Remediating Antebellum Laughter: Sheppard Lee, Bert Williams, and the Subversion of Blackface in *Get Out*

**ABSTRACT**
This article examines the literary and cinematic use of blackface typically employed to dehumanize and mimic Black life, arguing that Jordan Peele’s 2017 film *Get Out* is a contemporized reframing of blackface through use of the Coagula transplantation procedure and the “Sunken Place.” Unlike precursors *Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself* (1836) and the minstrelsy of actor Bert Williams, *Get Out*’s depiction of the Sunken Place and especially the performance of actress Betty Gabriel are meant to dismantle rather than propagate the weaponization of blackface and “antebellum laughter” tropes against Black people.

Brother, the blackness of Afro-American “black humor” is not black, it is tragically human and finds its source and object in the notion of “whiteness.”

—Ralph Waldo Ellison, “An Extravagance of Laughter”


In response to talk show host Stephen Colbert’s probing question about Universal Pictures’ decision to submit *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017) to the 2018 Golden Globes under the category of best “Musical or Comedy,” director and screenwriter Jordan Peele reiterated to Colbert and his *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (CBS, 2015–) audience the equivocal tweet he had posted just a few hours before the interview: “‘Get Out’ is a documentary.” Based on Peele’s personal experiences with white liberal racism and written and directed in the vein of the horror genre, *Get Out* places audiences in the perspective of an African American photographer named Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya) as he uncovers a diabolical scheme of live body snatching while he is meeting the family of his white girlfriend, Rose Armitage (Allison Williams). Through the perspective of the Black protagonist, we discover that his white girlfriend is in fact an evil predator who has been secretly luring her Black lovers to be sold at auction to members of her family’s cult, the Order of the Coagula. By no means masking their racial envy, the members of this cult, mostly composed of old wealthy white people, bid for the live bodies of younger Black individuals that they desire to literally embody by undergoing the Armitage family’s Coagula transplantation procedure—in which the Black mind is hypnotically suppressed and then surgically removed and replaced by the brain of the highest bidder.

The horrifying aspects of this racist scheme, the violent repercussions that it generates (to put an end to the evil plot, Chris sets fire to the house and kills every member of the family), and the terrifying truth about Black and minority experiences expressed by the film are among the most obvious reasons why Peele half-sarcastically relabeled *Get Out* after it was submitted as a work of comedy. “What the movie is about is not funny,” Peele stated during a promotional event for the film. “Call it what you want,” he said, speaking bluntly on the incongruity of its Golden Globes classification, “but the movie is an expression of my truth, my experience, the experiences of a lot of black people, and minorities.”

Therefore, while Peele makes use of dark humor and comic dialogue to modulate tension and to add sociopolitical breadth to the film, to classify *Get Out* as a comedy runs the very serious risk of reducing the depravities of slavery and systemic oppression into forms of comic entertainment that condition audiences to laugh off social concerns that must be seriously faced.

What is doubly ironic about the Golden Globes’ classification is that *Get Out* transforms a certain US tradition of comic entertainment into a gut-wrenching object of terror. Commissioned by Jordan Peele and Universal Pictures, Jermaine Rogers’s poster art for *Get Out* features a blue-gray illustration of the Armitage family standing behind protagonist Chris Washington as he covers half his terrified face with a blackface mask beaming a fire truck red

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grin.\textsuperscript{4} While this mask is placed in the center and at the forefront of Rogers’s graphic rendition of the film’s main characters, the film itself does not so overtly display images of blackface minstrelsy—and yet its style, direction, and performances hark back to this racist form of comic entertainment that started in the United States at the end of the 1820s. Instead of drawing viewers’ attention to a blackface mask as Rogers does, Peele absorbs and repurposes the form and content of past media that used blackface performances, conventions, symbols, and tropes. In an interview with Numa Perrier, Peele says that he wants his audience to be able to observe the reality of “what is scary about being Black” in the early twenty-first century, and for Peele this sort of everyday fear is a matter of both “horror and comedy.”\textsuperscript{5}

The horror and comedy of this fear is represented in a number of scenes throughout the film, but none captures this aesthetic paradox more profoundly than the iconic close-up shot of Georgina (Betty Gabriel)—an up-to-date mutation of the mammy archetype—simultaneously laughing and crying after Chris confides in her, with a half-smile: “Sometimes, if there’s too many white people, I get nervous, you know?”\textsuperscript{6} It is this racially based, horror-subsuming laughter that this article aims to analyze as a remediation of what the title refers to as antebellum laughter. Based on a white investment in “blackness” and Black culture, this ambivalent type of abject laughter is, moreover, symptomatic of the structural aspects that Eric Lott documents in the United States’ blackface media industry: “the dialectic flickering of racial insult and racial envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation, counterfeit and currency, a pattern at times amounting to no more than two faces of racism, at others gesturing toward a specific kind of political or sexual danger, and all constituting a peculiarly American structure of racial feeling.”\textsuperscript{7} As conjured in the close-up shot of Georgina’s tearful mirth, antebellum laughter, in other words, erupts from the cracks produced from staging this grotesque structure of racial feeling. Different from the comedy/horror line in Black horror films such as those from the \textit{Tales from the Hood} series, which boldly portray a Black character’s implication in perpetuating systemic racism, the horror and comedy of \textit{Get Out} implicates audience members on both sides of the color line in taking part in a certain horror-subsuming laughter that has its sources in white envy and desire.\textsuperscript{8}

In order to formulate a more vivid definition of antebellum laughter that can function as the primary lens for examining the remedial effect of Peele’s film, I begin with an analysis of racial embodiment as represented


\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Tales from the Hood} (Rusty Cundieff, 1995), \textit{Tales from the Hood 2} (Rusty Cundieff and Darin Scott, 2018), and \textit{Tales from the Hood 3} (Rusty Cundieff and Darin Scott, 2020).
in Robert Montgomery Bird’s pseudo-autobiography Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself (1836). After this close reading, a focus on the tragic fate of the great entertainer Bert Williams (1874–1922) will help us understand to what extent Black artists such as Spike Lee, Jordan Peele, and Betty Gabriel have had to navigate the pitfalls surrounding their subversive (re)appropriations of such racialized stereotypes. The section on Williams therefore functions to define key distinctions between white embodiments of Blackness and, more specifically, Black embodiments of Blackness. Finally, in the analysis of Get Out, the metaphysical musings in Edgar Allan Poe’s “Mesmeric Revelation” (1844) will be transplanted to the utopic-dystopic rationale of the Armitages’ Coagula procedure in order to assess the intentions surrounding Peele’s own cinematic coagula.

