. pp. 11-23.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS: SATIRIZING THE SPECTACLE OF BLACK SUFFERING IN *WELCOME TO BRAGGSVILLE* AND *THE SELLOUT*

Many whites testified that they looked upon the suffering of black people in the segregated South and were moved to work for change. The image of blacks as victims had an accepted place in the consciousness of every white person; it was the image of black folks as equals, as self-determining that had no place—that could evoke no sympathetic response. –bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*

Louis himself always insisted that the comic's job was to wake people up—with a full five-finger slap when necessary. –T. Geronimo Johnson, *Welcome to Braggsville*

That's the problem with history, we like to think it's a book—that we can turn the page and move the fuck on. But history isn't the paper it's printed on. It's memory, and memory is time, emotions, and song. History is the things that stay with you. –Paul Beatty, *The Sellout*

Introduction: The Society of the Spectacle of Black Suffering

In February 2020, Darnella Frazier captured on video Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd's neck as his fellow police officers stood around watching. For 8 minutes and 46 seconds, Chauvin pressed his knee into Floyd's neck until he went unconscious and later died. After Frazier bravely captured the events of Floyd's death on her camera phone she posted the video to her Facebook with the caption: "They killed him right in front of cup foods over south on 38th and Chicago!! No type of sympathy #POLICEBRUTALITY." The video immediately went viral, resulting in the eventual arrest of Chauvin and the other police officers involved. In an interview with the *Star Tribune*, Frazier insisted, "The world needed to see what I was seeing. Stuff like this happens in silence too many times" (Xiong and Walsh). Frazier's

comment about seeing raises an important idea in the contemporary debates about the role of bystander video and policing. Frazier is not the first to capture police brutality on video. Floyd is also not the first Black person to die so publicly at the hands of the state. Only weeks before, Ahmaud Arbery's violent stalking and murder was captured on video by one of the very men terrorizing him. In another case of police brutality, Breonna Taylor was shot multiple times while sleeping in her bed. In Arbery's case, his killers were arrested several months later, only after the video went viral. In Breonna Taylor's case, the men who killed her have still not been arrested. Differences in gender notwithstanding, the disparity between these three cases is that Floyd and Arbery's murders were captured on video while Taylor's was not. What does it mean when justice (or what little has been found) only comes with spectacle? Does Breonna Taylor's murderer get to walk free because her death wasn't captured on video?

The deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor raise important questions about the spectacle of Black suffering. Viral Black death has become increasingly more common with the ubiquity of camera phones, intensifying the significance of video footage in the African American community's pursuit of justice. From Rodney King's brutal beating and arrest in Los Angeles in 1991 to Floyd's death in 2020, documenting police brutality and other antiblack violence is central to the Black experience in the U.S. Viral Black death, however, is not a new phenomenon. We can trace its roots to the spectacle of lynching, made public by antiracist activists like Ida B. Wells and various newspapers across the Southern U.S. By publishing disturbing photos of the shooting, dismembering, burning, and hanging of Black bodies, Wells challenged

the lynching narrative that made local communities appear "heroic"; instead, Wells exposed them as racist and violently oppressive, especially towards African Americans (Silkey 3). Wells' work forced America to look at itself and eventually condemn the practice of lynching, and laid the groundwork for contemporary forms of visual activism, including Darnella Frazier's viral video.

In recent years, several writers have responded to visual activism's significance in their own work. In 2015, prompted by multiple instances of police brutality against unarmed Black men such as Eric Garner—whose violent death at the hands of police officer Daniel Pantaleo was captured on video—and protests erupted across the U.S., two novelists took to satire to explore the nuances of visual activism. T. Geronimo Johnson's *Welcome to Braggsville* (2015) and Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* (2015) satirize the ways visual activism relies on the spectacle of Black suffering. In order to challenge the pervasive and inherent racial inequalities that exist in the U.S., activists utilize images of suffering Black bodies like those found in viral videos, lynching postcards, and famously, Emmett Till's open casket. These images, they argue, force white Americans to *see* racial injustice, making them unable to deny the continued brutality of racism in the U.S. Both Johnson and Beatty's novels satirize the spectacle of Black suffering through its ironic embrace. In *Welcome to Braggsville*, Johnson's characters plot and stage a mock lynching at Braggsville's annual Civil War Reenactment as a form of social protest. But when the lynching becomes real, the hyper-visible horror of the crime they commit ties them historically to the very brutes whose actions they wish to repudiate. Ultimately, Johnson censures "performative wokeness" or "virtue signaling"

by exposing them as empty gestures that render the actual Black subject all but invisible. In *The Sellout*, the protagonist Me (or Bon Bon or the Sellout) reinstates slavery and segregation to save his hometown from obliteration. In doing so, Me embodies the Black picaro to expose the racist logic underpinning American whiteness: that Black existence is only reaffirmed through the spectacle of its suffering.

In exploring the spectacle of Black suffering through satire in their respective novels, Johnson and Beatty depart from the serious and sentimentalizing depictions of Blackness to which previous generations of writers had heretofore been conforming. Often labeled "post-black," "post-soul," or "new black," this newer generation attempts to redefine Blackness in the post-civil-rights era. Emerging from the visual arts world, in an exhibition curated by Thelma Golden in 2001, post-black describes a generation of Black artists born after the civil rights era who are "adamant about not being labeled 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness" (Golden 14). Similarly, post-soul, as defined by Bertram Ashe in his controversial essay in a 2007 issue of *African American Review*, is a label for those writers who came of age after civil rights whose work is characterized by "an exploration of the boundaries of blackness" or "blaxploration" that "trouble" blackness and ignore calls for racial unity or uplift (611-615). Instead, these writers prefer both internally and externally directed critique and have developed a strong proclivity for satire. In his introduction to *Hokum: An Anthology of African American Humor* (2006), Beatty describes this type of art as that which validates "our humanity through our madness" rather than "a tradition of abolitionist 'Ain't I an intellect?' activism" that was,

and continues to be, aimed at white people (10-11). To Beatty, Black suffering is not a novelty. But for white audiences, tales of Black suffering are worthy of awards.[27]

