

The following is a chapter from my dissertation on practices of self-deception in nineteenth-century American literature and culture. The chapter, entitled “Embodied Ownership: Sheppard Lee and Proprietary Whiteness in Jacksonian America” explores the narrative practices of self-deception that underlie the consolidation of proprietary whiteness in Jacksonian America. I focus on Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Sheppard Lee* (1836), claiming that the novel registers, and seeks to reconcile, anxieties among upper-class whites about the inclusion of propertyless white men in the electorate. Looking at the novel’s representation of whiteness as a neutral category as embodied by its propertyless white protagonist, I argue that Black subjugation constituted a central yet crucially unacknowledged means by which the white subject, regardless of class, affirmed his belonging to the white man’s republic.

My dissertation investigates self-deception as a practice of individual and collective self-formation. The nineteenth-century texts I examine, spanning from 1830-1900, offer an image of American identity that is consolidated through practices of self-deception. Following my investigation of *Sheppard Lee*, subsequent chapters focus respectively on practices of self-deception within literary responses to Transcendental ideals, primarily in Hawthorne’s *Blithedale Romance* (1852); in American travel writing about the Holy Land such as Twain’s *Innocents Abroad* (1869) and Melville’s *Clarel* (1876); and in representations of masculinity in response to the rise of consumer culture, centering on Henry James’ *The Beast in the Jungle* (1903).

Joining scholarship on confidence games in American literature, I view practices of deception as responding to and reflective of anxieties over major shifts that transformed conceptions of nationhood and selfhood, including upheavals such as Jacksonian democracy, mass urbanization, major changes in race relations, and crises in religious belief. Yet my focus on deception as a self-imposed practice that takes place within the self represents a significant departure from this scholarship. My study challenges the conventional hierarchy that places the artful con man at the top and the credulous victim at the bottom. In a society obsessed with confidence games, hoaxes, and other forms of humbuggery, self-deception was inevitable. My dissertation thus identifies self-deceptive practices as integral to the understanding of self and nation for nineteenth-century Americans.

I’m very much looking forward to the discussion. I would greatly appreciate your feedback on both content and structure, as well as any suggestions for improvement you might have.

Thank you for reading!

## Chapter One

### Embodied Ownership: *Sheppard Lee* and Proprietary Whiteness in Jacksonian America

**Draft: Please do not quote, cite, or circulate without permission.**

**Merav Schocken**

Sheppard Lee, the protagonist of Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself* (1836), possesses a unique ability: he is able to inhabit and reanimate others' corpses, assuming the identities of those he embodies. After losing his estate due to mismanagement early in the narrative, Lee, a white, impoverished New Jersey farmer, makes use of this power to escape his degraded status, occupying the bodies of characters across the social spectrum. As part of his metempsychosis, Lee takes on the identity of his bodily hosts, losing his own selfhood in the process. While he "possesses" the bodies he occupies, their previous tenants dictate his interiority, rendering him utterly dependent; in this dependency, he embodies the condition then commonly associated with his social (propertyless) status. In analyzing *Sheppard Lee* in the context of American political culture in the early republic, as this chapter does, it is thus noteworthy that Lee lacks two traditional prerequisites for civic participation: land-ownership and self-ownership.<sup>1</sup>

What Lee lacks in self-government and property, however, he makes up for in whiteness. By the time the novel was published, most states had replaced property requirements with universal white manhood suffrage, formally entrusting propertyless white men such as Lee with

---

<sup>1</sup> By civic participation, I primarily mean suffrage. In the period prior to the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, there was no unified legal definition of citizenship, resulting in "competing formulations of citizenship," as Carrie Hyde argues. Hyde, *Civic Longing: The Speculative Origins of U.S. Citizenship* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018, 36). Within this reality, the right to vote was one of the key markers of citizenship status: "experiences of citizenship were more state based than federal, and citizens in the early republic were identified more by a shifting catalogue of what they could and could not do within states (e.g., vote, own land, marry)...than by categorical federal statute". Derrick R. Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 18.

political participation. Yet the expansion of the white electorate in Jacksonian America was not an easy transition. The novel, I claim, registers sectional anxiety among upper-class whites over the relatively new civil standing of lower-class whites, and the “enormous upsurge of political participation” that was brought with it.<sup>2</sup> This is a precarious pursuit: in doing so, Bird must ensure not to call into question the link between whiteness and independence embedded deep in the national psyche. Within racial slavery, as legal scholar Cheryl Harris explains, “‘white’ racial identity marked who was ‘free’ or, at minimum, not a slave.”<sup>3</sup>

*Sheppard Lee*, however, seemingly works against itself: Bird indeed registers anxieties about the potential devaluation of whiteness, but he also, I argue, seeks to reconcile them. While Lee is depicted as unreliable and capricious throughout the body-snatching narrative, Bird eventually counterbalances these stereotypes by housing Lee in an enslaved man’s body; this foregrounds the proprietary value of whiteness at a time when its boundaries were in flux. Crucially, in my reading, this process is facilitated by Lee’s self-deception. Throughout the narrative, as Lee’s spirit shifts between different white men, whiteness is depicted as largely inconsequential, taking on a status quo existence. Yet Lee’s occupation of Tom’s body, an enslaved African American, shows the extent to which Lee’s identity, and by extension, the novel itself, is tied to his whiteness. It is in this section where, ironically, Lee’s whiteness becomes most pronounced, despite—or perhaps because of—its corporeal nonexistence. When Lee enters the body of Tom, he self-deceptively insists that, similar to his other incarnations, his

---

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Keyssar dates this shift to the 1830s and 1840s. Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, Revised edition (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 42. As Dana Nelson points out, however, at the same time that this shift was taking place, “the political power of the common folk... was vilified and feared by elites across the political spectrum.” Nelson, *Commons Democracy: Reading the Politics of Participation in the Early United States*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), ch 4.

<sup>3</sup> Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1718, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787>.

identity as Lee has not been carried over, and he is “no longer Sheppard Lee...nor anybody else, except simply Tom, Thomas, or Tommy, the slave”.<sup>4</sup> However, in this episode—the narrative’s singular instance of cross-racial incarnation—Lee is surprisingly most like himself than in other body, besides his own. Not only are Lee’s traits of idleness and laziness carried over, but, as I contend, a persistent kernel of his white consciousness remains that surveils, directs, and maneuvers Tom’s actions. This allows Lee to orchestrate, along with his fellow enslaved men, an (ultimately failed) rebellion during which he incapacitates Tom and polices other members of his community. Bird’s portrayal of the enslaved men as despotic and tyrannical helps perpetuates antebellum beliefs concerning African Americans’ incapability of self-possession, which in turn reinforces the citizenship of poor whites such as Lee and, more broadly, shores up the value of whiteness.

Lee’s self-deception, I claim, allows for an assertion of property rights in the Black body via a guise of neutrality, given that his whiteness is formally imperceptible. Lee’s dismissal of the existence, and by extension, relevance of his whiteness demonstrates precisely how whiteness operates “as invisible, as the unseen or the unmarked, as a non-color”; whiteness “secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular”.<sup>5</sup> I interpret Lee’s act of self-deception as symptomatic of a white impulse to dissimulate the relational construction of white identity in antebellum American life, which acquires coherence vis-à-vis the subjugation and exclusion of African Americans. This trajectory is governed by an ideology of what historian David Roediger has called “Herrenvolk republicanism,” involving a consolidation of whiteness

---

<sup>4</sup> Robert Montgomery Bird, *Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself*, New York Review Books Classics (New York: New York Review Books, 2008), 341.

<sup>5</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of AntiRacism”, *borderlands e-journal* 3, no. 2, 2004. <[http://www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au/vol3no2\\_2004/ahmed\\_declarations .htm](http://www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm)>; Dyer, Richard. "White." *Screen* 29.4 (1988): 44

that is dependent on the subordination of Blackness. Within this view, African Americans are “stigmatized as the antithesis of republican citizens,” which solidifies the equation of citizenship with whiteness.<sup>6</sup> Roediger has famously outlined the ways in which working class whites who were “made anxious by fear of dependency” associated with their propertyless status began “to construct an image of the Black population as ‘other’”.<sup>7</sup> While I am interested in the dynamics of this oppositional reality, I am more concerned here with whites’ lack of acknowledgement of it. At stake in my analysis is the potential to make visible the mechanism of self-deception, manifested in narrative form, that not only facilitates white racial consciousness and solidarity in the early republic, but also normalizes the logic of white racial domination.

