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Joseph Gorman

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“WELL, I’VE WHISPERED ‘RACISM’ IN A POST-RACIAL WORLD”: SATIRE  
AND THE ABSURDITY OF “POST-RACIAL” AMERICA

A Thesis Presented

by

JOSEPH GORMAN

MAY 2020

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AND THE ABSURDITY OF “POST-RACIAL” AMERICA

A Thesis Presented

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JOSEPH GORMAN

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis project is to look at the works of contemporary African American satirists as they confront post-racial ideology. In looking at the works of Jordan Peele, Paul Beatty, Mat Johnson, and Boots Riley, thematic threads emerge to form a portrait of dire unrest amongst those non-white identities living in an allegedly post-racial world. Before analyzing the works, I first contextualize the thesis with a brief discussion of satire as a literary genre and African American satire as a literary sub-genre, as well as address the emergence of post-racial ideology during the tenure of Barack Obama as President of the United States. I then examine the ways in which Peele's film *Get Out*, Beatty's novel *The Sellout*, Johnson's novel *Pym*, and Riley's film *Sorry to Bother You* attack a variety of satirical targets that all relate to the falsehoods of post-racialism.

In the first chapter, I analyze the ways in which *Get Out* and *The Sellout* address the covert nature of white supremacy in contemporary America. The second chapter covers all four artists' satirical visions of the ways American slavery still haunts and informs our national consciousness. In the final chapter, I address the efforts of Beatty, Johnson, and Riley to foster a greater understanding of the post-racial conditions that force the act of "selling out" racial identity in service of survival. While rich in their complexities and nuances, the four artists do not offer clear answers to the problems that continue to plague non-white identity in America. However, their collective efforts to expose the lies of post-racial ideology encourage an important conversation about how goals of racial equity and acceptance might be achieved. Together, Peele, Beatty,

Johnson, and Riley indict systemic oppression and create a historical snapshot of a vitally important period in America's continued struggles with race.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is the culmination of a long period of study with the English Department at Bridgewater State University. It marries my love of literature and film to what I feel is an important need to stay aware of our collective social conscience. I owe my passions and drive to the professors at BSU. Without their dedication to teaching, I would not have the skills to complete this project. Writing the thesis was difficult for many reasons, not the least of which being the circumstances surrounding the Spring 2020 semester. But ultimately, it has been rewarding beyond what I expected. Bearing this in mind, I feel it necessary to acknowledge the help I have received along the way—from early undergraduate study up through Graduate work.

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*“Well, I’ve Whispered ‘Racism’ in a Post-Racial World”: Satire and the Absurdity of  
“Post-Racial” America*

*I think a harsh truth can be compassionate, in the sense that it speeds us along from  
falseness to truth.*

*-George Saunders, Mike Sacks interview in The New Yorker*

**Introduction: Satire and Post-Racial America**

In a 2018 interview, Oscar Villalon asked poet and novelist Paul Beatty about the line between reality and satire in his work *The Sellout*; Beatty responded: “I guess people don’t often think about what satire really is—but for you to talk about how *real* it is, is a comfort to me. Because even some of the more ridiculous stuff in there, that you would think is obvious satire, *is* sort of real—or definitely based in something” (“Paul Beatty on Los Angeles”). Although known as being notoriously difficult to interview and evasive in delivering answers, Beatty’s summation that satire often deals in truth strikes an important chord when considering the implications and importance of the genre in contemporary America. In a world enveloped in irony and bombarded with information, it is safe to say that sometimes, the truths of satire land dangerously close to the hearts of those most in need of veracity. Regardless of reception, the genre has remained a steadfast element of America’s literary, artistic, political, and cultural fabric. But, as critic Alvin Kernan explains, “Every major writer of satire has been praised by some critics for his fearless determination to tell the truth about his world and damned by others for a twisted, unstable, prurient liar whose works no careful father should allow his children to open” (Kernan 251). This is the eternal risk run by creators of satire: misunderstood truths and unheard warnings. Depending on the audience, the same

satirical artifact can be either revelatory or revolting. In discussing the ethics of satire, Nafissa Thompson-Spires explains that “Satire is difficult to write because literalists exist, and it’s especially difficult when one of its goals is social commentary, the work of creating or encouraging empathy” (“What if Readers”). In describing the difficulties of writing satire, Thompson-Spires reveals just one of the possible payoffs for successful execution of the genre.

Satire’s capacity for truth and “encouraging empathy” has always made it an important tool in understanding the racial reality of America. One of the most renowned modern satirists to use the genre to explore race, Dave Chappelle, was recently awarded the Mark Twain prize for American Humor in 2020. Being an accomplished and notably controversial stand-up comedian, Chappelle’s career was launched into stratospheric success with his early 2000’s sketch comedy series, *Chappelle’s Show*. While there are certainly many black satirists that came before and shaped Chappelle, his ascendancy to fame seemed to open the door to satire in the years that saw Barack Obama become president of the United States. With Obama’s presidency arose new questions of racial identity, equity, and politics. Naturally, satirists responded with expediency and conviction. In the years during and after Obama’s two terms, those new questions—and concerns—about race in America were directly engaged by Jordan Peele’s film *Get Out* (2017), Paul Beatty’s novel *The Sellout* (2015), Mat Johnson’s novel *Pym* (2011), and Boots Riley’s film *Sorry to Bother You* (2018). While different in their conceptions and executions, the four satires all share the core concept of examining new conditions of black identity in an America that elected a black man president and touted racial progress on all fronts.

In order to analyze the four texts, it seems important to first explain the operation and value of satire, as well as address some of the criticism leveled against the genre. Satire has long proven itself to be a powerful—and sometimes problematic—tool of the righteous, the angry, the troubled, the vexed, the disenfranchised, and the desperate. In its many forms, satire functions as a lens through which an audience is afforded vision into the world and its many flaws. However, this lens is rarely objective or even handed; it imbues its subjects with varying levels of criticism and often casts them into absurd, sometimes dark, sometimes humorous, and often provocative realities. The subjects are targeted for their alleged transgressions and offenses—which may range from mildly objectionable to exceptionally grave—and thrust into a spotlight that works to expose, skewer, and even attack that which has been labeled abhorrent. At a basic level, the genre can often be split into two categories: playful Horatian satire or the more harsh, embittered Juvenalian<sup>1</sup> satire. In terms of operation, the genre generally employs a variety of rhetorical tools which allow an artist to craft their critique. Wit and humor are some of the most basic elements that lay the foundation of satire, while other techniques of the satirist include the use of exaggeration, invective, mimicry, parody, reduction, mockery, and irony. It is worth noting that “the scene of satire” (Kernan 253) takes careful construction and consideration of audience to achieve its desired effects. While Kernan goes on to spin this observation as a quasi-criticism, it is true that satire is a genre that is “bursting” with referential material and subtleties, which can at times make a work impenetrable and inaccessible for a wide audience. Some may consider more

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Highet’s work *The Anatomy of Satire* offers a more complete history of satire, reaching back to the Greek and Roman origins of the genre. Highet also delineates the classic Juvenalian and Horatian satires more specifically in his conclusion.

sophisticated works of satire to be an insiders' club that requires particular knowledge for welcomed entry. This does not necessarily weaken or hamper the genre. The fact that it can cut a narrow, specialized path while simultaneously tackling potentially far-reaching concerns of the human condition is one of the many reasons the genre is so complex, yet ultimately rewarding.

While celebrated for its sharp insight, the genre is not without its critiques. For example, I take issue with Alvin Kernan's claim that "in no art form is the complexity of human existence so obviously scanted as in satire" (265). While there may be some truth to the idea that satire can cast humanity in a darker, more critical light that often shows its flaws, Kernan does not account for the beauty and positivity that is visible only in relief against the darkness. The complexities of humanity are never easy to navigate, and satire offers a means to traverse both the positive and negative. The tools of the satirist very well may obscure, recast, and alter a given target to the mechanism and goal of the satire—but this is in no way an attempt to sidestep or reduce any sort of "complexity" that might be ascertained through consumption, reflection, and analysis. I argue that these moves enrich and celebrate said complexities, as they challenge both audiences of the work and the culture in which it exists. Yet the notion of a "disorderly and crowded" scene which allegedly circumnavigates "complexity" does beg the question of what actually qualifies as a "successful" satire. It certainly seems true that "Satire frequently fails or succeeds according to its ability to make the reader feels as if she or he has entered a world that is immensely disgusting and clearly mad, except for those corners of the text's universe where the sensible, albeit not infallible, satiric voice resides" (Dickson-Carr, *African American Satire* 31), but what happens once readers are in that

world? What is the function of satire outside of exposing vice and folly through an artist's ability to identify and engage a subject they deem worthy of attention? Part of exploring the goal and further success of satire is in looking to one of the main criticisms of the genre itself.

Some critics of satire claim that it has little capacity to ignite any actual, meaningful change or action beyond comforting those who are already well aware of the satirist's concerns. In fact, this question could potentially be asked of any artistic creation, yet satire is often singled out for this very flaw. Did Swift's seminal work "A Modest Proposal" incite any real economic revolution? Did Twain's Huck Finn turn the hearts of those who trafficked in hatred and prejudice? In touching upon the potential shortcomings of satire, Edward Rosenheim explains:

...there are many works which we are prepared to regard as satiric but which, if we are to be candid, do not seem to "persuade" us, in any reasonable sense of the term. In such works, the object under satiric treatment emerges, to be sure, in an unfavorable light, but it is a light which is accepted a priori by the audience. No new judgement is invited; no course of action is urged; no novel information is produced. The audience, rather, is asked chiefly to rejoice in heaping of opprobrium, ridicule, or fancied punishment upon an object of whose culpability they are already thoroughly convinced. (307)

Although Rosenheim emphasizes the aforementioned criticism of satire as being ineffectual and, in some cases, static in its "judgement" of that which is already deemed unacceptable, he does imply that satire is meant to "persuade." The criticism posed here

is problematic in its supposition that all audiences are of the same opinion and sense of what is unacceptable, and are therefore subject to the same resulting effect of all satirical artifacts. This is simply not true, for the context in which a satire exists and for whom a satire is created is rarely universal. As Derek Maus states in his introduction to the collection *Post-Soul Satire*, “To discuss satire effectively requires extensive discussion of the cultural and historical discourses in which it is embedded, since those discourses are most often the ‘targets’ of the satire itself, even when they are embedded within recognizable individuals” (Maus xviii). This embedded-ness that Maus describes also applies to evaluation of the genre. Yes, there is certainly the possibility that the audience of a given satire may already be fully accepting of the criticism presented by the artist. Yet this does not negate the power of the work, let alone the genre as a whole.

Contrary to Rosenheim’s claim, a work of satire that is birthed from and situated within specific “cultural and historical discourses” (Maus xviii) can quite feasibly urge a course of action or encourage new judgement within an audience. It is the satirist’s job to craft the “ridicule” and “fancied punishment”(Rosenheim 307) as a vehicle to foster deeper understanding and disseminate ideas to those in need of affirmation, clarity, or a voice they cannot muster on their own. Along with the audience that already empathizes with the satirist, there is also an audience that is presumably adrift and looking to the satire to help them navigate the targeted discourse or issue. They too are susceptible to the effects of carefully crafted satirical works, as this audience may find itself in a state of uncertainty and judgement. But what is to be said of the audience that associates with the perpetrators of the actions being attacked in the satire? Certainly they do not “rejoice” and revel along with their detractors. But there is the hope and potential for satire to

trigger recognition within those who associate with such repugnant targets. This recognition also has potential to lead to a call for action and change. In considering Rosenheim's rather reductive claim, I respond that satire—and in fact, art as a whole—operates, at least in part, on the interaction between artifact and audience. In the case of satire, it is not necessarily the “heaping of opprobrium” (Rosenheim 307) that persuades or inspires; it is the resulting emotions that come to the audience *after* engaging the work which will have any effect.

If satire does have the potential for change within its multiple audiences, it is worth noting that this change is far from instantaneous. In the introduction to their work *Satire's Persuasive Voice*, Edward Bloom and Lillian Bloom address this issue in explaining that “we readers of satire must remind ourselves that satire is a literary as well as a polemic art” and that “if the satire is just... The social or psychological change attributable to satire may be slow in coming; but if it comes at all, that serves obviously as a gain to be cherished” (Bloom and Bloom 18). The “satiric reform” posited by Bloom and Bloom is, as they explain, a slow process. It would be foolish to think that the mere existence of a satirical artifact would be so powerful as to cause instantaneous social shifts. Literary scholar Patricia Meyer Spacks's work on the “public function” of satire reveals how this “slow” social change occurs: “Although the satirist may arraign God and the universe...[the satirist] usually seems to believe—at least to hope—that change is possible...He shows us ourselves and our world; he demands that we improve both. And he creates a kind of emotion which moves us toward the desire to change” (353). The true power of the genre lies in Meyer Spacks's suggestion that satire creates emotion, “demands” improvement, and inspires hope. Obviously, satire is not a cure-all;



it is a looking glass and a catalyst.

While it is fair to say that satire might further fuel anger and validate unrest within its sympathetic audiences, the genre also has the capacity to conjure discomfort and raise alarms within those middling—and even unsympathetic—audiences. Meyer Spacks pushes back against criticism of the genre by going on to state “If satire sometimes generates self-satisfaction and complacency (when we can clearly identify its victims as other than ourselves), a more important satiric response is, I would suggest, uneasiness” (354) in which a consumer of satire might be left “insecure, unanchored” (354). She goes on to explain the function of this “uneasiness,” and I feel it worth quoting at length:

In the best satire [the satirist] is likely to create level upon level of uneasiness; as our insight increases, we see ever more sharply our own involvement in tangles which it is our responsibility to unravel. In the most powerful satire, too, uneasiness plays constantly against complacency. We identify the victims as others and feel our superiority, only to find ourselves trapped a moment later, impaled by the scorn we have comfortably leveled against the rest of the world.  
(Meyer Spacks 354)

Meyer Spacks takes the notion of “uneasiness” to a level that helps combat some of the problems highlighted by Rosenheim and Kernan. She is well aware of the idea that “satire sometimes generates self-satisfaction and complacency” (Meyer Spacks 354), but also understands that the “uneasiness” that can be achieved actually complicates the audience’s role—even when the feeling of “superiority” is initially present. As Meyer Spacks states, “uneasiness [playing] constantly against complacency” elevates the genre

beyond the pointing of fingers and laughing amongst similarly aggrieved members of the audience to something greater. With uneasiness (hopefully) comes contemplation, introspection, and opportunity for rectification, for the reader may “emerge from the satiric experience better equipped than before to fulfill his potential for social understanding and self-knowledge” (Bloom and Bloom 19). And so, inherently present in satire is “an underlying hope” (Bloom and Bloom 20) which, in my estimation, is an essential foundation for change.

If one of the main functions of satire—or in the very least a starting point to its final payoff—is to create uneasiness and reflection in hopes of change, one may be hard pressed to find a more potent and viable example of Meyer Spacks’s theory in practice than in the sub-genre of racial satire. While this term is obviously broad, my analysis more specifically looks at African American satire. The sub-genre employs many of the same basic techniques and tactics as more general satirical works; however, slight variations in construction and execution set it apart from its literary family. There is a well-documented history of how “African Americans have faced racism... with a rich tradition of humor that, instead of diminishing the dangers and perniciousness of racism, highlights them” (Carpio 4). This humor reaches back to the folktales that inform early iterations of the African American literary tradition, and is still clearly a viable device used in contemporary satire and storytelling. And while irony is an immensely important tool of the African American satirist, it is often used in conjunction with *reductio ad absurdum*, which effectively boils a target down to its absurd extremes (Dickson-Carr, *African American Satire* 26). These particular rhetorical tools shape the defining

characteristics of the sub-genre, as they are often potent and essential vehicles for exploring the African American experience in America.

Outside of the basic structures and operations of the genre, there is much to be said of African American satire's place in American literary history, as well as its function as a critical prism for examining the whole of American culture. Through the genre, "African American satirist[s] [join] other American writers in scrutinizing the idealistic promises of American democracy, and often [consider] racism a sign that those promises are ultimately hollow" (Dickson-Carr, *African American Satire* 32). There is no argument that other satirists who do not identify as Black also confront the social injustices of America, but the work of African American artists taps into a history of marginalization and racial violence that is—to a certain extent—singular and formative. Lisa Guerrero further distinguishes African American satire from other satiric forms because of its focus on "structures of racialization." Whereas other sub-genres of satire might train their crosshairs on wider, less culturally specific targets, African American artists often use the genre as a means to "critique society and legitimate black rage in a society that systematically invalidates black rage" (Guerrero 268). Such satires do not lash out at the social ills that plague the white American experience—they attack those social ills that directly infringe upon the lives of black people. And more than legitimizing those feelings that are too often "invalidated" and dismissed, African American satire also "exposes how racial conflict, and the obsessive ways that it colonizes American minds, can divest everyone, albeit at different registers, of a sense of reality" (Carpio 7). While Carpio is in fact referencing humor in this statement, I feel that the concept can easily and effectively be applied to satire as well. If racial conflict

can “divest everyone...of a sense of reality,” then satire’s capacity to create uneasiness, incite hope, and hopefully fuel action may provide a path to revealing problems and re-establishing reality for those “colonized American minds” that ignorantly perpetuate inequity and inequality.

As a sub-genre unto itself, African American satire has grown and shifted since its initial phases. While literary threads can certainly be traced back earlier than the 1920’s to writers like Charles Chesnutt, it was during the Harlem Renaissance that writers such as George Schuyler, Wallace Thurman, and Zora Neale Hurston more clearly emerged as main figures of the African American satirical tradition. There is some debate as to the exact nature of the satires created during this period—especially in terms of who the artists attack—but the Harlem Renaissance writers mostly looked at critiquing white society or larger social structures of inequity rather than their own community. In the decades after the Civil Rights Movement—which includes the establishment of the Black Arts Movement and the Black Aesthetic Movement—a new literary and artistic movement came to prominence, which George Nelson deemed “Post-Soul.”<sup>2</sup> African American artists born after the Civil Rights Movement and who create work from the 1980’s onward are generally referred to as post-soul. The movement is partially defined by its active complication of black identity in ways that are contrary to prior notions of black essentialism—especially in terms of situating said identity within multiple cultural discourses. Bertram Ashe describes part of the movement as “blaxploration,” which he clarifies as a “‘troubling’ of blackness,” that is “ultimately done in service to black people” (614). This “troubling” of black identity further separates the movement from its

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<sup>2</sup> See George Nelson’s 1992 *Village Voice* article

black essentialist and black nationalist forefathers—and also opens new avenues of critical exploration and inspection. While there is a great deal of scholarship outlining the features and influences of the post-soul movement, I am most concerned with how the movement affects satire.

One of the main differences between post-soul satire and its predecessors is the expansion of the targets engaged by the satirists. Derek C. Maus describes post-soul satire as being “dual-vectored” (xiii) in its approach and scope. The genre maintains its examination and criticism of systemic forces that are continually leveled against African American culture, but the post-soul satirists differentiate themselves with their propensity to scrutinize members of the black community and black identity as a whole (Maus xvii). This intragroup inspection and criticism “remained relatively marginal or even taboo during earlier periods such as the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Arts Movement” (Maus xv), but post-soul moves to simultaneously acknowledge its own history—including the progress made during the Civil Rights movement—while attempting to “normalize...a self critical tenor” (xv) which enriches its critical possibilities.

There are other features that differentiate post-soul from other movements, but I find these particular characteristics sufficient for the purposes of analyzing the works in this thesis. These features also highlight the important moves that African American satire has made on a larger literary stage, as Darryl Dickson-Carr notes that “By simply writing satire, [post-soul satirists] have implicitly declared the satiric muse’s centrality to the literature to show how African American literature and culture have always embraced irony, understatement, and invective and turned them into mirrors that reflect all Americans’ distorted and distorting idiocies back at themselves, perhaps clearer than they

might otherwise” (Dickson-Carr, “Afterword” 277). And so, the African American satirical gaze that once mostly looked outward and insulated black identity now looks around, and most importantly within, “all Americans,” to find the heart of what shapes, hinders, distorts, and heals the narrative of black identity in the United States.