Like Beatty, other contemporary Black writers, including Charles Johnson and Saidiya Hartman have expressed fatigue with tales of Black suffering. In his essay "The End of the Black American Narrative," Johnson demands "new and better stories," that involve "leaving behind the painful history of slavery and its consequences" since it only perpetuates a never-ending narrative of victimization ("The End"). Meanwhile, Hartman troubles our assumptions about viewing/reading depictions of slavery or antiblack violence and their relationship to empathy. She says that readers of slave narratives were meant to empathize with slaves and in doing so, denounce slavery. However, she states that empathy "is a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other" (19), and that in making the slave's suffering our own (or any Black suffering), we begin to feel for ourselves rather than for those "whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to reach" (19). Empathy removes the sufferer's individual humanity, their bodies become interchangeable vessels, and white readers can assuage their white guilt by briefly embodying the sufferer through empathy. In other words, the Black subject is all but erased in scenes of suffering. As Lisa Guerrero states, "Black subjectivity disintegrates into the spectacle. Black humanity disintegrates into

[27] Popular awards such as the Academy Awards, the Golden Globes, the Pulitzer Prize, and the National Book Award, love to celebrate tales of Black suffering, especially when white people are depicted as saviors. Movies like *Amistad* (1997), *Roots* (1977 and 2016), *Harriet* (2019), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), and books like *The Color Purple* (1982) and *The Invention of Wings* (2014) have won various awards for their depictions of slavery, sexual violence of Black women, and white saviors.

inconsequence" (*Crazy Funny* 69). By erasing the Black subject in scenes of suffering, white people are not contending with the history of Black oppression in the U.S. but merely signaling their virtue to exonerate themselves from past and present antiblack violence. Thus, Hartman concludes, in part, that representation is an impossibility.

However, I argue that satire is a productive means of representing the spectacle of Black suffering because, as John Clement Ball declares, "Satire, with its objectifying, disparaging gaze and its deliberate misrepresentations, is a form of othering—of representational violence" (297). Satire is a way of seeing, of representing what society values, only to dismantle those values through mockery and invective, making way for something better. Steven Weisenburger also insists on satire's violent nature: "Contemporary, degenerative satire is itself a discourse of violence. It is a means of exposing modalities of terror and of doing violence to cultural forms that are overtly or covertly dedicated to terror" (5-6). In this view, satire becomes not just a genre of sight but a mechanism for violence against what is depicted. Particularly in the U.S., contemporary African American writers took to the genre to mock "post-race" discourse following a year that witnessed the countless deaths of unarmed Black men, often at the hands of white police officers. In addition to Beatty and Johnson, novels by James Hannaham and Mat Johnson, films by Spike Lee, and shows like *Key & Peele* and *Black-ish* made 2015 the year for Black satire. Despite the belief that post-black artists reject what Yogita Goyal calls the "burden" of critique for other forms of expression (112), the satire produced by these artists assaults hegemonic and oppressive forces and subverts dominant ideologies. Weisenburger's definition of degenerative satire becomes

a productive means of identifying the satiric impulse at work in post-black satire, especially in Beatty and Johnson's work. Degenerative satires are aggressive, committing violence to cultural forms through the excessive, the grotesque, and the chaotic to undermine the logic of hierarchies of power. Weisenburger also insists that degenerative satire often enacts "the return of a repressed horror or violence" to speak to "ways of making meaning, including its own" (3). Unlike other "generative" forms of satire, however, degenerative satire does not generate any corrective goals or lessons. Instead, readers are left miring in the garbage heap of deconstructed norms, and must locate their own passage back to normality. Post-black satirists, especially Paul Beatty and T. Geronimo Johnson, use a degenerative form of satire and "pose a weightier challenge to the status quo than one advocating a better social order" (Goyal 113). "Better" is not good enough. Rather, these writers insist on an entirely different social order, one not premised on white supremacy and its appetite for the spectacle of Black suffering.

"Spectacular Disaster": *Welcome to Braggsville*'s #ZombieDickSlap

Published amidst a series of viral Black deaths and ensuing protests that would come to define the decade, *Welcome to Braggsville*'s critique of performative wokeness is remarkably apropos. Although derivatives of the term have been in use since the publication of Barbara Green's book *Spectacular Confessions: Autobiography, Performative Activism, and the Sites of Suffrage* (1997), "performative wokeness" is a more recent phenomenon, made popular with the advent of social media and camera

phones. Writing for *The Outline* in 2017, Jeff Ihaza says that "One of the most crippling tendencies of modern liberals is their obsession with being seen, whether it be at a protest wearing a fuzzy pink hat alongside Madonna or in viral tweets totally owning the president. This preoccupation with optics is more often than not frighteningly self-centered" ("A Shirt"). Ihaza links performative wokeness to visibility and purchasing power and argues that liberals signal their values through public displays and free market capitalism. "A t-shirt, a bracelet, or a hat," he asserts, "anything to signal to the outside world that yes, your opinions are Good" ("A Shirt"). Performative wokeness thus becomes a self-centered ploy to signal one's virtue and assuage white guilt rather than a commitment to affirm Black lives or fight for women's bodily autonomy.

This virtue signaling becomes the target of *Welcome to Braggsville*'s vitriolic satire. The novel tells the story of D'aron Davenport, a lonely white kid from Braggsville, Georgia who longs to get out of his tiny town (pop. 712) where he doesn't fit in. Unlike his childhood friends and the larger community of Braggsville, D'aron feels more at home among books and school than among guns and hunting lodges. Johnson shows just how much of a misfit D'aron is by beginning the novel with a litany of names D'aron has been called growing up, including Sissy, Brainiac, Buttercup, Turd Nerd, and, most often, Faggot (3-4). When he finally gets out of his town to attend UC Berkeley, he meets three other misfits at a party—Candice, a beautiful and earnest white girl from Iowa who claims to be part Native American; Charlie, an introspective African-American guy from Chicago; and Louis Chang, a raucous Malaysian comedian from San Francisco, with a desire to be "the next Lenny Bruce Lee, kung fu comedian"

(11). When the four decide to stage a performative intervention at Braggsville's Civil War reenactment over Spring Break for their capstone project in an alternative histories course, things go horribly awry, and the four become the center of a media storm. What at first appears to be a coming-of-age story explodes to become something entirely different: an outrageous exploration of visibility politics enmeshed with the problem of race in the U.S.

