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Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* as Allegory of the US Carceral System

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This study looks into Paul Beatty's 2016 Man Booker Prize winning novel *The Sellout* (2015) as a powerful literary elaboration on the politics of racial identity. In naturalizing slavery and segregation in current U.S. society—the idea at the core of *The Sellout*—Beatty deploys racism along a continuum from the past to the present, rather than something in the past or a memory in the contemporary so-called post-racial world. The present analysis examines how the literary devices of parody and allegory assist in the creation of a satire, particularly of the U.S. carceral system. The fictional events at Dickens, as well as Bonbon Me's story, it is argued, are only the first layer of signification in a plot that allegorizes what is perhaps the most racialized criminal system in the world, one that several critics see as the most efficient apparatus of social control after Jim Crow. Through a second layer of meaning, the most controversial representations in the novel, namely slavery and segregation, are explored. The signs of parody in his use of hyperbole and stereotype, are also marks of a black post-blackness critique that registers Beatty's literary voice in the current debate on 'blackness' as identity.

Keywords: race; racism; parody; satire; *The Sellout*.

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The Sellout, de Paul Beatty, como alegoría del sistema carcelario estadounidense

Este estudio se centra en la novela de Paul Beatty *The Sellout* (2015), ganadora del Man Booker Prize en 2016, como un producto literario de gran fuerza dentro del ámbito de las políticas de identidad racial. La novela retrata como algo natural la esclavitud y la segregación

en la sociedad actual de EEUU—idea sobre la que gira la obra. Con ello, Beatty despliega el racismo como un elemento continuo entre el pasado y el presente, en lugar de algo que ocurrió en el pasado o un recuerdo en el llamado mundo posracial contemporáneo. El presente análisis examina la forma en la que los recursos literarios de la parodia y la alegoría ayudan en la creación de una sátira, particularmente del sistema carcelario estadounidense. Se argumenta que los eventos ficticios en Dickens, así como la historia de Bonbon Me, son solo la primera capa de significado en una trama que alegoriza lo que quizás sea el sistema criminal más racializado del mundo, un sistema que varios críticos ven como el aparato de control social más eficiente posterior a Jim Crow. A través del análisis de una segunda capa de significado, este artículo explora las representaciones más controvertidas de la novela, a saber, la esclavitud y la segregación. Los signos de parodia en el uso que se hace de la hipérbole y de estereotipos se convierten en elementos significativos de una crítica negra posterior a la negritud que registra la voz literaria de Beatty en el debate actual sobre la “negritud” como identidad.

Palabras clave: raza; racismo; parodia; sátira; *The Sellout*

Paul Beatty's latest novel, *The Sellout* (2015), engages with matters of history and memory in order to take a stance in a debate that is central to African American culture, that of whether the African American community should either accept and integrate into a racist society or change that society by means of its integration. This is an argument that gained momentum shortly after Emancipation in the ideas of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois and which has seen various reconfigurations in diverse contexts in the writings of African American authors from Langston Hughes and James Baldwin to Toni Morrison, among many others. Their protagonists often reenact the dilemma between pursuing an individual path or linking themselves with the community, while also questioning and expanding the notion of a black identity.

Paul Beatty's approach is in line with the post-Civil Rights awareness of the diversity and complexity of experience among the African American community and the difficulty of pinning down the concept of blackness. Violence has always stood out as a constitutive element in that long journey *en route* to integration; a structural element entwined with the historical process of dehumanization related to enslavement and sustained by a biased criminal system. From the 1970s and into the new millennium—and despite the gains made by Civil Rights struggles—police brutality against the African American and other minority communities was normalized through the frequent acquittal of those involved in the murders. The disproportionate number of criminalized and incarcerated members of these same communities also generated millions in profit through the construction and maintenance of what Mike Davis (1995) called the prison industrial complex. Critical Race theorists in turn have demonstrated that the law has been a powerful ally in perpetuating the subjugation of these groups. The social movements Black Lives Matter and Prison Abolitionism gained visibility in the new millennium as active participants in the debate over enduring forms of racism in U.S. society, in particular police violence. Literature has also contributed to this discussion, developing new genres and critical concepts, from neo-slave narratives to black post-blackness.

This paper makes a case for a reading of Paul Beatty's novel within this wider debate. *The Sellout* presents us with a satire of the current U.S. society by projecting the revitalization of an urban African American neighborhood through what are considered the community's 'authentic' historical experiences, segregation and slavery. The plot tries to articulate anew ideas of a uniform black identity based on a single black experience, be it individual—represented in the main protagonists, Bonbon Me and Hominy Jenkins—or collective—the Dickens community. The novel follows both the political consequences and the impact that the introduction of slavery and segregation has on the community, and Bonbon's responsibility for implementing the plan. The novel begins *in medias res*, with Bonbon awaiting the Supreme Court's verdict for attempting to reintroduce segregation in his neighborhood, and feels torn between who he is and what others expect of him as a community leader. The purpose of this analysis is to explore how literary devices such as parody and allegory in *The Sellout* are central to understanding Beatty's politics of representation and thus allow the novel to

intervene powerfully in the ongoing discussion on race and the racialization of crime. Following Margo Crawford, I situate Paul Beatty's aesthetics and politics in black post-blackness, a term she coined and an aesthetic she claims "is most nuanced when it troubles blackness without worrying about the loss of blackness" (Crawford 2017, 6). While acknowledging the failure of the myths of 'post-blackness' and colorblindness, black post-black artists still consider the possibility of a Black identity. This is a link Crawford establishes between twenty-first-century black writers and the Black Arts Movement of the 60s, "a simultaneous investment in blackness *and* a type of freedom that broke the boundaries of blackness" (Crawford 2017, 4; italics in original).

