DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you find this book offensive? Why or why not? What other readers might take offense at *The Sellout*? Why is Paul Beatty’s language so incendiary?

2. In his lengthy Barnes & Noble review, Stefan Beck says that *The Sellout* will "shock all of us into reexamining what we think we know about race in America." Did the book have that effect on you? Did it alter how you, personally, view black-white relations in the US?

3. What is the thematic significance (and humor) in the fact that the father of the book’s narrator dropped the double-e from his last name, resulting in the surname Me—and, thus, the title of the Supreme Court case, *Me vs. the United States*?

4. How off-putting, or difficult, did you find the first 300 pages or so of this book? Was it difficult to follow the narrative thread, to get your “fictional footing”? Why might the author have opened his book with this stylistic technique?

5. What is the purpose of instituting slavery? What does Me hope to accomplish by doing so?

6. What do you think of the white woman who utters this: "[Y]ou’re a beautiful woman who just happens to be black, and you're far too smart not to know that it isn't race that's the problem but class"? What do you think of her statement? What do you think the author thinks of it?

7. What about academia? What does Beatty think of black intellectuals and, particularly, the attempt to sanitize Twain’s classic?

   I also improved Jim’s diction, rejiggered the plotline a bit, and retitled the book *The Pejorative-Free Adventures and Intellectual and Spiritual Journeys of African-American Jim and His Young Protege, White Brother Huckleberry Finn, as They Go in Search of the Lost Black Family Unit*.

   (By the way, pay attention to the use of the word "rejiggered.")

8. What is the title’s significance? First, what is a sellout?—define it. What is being sold out...or who is being sold out...and who is doing the selling out?

*Source: http://www.litlovers.com/*
Our Thing: An Interview with Paul Beatty

May 7, 2015 | by Chris Jackson

Photo: Hannah Assouline

Paul Beatty’s recurring themes—race and tribalism, human psychology, ambition and failure, and the haunting presence of history—are the heavy ones. But he moves through them with light steps, his precisely choreographed Southern California meander broken by exuberant outbursts of buck dancing and the occasional disemboweling. His early poetry and his first novel, The White Boy Shuffle, opened up expansive new territory for writers trying to build an alternative literature, one that found its energy and idiom outside of the traditional American literary complex. But he has always belonged only to himself, unrushed and unburdened by any scene or movement.

I first encountered his work through the Nuyorican Poetry scene in the nineties. I remember feeling that wash of recognition and estrangement that
certain books conjure—I was surprised by the familiarity of the voice, and thrilled by the weird, reckless shit it was saying. Paul seemed to come from the world I knew, a world filled with outsiders and cultural polymaths but still thick with the strange incense of African American life—where Amiri Baraka was a comedian, Kurt Vonnegut was black, and Ice Cube was an arch satirist. It was life-changing to see that world animated by Paul’s particular offbeat, backtracking, culture-swallowing genius. Beatty writes laceratingly funny books that often turn on the subject of race, but more than that, his novels are flares sent up—for anyone who happens to be looking—that illuminate the persistent and irreducible feelings that rumble in our deepest places. They’re about hope and failure and loss, the absurdity of systems and the loneliness of being our own weird selves. And they’re about the beautiful consolation of seeing it, really seeing it, in all its pain and nothingness, and laughing.

Paul’s latest novel, The Sellout, comes at an interesting moment in the eternal—and eternally recycled—American “conversation on race.” The protests that have broken out across the country over police violence have had a powerful undercurrent of black humor. My Twitter feed is illustrated with wild, vivid scenes that would be right at home in a Beatty novel: Newsman Jake Tapper in Ferguson for ABC News with a protestor behind him holding up a sign: IS IT OPEN SEASON ON A NIGGA’S ASS????????; CNN reporters getting their microphones jacked midinterview by angry protestors; a (probably doctored) photo of a young black boy riding a hijacked police horse away from the scene of a riot. Years ago, Beatty identified the source of this sort of dark comedy. “African Americans,” he wrote in one of his section introductions for Hokum, “like any other Americans, are an angry people with fragile egos. Humor is vengeance. Sometimes you laugh to keep from crying. Sometimes you laugh to keep from shooting … black folk are mad at everybody, so duck, because you’re bound to be in someone’s line of fire.”