Johnson's probing critique of performative wokeness and virtue signaling is amplified through the highly satirical tone of the novel. For Johnson, satire gives him the abilities to question social norms, trouble convention, and dismantle hegemony because, "No one would ever say, No, I don't want to hear a joke. I hate to laugh. Funny makes me runny" (T. Johnson 267). Satire makes us chuckle and in so doing, makes us more willing to listen. David Worcester confirms this notion in *The Art of Satire* when he states, rather cheekily:

> The philosopher bruises our brains, the critic soon leaves us cold, the formal moralist makes us yearn for a little rapine. They are so sober and dignified and self-important! Now if we could only see one of the long-bearded gentry break off his discourse, crack his heels together, and stand on his thumbs, we should feel a warm surge of affection for him and settle down contentedly to hear him out. (51)

Johnson is contending with exactly such moralizing in his own novel. D'aron and his friends, while they have good intentions, force Braggsville to listen in the same way as the philosopher and the moralist. Through satire, Johnson can expose the dangers of

performative wokeness while avoiding alienating his audience. Instead, like Louis Chang, Johnson's satire makes it "funny—no, not funny but comic, and in doing so . . . [makes] it real . . . [makes] it possible to express what [he] fe[els]—aloud" (T. Johnson 147).

Nowhere is the satire as biting and hilarious as in Johnson's depictions of academia. D'aron's decision to attend UC Berkeley, or "Berzerkeley" (9), stems from its ideological and geographical distance to Braggsville: "Berzerkeley and Braggsville were two worlds always on opposite sides of the sun" (31). Famous for its far-left-leaning politics, D'aron embraces the freedom Berkeley promises (maybe a little too much as his grades quickly plummet), and makes several close friends whose values align more closely with his own. Johnson, no stranger to academia (he earned his Master's degree at Berkeley), mocks academia's penchant for navel gazing, self-righteousness, and Ivory tower gate-keeping through his deep knowledge of cultural and critical theory which he sprinkles throughout the novel, as well as his playfully fragmented narrative structure, that mocks such self-important post-modernist writers as David Foster Wallace and his literary scion Jonathan Franzen. For example, the narrative is often interrupted by extended commentaries, including an academic paper (written by D'aron) about an event early in the novel. Johnson also includes a glossary and Works Cited, with entries for people like Judith Butler, Theodor Adorno, and Michel Certeau (names often found on critical theory syllabi), as well as the novel itself. When D'aron attends a beginning-of-the-semester "dot party" ("Per the tweet, one rule: Wear a dot where you want to be touched" (14)), Johnson's lampooning of liberal self-righteousness collides with his

critique of performative wokeness. D'aron, along with Candice, Charlie, and Louis wear dots in the center of their foreheads "which, oddly, some found offensive" (15). Eventually, they are forced outside where "A feisty blonde who wielded her index fingers like a two-gun cowperson, a blond who stood offended by, Your savage insensitivity, who exclaimed in a voice inflated by indignation, Only freshmen could disgrace a simple dot" (19). Her indignation draws a crowd, including passersby "perhaps expecting a juggling show or puppetry performance" (19), and she demands they remove the dots. She becomes the center of attention, her offendedness on display for all to see. Johnson further satirizes academia by mocking political correctness in his use of "cowperson" to refer to the blonde instead of the more common, but gender-specific term "cowboy." Louis, however, turns her offendedness on its head and when she again demands they remove their offensive dots, he asks her why she is wearing "yoga pants" or listening to "that Jay Z and Punjabi MC joint" (20), pointing out her own cultural appropriations and the hypocrisy of her offendedness. Louis demonstrates how the blonde's issue with the "4 little Indians" as they later dub themselves (18), is not actually about the offensive placement of their dots; their dots are simply a way for her to perform her wokeness. Reduced to "simple" dots, they cease to signify anything, and the people for whom bindis do matter are not even mentioned, let alone affirmed.

Johnson continues to lambast this lack of sincerity in performative wokeness through Candice, another blonde white student. Just as Louis is about to challenge the blonde again with another sarcastic remark, Candice interrupts him, her white fragility on full display as she tearfully shouts at the blonde. She becomes unglued by the

accusations that she is racist: “[Candice] went crimson and pursed her lips, clutching her neck as though cut, slashed, hacked even, spewing tearful, spittled apologies through the air” (16). Candice becomes so offended by the other blonde’s offendedness, she leaves, forcing the other three to follow her as she stomps away. Candice’s expression of her feelings at the dot party becomes a central part of her character. Often described as “weepy” (13) or making a “hurt face” (104), Candice’s character is a caricature of the “woke” white social justice female, complete with dreadlocks and an earnestness that borders on annoying. In this moment, however, Candice’s tears allow her to maintain her privileges as a white woman. According to Phyllis Marynick Palmer, because white women have traditionally been depicted as the foundation of purity, chastity, and virtue, their problem is “that their privilege is based on accepting the image of goodness, which is powerlessness” (170). Therefore, when Candice cries, she appears helpless and thus triggers sympathy, therefore absolving her of any racist actions. While Candice’s feelings are affirmed and legitimized, students of color who speak up against racist actions are ignored, made invisible, and, as Mamta Motwani Accapaldi states, “pathologized based on the operating ‘standard of humanity’” (210). As a white woman, Candice won’t be viewed as a damaging stereotype such as the “angry Black woman” or the “sassy Latina”; instead, her feelings are normalized and she can rest assured that her offendedness will exonerate her from any racist charges. Candice’s need to perform her wokeness and mitigate her white guilt will later drive the “spectacular disaster” of the “four little Indians” and their performative intervention (T. Johnson 61).

Just as Candice weaponizes her tears to mitigate her white guilt, D'aron positions himself as her rescuer, not only furthering a central notion in white supremacist ideology—chivalry and the protection of white womanhood—but doing so under the guise of social justice. Shortly before arriving in Braggsville for Spring Break, D'aron insists that his parents "hide everything offensive" (233), including their Little Black Sambo statues, dubbed "the Charlies" (50), before his friends arrive. He also begs his mom to tell several relatives not to use the "n-word" or tell "that Chinese joke" (50). D'aron does these things not because it might hurt Louis or Charlie, but so as not to offend Candice: "That they were antiques, that they were valuable, that they were gifts wasn't going to make Candice feel any better about them" (61). After the horrifying events of the intervention, Otis, the mayor of "the Gully," or the Black part of town, tells D'aron "Well, we appreciate what you did" to which D'aron responds, "I didn't do it for you" (269). Much like Candice's earnest virtue signaling, D'aron's participation in the performative intervention is not about social justice; instead, D'aron merely wants to *appear* virtuous to impress Candice.