In recent years, post-soul African American satirists have turned their equally reflective and scrutinous words and images towards what has been deemed the “post-racial” era in America. The works analyzed in this project all deal with post-racial ideology in its varying degrees and manifestations, and so, a brief definition and explanation of the term is pertinent. In short, “post-racial” suggests that society has moved beyond a preoccupation with racial identity and racial politics. While certain sociologists and scholars argue that the idea of post-racial ideology was birthed prior to the early 2000’s, the more widely referenced origin of the idea stems from the ascendancy of Barack Obama to the Presidency of the United States. During this period—which includes Obama’s original campaign for his first term—“the election of the first African American president [became] a powerful symbolic challenge to a long and violent history of racial oppression and white supremacy” (Moore and Bell 123). And while this may be true, it is important to note that the election was merely “symbolic” of a challenge, as the act alone “did nothing to dismantle the deeply embedded structural mechanisms that function to maintain racial inequality” (Moore and Bell 124). Nevertheless, Obama’s election by American voters imbued the social and national consciousness with a feeling of having overcome systemic problems of race. And so, race allegedly “became so purportedly insignificant that broad sectors of the country could claim the end of institutional racism and the achievement of a color-blind

society” (Carpio 3). However, the idea of a “color-blind society,” while idealistic and perhaps well intentioned, is in fact counterproductive to racial equity. When the reality of the United States sees continued turmoil between white and non-white people, the supposition that society has moved beyond “color” actually hinders any possibility for reconciliation or change. A denial of the existence of racism runs contrary to any efforts to move forward.

It is important to clarify that it is not simply the election of Obama that gave rise to post-racialism; there are other contributing factors and tenets of post-race that need to be outlined in order to complete a portrait of the ideology. Some sociologists suggest that post-racial ideology is in fact an extension of the efforts of the Civil Rights movement, and that the ideals fought for prior to, during, and after the movement evolved and carried over into the current state of post-racial ideology. This carry over is often paired with two other factors that contribute to the formation of post-racialism: neoliberalism and color blindness (which are interrelated themselves). While neoliberalism is in fact a larger ideological system that emphasizes “free market trust over social responsibility” and “individual rights, responsibility, and choice” (Perez and Salter 269), it has contributed to the emergence of post-racial ideology through the notion that “socioeconomic inequality is not an issue of discriminatory systems privileging Whites” (Perez and Salter 277), but instead lies within individuals’ abilities—and failures—to make something of themselves. With this in mind, a connection can be made between this ideology and the fact that “White Americans in the United States express little patience for racism faced by Black people in this country” (Perez and Salter 277) because they believe the blame lies outside of systemic racism and racial identification. The idea

that people of any racial identity have equal opportunity is obviously flawed, but it does help explain the post-racial perspective that race is no longer a viable factor in American society.

Along with neoliberalism, color-blindness is a closely related formative factor of post-racial ideology. Obviously, the term itself refers to the idea that racial coding is non-existent, but believing that race is nonexistent does not make it true. The term has also been refitted by scholars such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva as “color blind racism,” which he very basically describes as the act of using “‘raceless’ explanations for all sorts of race-related affairs” (“The Structure of Racism” 1364). Bonilla-Silva goes on to explain that the “central frames of color-blind racism are ‘minimization of racism,’ ‘cultural racism, ‘naturalization,’ and ‘abstract liberalism’” (“The Structure of Racism” 1364), which essentially bury racist ideology and tendencies under layers of denial, qualification, and recontextualization.<sup>3</sup> For example, a practitioner of color blind racism may attribute the reduced opportunity for upward economic mobility within the black community to a generalized flaw of motivation, rather than the social ills of systemic racial inequity. By minimizing the reality of racial prejudice, the color-blind racist can excuse themselves—and American society—from culpability. It is worth noting that the idea of a society which forgoes racial identity as a determination of opportunity and success is reasonable, if not noble and idealistic. However, a failure to acknowledge a past and present that still operates with institutional racism makes such lofty goals an impossibility.

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<sup>3</sup> Bonilla-Silva goes on to explain each of the central frames in his article “The Structure of Racism in Color-Blind, Post Racial America” (2015).



It is in the context of satire's operation, the sub-genre of African American satire, and post-racial ideology that Jordan Peele, Paul Beatty, Mat Johnson, and Boots Riley can be read together. Individually, the works examined in this thesis explore the contemporary state of race and identity in the United States of America. Obviously, this is not necessarily an original or new idea. Race has always shaped America, and satirists have always put themselves on the front lines of fighting against injustice. But this project analyzes specific examples of literature and film as they exist in a shared historical moment of the time spanning from Obama's presidency through what is often deemed the "Post Obama era." In analyzing Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*, Mat Johnson's *Pym*, and Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*, I suggest that the separate works come together to act as a snapshot of the approximately decade-long period—a snapshot that is essential to understanding the complexities, dangers, and challenges to the alleged post-racial era of America. Through the careful construction of both literary and cinematic satires, the artists catalogue the unrest and absurdity of a moment in American history which finds the construct and implications of race further problematized by a denial of racial identity and a perpetuation of systemic oppression. Through their art, Peele, Beatty, Johnson, and Riley present a collective indictment of the damaging narrative and falsehoods of post-racial ideology.

In taking the works of the four artists and moving them into conversation with one another, thematic parallels and satirical targets emerge to form a more complete picture of the complicated and dire nature of non-white racial identity in contemporary America. In chapter one, I examine the ways in which the satirists address the covert nature of white supremacy as it exists in the years since President Barack Obama was first elected

in 2008. Peele's *Get Out* and Beatty's *The Sellout* both take aim at white supremacist power structures which continue to fester under both the guise of post-racial rhetoric and the erasure of non-white identity. In chapter two, I address the ways in which the works incorporate the lasting legacy of American slavery into their individual satirical visions. Peele, Beatty, Riley, and Johnson all carefully expose the deep scars that the mass kidnapping, inhuman injustices, and racial violence of United States slavery have all left on black identity in contemporary America. In looking through their varied satirical lenses, the artists all confront the notion that slavery has never truly been dealt with on a national level. In their own ways, each artist touches upon how this lingering trauma is still very much alive in the era of post-racial ideology. Finally, in the third chapter I look at how Beatty, Johnson, and Riley all turn their satirical gazes to critique the social and economic circumstances which force black characters to "sell out" their racial identity for the sake of survival. The three works all feature black individuals who, in some way, succumb to the vast powers of white supremacy and oppressive social structures. Be it through their denial of history, inability to combat seemingly insurmountable systemic obstacles, or a willful surrender to the forces that have oppressed them, the characters represent the sheer weight and impossibility of living in a world that renders them impotent and without a clear and safe path to embracing a non-white identity.

Ultimately, the satires I examine in this project are not so bold as to claim to re-establish what it means to be black in America; however, they do work to further question how black identity and culture exist in this moment. They question how to maintain some semblance of a meaningful and viable identity. And finally, they work to locate and describe those issues that prevent racial reconciliation and equity from being a

feasible reality. In a time when certain facets of American culture suggest that the construct of race either doesn't exist or no longer matters, these works of highly charged satire force a conversation upon a world that is willfully blind to the damage and human cost of that very narrative. While there are critics of satire who may claim that the genre does little beyond exposing a problem and reveling in a "nihilistic abjuration" (Bloom and Bloom 21), I believe that this exposure—and the genre itself, for that matter—is absolutely vital to the present American cultural moment. The problems attacked in these works exist, at least in part, because of their ability to remain hidden, either by design or ignorance. In ushering the issues to the forefront of wider conversations about race and exploring the roots of the problem through the truth-bearing lens of satire, Peele, Beatty, Johnson, and Riley forge a historical artifact that both collects the silenced voices and cultural crimes of our time and strikes back at the systems and ideologies that have driven a dangerous wedge between the people of a single nation.

## Chapter 1: Covert White Supremacy in *Get Out* and *The Sellout*

Underlying any of the specific motivations and satirical targets of the works in this project is the need to explore and expose the nature of white supremacy as it quietly sustains itself in the supposed post-racial era. As previously stated, post-racial ideology exists because of the tenets of neo and abstract liberalism, as well as the proliferation of color-blind racism. Together with the election of America's first black president, these elements created a state in which white supremacy and racism can thrive under the guise of race's disappearance as a meaningful construct. It is exactly this idea—the subtler, more evasive yet ever present white supremacy that uses alleged “progress” as a cover—that Jordan Peele and Paul Beatty attack with their respective film and novel, *Get Out* and *The Sellout*. Within each narrative, the artists create extreme circumstances that not only unmask the problem of covert white supremacy and post-racial ideology into something more tangible than ideas, but also use the issue as the main conflict driving their satires. While Peele's film offers a more direct crystallization of the issue than Beatty's more abstract interpretation, both works speak to the same point. In doing so, the artists pull back the veil behind which racism is allowed to spread and expose the true state of the nation lurking behind the false narrative of post-racial ideology.

Part of the problem with the way white supremacy is able to maintain its existence in the post-racial moment lies in the fact that it has expressed itself via “gentler” forms of racism, rather than the outspoken hatred of the past. This is not to say that overt racism and open forms of white supremacy ceased to exist after January of 2008. In fact, studies show that there were a surge of “Obama-related hate crimes” and “scores of racially charged incidents—beatings, effigy burnings, racist graffiti, threats, and intimidation—

were reported across the country after the election” (Beirich and Schlatter 80). And while Beirich and Schlatter note that Obama’s “election injected a particular urgency into the white supremacist movement, and served as a stark reminder to those in it that demographic change... will eventually signal the death knell of the hate movement (80), there was also a sense that overt racism might be looked upon and handled differently by the general public. After all, to be labeled racist with a black president in office and a society leaning into an idealistic view of the nation cannot be seen as advantageous—even for those who subscribe to white supremacist and racist ideologies. Individuals on either side of the racial ideological divide understand that “racism in most public discussions is typically identified as something synonymous with atypical and reprehensible acts perpetrated by irrational bigots” (Esposito and Finley 166), and accordingly, those who hold to racist views are left to find more covert methods of perpetuating their beliefs.

Given the ways in which color-blindness can often be misused and misconstrued as an acceptance of all individuals regardless of racial identity, the ideological foundations of post-racial thinking inadvertently perpetuate a haven for the racial discrimination and violence. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explains that “Color-blind racism forms an impregnable yet elastic ideological wall that barricades whites off from America’s racial reality—an impregnable wall because it provides them a safe, color-blind way to state racial views without appearing to be irrational or rabidly racist” (*Racism Without Racists* 305). This “ideological wall” described by Bonilla-Silva protects those individuals from being publicly shamed and persecuted for proclaiming and advertising their prejudiced beliefs. Together with neo-liberal ideology, this “elastic

barricade” has the capacity to “covertly [protect] white privilege, power, and wealth by rhetorically divorcing these concepts from the structural realities of racial inequality” (Moore and Bell 124). Color-blind racists and white supremacist practitioners separate themselves—either knowingly or unwittingly—from what is deemed racist by relying on the so-called myth of post-racial thinking and its tenets. In doing so, white supremacy is able to remain powerful while simultaneously masquerading within idealistic and progressive ideologies. This notion of the nefarious and covert nature of contemporary white supremacy is directly satirized in Jordan Peele’s 2017 film, *Get Out*. More specifically, Peele uses a seemingly progressive and liberal family as the film’s villains—villains who seek to supplant white “minds” into black bodies, and therefore perpetuate the stranglehold of white supremacy.

*Get Out* is, at its core, a horror film that taps into Jordan Peele’s understanding of the genre and tropes of horror narratives to create a unique and original satirical experience. While there have been parallels drawn between the film and the 1967 film *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, those connections only relate to the most basic premise of the film. In what Peele himself has described as a “thriller that explores the victimization of black people” (“Jordan Peele Get Out”), *Get Out* cleverly uses a bait and switch technique in telling the story of the film’s protagonist Chris Washington, a black photographer who is meeting the white family of his girlfriend, Rose Armitage, during a weekend visit to her affluent country home. After the film’s opening sequence portrays the unnerving nighttime kidnapping of an innocent black man on the quiet streets of a white suburban neighborhood,<sup>4</sup> Peele immediately shifts the narrative to his

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<sup>4</sup> This scene effectively sets the stage to both create discomfort in viewers and raise suspicion that all will not be as it seems throughout the course of the film’s first act. Peele himself has stated that this particular

protagonist's journey to the Armitage home. Repeat viewings of the film's entirety reveal the careful foreshadowing and telegraphing of the narrative's third act "twist," in which Chris realizes that the Armitage family are not the progressive and "woke" liberal unit that they appear to be early on. They are, in fact, the masterminds of a white supremacist plot to surgically transplant elite white peoples' brains into the bodies of black people in order to take over and effectively erase the identities of the unaware victims.

Through the depiction of the Armitage family, Peele aims his satirical lens at the ways in which white supremacy lurks in the cloudy waters of post-racial ideology. In a 2017 interview discussing the film, Peele touches on his inspiration when drafting the script. He explains that he asked himself "What if I didn't take it to the more typical racism... the more outwardly demeaning...white superiority...[of] Trumpism?... What if it was the other side of that?" ("Jordan Peele Get Out"). In avoiding taking on the "more outwardly demeaning" iterations of white supremacy and racism, Peele effectively engages the notion of post-racial camouflage for racism under cover of progressive, performative masks. Peele's most compelling example of the masking of white supremacy via post-racialism is the character of Rose Armitage. In the aforementioned 2017 interview, Peele explains how complex and difficult it was to create a character with whom audiences should initially place their trust, and then be betrayed by in the film's third act. Even when compared to the film's other villainous white characters, Rose's white supremacist behaviors are cleverly hidden behind more than the ideologies of neo-liberalism or colorblindness. Rose uses a faux progressivism as a layer of her

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scene sets the stage for the rest of the film, as well as affords white audiences a glimpse into the displacement black individuals feel navigating the white community.

“disguise,” which not only further distinguishes her from the other players within the narrative, but also deepens the satire itself.

Peele’s introduction of Rose situates her as a progressive who is not aligned with the neoliberalism or colorblind racism generally associated with post-racial ideology, for she calls out those perspectives as belonging to her parent’s generation. In preparing for their weekend getaway to the Armitage home, Chris asks Rose if her parents know that he is black. In a frank and blunt answer, she replies “No. Should they?” and thus separates herself from anything that might be considered racist. As Chris explains to Rose that this may be something worth mentioning to her wealthy white parents (with whom Chris is preemptively uncomfortable), Rose mocks his concern and assuages his fears, claiming “My Dad would’ve voted for Obama a third time if he could’ve...I’m only telling you because he’s definitely going to want to talk to you about that, and it will definitely fucking suck, but that’s because he’s a lame dad more than anything,” thus qualifying her family’s status as being more liberal than what Chris may expect. She goes so far as to state that “The love [for Obama] is real,” implying that the Armitage parents, while of a different generation and privileged socioeconomic status, are accepting of all—regardless of race. Rose goes so far as to definitively state “They are not racist.” When one later understands the true motivations of the Armitage family, the brief conversation takes on a different weight. The uneasiness conveyed through Chris’s apprehension hints at the notion of the family concealing their white supremacist ideologies behind “real love” for the black community. This “love” is obviously not to be blindly believed, for such post-racial notions of colorblindness are coded as suspicious



via the audience's connection to Chris; therefore, this acts as Peele's first suggestion of the nefarious connection between post-racial ideology and white supremacy.

Unlike the other yet to be introduced members of her family, Rose is able to hide herself more effectively by not only quietly subscribing to what some may consider post-racial ideologies, but by performing a more progressive attitude towards racial politics. On their drive out of the city towards Rose's home, the couple strike a deer and are forced to pull over. As the camera moves in on Chris, Rose talks with a white police officer who arrives on the scene. Although Chris was not driving, the officer requests his license, citing standard procedures following an accident. Before Chris can protest, Rose steps in to speak for Chris. In doing so, Rose presents a "woke" attitude in defense of the unjust questioning of his identity. Whether or not the officer's request is unjust is secondary, for Peele uses the instance to show Rose leaning into her progressive masquerade. It is Rose who immediately challenges the white authority figure of the police, and therefore challenges the systemic racism that is prevalent in American culture. Given the timing of the film's release, a clear connection can be made between unjust police violence against the black community and the actions of the "woke" white hero figure. Rose not only separates herself from her neoliberal parents, but she becomes an advocate for racial justice. She does not rest upon visions of racial harmony and equity. Instead, she understands the inequities of race in America, and therefore stands up for what is "right." Peele's cleverly embedded irony is apparent only in understanding the Armitage family conspiracy. His satirical take on such an attitude is unveiled with the later revelation that Rose is simply providing a black body for sale to the highest bidder. In stating "I'm not going to let anyone fuck with my man" after the incident deescalates,

Rose's words carry a double entendre: they are both expressing a progressive stance on police violence and protecting the commodified black body for further exploitation by her family. Ultimately, Rose manipulates progressivism to her own ends: white racial domination.

While Rose is used as the face of post-racialism masquerading as progressivism, Peele uses the remainder of the Armitage family, particularly Rose's father Dean, to more directly satirize conventional versions of color-blind racism and neoliberalism. Upon meeting Chris for the first time, Dean immediately demands a hug and refers to Chris as "my man." In discussing the couple's relationship, Dean's language is punctuated with casual colloquialisms evocative of a liberal elite attempting to stay relevant and hip within a black cultural lexicon.<sup>5</sup> As Dean takes Chris on a tour of the house, he makes sure to cement his own multicultural and liberal status in noting that "it's such a privilege to experience another person's culture." Eventually, Dean stops by a wall of pictures and points out a photograph of his own late father, Roman Armitage. Dean explains that Roman lost to famed black athlete Jesse Owens in the 1936 Berlin Olympic trials, but praises the significance of Owens's accomplishment in stating "Yeah, what a moment, what a moment. I mean, Hitler's up there with all his perfect Aryan race bullshit. This black dude comes along, proves him wrong in front of the entire world. Amazing." Within Dean's character lies Peele's satirical critique of the white post-racial tendency to advertise the color-blind ideology. Dean quite obviously wants Chris to take comfort in the fact that he is beyond racial division. However, Dean also exhibits a propensity to

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<sup>5</sup> Dean's dialogue also rewards multiple viewings, as they unveil the high level of ironic lines delivered by the character. For example, the Armitage patriarch references "black mold" in the basement—a passing note that pays off later in the film as the body stealing plot is revealed.

hint at his true intentions. As Chris and Rose explain the incident with the deer, Dean states that more deer need to be killed as a means of stopping the species from taking over the country. Read metaphorically and satirically, Dean's remarks suggest an inability to fully contain white supremacist ideologies beneath the veneer of post-racial ideology. With Dean's Freudian slip, Peele carefully warns the audience to be wary of white liberalism and what lurks just below its composed and genial surface.

Along with the immediate family, the Armitage home is inhabited by two black individuals who work as a housekeeper and groundskeeper. While it is later revealed that these two characters are actually black bodies inhabited by the consciousnesses of the Armitage grandparents, their initial introduction is mined for further development of Dean's post-racial profile. As Chris and Dean walk into the backyard, Dean admits, unprompted, that "I know what you're thinking...Come on. I get it. White family, black servants. It's a total cliché." Dean reasons that once his own parents died, he couldn't let the two workers be without employment, but goes on to say "I hate the way it looks," acknowledging the optics of an elite white family employing black caretakers. Dean concludes his defense of his own liberalism by casually mentioning to Chris that he "would've voted for Obama for a third term" if given the opportunity, and that the former Commander in Chief was "the best president" of his lifetime. While this line is played for laughs because of Rose's early warning about her own father, it also satirizes the very nature of white liberals. The scholarship of Luigi Esposito and Laura Finley offer an alternative reading of Dean's remarks regarding his love of the former president, as they explain that "Obama's appeal among many Whites is predicated on the idea that he has overcome his Blackness. This, of course, presupposes that Blackness is a de facto source

of shame and pathology that must be somehow abandoned, or at least molded to fit all standards of acceptability demanded by White society” (169). Whether Dean’s statement is simply to lull Chris into a more relaxed state or to take a veiled jab at “un-Obama” blackness is left to the viewer. However, I argue that such a reading of the lines actually enriches and deepens Peele’s satirical vision of whiteness, and in the very least, helps contextualize the Armitage family’s horrific motivations.

