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"If I Ain't a Man Anymore, How's That Different from Just Being Dead?": The Postfeminist Gothic in *Lovecraft Country*

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Abstract: Bridging the horrors of the Black American experience with the literary legacies of the postfeminist Gothic, Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* comments on the deformation of time and space for Black women. Reflecting the historic preoccupation of the Gothic with the social anxieties of gender and sexuality, many of *Lovecraft Country*'s chapters center on economically or socially mobile Black women and respond to the contemporary conditions of the postfeminist Gothic and intersectional discourses of race, class, and gender. In the end, *Lovecraft Country* signals White patriarchal colonial geography as weird and represents its Black women characters as figuratively undead modern subjects due to intersectional oppression.

Keywords: weird fiction; American literature; the Gothic; feminism

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1. Introduction

The Lovecraftian events of Matt Ruff's 2016 novel, *Lovecraft Country*, are difficult to distinguish as real or imagined (Ruff 2017). This weird gothic duality is, of course, part of the novel's force. *Lovecraft Country* challenges our assessment of the many racialized horrors present at the local, national, and even Lovecraftian scales of the novel's Jim Crow America.[1] The weird horror novel-in-stories' first chapter, "Lovecraft Country", begins as a road trip in 1954 Chicago with Atticus Turner, a Black Korean War veteran and pulp fiction buff.[2] Atticus is in search of his father, Montrose, who was mysteriously lured away by a young White "sharp dresser" who is headed for Lovecraft Country. The mysterious man, as it turns out, is Caleb Braithwhite, a budding leader of a secret cabal called the Adamite Order of the Ancient Dawn, whose plans include White supremacist domination. Atticus is not alone on this magical adventure to find his father—his uncle George, who authors a Greenbook and runs a Black travel business—is splitting driving duties with Atticus and their childhood friend, Letitia, who stowed away for the journey.[3] Along the way, the group faces a gauntlet of racist White roadside towns while also encountering arcane texts, alternate universes, and other gothic tropes that mime the supernatural currency of Whiteness in the Gothic.[4] Beginning with this weird road trip, the remaining chapters of the novel portray different forms of social and economic Black mobility in a variety of gothic subgenre plots, from the sci-fi adventure to ghostly encounters in a haunted mansion.

Bridging the Black American experience with the literary legacies of the Gothic and the road trip genres, *Lovecraft Country* comments on the deformation of time and space for marginalized Black Americans in real life and in popular imagined worlds. Critics such as James Kneale have noted that *Lovecraft Country*'s weird style and gothic geographies explore how time and space is experienced and created differently for racialized subjects.[5] Ann and Jeff VanderMeer define the weird tale as "a story that has supernatural elements but does not

fall into the category of traditional ghost story or Gothic tale" (VanderMeer and VanderMeer 2011). *Lovecraft Country*'s unique adaptation of genres interrogates representations of space and time as not mirrors of geography but interpretations of our social relations. In twentieth-century narratives of the U.S. road trip genre, for example, the story often assumes a White civilization and nation as the orienting frame with a focus on future belonging. However, as Kris Lackey notes, Black travelers were unable to enjoy the same "illusion of disinterested liberty" and freedom as their White peers (Lackey 1997, p. xi). Black travel narratives have often reflected on the construction and experience of oppressive spatial limitations experienced by people of color (Lackey 1997, p. xi). The early Gothic genre, too—a formative genre of weird fiction—routinely spatialized the politics of Whiteness and colonialism. Early Gothic texts featured exotic settings outside of the Western empire that depicted people of color as figures of fear, addressing anxieties of modernity like immigration, national expansion, and industrialization (Ilott 2019, p. 24). If the Gothic genre's conventional framework suggests a superior White civilization fighting a marginalized other, Ruff's contemporary adaptation features a multi-racial U.S. fighting against its own White supremacist–misogynist organization and their magical tomes. The invented region of the novel, Lovecraft Country, makes literal what critics like Édouard Glissant describe as the "various kinds of madness" exposed in geographies that are produced by the racism and sexism of Western colonialism (Glissant 1989, p. 160).

If time and space are experienced and created differently for the Black community in Ruff's novel, *Lovecraft Country*'s mobile Black women in postfeminist Gothic chapters make clear the story's investment in the gendered experience of place and space (Kneale 2019, p. 95). Ruff's attention to gender and the Gothic is not coincidental; since the Gothic genre's emergence in the 18th century, authors have adopted the genre to interrogate entrenched norms and laws about gender and sexuality. Early critics of the genre also gendered the Gothic as feminine and low brow due to its overwhelming popularity with early women writers (Davison 2012, p. 124). Reflecting this historic preoccupation of the Gothic with gender and sexuality, many of *Lovecraft Country*'s chapters center on economically or socially mobile Black women and highlight the conditions that shape Black women's lives and influence the genres of the Female and the postfeminist Gothic. The Female Gothic, as Carol Davison defines, is a "twentieth-century classification and sub-category of the Gothic that takes as its focus female protagonists wrestling with repressed familial histories and problematic social and institutional pressures relating to female sexuality and gender roles" (Davison 2012, p. 124).[6] Second-wave feminists created the canon of the early Female Gothic in the 1970s, arguably for unified political representation in literary canons. Critics like Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar wrote formative feminist criticism about early transatlantic Female Gothic texts that were largely focused on themes and tropes such as distressed heroines; victim feminism; domestic incarceration; motherhood; anxiety about monstrous mothers; and sexual violence (Ledoux 2017). Recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in the Female Gothic and the creation of a postfeminist Gothic, a genre in conversation with and adapting the Female Gothic. The postfeminist Gothic notably responds to the contemporary discourse of postfeminism, which assumes that gender equity has been realized and that feminism is outdated and obsolete in the contemporary era (Whitney 2016, p. 2). Postfeminist Gothic narratives then critique discourses of postfeminism while expanding the limited focus of the Female Gothic canon. Postfeminist Gothic narratives go beyond victim feminism, eschewing an uncritical celebration of unity and avoiding the depiction of an easy achievement of empowerment.[7]