In other words, their works convey the sense that blackness as an identity cannot be contained in a single definition or treated as a specific ideology, yet the feeling of blackness as a particular experience lingers. This tension emerged in the 1970s, when the Civil Rights struggles and the Black Arts Movement were waning and there was anticipation about what would come next. Crawford argues that a black post-blackness aesthetics retrieves both the 1970s Black Arts Movement's political engagement and its intention to challenge institutionalized cultural forms deliberately. In both the 1960s and 1970s and the first decades of the twenty-first century, she remarks that artists' search for an art that was uniquely black "led to a wide horizon of shaping and unshaping blackness." It is this horizon of possibility that she refers to as 'black post-blackness' (Crawford 2017, 2). Black post-blackness artists aim to create forms that convey their skepticism about a unifying homogeneous experience of blackness, and they tend to be self-reflective about their own constructions of race.

Crawford specifically highlights satire as the literary form or mode that forms part of this 1960s-1970s legacy (2017, 137). It is also representative of twenty-first-century black writers' determination to bring political and social issues to bear on their works in a distinct way: "satire is one of the most expressive forms for the difficult task of making black post-blackness legible" (Crawford 2017, 138). It produces a sort of laughter that she identifies in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) as "lurking late"; not laughter simply for the sake of amusing the reader but a more refined form that anticipates the enactment of something sneaky or subversive (Crawford 2017, 139). This feature distances the form from common satire, which is based on familiarity with the object of critique, making recognition more immediate. There is a sort of a deferral of laughter, in the expectation of what may come next. This idea, as I will discuss later, is fundamental to understanding the particular choices Beatty makes in creating a satirical effect in *The Sellout*.

This analysis also relies on the contextualization of Beatty's novel within the current debate about neo-slavery and the emergence of the prison abolition movement. Contributions of critics such as Michelle Alexander (2010) and Ruth Gilmore (2012) have strengthened the critique of the New Abolitionist movement. Alexander highlights the racialization of mass incarceration as a new Jim Crow-like mechanism to reinvigorate and enforce the segregation and political and civic disempowerment

of the African American population, while Ruth Gilmore foregrounds the problem of incarceration as systematic. The goal of the new abolitionists is not just reform, but the complete dismantling of the racial correctional system (James 2015, xxiii). Although this denunciation can be found in the 1970s—in the writings of political radical George Jackson (1994)—it has been reinforced by the New Abolitionists' linking of the racist prison system to the return of slavery. In my analysis, I suggest that *The Sellout* engages with this perception that the post-Civil Rights era does not represent a real achievement of social justice, nor an erasure of the experience of difference felt on the part of the African American community. On the contrary, the post-Civil Rights decades witnessed the persistence of racist discourses in many forms, including in the law, a situation not dissimilar to what had happened a century earlier following Reconstruction. While analyzing the satirical representations that comment on the present state of affairs regarding race in the U.S., this essay examines the ways allegory and parody serve the satirical mode. I assume that the fictional events at Dickens and Bonbon's story are only the first layer of signification in a plot that actually allegorizes the reality of a prison system that aims to maintain the disempowerment of the African American community. It is against this second layer of meanings that the most controversial representations in the novel, slavery and segregation, should be read.

The allegorized dimension of the novel suggests that the institutionalization of racism both underpins and reproduces a logic of dispossession that no feel-good project of equality or compensation has yet been able to counter. The criminal justice system practices what Ruth Gilmore has called the "widescale dispossession of people" (2012, 159), through subjecting them to the worst forms of discrimination, not only while in jail but also after they leave; ex-prisoners will forever be screened to access housing or employment, not to mention that in many states they are deprived of citizenship rights, in particular, participating in decisions about the kind of society they wish to live in through exercising their vote.

The association of slavery with the U.S. corrections system is not new. Writing shortly after Emancipation, African American ex-slave Frederick Douglass was the first to warn about a particular form of racism he called the racialization of crime (1999, 650). The phenomenon was culturally absorbed and reproduced in long-lasting legislation, as historian Adam Jay Hirsch has long highlighted. Hirsch underscored the connection between formal and virtual slavery, stressing how chain-gang labor in the aftermath of the Civil War, and also under the Jim Crow laws, was the direct legacy of the Slave Codes, thus carrying racism from slavery into Emancipation. By criminalizing minor offenses, and even simple vagrancy among the recently freed African Americans, not to mention the extra-legal practice of penalty by lynching (Davis 2003, 27-32), the legal system aligned itself with the interests of those unwilling to let go of the Southern Way of Life or abide by the Emancipation amendments. The sanctioning of segregation granted by the Plessy v. Ferguson verdict in 1896—despite the gradual legal gains accomplished by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Civil Rights struggles and

the emergence of Critical Race Theory—allowed racism to safely pass into and ultimately take form in the carceral system from the 1970s on.

Just as Alexander drew a parallel between two historical periods barely a hundred and fifty years apart, Angela Davis has noted how, in the U.S. prison-industrial-complex the inmate population currently presents a higher proportion of African Americans within the population of the U.S. than were accounted for by slaves back in the nineteenth century. In effect, the U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world,¹ a disproportionate number of inmates being African Americans. African Americans indeed make up forty percent of the incarcerated total, despite representing only thirteen percent of the overall U.S. population (Prison Policy Initiative 2016).² It was largely the criminalization of race, and especially of drug trafficking, that created the racial demographics of the inmate population (Davis 1998, 15). African Americans, like other discriminated-against minorities, tend to be arrested for minor offenses such as marijuana possession. The national and state governments' continuous investment in prison facilities is a paradox given the alleged crack-down on crime since the 1980s (Gilmore 2012, 164) and veils other interests unrelated to the exercise of justice.