Although unacknowledged by Bird as such, I contend that there is a through line in the narrative, which the structure of this chapter follows, that begins with Lee’s dispossessed and degraded status, moves through a display of whiteness as mastery (among Lee’s other incarnations), and concludes with Lee’s repossession of his body and farm, upon which he becomes an industrious, upstanding citizen. Lee effectively moves from a state of propertyless dependence to that of civic belonging, echoing the trajectory that unpropertied whites formally followed after their enfranchisement – a process that coincided with the disfranchisement of African Americans. In both novel and history, whiteness masks its dependence on Black subjugation, a central means by which white male subjects, regardless of class, affirmed their belonging to the white man's republic.

The narrative self-deception, in my reading, mirrors the self-deception that underlines the consolidation of proprietary whiteness in Jacksonian America. This was a matter that concerned

---

<sup>6</sup> David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Rev. ed, Haymarket Series (London ; New York: Verso, 2007), 36.

<sup>7</sup> Roediger, 13–14.

not only the white lower class, but also the upper-class who, following the incorporation of propertyless whites in the electorate, needed to redefine for themselves the basis for their political eligibility and secure their group identity. I interpret the propensity for self-deception registered in the novel as emerging from the culture in which Bird and his contemporaries were situated. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, people were both captivated and troubled by the ubiquity of confidence games and fraudulence, particularly in urban areas such as Philadelphia, where Bird spent most of life.<sup>8</sup> Modes of deception, humbuggery, and trickery were at the forefront of various areas of everyday life: in the street and marketplace, where “swindles, frauds, forgeries, [and] counterfeiting activities” were abundant; in mass entertainment, where showmen such as P. T. Barnum displayed deceptively genuine curiosities and ventriloquists threw their voices from place to place; and in spiritualistic phenomena such as animal magnetism and spirit-rapping.<sup>9</sup> Within this environment, individuals regularly struggled to distinguish between appearances and reality, truth and falsehood. Scholars such as Wendy Bellion have argued that this did not stop them from trying, noting that encounters with illusionistic art in the early republic “challenged Americans to demonstrate their perceptual aptitude”.<sup>10</sup> Neil Harris has also influentially claimed that Barnum’s displays “trained Americans to absorb knowledge,” creating in them “a delight in observing process and examining for literal truth.”<sup>11</sup> These habits are in line with the era’s cultural and political ideals of transparency and

---

<sup>8</sup> I explore this context in the introduction to my dissertation, providing an overview of the relationship between self-deception and the literary and cultural nineteenth century history of deception.

<sup>9</sup> Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830 - 1870*, Yale Historical Publications Miscellany 129 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1982), 7. Relevant literary criticism also includes Emily Ogden, *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism* (University of Chicago Press, 2018); Lara Langer Cohen, *The Fabrication of American Literature: Fraudulence and Antebellum Print Culture* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); William E. Lenz, *Fast Talk & Flush Times: The Confidence Man as a Literary Convention* (University of Missouri Press, 1985); Gary H. Lindberg, *The Confidence Man in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> Bellion, *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America*, 2012, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, Phoenix ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 79.

sincerity, enacted as a defense mechanism against the anxieties of deception.<sup>12</sup> The pleasures of examination, however, did not guarantee truth. Indeed, an essential part of the enjoyment of Barnum's spectacles, for instance, derived from remaining in a space of vagueness, where truth is deferred – even when the hoax was exposed. I take such tendencies to be emblematic of wider currents in nineteenth-century American; the prevalence of confidence games rendered everyone susceptible to deception, struggling to distinguish between their own truths and falsehoods. In this sense, deception was not just externally imposed, but also self-inflicted. The nineteenth-century texts I examine, as this chapter and others show, offer an image of American identity that is consolidated via self-deception, resisting self-scrutiny in favor of opacity. When it came to categories of identity such as race, gender, and religion, too much was at stake to embrace transparency.

In the case of *Sheppard Lee*, self-deception fulfills a regulatory function in the construction of white Americans' racial consciousness in Jacksonian era, binding whiteness to self-government, and Blackness to its deprivation. In centering on Lee's self-deception, I lean on philosopher Herman Fingarette's account of the term: the self-deceiver, according to Fingarette, is one who is "engaged in the world in some way, and yet he refuses to identify himself as one who is so engaged."<sup>13</sup> Self-deception involves unacknowledged self-concealment; Lee conceals his retention of whiteness in Tom's body to obfuscate his dependency on the subjugation of Blackness. In turn, an alternative form of white identity emerges – one that is perceived as

---

<sup>12</sup> Bellion, for instance, explores the relationship between visual acuity and political subjectivity, noting that the ability to "discern truth from falsehood in the material landscape became a sign of able citizenship" in the early republic. Bellion, 5. Relatedly, Karen Halttunen argues that the middle class in the 1830s, encountering growing social mobility and urban anonymity, cultivated a "cult of sincerity" in an anxious response to fears of hypocrisy and deceit. Halttunen, 34. These anxieties were also reflected in the literature of the period, particularly in Gothic fiction where characters contend with the threat of inner, invisible forces that do not match up with outer appearances; Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) is a prime example.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert Fingarette, *Self-Deception*, Studies in Philosophical Psychology (London, New York: Routledge & K. Paul; Humanities P, 1969), 66.

insular, inherent mastery. In order to perpetuate the idea of proprietary whiteness, whiteness, as a category, had to be conceptualized as autonomous. Whiteness as mastery cannot be revealed as constructed as such; the link must be self-evident rather than deliberative in order to sustain its inviolability. This is a vision that the novel reinforces.

### **The Threat of Propertylessness**

The plot of *Sheppard Lee* indicates that the intersection of whiteness and propertylessness still alarmed Americans in 1836. This is precisely the condition that Bird tries to counter by housing Lee in Tom's body – an embodiment on which Lee self-deceptively heavily leans on. Prior to inspecting that, it is important to explore Lee's trajectory in the opening chapters (preceding his body-switching adventures), where Bird forges an association between property ownership and independent judgement. This is despite the fact that self-government had already largely replaced property ownership as the prerequisite for political participation. By 1836, universal white manhood suffrage was already being practiced in most states across the nation.<sup>14</sup> Not everyone welcomed this change: state constitutional conventions had engaged in heated debates over who should have the right to vote. Most Whigs, the party to which Bird was strongly attached, still “clung to the traditional conception of the suffrage as a privilege, rather than, as Democrats

---

<sup>14</sup> Dana D. Nelson, *Bad for Democracy: How the Presidency Undermines the Power of the People* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 80. This “democratizing surge,” historian Alexander Saxton explains, was evident in “battles at legislative sessions and constitutional conventions—in Virginia in 1829–1830; Mississippi in 1831; North Carolina in 1835; Louisiana in 1845; North Carolina again in the late 1840s and Virginia and Louisiana again in the early 1850s.” Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, The Haymarket Series (London ; New York: Verso, 2003), 136. David Brown reminds us, however, that “The granting of suffrage allowed more white men to participate in politics, but it did not of itself allow yeomen and poor whites significantly greater influence, much less control, of the political process, especially in states where there were significant numbers of planters.” Brown, “Citizenship, Democracy, and the Structure of Politics in the Old South,” in *Creating Citizenship in the Nineteenth-Century South*, ed. William A. Link, David Brown, and Martyn Bone (Gainesville : University Press of Florida, 2013), 91.

maintained, a right”.<sup>15</sup> This view was popular even among individuals such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, known for his liberal views and commitment to political reform. Writing in 1838, Emerson reveals his more conservative side in expressing his opposition to the principle of electoral equality that was already widely in practice: “whilst the rights of all as persons are equal...their rights in property are very unequal. One man owns his clothes, and another owns a country.”<sup>16</sup> This is why, Emerson explains, “the proprietors of the nation should have more elective franchise than non-proprietors.”<sup>17</sup>

Bird’s characterization of Lee in the opening chapters reinscribes stereotypes promoted by Eastern conservatives about the inherent dependence and political unreliability of poor whites. Lee, however, does not start off as propertyless: after his father dies, he inherits the family farm. In this, Lee is actually adequately positioned to settle into the yeoman farmer middleclass and fulfill the Jeffersonian ideals of agrarian independence that Bird and his contemporaries inherited and still upheld, alongside the rise of urban laborers in the third decade of the nineteenth century. Conservative Philip Nicholas, speaking at the 1829–1830 Virginia Constitutional Convention, indicates this in his comments: “If there are any chosen people of God, they are the cultivators of the soil. If there be virtue to be found anywhere, it would be amongst the middling farmers, who constitute the yeomanry, the bone and sinew of our country.”<sup>18</sup> As part of this ideology, “farming virtues became political virtues—independence, stability, good character, and respect for the personal and property rights of others”.<sup>19</sup> Lee,

---

<sup>15</sup> Curtis Dahl, *Robert Montgomery Bird* (Twayne Publishers, 1963), 29; John Ashworth, “Agrarians” and “Aristocrats”: *Party Political Ideology in the United States, 1837-1846*, 1st paperback ed (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 56.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Harvard University Press, 1964), 72.