Reflecting the postfeminist Gothic legacy, each chapter of *Lovecraft Country* touches on discourses of Black women's ownership and mobility in gothic narratives of dispossession, imprisonment, and conquest. The novel's chapters range from Black women and the

politics of home ownership (Atticus' friend Letitia in "Dreams of the Which House"); the State and its possession of Black women's histories and records (Atticus' great-great-grandmother, Adah, in "Abdullah's Book"); the ability of women to travel to far away, forbidden, or rarely visited places (George's wife, Hippolyta, in "Hippolyta Disturbs the Universe"); and even women's possession of the self and the other (Letitia's sister, Ruby, in "Jekyll in Hyde Park"). *Lovecraft Country*'s chapter, "Abdullah's Book", for example, is told through the perspective of George and Montrose but highlights the novel's overarching commentary on the erasure and dispossession of Black women by the State. In "Abdullah's Book", George and Montrose discover that their great-grandmother Adah's record of enslavement—the record of what she should have been paid for in terms of her labor hours plus interest—has been stolen by the cosmic White cult. The Order will only return the family's important "Book of Days" if George and Montrose find a magical ancient tome hidden within the Natural History Museum (Ruff 2017, p. 145). The two men then figuratively travel through national time and history in the museum to discover the ancient tome and once again possess Adah's record. With the Order also representing the nation, the threat of destroying records becomes a legitimate practice of the state that mitigates the power of the select record to be disseminated—in this case, Black women (Biber 2022, p. 155). "Abdullah's Book" thus engages with what Katherine McKittrick describes as the "rational spatial colonization and domination: the profitable erasure and objectification of subaltern subjectivities, stories, and lands" (McKittrick 2006, p. x). Abdullah's stolen record is not comfortably positioned in the past, present, or future; instead, her dispossession and dislocation from home and nation is literally both past and present. *Lovecraft Country* makes weird the oppression of women for men's mobility—considering the history will not be returned unless George and Montrose give Caleb a magical tome—and represents Black women as commodified undead modern subjects.

Not solely in "Abdullah's Book", all chapters of *Lovecraft Country* rewrite the Gothic genre's focus on White possession of time and space as well as its investment in inheritance and ownership with interests in gender. As James Watts notes in *Contesting the Gothic*, "In a period of industrialization and rapid social change. . .Gothic works insistently betrayed the fears and anxieties of the middle classes about the nature of their ascendancy, returning to the issues of ancestry, inheritance, and the transmission of property" (Watt 1999). *Lovecraft Country* parallels the commodification and displacement of Black women with ownership and entitlement of time and space, suggesting their relation in the legacies of Western colonialism and the worldmaking of literary genres. Letitia as a haunted house homeowner in an all-White neighborhood in the "Dreams of the Which House" chapter, for example, suggests the threat of her burgeoning Black intergenerational wealth and entitlement as a woman but also represents the uncertainty of place—how spatial arrangements are not static but permeable (Ruff 2017, p. 107). Notably, Letitia's social relationship to her supernatural environment—such as her card games with the haunted home's ghosts—is also what marks her as racially distinct from her neighbors. As Katherine McKittrick notes, "the black body often determines the ways in which the landscape around the black body is read", and this domination is persistently naturalized by "plac[ing] the world within an ideological order, unevenly" (McKittrick 2006, pp. xv, xvi). The novel's many chapters lay bare how Western geographic interpretations of the world are organized hierarchically by gender and race. *Lovecraft Country*'s Black women are both shaped by but also challenge these naturalized geographic arrangements in the novel.

In the end, *Lovecraft Country* signals White patriarchal colonial geography as weird and presents its Black women characters as figuratively undead modern subjects due to their intersectional oppressions. As Simon Bacon notes, the Gothic genre can itself be called undead: "In broad terms, the Gothic is an undead past that disrupts the present. . .though

such temporal discombobulations can haunt the present from the (possible) future as well" (Bloom 2020, p. 9). The novel's postfeminist Gothic plots significantly reveal modern subject formation as distinctly unavailable and eerie for Black women, considering the signals of modern subject formation, such as higher education and a job, are absent or impossible to attain for Black women in the novel. In fact, the Black women of *Lovecraft Country* only achieve these independent milestones through supernatural means and intervention, such as Letitia acquiring a haunted house via the cult's anonymous patronage, and her Black sister, Ruby, holding her first job as a White woman because the cabal gave her a magical elixir that produces Whiteness. In contrast, the novel's Black male characters are oppressed but mobile and able to acquire basic material needs like a job or a car, embodied by Atticus' previous military history, his ability and means to own a car and house, and his ultimate destiny as the privileged born son of the White cult patriarch. In both the real world and the fictitious Lovecraftian world, male identity and the male subject is normed, while women's access is interrupted by patriarchy. The novel's weird journeying and Caleb's quid pro quo gifts—which ultimately represents White colonialism and patriarchy—suggests its Black women characters are routinely denied belonging and the basic needs of modern subject formation for the support and expansion of White mobility. Several Black feminist critics, such as Toni Morrison, have weighed in on the absented presence of Black women and their narratives of erasure and material displacement in American society (for more, see Morrison 1993; see also Alexander-Floyd 2021). Similarly, Nikol Alexander-Floyd argues that the intersectional discourses of race, gender, and class and how they impact Black women are lacking in postfeminist inquiries (Alexander-Floyd 2021). *Lovecraft Country* explores who has access to and can imagine the past and future and traces the entangled histories of Gothic fiction, modern-day feminism, and the Black American experience of spaces and places during Jim Crow and beyond.

