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THE SELLOUT by PAUL BEATTY:
“UNMITIGATED BLACKNESS” IN OBAMA’S AMERICA

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May 2001

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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DEDICATION

To my wife and daughters, to my readers, and to the Andrews Foundation –

Thank you for your patience, perseverance, and support.

It's time to tie this project off, however incomplete.

THE SELLOUT:

“UNMITIGATED BLACKNESS” IN THE OBAMA ERA

JOHN E. DAVIES

ABSTRACT

Visibility and invisibility are long-standing tropes in the African-American literary tradition. Frequently they are presented in satiric language. I argue that Paul Beatty’s Mann Booker Award-winning novel *The Sellout* now holds an important role in this tradition. Specifically, *The Sellout* hearkens specifically to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and to Paul Beatty’s earlier novel *The White Boy Shuffle*. Further, *The Sellout* exposes the ongoing presence and function of racism in an America that has elected its first African-American president, Barack Obama, and that now claims to be “post-racial,” even as its spectral reproduction and commodification of blackness persist. By analyzing the four primary male characters, I show that the novel concludes that America is not yet ready for true multicultural heterogeneity because neither white America nor black America has truly reconciled itself with America’s historical and continuing racism, and I show that the novel’s solution is an anti-racist philosophy of “Unmitigated Blackness.”

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: TRAGICOMEDY AND SATIRE

Paul Beatty's fourth novel, *The Sellout*, enters the American literary and cultural discourses at an opportune moment. The novel firmly, trenchantly, and satirically confronts issues of race and racism at a time when some Americans imagined the country to be "post-racial," despite recent American history has demonstrated a fundamental and ongoing contradiction in the nation's arc towards racial justice. At the time of Barack Obama's election, one white political commentator quickly cried, "Obama is not black, and he is not white. And that is the true meaning of post-racial" (Hoagland). Yet much of white America did not accept the man, even as they praised post-racialism, and Donald Trump has since become "The First White President" and "the negation of Barack Obama's legacy" (Coates 2017). Race and racism are very much topics of the moment.

Thus, Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* makes a vigorous intervention into debates about the presence and future of racism in America. It does so as a literary text whose cultural politics are ever liminal. As a literary text, it builds upon the satiric tradition in which Beatty has operated since his first novel, *The White Boy Shuffle*, and it recalls the tropes

and concerns of *Invisible Man*. As a cultural and political production, it engages further with the legacy of nonfiction writing from Ralph Ellison and it confronts the naïve post-Civil Rights assumptions of an insouciant “New Black Aesthetic” and a putative post-racialism. As a plot-driven novel, *The Sellout* relays the adventure of an unnamed protagonist to put his hometown Dickens back on the map; this adventure ultimately lands him in front of the Supreme Court of the United States because he dares to “whisper ‘Racism’ in a post-racial world” by way of his irreverent and satirical abuse of the Civil Rights Act (262). Beyond its mere plot, *The Sellout* contributes to a racial counterdiscourse that resists the intractable nature of white racism in America.

In many ways *The Sellout* updates Beatty’s concerns about race and racism that he published in his first novel, *The White Boy Shuffle (TWBS)*. Many critics focus on the “commodified blackness” in that novel, and *The Sellout* will confront the inherent erasure of black identity that results from that commodification. For Murray (2008) the focus in *TWBS* is on the simulation of blackness in the wake of so many forms of cultural appropriation and media representation. The cumulative inauthenticity of these simulations is what leaves the post-Civil Rights African-American community in a leaderless and self-defeating position. Notably, “the tense interplay between simulation and communal identity” leaves individual characters in agitated states of alienation (223), while readers “cannot read these texts exclusively as indexes of a crisis in belonging, for they begin with the premise that whatever made older forms of communion possible now only exists as a spectral reproduction” (231). Kalich (2009) also examines the text’s concerns with the commodification of black popular culture, and she ultimately notes that Gunnar, the protagonist of *TWBS*, is himself representative of the “contradiction”

inherent in the text itself. For Gunnar, this contradiction is especially evident because he is “happily alienated and yet longing to fit in,” while for the text as a whole this contradiction is manifest in its “cynical hopefulness” (86). However, Schmidt (2014) adds another layer of analysis to these concerns about commodified blackness. In this reading, the novel “dissimulate[s] blackness and satirically play[s] with the visible/invisible nature of it” (152). The commodification of blackness distorts its authenticity, and here the concealment of blackness suggests the illusory nature of black identity in contemporary America. These critics all point to the individual character crises that emerge in the wake of the commodification of black culture.

Meanwhile other critics of *TWBS* focus on its satirical treatment of contemporary black politics, and *The Sellout*, as its name alone suggests, will produce a similar critique. Leader-Picone (2014) suggests that *TWBS* criticizes the political inactivity of the contemporary black community as that community waits idly for another great civil rights leader. The novel’s ambiguous ending is therefore an instantiation of this theme because it “denies the reader a prescriptive fiction” (149). Where the cultural reading of Kalich (2009) identifies a “contradiction” in this text and its ending because of the mixed messages of the protagonist’s ontology, the political reading of Leader-Picone (2014) argues that these contradictions emphasize “the gap between the idealistic desire for racial unity and the complexity of the contemporary African American experience” (149). This argument circles back to the claim of Murray (2008) that this novel forfeits the “utopian potential of revolt” in light of “the absoluteness of the system’s dominance” (230). These more political readings agree that Beatty’s first novel is ultimately defeatist.