Despite the fictional nature of Dickens in Beatty's novel, we learn that it is located in Los Angeles, and California is, in point of fact, one of the states that has built most prison or detention related facilities since the late 1970s. Tellingly, public spending on prisons in the state has increased year on year at a much faster rate than spending on other public services, such as education or health (Davis 1998, 13). Whereas the state built only twelve prisons between 1852 and 1964, this number doubled in twenty years between 1984 and 2007 (Gilmore 2012, 157), making the Department of Corrections the largest state agency (Gilmore 2012, 158). But private-public ventures are also part of this 'business,' whose most praised benefit is their capacity to make social problems disappear from the public eye, and provide cheap services in addition. As also claimed by Angela Davis, by the end of the twentieth century the prison industry was generating "an estimated 40 billion dollars a year" (1998, 13), as it benefitted from what can be called slave labor. Indeed, the use of prison workers more easily avoids strikes and union claims, at the same time evading regulations pertaining to the respect of human rights standards (Davis 1998, 14-18).

Latinos and African Americans are the obvious communities that are segregated in Dickens, but racism does not affect these groups alone: "racism's everywhere," says one of the characters in *The Sellout* (244). Hence, in submitting that the novel can be read as an allegory of U.S. carceral politics, I suggest that the self-inflicted radical separation of Dickens' black and Latino inhabitants from those from Los Angeles' white population

¹ According to 2019 data provided by Prison Policy Initiative, the United States had a total incarcerated population of over two million, in over six thousand different types of correctional facilities.

² The same source indicates (in data for 2016) that the incarceration rate for African Americans and Latinos is hugely disproportional to that of Whites, considering that taken together the two former groups make up only one quarter of the total U.S. population.

fictionally enacts the actual informal segregation that rules the city in real life, as disclosed by the narrator himself. In literally tracing the color line around Dickens, on buses, and in school and hospital, Bonbon and Hominy are symbolically materializing a reality already experienced in different forms by the community. They are making visible that invisible line that was always there.

Beatty's novel brings into evidence how non-white communities experience oppression in California, which functions as a microcosm of U.S. society. While some critics have discussed the satirical dimension of the novel (Rich 2016; Rose 2016; Crawford 2017, 137-166), my focus will be on the contribution of parody to the satirical mode. As a signpost for inadequacy, parody is a particularly apt literary form to lead the reader through the contradictions of the characters' choices and experiences. However, it is through parodic 'tricks' that the reader can access the second layer of signification. For instance, the apparent inadequate tone of many of Bonbon's remarks and his projects for segregating the community convey the ridiculous disparity between who he is—as an African American individual who accepts a particular memory of violence and oppression towards his community and his family—and the oppression inherent in the mechanisms he uses to liberate his community, in which he claims a position historically assumed by whites. The signs of parodic inadequacy are also evident in the use of stereotype and hyperbole, which generate the necessary distance for the reader to grasp the motives underlying Bonbon's self-conscious choices of both slavery and segregation.

Bonbon's self-association to racist discrimination ultimately carries satirical intent. Satire here applies to forms that are intentionally aggressive in their distortion of reality or character in order to gain the reader's attention and capacity for judgement. Parody is one of the best devices to balance the seriousness of satire, yet, as we will see, in *The Sellout* parody also verges on the grotesque, and as such it intensifies the satirical intent rather than attenuating it. Even if the reader laughs out of relief, it tends to be an uneasy laughter. Laughter is thus suspended to some extent because, if the ultimate goal of satire is to intervene in society and bring about change, that change needs to start with the reader—in their awareness that the fictional events on the page are impossible but there is something there that is familiar. It also implies that the reality under criticism can be reformed; the aspects satirized derive from an error in judgement, not from pure immutable evil (Quintero 2007, 2).

The novel begins and ends at the Supreme Court, where the protagonist is facing criminal charges and runs the risk of being imprisoned. Bonbon Me, a young African American male and the first-person narrator, faces a prison sentence because he has engaged in the wild project of reintroducing segregation to a decaying Los Angeles neighborhood called Dickens. The community was once known as The Farms and was established in 1868, symbolically at the outset of the Reconstruction. Originally, Dickens was an African-American agricultural island within the city of Los Angeles but, following immigration patterns, Mexicans added to the demographics of the state and moved into the marginal sections of the city. Bonbon suggests ethnic solidarity

as one of the structuring features of the neighborhood, which complicates the idea of blackness—even though different ethnicities sharing neighborhoods is common in other cities. Another controversial aspect is that Bonbon Me himself has a slave, fellow African American Hominy Jenkins, thus also suggesting differences in power within the same community, even if both characters do not enact the typical master-slave relationship.