2. Postfeminist Gothic in Lovecraft Country

Patriarchy leaves traces of the eerie in *Lovecraft Country*.[8] Patriarchy is omnipresent within the novel, shaping places and human agency but "not fully available to our sensory apprehension", which contributes to the novel's eerie quality (Fisher 2016, pp. 64).[9] If humanity is insignificant in the vast universes of weird fiction, patriarchy renders individuals, particularly women, as powerless in vast indifferent systems of inequality. *Lovecraft Country*'s eerie presentation of racism and patriarchy, of course, is in conversation with the history of H.P. Lovecraft's oeuvre and the weird fiction genre. In fact, any discussion of the weird fiction genre should include the latent sexism and racism of the literary history of Lovecraft, who coined the term "weird fiction" in his essay, "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (Lovecraft 2013). As Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock writes, weird fiction "is a late nineteenth-century development coming out of the earlier Gothic novel; but in place of the familiar trappings of the Gothic' the weird provides its own conventions instead" (Weinstock 2016, p. 182). The late Mark Fisher, in his book *The Weird and the Eerie*, describes Lovecraft's weird tale and its hallmark cosmic horror as the foundation of weird fiction. Cosmic horror, by definition, is the shock and bewilderment caused by the presence of something that should be absent—a presence outside of our thought and perception that nonetheless acts upon the living (Fisher 2016, pp. 64, 11). In weird fiction, the presence of an out-of-this-world alien or the perception of a hyperobject that makes us rethink our conception of the world are examples of the weird.

Unfortunately, Lovecraft's personal sexism and racism is central to the weird and eerie horror effects that he aimed to convey in his canon of weird fiction. His stories persistently invoke a cosmic existential dread combined with a profound physical disgust of difference (Remnick 2020). For Lovecraft, interracial or interspecies contact and the transgression

of boundaries—metaphorical borders of community norms, color lines, gender, sexuality, bloodlines—is the basis for the horrors that he presents in his oeuvre (Kneale 2019, p. 95). Obsessed with borders and outsiders, Lovecraft often situated fictional scholarship and histories of an ancient cosmos alongside factual history and real places in his weird tales. This Lovecraftian convention "causes a reality effect and de-realizes the factual and realizes the fictional" for his readers (Fisher 2016, p. 24). As Fisher notes, this sense of in-betweenness is crucial to the weird, and many artists have expanded on his fictional universe—both the good and the bad—in their own weird fiction (Fisher 2016, p. 28).

Lovecraft Country adapts Lovecraft's troubled legacy by esthetically presenting an eerie relationship between geographies of Western domination and Black women and its troubling emergence in popular genres. The novel adapts weird fiction, the postfeminist Gothic, and the Female Gothic, all genres that are particularly invested in the setting and scales of space and time. The Female Gothic, for example, coined by second-wave feminists to bolster the representation of women in transatlantic national canons, is "the adoption of the Gothic to signify the structural oppression at work in gender power relations" of both the home and the state (Gildersleeve 2020, p. 94). Critics like Carol Davison claim that many early Victorian Gothic works are "adept reconfigurations of the Female Gothic" that depicted "women imprisoned, circumscribed sexually, intellectually and legally, a status that actually reflected women's contemporary socio-political reality" (Davison 2012, p. 128). The Female Gothic as a subgenre, in the words of Jessica Gildersleeve, draws on a collective site of fear and represents "the quiet abuses conducted behind closed doors, and thus the gothic structures of domestic life" (Gildersleeve 2020, p. 94). Popular themes of the Female Gothic genre include domestic relations, motherhood, psychological or physical imprisonment, repressed sexuality, and the terrors, fears, and anxieties of women under patriarchy from the home to the nation.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, women writers began to reimagine the Female Gothic as the postfeminist Gothic, troubling the representation of safe spaces in the contemporary. Postfeminist Gothic narratives assert the need for continued feminist activism by providing new perspectives on women's experiences. Ben Brabon and Stéphanie Genz's 2007 book, *Postfeminist Gothic*, first coined and defined the postfeminist Gothic canon. Postfeminism, of course, assumes that feminism and equality has been achieved and, to some, signals the failure of feminism itself (Meyers 2001). Postfeminist Gothic texts then explore transgression and new horrors of gender inequality, taking up topics like new media's role in propagating inequality; postcolonialism and gender identity; the presence of political structures eroding women's rights (like the alt-right's defunding of Planned Parenthood); the rise in hyper-sexualized technology such as AI dolls and the gendering of AI itself; and more. A mix of old and new tropes pervade the postfeminist genre, such as zombies, previous safe places made unsafe, weird geographies of globalization, cyborgs, and more.

3. Traveling Through Lovecraft Country

Lovecraft Country's postfeminist Gothic chapters together depict the restraint of Black women's physical, economic, and social movements as also providing freedom to male mobility in the novel. Many of the chapter vignettes focus on narratives of spatial/temporal dislocation and the displacement of Black women, from the home to the nation and from the past to the Jim Crow present. While the male perspective is prominent throughout the story, the novel equally makes space for Black women's voices. In fact, half of the chapters are narrated through the perspective of one of the many Black women of the novel. Even the *Lovecraft Country* chapters anchored by male heroes also feature plots that hinge on disenfranchising and diminishing the lives, bloodlines, and labor of women.[10]

Lovecraft Country's eerie presentation of Black women's unhomely, undead subjectivity notably emerges in the road trip of the eponymous first chapter of the novel, "Lovecraft Country". Lovecraft Country, the group's travel destination and hard-to-find locale, could represent a new place of belonging and possibilities, considering the invented region's namesake is an author of fiction. However, Letitia and her friends' weird journey emerges as not a road trip of new possibilities and futures but a rehearsal of the U.S.' colonial origins and its Jim Crow present. The chapter largely adapts tropes of the New England Gothic—the origins of the Gothic in the U.S.—and the Puritans' "errand into the wilderness" (see Ringel 2013, p. 139; see also Miller 2009). Ruff's first chapter—told through the third-person perspective of Atticus, who is accompanied by Uncle George and Letitia—serves as an extended metaphor of the Black experience of American democracy and its contradictions.