Appearances also inform the choice of the "four little Indians" to stage a mock lynching for their performative intervention. According to Amy Louise Wood, "The cultural power of lynching—indeed, the cultural power of white supremacy itself—rested on spectacle" (3). Because most lynching involved a mob, they were largely public and visually sensational, distinguishing them from other forms of antiblack violence. Even after the ideological significance of lynching shifted, anti-lynching activists continued to use the power of brutal lynching images, disseminating them

nationwide, to encourage white people "to bear witness" and ultimately condemn the practice (Wood 5). The "four little Indians," however, have no idea of the history they are invoking by staging such an event. Trudier Harris notes how lynching became a ritual, reflecting "a belief, on the part of whites, in their racial superiority. Simultaneously, such rituals reflect a belief in the inferiority of Blacks as well as a belief in the denial of anything white, especially white women, or representative 'whiteness' (education, clothes, social status) to Blacks" (11). The lynching ritual helped white people maintain their conception of the universe, to "exorcise the evil" as Harris suggests (12). In *Braggsville*, the "four little Indians" stage a mock lynching not to protest any injury done to Black people but to put their offendedness on full display, once again erasing blackness from the equation. The "four little Indians" do not simply make a spectacle of antiblack violence, they actually perform antiblack violence, killing Louis Chang—complete with Blackface—in the process.

In order to combat the Indians' need for spectacle, Johnson avoids depicting Chang's death at all, and instead relies on witness accounts, tweets, FBI interview transcriptions, including several from Chang *after* his death, to recreate the event. This choice allows Johnson to commit violence in line with Weisenburger's definition of satire, denying the remaining Indians the spotlight and his readers the chance to gawk at yet another spectacle of Black suffering. Johnson notes how "two days after the Incident, regional news stations flashed a ticker-tape teaser: THE FIRST LYNCHING SINCE ALA 1981? When the anchors spoke, there was no question mark in their tone. The Huffington Post and NYT.com ran editorials. Facebook was on fire, the posts on Louis's

wall growing by the minute, mostly from people who didn't know that he was dead" (170). Candice tweets "Louis Chang hung from tree MURDERED in GA by Confederate pretenders whipped and teased—laughing paraded his body to town on car hood" (170). These various headlines and tweets turn Louis Chang's death into a national spectacle. Candice is also able to continue displaying her offendedness by exploiting Chang's death for her own social media presence, a tactic she uses throughout the novel to make herself seem "woke." Shortly after the media storm, a vigil gathers at the lynching site, made up of groups such as the Christian Fellowship Council, the Asian American Justice, and the NAACP. Then the FBI arrives to investigate. The various reactions to Chang's death mirror recent events of antiblack violence such as Floyd and Arbery's. And like recent events, the novel does not provide readers with a hopeful conclusion to Chang's death through systemic change, political upheaval, or even arrests of the people involved. Instead, all the noise made by the various special interest groups is ineffectual; it is just noise. Johnson, unlike Beatty, suggests that spectacles like Chang's death serve no function but to overshadow systemic injustice faced by the Black community. D'aron even wonders, as he reads Facebook posts from countless others "who had posted pictures and mementos of their own friends. How could there be so many Louis Changs in the world?" (203). Therefore, Johnson's refusal to depict Chang's brutal death subverts the spectacle of Black suffering; Johnson's readers don't get to gawk at Chang's brutalized body. Instead, like the remaining Indians, Johnson forces his readers to question their own investment in the society of the spectacle of Black suffering they have perhaps unconsciously reinforced by taking up his novel in the first

place. Like other post-black writers, Johnson subverts the racist logic of the publishing market that insists on the profitability of Black pain, laying bare the realities of a politically correct, color-blind racist society in which the invisible norm of whiteness comes at the expense of Black lives.

The most obvious representation of this invisibility is seen in the secret militia that secretly governs the town. The militia is so invisible, even D'aron has no idea that most of the white people in Braggsville, including his father, are members. D'aron accidentally stumbles into their home-base tucked away in the "holler" behind his house that separates the "Gully"—"where all the black people live"—from the white part of town where he lives (70). When he is taken on a tour of the place by the militia leader (Braggsville's postmaster), the truth of his town (and of the entire nation) is finally revealed: photos of all U.S. presidents except Obama line the walls, ("it ain't got nothing to do with his race. It's his nationality. He wasn't born here" (294)), as well as other photos of local residents shaking hands with racist public figures like KKK Grand Wizards David Duke and Railton Loy; far-right political commentator Hal Turner; and Russell Pearce, a former Arizona State Senator who championed a controversial anti-immigrant bill in 2010. These photos are accompanied by shelves lined with books like *The Bell Curve* (1994) and *Illegal is Not a Race—It's a Crime* (a made up though no less offensive title), and the code of conduct hangs on the wall, the first four rules of which are about (in)visibility, including "Good citizens make no contact with the media unless first cleared" and "Good citizens do not behave in ways that could harm the collective's public image" (300). In other words, the militia functions in opposite ways to

performative woke liberals. Rather than signaling their virtue through grotesque and performative displays, the militia tries to remain invisible, working in secret to keep the town segregated and the Black citizens confined to the Gully. While the performative intervention of the "four little Indians" relies on a politics of visibility, the militia thrives invisibly, in a true post-racial fashion. So invisibly, in fact, that D'aron has no idea it even exists. When D'aron asks how long the militia has been active, the postmaster states, "How do we beat the chaos back? How did we install order in the middle of nowhere? How'd we get rid of those injuns? You may as well ask how long the Gully's been here, or the town, or the Holler. It's all there's ever been. Forever" (298). Braggsville becomes an allegory for the nation, one in which white supremacy thrives, often invisibly, since the nation's founding. In the glossary, Johnson even defines Braggsville as "see U.S. of A." and U.S. of A. as "see Braggsville" (345-349), giving the novel's satire allegorical dimensions.