By tapping into contemporary cultural knowledge and the well-established form and function of the horror genre, Peele is able to expose the deceptive nature of white subscribers of post-racial ideology. The closing remarks of the back-yard sequence are used to create the uneasiness in viewers that Patricia Meyer Spacks claims is so essential to successful satire. Any seasoned connoisseur of horror films knows better than to trust Dean’s facade so early in the narrative, and Peele uses the character’s “woke” posturing as a damning portrayal of what lies beneath the facade. As Bonilla-Silva notes, “Whites’ explanations are ultimately justifications for our current racial situation as they see no reason for any kind of intervention to even ameliorate the extent of racial inequality. However, Whites’ contemporary racial discourse makes them ‘look good’ as they no longer sound ‘racist’” (“The Structure of Racism” 1364). The constant reassurance and qualifications of Dean’s liberal perspectives on race are not righteous—they are subservient to masking Dean’s white supremacist motivations of control and racial commodification. The irony of the situation is situational in that Peele uses the uncomfortable racial tension in the sequence’s set up in service of his larger satirical goals.

Part of the complexity in Peele's creation of the Armitage family is the way in which he layers the different iterations of post-racial ideology, particularly between Rose and the rest of her family members. While bearing in mind that ultimately they are united under the same goal of controlling black bodies, Peele actually uses Rose's false progressivism to call out the absurdity of her father's post-racial attitude. During a short scene following a dinner that finds Chris being challenged and evaluated, Rose complains about her father's behavior when first meeting Chris, particularly his use of the "my man stuff." Rose explains that she does not think Dean has ever "heard that or said it, and now it's just all he says," and also condemns her mother's rudeness to the black housekeeper, Georgina. As Chris knowingly nods along with her assessment of the afternoon, Rose asks "how are [her family] any different than that cop? That's the fucking bummer of it all," and thus distances herself from the Armitage family and further aligns herself with a black perspective. Chris insists that he knew such posturing would be the case, but assures Rose that the situation is manageable and that he likes her and "her racial flow." Rose goes on to warn him of the Armitage family party that takes place the following day—a scene which will be discussed in the following chapter of this project—and how the party is "so white." Through Rose's assessment of her parents, her response to the racist police officer, and her assessment of the forthcoming party, Peele condemns all levels of post-racial thinking—from the neoliberal, colorblind foundations to the furthest progressive strains. The suggestion here is that even the most "woke" and liberal iterations of whiteness are inherently dangerous, as they are inextricably linked to white supremacy. While this satirical move may be reductive in its treatment of all white

progressives, in Peele's hands it is highly effective in raising questions about the widespread—and detrimental—proliferation of post-racial ideology.

An analysis of Peele's satirical take down of covert white supremacy is incomplete without discussion of the actual plot to overtake black bodies: the aptly named Coagula procedure.<sup>6</sup> If the Armitage family members—along with other briefly introduced white characters—are representative of the camouflage created through fake progressive attitudes towards race, then the surgical Coagula procedure is representative of the covert nature of white supremacy in contemporary America. The procedure itself relies heavily on science fiction and horror tropes, as the transplantation of consciousness into another individual is not a wholly original idea in the vast history of film and literature.<sup>7</sup> However, it is the motivation for the transplantation—carefully crafted by Peele—that elevates the Armitage plot to its satirical heights. In the film's final act, the Armitage family reveals to Chris the purpose and practice of the Coagula as he is prepared to become a victim of their efforts. As Chris is strapped to a chair, he is shown a video of the former Armitage patriarch, the aforementioned Roman Armitage, whose consciousness currently resides within the black body of the house's groundskeeper. The entire Armitage family appears in the video, with Dean being a much younger man, and Rose and her brother as children. While the lo-fi quality of the footage produces an eerie and uncanny feeling, it also implicitly posits that post-racial ideology is not purely a product of the Obama age, instead supposing that his presidency simply escalated the

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<sup>6</sup> From Latin, meaning “to come together”

<sup>7</sup> One could potentially equate this to forms of possession often found in horror fiction, or even to the many versions of the science fiction classic, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

ideology to new extremes. Here, Peele suggests that post-race, even in its earliest forms, has been closely linked to white supremacy.

The explanation of the Coagula procedure is itself a satirical stab at post-racial ideology and white supremacy—especially the furtive strains which lurk within white liberals such as those caricatured in *Get Out*. In the Coagula video, Roman Armitage explains to Chris: “You have been chosen because of the physical advantages you’ve enjoyed your entire lifetime. With your natural gifts and our determination, we could both be a part of something greater...something perfect.” Roman’s words echo the false idealism associated with post-racial ideology and colorblindness. There is no mention of “black” or “white,” only unifying language that presupposes race as inconsequential to the results of the Coagula procedure. However, Roman Armitage’s evaluation of victims’, i.e. black individuals’, supposedly “natural [physical] gifts” in contrast to the “determination” of white individuals speaks to the racial fetishization of the Coagula procedure, as well as the inequitable racial dichotomy bolstered by white supremacy. As an analog for black identity, Chris is reduced down to mere physicality. But the absence of any definitive racial marker in Roman’s explanation represents a denial of black identity. To achieve the goals of the Order to which the Armitage family belong, the black body is simply coveted and desired—a product for consumption and manipulation. Roman Armitage explains that the Order has developed the Coagula procedure over a long period of time. This passing mention of an organized, communal presence functions as a clear representation of white supremacists within American Society. With this statement, Peele expands his satiric vision beyond an isolated family to the larger, historical systemic plague of racial violence.

Peele effectively satirizes the color-blind racism of a contemporary moment where race is denied as a defining construct, yet quite clearly shapes the reality of American society. For the white supremacist, the final product of the Coagula procedure results in perfection via racial harmony. The reality of the procedure—and for Peele, the reality of post-racial America—is the erasure of racial identity and the control of black bodies by whites. The further commentary of Luigi Esposito and Laura Finley helps ground Peele’s creation of the Armitage plot, as they explain that non-white racial “integration and success in mainstream US society is typically attained by minimizing styles, habits, and mannerisms often associated with African-American or non-White cultures” (170). Roman Armitage’s justification for the transplantation of white minds into black bodies is couched in false ideals of a raceless, multicultural society, yet the procedure eliminates that which makes any one person an individual. This is exemplified earlier in the film when a prior victim of the Armitage family, former jazz musician Andre Hayworth, is introduced to Chris. Hayworth is, in fact, first seen by the audience in the film’s prologue as the kidnapped man from the white suburb. When the two versions of Hayworth—pre and post Coagula procedure<sup>8</sup>—are compared, it is clear that Peele is satirizing the ways that white supremacist culture attempts to repress all but those “styles, habits, and mannerisms” that might be considered white. While he first appears dressed stylishly in a leather jacket and speaking casually, post-procedure Hayworth speak with a forced eloquence, and dresses in a manner evocative of a far older, conservative man. In relating the idea of “acceptable Blackness” to the emergence of Obama as an American icon, Esposito and Finley state that “Black worth is still subject to

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<sup>8</sup> It soon becomes clear that Hayworth was the target prior to Chris, and has thus undergone the procedure and now houses the mind of an older white man.



White approval. Blackness, in effect, remains something that must be managed or modified according to standards and specifications that presuppose White hegemony” (170). In applying this criticism to the film, the Armitages’ faux liberal posturing and post-racial rhetoric are read as merely a cover for racial domination and the mitigation of blackness to benefit white people.

While the erasure of black identity is a primary target of Peele’s horrific version of racial violence, his satire also critiques the ways in which post-racial ideology offers a similar disguise for a secondary form of white supremacy—racial capitalism. The Armitage family supplies bodies for the Coagula procedure, which are ultimately auctioned off to the highest bidder. Chris, being a promising photographer, is “purchased” by a blind art dealer, Jim Hudson, who seeks to hijack his vision. The tongue-in-cheek humor of a sightless art dealer doubles as a sharp metaphor for the alleged denial of seeing race—an absurd notion that Peele exposes all too clearly. Even in his blindness, Hudson is a willing participant in the racial violence perpetrated by the Armitage family. As Chris is prepped for the procedure, he and Hudson share a video conference where Chris asks “Why us? Why black people?” to which Hudson replies “who knows...people want to change, some people want to be stronger, faster, cooler.” Hudson attempts to qualify his color-blindness and justify his purchase of Chris’s body by stating “Please don’t lump me in with that—I could give a shit what color you are. What I want is deeper. I want your eye, man. I want those things you see through.” Hudson’s own words betray his true motivations, for his participation in the Armitage family’s plot is the ultimate—and undeniable—marker of guilt.

Hudson's claim of not caring about his victim's racial identity roots his character—another representation of progressivism—within Peele's vision of covert white supremacy thriving under the mask of post-racial ideology. By purchasing Chris's body, Hudson takes part in what law professor Nancy Leong calls "racial capitalism," which she broadly defines as "a systemic phenomenon... to describe the way that white people and predominantly white institutions derive value from non-whiteness" (2154). Leong goes on to explain that "Nonwhiteness has...become something desirable — and for many, it has become a commodity to be pursued, captured, possessed, and used," which Hudson all but admits in his conversation with Chris. Of course, in the context of *Get Out*, the system of racial capitalism is taken to its extreme satiric ends in which white minds literally occupy the mental and physical space of black bodies. Through Hudson's implied color-blindness—as well as that of the post-racial Armitage family—Peele is able to highlight the damages inflicted upon non-white identities. Of the power vested in the dominant white forces in the racial capitalism dynamic, Leong explains that the false mask of diversity—and therefore post-racial color-blindness—leads to the treatment of "nonwhiteness as a prized commodity rather than as a cherished and personal manifestation of identity" and that "Affiliation with nonwhite individuals thus becomes merely a useful means for white individuals and predominantly white institutions to acquire social and economic benefits while deflecting potential charges of racism" (2155). In Peele's film, Leong's suggestion of "affiliation with nonwhite individuals" is exaggerated and extrapolated to the satirical lengths of assimilation and domination. Yet the white characters do not see the dangerous cost of their ongoing racial supremacy.

Ultimately, the Armitage family and Jim Hudson represent the power of white supremacists to place value upon their own whiteness, and subsequently devalue and control non-whiteness. As Leong concisely notes, “nonwhiteness is valued in terms of what it adds to white people’s experiences or endeavors, [and] white people determine what nonwhiteness is worth” (2171). For the white characters in *Get Out*, black identity is transformed into a commodity. Further still, Leong’s explanation that racial capitalism “fractures identity, creates pressure for nonwhite people to engage in particular identity performances” (Leong 2204) directly correlates with Peele’s extreme rendering of racial violence, post-racial ideology, and white supremacy. The minds of those black bodies that undergo the Coagula procedure are relegated to a vast, empty mental space, known in the film as “the sunken place.” From this void, the victim is only able to watch their body perform under the control of whichever white person has taken on their mind. Their identities have been “fractured” to the point of fragmentation, never to be seen again. It is the collective efforts of Rose, Dean, the extended Armitage family, and Jim Hudson that account for the concealment of racial violence. Without the frameworks of post-racial ideology, neoliberalism, and color-blindness, the satirical vision of *Get Out* would fall into a more overt critique of white supremacy and racial violence via the attack of “Trumpism” Peele so explicitly hoped to avoid. Instead, the satirist cleverly and quite viciously attacks those who do not in fact see themselves as a functional part of the larger, systemic problems of white supremacy. His layered portraits of contemporary post-racial ideology afford a troubling—and more importantly, necessary—view of white supremacy’s capacity to circulate and infect American society undetected.

Whereas Peele uses satirical characters and a horror/science fiction frame to satirize post-racial ideology and white supremacy, Paul Beatty employs a more abstract metaphor of erasure to attack the same issue in his novel, *The Sellout*. Beatty's work is difficult to describe, both in its style and its execution. His frenetic, rhythmic, hip hop influenced, and highly referential prose combine with bizarrely rendered circumstances and characters to create a poignant yet comic portrait of America's absurd acceptance of post-racial ideology. The targets of Beatty's satire are widespread, seemingly leaving no racial identity or cultural group unscathed by his sharp insight and keen wit. The novel chronicles the efforts of the protagonist and narrator, nicknamed Bon Bon, as he attempts to save his physical and racial community by forcing race back into the national conversation. While Beatty's commentary addresses the "white" response of post-racial ideology, attention must first be paid to Beatty's metaphorical erasure of racial identity, which both drives the novel's conflict and sets satire in motion.

Like *Get Out*'s Armitage family who simultaneously represent masked white supremacy and the elimination of black identity, Beatty uses the erasure of an entire black and brown community to satirize the ways in which post-racial ideology allows white supremacy to grow. The novel's central conflict is sparked when Bon Bon's hometown of Dickens, a fictional part of Los Angeles,<sup>9</sup> is suddenly stricken from official record. Bon Bon explains that "You won't find Dickens on a map" and that the community "didn't go out with a bang like Nagasaki...it was quietly removed" (Beatty 56). Since the district is populated by black and Latino residents, Dickens can easily be

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<sup>9</sup> Dickens is somewhat based on a small community that does exist as a suburb of Los Angeles. However, Beatty fictionalizes the suburb in order to take necessary liberties in service of his absurdist satire.

interpreted as a stand in for non-white identity.<sup>10</sup> As Bon Bon identifies with Dickens, so too does he suffer with its erasure. Not unlike the way in which post-racial ideology quietly moves away from acknowledging race as a defining and meaningful construct, Dickens simply fades away from Bon Bon's reality when on "One clear South Central morning, [the citizens] awoke to find the city hadn't been renamed but the signs that said WELCOME TO THE CITY OF DICKENS were gone. There was never an official announcement, an article in the paper, or a feature on the evening news. No one cared" (Beatty 58). To announce the disappearance of Dickens would be to acknowledge the erasure of its people, community, and presence. Like with post-racial ideology, the lack of acknowledgement of eliminating race equates to evading accountability and dismissing inequity. Bon Bon further claims that "It was part of a blatant conspiracy by the surrounding, increasingly affluent, two-car-garage communities to keep their property values up and their blood pressures down" (Beatty 56). If "all domination is ultimately maintained through social-control strategies" (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists* 42), then the elimination of Dickens—and of the black and brown identities contained therein—is directly linked to the power structures maintained by those powerful social forces of white supremacy.

As Bon Bon struggles with the erasure of Dickens, so too do his fellow Dickensians. Early in the novel, Bon Bon recounts tales of his father's role as a "nigger whisperer," a term he himself coined. Having an academic degree and being an important member of the community, Bon Bon's father was often called in times of panic

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<sup>10</sup> As previously mentioned, Beatty casts a wide net with his work, and Dickens contains a variety of racial and cultural identities. While Bon Bon often speaks of "blackness," there are other instances where the forces of white supremacy affect other non-white identities.

to assuage the fears, frustrations, and outbursts of those members of Dickens who were under tremendous stress. After the death of his father, Bon Bon begrudgingly takes up this mantle and attempts to help his peers. He explains that “Up until the city’s disappearance, the workload wasn’t so bad. I was an every-other-month crisis negotiator, a farmer doing a little niggerwhispering on the side” (Beatty 59). But after the sudden, silent erasure of Dickens, Bon Bon states “I found myself in my pajamas, at least once a week...bullhorn in hand, staring up at some distraught, partially hotcombed-headed mother dangling her baby over a second-floor balcony ledge” (Beatty 59), and proceeds to lament his inability to effectively de-escalate such situations. While the explanation is punctuated with humorous banter, Beatty cleverly reveals the cost of Dickens’s erasure. If the community is in fact read as non-white identity, then the “crisis” negotiation that is foisted upon Bon Bon can be read as a crisis of post-racial identity erasure. The citizens of Dickens are suddenly thrust into a liminal space in which their racial identity is stripped, and therefore they are left adrift in a climate that devalues their lives to the point of denying their very existence. In the face of such criticism, the post-racial response to such a claim would be that race is simply a construct, and therefore holds no real weight or bearing. However, this neoliberal strand from post-racial ideology is offered by those who are never in danger of such an act of erasure. While race may be a construct, Heath Pearson offers the reminder that “Race matters in a place. Race happens in a place. Minds do not exist outside of bodies, which do not exist outside of places” (45). Beatty’s satirical metaphor shows that he is well aware of the real conditions that race creates, as well as the conditions that inevitably result from the denial of racial identity.

It is not only the initial erasure of Dickens that exposes the toxic relationship between post-racial ideology and white supremacy, but also Bon Bon's efforts to re-establish Dickens as a community, and thereby re-establish non-white racial identity as meaningful within American society. Amongst Bon Bon's absurd propositions and subversive plans to speak on behalf of his fellow aggrieved residents is his attempt to force Dickens back into existence through "redefining" the town itself. In what amounts to a six-week project, Bon Bon literally paints a boundary around the town limits of Dickens while being escorted by local police. Upon its completion, Dickensians begin to traverse the newly re-imposed border, though some "elderly" individuals struggle with the crossing of the "single white line" (Beatty 109). Even Bon Bon second guesses his own actions, openly questioning the complexity of the Dickens/racial border and admitting "in the days after I painted it, I, too, was 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" (Beatty 109). The telling comparison of Dickens's new border to the police outline of a dead body serves as a stark reminder of the power that white culture exerts over non-white identities. And while Bon Bon may not single handedly be capable of resurrection, he states that he "like[s] the line's artifice" and "the implication of solidarity and community it represented. And while I hadn't quite re-established Dickens, I had managed to quarantine it. And community-cum-leper colony wasn't a bad start" (Beatty 109). And so, Beatty posits the first steps to pressing back against emboldened white supremacist culture and post-racial ideology is convincing those victims of erasure that their identity does matter. Lines are drawn, imaginary or tangible, that shape reality for all people on both sides of the post-

racial divide. To be stripped of this construct is to be stripped of one's being, and therefore relegated to the borderless margins of society.

The erasure metaphor in and of itself serves as the basis for Beatty's satirical rendering of post-racial America, but it is incomplete without analysis of the "white" response to Bon Bon's refusal to accept the disappearance of Dickens. Interspersed throughout the novel are moments in which Beatty uses his characters as a means to shed light on those forces against which Bon Bon fights. *The Sellout* is structured with a framing device which, early on, hints at Beatty's frustration with the wider, dangerous white response to the criticism of post-racial ideology. In a disjunctive narrative move, the novel opens in a brief prologue with Bon Bon facing trial in the U.S. Supreme Court *after* his various attempts to re-establish Dickens and expose the lies of post-racial ideology. He casually and wryly describes the crimes he is being charged with as "Allegations that in summation accused me of everything from desecration of the Homeland to conspiracy to upset the apple cart just when things were going so well" (Beatty 15). Beatty's disdain for post-racial ideology is palpable through his protagonist's claim that his "crimes" simply disrupt a long-established status quo that serves those who have always been in power, i.e. white America. Bon Bon's alleged crime is the crux of Beatty's satire, as the character later states in conversation:

"It's illegal to yell 'Fire!' in a crowded theater, right?"

"It is."

"Well, I've whispered 'Racism' in a post-racial world." (Beatty 262)

This line, delivered in what might be considered the novel's climax, is a fundamental proclamation of the novel's thematic drive, for Bon Bon's insistence on the existence of



racism is a reaction to the denial of racial identity in the world around him. Bon Bon understands that “overt racism ain’t what it used to be” (Beatty 243), but also realizes that “racism’s everywhere” (Beatty 244), even when race is deliberately devalued and ignored. Beatty uses these moments to echo the notion of color-blind racism. Bon Bon’s journey exemplifies Bonilla-Silva’s claim that “racial inequality is still produced in a systematic way (i.e., there is still a racial structure in America), but that the dominant practices that produce it are no longer overt, seem almost invisible, and are seemingly nonracial” (“The Structure of Racism” 1363). The fact that Bon Bon’s efforts land him in the highest court of the American judicial system speaks to the “systematic” ways that “almost invisible” racism thrives within post-racial ideology.

Through his protagonist’s inner dialogue, Beatty unveils the nature of white supremacy’s existence in the alleged post-racial era. The satirist comments that to even acknowledge racism and an imbalance in racial power dynamics in a time where a black man has been elected president is absurd in and of itself. This is, in part, how white supremacy is able to thrive—through the denial of truths and convincing American society that “things [are] going so well.” However, it is always a matter of *for whom* things are going so well. In remembering the words of his deceased father, Bon Bon remarks “People eat the shit you shovel them” (Beatty 55), and with this line—which, in the context of the novel, applies to all races—Beatty brings to light the reality of the post-racial lie. Later in Bon Bon’s trial, he muses “when folks say, ‘why can’t we talk about race more honestly’ What they really mean is ‘Why can’t you niggers be reasonable’ or ‘Fuck you, white boy. If I said what I really wanted to say, I’d get fired even faster than you’d fire me if race were any easier to talk about’” (Beatty 273). Beatty’s crafting of

Bon Bon's sarcastic dialogue touches upon the ways in which "post-racial thinking...cleverly shifts the burden of racialized thinking to the victims of racial inequality" (Teasley and Ikard 416). There can be no honest discussion when those who would point out racism are silenced by the false idealism that is often associated with post-racial thinking. The white response to Bon Bon's efforts does not offer a deeper examination of the issues he is able to drag into the spotlight. Instead, the response is to punish those speaking on behalf of a racial identity that is constantly under attack.