The travelers together go through perils in the Lovecraft Country forest, which includes violent encounters with corrupt policemen, and they end up imprisoned in the medieval-styled manor of the cult leader, Samuel Braithwhite. Samuel and his son Caleb lead an order of evil ancient wizards called The Order of the Ancient Dawn. The reader finds out that Montrose was kidnapped to lure Atticus to the manor. Atticus is a direct descendant of the cult's early patriarch, Titus Braithwhite, and the enslaved forced laborer, Hanna. The cult needs a conduit for their ancient deadly ritual, and they want to use Atticus—a mixed-race descendant—which will ultimately kill him and Hanna's Black generational line. However, unbeknownst to Samuel and other cult members, Caleb also vies for power and wants to take over the cult. Caleb undermines his father's ritual, providing Atticus an incantation, and this betrayal ultimately kills his own father. Caleb then assumes control of the estate and allows the travelers to leave Lovecraft Country. Caleb later manipulates and asserts his power over the Black families even after they are far away from Lovecraft Country, making a metaphor of Western White masculine conquest and postcolonialism.

While the novel is obviously concerned with Whiteness, the chapter "Lovecraft Country" and its accompanying epigraph, "Jim Crow mile", centers men as producing, controlling, and defining the fictional spaces and universe of the novel. The *Lovecraft Country* chapter immediately announces a masculine-coded epigraph to suggest a universal disenfranchisement via the "Jim Crow mile". The epigraph reads "JIM CROW MILE–A unit of measurement, peculiar to colored motorists, comprising both the physical distance and random helpings of fear, paranoia, frustration, and outrage. Its amorphous nature makes exact travel times impossible to calculate, and its violence puts the travelers' good health and sanity constantly at hazard" (Ruff 2017, p. 1). Ruff's "Jim Crow Mile" is the novel's invented form of measurement based on oppressive Jim Crow era necropolitics of the novel's present and past. "Jim Crow" originates from the fictitious offensive Black men's 19th-century minstrel character, Daddy Rice.[11] The novel's "Jim Crow Mile" then emphasizes maps and their semantics as a form of symbolic communication and media, much like the literature, and articulates this through the anti-Black male character from popular culture.

The third person narrator again relates gender and geography by defining "Lovecraft Country"—the chapter name and region name—by a shelf of weird fiction books penned by all White men in the novel. The narrator notes that "The lowest shelf was Lovecraft Country: Algernon Black, Robert Bloch, August Derleth, William Hope Hogson, Frank Belknap Long, Clark Ashton Smith, and the man himself" (Ruff 2017, p. 65). Lovecraft Country in the novel is both a place but also a culture, reflecting space as produced and defined by social relations (the set of books), seemingly by and intended for men. Even the naming here contrasts historic White male authors and fictitious Black male characters, meaning White male authors define the terms and relations of society (Lovecraft Country

being a take on "country", as in nation), while the Black community as a fictional character "Jim Crow" must navigate the norms of an inequitable world not of their own making. The Lovecraft Country books on the shelf, written by all White men who were pioneers of weird fiction, thus represent patriarchy and how even in imaginative efforts, a society's spatial processes, inclusion practices, and geographies are articulated via predetermined social boundaries, such as color lines and gender roles.

When considering the absence of women in the title and epigraph, women's experience of patriarchy in Lovecraft Country becomes the true source of cosmic horror in this chapter and arguably the novel itself. Their travels, measured by a Jim Crow mile, begins with Atticus and George leaving on their weird road trip to find Atticus's father. Letitia notably stows herself away to join the journey, announcing, in her own words, that she had "run out of choices" in life as a Black woman (Ruff 2017, p. 30). The road trip to Lovecraft Country, the destination and hard-to-find locale in the novel, emerges as not a road trip of new possibilities and futures but a rehearsal of the U.S.' colonial origins and weird travels back in time that is also in the Jim Crow present. The chapter also then makes clear the double bind of Black women: women like the Black traveler Letitia are figuratively alienated in Lovecraft Country due to both Jim Crow and the patriarchy. However, Lovecraft Country also contradictorily serves as part of Letitia's national and literary heritage of horrors.

Letitia and the group journey deep into the Lovecraft Country woods and come upon the cult's Braithwhite family's manor, which serves as a metaphor for the New England Gothic and the early colonies' strict gender roles and Whiteness. The Braithwhite home is first described by one of George's acquaintances as part of a medieval village and akin to an old haunted manor like that of the early Gothic genre:[12] "The census taker compared it to a medieval farm village. Big manor house up on the hillside, cottages and field down by the water" (Ruff 2017, p. 42). When Atticus, Letitia, and George arrive at the manor, they affirm the description of the town as medieval: "...across the water, still half-shrouded in mist, was the farm village described by the census taker" (Ibid, p. 56). Later, "George pulled up to the manor's front entrance. To their left...a sundial atop a pedestal...The space above the manor's double doors was decorated, in silver, with a half sun peeking over a horizon. Smaller half suns were fixed to the doors themselves, serving as back plates for the door knockers" (Ibid, p. 59). Given a tour of the home as hostages, the Black travelers are informed that the smoking room is for men only. Letita cheekily responds to the White wizards' discrimination despite the duress: "So much for no positive prejudice" (Ibid, p. 63). The group is then given gender normative clothes to wear after the tour; Letitia notably receives a dress. The travelers are warned that they cannot leave the premises, quite literally rendering them immobile.

The "Lovecraft Country" chapter rehearses the violence of the New England Gothic and contrasts the genre with the history of the Puritans' errand into the wilderness, contrasting the terrifying similarities between the literary and colonial legacies. The early New England Gothic tradition associates the genre's European origins with New England history, as well as New England's production of the first U.S. authors and tales of supernatural horror (Ringel 2013, pp. 223–37). Echoing facets of the region's history and geography, the New England Gothic tradition includes themes of the occult, medieval history and settings, racial/cultural contact zones, the person of color as monster, wilderness isolation, religious fanaticism, Puritanism, and witchcraft. Similarly and in contrast, historian Perry Miller describes the original English Puritans' arrival to the U.S. as a "errand into the wilderness", which characterizes the religious–ethnic process by which the Puritans violently colonized the New World and became culturally and nationally American (Miller 2009). The entire first chapter of the novel thus serves as an extended metaphor of the violent colonial horrors

of the American experience, narrated through xenophobic tropes and violence of the New England Gothic and the errand through the wilderness colonial ideology.

