

## Contextualized Investigation of Setting and Racism in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*

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**Abstract:** This paper explores setting and racism in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*. The novel is set in the fictional town of Dickens in Los Angeles and features the character Bonbon, also called "Me," a young man whose life and experiences drive the novel. The police killed Bonbon's father, and Bonbon had to navigate life in that hostile environment that privileges the whites. Although a black man, Bonbon reintroduced racism and slavery in the town and was charged to court and sent to jail. Despite being aware of the consequences of his action, Bonbon was set to prove a point in this racially charged, intense, satirized novel.

**Key Words:** Racism, setting, discrimination, African Americans, inhumanity, segregation.

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### Introduction and Setting

*The Sellout* is a novel published by the African American author Paul Beatty in 2015. Paul Beatty won the 2016 Man Booker Award for his novel *The Sellout*, and by this feat, he is the first African American ever to win the prestigious award. In form, plot, setting, characterization, and thematic preoccupation, the novel has been described as a satire of U.S. racial politics in which the author did not spare anyone. Admittedly, "The truth is rarely pretty, and this is a book that nails the reader to the cross with cheerful abandon ... that is why the novel works" (Brown, n. pag.). Paul Beatty has unapologetically established himself as an influential contemporary American author and literary voice of the twenty-first century.

Its setting is Los Angeles, as revealed by the narrator, who would be called Bonbon throughout this paper. Bonbon gives us a vivid description of the setting in the novel's opening paragraph. In situating the novel's setting, the narrator states, "We lived in Dickens, a gentle community on the Southern outskirts of Los Angeles, and as odd as it might sound, I grew up on a farm in the inner city" (27). The original charter that established the city clearly stated its segregated nature, "Dickens shall remain free of Chinamen, redheads, city slickers, and unskilled Jews" (27). From the novel's introductory exposition, the author captures the American atmosphere of racial segregation and discrimination that has left a scar in the hearts of the victims, especially the narrator, who witnessed his father's death in cold blood at the hands of the white police for a minor traffic office. Writing about the plot structure of *The Sellout*, Reni Eddo posits that:

The plot is set in motion when Dickens, the City 'Me' Lives in, is surreptitiously wiped off the map, triggering an identity crisis in its residents...It just sort of disappears and nobody is told why...the comforting social blanket of whiteness is satirized mercilessly. If *The Sellout* does anything, it successfully points not only to the problem but all the complexities and nuances of the problem. (17)

Reni's assertion is critical, contextual, factual, and objectively engages the discourse on the plight of almost all races in America, including the Blacks who were literally "wiped off the map" and, as such, were launched into a helpless era of identity crisis. The society projected in the novel does not have a social order, and the lack of social order is one of the significant problems and issues of concern as the narrative unfolds and complicates.

Further, writing about the setting of the novel and its contributions to and influences on the characters and their actions, Gupta asserts:

In *The Sellout*, the narrator, Bonbon's father is accidentally gunned down by the LAPD. Then, Dickens the "ghetto community" on the outskirts of Los Angeles where Bonbon lives and where this novel is set, is "erased" from the map and Bonbon decides to do something about it, more precisely, to draw attention to it in a way that would force whoever it was that made these maps to put it back. (10)

Therefore, one admits that Bonbon's action in this regard, which equally resulted in introducing discrimination, segregation, and slavery even in public schools, is a deliberate attempt to draw the attention of the myopic white government officials and leaders to the plight of the blacks. This conclusion is informative mainly because even when such an act leads to the imprisonment of the narrator, the court setting becomes an avenue to satirize the whites and their regime that has dehumanized the blacks.

### **The Sellout: A Plot Overview**

The novel begins in the middle of a scene where Bonbon, also called Me, is awaiting the Supreme Court's judgment for trying to reintroduce the system and practice of segregation and slavery in his hometown of Dickens—an experience that launches him into a conflict between who he is as a person and what his society expects of him as a community leader. The protagonist is Bonbon, who is projected in the novel to be a young black or African American male living in Dickens, a fictional town in Los Angeles. Given his privileged position, Bonbon starts to introduce erstwhile abolished practices of segregation and holding slaves, an act which he did not see anything wrong with. He was raised by a single father, a disciplined and strict professor in sociology:

my father was a social scientist of some renown, as a founder and to my knowledge, sole practitioner of the field of psychology. I wasn't fed; I was presented with lukewarm appetitive stimuli... I wasn't loved but brought up in an atmosphere of calculated intimacy and intense levels of commitment. (27)