<sup>17</sup> Emerson, 72.

<sup>18</sup> Virginia Constitutional Convention, *Proceedings and Debates of the Virginia State Convention of 1829-1830: To Which Are Subjoined, the New Constitution of Virginia, and the Votes of the People* (S. Shepherd & Company, 1830), 86.

<sup>19</sup> Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 5.

however, who finds farming to be “tiresome,” promptly relinquishes direct management of the property and hires an overseer who ultimately cheats him out of his money, highlighting his own lack of authority.

Lee’s lack of control over his landed property extends to his inability to exert his authority over Jim Jumble, his enslaved property. In addition to being a “a crabbed, self-willed old fellow, whom [Lee] could never manage,” Jim objects to being set free, despite Lee’s wishes.<sup>20</sup> While Bird very clearly employs the minstrel stereotype of the lazy, shiftless slave in his characterization of Jim, his relationship with Lee also constitutes an inversion of the era’s racial hierarchies, calling into question Lee’s own capacity for self-government.<sup>21</sup> This incapacity, in combination with Lee’s own “indolent temper” eventually leads to his downfall: “I gave myself up to laziness, neglecting my affairs to such a a degree that they would soon become seriously entangled.”<sup>22</sup> As his farm goes to ruins, Lee quickly finds himself “reduced from independence,” losing possession of his property and entering a stage of “criminal poverty.”<sup>23</sup> With poverty comes disrespect: after his old acquaintances shun him, Lee concludes that “it is no wonder that poverty is the father of crime, since the poor man sees himself treated on all hands as a culprit”.<sup>24</sup> It is noteworthy that Lee’s continued possession of Jim indicates that he was not actually destitute. Relatedly, Lee is not a representative of the enfranchised wage-working class. In his lack of landed property, however, he lines up with their economic condition.

---

<sup>20</sup> Bird, 20.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of this point and the significance of Bird’s lack of ownership in his body as a reversal of Lockean subjectivity, see Sian Silyn Roberts, *Gothic Subjects: The Transformation of Individualism in American Fiction, 1790-1861* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 108, 86-115.

<sup>22</sup> Bird, 16.

<sup>23</sup> Bird, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Bird, 24.

In what reads as an expression of the anxieties of upper-white class whites about the political unreliability of unpropertied whites, Lee moves on to a short, opportunistic stint in local politics immediately after becoming dispossessed, in hopes of improving his financial situation. While Lee was not an upstanding member of the community as a freeholder, his loss of property seems to only compound his moral instability. Without property, Lee lacks the Blackstonian “stake in society” (still influential in the Jacksonian era) that ensures that he will vote and participate in politics responsibly. Bird conflates men such as Lee with members of the Jacksonian party when Lee finds his natural home within the “hurrah side,” the party he chooses “on the principle that the majority must always be right.”<sup>25</sup> As scholars have pointed out, Bird satirizes what he sees as populist Jacksonian ideology and the party’s anti-bank agenda when Lee is praised for an empty speech of which all he can remember is “that there was great slashing at the banks and aristocrats that ground the faces of the poor.”<sup>26</sup> Lee further reveals his ideological shakiness when he quickly switches parties after his party fails to back his appointment to a local office, labeled a “turncoat politician” by his neighbors.<sup>27</sup> Propertyless individuals, Bird seems to indicate, are unequipped to exercise their political rights responsibly. In considering Lee’s political status in the context of Jacksonian America, he is devoid not only of landed property, the traditional marker of independence in American political culture, but also of property in his own labor, which by Bird’s time had formally marked white wage workers “as sufficiently independent to be enfranchised.”<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Bird, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Stein, “The Whig Interpretation of Media: Sheppard Lee and Jacksonian Paperwork,” *History of the Present* 3, no. 1 (2013): 29, <https://doi.org/10.5406/historypresent.3.1.0029>; Bird, 25.

<sup>27</sup> Bird, 28.

<sup>28</sup> Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 50.

Bird's conservative sentiment continues a long tradition in Anglo-American legal theory of tying property ownership to able citizenship. Those identifying economic independence as a prerequisite for voting were echoing the common law tradition according to which propertyless men had "no will of their own."<sup>29</sup> Men "of indigent fortunes" were considered to be "under the immediate dominion of others."<sup>30</sup> Defenders of property restrictions indeed believed that unpropertied men were incapable of independent political judgment given their dependence on their landlords for accommodation, and occasionally livelihoods, and thus were considered politically unreliable. This did not disappear with the broadening of the suffrage: "Despite the abolition of property requirements, most Americans did not believe that all adult white males were entitled to full membership in the political community."<sup>31</sup> Writing in 1838, Millard Fillmore, the thirteenth US president, conveyed concerns about the corruptibility of the lower classes and the potentiality of mob rule, referring to "the caprice of popular favor' and the 'wild caprice of the ever-changing multitude."<sup>32</sup>

While propertyless men such as wage earners were gradually accepted as independent, given their possession of property in their own labor, the boundaries of universal white manhood suffrage were more rigid than the term suggests.<sup>33</sup> The implementation of pauper exclusion laws, enacted when property requirements were abandoned, illustrate this point, and show the extent to which poor men such as Lee posed a threat to the coherence of white racial identity – that now

---

<sup>29</sup> William Blackstone, *The Oxford Edition of Blackstone's: Commentaries on the Laws of England: Book I: Of the Rights of Persons* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 113.

<sup>30</sup> Blackstone, 113.

<sup>31</sup> Keyssar, 49.

<sup>32</sup> Fillmore, as quoted in John Ashworth, *Agrarians and Aristocrats: Party Political Ideology in the United States, 1837-1846*, 1st paperback ed (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). 56.

<sup>33</sup> Citing historian Daniel T. Rodgers, Peter Coviello explains that "the presence of so many wage laborers created [an] 'anomaly of dependence in a society in which self-employment was the moral norm.' To be a laborer in the 1830s and 1840s, just as in the 1780s, was to be dependent for one's existence on the caprices of another, and to have, in effect, 'rented out' the proprietorship of one's self." *Intimacy In America: Dreams Of Affiliation In Antebellum Literature* (U of Minnesota Press, n.d.), 47.

encompassed both property owning and propertyless white men. When the franchise was expanded, as legal historian Robert Steinfield explains, paupers receiving public funds were classified as legally dependent, like African Americans, and thus relegated to an entirely separate legal category. Once deemed as dependent, those without financial means were prevented from claiming membership in the political community, which secures the link between whiteness and self-government. As Steinfield points out, this shows us that despite the trend of democratization, only those who were economically independent were deemed fit for self-government: “the republican precept that only the self-governing should exercise political authority...was not abandoned. Rather, it was recast [with] the liberal idea that the self-governing were those who owned and disposed of themselves.”<sup>34</sup> The pauper exclusion laws highlight the extent to which it was important for white citizens to safeguard their group identity against associations of whiteness with dependence. The laws also suggest that a state of dependence was profoundly dangerous for propertyless men, given that the prospect of severe financial hardship was grounds for exclusion from the political community; it is this dependence, I claim, that Bird attempts to counteract through Lee’s occupation of Tom’s body.

Lee proves himself both wholly unfit for self-government and entirely dependent on others; this condition is literalized through his fragmented selfhood as he moves between different personas within the cycle of metempsychosis, the action around which the narrative revolves. This begins shortly after Lee ends his political career, when he meets his death while digging for buried treasure. He soon discovers that as an embodied spirit, he can inhabit and reanimate corpses. Overjoyed, Lee realizes he can experience a life better than the one he had, and sets out to “step out into the world to possess riches, respect, content, and all that man

---

<sup>34</sup> Robert J. Steinfield, “Property and Suffrage in the Early American Republic,” *Stanford Law Review* 41, no. 2 (1989): 375, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1228746>.

covets”; these hopes are gradually shattered as he suffers one misfortune after another in each new body.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, while Lee gains “property” in other bodies, the bodies’ original occupants determine his interiority, rendering him utterly dependent on their personality and idiosyncrasies. This is a reflection of the novel’s materialist view of identity as determined by the body, as Lee asserts in a reflection: “a man’s body is like a barrel, which, if you salt fish in it once, will make fish of every thing you put into it afterwards.”<sup>36</sup> If this were not the case, Lee would not have been able to truly become a different person with each incarnation. Lee is typically transformed entirely, as when he enters, for instance, the body of Abram Skinner, a miserly money-lender: “I had leisure to exchange all previous characteristics that might have clung to me, for those that more properly belonged to my new casing...My soul had lost its identity; it had taken its shape from the mould it occupied.”<sup>37</sup> In this sense, Lee’s own selfhood is continuously fractured, spilling into and across different individuals. In his inherent lack of self-possession and subjection to the authority of the bodies he inhabits, Lee fails to meet the Jacksonian criteria for political membership and continues to fulfill the stereotypes associated with poor men, thought by white elites to be incapable of exercising independent judgement. Lee’s insufficient self-possession is further reinforced when he is repeatedly manipulated, swindled, and victimized by opportunists in his new surroundings. In this sense, Lee’s limited self-government (fleeting as that self may be) leaves him in a state of vulnerability, open to the scheming of others.