Beatty further expounds the idea that dominant white voices are more highly valued than victims of racial inequity as Bon Bon's trial continues. At one point, Bon Bon states that "Black people don't even talk about race. Nothing's attributable to color anymore. It's all 'mitigating circumstance.' The only people discussing 'race' with any insight and courage are loud middle-aged white men who romanticize the Kennedys and Motown..." (Beatty 273). His frustration echoes the ways in which "Neoliberal ideologies promote invisibility as opposed to illumination" and how "[these] ideologies overshadow current racial inequalities in the United States in order to advocate trust in the current system and place burdens on individuals as if [American] society exists in an equal playing field" (Perez and Salter 281). While I read Beatty's use of the word "insight" as sarcastic, he is quite clear that the hypothetical "loud middle aged white men" are afforded the courage to discuss race—through their prism of neoliberalism and color-blind racism, of course—only because of the security privileged to them by the skewed landscape of post-racial ideology. The white response creates a vicious loop that both fuels and feeds upon the imbalance of power that serves as the basis of white supremacy.

Beatty takes a more direct slash at white supremacy—specifically white male privilege—in a latter scene of *The Sellout* which depicts Bon Bon deciding upon a sister city for Dickens.<sup>11</sup> After debating the rather hilarious listing of potential sister cities, Bon Bon narrows his choice to the telling “Lost City of White Male Privilege” (Beatty 149). Through Bon Bon, Beatty delivers a blistering sermon on white male privilege, writing:

we found it impossible to ignore the impassioned pleas of the Lost City of White Male Privilege, a controversial municipality whose very existence is often denied by many (mostly privileged white males). Others state categorically that the walls of the locale have been irreparably breached by hip hop and Roberto Bolano’s prose. That the popularity of the spicy tuna roll and a black American president were to white male domination what the smallpox blankets were to Native American existence. (Beatty 149)

The satiric genius of Beatty’s work lies in the absurdly apt pairing of Dickens—read as erased black identity—with the very force that lent a hand in said erasure. Nearly every line of this speech is directed at the tenets of color-blindness, neoliberalism, and post-racial ideology itself. Beatty sarcastically calls diversity a plague set forth upon the white power structures that course through American society. Of course, Beatty cannot go without stating that, for the denizens of the Lost City of White Male Privilege, to even acknowledge its existence is to acknowledge racial inequalities. This directly relates to the ideas of neoliberal ideology explained by scholars Perez and Salter: “socioeconomic inequality is not an issue of discriminatory systems privileging Whites, but an issue of individual failings or shortcomings” and that “white Americans in the United States

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<sup>11</sup> This, along with his painting of the lines around Dickens, is one of Bon Bon’s more concrete acts of re-establishing the community.

express little patience for racism faced by Black people in this country and proceed to place blame on the individual as opposed to the system”(277). Beatty is in fact attacking the “discriminatory system” which has long insulated white supremacy, and in doing so exposes its absurdity.

Bon Bon’s internal excoriation of white male privilege concludes with his ultimate decision that *The Lost City* would make a highly appropriate sister city to Dickens. Bon Bon explains the irony of white males reciting “mythological truisms like ‘We built this country!’” because America was built and is run by “brown men...hammering and nailing, cooking world-class French meals, and repairing your cars” (Beatty 149). In a vicious last jab, Beatty writes to those subscribers to post-racial ideology: “How could you call or think someone a ‘nigger’ when your own kids, lily-white and proper, call you ‘nigger’ when you refused them the keys to the car? When everyday ‘niggers’ were doing things that they aren’t supposed to be able to do” (Beatty 149-150). For Beatty, *The City of White Male Privilege*’s desire to be the sister city of Dickens makes that ultimate absurd statement about the white response to the damages of post-racial ideology. There is great irony in the simultaneous denial of white male privilege by those who most benefit from it and the wish to be paired with Dickens, the “Last Bastion of Blackness” (Beatty 150). For Beatty, even in the white response of denial, there is a desire to dominate and maintain power, voice, and control over non-white racial identity.

In the context of the satires *Get Out* and *The Sellout*, there is no way to unravel the knot of white-supremacy and post-racial ideology. The two concepts are so interwoven with each other that it is impossible not to discuss one without the other.

However, Peele and Beatty are not satisfied to simply show the symbiotic relationship between white power and a denial of non-white identity. Instead, their works ignite a conversation about the wider implications of post-racial ideology. The creation of the evil Armitage family and the silent erasure of Dickens serve as warnings to both those non-white victims of covert white supremacy and those who perpetuate forces of systemic oppression.

## **Chapter 2: America's Legacy of Slavery in *The Sellout*, *Get Out*, *Sorry to Bother You*, and *Pym***

In the previous chapter of this project, I discussed the ways in which African American satirists like Jordan Peele and Paul Beatty cast their insightful gazes upon the target of post-racial ideology as it relates to more covert forms of white supremacy in contemporary America. And while my analysis of that relationship with those texts is by no means exhaustive, there are other threads that Peele and Beatty, along with artist/filmmaker Boots Riley and writer Mat Johnson, share when crafting their particular satirical visions. In examining *The Sellout*, *Get Out*, Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*, and Johnson's *Pym*, it becomes clear that the artists' indictments of post-racial ideology all share another specific sub-target: the legacy of American slavery. Of this very idea, Glenda Carpio notes "Americans will continually return to the breach of slavery without resolving it" and that "given...the lasting impact of slavery, each generation of Americans needs to map its own relationship to a breach that has fundamentally shaped the nation" (9). In suggesting that America will always return to slavery, Carpio contextualizes and justifies the work of the satirists in the post-racial debate. While taking different paths, each of the works here satirize the false notion that America has somehow overcome its history of slavery, and therefore has moved beyond its implications. Whether addressing the ways in which slavery still exists or the ways in which slavery's imprint on black identity remains a visible and powerful force, the four satirists' works strip away the layers of post-racial ideology in order to pull America's legacy of human subjugation and racial violence out of the recesses of history and place it in the foreground of modern discussions of race.

Before analyzing the elements of the works that deal with slavery, I feel it important to acknowledge a few other artists whose efforts are not unlike that of Peele, Beatty, Johnson, and Riley. These four satirists are by no means the latest, last, or even most popular voices to delve into the history, horrors, and repercussions of American slavery. In March of 2019, *The Guardian* writer Colin Grant published an article spotlighting the work of recent writers such as Sara Collins, Marlon James, and Esi Edugyan as they carry on the literary tradition of addressing slavery and slave narratives (Grant, “We’re Still Living With It”). In the last decade, Steve McQueen’s film *12 Years a Slave* garnered critical acclaim with its adaptation of Solomon Northup’s memoir. Just a year prior to McQueen’s film, Quentin Tarantino directed the violent and divisive revenge tale, *Django Unchained*. Post-soul writer Colson Whitehead published his novel of magical realism, *The Underground Railroad*, in 2016. The aforementioned Dave Chappelle’s Comedy Central sketch show satirized the 1977 adaptation of *Roots*, and even went so far as to air a segment in which some of his recurring characters travel back in time to murder a slave owner. These works connect to Toni Morrison’s revered 1987 novel *Beloved*, as well as Octavia Butler’s time-travelling slave narrative *Kindred*, to show a continuum of artists who have always found ways of challenging America’s complicated history with the sins of slavery. In this sense, it is unsurprising that satirists of the supposed post-racial era are engaging the idea as well.

To fully appreciate the satirists’ interpretations and iterations of slavery that comprise and populate their works, it first seems reasonable to briefly touch upon America’s contentious relationship with its history of slavery. In 2019, the *New York Times Magazine* published a project titled “The 1619 Project,” which engaged the

complicated conversation about the lasting effects of American slavery as the country encountered the 400th anniversary of Africans being brought to the Americas. Editor in Chief of *The New York Times Magazine* Jake Silverstein explains that “The goal of The 1619 Project is to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation’s birth year. Doing so requires us to place the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country” (“Why We Published the 1619 Project”). With this motivation in mind, the work of the 1619 Project’s contributing writers frame the texts of the four satirists analyzed in this project: placing black identity and the consequences of slavery at the center of the American narrative. The satirists, however, are approaching an American narrative that has shifted to one of post-racial ideology. And with post-racial ideology comes a conundrum that sees race being ignored while memories of slavery are repressed and buried. In denying racial constructs as meaningful to identity, America’s history of slavery is dulled. Yet, for the descendants of slavery, the undeniable truth of the matter remains—the legacy of slavery cannot be ignored, let alone changed or repaired.

While there is no need to belabor the well documented history of American slavery, it is important to touch upon its problematic presence in the United States’ fundamental narrative. From its very inception, the nation has grappled with its relationship to the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans. Contributor to The 1619 Project Nikole Hannah Jones explains that “The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie” because, in regards to the Declaration of Independence, “the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of



thousands of black people in their midst” (“American Wasn’t a Democracy”). Jones’s point connects to America’s continual denial of slavery’s lasting impact on contemporary society. In fact, exposing the lie of this very denial partially drives the work of Peele, Beatty, Riley, and Johnson. The active forgetting of a history and country built around the racial violence of slavery is unsurprising in terms of the United States’ national identity.

America’s history of slavery is, by all accounts, an insoluble national embarrassment—yet it is inextricably tied to the American story. Ira Berlin perhaps states the notion most succinctly in noting that “American history cannot be understood without slavery. Slavery shaped America’s economy, politics, culture, and fundamental principles. For most of the nation’s history, American society was one of slaveholders and slaves” (2). Furthermore, historian James Oliver Horton explains of America’s relationship of slavery that “For a nation steeped in [a freedom driven] self-image, it is embarrassing, guilt-producing, and disillusioning to consider the role that race and slavery played in shaping the national narrative” (36). The idea of having such a vile formative element connected to a country which claims freedom and liberty for all citizens is certainly problematic to many facets of American identity. In the previously mentioned piece from the 1619 Project, Nikole Hannah Jones goes on to note that “The sin [of slavery] became this nation’s own, and so, too, the need to cleanse it. The shameful paradox of continuing chattel slavery in a nation founded on individual freedom, scholars today assert, led to a hardening of the racial caste system” (“American Wasn’t a Democracy”), and so suggests that while America has always searched for a

way to purge the ills of slavery from its annals, the history of slavery has in fact further solidified racial stratification.

One of the ideas addressed throughout the satires examined in this thesis is the notion that within contemporary America, slavery still possesses power over black identity. While this project's focus lies with the satirical renderings of slavery as they may connect to post-racial ideology, it is important to note how slavery still exists in the contemporary consciousness. Much like the emergence of post-racial ideology on the whole, some scholars suggest that the election of Barack Obama inadvertently contributed to the minimization of slavery's continued presence in the fabric of America. Dylan Rodriguez explains that through Obama's 2008 election "the vision (and for many, the fear) of a Black president calls forth the possibility of a national racial salvation that can (finally) escape the absolute historical gravity of the genocidally antiblack peculiar institution" (24). Whereas for some Americans, the election of a Black president signified the end of racial identity as a meaningful construct, it also appeared to diminish the lasting significance of slavery. In referring to the resulting ideological shift after Obama was sworn into office, Rodriguez posits that:

Slavery's lasting legacies of social, economic, and cultural violence thus disappear in the redemptive allegory of a righteously antiracist American body politic. This teleology of racial progress allows for a compartmentalization of genocidal slavery's temporality, spatiality, and sociological effect: it is a bygone period of American history, rather than a fundamental social architecture and discursive matrix guiding the formation of American racial power relations during and beyond the plantation era. (23)

And so, like with the previously discussed relationship between non-white racial identity and post-racial ideology, the alleged “progress” achieved by American society simply minimizes and, as Rodriguez claims, “compartmentalizes” the legacy of slavery to the point of negligibility. Similarly, Ira Berlin explains: “What makes slavery so difficult for Americans, both black and white, to come to terms with is that slavery encompasses two conflicting ideas...One says slavery is one of the greats crimes in human history; the other says men and women dealt with the crime [and] grew stronger because of it. One says slavery is our great nightmare; the other says slavery left a valuable legacy” (7). In the context of post-racial ideology, the side of the contradiction claiming slavery was in some way valuable informs a more idealized view of racial progress while denying the centuries-long toxicity of slavery which prevented social and cultural mobility of black people.

Naturally, any dismissive perspective of slavery is challenged by scholars and artists alike. For example, Ava DuVernay’s 2016 documentary *13th* exposes the ways in which slavery as an institution within American society continues after its abolition and still exists within the American penal system. In discussing the relationship between President Obama and the legacy of slavery, Dylan Rodriguez touches upon this same idea in writing that “criminalization is now the leverage point through which the ‘duly convicted’ are made available for enslavement. The slave relation itself is not abolished” (Rodriguez 36). For DuVernay, Rodriguez, and countless others, slavery has simply been repackaged and repurposed. Rodriguez goes on to point out that “A racial chattel logic permeates the contemporary US social formation, most stridently in the mutually constituting production of its policing, criminalization, and imprisonment apparatuses”

(Rodriguez 33), and by doing so contextualizes the legacy of slavery in modern America. There is no way to circumvent America's history of slavery because it is so essential to the past and present story of American. As Ira Berlin states, "The stench of slavery's moral rot cannot mask the design of American captivity: to commandeer the labor of the many to make a few rich and powerful" (Berlin 6). Such a statement can easily be applied to modern America's issues of race and class—be it within the justice system, penal system, or widespread economic disparity between the rich and the poor. And it is exactly the "moral rot" of slavery permeating America's past and present that inspire the satirical visions of Peele, Beatty, Johnson, and Riley.

While each of the four satirists examine the legacy of American slavery through different means, Beatty's route within *The Sellout* serves as an apt starting place for analysis. One of the most comical and pertinent elements of *The Sellout* is the character of Hominy Jenkins—a former understudy to Buckwheat Thomas and the last living actor of *The Little Rascals*, a racist television program that drew upon tropes of minstrelsy. Whereas the other satirists addressed in this chapter use their works to reveal the ways in which slavery either still exists or is recurrent within American society, Beatty's satirical figure of Hominy exposes the ways in which slavery is, and shall forever be, an indelible piece of black identity—even in a moment where race is stripped of its import and meaning.

Hominy is introduced early in the novel as being essential to the protagonist Bon Bon's vision for dragging the erased community of Dickens back into existence. Beatty casts the character as an oddity in Dickens. The children that Bon Bon grew up amongst would often visit the retired actor and watch recorded tapes of his time spent on *The Little*

*Rascals*. Beatty is quick to strike out against the mistreatment of Hominy and the inherent racism of the show, Hollywood, and America as a whole. In doing so, Beatty sets the stage for Hominy's satirical connection to slavery over the course of the novel. The character is mentioned early on as Bon Bon reminisces about his childhood habit of watching old footage of Hominy in cut sketches and outtakes from *The Little Rascals*. In explaining the unused tapes of young Hominy, Bon Bon realizes that "as the celluloid snippets of censored slapstick racism piled up on the cutting room floor, it became apparent that Hominy was a sort of *Little Rascals* stunt coon. His film career was a compendium of unseen outtakes where he's doused with all things white" (Beatty 71). In retrospect to the older Bon Bon, it is clear that young Hominy was nothing more than a racist punchline, and furthermore, taken advantage of by the powers of white Hollywood. In his inclusion in *The Little Rascals*, Hominy was reduced to simply a black body in relief against the oppressive forces of whiteness. In being subjected to constant humiliation without any sort of real recognition or payoff, Hominy becomes symbolic of bodily exploitation. In essence, he was enslaved since his childhood.

Much in the same way that Dickens is analogous to black identity in the post-racial moment, Hominy's character becomes analogous to black identity's deep-rooted connection to American slavery. The first mention of Hominy reveals that the former child actor, now an old man was, Bon Bon's first "nigger whispree" (66)<sup>12</sup> in need of help after various attempts to take his own life. Such a revelation reveals a character whose life is marked by turmoil, from childhood through old age. After being inspired to visit Hominy, Bon Bon finds the old man having stripped his clothing and attempting suicide

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<sup>12</sup> Refer back to the previous chapter for examples of Bon Bon's efforts to assuage the anxiety of his fellow Dickensians.

via hanging. After cutting down and cradling the naked geriatric, Bon Bon muses “if Hominy had been born elsewhere, say Edinburgh, maybe he’d be knighted by now,” but ultimately realizes that “in America Hominy is no source of pride: he’s a Living National Embarrassment. A mark of shame on the African American legacy, something to be eradicated, stricken from the racial record, like the hambone, Amos ‘n’ Andy, Dave Chappelle’s meltdown, and people who say ‘Valentine’s Day’” (Beatty 76). Not unlike the mark of slavery within American history, Hominy is representative of a past that cannot be shaken or altered. And while Hominy’s childhood of exploited blackness in the service of racist humor is certainly a “mark of shame on the African-American legacy,” he is also a woeful victim. When asked why he tried to kill himself, Hominy replies “Why, massa? Because when Dickens disappeared, I disappeared. I don’t get fanmail 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. Is that too much for an old coon to ask, massa? To feel relevant?” (Beatty 77). Hominy’s claim regarding his own relevance runs parallel to Beatty’s metaphor of the erasure of Dickens and black identity. As post-racial ideology takes hold and erodes black identity, Hominy loses what little sense of individuality he may have ever possessed.

In the stripping of his identity—along with his clothing<sup>13</sup>—Hominy is left without purpose in the post-racial world. This fact is bizarrely rectified by his pledging to become Bon Bon’s slave in repayment for the life-saving measures performed by the reluctant hero. When Bon Bon refuses his services, the self-enslaved Hominy explains:

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<sup>13</sup> While I believe that Beatty is partially playing up the sexualized nature of Hominy (which is often used to comedic effect throughout the novel), I also feel that the Hominy’s stripping of his clothing is symbolic of his loss of identity and reduction to the basest level of his humanity and history, i.e. his slavery.

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. A slave who just also happens to be an actor. But being black ain't method acting. Lee Strasberg could teach you how to be a tree, but he couldn't teach you how to be a nigger. This is the ultimate nexus between craft and purpose, and we won't be discussing this again. I'm your nigger for life, and that's it. (Beatty 77)

For Hominy, the only reaction to the damage inflicted by post-racial ideology is to revert back to a troubling and horrible history of enslavement that existed long before his time with *The Little Rascals*. Hominy's request to be Bon Bon's slave is the satirical vehicle through which Beatty attacks the lasting power of American slavery on black identity. Hominy's suggestion to "accept who we are and act accordingly" is both a lamentation and a proclamation. When black identity is nullified by the systemic forces of white supremacy via post-racial ideology, the only legacy left is that which first brought African bodies to the United States. Hominy considers himself "a slave who happens to be an actor," and in this statement, Beatty's vision of where America has left black identity becomes apparent. Hominy's self-identification as a slave before his beloved profession reveals the reduction of blackness to a history of slavery. In the totality of Hominy's claim to Bon Bon that "I'm your nigger for life, and that's it," Beatty takes aim at an irreparable and irremovable history of American slavery. In Hominy's eyes, the punishment, degradation, and violence of slavery transcend time and history, and tragically provide him with some semblance of identity in the absence of his previously held beliefs about his life. The only alternative is either death (thwarted by Bon Bon) or to live in irrelevance. And so, Hominy embraces his awful history—both personal and

racial—as a slave.