One could only imagine the thought processes going on in the young Bonbon's mind as he navigated life and existence under the strict tutelage of his professor father. Given his father's first-hand knowledge and experience of racial tensions in America, he opted to home-school his son rather than send him to a white public school, hence: "he liked to walk around the house aka 'the skinner's box' in a laboratory coat, where I, his gangly, absentminded black lab rat was homeschooled in strict accordance with Piaget's theory of cognitive development" (27). This implies that from a very tender age, Bonbon had started experiencing total isolation as a result of discrimination in society, as his father could not allow him to play around with other children in the neighborhood. As such, the novel captures the harsh American reality where racial discrimination, segregation, and racism thrive. Additionally, his narration of his father's death in the hands of the white police as he watches helplessly is quite informative and further exposes the brutality of the racial tensions that characterize the era:

My father was faced down the intersection. I recognized him by his fist, cocked and knuckled up tight, the veins on the back of his hand still bulging and full. I compromised the crime scene by picking link off his matted Afro, straightening the rumped collar of his oxford shirt, brushing the pebbles of gravel from his cheek, and, according to the police report, most egregiously by sticking my hand in the blood-pooled around his body, which to my surprise was cold. Not hot, roiling with the black anger and lifelong frustration of a decent, albeit slightly crazy man who never became what he thought he was. (42-43)

The above excerpt highlights the impunity with which the blacks were treated in the then-American society and underscores the brutal experiences they faced at the hands of the police. Given the discriminatory existence faced by the blacks, their dreams were often shattered as they had to exist at the mercy of brutal police forces. As each black man gets killed, their dreams are also killed. While nursing his helpless existence and reality, Bonbon cries out, "I was my father's child, a product of my environment and nothing more; Dickens was me. And I was my father; the problem is they both disappeared from my life first, my dad and then my hometown, and suddenly I had no idea who I was and no idea how to become myself" (40). His father's death is a symbolic representation of systemic injustice against blacks. Still, it is also a pointer to their dependent humanity as they had to live only at the mercy and dictates of white police and the machinery of the state. In a critical and thought-provoking assessment of the conflicts and contradictions that characterize the story's plot, setting, satire, and intricacies, Canelo concluded that "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 is considered the community's 'authentic' historical experiences, segregation and slavery." (198). How uncanny it is to describe a people's "authentic" historical experience as segregation and slavery!

### **Racism and Satirizing a Never-Ending Cycle**

Being black in America has historically been a challenging social experience that often leaves a bitter taste on the lips of the blacks who have for generations contended with the tragedies and trauma associated with their skin color. Using satire as a vehicle to criticize society, Beatty literally overturns the table, shining a critical light on the foibles of his society without leaving anyone behind the lens of his criticism. In her review of the novel, Eddo-Lodge observed that Beatty "throws in dozens of jokes: every stereotype, rivalry, and anxiety about race in the US is laid bare. No one is above criticism. The comforting social blanket of whiteness is satirised mercilessly. Black intellectuals on the left and right are exposed as fakes grasping for social power" (n.pag.).

M.H. Abrams' definition of satire will suffice here as it aligns well with Beatty's use of satire in the novel. According to Abrams, satire "can be described as the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation. It differs

from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire derides; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt that exists outside the work itself" (285). From the foregoing, Beatty made a great authorial decision to employ satire as a tool for societal exposure' and an x-ray of the raging racial tensions in the novel. Satirizing the white government and its unjust treatment of the blacks, Foy opines:

You're supposed to cry when your dad dies, curse the system because your father has died at the hands of the police. Bemoan being lower-middle class and colored in a police state that protects only white rich people and moric stars of all races, though I can't think of any African-American ones. (56)

Admittedly, the police have to protect the lives and property of citizens regardless of race and color, but in Dickens, they contribute to the plight of the people as they restrict their duties to white citizens and abandon others, even to the point of mindlessly taking the lives they ought to preserve. Consequently, such inhumane treatments cause the blacks to live in fear, deceit, and lies. Remarkable of such occasions is during population census where and when we see the narrator deny his identify in the form he filled although his tricks were later discovered at the arrival of the census official, "To this day, when the census form arrives in the mail, under the "RACE question I check the box marked "some other race" and proudly write in "Californian". Of course, two months later, a census worker shows up at my door, takes one look at me and says "you foul nigger." (65) The blacks faked their identity perhaps as a way to assert their individuality and humanity, but that comes with a cost because if one is discovered to be impersonating, the consequences are dire. Human beings are supposed to take pride in their identity, culture, values, and outlook, but as seen from the text, the blacks in Dickens suffered inhumanity due to their skin color and the coloration of race and racial segregation.

Given the several twists and turns of the novel, it is surprising that Bonbon Me recollects his father's assassination and subsequent burial and how his father's death and burial made him feel like a man. One would think that this tragic experience would make him sad and incomplete, but we see him ironically feeling relieved and in a celebration mood, "I buried my father in the back yard and that day I became a man, or some other droll American bullshit, but all that happened was that day I became relieved." (85) The narrator is relived because to him, death brings an end to all forms of indignity and inhumanity meted against the blacks and which they accepted with little or no objection. To this end, Gargi Gupta submits that "*The Sellout* by Paul Beatty is a biting satire on racism and its tenacious hold on US society" (2).