Braithwhite manor—with its New England Gothic setting, gendered segregation of rooms, strict forms of dress, and half suns and sundial decorations—associates national geographic conquest with sexual and racial conquest. The medieval manor covered in half suns frames the Order and, by extension, the nation as dependent on the segregation of racial communities and the oppression of women for power. The half suns also hearken to W.E.B. Du Bois's *Dusk of Dawn*, one of the later texts of his oeuvre, that describes his growing awareness of the habitual "subconscious", "unconscious", and "irrational" forces perpetuated in the maintenance of U.S. racialism (Du Bois 2007, p. 2). A half sun may also symbolize rebirth and reproduction, which has strong associations with women and is an incomplete expression of power. As Fred Botting comments, "Gothic texts are, overtly but ambiguously, not rational, depicting disturbances of sanity and security, from superstitious belief in ghosts and demons, displays of uncontrolled passion, violent emotion or flights of fancy to portrayals of perversion and obsession. . ." (Botting 2013, p. 2). Rather than the gothic country manor mystifying its socio-economic relations, Ruff's haunted house of half suns instead dramatizes the historical struggles of Black women and the Black community gaining effective political control of their mobility, self-identity, and culture in an old imperial American regime of compulsory patriarchy and Whiteness.[13]

The Black travelers' frightful encounter with the White spiritual cabal at a medieval manor embodies the overarching conflict of the novel, namely the ubiquity of the "religion of Whiteness" and patriarchy in the U.S. since its origins, as Du Bois would argue (Du Bois 1999, p. 18).[14] Samuel Braithwhite represents older forms of Whiteness, while his son Caleb—who claims to be avowedly not racist or sexist—represents new forms of oppression. When Samuel describes the magical powers that Atticus inherited, his description sounds akin to the power of White supremacy: "The power of the true philosopher is carried in the blood. . .You are a reservoir of that power. Diluted, no doubt, and also tainted somewhat, but still useful for the work we have to do" (Ruff 2017, p. 86). Like older forms of White supremacy and patriarchy, the previous generations of The Order of the Ancient Dawn cultists, like Samuel Braithwhite, do not hide their prejudice, and their money and power shield them from punitive repercussions despite their harassment of Black men and women. Racial and sexual violence by Klansmen, White nationalists, and segregationists also loom as real and obvious threats in the novel, appearing often as non-magical White men with guns. Interestingly though, *Lovecraft Country's* characters spend the majority of the narrative preoccupied with younger Caleb's evil doings, which are only subtly alluded to, carried out by others on his behalf, or obscured rather than immediately and blatantly shown in the novel. Montrose explains to Atticus the dangers of Caleb: "The father[Samuel] is a fool. . . It's the boy who is the dangerous one" (Ibid, p. 97).

Caleb Braithwhite is indeed the major antagonist of the novel, creating conflicts in all of the postfeminist Gothic chapters and serving as the paradigm of contemporary Whiteness and patriarchy. Ruff critiques and updates Lovecraft's typical protagonist for the 21st century, showing Caleb as exercising the institutional and structural power that has accumulated on his behalf as a White man across the centuries but with informal or covert methods of control. In the chapter "Dreams of the Which House", Caleb Braithwhite anonymously helps the unwitting Letitia purchase a haunted manor surrounded by violent racists in order to gain access to a magical book. In "Jekyll in Hyde Park", Caleb sleeps with and manipulates Letitia's younger unemployed sister Ruby to pass as White and complete dangerous immoral tasks at his behest like that of a racialized Jekyll and Hyde. He uses blood magic—which requires literal blood pumped from the body of his lower-class, brain-dead Irish servant woman—to change Ruby's skin color. Ruff poses Caleb's latent

sexism in a visceral, physical way to elicit a strong effect of horror, such as the scene when Ruby discovers the half-dead servant woman's blood being drained via a spigot by Caleb, the man she has been regularly intimate with (Ibid, p. 267). Caleb, as shown, routinely uses all of the advantages society has afforded him, exploiting those who are vulnerable to gender inequality while also benefiting from Whiteness' systemic advantages. Atticus's and Letitia's families' attempts to free themselves from the machinations of Caleb Braithwhite illustrates how latent racism and sexism—the kind of racism or sexism purveyed by those who consider themselves as unraced individuals or as not sexist—seriously warps and damages communities of color, just as the more blatant, immediate, physical violence of White supremacy and patriarchy.

The "Lovecraft Country" chapter concludes with the group both recognizing Caleb's magic as a combined force of Whiteness and patriarchy that is largely invisible but shapes and constructs the travelers' experience of U.S. spaces and places. Caleb's quid pro quo manipulations of access and freedom are granted to the group as they drive from the manor. Caleb allows the group to leave the estate and provides them with a series of gifts, including boxes of books, a copy of all the genealogical data Mr. Braithwhite managed to collect, and Leticia's dresses. He also modifies George's Packard with a "dash of immunity" akin to White privilege that provides the group the magic of invisibility in order to avoid detection by the police and other anti-Black groups (Ibid, p. 104). Caleb buys off the Black families' allegiances and rewards their adjacency to supernatural Whiteness with a set of entitlements that, however meager, set them apart from the Black community inside and outside Lovecraft Country. As Atticus and his friends drive away from the manor with their car full of gifts, Atticus "said nothing, only faced forward, and tried to believe that the country into which they now traveled was different from the one they left behind" (Ibid, p. 100). Atticus here poses the dualism of the eerie Lovecraft Country and the nation, suggesting that they are one and the same. Outside of Lovecraft Country, too, George realizes the dangers of Caleb's gifts of privilege: "But the enchantment laid on the Packard in Ardham still held, causing traffic cops and patrolmen to either avert their eyes from the car or stare straight through it. Which would have been gratifying, George reflected, if not for the knowledge that he was using Caleb Brathwhite's magic to do Caleb Braithwhite's bidding" (Ibid, p. 151).