The association of identity and race runs throughout the novel and the critique of the carceral system links to the ways racism is understood, practiced, and lived. Many of the aspects depicted, from power relations between the characters, to character construction, aspects of the setting, language, events, cultural representations such as stereotypes, or direct reference to real events, contribute to exposing how ingrained racism is. For instance, Bonbon Me introduces himself from the start as an insecure young man, a condition that resulted in his nickname, the sellout. In fact, the ‘sellout’ refers to his departure from his father’s anti-racist activism. We learn through Bonbon’s recollections that he sees himself as the twisted result of his father’s radical and abusive racial experiments, which had begun with educational segregation. His father becomes a caricature of obsessive racial awareness as he repeatedly humiliates his son in public to ensure that he gets a good grasp of racism, although he is indifferent to the trauma inflicted upon the child. Considering the school-system as one of the social institutions that fail to prepare black kids to react to racism, he has homeschooled Bonbon; he is also a single-father, in an inversion of the typical one-parent family. Segregation thus features as an experience Bonbon becomes acquainted with from an early age, although not exactly because of his experience but due to his father’s choices and intentions for his son’s own good. Bonbon’s project to segregate his community may be read as a perverse continuation of his childhood experiences and also an attempt to prove himself worthy of his father’s name and radicalism (Beatty 2016, 171).

Bonbon also experiences a deep feeling of injustice when his father dies a victim of police violence following a minor traffic infraction. It is his father’s legacy that presses him most to engage more seriously with the community, to do something for the community’s sake that will impact on his own identity as well. The father’s bequest is put both in terms of activism and of a conciliatory role within the community, but Bonbon struggles with this legacy and the identity that goes with it: “And I stand there useless, a vacant look on my face, a nigger whisperer without secrets and sweet nothings to whisper. The crowd murmurs that I don’t know what I’m doing. And I don’t” (Beatty 2016, 61). His sense of inadequacy is further suggested by the episode when he furtively sneaks a pack of Oreo cookies into a meeting of the Dum Dum Donuts (Beatty 2016, 96), a club founded by his father where his like-minded intellectual friends still meet. Since ‘Oreo’ is, through analogy to the physical appearance of the cookie—black biscuits sandwiched together with white fondant—a derogatory term applied to African American individuals who evince a desire to be white or follow aspects of white culture, this raises the question: does Bonbon qualify as black enough to claim his father’s place and respect in the community?

His epiphany that Dickens should be segregated comes as a life-changer for Bonbon in terms of gaining acceptance within the community. That the Oreo incident appears on the occasion when he proposes to test his talent as ‘nigger-whisperer’ at the Dum Dum Donuts by introducing the idea of segregation is also revealing. Rather than acting as someone who is skillful in dealing with and adapting to different audiences when discussing racial issues, Bonbon only manages to elicit the contempt and anger of his father’s peers, principally Foy Cheshire, who brands him a traitor—a “sellout.” His reading of his father’s legacy as justification for the segregation project is ultimately conveyed as being either a misreading or a ludicrous enterprise, accentuating the futility of radicalism.

This topic reengages with a central theme in African American literature—but with a twist. Since the early debates between African American intellectuals Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, shortly after Emancipation, and then between John Locke and the Harlem Renaissance critics and artists, and later on within the 1960s Black Arts Movement, the issue of the relationship between individualism and community building has echoed through African American artistic works. The individual artist, intellectual or grassroots leader was always torn between self-creation in the American individualist tradition and the simultaneous need to relate to their African American community, its forms of knowledge, and an identity that was racial at core.³ This same debate gave rise to further concerns about the integration of the black community into a white society if it meant giving up their differences and simply assimilating.

There are other aspects in Bonbon’s self-making that are also worth noting. Following his father’s death, he becomes economically independent as a farmer and makes a good living on the produce of his property. And although he places little hope in his father’s gift as the community leader, he keeps up with other cultural legacies, namely the stereotypical association of the African American with drugs. He does not sell or buy, though; updating the stereotype in a more capitalist fashion, he becomes a producer. Alongside weed, he also cultivates watermelon and citrus fruits, investing in specialization and the development of new, genetically modified, products. His lecture to the reader about his preference for watermelon adds to the irony, given the association in popular culture of African Americans with this fruit, possibly because it was easy to grow and messy to eat, adding to the stereotype of the African American as lazy, lusty, rude and contented with close to nothing. As if oblivious to that echo of racism, Bonbon describes his irresistible square, pyramidal or rabbit-shaped watermelons—exaggerating their sweetness to parodic effect: “Think of the best watermelon you’ve

³ Toni Morrison, arguably the most respected African American writer and intellectual, expressed the dilemma in many of her novels. Although the ancestor as source of knowledge and culture stands at the center of the community, for example Baby Suggs in *Beloved* (1987), the legacy must be passed on to the younger ones, Sethe’s daughter Denver, just like in the relationship between Pilate and Milk Man in *Song of Solomon* (1977). The younger generation will however not necessarily replicate the actions and values of the ancestor, because society changes and the community’s aspirations and needs change as well; hence also the impossibility of considering blackness a monolithic category.

ever had. Now add a bit of anise and brown sugar. [...] I've never seen it, but they say people have bitten into my watermelon and fainted straightaway" (Beatty 2016, 63). And then, when he justifies his choice of what to grow by saying that he chose "the plant life that had the most cultural relevance to [him]" (Beatty 2016, 62), marijuana stands out as his mainstay and his true favorite, and that he has developed a strain aptly called, in the racially charged context of the novel, "Anglophobia" (Beatty 2016, 64). During his court trial he shows up unabashedly smoking a joint, though ironically, this aspect is overlooked as attention is focused on the segregationist project.

As a producer, Bonbon caricatures the agency often attributed to the African Americans involved in the drug business or as drug addicts, as if it is simply an individual choice. This is one of the fallacies that the Prison Abolition movement has been denouncing. The criminal system, and the law itself, fail to consider the crimes associated to African Americans within a wider context and the responsibility for the social and economic inequalities that often push individuals to getting involved with drugs. Incarceration thus hides the problem rather than contributing to its solution.