With such sardonic depictions of white Southerners, academia, and performative wokeness, it is easy to see very little in Johnson's novel to be hopeful about. However, against the backdrop of such hopelessness, Johnson also captures the resilience of the Black population that refuses to be controlled by undying, unending, and unyielding white supremacy embodied by the militia. When D'aron visits the Gully with his cousin Quint after Chang's death, the entire neighborhood turns out for his arrival, celebrating the "fine thing" he did (266). They roast pigs, play live music, and party all night. At the same time, they represent the limits of Black resistance as everyone avoids the topic of the secret militia, avoiding D'aron's questions with "Ain't nothing but a thang" (267). In

this way, the Gully's celebration of D'aron and the performative intervention embodies what Hartman characterizes as a white American practice of reading Black expressions of contentment and celebration in terms of both Black abjection and Black empowerment. Hartman notes that expressions of pleasure among antebellum slave populations both enabled enslavers to "secure the submission of the enslaved" (43) and allowed the enslaved to generate "supportive, enjoyable, and nurturing connections" (60). The Gully celebration also serves to further establish the Black participants' subjection to the militia's white supremacist state while simultaneously building community within the Gully. As a contradictory site of both mourning and joy, the Gully is a byproduct of the spectacle of Black suffering, in which the Black community seeks to heal from its losses by reaffirming the value of Black lives through a collective display of solidarity. Thus, Chang's irreverent hashtag, #zombiedickslap becomes clear in this moment. Chang links zombies—an archetypal figure born out of the transatlantic slave trade—to a reciprocal homosocial bonding ritual enacted by young men, including D'aron and himself who slap one another's crotches as a game, to suggest that the history of white patriarchal power, undying itself, will soon get slapped. As Jessica Hurley conveys, the zombie is a multi-dimensional symbol, representing a myriad of meanings: "because it embodies the history of whitening, it cannot be limited to a two-dimensional symbol, but always brings with it its own history: a history of racialized slavery, and a history of how that history is suppressed in America by a whiteness that longs . . . to be guiltless and alone" (318). Hurley speaks to the ways the zombie's obscured racial past makes it an ideal metaphor for post-racialism, which also works to

obscure the racialized past of the U.S. and the continued dominion of white supremacy. In his last words, and the words that end the novel, Chang confirms the transformative power of such a ridiculous hashtag: "We're activists. Activists are always ahead of their time. And we never die—in peace or otherwise!" (342). Like the contradictory nature of the Gully party, Black abjection and Black empowerment exist simultaneously within the society of the spectacle of Black suffering.

The Sellout: Whispering "Racism" in a Post-racial World

While the spectacle of Black suffering in Johnson's novel is satirized to comment on the ways white people perform wokeness to divert attention from the routine violence committed against Black people and therefore invalidate Blackness, Beatty's novel reclaims the spectacle of Black suffering to affirm Black existence in the face of its violent denial. Described as a severely "caustic" satire (Gatti 44), *The Sellout* explores U.S. race relations through the eyes of Me (aka Bon Bon or Sellout), a denizen of Dickens, California in central Los Angeles. When Dickens is suddenly wiped off the map of California in what Me calls a "blatant conspiracy by the surrounding, increasingly affluent, two-car-garage communities to keep their property values up and blood pressures down" (Beatty, *Sellout* 57), Me decides to summon the specters of antebellum slavery and Jim Crow segregation. Such actions garner the attention of the Supreme Court, where he must defend "selling out" his race. Because the legacy of segregation and slavery endure in the twenty-first century through state-sanctioned violence that controls Black bodies, such as stop-and-frisk law enforcement practices,

mass incarceration of people of color, and the continued loss of Black life at the hands of police, Me's status as a "sellout" satirizes the contemporary U.S. racial climate in which the suffering of people of color is only acknowledged by way of spectacle. Therefore, by reinstating slavery and segregation, Me hijacks the logic of white supremacy and affirms Black existence through the spectacle of its suffering, bringing Dickens back from oblivion.

A large part of the novel's satirical humor stems from Beatty's use of the picaro, a customary figure of African American satire, to mock the discourse of post-racialism and its attendant camps: the Black bourgeoisie and white supremacy. According to Darryl Dickson-Carr, the picaro is a close relative to the trickster and behaves like an inveterate though clever, amoral yet likeable "scoundrel" who drives the picaresque narrative (*African American Satire* 35). These narratives make a deliberate attempt to "lay bare" the artificial nature of normative constructions through the picaro's encounters with a range of "morally decrepit denizens of society" (36). Gilbert Highet argues that through such encounters, the picaro exposes how "his era produces, even encourages, rascals; and that in his corrupt world open rascality is really more admirable than villainy masquerading as virtue" (218). Me embodies the rascality of the picaro, particularly in his interactions with the "Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals" (Beatty, *Sellout* 42), a group of older Black men who meet at a local donut shop to discuss issues facing the Black community all the while achieving nothing. These intellectuals are the epitome of post-racial ideology, as they render the past more politically correct by renaming Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* "The Pejorative-Free Adventures

and Intellectual and Spiritual Journeys of African-American Jim and His Young Protégé, White Brother Huckleberry Finn, as They Go in Search of the Lost Black Family Unit" (95) and rewriting other classic works of American literature such as The Point Guard in the Rye, The Great Blacksby, and The Dopeman Cometh (165-166). These intellectuals even go so far as to revise *Huckleberry Finn* by removing the n-word and replacing it with "warrior" while the word "slave" is replaced with "dark-skinned volunteer" (95-96). Led by a man named Foy Cheshire, these men become the impetus for Me to raise hell. Their ridiculous revisions of American literature and ineffectual leadership makes Me angry, so he continues to attend their meetings to mock them. He insists that "black literature sucks" (143) and embraces his label as a "fucking race pervert" who has "set black people back five hundred years" with his reintroduction of slavery and segregation into Dickens as well as his embrace of several Black stereotypes, including his growing and smoking marijuana and his selling of his famous square watermelons (130). The Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals charge of Me being a race pervert and a "sellout" confirm Me's status as a picaro (98), his subversive behavior laying bare the false and illusory nature of the Intellectuals' performance of social justice and its obliteration of the histories of antiblack oppression.