Last, throughout the course of this article, my use of the notion of remediation—that is, the use of past media to create something new—is based on the assumption that all forms of media entail remediation, since the medium itself, acting as an extension of ourselves, is made of other media. In their influential work Remediation: Understanding New Media, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin discuss the double logic of remediation.9 On the one hand, remediations such as novels and films are meant to produce a sense of immediacy that makes us ignore the media (the book, the cinematic apparatus) conveying the message. On the other hand, remediations also entail the logic of hypermediacy, in which the remediation is meant to draw our attention to the media through deliberate representations of the media. Based on remediation’s double logic, I read the remediations of Bird’s novel, Williams’s mask, and Peele’s film as subversive “attempts to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation” in the very act of multiplying various forms of blackface media.10 In all three of these primary sources, in other words, the hypermediacy of blackface tropes is meant to draw our attention to the fact that each source is capable of evoking an immediate emotional response. Indeed, the double logic of remediation is made evident by the facts that Sheppard Lee was originally published as an autobiography, that Williams and his costar advertised themselves as “Two Real Coons,” and that Peele outspokenly relabeled Get Out as a documentary. In each case, the purpose of remediating the horror and comedy of blackface is to play on the minds of the audience for a dissonant and potentially disturbing effect. Unlike precursors Sheppard Lee and the minstrelsy of actor Bert Williams, Get Out’s depiction of the “Sunken Place” and especially the performance of actress Betty Gabriel are meant to dismantle rather than propagate the weaponization of blackface and antebellum laughter against Black people.

**SHEPPARD LEE: BLACKFACE MIMESIS AND ABOLITIONIST PRINT ON THE SOUTHERN PLANTATION**

Robert Montgomery Bird’s (1806–1854) subversive literary remediation of blackface minstrelsy reveals the dangers of drawing upon this theatrical

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form of mass media and provides readers with the image of an acquiescent, happy-go-lucky Tom figure that preceded Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom by nearly two decades.\textsuperscript{11} While “minstrelsy and ‘tommimg are,” according to Yuval Taylor and Jake Austin, “almost synonymous” today, this was not the case in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{12} It was not until the explosive popularity of Stowe’s \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} (1852) and the subsequent proliferation of stage adaptations of the novel that Stowe’s meek and lowly Uncle Tom amalgamated associations with minstrel elements. Always depicted as being “chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted” yet remaining “hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind,” these stage and, eventually, screen adaptations of Uncle Tom flattened minstrelsy’s dramatic ambiguities and thus reproduced forms of racist entertainment “aimed squarely at white audiences and [that] held little appeal to blacks.”\textsuperscript{13} Writing at a time when minstrel figures did not solely “endear themselves to white audiences,” Bird, much like Stowe, utilizes the tragicomic ambiguities of minstrelsy in order to subvert white audiences’ ideological assumptions and convert them to the abolitionist cause. But whereas Stowe repurposes blackface characterization in order to attack both minstrelsy and the institution of slavery, Bird aims his literary adaptations of minstrelsy at not only minstrelsy and slavery but also the covert, polite, or even \textit{benevolent} racism of white liberals.

First published in two volumes as the work of Sheppard Lee himself, \textit{Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself} is a scathing satire told from the point of view of the eponymous New Jerseyan as he seeks to find satisfaction in life by transmigrating into a total of six different bodies. As the invisible author of Lee’s metempsychotic experiences, Bird is therefore imaginatively impersonating Lee’s embodied impersonations of these men. Fictionally speaking, the reason why the transmigrations are indeed impersonations and not total transferences of the psyches is because a sliver of Lee’s soul supernaturally grafts itself onto the consciousness that remains in the dead body. For instance, at the beginning of the novel’s second book, Lee conveys his thoughts and feelings after his first transmigration into the vacant body of a successful Philadelphia brewer who was suffering from gout:

\begin{quote}
To account for my forgetfulness of this important transformation, I must relate that, although I had acquired along with his body all the peculiarities of feeling, propensity, conversation, and conduct of Squire Higginson, I had not entirely lost those that belonged to Sheppard Lee. In fact, I may be said to have possessed, at that time, two different characters, one of which now governed me, and now the other; though the squire’s, it must be confessed, was greatly predominant. . . . The difficulty, was that I could not immediately shake off my old Sheppard Lee habits; and the influence of these, perhaps (if one must scrutinize into the matter), more than the absolute
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} Bogle, \textit{Toms, Coons, Mulattoes}, 4–7.
\textsuperscript{13} Bogle, \textit{Toms, Coons, Mulattoes}, 4–6; and Taylor and Austin, \textit{Darkest America}, 57.
retention of any other native peculiarities, drove me into the inco-
sistencies of which I was for a short time guilty. 14

As we will later see in our analysis of *Get Out*, the transmigratory process
Lee undergoes is an inversion of the Armitages’ Coagula operation in which
the Black host’s soul is not desired and embraced but, rather, mesmerically
repressed into what is called the Sunken Place in the film—and what Peele
refers to as Uncle Tom during his interview with Perrier. 15 Besides function-
ing as the basis for narrative coherence, Lee is never capable of dispensing
with his original consciousness, even when he has successfully integrated
into the body of a new host. Since the character of the dead, soulless squire
“was greatly predominant,” it is clear moreover that Bird sees the self as
being more physically and socioeconomically than mentally determined.
These principles are a narratological necessity for Bird, as each book of the
novel functions formally as separate bodies of text in and through which he
creatively meditates on the bodily basis of political life. As for Lee himself,
the eponymous metempsychosist is frustrated by his lingering psyche because
his hope—contrary to the Armitage family’s scheme to preserve the white
psyche—is to do away with his former body and mind altogether. Despite his
efforts, something like a mind or soul of his former self minimally persists.
And the “inconsistencies” resulting from Lee’s compounded consciousness
allow Bird to relay his derisive social, political, and economic commentaries
in a way that provides readers with the much-needed comic relief in reading
this rather horrific series of events.