Slavery accompanies, albeit accidentally, Bonbon's plan for the segregation of Dickens. Hominy Jenkins, who believes Bonbon saved his life, forces Bonbon to take him on as a slave, and he eventually becomes as central a character in the plot as Bonbon in terms of depictions of race. Hominy's character works mainly through dismantling stereotypical representations. Following Stuart Hall (2007), who identified a second function for stereotypes—an oppositional tool of contestation from within, or a counterstrategy that appropriates the representational process in order to reverse it—I see Hominy as one of the ironic elements that add to the satirical effect. Hominy is ignorant of the process of racialization and of his own interiorization of racism, and he therefore fails to perceive its perverse effects. Beatty does not use the stereotype to reverse the binary opposition underlying it and thereby attain a positive identification towards the abject, as Hall propounded. Instead, he makes the stereotype work against itself. For instance, in his role as Bonbon's slave, Hominy hones to the extreme the previous experience he had as a child actor in soft-toned racist films (Bonbon describes him to the reader using the slur expression 'a stunt coon,' Beatty 2016, 71). Hominy, now an old man, had once enjoyed nationwide fame as a character in the child-comedy *The Little Rascals* and it appears to be for nostalgic reasons that he translates the child character into the adult slave.⁴ This appropriation of the stereotype from within to take it to a higher level of humiliation causes a profound estrangement in the reader because the humiliation it causes on Hominy renders palpable the pain and powerlessness of the oppressed.

⁴ The original and very popular series was also known as *Our Gang* (dir. Hal Roach) and ran in the heyday of cinema and television, from the 1920s through the 1940s. As the heir of minstrel shows, some critics consider that, its blatant racist matter notwithstanding, the genre was the first form of public entertainment by means of which white Americans gained some form of insight, even though it was distorted, about African American culture. Others take it a step further in approaching the series as one of the few representations of interracial relations, for it followed the everyday adventures of a group of children that included both whites and African Americans. See, for instance, the argument in Julia Lee's study *Our Gang: A Racial History of The Little Rascals* (2015).

Either Hominy has interiorized subservience, or he cannot distinguish between fact and fiction. However, there is another reason that can be inferred: Hominy is proud of his acting career because he connects it with social recognition. The “L.A. Festival of Forbidden Cinema and Unabashedly Racist Animation,” which Hominy promotes and attends (Beatty 2016, 238) provides him with the opportunity to re-visit and re-live his part nostalgically in the old series. His decision to keep the event focused on art rather than racism (Beatty 2016, 240) seems to stem from the same disposition that makes him offer himself as a slave and applaud the segregation in Dickens; he lacks social respect.

Bonbon is often ill at ease with Hominy’s servility—he calls him either a “stoop-shouldered epitome of obsequiousness” (Beatty 2016, 132) or the town fool. After he beats Hominy, who has himself requested this, and despite his obvious suffering, Bonbon sardonically remarks: “like every slave throughout history, [Hominy] refus[ed] to press charges” (Beatty 2016, 80). This is obviously an impossible accusation given the lack of rights inherent to the slave condition but possibly can also be considered a critique of the ethics of endurance that history registered as the typical response of the enslaved to the violence of slavery. Despite Bonbon’s initial uneasiness about owning human property, he and Hominy end up in a strange alliance that results in the no less bizarre decision of recreating segregation.

However, Hominy plays a larger role than simply the submissive slave or the fool. Indeed, in opposition to this characterization, it is actually this character who pinpoints that the practice of the criminalization of race specifically affects the African American community. Obviously, the debate on blackness as identity is integral to the plot. Solidarity with the Mexican-American community in Dickens, on the one hand, and ‘Anglophobia’ on the other, are the two typical forms of intergroup relation. Racial division seems difficult to overcome even when there is well-meaning empathy from outside of those two communities. The most revealing episode about this position is when Hominy is faced with the discourse of a white admirer of his previous career as an actor, who tries to persuade him that whites are undergoing a similar ordeal to that of racialized minorities. The parallel sounds so far-fetched given the social differences between the groups that parody steps in again. And even though the character is hinting at their loss of privilege, Hominy’s closing remark introduces a fundamental difference that it is worth looking into:

‘And do you know why there aren’t any more niggers?’ [the admirer asked Hominy]

‘No sir. I don’t.’

‘Because white people are the new niggers. We’re just too full of ourselves to realize it.’

‘The new niggers, you say?’

‘That’s right, both me and you—niggers to the last. Disenfranchised equals ready to fight back against the motherfucking system.’

‘Except that you get half the jail time.’ (Beatty 2016, 244)

Even if there is a general sense that inequality is structural and therefore may cause harm to groups within which there are differences (such as class or gender, in the case of whites), Hominy's final observation very clearly redraws the line—*race* draws the line. Hominy's words recall an experience that remains radically different for blacks and whites—criminalization and incarceration—thus pointing towards the racial configuration of mass incarceration in the U.S.