Like the Intellectuals' "revision" of American history, the central plot of *The Sellout* also commences with erasure: first, Me's father is shot by police during a routine traffic stop and then Dickens is suddenly, and without any warning, wiped off the map of California. That the death of Me's father, a prominent social scientist who actually worked with the LAPD to prevent suicide in Dickens, happens at the hands of police,

makes the novel's critique of the post-racial age all the clearer. As Roberta Wolfson argues, "*The Sellout* echoes one of the central messages of the Black Lives Matter movement that launched in 2013: antiblack racism in the supposedly postracial contemporary moment continues to allow state agents to murder Black people with impunity" (636). No cops are arrested or indicted for Me's father's "accidental" death (Beatty 50), and his murder soon fades into oblivion. Likewise, there is little fanfare when Dickens residents awake one morning to find that "the signs that said WELCOME TO THE CITY OF DICKENS were gone" without "an official announcement, an article in the paper, or a feature on the evening news" (58). These dual erasures cause Me psychological damage, as he considers them both part of who he is: "Like the entire town of Dickens, I was my father's child, a product of my environment, and nothing more. Dickens was me. And I was my father. Problem is, they both disappeared from my life, first my dad, and then my hometown, and suddenly I had no idea who I was, and no clue how to become myself" (40). Me's distress at the dual erasures of father and home recalls the "social death" of Black people (Patterson 38), the essential condition of slavery characterized by a loss of individuality, beginning with "natal alienation" in which the enslaved individual is "alienated from all rights or claims of birth" (5), and excluded from all aspects of society. Therefore, these dual erasures are further proof of white America's continued exclusion and denial of Black people even in the age of post-race.

Unwilling to accept the erasure of his hometown, Me undertakes an absurd mission to bring it back from the dead. Although fictional, Dickens is inspired by the

notorious city of Compton, one of the most impoverished and most notorious majority Black cities in Los Angeles. As the site of the highly photographed 1965 Watt Riots and the 1992 protests that followed the acquittal of the four police officers who brutally beat Rodney King—one of the first cases of racialized police brutality caught on video—Compton is a significant setting in the history of the spectacle of Black suffering. The city has also become famous for its depictions in numerous films, including John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) and the Hughes Brothers' *Menace II Society* (1993), as well as a multitude of references in rap lyrics from Tupac Shakur, Ice Cube, The Game, and Kendrick Lamar. In short, by basing the city of Dickens on Compton and the surrounding Watts neighborhood, Beatty invokes the history of the spectacle of Black suffering as a crucial site from which to critique the contemporary U.S. racial climate and its erasure of Blackness. Me's decision to reinstate slavery and segregation ironically draws attention to the fact that the U.S. refuses to acknowledge that Black lives matter unless they are seen as suffering. Me hijacks this racist logic with picaresque rationale, fighting absurdity with further absurdity, making visible an otherwise invisible population.

Me comes up with the idea to reinstate slavery and segregation after developing a relationship with Dickens' resident celebrity, Hominy Jenkins, the last surviving member of the television show *Our Gang*. Celebrated in his heyday for performing racist tropes as the understudy to the main Black character, Buckwheat, Hominy feels most at home in the spotlight performing for fans. Hominy thrives on the spectacle of Black suffering because it made his career (he also shares a birthday with Rodney King (128)).

After Dickens' erasure, his fans are unable to find him, and Hominy becomes suicidal. Hominy laments to Me, "When Dickens disappeared, I disappeared. I don't get fan mail anymore. I haven't had a visitor in ten years, 'cause don't nobody know where to find me. I just want to feel relevant" (Beatty 77). When Hominy hangs himself in a "self-lynching" (75), Me intervenes and saves his life, which prompts Hominy to declare himself Me's slave. At first Me refuses, but Hominy astutely points out that on the stage of America, "sometimes we just have to accept who we are and act accordingly. I'm a slave. That's who I am. It's the role I was born to play" (77). Hominy incisively links spectacle and suffering and acknowledges that for Black people, certain "roles" have been prescribed since birth. When he later begs Me, "Just get me some racism and I'll be straight" (128), Hominy demonstrates that in order to feel legitimate once again, he must be seen as suffering under the "Massa" and his metaphorical whip (77).

Hominy's candid acceptance of his slave-like role allows Me to understand that the most effective way to bring Dickens back is to perform similar actions city-wide by raising the specter of segregation. As Wolfson notes, "Me reasons that Dickens can gain recognition again only by reprising the traditionally racist power structures embedded in slavery and segregation" (639). More importantly, Me realizes that in the post-racial age, peoples' "offendedness" at Me's actions will give Dickens the notoriety it needs to be reborn (Beatty, *Sellout* 130), much like the "four little Indians" in *Braggsville*. Me weaponizes the offendedness, "whisper[s] 'Racism' in a post-racial world" (262), and uses the spectacle of Black suffering productively against itself. Ironically, reintroducing segregation has the unexpected effect of unifying Dickens' residents and revitalizing the

city's schools and neighborhoods. When Me places a sign on the city bus (driven by his on-again-off-again girlfriend Marpessa) that reads, "PRIORITY SEATING FOR SENIORS, DISABLED, AND WHITES" (128), Marpessa reports an increase in the civility of her passengers. She tells Me, "It's the signs. People grouse at first, but the racism takes them back. Makes them humble. Makes them realize how far we've come and, more important, how far we have to go. On that bus it's like the specter of segregation has brought Dickens together" (163). Similarly, when Me segregates the local middle school by posting a sign across the street advertising the construction of a white-only school—"Wheaton Academy Charter Magnet School of the Arts, Science, Humanities, Business, Fashion, and Everything Else"—Me's friend Charisma, a teacher at the local Chaff Middle School, reports that the students suddenly start performing better (192). Wheaton Academy Charter becomes "an on-call Caucasian panopticon" (209), making the students at Chaff Middle School feel the need to "impress, to behave, to tuck in our shirts, do our homework, show up on time" (208). In just three months, "employment in Dickens was up an eighth. Housing prices had risen three-eighths. Even graduation rates were up a quarter" (216). By invoking Jeremy Bentham and Michel Foucault's theory of the panopticon, a method of social control premised on an all-seeing but unseen surveiller, Beatty demonstrates the ways Black people continued to be surveilled and controlled in the postslavery era. Me therefore co-opts the white gaze as a method of what Simone Browne calls "dark sousveillance," that "plots imaginaries that are oppositional and that are hopeful for another way of being" (21). Browne shows how the tools of social control on the plantation or during Jim Crow were appropriated, co-

opted, repurposed, and challenged in order to facilitate survival and escape" and that dark sousveillance is thus "a site of critique, as it speaks to black epistemologies of contending with antiblack surveillance" (21). Me's picaresque appropriation of antiblack surveillance revitalizes Dickens and increases the successes of its residents, reducing the specter of white supremacist social control to an absurdity.