At the beginning of the sixth book, “Containing a History and a Moral,”
Lee awakens in the body of a slave whom his masters nicknamed “Giggling
Tom” and eventually finds himself “quite certain [he] never was better in
[his] life.”16 By imagining and representing a white man’s literal embodiment
of a Black man’s body and character, Bird is working through the deadly
ironies that constitute not only the institution of slavery but also the cathartic
entertainment provided by the blackface mask. After failing to find hap-
piness in the bodies of a wealthy brewer, a penniless dandy, and a miserly note
shaver, Lee occupies the body of a naive Quaker philanthropist. While Lee
is traversing through Virginia with, coincidentally, a runaway slave, a mob of
Virginians accuses him of being an abolitionist, then quickly ties him up to
be hanged. Terrified by the thought of his impending fate, Lee is offered an
escape route through a terribly ludicrous deus ex machina: “Matters were
coming—I may say had come—to a crisis, and my life hung upon a thread;
when suddenly a negro [Tom], who had been among the most active and
zealous of the volunteers on the tree, fell from a high branch to the ground,
and, besides breaking his own neck, as I understood by the cry that was set
up, crushed two or three white men that stood below.”17

Whether we laugh out loud, silently grin, or sigh in frustration, violent

17 Bird, 325–326.
slapstick scenes like these are representative of Bird’s evenhanded treatment of characters (and readers) as objects of ridicule and laughter. Starting the passage with a pun on Lee’s grim situation, Bird establishes a tone of comic abjection that is amplified by the white men dying as a consequence of Tom being forced to assist in the hanging of a supposed abolitionist. Besides intensifying the absurdity of the scene, the deaths of the white men amount to a multifaceted form of nihilistic retribution. Bird not only sacrifices these men as a fictional and compositional act of justice for his obscene introduction and subsequent exploitation of Tom, but he also reduces the identities of the dead Virginians to an irrelevant mass of “two or three white men”—indeed, these men serve no purpose in the story besides being the last props of this grotesque episode. Though Bird’s personal diary indicates that he took pleasure in disturbing the haughtiness of the slaveholding South, Sheppard Lee was written to stifle the sense of moral self-assurance in all white readers, as the scene at hand attests.¹⁸ In this particular case, a reader’s burst of mirth does not take the form of mourning, of moralizing; instead, it pillories the ideologies and practices that allow those on any side of the issue of slavery to benefit emotionally, financially, and/or morally from the slaves’ lack of control of their own bodies as well as how they are represented.

On the surface, Bird’s representation of Lee’s embodiment of Tom is a literary remediation of the “grossly drawn out stereotypes of laziness, superstition, lasciviousness, and buffoonish behavior” that white blackface minstrels performed on stage for rural migrants and other non-elite whites.¹⁹ Before the reader encounters Bird’s remediation of these familiar stereotypes, however, Lee, already in Tom’s body, does not immediately assume the body-mind of Tom. Instead, he regrets his transmigration and so treats the situation as a kind of anthropological learning experience—an anachronistic, literary form of identity tourism: “I had forgotten the state of the bondman, the condition of the expatriated African. Now I was at last to learn in reality what it was to be the victim of fortune, what to be the exemplar of wretchedness, the true repository of all the griefs that can afflict a human being.”²⁰ At this point, readers know what to expect (i.e., sketches of human depravity that typically make up abolitionist pamphlets and magazines), but within the third chapter Bird shatters these expectations: “In short, I was treated like a human being, and fed like a king, and began to grow wondrous content with my situation.”²¹ As the slave of a relatively humane master, Lee finds himself “luxuriating in happy laziness” and declares, “I found myself, for the first time in my life, content.”²² Perusing this unexpected turn in the plot with only a handful of chapters of the novel remaining, readers are sure to know the author is preparing something preposterous.

Before we assess the ruthless vitriol simmering in the climax of the sixth book, Lee’s explication for his true contentedness is well worth examining,

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¹⁸ Christopher Looby, introduction to Bird, Sheppard Lee, xxxi.
¹⁹ Glenda Carpio, Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 23.
²⁰ Bird, Sheppard Lee, 332.
²¹ Bird, 336.
²² Bird, 337, 341.
since it offers a pseudo-scientific paradigm working to distract readers from doubting the authenticity of Lee’s (and Bird’s) minstrel performance. Because Bird’s platform for remediating the authenticity of Tom’s character is not the stage but the page, Bird has Lee introspect about his shift in attitude in the body of Tom:

I had ceased to remember all my previous states of existence. I could not have been an African had I troubled myself with thoughts of anything but the present.

Perhaps this defect in memory will account for my being satisfied with my new condition. I had no recollection of the sweets of liberty to compare and contrast with the disgusts of servitude. Perhaps my mind was stupefied—sunk beneath the ordinary level of the human understanding, and therefore incapable of realizing the evils of my condition. Or, perhaps, after all, considering the circumstances of my lot with reference to those of my mind and nature, such evils did not in reality exist.23

After pausing to appreciate the beauty of his face and clothes, Lee continues pondering over his condition:

I say again, I cannot account for my being so contented with bondage. It may be, however, that there is nothing necessarily adverse to happiness in slavery, unaccompanied by other evils; and that when the slave is ground by no oppression and goaded by no cruelty, he is not apt to repine or moralize upon his condition, nor to seek for those torments of sentiment which imagination associates with the idea of slavery in the abstract.