Paul and I had a long talk in front of a single cup of coffee at a café in the East Village. That wide-ranging, candid interview was cursed by the gods of Cupertino and lost forever. Paul, being a mensch, agreed to meet me again at a different East Village café, and just as he started to open up about the path of his career, we were interrupted—our quiet café hosted a comedy night. We fled to yet another café, where we had this conversation.
Has your take on the significance of race changed over the years? I’m asking because of a scene that struck me as one of the most powerful moments in the book—the narrator is at a comedy show with a black comedian on stage who berates a white couple in the crowd by saying, “This shit ain’t for you. Understand? Now get the fuck out! This is our thing!” And the narrator ruefully says, “I wish I’d stood up to the man and asked him a question: ‘So what exactly is our thing?’ ”

It’s funny—in White Boy Shuffle there’s a similar moment. I remember being in London and someone coming to me to talk about White Boy Shuffle and he says, I love the scene where Gunnar is getting ready to leave to see some white people and his black friend says, Stay black, nigger, and Gunnar asks, What the fuck does that mean? And his friend says, It means be yourself. That’s not something I agree with, but I understand why someone would take that away from the book. And it’s a very similar construction to that moment in the comedy club in The Sellout. There’s still that idea of basic self-examination—Who are you? Most people are like, Be yourself, that’s enough—but in Slumberland there’s a line where the narrator decided he’s not going to tell anyone to “be themselves,” because most times when people are themselves they act like assholes. Why would I encourage that? It’s an idea I play with and try to reshape from book to book, about our individual responsibility and culpability. There’s something in the shift from White Boy Shuffle to Slumberland to The Sellout that shows a progression, but it’s the kind of progression that I completely believe in—things change but remain the same.

Has there been a lot of evolution in the psychology of race? In the acknowledgments of The Sellout you credit William E. Cross for his essay “The Negro-to-Black Conversion Experience.”

He first wrote that piece in the seventies, though he’s revised it. This guy’s research was about, for lack of a better term, what a self-actualized black person is, or more specifically a black man—not explicitly, it just read very male, but that changes over time. As he updated it over the years, it evolved. It became less tied to gender, less tied to a nationalist sense of black consciousness. It became a little more accepting of other ways of thinking, other ways of seeing the world. It’s really interesting that as the zeitgeist
around blackness, around race, changed, his idea of this general racial identity changed, too—the essay became weirdly less about race as he adjusted it. It’s really interesting to think about the progress he made in doing this. It probably parallels the way black writers have portrayed themselves and the community over time.

Do you think white writers write about race in the same way that black writers do?

I think they do. Maybe not explicitly. I’m trying to think of a book—but almost anything will do, really—think of whatever’s number fifteen on the best-seller list now, written by a white writer. It has nothing to do with blackness or Asianness or Latinoness, or whatever. I think that’s as much a comment on race as anything else, whether the writer realizes it or not. And the problem is we don’t think about it like that. We just think they’re writing about the common experience, we think it’s just the way the world is.

And the white writers themselves are not self-aware.

They don’t have to be. It doesn’t matter. I realize it. I could be wrong. But this is a lesson I learned a long time ago, in M.F.A. school as a matter of fact. Ginsberg was absent once and Gregory Corso came in. We read our poems—it was me and this poet named Karen, a really good poet, and another poet, Pamela Hughes. And the three of us read our things, and Corso got so mad, he just didn’t know how to process what we were doing. Because it wasn’t about shit that he cared about. He kept saying, Where’s your universality? I’d never heard anyone argue that out loud before. I was like, Oh, this motherfucker thinks his is the only way to see the world. And I realized that’s as much about race as anything. I have a terrible habit of listening to sports radio for the half hour I’m in my car. And again, 80 percent of what they’re talking about is about race in some way—what they talk about, how they talk about it, who they talk about, the language they use when talking about certain players, the words they don’t use. It’s about race, it’s about being white. They don’t know it, and it’s easy to argue that it’s not. But it is.

It’s so interesting that Corso’s response was anger.

He was so pissed. And we got pissed at him, too. But it was a good thing to learn, about distinctions in how people see things, why people see certain
things. I’ve never mapped this out or written a paper about it—but in a strange way it’s similar to how people see plot. I think plot is very subjective. If a book’s about something you care about it, it doesn’t matter what tangents it goes on; as a reader you’re tied into it in a way that feels like plot, that feels like structure. But if the book is about things that are really, really tangential to how you read, or the things that are in your world, your reaction might be, Oh, there’s no plot here.

But then there’s another way of looking at it. I remember running into Greg Tate one day, and we were talking about something, just meandering all over the place, and he said, Well, you know niggers can’t stay on the subject anyway. And I was like, Oh, it’s a whole cultural thing now. I don’t necessarily agree with that. But for him, maybe, it’s just how we do.

I’ve always loved the sentences in your work, but also the accumulation of sentences—you go through these riffs that feel like they’re very controlled, like the construction of a joke, almost. Do you do a lot of revision to achieve this effect?