---

<sup>35</sup> Bird, 52.

<sup>36</sup> Bird, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Bird, 200.

### **Lee's Self-Deception: Lingering Whiteness and the Surveillance of Blackness**

While Lee is easily manipulated by those he encounters (and to some extent, by the bodies he inhabits), Bird reverses these dynamics when Lee occupies the body of Tom, an enslaved man; this episode in the narrative allows for a display of the mastery of whiteness, thus reaffirming its proprietary value. This is not a conscious dynamic on Bird's part, but rather, as I claim, one that demonstrates the anxiety surrounding the intersection of whiteness and dependence. In other white bodies, Lee is insufficiently self-possessed; his mastery over an enslaved body, however, must be accepted as a given. Throughout the "Tom" chapters, Lee deceives himself into believing that he is "no longer Sheppard Lee", an assertion that works to mask the dependence of whiteness on the control of Blackness, advancing a racial identity that is insular rather than relational. Importantly, Lee's invisible whiteness while in Tom's body also helps advance a conception of whiteness whose hegemony is self-evident.

At this stage, it is important to give a brief overview of the events that take place throughout Lee's embodiment of Tom given the centrality of this episode for my analysis. Prior to his acquisition of Tom's body, Lee inhabits that of Zachariah Longstraw, a philanthropist Quaker kidnapped by white criminals who misrepresent him as an abolitionist and take him to the South to be lynched by anti-abolitionists. As the angry mob closes in on him, Lee escapes by jumping into the recently deceased body of Tom, an enslaved African American who is killed after falling from a nearby tree while watching the lynching. When Lee, in Tom's body, awakens on the Virginia plantation where Tom lives, he is initially thrown into a state of despair: "Was there no other situation in life sufficiently wretched, but that I must take up my lot in the body of a miserable negro slave?." <sup>38</sup> Soon, however, upon becoming aware of the kindness of his master

---

<sup>38</sup> Bird, 332.

and the lightness of his labor, Lee finds himself, for the very first time, “content, or very nearly so, with my condition.”<sup>39</sup> This quickly changes when he, along with other members of the enslaved community, come across an anti-slavery pamphlet from which they learn about natural rights, awakening them to the injustice of their enslavement. The pamphlet stirs them to lead a bloody revolt against their enslavers, which is followed by their defeat. Lee is jailed and then hanged (albeit escaping shortly afterwards to a white body), while others are killed at the scene of the battle.

Lee’s occupation of Tom’s body allows him to prove his worth to his white society when he immobilizes himself during the revolt and monitors the behavior of the other enslaved rebels, marking a sharp break from his relationship with Jim Jumble. Lee claims authority, in this sense, by virtue of his whiteness. As David Roediger has shown, white laborers similarly positioned their racially embodied property (as W.E.B. Du Bois terms it, their “psychological wages”) as central to their identity in contrast to African Americans, as a way of valorizing wage labor and legitimizing their political equality.<sup>40</sup> While the “Tom” chapters engage with this reality covertly, as I will demonstrate, scenes of intense class stratification typical of the Jacksonian era suffuse the novel. A stark instance is shown when Lee, as Zachariah Longstraw – Bird’s satirical portrait of the self-interested, do-gooder philanthropist – “benevolently takes part in the efforts of...poor unfortunate needle-women to obtain better wages”.<sup>41</sup> After Lee suggests that they would find more work as domestic servants, they angrily emphasize their racialized freedom (albeit limited, given their gender) in opposition to those enslaved: ““he wants to make niggur servants of us! *us*, that is freeborn American girls!””<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Bird, 341.

<sup>40</sup> Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*.

<sup>41</sup> Bird, 279.

<sup>42</sup> Bird, 280 (italics in original).

Lee follows a similar route when he asserts his property rights in Tom's body as a way of offsetting previous connotations of dependence. While Lee takes the center stage of action upon entering other bodies, as fitting for a protagonist, in Tom's body he is constantly but inconspicuously on the outside of events, looking in, despite claiming otherwise. In this sense, Tom virtually has no existence as a character outside of being embodied property for Lee. My analysis of this episode draws on legal scholar Cheryl Harris's seminal theory of whiteness as property to illuminate the practices in the novel that reinforce the link between whiteness and property rights. Central to Harris's theory is the idea that whiteness is not just a privileged status, but a legal construct: "according whiteness actual legal status converted an aspect of identity into an external object of property, moving whiteness from privileged identity to a vested interest."<sup>43</sup> Harris draws on the theory of property interest in whiteness first developed by Albion Tourgée in his brief for *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), where he argued that Plessy, who appeared white but was considered Black under Louisiana law, was deprived of the "reputation of being a white man" in being removed from a train car designated for whites.<sup>44</sup> Harris asserts that the reputation of whiteness hence becomes a form of property which entails the right to exclude others, a notion that also uncovers the fragile nature of whiteness: "the right to exclude was the central principle...of whiteness as identity, for mainly whiteness has been characterized, not by an inherent unifying characteristic, but by the exclusion of others deemed to be 'not white.'"<sup>45</sup> While the conception of the property of whiteness as an intangible asset emerged during the turn of the century, after the "formal end of legal race segregation," Harris indicates that the status of whiteness was already precarious during the antebellum era, when the boundaries between

---

<sup>43</sup> Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1725.

<sup>44</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 538, 540 (1896).

<sup>45</sup> Harris, 1736.

Blackness and whiteness were less easily permeable: this was a time when “‘Black’ racial identity marked who was subject to enslavement; ‘white’ racial identity marked who was ‘free’ or, at minimum, not a slave”.<sup>46</sup> My exploration of the “Tom” chapters follows Harris’s assertion that “whiteness became a shield from slavery, a highly volatile and unstable form of property”; it is because of these stakes that Bird does not allow Tom’s identity to eclipse that of Lee’s, even at the price of an inconsistency in the novel’s logic of metempsychosis.<sup>47</sup>

By literally embodying Tom, Lee has absolute authority over his body. While Lee inhabits and makes use of a variety of bodies, his relation to Tom’s body is that of ownership. Within the logic of white racial domination, mastery needs to be immediately assumed, and not explained; Lee’s self-deception masks this construction, thus facilitating its reality. The power dynamics embedded in Lee’s relationship with Tom can be better understood through the Roman doctrine of absolute property. As Orlando Patterson explains, “Romans invented the legal fiction of absolute dominium or absolute ownership” in order to formalize the status of slaves as things entirely owned by others.<sup>48</sup> The notion of “absolute power” included not just the right to use, “but perhaps most significantly, as the Danish legal historian C. W. Westrup notes, it has the psychological meaning ‘of inner power over a thing beyond mere control.’”<sup>49</sup> Lee’s manipulation of Tom’s body, which results in immobilization, is precisely an expression of such “inner power”; when the revolt takes place, Tom becomes paralyzed with guilt and feels unable to participate in the violence. Tom is hence reduced to malleable property, but also, more importantly, one that is animated with human capacities via Lee’s white personhood, enabling

---

<sup>46</sup> Harris, 1718.

<sup>47</sup> Harris, 1720.

<sup>48</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), 31.

<sup>49</sup> Patterson, 31.

him to take part in his own subjugation. This demonstrates Harris's argument that "whiteness became the quintessential property for personhood."<sup>50</sup> Tom's bondage extends beyond a property relation, showing, as Tourgée suggests, that "slavery was a caste, a legal condition of subjection to the dominant class, a bondage quite separable from the incident of ownership."<sup>51</sup> In this sequence, proprietary whiteness is consolidated by means of a performance of Black subordination, which is in line with both Patterson's and Tourgée's assertion that the control of the enslaver extends beyond ownership of the enslaved.