Of one thing, at least, I can be very certain. I never had so easy and idle a time of it in my whole life.24

According to Lee, his “defect in memory” is the probable reason for his baffling sense of satisfaction in the body of a slave. Whereas the other bodies retained memories of their past experiences, the slave’s body—never troubled by “thoughts of anything but the present”—becomes a pure medium that bypasses the influences of memory and ideology. Before Lee entered his body, Tom’s “mind was stupefied—sunk beneath the ordinary level of human understanding”—because of the real conditions of slavery. Though it is more than likely Bird himself ascribed to such a materialist conception of slavery’s effects on the formation of subjectivity, Bird is doing more than simply re-presenting the dehumanizing effects of slavery. By invisibly remediating the thoughts of a white minstrel embodied in the character of a slave within a white man’s novel, Bird uses printed thoughts in analogous fashion

24 Bird, 342.
to how white performers used blackface in order to remediate Black subjectivity. In other words, Bird, through the double logic of remediation, wants his readers to play along with the open trick that what is beneath the surface of the words is in fact exactly what they see on the surface: a contented slave. The minstrel Lee is unconcerned with questions of morality because “when the slave is ground by no oppression and goaded by no cruelty, he is not apt to repine or moralize upon his condition.” For contented readers “goaded by no cruelty” (at least not yet), they have no reason to challenge what’s on the face of the page: a white man explaining the real conditions of the slave’s life in the South, which is in reality the racist fantasy that (re)produced the blackface mask. Therefore, the most obvious differences between Bird’s and Peele’s subversive remediations of blackface are twofold: (1) the authors’ races are different, and, unlike Bird and unlike Stowe as well, (2) Peele steers clear from repurposing minstrelsy’s comic tropes in order to avoid moral ambiguity and potential misreadings. While we know Bird was most certainly a critic of the institution of slavery, Bird’s satirical play on blackface buffoonery, much like Stowe’s subversive utilization of these same tropes, has led to the unabashed reproduction of such derogatory images and ideas that haunt us to this day.

For readers sensing Bird’s acrobatic imitation (of imitations) of racist images derived from the white imaginary, they might have already been laughing at the author’s literary jape. With what follows in the story, however, Bird’s overt display of mimesis—his literary staging of mimesis—collapses the line between those who take the words (and the masks) for reality and those who are able to see the difference between reality and its imitation. Defining comedy as “mimesis in action,” Mladen Dolar argues that the power and danger of comedy comes from the fact that “it sees double in what ought to be clearly separated”: the imitation and its real model. Though it might be constructive for comedy to stage and catch the formation of belief “just before it can yield to faith” in the imitation and its meaning, the risk—the justification for Plato’s banishment of the poet—lies in the fact that the “[i]mitation shapes the imitator, and it shapes the model that is imitated.”

Whether or not readers fall for Bird’s verisimilitude, believing or not believing the words on the page, Bird crafts an outrageous scene in which the images printed in abolitionist pamphlets are being tragicomically performed and watched by the other contented slaves of the house:

By-and-by, hearing a great chattering and laughing among the men below, I looked down and beheld one of them diverting himself with a ludicrous sport, frequently practised by slaves to whom the lash is unknown. He was frisking and dodging about pretty much as aunt Phoebe had done when endeavouring to show me how the whip was handled in Mississippi; and, like her, rubbed his back, now here, now there, now with the right, now with the left hand; now ducking to the earth, now jumping in the air, as though some lusty overseer

26 Dolar, 580.
were plying him, whip in hand, with all his might. The wonder of the thing was, however, that Governor (for that was the fellow’s name) had in his hand a pamphlet, or sheet of printed paper, the contents of which he was endeavouring both to convey to his companions and to illustrate by those ridiculous antics. The contents of the paper were varied, for varied also was the representation.27

Produced by the tragicomic redoubling of both blackface minstrelsy and the horrific scenes of subjection printed in abolitionist pamphlets, antebellum laughter sharply resonates throughout this passage. While the obvious irony is that the slaves’ uninformed reproduction and observation of these scenes is doing the very work of dehumanization that abolitionists publicly revile, it is the effect of this redoubled staging—the didactic staging of the staging of white brutality against Black people—that reveals a darker irony. In mistakenly mimicking these re-presentations of violence as a “ludicrous sport,” the slaves have learned to cathertically pacify one another based on the images in the pamphlet, which are in and of themselves reproductions that subordinate the image to what is being re-presented—an Uncle Tom. In other words, Bird has Governor “convey” and “illustrate” the unacknowledged paradox that the pamphlet has become the abolitionists’ stage for their progressive, moralist mode of blackface minstrelsy. The most hilarious and terrifying irony is that despite the slaves’ unawareness of the intended meaning and function of the abolitionist pamphlet, and despite the actual pleasure they receive from acting out and watching the scenes, they have become both the mask and the slave, both the comic fantasy and the tragic reality—a comedy of the horror of comedy. For our reading of Get Out, it is this interracial aesthetic paradox that is at the core—that is the object—of antebellum laughter.

Whereas the “mimicry and merriment” of this fictional stage adaptation subverts the acts of violence committed against slaves, the double mimicry and precarious humor of Bird’s novelistic remediation functions as a self-reflexive attack against white re-presentations of Black bodies.28 All along, he has entangled himself in the very practice he is satirizing, as we shall now see. Bird has Lee enter the body of a slave in order to construct a plantation system in which slaves ignorantly and willfully subject themselves to disciplinary self-derision. This twisted fantasy does not last long, however. Examining the caption of the whipping scene they had been acting out, a slave misreads the caption as “De fat ob de slave” and concludes the picture illustrates a benevolent master whipping unnecessary fat off a slave. Lee takes a look for himself and proceeds to correct the other’s misreading of the caption: “THE FATE OF THE SLAVE.” Upon hearing these words, the slaves realize that they have been mimicking the reality of their condition as established and reproduced by white people:

The reading of that little sentence seemed, I know not why, to have cast a sudden damper on the spirits of all present. Until that

27 Bird, Sheppard Lee, 347.
28 Bird, 350.
moment, there had been much shouting, laughing, and mimicking of the pains of men undergoing flagellation. Every picture had been examined, commented on, and illustrated with glee, it associated only the idea of some idle vagabond or other winning his deserts. A new face, a new interpretation was given to the matter by the words I had read. The chain and scourge appeared no longer as the punishment of an individual; they were to be regarded as the doom of the race. The laughing and mimicry ceased, and I beheld around nothing but blank faces. It was manifest, however, that the feeling was rather indignation than anxiety; and that my friends looked upon the ominous words as a libel upon their masters and themselves.29

Outraged by the “cuss’ bobbolitionist” whose rhetorical force is ironically based on “the doom of the race,” Governor and the others initially interpret the caption as a “libel upon their masters and themselves,” especially since their principal master, whose “good-nature was abused a thousand times a day,” was “a greater slave than his bondmen.”30 Building suspense, Lee continues to amend their interpretations by providing them with more and more knowledge. Soon they learn the purpose of the book as intended by its authors: with the air of a “more humane and Christian character[,] it was to convince the master that he was a robber and villain.”31 With the help of Lee as an intermediary, the slaves disregard their past experiences and start believing in “the doom of the race” as facilitated by all their masters, including the children. Like Tom’s body and his seemingly unmediated thoughts, the message of the media printed in the pamphlet supplants the memory of past experiences with a new belief in the self and its relation to itself and the world. The meaning of these representations “wrought a revolution in [their] feelings as surprising as it was fearful,” “convinc[ing] them they possessed the power to redress their wrongs, and raise themselves into a mighty nation”—and so they massacre every white person, not even sparing the children.32 Though no redemption within the world of the novel, the grotesque excess of retaliatory violence has the potential to produce the effect of both horror and comedy, depending on the reader’s relation to or identification with the novel’s characters.