All the time. From word to word. It’s all fucking revision. I’m always going back. I’ll start by writing however many pages feel right, say five pages. And then I go back to the top of those five pages and write my way back down. I don’t go forward until I’m really satisfied with that block. It takes a long time. And even after that, I go back and redo the whole block again just to make sure it’s tighter and tighter. So eventually I got to more or less the first draft of the whole thing, which took a while. Then I just thought about it for a long time and didn’t do any work on the page for six months, which is when I met with Colin Dickerman, my editor, and he had some good things to suggest. At that point it was tight enough that I could go back and rip it apart and improve it without losing anything. I could take big-ass chunks out, and still think to myself, Yeah, it’s still working. There were some obvious things I knew he would say.

That’s a really good question. I don’t know. He probably did, but I couldn’t say that for a fact.

When you were younger, you read Heller and Vonnegut, and you’ve said they had a strong influence on you. Someone like Vonnegut I always thought was gentle as a satirist and also a humanist—there
was something affirming but something also vicious about Vonnegut. Then there’s Chester Himes, whom I loved because he confirmed what I believed, which was that nothing really mattered, just layers of absurdity piled on each other, stacked up. Do you think you write in that tradition at all?

I think you could easily put me there. I’m not attempting to. But you could put me in that lane and I wouldn’t complain that much.

**Do you think of yourself as a writer of satire?**

No, not at all. In my head it would limit what I could do, how I could write about something. I’m just writing. Some of it’s funny. I’m surprised that everybody keeps calling this a comic novel. I mean, I get it. But it’s an easy way not to talk about anything else. I would better understand it if they talked about it in a hyphenated way, to talk about it as a tragicomic novel, even. There’s comedy in the book, but there’s a bunch of other stuff in there, too. It’s easy just to hide behind the humor, and then you don’t have to talk about anything else. But I definitely don’t think of myself as a satirist. I mean, what is satire? Do you remember that *New Yorker* cover that everyone was saying was satire? Barack and Michelle fist-bumping? That’s not satire to me. It was just a commentary. Just poking fun at somebody doesn’t make something satire. It’s a word everyone throws around a lot. I’m not sure how I define it.

**Do you write with some kind of reader in mind? Do you feel like you’re addressing your reader’s ideas about something, subverting or upending some preconceived idea?**

I guess I am. I don’t think about it while I’m writing. I was talking to a friend and she said, Your audience is just a bunch of weirdos. But she meant it in a very positive way. There’s a special kind of weirdo who’s going to appreciate it. At least, I think that’s what she was saying.

I’ve always felt that—and this is my own narcissism—I *am* actually your target audience. But I don’t feel pandered to.

Because you’re black, the age you are, the world you travel in, the circles you travel in. There was something someone told me a long time ago and it fucked
me up for a long time. I was reading a poem, and this woman says, It must be really hard to be you. And I was like, What, why, what are you talking about? And she says, Because everybody, no matter who they are, they only get half of your jokes. And I was like, Oh no, don’t say that! That just messed me up. But I understood exactly what she was saying, and then I just had to let it go.

In the recent Toni Morrison profile in the New York Times, Morrison commented that she’s interested in writing without the “white gaze,” without any outside pressure about what her books should be or how they should feel. Do you ever feel any pressure around your writing? For example, do you ever feel any sense that you need to have a more familiar structure to your novels?

No, no, no. It’s almost like how a black sitcom will have a completely useless white character, or a white sitcom will have a completely useless black character, to ground the audiences in something, to make sure that in that weird panorama, the viewer is like, Oh, here’s where I fit in. I don’t think I do that at all. I never even talk about it. I’ve been having all these conversations about contemporary books, and what’s so weird is that these books are structured for a certain target audience—mostly white liberal intellectuals, who respond really positively to them. But the books are written for them! Which is absolutely okay. No one talks about that. It’s just like, Oh, all right, that’s fine. And those books get a certain kind of attention. I’ll see it and think, That feels like pandering—but that’s just who these people want to talk to, which is absolutely fine. I hope I’m not doing that. I don’t think I’m doing that.

I don’t know if I consciously think I don’t want that white gaze, although I know what you mean. I hope that in my audience of weirdos, there’s some of those people of all races. As people of color, as black people, we all have to have this ability to speak these different languages and make these different references—we don’t have to have it, but it helps. So for me, it’s still all in one big thing, and these cultures overlap more than they ever have. You know, in the 1970s people wanted this “authentic angry” stuff that was still directed at them but in a weird I-want-to-slit-your-throat way. I’m not saying those people aren’t a part of my audience. I’m just yelling. I know their ears will hear. But I’m hoping there are a ton of ears out there that hear. I’m trying not to yell in one direction, even though I can’t really help but to do that.
We’ve talked before about how some writers don’t go to a place where they put themselves at risk. Do you put yourself into positions where you feel some kind of fear or true risk as you’re writing?