Me's ultimate embrace of his sellout title—his status as a slave owner and segregationist serving as the core of this designation—catalyzes the return of Dickens. This process, as Wolfson notes, commences at the "symbolic site of slavery" (64): the plantation. In the interview with Gatti, Beatty discusses Compton's history as an agricultural hub and reminisces about "black people on horseback," buying milk from the neighbors who had a cow, and coming across hundreds of chickens in the middle of the road. He concludes by stating, "Compton is just weird" (44). Beatty's experiences of Compton influence his depiction of Dickens and, in particular, Me's homestead, a "farm in the middle of the ghetto" that he inherited after his father's death (Beatty, *Sellout* 53). Read as a modern-day slave plantation, Me remembers toiling in the fields, being forced by his father to pick "strawberries, snow peas, or whatever the fuck was in season. Cotton was the worst" (53). Me's farm, like the bus signs, unifies the community. Denizens come from all over to buy his square watermelons, his sweet satsumas, and his weed. As a former site of oppression and suffering, the community's ironic embrace of Me's farm can be read as an invocation of what George Lipsitz calls "a Black spatial imaginary" that strategically realigns places as a way to contest the oppression of race (19). Instead of viewing the farm as an oppressive site, the community converges on its

premises to enjoy Me's crops. Like the spectacle of slavery embodied by Hominy, Me's modern day plantation functions to affirm Black life in a place representative of its denial.

Me continues to employ tactics of visibility to save his hometown from erasure. Like the spectacle of segregation embodied by the bus signs and the all-white Charter school, Me also decides to paint the boundary of Dickens with white spray paint to help with its reestablishment. At first, no one knows what he is doing, mistaking him for "a performance artist or a crazy person" (Beatty, *Sellout* 107), the former designation linking him to the "four little Indians" in *Braggsville* and emphasizing the spectacle-like nature of his actions. His white line soon draws a crowd of bystanders, who "stand guard" over it and shoo people away "to prevent them from smearing the border" (107). Soon, others take up where Me leaves off for the night, extending the line with "drops of blood, or an uninterrupted string of graffiti" (107), linking the line literally to expression and Black life. Once the line is finished, citizens refuse to cross it, feeling like they belonged on the Dickens side of it. Me is also hesitant to cross the line, "because the jagged way it surrounded the remnants of the city reminded me of the chalk outline the police had needlessly drawn around my father's body. But I did like the line's artifice. The implication of solidarity and community it represented" (109). Me once again connects his father's death and Dickens' erasure, linking the two to the spectacle of Black suffering. Me finds comfort in the artifice of such spectacle, as the town ironically embraces another visible sign of segregation, rallying behind Me's picaresque response to the erasure of Blackness.

By embracing the social death of Black people through the rearticulation of slavery and segregation, Me reaffirms their existence through the very logic that killed them off in the first place. He literally brings Dickens back from the dead through a spectacle of Black suffering, signifying on the white spectators' sympathy alluded to by hooks in this essay's introduction. Me's commitment to his town is so significant, he is willing to be tried and convicted by the Supreme Court if doing so will give Dickens' denizens a sense of self-worth. When the weather channel reports the temperature of Dickens at 88 degrees (Beatty, *Sellout* 284), Me is moved to tears by such institutional acknowledgement. Despite his status as a "sellout" through his violations of "the Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1871, 1957, and 1968, the Equal Rights Act of 1963, the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments, and at least of six of the Ten Commandments" (265), Me's actions read more as radically antiracist than as self-loathing crimes against his race.

Me's abilities to merge the heroic with the ironic in his fight to bring Dickens back from the dead make him, according to Dickson-Carr, the "quintessential African American satiric figure" (*African American Satire* 36). Because the picaresque story is most often an "ironic commentary upon the problematic acceptability of subversive or transgressive behavior at a time when the cultural politics of society are in a state of flux or relative uncertainty" (36), Beatty's use of the picaro figure allows him to lay bare the artificial nature of "post-race" era, its attendant anxieties, and its appetite for the spectacle of Black suffering. While the plot of the novel never fully resolves ("there is no such thing as closure" (Beatty, *Sellout* 276)), Beatty offers a possibility for

transcending the “social death” faced by Black people in the U.S. and its politics of visibility: “Unmitigated Blackness” (277):

> I’m not sure what Unmitigated Blackness is, but whatever it is, it doesn’t sell. On the surface Unmitigated Blackness is a seeming unwillingness to succeed. It’s Donald Goines, Chester Himes, Abbey Lincoln, Marcus Garvey, Alfre Woodard, and the serious Black actor. It’s Tiparillos, chitterlings, and a night in jail. It’s the crossover dribble and wearing house shoes outside. It’s ‘whereas’ and ‘things of that nature.’ It’s our beautiful hands and our fucked-up feet. Unmitigated Blackness is simply not giving a fuck . . . Unmitigated Blackness is coming to the realization that as fucked up and meaningless as it all is, sometimes it’s the nihilism that makes life worth living. (277)

Me’s definition of Unmitigated Blackness espouses a Blackness free from previously confining definitions that sought to emphasize only the positive and noble in order to uplift the race. Instead, Me’s Unmitigated Blackness dissolves all essentialism to celebrate the variety of experiences shaping Black identity. Additionally, by calling for a nihilistic strategy as a possibility for transcending “social death,” Me suggests that true liberation comes with the complete breakdown of normative structures and codes of behavior that shape society. Unmitigated Blackness also “doesn’t sell,” rendering the spectacle of Black suffering obsolete.