Ensuring all readers get their fair doses of horror and comedy, Bird has “a party of armed horsemen” kill most of the slaves and imprison the few survivors of the counterinsurgency.33 As for the author remediating the buffoonish and monstrous blackface stereotypes performed on stage and printed on page, Bird goes as far as to make himself an object of ridicule for having aesthetically experimented with images of slavery and blackface minstrelsy. While Lee is “record[ing] his own death and burial,” Tom’s body undergoes one more operation “when certain young doctors of the village, who were desirous to show their skill in anatomy, came to the place of execution, and

29 Bird, 350–351.
30 Bird, 345.
31 Bird, 352.
33 Bird, 368.
dug up the three best bodies, of which, as [his] good luck would have it, [his] own was one.”34 Soon after, the bodysnatching quacks start conducting galvanic experiments on the corpses, which end up momentarily resurrecting Tom only to terrify one of the white men to death, thus providing Lee with his escape route and final host. Ironically, the buffoonish monster—a Frankenstein’s monster created by the masters, the doctors, the protagonist, and the author—is what allows Lee (and Bird) to get out of Tom’s body. Doubly ironic is the fact that Bird had set up a medical practice in Philadelphia before he became disillusioned by medicine and subsequently devoted himself to literature.35 By the end of the sixth book, only a duplicitous reading can evade what is on the page: regardless of where one might stand on the question of slavery, the white re-presentation of the Black body has served as the white mind’s form of expression, escape, and dread. In fact, Sheppard Lee has nothing to say for or about Black individuals, besides pointing at white America’s anxieties about violent retribution. As we shall see later in our reading of the iconic close-up shot of Georgina’s face in Get Out, actor Betty Gabriel conjures this anxiety in order to foreshadow the violent climax of Chris’s escape from the Armitage family’s diabolical plot.

In the mid-1860s, some thirty years after the publication of Sheppard Lee, an increasing number of Black individuals became established as performers of blackface minstrelsy, though their contributions in imitating white men performing blackface did little to alter the tradition.36 Instead of having the liberty to undercut prevailing blackface stereotypes through original performances, Black performers were able to “participate in the theatrical form only by virtue of their declarations of authenticity.”37 Black performers donning the burnt cork mask, as Camille Forbes states, “thus became the means by which the character, through the songs the comedian sang or the darky dialect in which he sang them, could be thought realistic.”38 And as “the black entertainers performed the stereotypes, the damage extended even further: they risked ossifying their own representations.”39 In short, burnt cork was known to be a mask covering or transforming a white performer, but on a Black performer the mask—the medium—was erased further and interpreted as genuine. For this reason, Black audiences read against the grain of the mask’s content that white audiences tended to (mis)read and accept as authentic and thus immediate forms of Blackness. The line between blackface mask and Black minstrel would not be boldly danced on until Bert Williams took the stage.

BERT WILLIAMS: THE GREATEST BLACK MINSTREL AND THE ENDS OF HIS TRAGICOMIC MASK

Widely recognized as the greatest and highest paid comedian on the American stage during the early twentieth century, Bert Williams (1874–1922)

34 Bird, 371.
35 Looby, introduction, xxii–xxiii.
37 Forbes, 25.
38 Forbes, 25.
39 Forbes, 25.
began his acting career as a Barker for a medicine show troupe touring California in the early 1890s. He stationed himself outside tents in order to draw a tip and entice passing audiences to see what they might have not planned to see. This was also when Williams met his Black minstrel partner George Walker. Meticulously developing his skills in mimicry and characterization, Williams quickly realized two key points: his predominately white audiences were always interested in blackface song and dance, and he could perform in blackface better than any white performer. From medicine show, Williams turned to minstrelsy, and from minstrelsy to Black musical theater, from Black theater to vaudeville, and from vaudeville to all-white Broadway productions, Columbia Records, early motion pictures, and more. Though he was a trailblazer for his time, successfully appropriating from whites the very right to perform the “darker,” “his name became inextricably linked to the demonic history of possession, caricature, slavery, and dehumanization embodied by the form he in fact reinvented and appropriated to subversive effect: blackface minstrelsy.” Despite the subversive, anti-racist readings his performances afforded, after Williams’s death in 1922, the tragic weight of his comic performance haunted his legacy, reducing his life and pioneering work to near obscurity.

Born in the Bahamas and identifying publicly as a West Indian from the Bahamas, Williams donned the blackface mask not as a West Indian but as an “authentic” African American “coon,” a racist figure that referenced the purported practices of brutish, indolent slaves. Dubbing themselves “Two Real Coons,” Williams and Walker played the Jim Crow and Zip Coon (or Jim Dandy) characters, respectively. This was a strategic decision, of course, as they were asserting their “realness” in the face of the counterfeit of white blackface performance. Though they made sure to suppress the more appalling tropes of those stereotypes in order to please their Black audience, they could not totally refute the images of minstrelsy because that’s precisely what their white audience wanted. Nevertheless, the consequential debate over Black re-presentation led them to underplay dialect and raucous clowning and to focus instead on the evolving relationship between the two opposing yet complementary characters.