Crucially, Lee repeatedly insists that his occupation of Tom's body is in line with his inhabitation of other hosts, having no memory of his "past existence."<sup>52</sup> Yet various instances indicate that Lee has preserved a kernel not only of whiteness but also of his past self in Tom's body. Bird forges tacit connections between Tom and Lee, typical of the covert means by which the narrative consolidates the political legitimacy of propertyless men and white collective identity as a whole. Readers are aware that Lee has taken on Tom's body and identity, but implicit references to Lee sustain a connection between the two personas.<sup>53</sup> Only by establishing this connection of continuity can Lee reap the benefits of the proprietary value acquired in Tom's body. Similar to Lee, Tom is naturally indolent, with no inclination to work; fortunately, as Lee points out in an oblique reference to his previous existence, as an enslaved man, he "never had so

---

<sup>50</sup> Harris, 1730.

<sup>51</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

<sup>52</sup> Bird, 350.

<sup>53</sup> Justine Murison's following observation regarding the pronounced presence of Lee's identity in Tom's body in her astute analysis of the novel in *The Politics of Anxiety* has served as a point of departure for my reading of the "Tom" chapters: "one of the reasons Tom's character troubles the narrative sequence is that, though he seems to be racially circumscribed, he is actually more like Lee than any of the other identities thus far". While Murison indeed acknowledges race as a factor in explaining Tom's disproportionately split-identity, my analysis attempts to explain this inconsistency through the persistence of whiteness. I depart from Murison by placing the origins of Tom's inner whiteness in efforts to consolidate proprietary whiteness, and counterbalance dependence. Additionally, while Murison often conflates Tom and Lee (using "Lee/Tom"), I claim that there is a hierarchy that keeps them separate, given Lee's control of Tom. Murison, *The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 38..

easy and idle a time of it in [his] whole life".<sup>54</sup> Moreover, while Lee typically takes on the distinctive speech patterns of the characters he embodies (as with Longstraw's repeated use of the Quaker "thee" and "verily"), Tom's voice is not individualized; this is in contrast to the minstrel dialect of members of the enslaved community.<sup>55</sup> The stability of Lee's sense of self (he fully governs himself in this episode) is generated against the backdrop of his authority over Tom.

In determining that Lee's whiteness overpowers Tom's corporeal form, I move away from critical approaches to the novel that concur that personal identity in the narrative is determined by the body. Christopher Looby, for instance, notes in his introduction to the novel that Bird views the self as "physically determined," explaining that "at each of the transmigrations, Bird has Sheppard Lee give us an account of how one fiction of identity disassembles or decomposes and a new set of habits, propensities, sensations, and so forth is reassembled...into a person."<sup>56</sup> Sheppard Lee, he states, "essentially becomes a new person at each incarnation, with only a faint (and fading) memory of his previous states. Sheppard Lee is not so much a person as an afterthought."<sup>57</sup> As we see, however, Lee deviates from this principle when embodying Tom. Lee's original identity can indeed take a back seat when occupying the bodies of white characters, which explains precisely why all other characters have distinctive and fully-formed identities. Simply put, other characters have more room to grow because their whiteness is already established; Lee cannot afford to reduce his identity when embodying Tom because doing so would endanger whiteness. The notion that race trumps physical appearance is consistent with the conception that

---

<sup>54</sup> Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 342.

<sup>55</sup> Justine Murison makes this point, connecting Lee's "seamless integration" of both his narrative voice and body with Tom's as part of the novel's wider critique of pathological sympathy, noting that the "inability to delineate self from other haunts the narrative as a whole." *The Politics of Anxiety*, 37, 29.

<sup>56</sup> Christopher Looby, introduction to *Sheppard Lee*, xix.

<sup>57</sup> Looby, xvii.

existed during the antebellum period and intensified towards the turn of the century that the property of whiteness is indeed intangible, with race imagined as an interior truth. Accordingly, one's bodily appearance was not taken as a reliable marker of race – Homer Plessy's eviction from a white train car despite his white appearance stands as evidence for this claim.

While Tom's inner whiteness takes center stage when the revolt takes place, the first signs of his racial allegiance make an appearance beforehand, in the form of a wavering conscience. Tom is initially swayed by the abolitionist ideas described in a pamphlet discovered by a fellow enslaved man, noting that the "fatal book infected my own spirit as deeply as it did those of others," and vowing along with the other enslaved to "exterminate all the white men in Virginia, beginning with our master and his family." However, when the reality of the impending horrors dawns on him, he has a change of heart: "I remember that my blood suddenly froze within my veins when the conspiracy had reached this point; and the idea of seeing those innocent, helpless maidens made the prey of brutal murderers, was so shocking to my spirit that I lost speech..." Tom takes care to distance himself from the group of "brutal murderers," gesturing towards an alliance with whites.<sup>58</sup> The hierarchical division between the two races that is starkly protected in this episode is already foreshadowed in the title of the very first chapter that opens the sequence, "In which Sheppard Lee finds every thing black about him," where Lee gets accustomed to his new physical form.<sup>59</sup> The double connotation of the wording "about him" as concerning both Lee's own Black body and his surroundings in the form of the enslaved community is a precise reflection of the manner in which Bird manipulates embodied Blackness to straddle both identification and alienation.<sup>60</sup> Such tactics have the effect of establishing Tom

---

<sup>58</sup> Bird, 360.

<sup>59</sup> Bird, 331.

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin J. Doty similarly emphasizes the double meanings of the word "about" here, noting that we can interpret in "every thing black about him" as referring to Lee's Black skin, but also to his "darkness of

as authentically Black, which gives more credibility to his eventual denouncement of his fellow enslaved companions.

Lee's regulatory authority increases when the revolt occurs, as shown in Tom's withdrawn perspective and his close observation of members of his community. When the enslaved men attack their enslaver's home, Tom becomes incapacitated, standing "rooted to the ground."<sup>61</sup> As they pursue the daughters of their enslaver, Tom reports the events that take place around him in a manner that preserves the purity of whiteness and the savagery of blackness. At one point, he notes with horror that one of the daughters, whose "face [w]as white as snow" was "separated only by a narrow plank from ruffians maddened by rage and carnage". Tom then remarks, after an enslaved man fails in his attempts to seize the daughter, that the man "was not destined to lay an impure touch on the devoted and heroic creature."<sup>62</sup> In these instances, Tom becomes a docile body, reducing himself to the status of spectator rather than participant and policing the actions of the enslaved. With no apparent external supervision, Lee's whiteness functions as a mechanism of internal surveillance – a self-sustaining mechanism. Lee's self-deception concerning the presence of his whiteness allows him to slip unnoticed into the position of an unseen watchman. In this sense, self-deception enables the practice of surveillance.

Throughout his embodiment as Tom, Lee denies the existence of his whiteness, creating the impression that it is of no relevance. Just one example is shown when he notes, "I was no longer Sheppard Lee....nor anybody else, except simply Tom, Thomas, or Tommy, the slave. I forgot that I once had been a freeman, or, to speak more strictly, I did not remember it...I had ceased to remember all my previous states of existence." Conveniently, Lee overlooks the

---

unconsciousness" given that the chapter begins with Lee's adjustment to Tom's body. Doty, "Satire, Minstrelsy, and Embodiment in 'Sheppard Lee,'" *Early American Literature* 51, no. 1 (2016): 131–56, 144.

<sup>61</sup> Bird, 365.

<sup>62</sup> Bird, 368.

impossibility of this statement inherent in his very acknowledgment of previous incarnations, and adds, “I could not have been an African had I troubled myself with thoughts of any thing but the present.”<sup>63</sup> The dynamics at play throughout the sequence are similar to those of blackface minstrelsy, but with one crucial difference: while audiences at minstrel shows retain an awareness that the performer is “white inside,” Bird’s readers are not alerted to the presence of the mask, allowing unsuspecting readers to assume he has simply taken on Tom’s identity just as he has taken on those of others. This is precisely what makes Lee’s performance of blackness so insidious – unlike blackface, Bird erases the presence of the mask – or rather, makes it one with the body. Importantly, however, Lee’s whiteness hovers in subliminal spaces while he asserts his authority over Tom’s body, as previously demonstrated, rendering readers simultaneously aware and not aware of Lee’s original identity. This has the double effect of not only reinforcing the connection between whiteness and property rights, but also of rendering this connection automatic and self-evident, as if reflecting a fact of reality. In his invisibility, Lee embodies the paradoxical properties that whiteness adopts to maintain its hegemony, as Richard Dyer details: “Whites must be seen to be white, yet whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen. To be seen as white is to have one's corporeality registered, yet true whiteness resides in the non-corporeal.”<sup>64</sup> By making Lee’s whiteness invisible, the novel aids in naturalizing hegemonic whiteness as the unmarked norm.

