

Segregated comfort

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Paul Beatty

THE SELLOUT

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Last year in St Louis, during a fiery speech by the president of the NAACP Cornell William Brooks, a group of black agitators in their early twenties stood up before a gathering of older Civil Rights figures. Accusing their leaders of standing by while they dodged rubber bullets and tear gas canisters, the protesters demanded, and received, a chance to speak. “This ain’t your grandparents’ Civil Rights movement”, a young St Louis rapper named Tef Poe exhorted them. “Get off your ass and join us!”

Paul Beatty may be a few years older than Poe, but with his well-timed and audacious novel, he has written a book-length version of Poe’s generational *cri di coeur*. In both form and page-upon-page of hilarious content, *The Sellout* lays to rest rational narratives of any comfortable “post-racial” America.

Beatty stakes out a fractured universe that would be merely cartoonish if it did not contain so many whispers of the real. The story opens with its pot-smoking narrator, whose last name is Me – and who is variously nicknamed “Bonbon”, “Massa” and “Sellout” – before the Supreme Court bench, hands cuffed and crossed behind his back. From a marijuana haze, he assures us that his crimes are graver than we might expect:

This may be hard to believe, coming from a black man, but I’ve never stolen anything. Never cheated on my taxes or at cards . . . I’ve never burgled a house. Held up a liquor store.

What Me has done is violate the Constitution’s Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments by instituting slavery and segregation. In a quixotic bid to recover his lost hometown of Dickens, an “agrarian ghetto” gentrified off the Los Angeles map, Me has revived the two deadliest sins of American history.

Me’s programme to keep whites out of the public transport and education systems in Dickens has met with unexpected success. Me deploys separatism as a tool because he recognizes that integration, in America, is often used as “a cover-up”. As Me mockingly puts it, “I’m not a racist. My prom date, my second cousin, my president is black (or whatever)”. Me’s social engineering eventually prompts a panic-stricken reaction. The vastly improved test scores of black children in Dickens’s newly segregated Chaff middle school draw the smug ire of one national magazine:

. . . the secret was out. *The New-ish Republic Magazine*, which hadn’t had a child on its cover since the Lindbergh baby, broke the story: Above the caption “The New Jim Crow: Has Public Education Clipped The Wings of the White Child?” was a twelve-year-old white boy, posed as the pint-sized symbol of reverse racism.

Like the novel itself, which is both riotously experimental and touching, both erudite (it alludes, often jeeringly, to

everyone from Tennyson and Mark Twain to Toni Morrison and Jean-Michel Basquiat) and viscerally engaging, Me inhabits a state of crushing bifurcations. Raised by his radical academic single father, who made Me the subject of a series of race-related psychological experiments, Me is an alien to his own community while sharing the same “shitty upbringing” in south Los Angeles “that I’ll never be able to live down”. When his father is gunned down by police in a ludicrous “accident”, his first reaction is disbelief: “I didn’t cry. I thought his death was a trick. Another one of his elaborate schemes to educate me on the plight of the black race and to inspire me to make something of myself . . .”.

There lingers throughout *The Sellout* a fatalism, an expectation that “like all lower-middle-class Californians, I’d die in the same bedroom I’d grown up in, looking up in the cracks in the stucco ceiling that have been there since the ’68 quake”. While the narrator of *The Sellout* possesses a home-school education and the dreams of his father, he has little else, save his wit. And there’s no money. His father’s memoir that he said would one day secure “an easy twenty thousand up front” never materializes.

Rather than tightly woven plots, Beatty fashions a rough-hewn narrative scaffolding. From that vantage point, the greater part of the novel is a loosely corralled series of routines, to echo William Burroughs’s word for the “fragmentary” vignettes that comprise *Naked Lunch*, a book that shares with *The Sellout* a no-holds-barred sense of sacred mission and endless playfulness.

Exceptional comic writing makes the skeletal plotting work. Similar in spirit and form to the iconoclastic stand-up of Bill Hicks or the early storytelling of Chris Rock, the routines allow you to dip in almost anywhere and reap rewards. The author of two books of poetry and two well-regarded novels in a peripatetic career reaching back to the early 1990s, Beatty is especially acute when pointing at literary culture. As Me puts it during one of his local “Dum Dum Donuts” book club discussions:

I’m so fucking tired of black women always being described by their skin tones! Honey-colored this! Dark-chocolate that! My paternal grandmother was mocha-tinged, café-au-lait, graham-fucking-cracker brown! How come they never describe white characters in relation to foodstuff and hot liquids?

Terms such as “bitter”, “caustic”, “biting”, “acerbic”, and anything in the “corrosive” line always have a way of reducing satire to something that sounds more like a toxic dump or a bathroom cleaner than literature. Beatty’s inspiring new novel about the impossibility of “post-racial” anything in America is much more than “scathing” – it is constructive.