Throughout his career, Williams’s limbs were being pulled from both sides of the audience line. As Forbes elucidates, “Whites and blacks alike brought to performances their own notions of what was an appropriate representation for blacks. Both expected that representation to be ‘real’ or ‘true’ to their notions. Both audiences conflated what they saw onstage to be a manifestation of ‘truth.’ For whites, the coon, and for blacks, the ‘New Negro.’” Because Black leaders at the turn of the century “charged
performers with the duty to expose audiences to blacks' reality, which minstrelsy failed to do,” Williams received a good deal of negative criticism from Black editors and reviewers, especially after turning away from Black productions in 1910 in order to star in the Ziegfeld Follies (1907–1931)—a series of theatrical revues produced and performed by whites for white audiences.47 Addressing his racially and ideologically divided audiences, Williams, as a blackface trickster, would (dis)please both sides at differing times, depending on who was being framed as the butt of the joke and who was taken in as the performer’s co-conspirator. In this sense, whereas Bird imaginatively blackened up as the Zip Coon figure in order to eviscerate the ideologies and re-presentations on both sides that constituted the white antebellum imaginary, Williams performatively blackened up in order to not only subvert ideal re-presentations of Blackness espoused on both sides of the color line but also expose the humanity of Black Americans through a comic exploration of both the surface and below.

Williams did not depend on burnt cork to hide his pain from the world; rather, the mask was the primary source of his fame, his fortune, his misery, and his (self-)erasure on- and off-stage. Louis Chude-Sokei defines Williams’s melancholia as “the sadness of the black performer held by racialized performance conventions; the tragic sadness of black skin trapped underneath a black mask held firmly in place by racism and the complex symbolic value of race in fin de siècle American popular culture.”48 While Williams was ultimately trapped by the racist implications of minstrelsy, Chude-Sokei adds, “the sadness must also have been associated with the political assumptions of an African American nationalism, for which [international cross-cultural Black] assimilation was its goal.”49 As a Black West Indian performing blackface in order to dignify the African American as well as (re)mediate the relationships between the assimilationist African American community and the cross-cultural non–African American Black community, Williams dramatized a capacity for plural forms of identity. But it was the weight of this multiplicity that precipitated the disappearance of his soul. Unlike Stowe’s Tom (submitting to the white imaginary) and unlike Bird’s Tom (teaching his fellow bondmen ways to interpret and present themselves), the blackface mask worn by this West Indian minstrel was a sign of interracial, cross-cultural signifying that destabilizes binary racial structures and thus “transforms race into a transnational and self-referential vortex, an ever-shifting space of multiple and simultaneous performances.”50

If anywhere, perhaps the flickering of Williams’s true self could be located or perceived in the tragicomic excess escaping from his ability to “signify on signifying”—that is, to performatively remediate the African American’s act of double-consciousness.51 And as Chude-Sokei notes, such a performance is essentially “a vision of blackface minstrelsy: of a black subject trapped beneath the black mask constructed by generations of white racist

47 Forbes, 97, 194.
49 Chude-Sokei, 21.
50 Chude-Sokei, 106.
51 Chude-Sokei, 106.
representations of the black subject.” As an imitation of the form of entertainment that pleased white audiences through transmedial re-productions of their racist fantasies, and of the state of double-consciousness that had always run the risk of coloring all acts of Black agency as reactions to and, ergo, constituted by the white gaze, Williams’s blackface performance was more than mimesis. It was a progressive remediation of the interracial and cross-cultural dialectics working at the core of racialized mimicry, irony, and appropriation. The only graspable constant surrounding his performances was the re-production of the absence of his true self, and so the transmedial presence of Williams’s self-negation stopped being funny. Therefore, whereas Bird was able to maintain comic distance from his literary embodiment of a Black slave, Williams was unable to separate himself from the comically miserable scapegoat he played, because of his race. Within “the universe of semblances, the universalized appearance, the proliferation of copies and simulacra,” Dolar warns, we see that Williams’s transmedial (self-)erasure was anachronistic of “the postmodern way to kill the spirit of comedy.” In this case, the comic potential of blackface minstrelsy was not killed off—what perished was the spirit of comedy in Williams himself.

It would take the release of *Bamboozled* (2000), Spike Lee’s sardonic remedial tribute to the hundredth anniversary of cinema and fiftieth of television, for the mask to be turned inside out in order to reveal the sheer horror underlying the United States’ first original form of mass media entertainment. As for those retrospective viewers disturbed for having laughed during this extremely disturbing film, they are tasked to face Spike Lee’s grim revisionist history of “the inherent agony of blacking.” Therefore, what Peele does with the comic potential of blackface that Williams dignified through his self-denying sadness is turn it into the source of destruction of not only the minds and spirits of Black people but also, echoing the denouement of *Sheppard Lee*, the lives of privileged whites in search of more soul via bodily objectification of the racialized other.

**GET OUT: REMEDIATING THE WEAPONIZATION OF ANTEBELLUM LAUGHTER**

Whereas Spike Lee’s cinematic remediation of blackface (and its haunting laughter) serves as a warning against artistic attempts to wipe away cinema’s debt to vaudeville and minstrelsy, Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* is a re-embodiment of the cinema’s image. In his horrific remediation of blackface, in other words, Peele redeems the screen reality of the cinematic apparatus by showing how “the cinematic apparatus and the apparatus of race reinforce

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52 Chude-Sokei, 67.
54 While the live-action/animated satire *Coonskin* (Ralph Bakshi, 1975) is a notable exception to this historical claim, it is, as Michael Boyce Gillespie argues, concerned with satirizing blackface iconography primarily (as opposed to blackface performance) in order to show how “purveyors and admirers of this iconography are complicit with regimes of antiblackness and white supremacy.” Michael Boyce Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 48.
one another because of their mutual dependence upon discourses of embodiment, authenticity, and the evidence of the senses.56 As indicated, for example, by the projection of the embodied Black voice as the medium for advertising the signifying power of the newly developed talking picture, the medium (the talking images projected on-screen) and the subject (the Black actor speaking, as captured by the medium) seem to switch places. In The Cinema and Its Shadow: Race and Technology in Early Cinema, Alice Maurice describes the two rhetorical strategies at work here as “emphasizing the hyper-presence of black bodies in order to deflect attention away from the apparatus and using those same bodies and their ‘inherent’ talents to show off the prowess of the apparatus.”57 In this sense, Peele does not remediate the appropriation of Black bodies in order to sever the relationship between the mask and the white performer, between the Black body and the cinematic apparatus, but instead frames the relationship in a way that the reality of the screen image depends on the mixed, racially embodied experiences of watching a horrifying mutation of whites trying to embody Black people yet again. Peele emphasizes the presence of white liberal appropriation, exploitation, and fabrication of Blackness in order to reveal the absurd mise en abyme of the signifying process involved in locating a true sign of whiteness or a true sign of Blackness in bodies of work controlled largely by whites.