Yeah, I try to a little bit. Part of that fear just comes from criticizing shit that I really like, that I really respect on some level—like when I criticize the Civil Rights Movement. Not criticizing, but teasing and parsing out certain aspects of it. I mean, how can you not have respect for the Civil Rights Movement? So there’s a risk in that. There’s the risk of exposing shit about myself that I don’t want anybody to know, but at the same time I have to try to do that. Sometimes the humor is a way to mask all that, so the reader won’t know that what I’m writing about is me, or figure out what side of the argument I stand on. Then there’s a risk in just trying to say what you mean to say. And not, as we were talking about, to not speak toward this target group that I know, if I want to, I can please on a certain level and tell them the shit they want to hear. I think I could do that if I wanted to, but I also know that I can’t do that. I’ve learned that I can’t do that. Writing is a risk no matter what. I don’t think there’s the risk that I’ll drive myself crazy—I’m not going to do a Sylvia Plath. But that’s the subtext of a lot that I write about. There’s a lot of suicide in my work, for instance. These are things that are really personal to me in a real way.

You do talk about death and loss in your work—and for a comic novel, there’s a strong elegiac quality to *The Sellout*. There’s always some kind of utopia that briefly forms in the mind of your characters in some way. Some kind of heroic mission or utopic possibility that disappears, that falls just out of reach. Sometimes I feel like the humor is a way of dealing with those things—loss and failure. Even the idea that nothing ever changes is a suggestion of that existential absurdity we talked about.

I feel like I saw some documentary recently where they were talking about exactly this. How people deal with failure. You never have classes about how to deal with this shit. I remember being in college and my friends were talking about the old hard-work trope, you know—you work hard and your dreams will come true. And my friend said, My dad’s a janitor from Nashville, and he’s worked hard his whole fucking life and none of his dreams have come true. The thing I want is just to write. And hard work goes into all of it. But there
are no guarantees. I’ve had the good fortune to have come of age when I did. Writing is a way I can go back and think about what came before. Like in the book where I have Martin Luther King saying, Man, if only I’d tasted how nasty the fucking ice tea was at those segregated lunch counters, I never would’ve started this thing. It comes back to this question—is it worth it? Most people think that it’s been worth it—I mean, obviously it has—but we don’t know how to measure that, still. And we can’t measure it in terms of the kind of guilt we have—some kind of survivor’s guilt.

The same questions and problems continue to manifest themselves. I remember reading some Aristophanes play where the narrator is basically saying that the other playwrights who are so popular—the shit that’s getting all the acclaim—is just worthless commercial stuff. So even that idea is old—I’m real, they’re not real. That flipped me out, but it was also really soothing. All this angst, all this stuff we all feel, is just tied to making art. It’s so ancient. These discussions we’re having, people have been having them for a long time. Not that the work hasn’t changed—of course it has—but these fundamental things are the same. We’re still just humans creating.

Chris Jackson is executive editor at Spiegel & Grau.

Source: http://www.theparisreview.org/
Review: ‘The Sellout,’ Paul Beatty’s Biting Satire on Race in America

By DWIGHT GARNE FEB. 26, 2015

Paul Beatty is the author of four novels and two books of poetry, all of them worthwhile. But the book of his that I return to most is one he edited. It’s called “Hokum: An Anthology of African-American Humor” (2006).

In his introduction to “Hokum,” Mr. Beatty speaks about reading the canonical black writers as a young man and “welcoming the rhetoric but over time missing the black bon mot, the snap, the bag, the whimsy upon which” — I am working around a perfectly detonated vulgarity here — both righteous anger and freedom take flight. “It was as if the black writers I’d read,” he declared, “didn’t have any friends.”

Mr. Beatty ended his introduction by making a kind of promise, one his anthology kept. “I hope ‘Hokum’ beats you down like an outclassed club fighter,” he wrote. “Each blow plastering that beaten boxer smile on your face, that ear-to-ear grin you flash to the crowd to convince them that if you’re laughing, then you ain’t hurt.”

Mr. Beatty’s introduction was audacious on many levels, one of them being that he writes funny himself. His declarations in “Hokum” can’t help but read, in part, like Babe Ruth pointing to the bleachers in anticipation of pounding a ball straight out there. They read like the declarations of a man intent on standing, chuckling and delivering.