Using the character of Hominy, Beatty reveals yet another instance of racial discrimination at the traffic jam scene. Here, there is an apparent open verbal attack on the blacks as Hominy alighted from his car to control traffic. The events of the car traffic control further lead into the heart of the matter of racism, "if you black, get back! White, to the right. Yellow, follow the whites and let it mellow... if he couldn't categorize by sight, he asked the drivers what color they were, Chicano? What colour is that? You just can't make up a race, mother fucker. Puto? I got your puto right here, pendejo! You pick a lane nigger and stay in it. Get in where you fit in!." (96) The above excerpt satirizes a society where people are judged based on the color of their skin and outward appearance, not on fundamental human rights and individual dignity and character. The height of racial discrimination in society led to the formation of the Dum Dum Donut intellectuals by the narrator's father. It is an association of the segregated blacks where matters relating to them and their survival in the hostile community are discussed and the way forward suggested.

As one of the direct victims of racial discrimination and having lost his father in the system, Bonbon Me decides to start a movement against racial discrimination, although not through violence. He first began by reinstating the city of Dickens, which was removed from the American map without justification:

I brought shipload of white spray paint and a line marking machine, and before my morning chores, when the traffic was light, I'd have my ass to the designated location, set up shop in the middle of the road and paint the line... It was a sign of the ineffectualness of the Dum Dum Donut. Thank luck that no one had any idea what I was doing. Most folks who didn't know me mistook me for a performance artist or a crazy person... I'm looking for the lost city of Dickens. (106)

The situation, as portrayed in the novel, gets to the point that Dickens's fictitious neighborhood in Los Angeles, occupied by blacks, is one day wiped off the map through gentrification, which the narrator "Bonbon" attempts to put back, as could be seen in the above excerpt. One way he does this is by painting a line on the streets, outlining the city's boundaries.

Historically, African Americans have often been marginalized to the point where they do not hold prestigious careers or occupy essential positions. As seen in the novel, American society rarely has good jobs for blacks. They do most of the menial jobs like cleaning and driving as their source of income. Marpessa is the bus driver and the following encounter in the hands of the passengers are very pathetic and quite telling, "Her average workday was filled with fights, purse snatching, fare beaters, molestations, public intoxication, child

endangering, pandering, niggers constantly standing on the wrong side of the yellow line while the bus was in motion, of the occasional attempted murder.” (119)

The situation of the blacks is very pathetic in the sense that their continued existence and residence in the area means continued insult and abuse because so long as they are born blacks, they are born with hatred and humiliation. In the prevailing circumstances, Beatty draws our attention to the height of discrimination in public places. Remarkably, the narrator recounts a bitter experience at the gas station where he went to buy gas with his father. He needed to buy soft drinks at the gas station because of the hot weather. At the point of purchase, Bonbon Me decided to use the restroom but was surprised and disappointed when he was told that: “Restrooms are for customers,” he responded: “But my dad just purchased some gas.” But the seller retorted “and your father can shit here until his heart’s content” (179). In his attempt to buy a soft drink from the shop at the gas station, the attendant retorted “you on the other hand are drinking white man’s coke while his ice is colder than ours” (179). This implies that discrimination gets to the point of having a brand of Coke drink that is strictly made for whites, which makes the narrator request soda. Yet, the seller went as far as increasing the price of the drink, as revealed in the following dialogue when the narrator pointed to the row of seven-ounce sodas in the cooler:

How much?”

“Dollar fifty”.

But they’re seven cents across the street.

Buy black or piss off literally. Feeling sorry for me  
and wining on points, black Bobby Fischer, pointed  
in the distance at an old bus station (179).

The above excerpt implies that at the sight of a black in a white man’s shop, the prices of commodities change, which not only does this practice represent discrimination it points to a lack of social order in society.