Besides the fact that Peele has been a horror film buff since he was a teenager, it is quite important that his remediation of antebellum laughter is a horror film because, as Larrie Dudenhoeff er argues, “all horror is body horror,” bringing the viewer’s “embodiment to light, most typically the involuntary twitches it draws out of the darkness of the muscle fibers . . . the secretions, the tears, sweat . . . the screams, rattles, and interjections that it draws out of the darkness of the throat.”58 In the experience of watching horror films, the screen thus functions as “a correlate to the darkness of our insides that ‘come to light’ through the very representational nature of even the tamest of horror films.”59 Therefore, the uncomfortable chuckles and hair-raising shivers brought about while watching Get Out are indicative of the ways that racial socio-symbolic forces remain indivisible from our anatomic structures as we (mis)understand them. Get Out adds the variable of race to the horror genre’s interrogation of the “always incomplete mythography of the flesh.”60 Peele has his audience feel and face the real horror that has surrounded white mythographies of Black bodies.

In the nightmarish world Peele constructs in Get Out, the Armitage family’s appropriation of Black bodies involves a three-step process: (1) hypnosis of the Black person, (2) preoperative psychological preparation, and (3) partial transplantation of the white brain into the Black body. As noted earlier, these white characters, unlike Sheppard Lee, have no desire to experi-

57 Maurice, 167.
59 By this definition, Bamboozled could be classified as a horror film, and one with no hint of redemption. Dudenhoeff er, Embodiment and Horror Cinema, 13.
60 Dudenhoeff er, 12.
rience life through the soul or psyche of the Black body; instead, they want the benefits that have been socio-symbolically attributed to the Black body without having to sacrifice their own white psyches. For the transplantation to be successful, moreover, the piece of the brain connected to the nervous system needs to “stay put, keeping those intricate connections intact,” as Jim Hudson (Stephen Root) informs Chris during their psychological pre-op. Hudson continues: “So you won’t be gone, completely. A sliver of you will still be there, somewhere, limited consciousness. You’ll be able to see and hear what your body is doing, but your existence will be as a passenger. An audience.” Not so much a “limited consciousness” as it is one that has been (re)formed by the subtraction of voluntary movement and the external senses of touch, taste, and smell, this state of being—referred to as the Sunken Place in the film—is established during the first step of the Coagula process. Therefore, the Sunken Place of Get Out is Peele’s modern variation of the Uncle Tom syndrome—that is, the traumatic, self-denying state of existence conditioned by slavery and the blackface industry.

An obvious reference to hypnotism’s roots in nineteenth-century experiments, pseudo-scientific articles, and public discourses on mesmerism and race, the Armitages’ use of hypnosis, like Bird’s use of the page, transforms Black figures into pure mediums for white consciousness. Edgar Allan Poe’s “Mesmeric Revelation,” framed as the report of a real scientific investigation between an unnamed physician and his mesmerized patient Mr. Vankirk, starts with a description of the mesmeric state, which Poe had “borrowed” from Chauncey Hare Townshend’s Facts in Mesmerism (1840): “while in this state, the person so impressed employs only with effort, and then feebly, the external organs of sense, yet perceives, with keenly refined perception, and through channels supposed unknown, matters beyond the scope of the physical organs; that, moreover, his intellectual faculties are wonderfully exalted and invigorated; that his sympathies with the person so impressing him are profound; and, finally, that his susceptibility to the impression increases with its frequency.” With the numbing of the “external organs of sense,” the mesmerized subject develops a “keenly refined perception” and sensitivity to “the person so impressing him.” This is not merely a description of the mesmeric state, however. It is also a reflection of the reader impressed by the media of Poe’s “report,” as one might be so impressed by Lee’s “memoirs,” by the minstrel’s “authenticity,” or by Peele’s film. Indeed, the “channels supposed unknown” are the forms of media that produce aesthetic experiences in which “intellectual faculties are wonderfully exalted and invigorated.” For similar interests in (re)mediation, this is why Peele’s visualization of the Sunken Place as a cinematic apparatus has stimulated a great amount of discussion about the marginalizing effects of white Hollywood.

From the point of view of Chris, the mise-en-scène of the Sunken Place consists of high angle shots of a floating television screen engulfed in total

61 Peele, Get Out.
62 Peele.
darkness. Chris can only see and hear what is being projected from the screen, and so when the film cuts from the shot of the television screen to the reverse shot of Chris’s eyes gleaming out of the darkness, we realize that we have been in the Sunken Place all along—that Peele wants us to confront our own Uncle Tom. Therefore, Peele does not re-embbody the image of cinema in the racialized body that has disappeared in the darkness cast by white Hollywood; instead, the image, the feeling, the sound of horror is re-embodied in the viewer staring into the projection of the eyes of Chris.

Through “channels supposed unknown” (i.e., the cinematic apparatus), it becomes clear that the camera has become a substitute and annex of the brain, and the particular brain Peele implants in us is one shackled by the prison-industrial complex, the lack of representation of Black people in film and in genre, which is not to say other Sunken Places do not exist. Through the conventions of psychological horror, Get Out induces viewers to imagine and somewhat feel “the way whiteness makes its presence felt in black life,” as bell hooks says, “most often as terrorizing imposition.”64 And by drawing the viewer’s attention to the haunting legacies of minstrelsy, Peele embeds in blackface stereotypes “the traumatic pain and anguish that remain a consequence of white racist domination.”65 In short, Peele contributes to the liberatory project that Ed Guerrero defines as “framing blackness away from the dominant Hollywood apparatus.”66 And by participating in Black commercial filmmaking as opposed to Black independent filmmaking (an important distinction highlighted by Mark A. Reid), Peele is in effect attempting to reframe Blackness through the very channels that have perpetuated derogatory, anti-Black re-presentations—by turning them inside out and outside in.67

With Get Out, Peele ironically situates his audience in the Sunken Place in order to effectuate his own cinematic coagula. Once again, the pseudo-metaphysical musings in Poe’s “Mesmeric Revelation” can be quite helpful, especially in differentiating between Peele’s and the Armitages’ respective coagula experiments. In the following segment of dialogue, Vankirk responds to the physician’s inquiries about postmortem survival:

V. There are two bodies—the rudimental and the complete; corresponding with the two conditions of the worm and the butterfly. What we call “death,” is but the painful metamorphosis. Our present incarnation is progressive, preparatory, temporary. Our future is perfected, ultimate, immortal. The ultimate life is the full design.