Hominy's antithesis is the character Foy Cheshire, a parody of another type, that of the liberal intellectual who believes language alone will save the world. Foy is a militant supporter of an alternative school curriculum and one of his fundamental quests is the rewriting of the great American literary classics. Some of his reworks have titles that mock concerns about cultural justice, such as *Tom Soarer*, *The Great Blacksby* and *Of Rice and Yen*. He is possibly intended as a critique of an idealist intellectual establishment that invests in politically correct discourse with the mission of ending racism and other social inequalities. As in the case of Hominy, Foy's traits are exaggerated, and he eventually develops into an extremist and attempts to kill Bonbon. Foy's flaws resonate in Bonbon's refusal to take his father's place as the mediator in community conflicts (Beatty 2016, 58-59). As individual models for change, neither Foy nor Bonbon and Hominy can ultimately provide the community with strong and reliable leadership. This may be because in their ideals they merely mimic or invert values that derive from white society, which adds to the bitter tone of the novel.⁵

In *The Sellout*, segregation actually fits into the larger plan of the Dickens community recovering a sense of identity, reframing the issue from a black post-black perspective, which is to say, a critical perspective that evinces the pitfalls of the ideal of racial authenticity. Beatty does this with a parodic twist: Bonbon aims to make Dickens "the Last Bastion of Blackness" (Beatty 2016, 150), thus placing race at the heart of the project as something that can be authentically pinned down and represented. We learn that Dickens was once a city, and that its decline was the result of the gentrification of nearby areas rather than an accident. We also read that it was gentrification that first segregated the community as "part of a blatant conspiracy by the surrounding, increasingly affluent, two-car-garage communities to keep their property values up and blood pressures down" (Beatty 2016, 57). Dickens thus turned into an anonymous neighborhood whose residents were discouraged from identifying with. In Bonbon's hyperbolic style, which sometimes mixes meaningful political events and trivial or fictional facts, he compares Dickens to still existing colonial territories owned by the U.S.: "occupied territory. Like Guam, American Samoa" and, with the intention of

⁵ To turn to Toni Morrison's novels again as example, in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) Pecola's suffering could have been avoided if the community had not emulated white forms of beauty as a measure of self-esteem, just as in *Paradise* (Morrison, 1998), where efforts to build the town of Ruby as a community based on the segregation of whites also fails. The women's community in the nearby Convent is feared for their rejection of the white patriarchal model together with racial difference and male power. The Convent community could pose an alternative to community building, yet it is estranged and eventually destroyed by the inhabitants of Ruby. See Pattel (2001, 149).

adding an extra touch of humor, also in the “Sea of Tranquillity” (Beatty 2016, 146). Bonbon’s first attempt to put Dickens back on the map is to find twin-cities—places that shared historical aspects or events, or had some sort of common ground with Dickens—with a view to reinforcing the identity of the town. Although all his efforts fail, it is through this enterprise that he learns more about the identity of his community: the only cities willing to pair with Dickens are places connected to experiences of extreme violence: Juárez, Chernobyl and Kinshasa (Beatty 2016, 146). Undeterred, he resorts to ‘lost-cities,’ places that, like Dickens, had “disappeared under dubious circumstances” but only to parodic effect again: from Thebes, in Ancient Egypt (brutally destroyed by Alexander the Great, its survivors sold as slaves), to Döllersheim, in Austria (where the family of one of the most notorious exterminators in history, Adolf Hitler, came from), to the absurd Lost City of White Male Privilege (Beatty 2016, 148).

Segregation thus springs to his mind as the project to keep the community pure. In effect, it is Hominy who gives Bonbon the communitarian vision he lacked, even if in rather racist metaphors: “you’re thinking too small. That saving Dickens nigger by nigger ain’t never going to work. [. . .] Well, you have to stop seeing us as individuals, ‘cause right now, massa, you ain’t seeing the plantation for the niggers” (Beatty 2016, 79-80). The plan gradually develops into creating a common unifying symbol; a monument that would work like a flag, triggering immediate recognition and so reinvigorate the local identity: “like Paris has the Eiffel Tower, Saint Louis the Arch” (Beatty 2016, 170). But L.A.’s flagship must be aligned with the city’s most authentic experiences rather than with an aesthetic monument, and, for Bonbon, racism is that experience. Bonbon and Hominy’s initiative therefore consists in bringing to light practices that had always counted on the tacit acceptance of L.A. residents: “From the music clubs to the jail houses [. . .] LA is a mind-numbingly racially segregated city” (Beatty 2016, 204), if not “the most racist city in the world,” asserts Bonbon (Beatty 2016, 129). And in comes parody again, working toward critical detachment, when Bonbon devises the best symbol to identify Los Angeles as “the racist vortex” and, in a bizarre hyperbole, imagines selling racism as a tourist experience: “[i]f places like Sedona, Arizona, have energy vortexes, mystical holy land where visitors experience rejuvenation and spiritual awakenings, Los Angeles must have racism vortexes. Spots where visitors experience deep feelings of melancholy and ethnic worthlessness” (Beatty 2016, 128-129).

The incongruence of the image of the racist vortex is stressed when history is again called upon and a number of historical places associated with episodes of racism and violence are chronologically detailed: from the street spot where Rodney King was brutally beaten by police officers, to the place where white taxi driver Reginald Denny was nearly killed in retaliation; Chávez Ravine, the Mexican American *colonia* where residents were forcibly displaced to make way for the Dodgers baseball stadium; and even Seventh Street, where in 1942 buses were deployed to remove the Japanese American local community to their three-year long confinement in internment camps (Beatty 2016, 129). Perhaps the hyperbole is only half of a joke, for what Bonbon

is envisioning is actually done in other cities that acknowledge the violence of their past and turn it not into celebratory monuments, but pedagogical lessons. If racism was a deep-seated reality that history confirmed, Bonbon wonders, why not turn it into a badge of honor and have L.A. recognize it as core to its identity. In this case, the parody intensifies the failure of all the other anti-racist strategies—from shame to trivial everyday practices, political correctness, quotas, or colorblindness—none of which have succeeded in effectively overcoming prejudice.