At this point it is important to clarify that my contention is not that Bird deliberately constructs Lee as self-deceived. Instead, I hold that the self-deception is a manifestation of the white imperative (one that Bird falls into) of the period to bolster the proprietary value of whiteness. If we revisit Fingarette’s account of self-deception, he explains that the self-deceiver is

---

<sup>63</sup> Bird, 341.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Dyer, *White: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Routledge, 2017), ch 2.

one who “will be provoked into a kind of engagement which...the person cannot avow as his engagement, for to avow it would apparently lead to such intensely disruptive, distressing consequences as to be unmanageably destructive to the person. The crux of the matter here is the *unacceptability* of the engagement to the person.”<sup>65</sup> Fingarette further explains that self-deception opens up a space where one can occupy two opposing yet self-serving states simultaneously: an individual may “pursue specific engagements independently, as autonomous projects, without integration into the complex unity of a personal self.”<sup>66</sup> In Lee’s case, he is able to mask the stakes that are at hand. The “unacceptability” of Lee’s engagement in embodying Tom would be an awareness of his investment in and dependency on this embodiment. This is precisely why Lee’s assumption of racial invisibility plays a critical role – it engenders a construction of whiteness that reinforces its “natural” superiority. As a positionality, whiteness does not announce itself, constituting an “invisible normative power.”<sup>67</sup>

### **Inclusion and Exclusion**

The self-deceptive sequence in the novel (despite his insistence otherwise, Lee’s identity becomes pronounced in Tom’s body rather than minimized) is a manifestation of the dialectic of political inclusion and exclusion that characterized Jacksonian Democracy: the broadening of the franchise coincided with the disfranchisement of free African Americans, “shifting the property required for voting from land to whiteness.”<sup>68</sup> This correlates with Rogers M. Smith’s argument

---

<sup>65</sup> Fingarette, 86 (emphasis in original)

<sup>66</sup> Fingarette. 86.

<sup>67</sup> George Yancy, *Look, A White!: Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* (Temple University Press, 2012), 109.

<sup>68</sup> Sherrow O. Pinder, *Whiteness and Racialized Ethnic Groups in the United States: The Politics of Remembering* (Lexington Books, 2012), 36.; Black disenfranchisement was widespread: "Blacks were legally disfranchised in New Jersey in 1807, in Maryland in 1810, in Connecticut in 1818, in Rhode Island in 1822, in Tennessee in 1834, in North Carolina in 1835, and in Pennsylvania in 1838." Diamond, Raymond T. and Cottrol, Robert J., "Codifying Caste: Louisiana's Racial Classification Scheme and the Fourteenth Amendment" (1983). Journal Articles, 286.

that within American political culture, liberalism went hand in hand with the enactment of ascriptive hierarchies (eligibility for political membership as based on ascriptive features such as race and gender).<sup>69</sup> Lee implicitly consolidates proprietary whiteness by subordinating a Black man; similarly, racially exclusionary measures helped solidify a collective white male identity that included both property owners as well as landless wage earners. As historian David Brown reminds us, however, “class politics and elite privilege did not disappear”; lower-class whites were not seamlessly incorporated into the electorate, as the first section of my chapter has shown, and anxieties over white propertylessness seeped into the cultural imaginary.<sup>70</sup>

The novel’s portrayal of the antidemocratic inclinations of the enslaved in Lee’s embodiment of Tom, to which I will turn in this section, allow Lee to reinforce his own self-government and citizenship by relation of opposition. Scholarship on whiteness has indicated that whites mobilized their race as what Peter Coviello has termed “a language of affiliation.”<sup>71</sup> My analysis correlates with this assessment, but makes a crucial distinction: in my reading, not only is whiteness incorporeal, but its existence is masked via self-deception.<sup>72</sup> This is a manifestation of the formation process of white racial identity: it dissimulates its own investment in racial relationality, thus rendering itself neutral and naturalizing its hegemony.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>70</sup> In his examination of conceptions of citizenship in the south, Brown notes that “to characterize citizenship as solely a matter of whiteness is to ignore ways in which elites remained influential in southern politics after universal suffrage was implemented”; Brown, “Citizenship, Democracy, and the Structure of Politics in the Old South,” 17.

<sup>71</sup> Coviello, *Intimacy In America*, 4. See also Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men*, New Americanists (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

<sup>72</sup> In considering whiteness as immaterial, I follow Albion W. Tourgée and Cheryl Harris’s conceptualization of whiteness as status and reputation.

<sup>73</sup> Relatedly, Robyn Wiegman has argued that post-emancipation, white men constituted their citizenship as a “disembodied entity” through practices of lynching, and in this “‘freed’ [themselves] from the corporeality that might otherwise impede [their] insertion into the larger body of national identity. Inversely, lynching ascribed African American bodies with an “extreme corporeality that defined [their] distance from the privileged ranks of citizenry.” Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Duke University Press, 1995), 94..

A concrete example of this self-deceptive logic of relationality that helps sustain whiteness as autonomous mastery without explicitly saying so can be found in comments made by Democrat Benjamin Martin at the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention in 1838, two years after the novel's publication. Up until then, the State Constitution recognized the right of "every freeman..age 21" to vote, a wording that allowed for the inclusion of the state's propertied African Americans in the franchise. The 1838 convention eventually restricted suffrage to "white freemen," effectively disenfranchising black men. Martin, who had pushed for inserting the word "white" into the suffrage article, explained his position in favor of Black disenfranchisement as follows:

To hold out to [African Americans] social rights, or to incorporate them with ourselves in the exercise of the right of franchise, is a violation of the law of nature...the divisionary line between the races, is so strongly marked by the Creator, that it is unwise and cruelly unjust, in any way, to amalgamate them, for it must be apparent to every well judging person, that *the elevation of the black, is the degradation of the white man.*<sup>74</sup>

While Martin clearly states that his rationale for Black disenfranchisement partially stems from his belief that the "elevation" of African Americans leads to the "degradation" of whites, the implied flip side that remains unsaid is that the elevation of whites is dependent on the degradation of Blacks. Martin freely states that the bestowal of political rights on African Americans effectively depreciates the value of such rights for white men. However, the ensuing implication, by which white Americans in fact rely on the subjugation of African Americans for the coherence of their identity, does not rise to the surface, for this would suggest an inherent dependency. By positioning the "elevation of the black" as the cause of "the degradation of the

---

<sup>74</sup> Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention, *Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, to Propose Amendments to the Constitution: Commenced and Held at Harrisburg, on the Second Day of May, 1837* (Packer, Barrett, and Parke, 1838), 321 (my emphasis).

white man,” Martin can portray whiteness as an insular group identity – yet this also reveals its constant need for reinforcement through the subjugation and exclusion of racialized others.<sup>75</sup>

Martin’s justification for the disenfranchisement of African Americans rests upon what he sees as the natural unfitness of African Americans for self-government and citizenship. Similar debates were taking place at constitutional conventions in the years leading up to the novel’s publication, where delegates attempted to determine who should be able to vote. As Laura E. Free points out, those “who argued that race and gender, rather than service or property, determined voting fitness had a particular problem: in their states African American men already were enfranchised and had been so for decades—if they had enough property. Therefore, anti-black suffrage delegates had to explain exactly why black men should be disfranchised.”<sup>76</sup> This inconsistency indicates precisely why it was precarious to rely on whiteness as an embodied marker of fitness for self-government.<sup>77</sup> Given this reality, an urgency developed among white citizens not only to define citizenship through whiteness, despite its unstable referential status, but also to perpetuate the image of African Americans as naturally unfit for political responsibility – an equation that Bird’s novel seeks to reinforce. Given that whiteness is defined through what is not, whiteness comes to signify what Richard Dyer terms, citing philosopher David Lloyd, a “subject without properties” that is “unmarked, universal, just human.”<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> As Nancy Bentley explains in her discussion of counterfactual narratives, nineteenth-century white liberals also fell into a relational dynamic that prioritized their whiteness – even when advocating for African Americans’ political rights. As Bentley shows, Tourgée played to this proclivity in his brief for *Plessy v. Ferguson* when “he urged the justices to transplant their racial experience as white men into black bodies,” asking them to imagine themselves with “black skin and curly hair.” Combined with Bird’s fiction, this points to the white inability to comprehend Blackness on its own terms. Bentley, “The Fourth Dimension: Kinlessness and African American Narrative,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (January 2009): 286, <https://doi.org/10.1086/596643>.