Furthermore, an attempt is made to satirize a society that is myopic in terms of the plight of the people. Describing the bleak existence of the blacks in the American society, we are told that they cannot move freely on the road as they are often harassed and maltreated by the white police on the road as narrator recounts, “Between the police and the gangs, navigating the streets of any neighborhood in the L.A country, especially any section not familiar with you, can be dangerous. You just never knew where’re going to get rolled up on for being or wearing the wrong colors” (228). This development causes Bonbon Me and Hominy to attach two small purple and gold leaves permanently at the front fenders of their pickup truck in order “to get in and out with their ass intact”. Critically speaking, therefore, the novel satirizes a society that unleashes all sorts of hatred and inhumanity against the blacks. It is no wonder Dwright Garner states, “Prick the Satire in *The Sellout* and real blood emerges. The narrator’s father is shot dead by Los Angeles police officers for basically driving while black. There’s a surreal but aching scene in which the narrator drapes his father’s body over the horse he keeps on his urban farm and clops home through the street. (14)

Going by the above picture, we discover that the white government officials do not regard the blacks as humans but rather as objects that need to be phased out of society. Consequently, the narrator, who witnessed the father’s untimely death in a deliberate act, is left with no other option than to fight back against the society that has treated him with impunity, which he does through the act of segregation. Consequently, the narrator confesses: “Homing and I had managed to instill some form of segregation nearly in every section of public facility in Dickens” (228). Remarkable of such places of segregation is the school, as the narrator instructs:

Segregate the school...as soon as I said it, I realized that segregation would be the key to bringing Dickens back...Chaff Middle school had already been segregated and re segregated many times over. There is also the Wanda Coleman public library where the narrator equally segregated as he speaks “We didn’t always ask for permission; with paint and brush we changed the opening hours of the Wanda Coleman public library from “Sun – Tue: closed, Wed - sat: 10 – 5:30 to Sun – Tue: whites only, Wed-Sat: colored only. (225)

From the narrator's perspective, the development of school segregation is acceptable. As a welcomed development, it is admired by all, including Dr. Wilberforce Mingo. According to the narrator, “The director of Martin Luther “Killer” King Jr. Hospital, Dr. Wilberforce Mingo, was an old friend of my father and had given me permission to segregate the place when I explained to him... He leaned back in his chair and said that I could segregate his hospital in any way I saw fit... then we drilled a plain black and white metal placard into the middlemost concrete pillar. It read, WHITE OWNED AMBULANCE UNITS ONLY (229). The narrator and Hominy felt there was no justification to continue to swallow the white man’s injustices; therefore, total separation would be the ultimate and truest means to end discrimination.

However, Hominy once pointed out that their action may be interpreted by whites as a demonstration of insanity when he tells Bonbon, “if any white people do come through here and see this shit, they going to think what they always think, these niggers crazy and carry on about that business (230). Perceiving the nature of the environment and his actions the narrator states that “America’s nose is all up in our business and I knew eventually I was fucking going to jail”. (230) As prophetic as this might sound, the narrator was jailed as he was charged with instilling segregation in the land as well as violating civil rights in the law court. In handing down the judgment, Californian attorney general submits:

This defendant, evil genius that he is, had through his abhorrent actions managed to racially discriminate against every race all at the same time, to say nothing of his unabashed slaveholding. The state of California feels that it has more than enough evidence to prove that the defendant is an object violation of the civil rights acts of 1866, 1871, 1957, 1964 and 1968, the equal Right Act of 1963... if it were within my power I’d charge him with crimes against humanity. (265)

In appreciating the power and pathos of the novel, Matthew Reddin concludes:

It’s hard to qualify this novel which is brilliant, hallucinogenic piece of work – from any kind of experience... though a challenging read, without much of a narrative structure, the novel succeeds as a satire, for it uses the form as a means of protest... *The Sellout* is a fearless expose of an uncomfortable truth, its words and chapters will make you laugh, and then wince at your laughter. You could not ask for a more pointed, relevant and necessary satirical tone in these times of ours. (11)

### Conclusion

While the discourse on race, racism, and racial relations is a never-ending subject, Paul Beatty offered a new, holistic, and nuanced perspective to illuminate the narrative further. *The Sellout* explores racial tensions in America and highlights the apparent tendency of white people to silence the blacks in their fight and struggle against oppression, subjugation, discrimination, and man’s inhumanity. The narrator’s imprisonment symbolizes the imprisonment of the black race, identity, and justice in the white-dominated society. *The Sellout* can be described as a satire about the whites and their acclaimed superiority using humor. Beatty fires a hot literary and critical arrow into the American racial order through parody, humor, and satire to purge it of this age-long *malaise*. Bonbon’s re-establishment of slavery is a bold attempt not only to confront the status quo but to engage it head-on, especially when one considers that what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Although Bonbon knew he would be arrested and charged, he wanted to situate his name at the center of the discourse on justice and equity. Although the novel could be viewed as focusing on black-white relations, it extends beyond that to take an all-embracing stance. Thus, “This book centers race – and nobody is left unscathed. White, Black, Asian, Latino, Mexican (a nationality treated as a racial group) – the book satirizes each of these communities for the absurd ways each deals with discussions of race; actions that perpetuate racist assumptions; and the ways our racial identities (developmentally) influence our life choices and behaviors. This is not just a book about Black and White racial relations.” (Eaton).

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