Bonbon and Hominy's parodic plan ultimately exposes what Ann DuCille aptly called periracism, the subtle and contradictory forms racism takes which are deeply embedded in everyday life and social relations. They are tacitly accepted and continuously reenacted by both whites and non-whites: "something that is so pervasive yet so seemingly neutral and normative, that it passes for civility" (2012, 206). This acceptance, along with tolerance, plays a part in the naturalization of racism, suggesting that the phenomenon is much more complex than a simple top-down strategy: "periracism is institutionalized racism's precondition and progenitor, as well as its sanction and authorizing agent, at once its consequence and precondition" (DuCille 2012, 206). In *The Sellout*, when given the chance, the L.A. population openly embraces the racism written in their life experiences and in their memory but which they had not before had the chance to admit to. Racism shows itself to be a stranger to no-one: indeed it is its easy familiarity that triggers the parodic effect and stuns the reader. Racism turns out to be the bond that binds the Dickens community. It appears as only natural that bus passengers feel no indignation nor resentment when they find a segregation sign put on a local bus in honor of Hominy's birthday that states: "Priority seating for seniors, disabled, and whites" (Beatty 2016, 128). In fact, the residents wonder why the city had taken so long in bringing to the fore institutional racism (Beatty 2016, 129). This is how Bonbon wins himself the title of "City Planner in Charge of Restoration and Segregation" (Beatty 2016, 168), a career he takes seriously for a while. The fact that Bonbon's surname is 'Me' is certainly not incidental, but rather a strategy to bring the reader closer to this representation of periracism. The first layer may be satirical and the reader may be astonished at the behavior of the Dickens residents; but that is only because we are a part of hypocritical societies that have institutionalized racism and hence normalized the inverse of the version in place in Dickens.

Perhaps in not so unexpected a turn of events in the context of the plot, the absurd recreation of segregation leads the community to expose its own contradictions, its own racism and desire to lay it out in the open, but essentially to reflect on racism (Beatty 2016, 167): "It's like the specter of segregation has brought the city of Dickens back together again" (Beatty 2016, 168). In adhering instantly to Bonbon and Hominy's project, does the community banalize or reinforce racism? The "communal feeling" experienced by the passengers on the bus (Beatty 2016, 167) encouraged Bonbon to spread segregation to other institutions in the neighborhood, namely Chaff Middle School and the hospital, and to paint a white line to cordon off the neighborhood. The refoundation of the system

is based on the premise that segregation is a better way to attain equality and survival, and Bonbon invokes a candid comparison to farming practices, but in parodic line with the actions and intents of historical figures linked to institutional racism. As Bonbon explains: "I'm not Rudolf Hess, P. W. Botha, Capitol records, or present day US of A. Those motherfuckers segregate because they want to hold on to power. I'm a farmer: we segregate in an effort to give every tree, every plant, every poor Mexican, every poor nigger, a chance for equal access to sunlight and water; we make sure every living organism has room to breathe" (Beatty 2016, 214). Metaphors aside, Bonbon's purpose is not so distant from Booker T. Washington's when he defended segregated institutions until the African American community could reach a higher stage and claim full integration.

As for school segregation, it is introduced as a measure to strengthen the "sense of community" in Dickens (Beatty 2016, 262). "COLORED ONLY" signs are placed in restaurants and beauty salons, the movie theater and the Public Library. The proprietors of the establishments were given a choice from a menu of signs, where only inclusion was forbidden: "BLACK, ASIAN, AND LATINO ONLY; LATINO, ASIAN, AND BLACK ONLY; and NO WHITES ALLOWED." Business owners were given the same choice but instead of selecting the exclusive sign ('Colored Only') they picked the blunt exclusionary options because they made the clientele feel special and guiltless: "'The customers love it. It's like they belong to a private club that's public!'" (Beatty 2016, 225). This liberation from the forbidden ideology sustaining the community reveals the contradictions of identity politics and also the complexity of racism. The goal ultimately becomes self-critique: "People grouse at first, but racism takes them back. Makes them humble. Makes them realize how far we've come and, more important, how far we have to go" (Beatty 2016, 163).

Segregating the hospital in turn raises awareness about the degree of neglect the community had been subject to. Again defying common sense, Hominy and Bonbon painted a disconcerting no-color line that "look[ed] either black or brown, depending on the light, one's height, and one's mood" (Beatty 2016, 231), ironically hinting at the limitations of colorblindness. The patients, who stood waiting in line for hours, eventually followed the "brackish-colored line" only to be led to three inconsequential exits: a back alley, the morgue or a bank of soda pop and junk-food vending machine. Bonbon assumes that he may not have solved "the racial and class inequities in health care" but he applauds the fact that patients who followed the strange color line to dead ends became more critical and proactive, aware of their rights and ready to hold the system accountable for neglecting the African American community: "when their names are finally called, the first thing they say to the attending physician is 'Doctor, before you treat me, I need to know one thing. Do you give a fuck about me? I mean, do you really give a fuck?'" (Beatty 2016, 231).