Conclusion: Closure?

The satire of these novels continues to bite because they expose disturbing truths: in the years since their publication, Black people continued to be killed with impunity for all the world to see. What's even more insidious is that white people—who have become even more brazen in their defiance of national and state laws by storming government buildings fully armed—continue to walk free. While the Black Lives Matter movement protests peacefully and gets shot, killed, and denounced as "thugs," armed white terrorists enter capitol buildings without obstruction. Kyle Rittenhouse can safely walk down a street, gunning down peaceful protesters in the process, without police interference while Elijah McCain, armed with only music, cannot. "Post-race," in other words, is absurd. There is no closure when it comes to matters of race, not when white supremacy continues to operate as the norm.

Rather than relying on some form of narrative closure or "corrective goals" as with traditional, generative satire (Weisenburger 14), both novels opt for unbridled outrage. Because, as Me's father once told him, closure is a "false psychological concept" meant to "assuage white Western guilt" (Beatty *Sellout* 261). Closure is a fiction. In the years since "the black dude was inaugurated" (289), expressions of white supremacy have only become more virulent, shaped by Donald Trump's inflammatory rhetoric. As Dickson-Carr poses, "How does a satirist lampoon those who have already rendered themselves absurd, accepted their own absurdity, and subsequently reveled in it?" ("Afterword" 277). While neither Johnson nor Beatty have the answer to this question, we might look at more recent representations of Black satire that have come

out since the orange dude was inaugurated. Black satire of the Trump era is darker, more sinister, prompted by Jordan Peele's groundbreaking horror film *Get Out* (2017). Since then, Black satirical horror has exploded, casting whiteness, not as absurd, but as terrifying. P. Djèlí Clark's novella *Ring Shout* (2020) turns the Ku Klux Klan into horrifying aliens that feed off hate. Alyssa Cole's novel *When No One is Watching* (2020) puts gentrification at its horrifying center. HBO's *Lovecraft Country* (2020—) reimagines the 1950s Jim Crow America to include Lovecraftian monster that are equally terrifying to the racist terrors of white America. In many ways, this trend in satirical horror more realistically reflects today's America. Because as more and more Black people are murdered by police in full sight of everyone, while white terrorists walk free, "laughing to keep from cryin'" doesn't cut it anymore. This reality is scary.

Works Cited

Accapadi, Mamta Motwani. "When White Women Cry: How White Women's Tears Oppress Women of Color." *College Student Affairs Journal*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2007, pp. 208–15.

Ashe, Bertram D. "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction." *African American Review*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2007, pp. 609-623.

Ball, John Clement. "Capital Offenses: Public Discourse on Satire after *Charlie Hebdo*." *Genre*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2017, pp. 297–317.

Beatty, Paul. *Hokum: An Anthology of African-American Humor*. Edited by Paul Beatty. Bloomsbury, 2006.

---. *The Sellout*. Reprint edition, Picador, 2016.

Browne, Simone. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Duke UP, 2015.

Dickson-Carr, Darryl. *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*. U of Missouri P, 2001.

---. "Afterword: From Pilloried to Post-Soul: The Future of African American Satire." *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity After Civil Rights*. Edited by Derek C. Maus and James J. Donahue, UP of Mississippi, 2014, pp. 269-280.

Frazier, Darnella. George Floyd Video. *Facebook*, 26 May, 2020, 12:46 a.m., https://www.facebook.com/darnellareallprettymarie/posts/1425401580994277. Accessed 7 January 2021.

Gatti, Tom. "'I Invented a Richter Scale of Racism': The Booker Prizewinner Paul Beatty on Taking Offence, Decoding Trump and Why He Isn't a Satirist." *New Statesman*, vol. 145, no. 5339, 2016. pp. 44-45.

Golden, Thelma. *Freestyle*, exhibition catalogue. Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001.

Goyal, Yogita. "Post-Black Satire." *Runaway Genres: The Global Afterlives of Slavery*. New York UP, 2019, pp. 105-140.

Guerrero, Lisa. *Crazy Funny: Popular Black Satire and the Method of Madness*. Routledge, 2020.

Harris, Trudier. *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals*. Indiana UP, 1984.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford UP, 1997.

Highet, Gilbert. *The Anatomy of Satire*. Princeton UP, 1962.

hooks, bell. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism.* H. Holt and Co., 1995.

Hurley, Jessica. "History Is What Bites: Zombies, Race, and the Limits of Biopower in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*." *Extrapolation*, vol. 3, 2015, pp. 311–33.

Ihaza, Jeff. "A T-Shirt Is Not a Protest." *The Outline*, 1 February, 2017. https://theoutline.com/post/982/opening-ceremony-protest-shirts-are-not-an-actual- protest.

Johnson, Charles. "The End of the Black American Narrative." *The American Scholar*, 1 June, 2008. https://theamericanscholar.org/the-end-of-the-black-american-narrative/.

Johnson, T. Geronimo. *Welcome to Braggsville*. William Morrow, 2015.

Lipsitz, George. *How Racism Takes Place*. Temple UP, 2011.

Palmer, Phyllis Marynick. "White Women/Black Women: The Dualism of Female Identity and Experience." *From Different Shores: Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity*. Edited by Ronald Takaki, Oxford UP, 1994, pp. 167-174.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Harvard UP, 1982.

Silkey, Sarah L. *Black Woman Reformer: Ida B. Wells, Lynching, & Transatlantic Activism*. U of Georgia P, 2015.

Weisenburger, Steven. *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980.* U of Georgia P, 1995.

Wolfson, Roberta. "Race Leaders, Race Traitors, and the Necropolitics of Black Exceptionalism in Paul Beatty's Fiction." *American Literature*, vol. 91, no. 3, 2019, pp. 619–647.

Worcester, David. *The Art of Satire*. 1940. Norton, 1969.

Wood, Amy Louise. *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890- 1940.* U of North Carolina P, 2009.

Xiong, Chao, and Paul Walsh. "'World Needed to See,' Says Woman Who Took Video of Man Dying under Officer's Knee." *Star Tribune*, 26 May 2020, https://www.startribune.com/world-needed-to-see-says-woman-who-took-video-of-man-dying-under-officer-s-knee/570774152/.