Deliver Mr. Beatty has. The first 100 pages of his new novel, “The Sellout,” are the most caustic and the most badass first 100 pages of an American novel I’ve read in at least a decade. I gave up underlining the killer bits because my arm began to hurt.

“Badass” is not the most precise critical term. What I mean is that the first third of “The Sellout” reads like the most concussive monologues and interviews of Chris Rock, Richard Pryor and Dave Chappelle wrapped in a satirical yet surprisingly delicate literary and historical sensibility.

Mr. Beatty impastos every line, in ways that recall writers like Ishmael Reed, with shifting densities of racial and political meaning. The jokes come up through your spleen.

So much happens in “The Sellout” that describing it is like trying to shove a lemon tree into a shot glass. It’s also hard to describe without quoting the nimble ways Mr. Beatty deals out the N-word. This novel’s best lines, the ones that either puncture or tattoo your heart, are mostly not quotable here.

Most basically “The Sellout” is about a young black man born in the “agrarian ghetto” of Dickens, a neighborhood on the southern outskirts of Los Angeles, who becomes an artisanal watermelon and weed dealer. One of the finer pot strains he develops is called Anglophobia.

He ends up before the Supreme Court because he is — wait for it — reinstating slavery, at least in his own house, and segregating the local middle school, boxing whites out. His sidekick and
erstwhile chattel is an old man named Hominy, the last surviving Little Rascal. Hominy says
things like, “You know, massa, Bugs Bunny wasn’t nothing but Br’er Rabbit with a better agent.”

Broad satirical vistas are not so hard for a novelist to sketch. What’s hard is the close-up work, the
bolt-by-bolt driving home of your thoughts and your sensibility. This is where Mr. Beatty shines.

“Like most black males raised in Los Angeles, I’m bilingual only to the extent that I can sexually
harass women of all ethnicities in their native languages,” our narrator deposes. He’s bluffling,
mostly.

He’s a sensitive soul, attuned to the way the sunlight floods over his girlfriend, “turning the edges
of her frizzy undone hair into a flaming corona of split ends and shame.” His favorite color is “the
soft light-blue of a pool lit up at night.”

The son of a single father, who is a maniacal social scientist (the narrator’s absent mother was
once “beauty of the week” in Jet magazine), he had a weird childhood. His allowance was called
restitution. He was the subject of odd experiments.

“When I was seven months,” he tells us, “Pops placed objects like toy police cars, cold cans of
Pabst Blue Ribbon, Richard Nixon campaign buttons, and a copy of The Economist in my
bassinet, but instead of conditioning me with a deafening clang, I learned to be afraid of the
presented stimuli because they were accompanied by him taking out the family .38 Special and
firing several window-rattling rounds into the ceiling, while shouting, ‘Nigger, go back to Africa!’
loud enough to make himself heard over the quadraphonic console stereo blasting ‘Sweet Home
Alabama’ in the living room.”

His dad takes him to the regular meetings of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals, held in a local
doughnut shop, meetings that are a gift to an author primed to send up the pretensions of some
black intellectuals. His dad never does get around to writing the best-selling memoir he hopes to
write, which he considered calling “I’m Ai’ight. You’re Ai’ight.”

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 streets, a pageant I’d love to see filmed by Charles Burnett.

Almost the entirety of black American culture and stereotypes are carved up under this novel’s
microscope: Tiger Woods, Clarence Thomas (given a memorable line), Oreo cookies, fairy tales
(“Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your weave!”), Bill Cosby, cotton picking, penis size, Saturday
morning cartoons, George Washington Carver, lawn jockeys, Mike Tyson. The “do-gooder
condescension” of Dave Eggers comes in for a hazing. The American liberal agenda is folded into
origami.

A bowdlerized version of “Middlemarch” for black students is retitled, “Middlemarch Middle of
April, I’ll Have Your Money — I Swear.” A television crew asks a rioter if the looting and madness
will change anything. The response, when it arrives: “Well, I’m on TV, ain’t I, bitch?”
The riffs don’t stop coming in this landmark and deeply aware comic novel. About Stevie Wonder, the narrator says his Latin motto should be, “Cogito, ergo Boogieum. I think, therefore I jam.” Ditto this book.

“The Sellout,” I am sad to say, falls into a holding pattern in its final two-thirds. Mr. Beatty still writes vividly, and you’re already up there at 30,000 feet. But the sense of upward thrust is mostly absent.

Yet this slashing novel puts you down in a place that’s miles from where it picked you up. It suggests, as the narrator’s father tells him one night, half-wasted on Scotch whisky, “The real question is not where do ideas come from but where do they go.” That’s not hokum at all.

Source: http://www.nytimes.com/