Hominy’s self-imposed slavery serves as a constant reminder to Bon Bon—and to Beatty’s audience—of how the systemic oppression of slavery shapes the very foundations of black identity in America. As is the case with the novel’s broader treatment of post-racial ideology, Beatty employs a great deal of wild circumstance and absurdity to depict Hominy’s indebted servitude to Bon Bon. For example, Hominy is described as being ineffective as Bon Bon’s slave. At times, he dresses up and poses as “a life-size lawn jockey” (Beatty 81) in the yard. Other times, he wishes to act as Bon Bon’s foot stool, crouching over to provide a step for his master. Later in the novel, he dresses as a posh British butler, dons an accent, and provides Bon Bon with “black hash” to smoke. But underlying Hominy’s outlandish, comical behavior is a need to *feel* something, which leads back to Beatty’s commentary on the formative legacy of slavery. In the wake of his initial insistence on being a slave to Bon Bon, Hominy requests of his new master “beat me within an inch of my worthless black life. Beat me, but don’t kill me, massa. Beat me just enough so that I can feel what I’m missing” (Beatty 78). To combat the feeling of irrelevance, he leans into a history of racial violence—stemming from slavery—through which he can grasp some sense of racial identity. As Bon Bon observes “The teary-eyed joy and thankfulness [Hominy] showed me as he crawled, not away from the beating, but into it” (Beatty 78), the irony of the situation becomes potent. In a macabre and grotesque satirical turn, the violence is a comfort to Hominy—and a stark reminder of a horrific past for black identity.

Hominy returns to this ironic tendency throughout the novel. For example, he visits a dominatrix whom he pays to degrade him with racial slurs, whip him, and play



out an odd Civil War fantasy (Beatty 84). For his birthday, he states “Just get me some racism and I’ll be straight” (Beatty 128), and proceeds to have a celebration on a newly segregated bus.<sup>14</sup> Hominy thus relegates himself to the role of abused, racialized slave because he feels he is left with no other option. As James Oliver Horton writes, “The things Americans take for granted about race, those assumptions for which no explanation is required, those feelings of which they are barely conscious, are the products of a culture that slavery and efforts to justify it have shaped” (54). In Beatty’s satire, Hominy exemplifies the “product” to which Horton refers. As a shaping force upon American culture, slavery has left Hominy—and black identity as a whole—without a viable way to move beyond history. Instead of the false view that post-racial ideology is progressive in its color-blind perspective, Beatty suggests that the ideological force is regressive to the point of leaving nothing but slavery as a cultural touchstone for black Americans.

Ultimately, the humor and irreverence of Beatty’s satirical creation is tempered by the insight and poignancy of his message. The work of Glenda Carpio effectively contextualizes Beatty’s treatment of Hominy and the legacy of slavery as she notes “How can slavery, the sorrow and anger that it has signified for African Americans and the devastation that it caused Africa, serve as the subject of humor? It becomes such a subject only in the most piercing tragicomedy, one in which laughter is disassociated from gaiety and is, instead, a form of mourning” (7). Beatty uses the madcap humor and irony of Hominy to strike out at the absurdity of all that filters into the alleged post-racial era—not the least of which being America’s history of slavery. Hominy’s very existence as a

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<sup>14</sup> The segregation of the bus is an experiment of sorts, crafted by Bon Bon as one of his efforts to expose the lies of post-racial ideology. This will be further addressed in the following chapter.

relic of the past evokes feelings of disenfranchisement and violation that reach back far further than his time with *The Little Rascals*. Not unlike archetypal fool characters such as the gravedigger from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hominy unmasks truths. For Beatty, these truths lie in an acceptance of slavery's everlasting imprint on black America.

While *The Sellout* exposes the ways in which black identity can be reduced to the history of American slavery through post-racial ideology, Jordan Peele and Boots Riley suggest a more purposed presence within contemporary America—one that sees the legacy of slavery actively pursued and perpetuated. In both Peele's film *Get Out* and Riley's film *Sorry to Bother You*, the satirists take modern slavery to its extreme ends through horrific and, in the latter case, absurd visions of bodily domination through which white characters and entities use slavery to maintain power. Unlike Beatty's Hominy who falls back into his own cultural history of slavery when faced with the elimination of his identity, Peele and Riley's characters are directly subjected to more active and exploitive iterations of slavery. In the previous chapter, I discussed Peele's satirical creation of the Coagula procedure, through which white minds are transplanted into black bodies by a covert group of white supremacists. The connection to slavery that Peele makes is quite clear—the victims' bodies are under the control of a dominant power, and hence, enslaved. They are stripped of individuality and repurposed as slaves in service of whiteness. More simply stated, the black bodies are commodified and turned into empty vessels for whiteness. And while this is perhaps obvious in its satirical vision, Peele's creation of the auction scene in which the protagonist Chris is sold calls for closer examination.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> It is also worth noting that *Get Out* is not Peele's first foray into satirizing slavery. For example, an episode from his Comedy Central show *Key and Peele* once portrayed two slaves arguing as they are

Prior to the actual revelation of the Coagula procedure, Peele satirizes the constant evaluation of black bodies by whiteness in search of domination, and therefore suggests that post-racial ideology carries forward the legacy of American slavery. In the critical study of African American representation on film titled *Framing Blackness*, Ed Guerrero notes that “the psychic residue of slavery continues to taint subtly all black-white social relations and transactions, if for no other reason than the fact that African Americans still find white domination a persistent condition and black folk more disadvantaged and marginalized than any other group or social collectivity in the society” (42). Peele takes this idea to its extreme in recreating a slave auction under the thin guise of post-racial posturing. For Peele’s film, the “psychic residue of slavery” is anything but subtle, as Guerrero suggests.

After his first night spent with the white family of his girlfriend Rose Armitage, Chris is unwittingly the subject of an appraisal and sale that takes place under the guise of a yearly party. As Chris and Rose meander through the crowd, Peele cuts together a short montage that portrays white potential buyers committing microaggressions—defined by Columbia professor Derald Wing Sue as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (273)—as they evaluate Chris. The first couple encountered, a retired professional golfer and his wife, look to Chris’s physique and enquire about his athleticism. The man oddly attempts to qualify his own liberalism by stating that Tiger Woods is the best golfer he’s ever seen. He then asks to see Chris’s “form”—thus treating Chris as a specimen and potential tool for command. Peele then cuts to a second couple consisting of a clearly ailing man using

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auctioned off. While this sketch more closely aligns itself with the humor outlined by Glenda Carpio, *Get Out* takes a far more grave and acerbic approach to the satirizing American slavery.

oxygen and a wheelchair, led by his well-dressed wife. The woman immediately comments on Chris's handsomeness, and proceeds to grasp his arm, feeling his biceps and chest. She goes so far as to ask Rose if the stories of black masculinity and sexual prowess are true. It is clear that the couple are both seeking a sexual avatar for the husband and fetishizing Chris's blackness.<sup>16</sup> The third shot of the sequence involves a man explaining to Chris that "Fairer skin has been in favor for the past what, couple of hundreds of years? But now the pendulum has swung back. Black is in fashion"—all while tellingly clothed entirely in the color black. The brazen statement of the man's desire for "blackness" leaves Chris speechless.

To Chris, these interactions are perceived as ignorant microaggressions by the white party guests as they unwittingly show their post-racial playing cards. These moments are, by satirical design, meant to cause discomfort in viewers who have attached themselves to Chris. The audience becomes aware of the fact that Chris is slowly being reduced to a body without identity. This transformation is akin to Aimé Césaire's notion of "thingification," in which the body of the "indigenous man"—Chris, in Peele's vision—is turned "into an instrument of production" (42). Chris is robbed of his humanity and repurposed to "produce" a service for consumption by whiteness. And, in the greater context of Peele's satirical vision, the microaggressive interactions connect post-racial ideology to the commodification of blackness, and in turn, the continued enslavement of black identity. The horror of the scene's evocation of slavery lies partly in the nonchalance of the elite white liberals vying for ownership of Chris. Their appraisal

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<sup>16</sup> In a brief sequence embedded within the auction scene, Chris calls his friend, Rod, and explains his strange stay at the Armitage home. Rod jokingly warns Chris that white people often want to turn black people into "sex slaves". While Chris laughs off Rod's suggestion, the wild accusation actually bears some truth for the white attendees of the party.

of his worth satirizes not only the continued existence of systems of slavery within America, but also the disproportionate power of whites over blacks. The party culminates in a silent auction of Chris while he is distracted and escorted away by Rose. Interestingly, Peele is able to evoke the menace and horror of body trafficking without having his protagonist present. While in one location Dean Armitage stands next to a portrait of Chris and runs the bidding war, Chris elsewhere expresses his fears and anxieties to Rose. With his vulnerability on display, Chris is portrayed as being afraid of the situation in its entirety. Perhaps most terrifying of all is the prospect that like the African slaves auctioned off to plantation owners, Chris is powerless. For the elite white buyers, he simply a product to be purchased, stripped, consumed. In short, Peele suggests that post-racial ideology not only keeps white supremacy alive, but in fact, reveals the legacy of slavery to be ever present in the modern moment through racial capitalism.

In a work that seems to toe the line between the absurdity and style of *The Sellout* and the shades of science fiction of *Get Out*, Boots Riley's film *Sorry to Bother You* takes Peele's bodily terror and enslavement to cartoonish extremes. Riley's film is set in an alternate, surreal version of Oakland, CA where an African American protagonist Cassius Green<sup>17</sup> finds success at the telemarketing firm Regal View by using his "white voice"—the dubbed voice of actor David Cross—to make sales and ascend a strange corporate ladder. Over the course of this bizarre, literally colorful film, Cassius becomes involved with a rebellious labor union, dabbles with a radical protest group, debates racial representation with his artist girlfriend, and eventually uncovers a grand capitalist

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<sup>17</sup> The obvious pun of the name speaks to Riley's take down of capitalism and the power that wealth has over Americans of any race or cultural identity.

conspiracy that ends in horrible—yet comical—strangeness. It is important to make clear that Riley's take on capitalism moves hand in hand with his treatment of slavery—especially given the aforementioned context of slavery's impact on the economic structures of America. While I address Cassius's use of his "white voice" in the third chapter of this thesis, Riley's portrayal of slavery makes for an interesting pairing with Peele's *Get Out*.

Whereas Peele's depiction of slavery is focused on a small group of victims, *Sorry to Bother You* addresses the legacy of slavery by satirizing it on a far grander scale. Early in the film, Cassius is shown watching a television commercial for the "Worry Free Solution," which entails a lifetime labor contract with the Worry Free company—a global corporation of cheap labor and exploited workers. The commercial itself is set in the Worry Free living quarters, which all too closely resemble prison cells. The commercial voice over claims "Worry Free is a revolutionary new business and lifestyle model taking the world by storm" and that when signing a Worry Free contract, participants are "guaranteed employment and housing for life." The commercial goes on to tout state-of-the-art living spaces, ample food, and "fulfilling" work. The obvious irony of the Worry Free company is that there are no worries when enslaved—only exploitation. While this seems absurd, Cassius is initially intrigued. As he leans in towards the TV, he absently asks his girlfriend if she would ever consider a contract with the corporatized enslavement to manual labor. His character is cast as being desperate for a means of existence, living in his uncle's garage and driving a barely functioning car. On his way to work, he buys forty-two cents worth of gas. This social condition of desperation and near poverty permeates the film in many facets, from other characters in search of prosperity

to images of people living without homes and navigating urban decay. To a disenfranchised American like Cassius, Riley seems to suggest that contracted enslavement like the Worry Free solution may be the only reasonable option for viability.

Like Peele's use of the Armitage family in *Get Out*, Riley uses a faux progressive white elite as both antagonist and symbolic representation of domination. The film is dotted with Worry Free advertisements in the form of posters and billboards, many of which are vandalized by a group looking to expose the sinister nature of the Worry Free corporation. At one point, Cassius and his coworker find themselves in a bar where the news reports "violent protests" outside the Worry Free headquarters. The report features a brief interview with Worry Free CEO, Steve Lift. While his name, like the pun of Cassius Green, echoes the views of upward mobility and self-made economic uplift often associated with neoliberalism, he also serves as an absurd mouthpiece of Riley's satirical target. When faced with the claim that Worry Free is simply a new version of slavery, Lift replies "no conclusively, no. Our workers do not sign contracts under threats of violence. So therefore, the comparison to slavery is ludicrous and offensive. We are transforming life itself. We are saving the economy. We are saving lives." The hip, fashionably dressed Lift<sup>18</sup> attempts to rationalize the economic value of his own brand of repackaged slavery and distinguishes it from slavery by noting the non-violent nature of hiring workers. Given the social circumstances that Riley conveys through the struggles of Cassius and his peers, Lift's faux progressive attitude and righteous stance towards the Worry Free contracts reveal the ways in which slavery is not only pushed to the backs of American minds, but is recycled for the modern era. Lift not only attempts to separate

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<sup>18</sup> I mention the costuming of Lift only to further clarify the caricature crafted by Riley. Lift is not portrayed as the elite business type. Instead, he is cast as a more progressive and youthful individual.

himself from slavery—he outright denies it. Riley also takes aim at the ways in which the issue of slavery is not addressed head on, or at least, not taken seriously by those who control systemic power and have the capacity to make change. As the news report moves to a protester interviewed after Lift, a bartender casually changes the television station to the fake “I Got the Shit Kicked Out of Me” game show. While Riley may be lashing out at American entertainment habits and a predilection towards vapidty, his damning of the societal indifference towards social injustices of slavery and economic inequity rings clearly.

Riley’s satirical vision of modern slavery ends not with the portrait of the Worry Free corporation, but continues with the ultimate plan of CEO Steve Lift to turn his “workers” into hyper-productive horse/human hybrids, called “Equisapians.” While this is certainly more cartoonish than Peele’s vision of supplanted white minds enslaving black bodies, Riley’s depiction of body horror and enslavement still serves as a satirical reminder of slavery’s legacy of degradation and dehumanization. The revelation of the Equisapian plot ignites the film’s final act. After moving to the top of the corporate ladder as a telemarketing sensation, Cassius finds himself at a party hosted by Steve Lift. As the party devolves into a drug fueled orgy, Cassius is sent to Lift’s private office where he is offered a position at Worry Free. After consuming what appears to be cocaine provided by Lift, Cassius heads to the bathroom and mistakenly discovers grotesque horse/human hybrids chained up in captivity. Capable of speech and obviously capable of emotion, the monstrous creatures beg for mercy and help. Cassius retreats to the CEO’s office where Lift outlines his visions of productivity via the transformation of workers into Equisapians. In an animated video explaining the process, a narrator comments that



throughout human history, man has been able to use tools in order to survive and thrive in the world. The narrator asks “but what are tools if not the natural extension of the appendages with which we are born?” and goes on to explain the process of turning humans into hybrid animal workers that are “Stronger, more obedient, more durable, and therefore, more efficient and profitable.” The plot twist is indeed strange, and even comical—even for a film that leans into its own sense of absurdity. Regardless of execution, Riley’s outcry against the legacy of slavery is effective.

By virtue of Lift’s Worry Free Equisapian video, Riley exposes the dehumanization of slave labor, from the initial African slaves up through the disenfranchised socioeconomic bracket depicted throughout *Sorry to Bother You*. While perhaps blunt in its delivery, the message of the Equisapians being used as “tools” that are “efficient and profitable” reveals the true nature of slavery in all iterations. Riley’s satirical creation provides a visual rendering of Ridwan Laher’s claim that “The African slave is thus no more than a workhorse - an artefact of rudimentary labour with no real historical or dialectical consequence over the developmental course. In the discourse of race and racism, racialised objects are gazed upon and their identity and value are prescribed from outside” (105). For Riley, the “workhorse” metaphor is taken quite literally. The same might be said of Peele’s vision of slavery in *Get Out*. Not unlike Riley’s Equisapians, the black bodies in Peele’s film are simply tools to achieve the ends of those white minds in power. Whether it is the corporate greed of the Worry Free system or the elite white liberals of *Get Out*, the bodies are “racialized” and valued only for their potential productivity. For the villains of Peele’s work and Steve Lift from *Sorry to Bother You*, there is no willing connection to slavery in its historical sense, because

said characters reap the benefits of systemic oppression. To remember a past of racial violence would mean to acknowledge a present and future of exploitation. In avoiding the past, there is an active dismissal of Anthony Bogues's argument that "racial slavery created deposits which fundamentally shaped both capitalism and political modernity" (372). Peele and Riley take the aforementioned theory of "racial capital" to the far ends of satire, and in doing so, work to uncover the ways in which the legacy of slavery is simultaneously ignored and perpetuated in post-racial America.

Any discussion of contemporary satirists' examinations of American slavery would be incomplete without the inclusion of Mat Johnson's acclaimed 2011 satirical novel, *Pym*. In a 2011 interview with the University of Oregon, Johnson explains that his novel is a sequel—of sorts—to Edgar Allen Poe's only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* ("UO Today"). While Johnson acknowledges the seemingly unsuccessful nature of the source text, he explains that Poe's racialized perspective on an adventure story provided a springboard for his own examination of whiteness, blackness, and the relationship that continues to exist between the two racial constructs. Poe's novel follows the seafaring voyage of Arthur Gordon Pym and his "black"<sup>19</sup> companion Dirk Peters, during which they travel south towards Antarctica and discover an all-black island called Tsalal. In the same interview, Johnson explains Poe "imprinted his racial subconscious on to the page" as he demonizes the black inhabitants of Tsalal, casting them as base savages ("UO Today"). Eventually, after the characters leave the island, the novel ends with Pym and Peters encountering a mysterious, looming white figure

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<sup>19</sup> Johnson notes that in Poe's novel, Peters is not of African descent, but rather Indian. Johnson suggests that this is a narrative move employed by Poe to make the character more redeemable to 19th century audiences, given the associations of blackness both racially and symbolically.

emerging from the white ice of the Antarctic shelf. Upon seeing the figure, the characters sail into the ice and disappear without resolution. While others have tried to rectify the fragmented and ambiguous ending of Poe's novel,<sup>20</sup> Johnson saw a challenge and opportunity of bringing the narrative into the contemporary world, and thus crafted the multi-genre satire *Pym*.

The concept and plot of *Pym* make for an odd, hilarious, and insightful satirical exploration of race in the modern world. In discussing the origins of *Pym* in relation to Poe's racist perspective, Johnson explains that "a lot of [Americans'] racial discussions today are haunted by [a racial binary]" and that he sees an "inability to find peace between [blackness and whiteness]" ("UO Today"). Given its 2011 publication, it is safe to assume that Johnson's hope to explore the "racial binary" is directly linked to the emergence of post-racial ideology throughout the Obama era. In order to satirize how "[society has not] figured out new ways to dismantle [issues of race]" ("UO Today"), Johnson takes the basic narrative structure of Poe's novel and sends his own protagonist, disgraced bi-racial academic Chris Jaynes, on an adventure in search of Arthur Gordon Pym's legacy and the island of Tsalal. The writer describes his novel as existing in three pieces ("UO Today"), with the first depicting Chris Jaynes's discovery that Poe's novel is in fact a historical document of real events. Chris assembles a team populated by his activist-turned-diver cousin, Booker Jaynes, Chris's best friend Garth, and various other figures, to venture to the last known location of Arthur Gordon Pym—Antarctica. The second portion of *Pym* has Chris and his crew finding that the shrouded white figures that appear at the close of Poe's novel are real, monstrous albino humanoids that live deep

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<sup>20</sup> In the University of Oregon interview, Johnson explains that writers like H.P. Lovecraft and Jules Verne attempted to tackle the oddity that is Poe's work with varying success.

below the icy surface. As they venture into the ice with the creatures—dubbed the Tekelians—Chris and his companions are enslaved. The third and, in Johnson’s own words, surreal final piece of *Pym* sees Chris escaping his enslavement, taking refuge in the self-sustaining biodome of a fictional painter, and eventually attempting genocide against the Tekelians. In all its creativity, one of the most pressing and prominent elements of the novel is Johnson’s treatment of slavery. While the previously discussed satirists deal with slavery’s imprint on black identity and modern modes of enslavement, Johnson casts light onto the cyclical nature of enslavement, showing how the legacy of American slavery underlies the “binary between black and white” that continues to exist within post-racial America.

There are two larger scale instances of Johnson addressing the legacy of American slavery throughout *Pym*: the actual enslavement of Chris’s crew and the neo-plantation inadvertently created within the Karvel biodome. The former is perhaps a more direct representation of slavery than any that has been addressed in this chapter of the project. It is very early in the encounter between Chris’s all black crew and giant white Tekelians that slavery is forced upon the explorers. Prior to the enslavement, Johnson is careful to alert his audience to the specter of American slavery looming for his characters. For example, Booker Jaynes has a fascination with collecting relics and artifacts of slavery. The narrator himself admits that he possesses a passion for reading slave narratives.<sup>21</sup> Such subtle nods to American slavery not only foreshadow the forthcoming ordeal that Chris and his crew face, but also suggest the lingering presence of slavery in the lives of black Americans living under a supposed post-racial society.