<sup>76</sup> Free, *Suffrage Reconstructed: Gender, Race, and Voting Rights in the Civil War Era* (Cornell University Press, 2015), 73.

<sup>77</sup> See Matthew Frye Jacobson's discussion of how the existence of free African Americans in the antebellum era stood out as a "political anomaly" within the logic of a "republican framework of racially recognized 'fitness for self-government.'" Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 28.

<sup>78</sup> Richard Dyer, *White*, ch 1.

Given my assertion that Bird's portrayal of Tom serves the purpose of consolidating Lee's proprietary whiteness, the scenes that lead up to the revolt — which include the enslaved community's engagement with human rights discourse as located in the abolitionist pamphlet — seem misplaced. However, these scenes only further solidify the equation of whiteness with self-government by demonstrating, by way of opposition, the slaves' misapplication of natural rights in their blind following of the incendiary pamphlet. Throughout, Lee's whiteness remains immaterial as he retreats to the sidelines when the enslaved debate amongst themselves. In his relative silence, Lee embodies the voice of reason, further fashioning his position as a rational political subject.

Channeling white reservations, Lee (as Tom) presents the pamphlet as follows: “Unluckily, the very next paragraph was opened by the quotation from the Declaration of Independence, that ‘all men were born free and equal,’ which was asserted to be true of all men, negroes as well as others; from which it followed that the master's claim to the slave born in thralldom was as fraudulent as in the case of one obtained by purchase.”<sup>79</sup> The enslaved respond with indignation upon discovering the injustice of their servitude. One enslaved man, using minstrel dialect and evoking language used in abolitionist campaigns, remarks the following: “‘Whaw dat?’ said Governor; ‘Decoracion of Independence say *dat*?...‘All men born free and equal.’ A nigga is a man! who says *no* to dat? How come Massa Cunnel to be massa den?’”<sup>80</sup> However, Bird shows that the enslaved are quick to distort ideals of equality for self-serving purposes — a misunderstanding already invoked in their referral to the Declaration as a mere “Decoracion”. In supposedly citing the Declaration of Independence, Bird sets up a parallel between the condition of the enslaved and that of the white colonists who fought for independence from the British

---

<sup>79</sup> Bird, 353.

<sup>80</sup> Bird, 353.

monarchy.<sup>81</sup> However, rather than strive for their own liberation, the pamphlet creates in the enslaved a desire for sovereignty.

The debates surrounding the enfranchisement of the white working-class and the accompanying disfranchisement of African Americans that were taking place while Bird was writing the novel, seem to have created an imperative for him to present African Americans as incapable of independent thought. Indeed, Bird was fearful of the prospect of Black voters and political equality, as he indicated in a letter to his friend Samuel Groome. In the letter, Bird indirectly invokes the Pennsylvania Convention when explaining his desire to leave the state:

I had then some thoughts of turning clodhopper and setting up my stakes on the Eastern Shore; and I have now a stronger tendency that way than ever; for our blackguards in the Convention are actually debating the propriety of admitting the negroes to the right of suffrage,— a measure that will drive me out of Pennsylvania, were the alternative the other side of the Rocky Mountains, and the very thought of which— though I believe there is not much fear of its actual occurrence— sharpens my desire to be off.<sup>82</sup>

The enslaved community's engagement with the pamphlet presents Bird with the opportunity to solidify his arguments against Black suffrage. The pamphlet, as Lee details, tells the enslaved that “the negro was, in organic and mental structure, the white man's equal, if not his superior, and that there was a peculiar injustice in subjecting to bondage *his* race, which had been (or so the writer averred), in the earlier days of the world, the sole possessors of knowledge and civilization.”<sup>83</sup>

While Bird is clearly disparaging what he sees as the inflammatory publications of abolitionists,

---

<sup>81</sup> As Justine Murison points out, the abolitionist pamphlet in fact quotes the French Declaration of the Rights of Man rather than the American Declaration; Murison situates this as part of Bird's critique of abolitionist rhetoric, pointing out that with this, “Bird implies that a French revolutionary Terror will follow the spread of abolitionist principles, and these associations draws in Haiti as a prominent site of revolt.” Murison, 42-43.

<sup>82</sup> Robert Montgomery Bird, *The Robert Montgomery Bird Papers* (Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania), box 1, folder 62, quoted in Peter Jaros, “The Faculties of Law: Robert Montgomery Bird's Sheppard Lee as Legal Fiction.” *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 3, no. 2 (2015): 307-335, 325. doi:10.1353/jnc.2015.0027. Jaros explores the novel in relation to the context of the 1838 Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention, by which he sheds light on the novel's “remarkable superimposition of two complementary crises of personhood: one corporate and one racial.” Jaros, 308.

<sup>83</sup> Bird, 356 (emphasis in original).

the enslaved are portrayed as equally to blame for their uncritical acceptance of the information. The pamphlet only ignites the aggression that was already in them, as Lee explains: “there was scarcely a word in it” – which we can take to encompass both the natural rights arguments and the claims of their racial superiority – “that did not contribute to increase the evil spirit which its first paragraph had excited among my companions.”<sup>84</sup> The enslaved, he details, “received with uncommon pleasure” notions concerning the “original greatness of their race,” and the “reviving grandeur [of their race] in the liberated Hayti, convinced them they possessed the power to redress their wrongs.”<sup>85</sup> In these scenes, Bird is also drawing upon and responding to anxieties about the threat of slave revolts, which were particularly heightened in these years following Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion, occurring five years before the novel's publication. The possibility of what Derrick Spires calls “black self-assertion” present both in state constitutional conventions and in the phenomenon of slave revolts, leads Bird to depict the enslaved as the antithesis of citizens.<sup>86</sup>

Instead of striving for equality within a democratic society, as in line with the outwardly egalitarian reforms of the Jacksonian era that reorganized white society, the enslaved purportedly seek to secure a status-based hierarchy within which each is on top. This is apparent when they voice their ambitions to hold positions of nobility following their imagined victory. After one enslaved man mentions the “great kings and generals...who had distinguished the race in olden time,” the following exchange takes place:

‘What *you* speak faw, pawson?’ said Governor, interrupting him and looking round with the the air of a lord; ‘I be king, hah? And hab my sarvants to wait on me!’  
 ‘What you say dah, Gub’nor?’ cried Zip the fiddler, with equal spirit: ‘You be king, I be president.’  
 ‘I be empr’ror, like dat ah nigga in Hight-ty!’ said another.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> Bird, 356.

<sup>85</sup> Bird, 357.

<sup>86</sup> Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship*, 247.

<sup>87</sup> Bird, 361.

In invoking “High-ty”, Bird implies that the enslaved are not seeking emancipation, but rather possess a proclivity for despotism of the kind Americans associated with Haiti’s enslaved community following their struggle for independence in 1791. The savagery of the enslaved is further demonstrated when they “apportion[] among themselves, in prospective, the wives and daughters of their intended victims.”<sup>88</sup> Bird seeks here to render African Americans as inherently incapable of self-government, thus justifying the curtailing of their political rights; African Americans, he seems to imply, are unworthy of self-possession given that they will only misuse their freedom. As the enslaved community’s aspirations are ridiculed, the natural rights presented in the abolitionist pamphlet are reestablished as exclusively white rights.

The combination of the novel’s portrayal of the antidemocratic tendencies of the enslaved and their criminal activities during the revolt is noteworthy. In this, the novel reinforces the doctrinal logic of slave law, which denies civil agency to the enslaved while policing their criminal activities. Enslaved men and women occupied under law what James Madison in *Federalist Paper* No. 54. (1788) termed “a mixed character of persons and property.”<sup>89</sup> As Jeannine DeLombard argues, this legal fiction of the enslaved “located personhood in criminal responsibility”; courts tacitly recognized the humanity of the enslaved by holding them accountable for their illegal actions.<sup>90</sup> The legal logic in this sense naturalizes the association of black personhood with criminality. The novel’s exclusion of the enslaved from both civil and political membership affirms, by way of opposition, the personhood and citizenship of poor whites such as Lee, validating his political status in the white man’s republic. Throughout, of course, Lee’s whiteness

---

<sup>88</sup> Bird, 360.

<sup>89</sup> James Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, No. 54, The Avalon Project, Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, [https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a1\\_2\\_3s13.html](https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a1_2_3s13.html).