Figuratively and literally, the travelers cannot escape the larger forces Caleb represents in Lovecraft Country, and he again appears in the supernatural second chapter of the novel, "Dreams of the Which House", which is told from the point of view of Letitia. In "Dreams of the Which House", Letitia undergoes the harrowing process of buying the haunted house of one of the earliest cabal leaders—Hiram Winthrop—in an all-White neighborhood.[15] On the level of plot, the chapter adapts the haunted house ghost story popular with women writers of the 19th-century Gothic. For 19th-century women writers, engaging with the ghost story genre increased visibility and opportunity in a climate of social and political reform and hinged on everyday issues of class and wealth for women (Smith 2013). Rather than a haunted house with ghosts plaguing Leticia in "Dreams of the Which House", she instead spends most of the chapter worrying about finances and violence due to the ghosts in her house and the race-based hate in her neighborhood. This chapter is also a tongue-in-cheek adaptation of Lovecraft's short story, "The Dreams in the Witch House". In Lovecraft's "Dreams in the Witch House", a male student is terrorized by a 17th-century witch from the Cthulhu mythos. In Ruff's both horrific and hilarious "Dreams of the Which House", rather than a man plagued by an ancient witch, protagonist Letitia circumvents redlining policies to buy a haunted house but is subsequently plagued by White ghosts and White men in her neighborhood.

The dark comedic chapter begins with Letitia and her sister Ruby being gifted a large sum of money by an anonymous donor who claims to be repaying a debt to their late father, Warren. Encouraged to buy a multi-bedroom home that they can rent for income, Letitia encounters a local realtor who describes how they can circumvent redlining policies to buy the haunted Winthrop house. "It's OK", Letitia says to her realtor. "We're not afraid of dead people. . . One thing, though–now that the cat's out of the bag, you think the seller might come down on the price even more?" (Ruff 2017, pp. 118–19). Letitia eventually buys the home, and she meets the ghosts of the Winthrop home who are previous members of the Order, the Winthrop family. Letitia also discovers an intricate orrery model of the solar system in the home and an ancient magical tome. She names a room of the home after the mechanical model constellation, referring to the room as the "Orrery room". As she settles into her new home, she encounters violence inside and outside the domestic space: the ghosts inside push her around the house and turn on the orrery to frighten her, while outside the home, a group of White boys harasses her. Leticia eventually befriends the frightening ghosts of her home—even regularly playing cards with them—and the apparitions later help protect her property from the real monsters—her White supremacist neighbors that attempt to run her out of the neighborhood and burn her home to the ground. The chapter ends with Atticus visiting Letitia in her new home. He suspects Caleb helped engineer the anonymous donor and realtor behind Letitia's home purchase. Atticus sends a warning to Caleb through Letitia's realtor.

The "Dreams of the Which House" chapter ultimately combines the Jim Crow-era real estate policies that structurally oppressed the black community with supernatural tropes of the postfeminist Gothic. The chapter makes literal how patriarchal societies cause Black women to feel and be unhomed, constituting and hiding the "unhomeliness" of women at the heart of society (Bhaba 1994, p. 10). The tropes of ghosts and the cosmos inside the Winthrop house blur the dualistic categories of what was once foreign and domestic, cosmic horror and gothic terror. In multiple scenes, the ghosts attempt to terrify Letitia and turn on the mechanical orrery model, presenting the cosmos in the home itself. The solar system in the home combined with the presence of the supernatural ghosts blurs the "outside" cosmos "inside" the domestic and simultaneously makes the interiors also the exterior. Leticia can never leave home because she never quite left, and she is in a permanent state of displacement. Neither here nor there, the chapter makes literal Black women's absent presence as figuratively socially and politically undead subjects in the U.S.

In addition, if gender is produced through one's actions in lived spaces, Letitia's repeated card games at home with ghosts blatantly contrasts women's absent present subjectivity with the undead and suggests her mobility as only possible in the real world with supernatural intervention, like the mysticism of cards and card readings (Wilson 2004). In the literature, card games can represent the re-ordering of time and divination. After all, a deck of cards reassembled in any random order can produce a different story, game, and outcome. Card games, too, carry cosmic associations due to their relationship with tarot cards and fortune-telling, suggesting their relationship to the past and the present and future, as well as those dead and those alive (Goggin 2020). Ruff's tongue-in-cheek trope of card games then infers his restructuring of the Lovecraft narrative and retelling of the modern coming-of-age story from the perspective of a Black woman as a homeowner, suggesting this form of women's social and economic mobility as akin to the supernatural. Critic Mark Fisher cites capital itself as a contemporary example of weird horror, writing that "Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity" (Fisher 2016, p. 11). In weird fiction, out-of-this-world species like aliens or hard to perceive hyperobjects—entities distributed over time and space that are difficult to comprehend but have prominent effects

on the living—are examples of cosmic horror. With Letitia's home purchase and social mobility made possible only through predatory money and manipulations, Ruff highlights Black women's undead, eerie sense of belonging due to the influences of capital (class), patriarchy, and race in the U.S. In *Lovecraft Country*, to live as a Black woman property owner means to dwell in a haunted house of card games that is neither here nor there ("which" house).

Similarly to Letitia's story, *Lovecraft Country*'s sci-fi chapter, "Hippolyta Disturbs the Universe" a horrifying space exploration story that features George's wife, Hippolyta, traveling the cosmos. In the chapter, Hippolyta is researching potential cities and places for their family's Black travel guide, and she stumbles upon a new observatory, which happens to be that of the former cabal leader, Hiram Winthrop. In a flashback, readers discover that Hippolyta has loved astronomy since she was a little girl, but she was barred from her local observatory due to classism and racism. Her love for astronomy and space travel remains today, and she goes to explore Hiram Winthrop's observatory. While in the observatory, Hippolyta accidentally gains access to the universe through a magical portal opened by a lock and key in the home. Upon traveling the universe, however, Hippolyta makes a horrifying discovery—the alien life forms on another planet are in fact forcibly segregated Black people from Earth. Hiram shipped his former employees—a woman named Ida and other employees—to the planet "Terra Hiram" after Ida's daughter, Pearl, ran off with Hiram's son. Ida eventually tries to murder Hippolyta out of fear of retribution by Hiram, but Hippolyta escapes the planet after a space monster inadvertently saves her from Ida.