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<sup>21</sup> This actually informs his fascination with Poe’s novel and the character of Dirk Peters.

Soon after the discovery of the Tekelians, the monsters immediately create a black versus white dichotomy that results in enslavement. Barring the actions of Chris's poorly regarded "slave master"—referred to as Augustus—the Tekelians subject the crew to a violence and subservience that is evocative of American slavery. At one point, a particularly dominant Tekelian gruesomely maims one of Chris's crewmates by throwing a knife into his eye. The crew are treated as property, and are therefore condemned as subjects to whiteness. They suffer under the icy conditions and perform laborious jobs in service of the Tekelians. Johnson is not subtle here, but he does not need to be. Through the immediate division of racial boundaries for the sake of domination and control, Johnson suggests that the legacy of American slavery is inescapable, even at the extreme ends of the earth.

In what might be read as a metatextual moment within the novel, Chris Jaynes bemoans the propensity of writers to re-create slave narratives, and in doing so ironically reveals the terrible and lasting power slavery has on the African American narrative. Chris admits "I am bored with the topic of Atlantic slavery...because so many boring people have talked about it," and goes on to explain how a variety of artists and writers "appropriate [slavery], adding no new insight or profound understanding" and "instead [degrade] it with their nothingness" (Johnson 159). And while Chris—and by proxy, Johnson—lashes out against some representations of slavery as being reductive to the point of "pungent cliché" and "[perversion into] Afrocentric bling," he admits that "the topic of chattel slavery is still unavoidable for its American descendants" (Johnson 159). To the narrative of black Americans, and of course, to America's national narrative, slavery is an inescapable foundational story. It cannot be cut out from history. Chris

explains his frustration that he feels slavery has become one of the only black stories to tell, and that even though slavery is exceeding difficult to discuss respectfully, the originality of slave narratives share a motivation of “[documenting] the atrocity of chattel slavery and thereby assist in ending it” (Johnson 159). The irony of the rant lies in the fact that the speaker has in fact been enslaved and is now being forced into a recreation of the sullied American narrative of chattel slavery. In what amounts to a comic punchline to his diatribe, Chris claims “Turns out that through my thorough and exhaustive scholarship into the slave narratives of the African Diaspora in no way prepared me to actually become a fucking slave. In fact, it did quite the opposite” (Johnson 160). Through the use of the ironic circumstances involving the enslavement of Chris’s black crew by the white Tekelians, Johnson cleverly suggests that regardless of the study, scholarship, and artistic renderings of slavery, its impact is such that it cannot ever be fully comprehended and packed away as a horrible historical relic.

Along with the physical enslavement of the crew and Chris’s ironic relationship to slave narratives, the discovery of an oddly preserved Arthur Gordon Pym living under the ice of Antarctica with the Tekelians serves as a potent sign of slavery’s lasting legacy. Being of the 19th century American South, Pym maintains a blatantly racist ideology unbecoming the alleged post-racial present, and cannot grasp the audacity of a free, all black crew. Regarding Pym’s symbolic resonance, Kimberly Chabot Davis notes “Johnson symbolically implies that white privilege dies hard, just as remnants of antebellum racial ideologies persist into the American present” (27-28). Of the white Tekelian monsters with whom he has lived for centuries, Pym remarks “These creatures...they are perfection incarnate. They are the end of being, for after them there is

nowhere to go. You...are in the presence of the *Gods*” (Johnson 140). Comparatively, he continually refers to Chris’s fellow crew members as “chattel,” though excusing the light-skinned Chris from inclusion until his bi-racial identity is revealed. Pym’s worship of whiteness and instant valuation of the black crew as property suggests that, like the well-preserved man, the ideology that drove American slavery in its earliest conceptions still lives on through a reverence for and dominance of whiteness. Pym is a man out of time—much like the suggestion of slavery’s legacy and power in an era of color-blindness and post-racial ideology, yet undeniably the two are intertwined.

Following Johnson’s use of his characters’ enslavement under the Tekelians to satirize the persistent legacy of American slavery, he uses the introduction of Thomas Karvel and his wife as a means to critique the recurring imposition of slavery in the allegedly post-racial moment. In an examination of capitalism throughout the novel, Tim Christensen describes Karvel as “a paranoid American conservative” (168) made famous and wildly rich for painting quaint, dreamlike European landscapes. While the character is in fact a fictionalized mockery based on painter Thomas Kinkade, he is also the subject of deep obsession for Chris’s best friend, Garth. Having been originally included as a part of Chris’s crew, Garth buys his way out of Tekelian enslavement and reappears to help Chris escape the icy caverns. The two men, with the ancient Arthur Gordon Pym in tow,<sup>22</sup> flee across the frozen wasteland in search of the haven of Thomas Karvel, whom Garth insists sequestered himself in an Antarctic home. Much to Chris’s surprise, he and Garth are saved by Karvel, who lives in a custom-made dome.

Under Johnson’s careful satirical pen, Karvel’s biodome is both a recreation of his

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<sup>22</sup> Pym does not make it into the dome, but later appears in the climactic showdown between the Karvel complex inhabitants and the Tekelians.

painting, *Dome of Light*, and an experiment in perfection and control. In the dome, Karvel creates a world to replicate the vivid pastoral rendering of his own painting. Crafted in order to escape a speculative apocalypse via nuclear holocaust and/or disease,<sup>23</sup> the meticulously maintained, self-sustaining dome is a technical wonder, described by Chris as “stunning [in] the amount of detail that went into the realism of the place” (Johnson 240). Yet there is an odd artificiality to the dome, one that sees a river run in vivid colors and taste of Kool-Aid. The environment’s temperature is precisely maintained, and “the sky, although stuck in perpetual sunset...was clearly an actual photograph of a Karvel original” (Johnson 240). In referencing Baudrillard, Christensen notes that “Johnson has created a stunning example of a *simulacrum*, the self-contained image world that is both the dream and the nightmare of post-modern culture” (178). For Karvel and his adoring fan Garth, the faithful recreation and “simulacrum” of the source painting is something to be cherished and even worshipped. The perfection of the surreal images in Karvel’s painting actually become his reality, and therefore separate him from the reality of others.

While the habitat is, of course, a near perfect visual reproduction of Karvel’s painting, the dome is also attributed ideological and political elements that deepen Johnson’s satire of American slavery. Along with the vivid optics of the dome, Karvel pumps in pre-recorded soundbites of conservative pundits such as Bill O’Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Glenn Beck, which play in loops (Johnson 236). Of the recordings, Karvel explains they “[make the dome] America. America without taxes, and big government,

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<sup>23</sup> The latter half of the novel suggests that the world has in fact fallen into some sort of global catastrophe, indicated by sparse news and an eventual cessation of communication between Chris’s crew and the rest of the world.



and terrorist bullshit. I knew this was coming, end of the world, been saying it since the sixties. I got out because I love it too much, really. But I'll never leave the U.S. of A. God bless America" (Johnson 236). Furthermore, the outside of the entire structure is painted to resemble an enormous American flag planted in the middle of the Antarctic snow. Karvel later goes on to state that his dome "is a place without history. A place without stain. No yesterday, only tomorrow. Only beauty. Only the world the way it's supposed to be" (Johnson 241) and that "there is only one vision. Perfection isn't about change, diversity. It's about getting closer to that one vision" (Johnson 251). Davis describes Karvel's creation as "a contemporary manifestation of the imperialist impulse to write one's desires on the landscape of the new world" (30). Karvel treats the biodome as a canvas that is to be shaped to his vision of American society. In a creation "without stain" and "without history," Johnson is able to satirize the desire to exclude America's past—not to mention any unwanted ideology—from its future. In continuing on from Davis's analysis of Karvel being a "vehicle for [Johnson's] critique of perfection-seeking utopias that often result in an obsession with purity and the exclusion of "imperfect" others (31), the arrival of Chris and Garth at the *Dome of Light* corrupts Karvel's vision, and in doing so, suggests the recurring presence of slavery in any vision or version of America.

As the two black men pose a disruption to the carefully balanced system created by the Karvel couple, the landscape of the dome shifts to a neo-plantation in which Chris and Garth are once again subjected to enslavement. Given the limited food supply

warranted by the supposition that only two humans were to inhabit the Edenic structure,<sup>24</sup> the pair are afforded a small, empty cottage on the outskirts of the dome. Due to the climate maintained within the structure, Chris and Garth are given Karvel's clothing to wear, but note that "Only the pants fit...and even those just made it as far as our shins" and that "above the waist we were naked" (Johnson 240). The imagery is striking and suggests more commonly conjured depictions of African slaves. And, with the justification of sustainability, Chris and Garth enter into what amounts to a sharecropping system in which they are allowed to cultivate food on a plot of land—albeit one that the Karvels "...can't see from [their] place" (Johnson 243). And so, the two men begin their enslavement within the allegedly utopian reality created by the Karvels. Chris goes on to later refer to the operation as a plantation (Johnson 249), and also explains of the manual labor that after a few days "it felt good to work, to focus on my hands instead of my mind. To not be a freeloader on someone else's land" (Johnson 244). And as Chris starts "to tune the ever-present [conservative] voices out," he also admits that the system of the Karvel dome "was so much a creation of our host that, in a Lockean sense, it was a relief to establish some form of ownership through our labor" (Johnson 244). Such an admission posits that, even after being chastised by Garth for racializing the Karvel's generosity, Chris falls victim to the systemic pressure of slavery imposed—by design or not—within the dome.

Through Karvel's efforts to maintain a perfect vision of an unblemished America, the institution of slavery recycles itself and becomes a norm for both the white

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<sup>24</sup> Upon their initial arrival to the *Dome of Light*, Garth says to Chris "This is Eden, dog. As in 'the garden of'" (Johnson 234). The irony of Garth's evaluation and the conditions he soon faces further add to Johnson's satirical examination of race in America.

and black inhabitants of the dome. Ironically, the history of which Karvel wishes to relieve himself in maintaining the habitat self-replicates and follows the terrible American narrative of slavery. As Karvel's "clean canvas... a place with no violence and no disease, no poverty and no crime" is challenged by the arrival of black bodies, slavery is quietly reinstated without protest or question. The bold image of a blank canvas, read as "white" and pure, racializes the dome and informs the same systems of prejudice that have always plagued American society. In the "simulacrum" that is the amalgamation of Karvel's surreal imagery and a new American experiment "without stain," Johnson suggests that slavery, and therefore the imbalance of equity and power between white domination and non-white identity, are the reality. There is no ideology that can wipe the stain of slavery from the American story. Even in the most hermetically sealed, meticulously planned, carefully redesigned microcosm, the sins of history loom large and powerfully in the American reality.

In a moment that occurs prior to Chris and Garth's arrival at the Karvel dome, Chris comes to a realization about whiteness on the whole—one that contextualizes not only Johnson's satirical examination of slavery's legacy in the American narrative, but also the works of Beatty, Peele, and Riley as well. Regarding Pym's steadfast worship and justification of the Tekelians, Chris explains "That is how they stay so white: by refusing to accept blemish or history. Whiteness isn't about being something, it is about being no thing, nothing, an erasure. Covering over the truth with layers of blank reality just as the snowstorm was now covering our tent, whipping away all traces of our existence from this pristine landscape" (Johnson 225). Like the post-racial ideology that erases racial identity, Johnson and the other satirists suggest that whiteness maintains

power in the American system by “refusing to accept blemish or history,” and perhaps more specifically, the “blemish” of slavery on American history. For the satirists discussed in this chapter, not only is the relationship of power between whiteness and slavery very much alive in post-racial America, but the legacy of slavery is inescapable for black identity, and therefore needs meaningful engagement. Whether or not rectification for the crimes of slavery is even possible seems almost to be a moot point; for, as Ridwan Laher claims, “What is needed is a more direct confrontation with the legacy of slavery that seeks to deconstruct the value of race and its implied influence over the discourse of what it means to live inside the American nation” (112). Be it through Beatty’s *Hominy*, Peele’s *Coagula* procedure, Riley’s *Equisapians*, or Johnson’s post-racial retrofitting of Poe’s novel, satire provides a worthy vehicle to confront and challenge not only the history of American slavery, but its devastating and perhaps irreparable implications for the American present and future.

### Chapter 3: The Sympathetic Sell Outs of *Pym*, *Sorry to Bother You*, and *The Sellout*

In examining the satirists' connections between post-racial ideology and white supremacy, as well as the legacy of American slavery on black identity, a third interconnected thematic thread emerges which further expands the collective critique offered in the works analyzed in this thesis. With the exclusion of Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, Johnson, Riley, and Beatty all tackle the notion of the racial "sellout" figure in their respective satirical visions. The "sellout" character is not a new trope in literature, and it is certainly not new to African American culture and literature. In his work regarding different forms of selling out, Professor Randall Kennedy explains that "When used in a racial context amongst African Americans, 'sellout' is a disparaging term that refers to blacks who knowingly or with gross negligence act against the interest of blacks as a whole" (4). For an identity with a history of enslavement by white Americans, selling out and racial betrayal can be considered high crimes. For example, Andrea L. Dennis published an article in the *Marquette Law Review* that examines the repercussions of blacks working as informants during slavery. Such acts created a cultural effect that rippled out through time and set the stage for a long history of dealing with selling out.

Be it in fictional representations or sociological study, it is clear that the sellout figure is not one that can be easily reconciled, regardless of time. In a literary and cultural sense, Harriet Beecher Stowe's character Uncle Tom is, in many ways, the original iteration of the black sellout figure. In a 2008 interview with NPR, Professor Patricia Turner explains that the actual narrative of the character and the representation of being a sellout do not exactly coincide ("Why African Americans Loathe"). However, the damage of the misrepresentation is seemingly irreversible, as Adena Spingarn notes that

the figure “has taken on a uniquely dynamic cultural life beyond the pages of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, becoming a widely recognized epithet for a black person deemed so subservient to whites that he betrays his race” (1). Spingarn goes on to explain that the term “is as much a product of black discourse as of the white imagination, a figure drawn upon and shaped by fundamental debates within the black community over who should represent the race and how it should be represented” (5), and therefore situates the complicated nature of the sellout figure both inside and outside black identity. Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* brings to mind another prominent example of the sellout trope in African American literature. In a more contemporary turn, the same can be said of Spike Lee’s character Pierre Delacroix, portrayed by actor Damon Wayans in the 2000 film *Bamboozled*. The repeated appearance of the sellout figure in explorations of blackness speaks to a continued fascination and relationship with racial representation and allegiance. Of this idea, Randall Kennedy notes that “Angst over complacency, collaboration, and defection continues to occupy a salient place in the Afro-American mind and soul” (58). And so, the sellout figure arrives in the post-racial era being reviled for pursuance of success at the expense of the greater community. And while there are certainly other examples which offer more critical and damning examinations of selling out, I argue that the satirists analyzed in this thesis use the sellout trope as a lens through which they skewer the social conditions that warrant the alleged disloyalty of the black “sellout.” With careful consideration of the satirical context in which the characters exist, it becomes clear that the artists are less concerned with condemning the sellout, and more concerned with exposing the systemic powers of whiteness that foster such betrayal.

For Johnson's novel *Pym*, the presence of two "sellout" characters is shaped by the necessity to survive the imposition of enslavement. While Johnson's rendering of the characters Booker Jaynes and Nathaniel Latham certainly speak to the post-soul satirist move of intragroup critiques of black identity, these characters also complicate the very nature of selling out via their extreme conditions. As the leader of Chris Jaynes's Antarctic crew, Booker is initially described as a former activist who not only celebrates his own blackness, but openly despises the power of whiteness. In searching for someone to helm the crew, Chris explains that his cousin Booker "was probably the world's only civil rights activist turned deep sea diver," and that "the successes of the struggle in the South left him feeling distraught and betrayed—he was just getting started when those Negroes down there called it quits" (Johnson 70). In alluding to the Civil Rights Movement, Chris suggests that Booker is not only a man in need of a cause, but one who feels empowered through the confirmation of his convictions and beliefs. Booker basically admits this in explaining how disappointed he was in the black community when "not one goddamn person came to the Twin Towers bombing rally. Not one, not even the Negroes bothered" (Johnson 72). In continuing his fit of rage, Booker asks "what the hell has this country come to, that people won't rally against injustice? What the hell is wrong with a society that won't even bother marching anymore?" (Johnson 72). When pressed by Chris about what or whom Booker desires people should march against, he reverts to answering with his hatred of white identity.

In many ways, Booker is driven by a need to resist those powers that he feels oppress him. In what Chris deems as paranoia, Booker explains of his own diving career that white people follow him around "so they can come right up behind me and steal

something” and that “white folks...wake up every morning and say, ‘Hmm, I’m getting kind of low, I wonder what Captain Jaynes is finding that I can take from him” ( Johnson 73). While somewhat comical, Booker’s fears speak to the inequity and disenfranchisement still faced by the black community in the post-racial moment. His feelings of being a victim of theft might also be read as representing a history of Africans being kidnapped from Africa and of culture being appropriated to white ends. For Booker, his identity is locked in a perpetual state of victimhood at the hands of white supremacy. Until his enslavement by the Tekelians in Antarctica, he is quite immovable in his disdain and distrust of whiteness. Rather hilariously, Chris points out that “The only white folks Captain Jaynes, Race Man, invited onto our crew’s Antarctic mining mission was White Folks, his dog. And even that dog was a thickly spotted Dalmatian” (Johnson 99). Chris explains that his cousin loves exclaiming the dog’s name in anger, creating a scenario in which the “Race Man” blames “White Folks” for his every vexation. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, Booker is a collector of slave artifacts and “black memorabilia” (Johnson 100). Chris notices that the chains forming the collar around White Folks’s neck are in fact “old Slave bonds” that Booker asserts are “real enough for White Folks” (Johnson 100). The entire exchange is rife with Johnson’s clever, satirical use of pun and double entendre—especially in considering that Booker is figuratively enslaving his own dog. When asked why he collects such reminders of a horrible history, Booker simply states “I’m collecting evidence” (Johnson 100). At one point, Chris mentions that Poe’s work *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* is in fact real, to which Booker plainly responds “Life is too short to be reading more books by white people. Especially dead ones. We got our own books. We got our own



culture” (Johnson 100). For the captain of the crew, blackness is always in opposition to whiteness.

Booker’s distrust of whiteness is most evident in his evaluation of the Tekelians. After the initial encounter with the monsters, the crew ventures into the ice where they interact with the previously analyzed Arthur Gordon Pym. As the crew tries to decide what to make of the Tekelians—be they some sort of missing evolutionary link or otherwise—Booker reduces the humanoids down to their whiteness in stating “They’re just crackers” (Johnson 141). He continues “Trust me, I know white folks, I can smell them a click away. These are just plain old, backward-ass white people. Big ugly ones, but still” (Johnson 141). As another crew member tries to point out the Tekelians’ qualities which might separate them from “any white folks [he’s] ever seen in [his] whole life”(Johnson 142), Booker continues to equate all whiteness to evil. In a later discussion of the price to be paid for the crew’s potential freedom, Booker explains of the Tekelians: “They’ll want more later, Trust me. They’re white folks. Eventually they’ll try to take everything” (Johnson 150). For Booker, the supremacy and crimes of racial inequity are ubiquitous amongst any and all versions of whiteness. Although his claim may be reductive, Booker is eventually proven correct by the Tekelians’ treatment of the all-black crew.

In what is perhaps most telling and most closely tied to the post-racial context of *Pym* as a whole, Chris explains Booker’s reaction to being called “nigger” by the ancient, preserved antebellum Arthur Gordon Pym:

Captain Booker Jaynes did not lose his composure or for that matter seem in any way surprised or offended by Arthur Gordon Pym’s word choice. In my cousin’s

head, this was how all white people were...they were all racist, they looked at all of us as niggers and were blind to us in every human way.\* Even after Obama; a black president in Booker Jayne's mind was just the nigger white folks voted to be their servant. (Johnson 145)

Given the narrative format through which Johnson crafts *Pym*, the narrator Chris uses footnotes throughout the text to further comment on the happenings of the Antarctic adventure. Within the aforementioned quote, Chris uses a footnote to explain "My cousin felt that a white liberal was a Caucasian who said to himself or herself every day, 'Don't hate niggers. Don't hate niggers.' And that the rest of white America's racial perspective was 'Don't let the niggers hear you say 'nigger' out loud'" (Johnson 145).