Solidarity between the African- and the Mexican American communities is evinced in several passages ("regardless of race, all newborn babies look Mexican, and all baldheaded men look black, more or less" [Beatty 2016, 235]), while the segregation in education

enables the antiracist Mexican American history in L.A. to be recovered and highlighted.⁶ In the plot, the alliance serves to exclude Anglos from Chaff Middle School, an inversion where parody is again at work: concerns about the exclusion lead to the creation of a “Whitey Week” to counterbalance the “disingenuous pride and niche marketing that took place during Black History and Hispanic Heritage Months” (Beatty 2016, 226). In “Whitey Week”, pupils can choose to perform “Regular Whiteness,” “Deluxe Whiteness” or “Super Deluxe Whiteness” (Beatty 2016, 227), which is actually just minstrelsy in reverse, for Anglos are prevented from attending the school. In fact, though, interest in attendance is raised among Anglo parents, after the ironic result that the school climbs in the rankings following the news about its segregation approach. In another parodic episode, a group of white students who are barred access to the school is dubbed the “Dickens Five.” Only the distracted reader would miss the pun on the ‘Little Rock Nine’—the African American high school students whose law-mandated integration infuriated Southern segregationists and originated riots during the Civil Rights era.

In taking up the task of looking at the history of the African American community from a black post-blackness angle, Beatty resorts to parody and allegory to enlarge the meanings and the experiences of “blackness.” In embracing the position of the oppressor—Bonbon—and making the choice of being a slave—Hominy—the characters exhibit the limitations of the options available. The novel may be throwing onto the reader’s face that the terms of oppression remain in place and so too the forms of oppression they breed. Despite having achieved some degree of agency, freedom for African Americans is still a mock-freedom if real choice remains absent. Bonbon seems to be trapped in history not just because the experience of slavery is inscribed in the history of his community, but because racism speaks to him daily in his most commonplace routines. His extravagant performance of the white master does not prevent him from having the sardonic realization that “just because racism is dead, don’t mean they don’t shoot niggers on sight” (Beatty 2016, 43).

Racism also breeds new forms of imprisonment akin to slavery. The critique of racist mass incarceration is an undercurrent throughout this novel, which begins and ends at the highest example of U.S. justice. At the point that comes closest to the verdict, the judge suggests some understanding of Bonbon’s motivation, stating that the crime was “to restore his community through [. . .] precepts [. . .] that, given his cultural history, have come to define his community despite the supposed unconstitutionality and nonexistence of these concepts” (Beatty 2016, 265-6). The judge’s words may convey that you cannot elide history, despite ethical or moral considerations. Which is not to say that Bonbon is entitled to repeat the wrongs of history just because they

⁶ These episodes fall outside the parodic frame. Despite the fact that the established narrative of the Civil Rights Movement generally fails to pay close attention to school unrest as a crucial chapter in the non-violent tactics on the part of the Chicano community, East L.A. did in fact witness several School Walkouts in the late 1960s led by Chicano students. These were the equivalent to the famous African American student sit-ins earlier in the decade, student strikes that contested discrimination in education.

were registered on the bodies of his ancestors. Bonbon himself meditates on his own 'crime,' when he is injured by Foy Cheshire on account of his recreation of the African American badge of shame and says, half-regretfully half ironically: "I've whispered 'Racism' in a post-racial world" (Beatty 2016, 262).

Along the same lines, the proclamation of a post-racial America is called into question through Bonbon's detached observations when watching Foy Cheshire waving the American flag. As Foy drives by, in what is suggested to be a celebration of Obama's second term victory, Foy says that the reelection of the black President had allowed America "to finally pa[ly] off its debts" (Beatty 2016, 288). But Bonbon retorts: "And what about the Native Americans? What about the Chinese, the Japanese, the Mexicans, the poor, the forests, the water, the air, the fucking California condor? When do they collect?" (Beatty 2016, 288), again reminding the reader that racism is not a problem specific to the African American community, nor a definer of "blackness." Memory will keep the issue of closure on the agenda, for "[h]istory is the things that stay with you" (Beatty 2016, 115), Bonbon asserts.

When, close to the end of the novel, Bonbon reflects on the racial motivation of black guilt, while still awaiting his verdict, he says: "I understand now that the only time black people don't feel guilty is when we've actually done something wrong, because that relieves us of the cognitive dissociation of being black and innocent, and in a way the prospect of going to jail becomes a relief" (Beatty 2016, 18). Bonbon's troublesome correlation is ironic but again touches upon another sore spot: it is class and racial status rather than crime that marks the continuum in African American oppression. From the slave plantation to the prison plantation, as New Abolitionist critics argue, racism has been producing different but persistent forms of segregation. In other words, despite their respective historical contexts, enslavement and incarceration are correlatives (James 2015, xxiii).

In the novel, after the final Court session, Bonbon heads home because the verdict is postponed and his friends want to celebrate his (albeit provisional) homecoming. As he passes through the kitchen doorway, he sees a welcome banner that maximizes the fundamental question regarding the nature of segregation: "CONSTITUTIONAL OR INSTITUTIONAL—TO BE DECIDED" (Beatty 2016, 279). The cynical false alternative, again used to parodic effect, sustains disbelief in the successful erasure of racism and confirms Margo Crawford's idea that black post-blackness writers invest in open forms and states of suspension, in an anticipation of the future rather than locking it off in a neat formula of the past. The reader may wonder about the Supreme Court verdict, and what the future holds for Bonbon; but the readers also realize that the suggested suspension of the novel's closure is only apparent. Because the point is not if Bonbon will eventually go to jail or not, nor if the Dickens community will fare better after the eccentric experiment of segregation and win the battle over blackness. It is rather that whichever form the rhetoric of racism takes, the real decision is about racism itself, not about individual cases.

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