Ruff's space story, once again naming important places after men, hyperbolizes how discourses about Black women construct boundaries in culture figuratively, how (Black women's) bodies are commodified and mark exclusionary limits for normative discourses of race, sex, class, and nation. Pearl's relationship with Hiram's White son obviously threatens racial and sexual norms of family, and Hiram responds with violent social penalties that render Ida invisible because of her daughter's highly visible body. Literally, Hiram forcibly migrates Ida from her home planet to a planet of his choosing, named after himself ("Terra" means land). By the end of the chapter, Ida herself becomes violent, attempting to murder Hippolyta out of fear of Hiram's ghost tracking Pearl through Hippolyta. Ida, however, fails in her attempt. Hippolyta tragically finds out later that Pearl and her family—including her White husband and their mixed-race child—were murdered by a mob in their own neighborhood for their interracial union. Pearl and Ida's stories, representing the threat of a blended home and interracial intimacies in 1950s Jim Crow, thus ends as a multi-generational and multi-scale trauma for Black women. If Lovecraft's fiction routinely presents Blackness in White spaces as an eerie form of cosmic horror, then Ruff's Black women encountering Black others in outer space makes literal Blackness as alien and magnifies the uncanny of otherness for women inside and outside the home and planet.

Ruff's additional postfeminist Gothic chapter that touches upon interraciality, "Jekyll in Hyde Park", in contrast, serves as an adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's doppelgänger horror novel, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* but infused with feminism and the concept of passing. The chapter begins with a provocative statement of racial passing: "New Year's Day, Ruby woke up white" (Ruff 2017, p. 213). Ruff's chapter rewrites Stevenson's novel from the perspective of Letitia's sister, Ruby. The unemployed, depressed Ruby—who unwittingly slept with Caleb Braithwhite after a night out of drinking—finds herself propositioned by Caleb. He asks her to work for him. However, there is a catch—Ruby must pass as a White woman to work for Caleb. She agrees, and the financially precarious Ruby chooses to regularly transform into a White woman named "Hillary" to run errands in the city for Caleb. She also continues to engage in a casual, intimate relationship with Caleb, having sex with him outside of marriage and a formal relationship.

Caleb, in turn, rewards Ruby/Hillary with the deed to a condo filled with vials of the magic White elixir in order to keep up her lifestyle as his assistant and lover with a double identity.

Caleb and his magic elixir of Whiteness is portrayed as literally producing life, and Ruby's White self, Hillary, serves as a doppelganger that experiences space and access differently than Black Ruby. When Ruby first works for Caleb as Hillary, she sees a billboard on the street and feels the thrill of economic access and the possibilities that Whiteness provides: "The billboard was illustrated with a lineup of White women, modeling professions rather than hairstyles. . .. As she scanned the rest of the lineup she felt that weird thrill again, her excitement having less to do with any specific option than with the overall sense of possibility and choice" (Ruff 2017, p. 237). Formerly unemployed and now financially comfortable as a working White woman, Ruby figuratively and literally leads a double life in a world that demands Black women to follow Anglo-European standards of beauty and normative mores of Whiteness in order to become financially independent. As "Hillary", Ruby's personality begins to change, and she gains confidence as she experiences privilege. Ruby tellingly asks herself out loud, "What else comes with being you?" After experiencing the race-based differential treatment in public, she describes Whiteness as giving life: "Ruby had known White women had it easier, but my God, this was like getting extra years on her life" (Ibid, p. 235). Ruby becomes ethically torn about her decision to pursue economic mobility through Whiteness, though, pointedly asking herself and her friends during a conversation about the Gothic, "Was it Jekyll or Hyde who was the bad one?" (Ibid, p. 262).

An homage to the Du Boisian double consciousness with the added perspective of gender, Black and White Ruby is the gothic double that disrupts racial and gender mores of 1950s America and women's social and economic mobility. In the mid-twentieth century, women of all racial communities experienced tremendous social pressure to marry and have a family; if choosing to work, women, in general, suffered from harassment and oppression in the workforce. The Food and Drug Administration also did not approve the first birth control pill until 1960, leaving single and/or working women particularly socially and economically vulnerable. *Lovecraft Country*'s Ruby/Hillary, like Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde, is the rebellious character symbolizing the threat of feminist change in the 1950s, such as women's sexuality, interracial intimacy, and even financial autonomy. Ruby, as a woman of the city, travels around the public sphere to support herself and opts for an interracial relationship that does not end in matrimony, which largely violates the era's social mores. Because Ruby uncannily occupies the same narrative space as the double Hillary, the character embodies the familiar in the sense that both identities share the same sexual and gender identity while simultaneously representing the unknown, because Black Ruby also chooses to live her life as White Hillary. With her newfound Whiteness, Ruby delights in being able to perform her gender and identity through this new public profession and presents an alternative geographic paradigm and mobility.

Ultimately, though, Ruby is dispossessed in "Jekyll in Hyde Park". Ruby chooses to abandon Ruby to work as White Hillary, because even temporary Whiteness is figured as giving life in the chapter, making the inverse Black women a state of the undead. Ruff presents Caleb as figuratively possessing the agency and the ability to conjure a woman from the magic of Whiteness. Mimicking reproduction itself, Caleb brings Hillary into being, which means Caleb himself can create life without the use of a woman. Ruby ends the novel in her White form, Hillary, and readers see her applying for a job. Hillary, of course, is not the product of an actual pregnancy, but Caleb brings to life a different form of woman that "adds years" to Ruby's life. Similarly to how a woman creates life from her own body, Whiteness serves as a magic form of life-giving and creation. Caleb's figurative desire for the "other" version of Ruby, Hillary, also implies a normative preference for

White Ruby and the beauty standards that are connected to Hillary. Ruby, too, willingly chooses to become Hillary in the end partially due to her circumstances, which suggests Caleb's agency in White life-giving and Black womanhood as a form of social death. Caleb as a metaphor of Whiteness here suggests that the U.S. oppresses its own self—the Black populace—to give birth to White privilege. In the end, Caleb himself brings life from Ruby's body and demonstrates his possession of her and Ruby's own dispossession.