While it might be argued that Booker is unfairly critical of all whiteness, the satirical use of his perspective makes way for Johnson's ongoing examination of post-racial ideology and racial inequalities. For Booker, there is always an underlying manipulation being perpetrated by white people. In Chris's explanation of Booker's undying distrust of whiteness, Johnson briefly turns his gaze towards the white liberalism that is more blatantly engaged by satirists like Peele or Beatty. By attributing such a perspective to a character like Booker, Johnson suggests that even seemingly benign representations of whiteness must be scrutinized.

Johnson's representation of Booker as a "Race Man" positioned in staunch opposition to any forms of whiteness plays ironically against his acceptance of enslavement at the hands of the Tekelians, thus earning him the designation of "sell out" by Chris. However, this selling out of his racial identity is complicated by the need for survival in the icy tunnels of the Tekelian world. Soon after the crew is enslaved, Chris

finds Booker working to break up ice in service of his female Tekelian captor, Hunka. When asked by Chris about the possibility of not being rescued by the world outside of Antarctica, Booker simply replies “Then we will do what our people have always done: we will wait for our chance. And we will endure” (Johnson 173). Chris goes on to describe the oddity of Booker’s tone, noting “he seemed more at peace in [the stomping of ice] than I had seen him in any of his [crew leader] duties," and that in his voice “There was relief...As if the man’s worst fears in life had been realized and justified all in the same moment” (Johnson 173). There is a sense that, like Hominy in Paul Beatty’s *The Sellout*, Booker is falling into a role he feels has been permanently imprinted within his racial identity. Yet the difference lies in Chris’s observation that Booker feels “relief” in the manual labor thrust upon him by his captor.<sup>25</sup> For a character who—in comparison to other characters in *Pym*—most boldly pushes back against whiteness and oppression, the turn to docile slave waiting for opportunity is ironic and unsettling. Whereas Beatty’s Hominy designates himself a slave in relation to his always having been subject to forms of exploitation and slavery, Booker’s acquiescence to slavery ventures further into “selling out” as he begins to sympathize with his captor.

The irony of Booker’s turn is cemented not only by his budding relationship with his female master, but also in his newfound attitude towards whiteness. As Chris attempts to flee the Tekelian ice tunnels, he stumbles upon Booker having sex with Hunka in their “home.” When urged to leave, Booker replies “No, we shouldn’t leave this place” (Johnson 208). Booker goes on to explain that he feels as if he needs to stay and engage the Tekelians. Chris so much as calls him out on being “the one always

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<sup>25</sup> Hominy also feels relief from his enslavement—but only because he seeks a clear identity instead of a death in obscurity.

talking about getting away from normal white folks” (Johnson 209), yet Booker wishes to embrace the Tekelian culture in order to resist from within. While this may not seem like racial betrayal on the surface, Booker hints at his own admiration for the Tekelians, explaining “They got courts: we can litigate our freedom. They like ice sculpture: we can learn the medium and then outshine them...we will teach them to respect us...then they will be forced to love us” (Johnson 209). To Chris, Booker seems to have lost his mind. In what may be read as a psychological response of Stockholm syndrome, Booker’s qualifying of the Tekelians suggests an internalizing of the white supremacy that oppresses him. Having lived with his captor, Booker slowly starts to empathize with whiteness in a way that was previously antithetical to his own ideology. When Chris claims that Booker has “sold out” because he is “screwing that ice ape,” Booker becomes highly defensive and retorts with “Don’t talk about Hunka like that...Shut your mouth. That is a special creature there. Don’t add insult by pretending like you don’t think she’s fine” (Johnson 209-210). The irony of the situation lies in the fact that prior to Hunka, Booker was incredibly critical of all representations of whiteness. Yet in his newfound partner, Booker sees no fault, exploitation, or manipulation. The man who once was upset by the black community’s failure to rally against injustice now fawns over his white captor. Booker ends the conversation in claiming there is “no point in running anymore, can’t you see that. We stay, and we struggle. Because the struggle is who we are” (Johnson 2010), and in doing so gives up on his long-established identity of black rebelliousness. In Booker’s acceptance of slavery, Johnson seems to suggest a more sympathetic view of selling out. Not unlike the reality for African Americans in the

allegedly post-racial era of America, Booker has been reduced and broken by systems of whiteness.

Booker Jaynes is not the sole character within *Pym* to commit the act of “selling out” his blackness; there is also the secondary character of Nathaniel Latham, who becomes a Tekelian sympathizer in order to more easily survive his own enslavement. Being described as a Morehouse College alumni and entertainment lawyer, Nathaniel is in fact the new husband of Chris’s former lover, Angela. Together, Nathaniel and Angela are a part of the crew which venture down to Antarctica. There is a pseudo-love triangle that plays out over the course of the novel, but the real satirical value of Nathaniel comes when he eventually turns into an opportunistic ally to the Tekelians. It is important to note that at a variety of times throughout the novel, the lawyer looks for ways to exploit and capitalize on the situation in which the crew finds themselves. He is more concerned with the financial repercussions of naming and claiming the ice caves than he is of the mysteries below. In learning that Arthur Gordon Pym has lived so long due to the consumption of a foul liquor made from fermented whale urine, Chris claims Nathaniel is intrigued at selling the liquid back to civilization. Nathaniel’s exaggerated capitalistic predilections lay the basis for his selling out to the whiteness of the Tekelians.

After being injured in the ice caves and cast away by his “owners,” Nathaniel rationalizes the actions of the Tekelians—and thereby rationalizes the enslavement of his fellow crew members. In talking to Chris, Nathaniel claims “I’m a businessman...I know what I’m seeing here. They don’t hate us...they just want us to do their work for them, to get a return on their investment” (Johnson 197). While Chris sees his enslavement as “personal” (Johnson 197) and a terrible display of inhumanity, Nathaniel recasts the

situation as a business transaction. In doing so, he removes any human element from the crime of enslavement. He goes on to explain his need to be useful to the Tekelians, and therefore valuable to the point of being kept alive. Nathaniel learns the Tekelian language, because for the lawyer, “life is all about assets” (Johnson 197). While Nathaniel may seem pragmatic, he is also highly opportunistic. He shows little allegiance to his crew or his racial identity, but in doing so is able to survive. Nathaniel is simply self-serving in his bowing down to whiteness.

It is in the ultimate fates of the two characters that Johnson examines the cost of selling out one’s racial identity for the sake of survival. As addressed in the preceding chapter, the novel’s third section mainly takes place at the Karvel Biodome—a simulated “paradise” created by the eccentric, conservative painter Thomas Karvel and his wife. After Chris and Garth begin to settle into new lives with the Karvel couple, the Tekelians emerge from the ice and mount an attack on the biodome in order to preserve their own habitat.<sup>26</sup> The other characters return to the narrative as the conflict erupts, reuniting Chris and Garth with the rest of their crew. It is in this closing section that both Booker and Nathaniel fully commit to their “selling out” by pledging allegiance to the white Tekelians. In what amounts to a visual pun of sorts, Johnson uses color to represent their betrayal. Upon his arrival, Booker is described as being “so pale from his discomfort that he had gone from brown to gray” (Johnson 280). The same is said of Nathaniel, as Chris describes him “...shivering in the cold. His face drained to a mortal gray” (Johnson 275). In aligning themselves with the Tekelians, Booker and Nathaniel lose “blackness” both literally and figuratively, and in doing so, forgo their connections to the black

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<sup>26</sup> Maintaining the temperature of the Karvel biodome results in a melting of the ice caverns that house the Tekelians.

community. Johnson's subtle use of color suggests a finality to the two men's traitorous acts.

Booker and Nathaniel's racial "selling out" is further indicated through their capacity to embrace white Tekelian captors. In an attempt to protect the dome and survive a battle with the stronger humanoids, Chris, Garth, and the Karvels plan to poison the Tekelians in a great feast. Learning of the plan, Booker protects his lover, Hunka, further citing that the only way to survive is to submit to whiteness. Preserving food untainted by poison, Booker delicately feeds Hunka her meal while tending to her needs. Chris observes that "Even when he dabbed a smudge of cheese off the corner of her mouth, the other Tekelians apparently found this intimate gesture not the least bit out of the ordinary, the actions of a good slave and a good lover being more or less the same" (Johnson 300). For Booker, his means of surviving are connected to his captor, and therefore he treats her as a lover. Booker's selling out of his blackness is materialized in his embracing the domination of whiteness. When beckoned by his fellow crew members to escape, Chris explains "he's not coming. He's with that woman. He thinks he can make it with her instead" (Johnson 301). In essence, Booker sells out his blackness with the belief that folding to the power of whiteness represented by the Tekelians is the only way to carry on. For the former "Race man," this is a rather tragic turn. His "selling out" to whiteness comes when he feels there is no other choice for survival. However, in a horrifying ironic twist, Booker's newfound and—in his own view—subversive worship of whiteness leads to his death. In attempting to quell the Tekelians, Booker is brutally struck and knocked from the heights of the dome, and therefore betrayed by his submission to whiteness.

In using his protagonist's narration as a means of balancing his critique, Johnson explores the further complexity of racial betrayal in the character Nathaniel. Upon seeing the lawyer side with the Tekelians, Chris states:

Speak no ill of the successful black male sellout, for he has achieved the goal of the community that has produced him: he has 'made it,' used his skills to attain the status that would be denied him, earned entry at the door of the big house of prosperity. His only flaw is that he agreed to leave that community, its hopes, customs, aspirations, on the porch behind him. It is a matter of expedience as much as morality" (Johnson 271).

Like so many of the nuances in *Pym*, Johnson does not simply attack the "sell out" figure—he opens a dialogue. In some ways, Chris blames both the immediate and systemic circumstances for Nathaniel's selling out to the Tekelians. Is Nathaniel guilty of selling out? Yes. The same can be said of Booker. Can the two characters be blamed for their desire to preserve life by whatever means necessary? This question appears more complex for Johnson. As a post-soul satirist, Johnson looks inward by suggesting that Nathaniel has simply moved upward in pursuance of "the goal of the community that has produced him." Nathaniel's behavior can be read as a product of having been a part of a capitalistic culture. However, as Chris points out, by achieving said survival and mobility by embracing opportunism, Nathaniel leaves behind his black identity in service of whiteness.

Contrary to Chris's more complicated evaluation of Nathaniel's actions, Angela reduces her husband's betrayal to its most basic evaluation. Having more intimate knowledge than Chris, she claims "He's trying to be one of them, trying to get in



good...I've seen him act that way with potential corporate clients, that same groveling act. It's disgusting. He's limping around the tunnels wearing one of their robes now, tripping over the damn thing because it's too long" (Johnson 272). To Angela, Nathaniel is truly a sell out in that he not only acts in his own best interests but has attempted to assimilate with the culture of the enemy. In the last lines that Nathaniel delivers before both fully abandoning the crew and then ironically being swarmed by Tekelians, he pleads "There's simply nowhere to run to, don't you understand that? This is it. We need to get in with these people, make a place with them. Secure our positions. That's our reality now. Not some fantasy world" (Johnson 300). Nathaniel's final efforts to convince his former crew that the best chance for viability is to bow down to whiteness opens wider consideration of what leads to "selling out" in search of survival. While his personality is exaggerated to be opportunistic and capitalistic to a fault, there is a tragic element to Nathaniel's feeling nowhere else to turn but to the powers that have systematically devalued his racial identity. Much of the same can be said for Booker: without enslavement, would he have betrayed his racial identity? Through the two characters, Johnson suggests that the power and supremacy of whiteness not only oppress black identity, but it can lead to unwitting racial betrayal as a means of surviving the unlivable. In applying Johnson's satirical sellouts to a wider context, the novel serves as a warning to those who do not fully understand the circumstances that encourage a selling out of racial identity. Booker and Nathaniel are by no means guiltless in their decisions, yet Johnson avoids outright mockery or an invective satirical treatment. Instead, his work invites closer consideration of *how* black identity might arrive at the worship of whiteness in order to survive. With

the ultimate consequence of betrayal and death, Johnson's characters represent the tragic trajectory of succumbing to the pressures of capitalistic white supremacy.

In terms of "selling out" racial identity in service of success or survival, Boots Riley's protagonist Cassius Green in *Sorry to Bother You* serves as an interesting pairing with Johnson's characters in *Pym*. Whereas Booker and Nathaniel sell out in order to survive their enslavement at the hands of white creatures, Cassius sells out his racial identity in a more standard sense—out of a need for economic survival. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Riley's film is set in an alternate version of Oakland, CA where economic disparity is rampant amongst citizens. With the neo-slavery corporation Worry Free looming in the background, Cassius begins a job as a telemarketer at the firm, Regal View. Within the company, the most successful callers are deemed "Power Callers," and ascend to the top floors of the office building via a golden elevator. Early on, Cassius struggles to sell products to unwilling customers. However, an older coworker, Langston, encourages Cassius to use his "white voice" in order to make sales. In a brief comparison of the "white voice" in *Sorry to Bother You* and Spike Lee's film *BlacKkKlansman*, Doreen St. Felix explains the element as "white face—the act of reverse minstrelsy," made prominent by comedian Richard Pryor, and then carried on by comedians such as Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Dave Chappelle ("The Twisted Power of White Voice").

Yet Riley does not simply create a mockery of whiteness in use of the voice—he comments on the sociological and economic implications of racial identity. Langston tells Cassius that "[using the white voice is] like being pulled over by the police," to which Cassius replies that people tell him he already "talks white" and that it gets him nowhere.

Langston explains to Cassius “Well you don’t talk white enough. I’m not talking ‘Will Smith white’ ...I’m talking about the real deal.” While pinching his nostrils, Cassius mockingly asks if he is supposed to sound nasal, to which Langston replies:

I’m talking about sounding like you don’t have a care. Got your bills paid. You’re happy about your future. You’re about ready to jump in *your* Ferrari out there after you get off this call. Put some little breath in there...breezy like ‘I don’t really need this money.’ You never been fired—only laid off. It’s not really a white voice—it’s what they wish they sounded like. It’s like what they think they’re supposed to sound like.

Langston goes on to demonstrate his use of a “white voice”—which is an overdub provided by a different actor. The effect is a disembodied voice that is at once comical and unnerving.<sup>27</sup> He is able to project stereotypical whiteness through his call, and therefore capitalize on what the filmmaker suggests is the power of whiteness. Riley’s exaggerated use of the overdubbed voice speaks to Devon W. Carbado and Mitu Gulati’s explanation that “The ‘talking white’ dynamic is not just about speaking with a certain accent; it is also about the content of what we say” (48). The scholars go on to note that “Under this formulation of ‘talking white,’ anything an African American says that has the potential to minimize the extent to which others perceive her to be black is ‘talking white’” and that “Within majority-white workspaces, ‘talking white’ is more advantageous to an employee than ‘talking black’” (Carbado and Gulati 48). In Riley’s hands, the characters mask their racial identity in order to portray a more successful, lucrative, and privileged attitude that they associate with whiteness—one that betrays the

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<sup>27</sup> The first time Cassius uses his “white voice” for a group of people, his best friend comments that the act was “some puppet master voodoo shit. You sounded overdubbed”.

economic realities of their own lives. As a result, their performance is rewarded by an economic system which, in Riley's view, values white supremacy above racial authenticity.

As Cassius finds himself and his family in increasingly dire financial circumstances, he begins using his white voice. With this voice, described by Fenix as being "of no geographic region...psychotically chipper...[and] entitle[d]," ("The Twisted Power of White Voice"), Cassius is able to find a great deal of success and rise through the corporate ranks of Regal View. Eventually, Cassius becomes a "Power Caller," gaining entry to the top levels of the office building where he is forced to speak in his "white voice" all the time while brokering multi-million-dollar deals. As his new superior—another black man using a "white voice"—tells him, "We sell Power up here." Cassius's boss goes on to explain that Worry Free is in fact Regal View's biggest client—one to which the telemarketing firm sells "manpower." When Cassius asks, "so you mean we are selling slave labor to companies over the phone?" his boss simply replies, "hot damn you're a sharp one." The exchange further deepens Riley's satirical use of the overdubbed "white voice" from merely a device to something graver. In order to support his family, Cassius is given the opportunity to sell slavery en masse to the Worry Free company. His boss claims that "Worry Free has resuscitated America," and that the exploitation of lifetime contacts and cheap labor have bolstered the economy. With the offer of a presumably attractive salary, Cassius is faced with a choice: using his "white voice" to perpetuate the same systemic oppression that shapes his cultural past, or suffer in poverty.<sup>28</sup> While this is perhaps more blunt than the satirical underpinnings of

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<sup>28</sup> In yet another layer of irony, Cassius's uncle is so desperate for economic relief that he considers a Worry Free contract. While Cassius convinces him not to pursue the offer, he is later guilty of filling a

Johnson's *Pym*, the critique of the position foisted upon the black community is striking and poignant. In Riley's satirical vision, selling out to the systemic powers of whiteness that have always shaped America is the only option for prosperity and—more importantly—survival.

As is the case with the other satirists who examine the act of selling out, Riley is not content with simply having his character betray his racial identity. Instead, the filmmaker also investigates the costs of selling out. In a running visual motif throughout the film, Cassius is followed by a picture—or photocopied picture—of his presumably deceased father. The photograph portrays a man leaning against a car, wearing a fedora and smiling at the camera. The image is first glimpsed at Cassius's bedside. Laying with his girlfriend, Detroit, and staring at the photograph, Cassius expresses an existential fear of death and what he will leave behind once his life is over. Read metaphorically, Cassius is searching for guidance and contemplating his place and purpose—all while being observed by his father, i.e. the past. Over the course of the film's narrative, the photograph changes in what amounts to an evaluation of Cassius's actions when climbing the Regal View ladder to be a Power Caller.

While the photo initially serves as a hopeful reminder to Cassius, the image of his father “reacts” to Cassius's continued use of his “white voice.” After making his first sale of a Worry Free work contract, Cassius is handsomely rewarded and finds himself and Detroit living in a new apartment. Upon waking up after a night of celebrating, Cassius immediately uses his “white voice,” but is quickly scolded by Detroit for the

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similar contract, thereby exploiting another victim like his uncle. Under the absurdity of the plot, Riley manages to craft dense and meaningful questions of the consequences for selling out in search of upward social and economic mobility.

continued use of the voice outside of his sales calls. When Cassius claims he does not even realize he is using the voice, Detroit tells him “that’s a problem you know,” which is followed by a camera pan to the now changed photograph of his father. The image shifts from a once contented man to one who now holds his hands against his face in pantomimed shame. In the satirical vision of Riley, the photograph serves as both Cassius’s conscience and an evaluative reminder of his cultural identity. After being called out by Detroit for selling slave labor, Cassius exclaims “What isn’t slave labor?” and returns to work. Yet again, the picture—a copy that hangs in his office—changes to Cassius’s father giving him a thumbs down sign, indicating clear disapproval of his continued use of his “white voice” for personal gain. Yet for Cassius, the allure of opportunity and desperate need for economic relief supersedes his ability to see the fault of his selling out.

While Cassius is criticized for his pursuance of success at the expense of his identity, he also comes to understand the consequences of his racial inauthenticity in meeting the previously discussed character, Steve Lift. Even in being celebrated for his successful use of the “white voice,” Cassius is ultimately the victim of stereotyping and reduction at the hands of the elite white clientele for whom he works. At a party hosted by the Worry Free CEO, Cassius is put on display for his blackness. During the party, Lift encourages Cassius to tell an almost exclusively white crowd about “some of the Oakland gangster shit” he is sure his employee has experienced. The request is obviously indicative of Lift’s racist, stereotypical perspective on black urban identity. Led by the CEO, the crowd begins to urge Cassius to rap—a skill which he admits he does not possess. As Cassius finds himself perched on a staircase above the white crowd, music is

played while he stumbles through an awkward attempt at free-style rapping. As the crowd—and perhaps most importantly Lift—begin to show their disdain, Cassius starts to rhythmically chant “nigger shit” to the beat of the music. The partygoers begin to dance and chant along with Cassius while Lift nods approvingly. As the crowd drowns out Cassius, he begins to halt his own chanting and looks around the room, seemingly ashamed of his resorting to the use of a racial slur to both appease and excite the white audience. In what amounts to a sobering moment of discomfort, Cassius does not even need to conjure his “white voice” to sell out his racial identity—he simply succumbs to the pressure of the white partiers who have put him on display for their own amusement.