P. But of the worm’s metamorphosis we are palpably cognizant.

65 hooks, 170.
67 Mark A. Reid, Redefining Black Film (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2–3.
V. We, certainly—but not the worm. The matter of which our rudimental body is composed, is within the ken of the organs of that body; or, more distinctly, our rudimental body; but not to that of which the ultimate body is composed. The ultimate body thus escapes our rudimental senses, and we perceive only the shell which falls, in decaying, from the inner form; not that inner form itself; but this inner form, as well as the shell, is appreciable by those who have already acquired the ultimate life.

P. You have often said that the mesmeric state very nearly resembles death. How is this?

V. When I say that it resembles death, I mean that it resembles the ultimate life; for when I am entranced the senses of my rudimental life are in abeyance, and I perceive external things directly, without organs, through a medium which I shall employ in the ultimate, unorganized life.68

Viewing Poe’s materialist conception of spirit from the perspective of the Armitage family, the “ultimate life” is the white psyche that exists for eternity, uninhibited by the limitation and deterioration of its past “rudimental body,” as Dean Armitage (Bradley Whitford), the patriarchal neurosurgeon of the family, tells Chris prior to pre-op: “We are divine. We are the Gods trapped in cocoons.”69 Furthermore, based on Vankirk’s revelation that “man will never put off the body,” the white psyche must take the form of an “ultimate body” that escapes the “rudimental senses” and “perceive[s] external things directly, . . . through a medium.”70 Finally, in order to appropriate the Black body’s “shell,” transform its rudimental form into the ultimate body, and retain this ultimate body as a pure medium of and for the ultimate life, a sliver of the Black psyche must remain in the ultimate form, or else nothing—material or immaterial—can be (re)mediated. In relation to its antebellum roots, what the Armitages’ ultimate body amounts to is the liberal-minded Sheppard Lee entering the body of Uncle Tom.

Compelling audiences to recognize their differences in order to sense “by the end of the movie we are all Chris,” Peele’s cinematic coagula is most effective during the scenes that conjure vibrations of antebellum laughter—especially in the iconic close-up shot of Georgina laughing and crying in front of Chris.71 The ultimate body of minstrelsy’s legacy, Georgina, like the other Frankenstein’s monsters, is both the repressed Black agency (Uncle Tom) and the white embodiment of Blackness (Sheppard Lee). For this reason, when Chris confides to Georgina that “if there’s too many white people, [he] get[s] nervous,” Georgina’s facial expressions indicate a quadrupled affective response. That is to say, Peele’s remediation of the ultimate life of

68 Poe, “Mesmeric Revelation,” 1037.
69 Peele, Get Out.
70 Peele.
71 Peele and Perrier, “Get Out.”
minstrelsy is a racialized doubling of both horror and comedy: both sides of the color line are laughing and crying, when (not) trying to suppress one or the other (see Figure 1).

As a full remediation of the racialized aesthetic experiences of both performing and watching blackface minstrelsy, Georgina’s laughter is both a suppression of discomfort and a mockery disguised as comfort, and her tears indicate both melancholic sentiment and sheer horror. As a Sheppard Lee, on the one hand, Peele’s monster laughs at the irony of Chris’s tragic situation and cries in horror from the thought of his final act of revolt; on the other hand, as an Uncle Tom, Georgina laughs at the validity of Chris’s anxiety and cries from the thought of their collective suffering. Though it is possible to review the shot frame by frame in order to differentiate the white tear from the Black, the Black laugh from the white, this exercise would eventually lead the viewer to Georgina’s glowering face as she repeats the word “no” over a dozen times. In her chapter on the close-up shot, Maurice argues that the close-up shot of the Black face has done more than resurrect the image of blackface minstrelsy; this “offensive screen creature blurs racial boundaries as well, threatening the racial identity of the actor, it turns out, as the exaggerated face retains stubborn traces of what should be a removable mask.”72 Peele’s extraordinary remediation of antebellum laughter can therefore function as an aesthetic gambit that disarms readers, inducing them to ignore the material presence of the medium (i.e., the projection of a close-up shot of the actor laughing and crying). Trying to read the real Blackness and the real whiteness in Georgina’s expressions will ultimately reveal the absurdity of such physiognomic analysis. This is why near the end of the scene it is the reproachful blackface mask that repeatedly tells us “no, no, no, no” (see Figure 2).

Betty Gabriel, the actor playing as Georgina, is able to evade the pitfalls surrounding Black blackface minstrels like Bert Williams and the fictional characters in Bamboozled because the monstrous character she plays is revolt-

72 Maurice, Cinema and Its Shadow, 90.
ing in the eyes of all viewers. In other words, the horror and comedy of her mask provokes disbelief among viewers, which is an ironic reversal of Georgina’s attempt to banish Chris’s suspicions. Watching this remediation of blackface, we can only be sure of the fact that this medium—this monster—cannot or should not exist in the real world. When asked in an interview to elaborate on the scene, Gabriel responded by refusing to identify and give content to the medium: “I would say that I made my choices. But I don’t know if I want to share them. It’s really, what does it make you feel? I think that’s all that matters.” Projected onto the back of the eye, the projection of this close-up shot is both screen and image, spectacle and audience of the haunting legacy of blackface minstrelsy and its basis in the real conditions of slavery. We might at first laugh and tremble at the grotesque incongruity that Peele has staged and shot. But by the second viewing of this scene, we are sure to grasp the reality of its horror and comedy as it is of our own accord. Ultimately, Gabriel’s performance pushes us to question our affective responses so that we might be able to catch and blast asunder the whiteness of the mask that’s been sunken deep within.

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