<sup>90</sup> Jeannine Marie DeLombard, *In the Shadow of the Gallows: Race, Crime, and American Civic Identity* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 42.

remains mostly veiled via Lee's self-deception, which allows Bird to consolidate a collective white male consciousness without revealing or fully acknowledging its need for reinforcement.

In a pivot from the novel's opening chapters that portray Lee as lazy and politically unreliable, Bird reveals the novel's participation in shoring up the value of collective whiteness when Lee, this time as Zachariah Longstraw, pauses the narrative to issue a warning and reminder to his imagined reader. Lee, who is sensitive to the disrespect shown to indigent white men, make a case for their respectability:

Reader, if thou art a rich man, and despisest thy neighbor, remember that he has a thousand friends of his class where thou hast one of thine, and that he can beat thee at the elections. If thou art a gentleman, remember that thy cobbler is another, or thinks himself so – which is all the same thing in America. At all events, remember *this*—namely, that the poor man will find no fault with thy wealth, if thou findest none with his poverty.<sup>91</sup>

In this, the novel reminds its readers of the reality of Jacksonian Democracy; while propertied whites may not see lower-class whites as their social equals, universal white manhood suffrage affirmed their political equality. Under this reality, whiteness trumps class. The novel consolidates this conception by marking what whiteness is not, via Blacks' disqualification of political and civil membership.

Lee's address to the reader points to the gap between political theory and reality under Jacksonian Democracy, where common whites such as Lee were still viewed with suspicion. Within the logic of the race-based slavery, however, whiteness must be inextricably and unequivocally tied to property rights. The evolution that Sheppard Lee undergoes in the novel – by which he starts off as propertyless man, dominates a Black man's body, and regains his property – can be better understood by considering the comparable position of John Mann, the defendant in the 1829 case of *State v Mann*. Considering the case alongside *Sheppard Lee* reveals the way in

---

<sup>91</sup> Bird, 306.

which the novel functions as an imaginative space that fleshes out the ideology of the legal system, specifically as it pertains to race, property rights, and social class. John Mann, a slave-hirer from Chowan County, North Carolina, was convicted of assaulting Lydia, a hired enslaved woman. Mann shot Lydia after she tried to escape a whipping. Justice Thomas Ruffin overturned this conviction, determining that slave hirers and owners, both temporary and permanent masters, have equal authority over an enslaved man or woman. Ruffin noted that “Our laws uniformly treat the Master, overseer or other person having the possession and command of the slave, as entitled to the same authority” adding that masters must have “uncontrolled authority over the Body [of the enslaved].”<sup>92</sup> Ruffin extends legal power to white men who do not necessarily have the financial means to afford enslaved labor, thus solidifying the link between whiteness and property rights. The case, drawing an equivalence between the authorities of temporary and permanent enslavers, shows how whiteness came to be understood as mastery regardless of actual ownership status. Within such a reality, as legal treatise writer George M. Stroud writes in his description of slave laws, “submission is required of the slave not to the will of his master only, but to the will of all other white persons.”<sup>93</sup> These circumstances, categorized by Stroud under the heading of “Subjection to All Whites,” elevate the status of all white men, regardless of class. Lee reifies this reality in assuming absolute authority over Tom, which allows him to transcend his status, regardless of his actual financial state.

---

<sup>92</sup> *The State v. John Mann*, 13 NC 263 (North Carolina Supreme Court, 1829), [http:// plaza.ufl.edu/edale/Mann.htm](http://plaza.ufl.edu/edale/Mann.htm)

<sup>93</sup> George M. Stroud, *Stroud's Slave Laws: A Sketch of the Laws Relating to Slavery in the Several States of the United States of America* (Black Classic Press, 2005), 154.

### **Dissolution and Reassembly**

In what appears to be an ironic twist of fate, after Lee (as Tom) is hanged for his role in the insurrection, he takes possession of the body of Arthur Megrin, a wealthy Virginia planter. This takes place after Tom's body is dug up by anatomists who revive him by performing a galvanic experiment on his corpse; Lee then leaps into Megrin's body, a spectator who dies of shock after seeing Tom's body restored to life. In the logic of my reading, however, this is no coincidence: Lee, who has asserted property rights in an enslaved man's body, may now easily step into the role of an aristocratic plantation-owner. Notably, Megrin has numerous property holdings: "I had lands and houses, rich plantations, a nation or two of negroes, herds of sheep and cattle, with mills, fisheries, and some half dozen or more goldmines."<sup>94</sup> In embodying Megrin, the final body Lee inhabits before returning to his original body, Lee finally succeeds in climbing the social ladder. Interestingly, however, the self-governing capacity Lee acquired in Tom's body dissipates in Megrin's. In the course of the episode, the planter, a dyspeptic, severe hypochondriac, believes he has transformed into, among other objects, a tea-pot, a chicken, a loaded cannon, and a clock.<sup>95</sup> Yet this shows precisely what Lee's occupation of Tom's body has achieved: despite Lee's questionable self-government in Megrin's body, his property ownership is never questioned. Now that Lee has proved his worth in asserting his authority over an enslaved body, the status of whiteness as property can withstand a loss of self-possession. Crucially, Lee's practices of self-deception have facilitated and reified this reality, formulating whiteness as self-evident mastery. As Lee has shown, whiteness does not have to be inscribed on the body in order to connote authority.

---

<sup>94</sup> Bird, 384.

<sup>95</sup> Bird, 393-4.

As *Sheppard Lee* nears its end, so does the body's stable form: while inhabiting Megrin's body, Lee visits an exhibit that displays "an infinite variety of fragments from the bodies of animals and human beings..."<sup>96</sup> While he assumes at first that they are "imitations," he is informed that "they were real specimens" preserved through the process of embalming, a practice that was emerging at the time Bird was writing. Feurteufel, the German doctor who created the exhibit (and initially dug up Sheppard Lee's original body) shares the motivation behind such methods: "I can make him [the human body] shuse as he is, dat is *flesh*—put flesh vat is never corrupt...I take de nature as I find him—de shape, de color, de lips, de eyes, de hair, de all—and I do, py my process, make him indestructeeble, and not to alter for ever."<sup>97</sup> Feurteufel then uncovers the central showpiece: an embalmed mummy, which Lee leaps into after recognizing it as his own lost body. In portraying the human body, in its mummified form and various fragments, as a commodity, Bird seems to raise several questions, some of which touch on modern bioethical concerns: if the body is made up of a collection of parts, what distinguishes subject from object? What constitutes a human being? Is the preserved, perfect body merely a representation of the once-living person, or is it the person himself or herself? What happens to property rights when proprietors lose their self-propriety? And, perhaps, most importantly, where does personhood reside? Given the focus of this chapter, what role does self-deception play in this context? These questions become even more pertinent (and difficult) when considering a central point on which the novel hinges: Sheppard Lee exists in more than just one person.

An inspection of the novel's closing scenes will help provide an answer to the two final questions. When Lee returns to his original body and goes back to what was once his farm, he discovers that his brother in law has restored the mortgaged property to its original condition, as

---

<sup>96</sup> Bird, 399.

<sup>97</sup> Bird, 403 (emphasis in original).

well as paid off a portion of his debts. Lee then vows to commit himself to agricultural labor, and pay off his remaining debts: “I shall now bid adieu to indolence and discontent...and do as my father did before me, that is, cultivate these few acres which my folly has left me, with my own hands.”<sup>98</sup> Lee is now satisfied with his life, embracing new industrious habits. Bird’s supposed moral then seems to be that each person should find contentment in their class position, and not attempt to alter it. Indeed, Lee expresses great gratitude for what he has in the novel’s closing lines: “At all events – be my body what it may, hardy or frail, stiff or supple, I am satisfied with it, and shall never again seek to exchange it for another.”<sup>99</sup> However, leaving it at that does not account for Lee’s significant shift from “criminal poverty” and propertylessness to farm ownership. Indeed, Lee has not just returned to his original condition, but rather to an improved one; in this new condition, he embodies the qualities of virtue and independence associated with responsible political membership. In my reading, the trigger that sets Lee’s transformation in motion and legitimizes his political membership is his embodiment of Tom. Lee personhood gains its coherence as self-proprietorship when he asserts property rights in Tom’s body – retaining an inviolable personhood even in the formal absence of his whiteness. As shown, Lee’s residual whiteness serves to reinforce exclusionary practices against African Americans, which consolidates his own citizenship. It is residual precisely because Bird’s fiction hides it from view by way of self-deception, which in turn conceals the dependence of whiteness on black subordination. In its utilization of self-deception, the novel offers a portrait of American identity that embraces self-obfuscation.

---

<sup>98</sup> Bird, 416.

<sup>99</sup> Bird, 425.