Before heading into Lift’s office and learning of the plan to turn workers into Equisapian hybrids, Cassius’s Regal View boss tells him “look here, youngblood: we don’t cry about the shit that should be, we just thrive in what is...opportunity.” Coming on the heels of his tragically racist and exploitive rap performance, the invitation to look forward to “opportunity” helps Cassius leave behind the guilt of selling out his black identity. He is eventually offered a chance to become Steve Lift’s ambassador to the Equisapian workers<sup>29</sup>—an opportunity he denies—and is unknowingly transformed into one of the inhuman hybrids in the film’s closing scene. While the film’s climax is not necessarily cohesive, the final ironic twist of Cassius becoming an Equisapian monster suggests a karmic punishment for his selling out. Not unlike Johnson’s characters of Booker and Nathaniel, Cassius sells out to survive, but ultimately suffers at the expense of his success. Tellingly, in his efforts to find a means to live, Cassius becomes both the

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<sup>29</sup> Lift is worried that his Equisapian workers will organize and rebel, and therefore needs Cassius—who Lift claims understands how to speak to people—to be “the Equisapian Martin Luther King, Jr.”

extension of whiteness and the victim of whiteness—as well as a powerful symbolic target of Riley’s satire.

Whereas both *Pym* and *Sorry to Bother You* utilize sellout figures to satirize the power that white supremacy, American social conditions, and economic desperation have over black identity, Paul Beatty’s ironically titled *The Sellout* offers yet another perspective on the complex nature of racial betrayal. Beatty’s vision of selling out racial identity is perhaps more complex than the previously analyzed characters, but this only widens the critical discussion of the supposed post-racial era of American society. The novel’s title is derived from an ironic mischaracterization of the protagonist Bon Bon by the novel’s antagonist—Foy Cheshire. This act of misnaming speaks to the difficulties of navigating racial identity in a time when race is diminished to an allegedly inconsequential phenotypic marker. As I have addressed in the previous chapters of this thesis, *The Sellout* depicts Bon Bon’s attempts to get his hometown of Dickens, CA back on the map, as it has been erased from existence. The erasure of Dickens is used by Beatty as a metaphor to portray the consequences of post-racial ideology and the supposition that racial identity no longer matters in American society. While Bon Bon works to re-establish identity through Dickens, Beatty also uses the character to expose the folly of post-racial ideology and veins of racism that still thrive in America.

Though outlandish and extreme, it is Bon Bon’s reinstatement of segregation across Dickens that earns him the false moniker of “sell out.” In order to prove that white supremacy and racial inequity not only exist, but continue to shape America for the non-white community, Bon Bon mounts a series of “re-segregations” that do not propagate racism, but instead shine a spotlight on the segregation that already exists Dickens. For



example, Bon Bon explains that he ventures into small businesses and claims to be with “the Federal Department of Racial Injustice...conducting a monthlong study of the effects of ‘racial segregation on the normative behaviors of the racially segregated’” (Beatty 225), and then asks to hang a “no whites allowed” sign. In another small scale operation, Bon Bon and his companion Hominy transform a former car wash into a “tunnel of Whiteness,” which, with sharp satirical wit, catalogues the varying degrees of white privilege that are unavailable to the people of Dickens. He even goes on to establish “Whitey Week” as a reprieve for students “weary and stuffed from being force-fed the falsehood that when one of your kind makes it, it means that you’ve all made it” (Beatty 227). Through Bon Bon’s small efforts, Beatty takes an ironic view of segregation and creates subversive acts of resistance.

In one of the more narratively detailed instances of the social experiment, Bon Bon celebrates Hominy’s birthday by segregating a bus, using a sign that reads “PRIORITY SEATING FOR SENIORS, DISABLED, AND WHITES” (Beatty 128). When told by the bus driver—who is actually Bon Bon’s former lover, Marpessa—that the act is offensive, and that “those damn signs...have fucking set black people back five hundred years,” Bon Bon replies “Correction. It’s the twenty-sixth century, because as of today I’ve set black people five hundred years ahead of everybody else on the planet” (Beatty 130). The irony of Bon Bon’s claim lies in the idea that his “segregation” of the bus is in fact representative of the present and future—one in which inequality and racial segregation still exist. For Bon Bon, his radical stunt—and all others he commits—are not selling out to the powers of racial division; instead, he simply frees Dickens’s citizens of the post-racial lie that segregation ended after the Civil Rights movement.

The same can be said of Bon Bon's final post-racial protest—the segregation of a school through the creation of a fake, ultra-elite liberal school. After seeing the success of his bus protest, Bon Bon is challenged to do the same for the children of a Dickens middle school. He suggests that “The communal feeling of the bus [i.e. exposure of the post-racial lie and the coming together to resist the realities of inequality] would spread to the school, and then permeate the rest of the city. Apartheid united black South Africa, why couldn't it do the same for Dickens?” (Beatty 167). As Bon Bon explains that “for many people integration is a finite concept. Here, in America, ‘integration’ can be covered up” (Beatty 167), he touches upon the idea that the desegregation of schooling—and in fact, all of America—never occurred in any meaningful or lasting way. Instead, integration is used as a malleable patch to cover the inequities that amount to the marginalization of disenfranchised people. By simply creating an advertisement for “The Wheaton Academy Charter Magnet School” (Beatty 192)—which is simply a composite of a college campus and various white students at work—Bon Bon manages to ironically expose the fact that elite institutions exist, and are in fact unattainable for anyone but the white upper class of America. Of his own creation, Bon Bon muses that the implied segregation suggested by the Wheaton Academy draws forth “the colored person's desire for the domineering white presence” and that “even in these times of racial equality, when someone whiter than us, richer than us, blacker than us...comes around throwing their equality in our faces, it brings out our need to impress” (Beatty 208). For Bon Bon, creating the fake school is not selling out to whiteness—it is attacking the lie of racial and economic equity set forth by post-racial ideology. The presence of the school is not a celebration of whiteness; it serves as a rallying cry to come together under a unified black

identity in opposition to the exclusive opportunities afforded whiteness. The “domineering white presence” that Bon Bon claims motivates the black community suggests that contrary to post-racial beliefs, race and “color” still matter greatly.

In a befitting ironic fashion, Bon Bon is almost always referred to as “Sellout” by the black pseudo-activist—and the novel’s true sellout—Foy Cheshire. The character is introduced early in the novel as a prominent member of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals—a group started by Bon Bon’s late father, which is now comprised of “star-struck, middle-class black out-of-towners and academics who [meet] bimonthly to fawn over the semifamous Foy Cheshire” (Beatty 93). Described as being relatively successful, Cheshire found fortune by cashing in on a children’s cartoon developed by Bon Bon’s father. Bon Bon explains that, while having an academic background, Cheshire “was no deep thinker,” and that he used the intellectual debating and opportunity for change within the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals to “springboard to fame” (Beatty 48). In some ways, the character is an echoed amalgamation of the characterizations of Booker Jaynes and Nathaniel Latham from *Pym*. Cheshire is a conflicted “race man” like Booker, and also a cunning opportunist like Nathaniel.

Part of Cheshire’s “selling out” is in the exploitation of his own prominence and blackness. At one point, Bon Bon describes Cheshire as a “werenigger,” which he defines as “black lycanthropic thinkers” who “by day are erudite and urbane, but with every lunar cycle, fiscal quarter, and tenure review their hackles rise, and they slip into their floor-length fur coats and mink stoles, grow fangs and schlep down from their ivory towers...to prowl the inner cities” (Beatty 96). In the context of the novel, Cheshire is

inauthentic in his identity, for he can don his blackness when it appears most beneficial.<sup>30</sup> Bon Bon explains that Cheshire hosts a variety of radio and television shows with names like “*Black, Fiction, Blacktotum, and Just the Blacks, Ma’am*” (Beatty 104) in order to keep himself afloat in times of financial difficulty. In order to present at the Dum Dum meetings, Cheshire insists participants must use “Empowerpoint, a slide presentation of ‘African American software’ package developed by [Cheshire]” (Beatty 99). Beatty’s creation of “black” products reveals the means by which Cheshire is able to manipulate his own racial identity for monetary gain. Described through the sarcastic narration of Bon Bon, Cheshire’s efforts to celebrate blackness are but empty vessels that are used to empower the individual—not fight on behalf of the black community as a whole. As in Bon Bon’s “werenigger” designation, Cheshire’s blackness is contingent upon his needs and desires.

Beyond Cheshire’s exploitation of black solidarity and identity, the character is at odds with Bon Bon by nature of their respective “efforts” to combat the racism of the American past, present, and future. Whereas Bon Bon feels it necessary to draw attention to the consequences of post-racial ideology through ironic displays of inequity, segregation, and racism, Cheshire works to bury any evidence of said systemic crimes. In a meeting of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals, Cheshire boasts that he has rewritten Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*—retitling the novel “*The Pejorative-Free Adventures and Intellectual and Spiritual Journeys of African-American Jim and His Young Protege, White Brother Huckleberry Finn, as They Go in Search of the Lost Black Family Unit*”

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<sup>30</sup> During one confrontation with Cheshire, Bon Bon quietly eats Oreo cookies. The image casts a subtle satirical nod to the perpetuation and embracing of white interests masked in blackness, represented by Cheshire.

(Beatty 95), replacing the word “nigger” with positive diction, and changing the plot. As Cheshire claims that he cannot read the novel to his grandchildren due to its racist nature, Bon Bon thinks:

That’s the difference between most oppressed peoples of the world and American blacks. They vow never to forget, and we want everything expunged from our record, sealed and filed away for eternity. We want someone like Foy Cheshire to present our case to the world with a set of instructions that the jury will disregard centuries of ridicule and stereotype and pretend the woebegone niggers in front of you are starting from scratch. (Beatty 98)

In this musing from the narrator lies the central issue of Cheshire’s selling out his black identity. Cheshire is presented as a sellout because of his inability to see the truth behind the post-racial condition. This is problematic for Bon Bon, who feels it disingenuous and dangerous to “expunge” a history of oppression in favor of a blind belief in progress. It is also worth noting that Beatty does not simply lay blame upon Cheshire, as he refers to all “black Americans” in the preceding statement. This signature intragroup critique of the post-soul satire movement elevates Beatty’s work from merely damning sellout figures like Cheshire to a wider examination of the relationship between black identity and American history.

As for the sellout figures in all the satires examined in this chapter, Foy Cheshire’s guilt is a byproduct of circumstance; therefore, Beatty does not simply indict the sellout character. In fact, Cheshire’s racial posturing and denial of black America’s condition are directly linked to his own downfall and tragic exploitation as a child. Over the course of the novel, Bon Bon hints at the growing mental instability of Cheshire. In a

metaphorical explanation of the man's condition, Bon Bon explains that to know "if a tree is dying on the inside," one must "look at the roots...if [the roots] are cracked and covered in spores and fungi, well..." (Beatty 105) and then proceeds to describe the failing appearance of the aging leader of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals. The "root" of Cheshire's selling out his racial identity is actually revealed in the novel's penultimate chapter where Bon Bon, Hominy, and their friends recover a long-desired film reel containing most racist segments from the *Little Rascals* collection. In a tragically ironic revelation, Cheshire bought the film and locked it away to conceal his own exploitation as a child actor. In the scene contained in the reel, Hominy, *Little Rascals* actor Buckwheat, Cheshire are all portrayed as selling the blood of black children for oil profits. In reference to his catch phrase "It's black folk," an offscreen director yells at Cheshire "C'mon, Foy, do it right this time. I know you're only five, but niggerize the hell out of this one" (Beatty 281). While Beatty is, again, obviously lashing out against Hollywood's treatment of blackness, he also unpacks the center of Cheshire's overarching desire to bury a history of racism and inequity. In layers of irony, Beatty crafts a man who is not only portrayed as selling out blackness on film, but one who is manipulated into unwittingly betraying his racial identity before being old enough to comprehend the crime.

It is the horrific tragedy<sup>31</sup> of Cheshire's childhood racial debasement that ignites his symbolic implosion at a protest of Bon Bon's Wheaton Academy. In an increasingly desperate attempt to undermine the "racist" school, Cheshire suffers a breakdown and

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<sup>31</sup> After watching the reel, some of the attendees are left in tears—one of which being "Stevie, a hardcore gangster as ruthless as the free market" (Beatty 282). The resulting reaction from witnessing Cheshire's exploitation underscores the tragic nature of his sellout status.

begins firing a pistol into the back of his own Mercedes. In a continuation of his father's words that "professional niggers that just snap because the charade is over," Bon Bon explains of Cheshire's crisis "The blackness that had consumed [him] suddenly evaporates...All that's left is the transparency of the human condition...The lie on the resume has finally been discovered" (Beatty 259). In an act of resignation as much as selling out, Cheshire places the gun to his own temple and pours a can of white paint over his own head, "covering half of his face and down the length of that side of his body, until one eye, one nostril, one shirtsleeve...were washed completely white" (Beatty 259). In Bon Bon's efforts to expose the post-racial lie of progress and equality, he also exposes Cheshire's inability to cope with a racist world, and therefore highlights the broken celebrity's capacity to sellout blackness in perverse service to systemic powers of whiteness. In contributing to white America's denial of its national history of racial violence and perpetuating myths of progress, Cheshire "sells out" and renders himself without a true black identity. For the clearly traumatized child actor turned activist, it is easier to change, alter, or altogether forget a past of racial inequity than it is to come to terms with an imperfect present.

The sellout figures in the satires of Johnson, Riley, and Beatty share more than their willingness to sell out black identity for survival, personal gain, or denial—they all share the tragedy of being victims of circumstance. While Booker and Nathaniel are dismissed and hated for aligning themselves with monstrous visions of whiteness, they do so out of a desperate need for relief from slavery. Cassius Green's ability to perform with the privileged voice of whiteness and sell slave labor stems from his need to survive the dire economic hardships that face his family. Foy Cheshire's exploitation of his own

blackness comes as a direct response to the dual pronged tragedy of childhood trauma and crippling post-racial lies of equality. The characters all exist under the weight of external pressures and systemic powers that force them into making unreasonable and unfair choices regarding their identity. In discussing the nature of post-soul satire, Derek Maus explains that the genre “comment[s] critically not only upon the oppressive political, economic, and social forces that still encircle African-American culture in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, but also upon the multitude of ways in which African Americans have misused their hard-won freedoms and thereby hindered their own ascendance to equality” (Maus xvii). In *Pym*, *Sorry to Bother You*, and *The Sellout*, the artists use the potentials of satire and the very nature of the post-racial moment to marry the two ideas outlined in Maus’s commentary. For these satirists, there is not a distinction between attacking “oppressive, political, economic, and social forces” and attacking sellout figures who “misuse their hard-won freedoms”—there is only an exploration of how the two targets inform and shape each other. Furthermore, I suggest that *Pym*, *Sorry to Bother You*, and *The Sellout* attempt to resist the previously noted criticisms of satire that claim the genre revels in dolling out punishment and fostering feelings of superiority. If this were the case, then there would be no sympathetic dimension to the characters of Booker, Nathaniel, Cassius, and Cheshire. The artists analyzed here use the vehicle of satire not to lash out at black sellouts; Instead, they collectively craft an invitation to look at the sellout figure with sympathy and empathy. And more importantly, the artists invite their audiences to look beyond the sellout to the greater forces that shape the dire circumstances for non-white identity in post-racial America.



## Conclusion

I would be remiss if I did not admit that there is much more to cull and mine from the works analyzed over the course of this project. The satires created by Peele, Beatty, Johnson, and Riley not only offer more depth and insight than can be explored in a single project—they continue to resonate long after their publications and releases. In the introduction of this thesis, I noted that the writers and filmmakers I analyze do not claim to have an answer to the problems facing black identity or a precise remedy to combat the falsehoods of post-racial ideology. This notion is perhaps best expressed through the closing lines of Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*. After Bon Bon's efforts to re-establish the erased community of Dickens succeed, he witnesses a comedian chastise white patrons out of a predominantly black comedy club by yelling "[blackness] is our thing" (Beatty 287). Bon Bon then delivers the final line of the novel by asking "So what exactly is *our thing*?" (Beatty 288). For Beatty and the other satirists, there are no defined answers or resolutions to the questions and issues they raise. It is foolish to suppose that systemic problems of race and inequity have simple paths towards healing and repair. In a moment where post-racial ideology attempts to negate non-white identity, there remains a human desire to feel relevant and significant. Yet, as Bon Bon muses, "Silence can be either protest or consent, but most times, it's fear" (Beatty 287). Without exposure and confrontation, progress is an impossibility. The role of the silent bystander will ultimately yield no movement towards improvement, hence the urgent need for voices to speak out. And so, Peele, Beatty, Johnson, and Riley hold the post-racial era up against a scrutinous light in an attempt to expose, confront, and speak truths about race in America's past and present.

It is not coincidence—nor is it even surprising—that the four artists all tackle the same issues of covert white supremacy, the legacy of slavery, and circumstances of racial betrayal in their works. These ideas fold in upon themselves and inform each other as they have throughout the entirety of the African American narrative. The thought that problems of race have vanished within the wake of post-racial attitudes and the election of the nation’s first black president is absurd—and this is precisely why the vehicle of satire is so effective in the hands of artists like Peele, Beatty, Johnson, and Riley. As Darryl Dickson-Carr asks “How does a satirist lampoon those who have already rendered themselves absurd, accepted their own absurdity, and subsequently reveled in it?” (“Afterword” 277). In some ways, the only means to engage the absurd is to embrace, repurpose, and redeliver absurdity in service of uncovering truths. Without the mechanisms of satire, this may not be palatable, let alone possible. As celebrated satirist George Saunders notes, “Satire...is a way of encouraging clear sight” (“An Interview with George Saunders”). The genre is not the solution in and of itself. It would be naive to subscribe to the possibility that satire possesses the power to immediately alter ideologies that have been a mainstay of the American conscience for as long as the country has been in existence. But this is not the point. Of his own contribution to contemporary African American satire, acclaimed author of the short story collection *Friday Black* and former student of George Saunders, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah notes that “asking questions creates some kind of truth. You’ve just got to be willing to look at it hard and say something real” (Iqbal). Even in absurdity and extremity, satirists “say something real” and ask questions that cry out for meaningful examination.

The genre of satire is one of the important means by which humanity can look inward with a critical eye when interrogation is most necessary. As previously mentioned, satire is meant to create uneasiness in the hopes of inspiring introspection and empathy. And, as explained by Edward and Lillian Bloom, satire is meant “to affect a gradual moral reawakening, a reaffirmation of positive social and individual values. This renewed awareness—probably beyond the grasp of the culprit or eiron under fire—is intended for a general mankind capable of moral perception” (Bloom and Bloom 17). I believe that when considered collectively, *Get Out*, *The Sellout*, *Pym*, and *Sorry to Bother You* move towards the “gradual moral reawakening” posited by Bloom and Bloom. Together, the satirists manage to catalogue both the tangible and intangible consequences of an ideology that suggests race no longer matters in America. Together, their works create a historical snapshot, scathing indictment, and invitation to confront post-racial ideology as America ventures into an unsure future. While Peele, Beatty, Johnson, and Riley may be considered “satirists who scold and berate, who sound caustic, bitter, and savage because they care enough about man to be angered by his errant betrayals of self and fellow creatures” (Bloom and Bloom 20), it is unfair to reduce them to nothing more than angry artists with the capacity to point fingers and scoff from on high. Instead, they embody the idea that “the satirist addresses his subject...in an active spirit of social integrity and continuity, in the language of Truth, Justice, and Reformation” (Bloom and Bloom 21). Their works both carry on a vital literary tradition and hold open the door for emerging African American satirists like Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah and Nafissa Thompson-Spires. The continual return of writers and filmmakers to the tumultuous landscape of racial inequity and a need for change testifies to the dire importance of the

satirical voice in American culture. Peele, Beatty, Johnson, and Riley all traffic “in the language of Truth, Justice, and Reformation” because they must. A failure to do so is not simply a missed opportunity for art—it is a missed opportunity to speak out against systemic oppression and fight on behalf of those victims of post-racial ideology who cannot fight for themselves.

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