4. Conclusions: Lovecraft Country as a Nation

Lovecraft Country concludes with women once again excluded from the novel's geographic arrangements of space, place, and power. In the final scene, Atticus enchants Caleb with a negative print of the *Safe Negro's Guide* that restricts his mobility into African American neighborhoods and reaffirms their Black collective identity. Atticus casts a spell on Caleb that removes most of his powers, and Caleb responds with a threat, saying "no matter where you go, you'll never be safe". Atticus and his friends "roared" with laughter at the sorcerer's threat, and Atticus replies "What is it you're trying to scare me with? You think I don't know what country I live in? I know. We all do. We always have. You're the one who doesn't understand" (Ibid, p. 366). The violence of Whiteness is not eliminated, which the group understands. However, the Black travelers have claimed some semblance of safety and space for the Black community by restricting Caleb's mobility.

Of course, though, Atticus' enchanted negative print of the Negro Travel Guide map relies on past categories; the solution does not reimagine identity and space beyond assumptions of Black–White frameworks and men as the assumed subject. While men found some freedom of mobility in the novel, Black women remain acutely vulnerable even after Atticus' spell. The map protects Black neighborhoods and not the individual, which by extension means Letitia and her haunted house in the all-White neighborhood, for example, falls out of the magical zone of protection. Ruby, too, who lives and works in the city as both a Black and White woman, also does not fit into this framework of support. Space traveler Hippolyta can never return to space travels without risk, whether that is through a White neighborhood's portal to the cosmos or a space station outside of the zone of magical protection. In short, while Atticus' magical spell largely protects the Black community, the protection it provides is always partial and ineffective for the particular intersectional subjectivity of Black women. Black women are rendered ungeographic and undead in the story—always out of place, unrecognized, and unprotected by rational forces of spatial colonization and organization. Ruff's weird geography underscores, as Doreen Massey argues, that there is no "single sense of place. For people occupy different positions within any community" (Massey 1994). In the end, *Lovecraft Country* engages with the postfeminist project by challenging postfeminist discourses of women's equity while highlighting intersectional race and gender oppressions that further undermine these claims. *Lovecraft Country* is, unfortunately, our country.

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Notes

[1] Brian Norman provides a clear definition of "Jim Crow" that will be used in this essay. "Generally, "Jim Crow" is shorthand for the diverse practices, customs, attitudes, and legal frameworks that arose in post-bellum America, especially the former

slave-holding states, to undergird a regime of compulsory race segregation." (p. 35). For more, see Norman (2015). Also, my use of scale here refers to a kind of cosmic terror response to the inhuman scale of the universe and deep time in Lovecraft's weird fiction.

2 James Kneale describes Lovecraft's characteristic weird geography as "This entangling of places and times is a key element of Lovecraft's writing, one that prompts a consideration of style and allusion as forms of engagement with cosmic scales of space and time" (p. 45). For more, see Kneale (2016).

3 Written by travel writer Victor Hugo Green, *The Negro Motorist Green Book* provided locales and advice on safe places to eat and sleep for Black roadtrippers, while activists also used the book to find safe havens for gatherings. For more, see Hall (2014).

4 Historically, the gothic novel first emerged in the mid-18th century and sparked popular critical debate and condemnation in the U.S. and Britain. Yet, over the course of the next century, the Gothic genre widely influenced transatlantic popular culture and gave birth to a variety of popular genres that continue to develop and flourish today, including weird fiction, detective fiction, science fiction, horror, ghost stories, and others. Today, the Gothic is defined as both a genre and a mode according to Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy, particularly in "its emphasis on the returning past, its dual interest in transgression and decay, its commitment to exploring the aesthetics of fear, and its cross contamination of reality and fantasy" (1). For more, see Spooner and McEvoy (2007).

5 I am thinking of works such as Fisher's (2016, pp. 64, 11). See also Kneale (2019, p. 95). See also Moreno-Garcia (2016, pp. 9–10). In addition, Pierrot (2020).

6 Ellen Moers and other second-wave feminists of the late-20th century introduced the canon of a Female Gothic, which explored how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women employed specific literary techniques and language to describe their positionality.

7 In *Splattered Ink*, Sarah Whitney describes conventions of the postfeminist Gothic: "Postfeminist Gothic novels [. . .] violently intrude on the well-constructed fantasy of a safe and equitable world. They feature abject protagonists who are socially invisible, physically broken, or speaking from the grave. Emphasizing women's disempowerment, they go against the grain of a victim-resistant, empowerment-oriented age [. . .] [They] eschew the therapeutic structures embedded in postfeminist popular culture". (p. 2). For more, see Whitney (2016).

8 Timothy Morton describes hyperobjects as entities with discernible impacts but are so large that they are beyond comprehension. For more, see Morton (2013).

9 The weird is marked by an excessive presence of that which does not belong, whereas eerie is something that should be present but is not, like an abandoned city or a failure of absence (p. 61).

10 Chapters in *Lovecraft Country* like "Abdullah's Book", for example, focuses on George and Montrose searching for an ancient tome in order to retrieve from the cult the stolen records of their great-grandmother, Adah, that detailed how much she should have been paid for her slave labor.

11 Necropolitics argues that the state designates some communities as socially dead underclasses outside of the state's circle of care, which subjects them to various forms of exclusion, indifference, hatred, or violence. For more, see Mbembé and Meintjes (2003).

12 William Moss says that "Since the appearance in 1764 of Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto, the ancient manor, the haunted castle, has been a dominant image of literary Gothicism". For more, see Moss (2013, p. 177).

13 As Raymond Williams argues, the early romantic image of the country house in the English literature mystified its relation to capitalism and never widened its frame to include the exploitation of the field laborers. For more, see Williams (1975).

14 In the chapter titled "The Souls of White Folks", Du Bois describes "the new religion of whiteness" and claims that ". . .the title to the universe claimed by White Folk is faulty" (p. 18).

15 The colonial exceptionalist rhetoric of the U.S. as "the shining city on a hill" came from a sermon preached by John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts Bay, as he and the Puritans sailed to New England. Not coincidentally, *Lovecraft Country*'s character Hiram Winthrop is one of the White wizard cabal's earliest members and competes even as a ghost with the Braithwhite family for White power.

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