Beatty's intentions with *The Sellout* are equally complicated and satirical as his intentions with *TWBS*, yet they are also more didactic and illuminating. *The Sellout* seeks to redeem contradictoriness in principle, and it more clearly inflames black political consciousness. The novel accomplishes both by wading into the trope of (in)visibility. Where Jordan (2002) laments "the indeterminate meaning" and "absen[ce] of heroes" in novels like *TWBS*, Murray (2008) then calls for a greater analysis of "the flotation of signifiers conjuring newly spectral forms of blackness" (218). *The Sellout* seeks to make those "spectral forms of blackness" more concrete and visible, and it does so by utilizing the effaced histories of segregation, Hollywood minstrelsy, and slavery.

Of course, the trope of (in)visibility conjures the work of Ralph Ellison and his novel *Invisible Man*. Criticism of that novel has long argued that "the novel ... giv[es] abstract themes and ideas a concreteness which indicates that they can only be valid if felt as part of an experience which has been lived through" (Stepo 77); *The Sellout* reveals the living histories of discriminations that are all-too-often imagined as theoretical pasts. In *Invisible Man*, masks conceal reality, and the strategy of the novel "is the progressive disillusionment" of the invisible man through "the removal of another mask" and another mask and another (Schaub 145); in *The Sellout* the "progressive disillusionment" is of the townsfolk of Dickens. This same reading argues that masks are inevitable and necessary despite their inherent contradiction and ambiguity, but the important revelation in Ellison's novel is that "One may choose the mask by which he makes his way in the world and thus participate in constituting his reality, or one may accept the mask he is given, in which case his strings are being pulled by a power that remains hidden" (Schaub 146-147); *The Sellout* foregrounds that same inevitability of

contradiction and it activates the agency of its characters to determine their own reality. Both novels reveal the machinations of racism in their respective worlds, and both cope with the fallout of that racism.

Further, critical conversations have long emphasized the “tragicomic sensibility” of Ellison’s novel (Bone 8), and this tragicomic sensibility is ever-present in *The Sellout*’s satiric manipulation of racial injustice. Critics note that Ellison himself idolized blues music as “an impulse to keep the painful details of a personal catastrophe alive in one’s consciousness and to transcend it by squeezing from it a near-tragic, a near-comic lyricism” (Schor 222). Beatty’s satire strums similar melodies. Yet Lyne (1992) argues that in various scenes *Invisible Man* “show[s] the underside of the blues, the limits of signifying” and that “The paradox of suffering may produce a fertile artistic environment ... but it does not remove the suffering or destroy many institutional and economic barriers” (193). Here is a convention where *The Sellout* not only nods to its intergenerational totem but also revises that mark, for *The Sellout* more bluntly claims that the simple recognition of those “institutional and economic barriers” is enough to enliven the community and restore its individuals. In fact, *The Sellout* attempts psychic change on a much broader scale than *Invisible Man*: where only the individual character IM achieves an “ultimate understanding of his identity as a link in the chain of tradition, as a member of the collectivity, and as an individual” (Schor 218), the entire community of Dickens benefits from a comparable enlightenment. While Ellison’s devotion to the “tragicomic sensibility” of the blues underwrites much of the subtle irony and individual redemption of *Invisible Man*, Beatty’s utilization of the same launches the satiric iconoclasm and communal resurrection of *The Sellout*.

Because the text of *The Sellout* reveals Beatty's hyper-awareness of the African-American literary tradition, it engages also with the nonfiction writing of Ellison. This engagement is liminal in its ideological discourse. Allen (2004) connects Ellison the man to the critical conversation about "tragicomic sensibilities" by noting that "As far as Ellison is concerned, laughter and irony, and not merely forgiveness, enable citizens satisfactorily to assimilate the political imposition of losses and sacrifices" (50). Yet Ellison's own words are even more relevant. In "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ellison argues that "The white American has charged the Negro American with being without past or tradition" (54), a sentiment that Beatty identifies as a core problem for the characters in his fourth novel. In "The World and the Jug," Ellison considers what it means to be an African American. He argues first that "American Negro life" is a "discipline" (112); second that "Being a Negro American has to do with the memory of slavery and the hope of emancipation and the betrayal by allies and the revenge and contempt inflicted by our former masters after the Reconstruction, and the myths ... which are propagated in justification of that betrayal" (131); and third that "being a Negro American involves a *willed* ... affirmation of self as against all outside pressures – an identification with the group" that will not end until "social and political justice" is achieved (132). All three of these definitions find purchase in *The Sellout*: through the lead of the actor Hominy; through the conspicuous reincarnation of segregation; and through the reformation of Dickens as a marginalized community. Ellison's writings come before the Civil Rights Act, which would seem a watershed moment in African-American history, and Beatty's text comes after the election of the first African-American president. Their shared concern with black identity and its reliance on a shared

cultural past signifies, however, how little institutional racism has been changed by legal revision and selective ascension.

While critics of Beatty's first novel have argued that it is a defeatist reading of the contradiction inherent in contemporary African-American identity, I contend that *The Sellout* seeks to make those "spectral forms of blackness" more concrete and visible, and it does so by utilizing the effaced histories of segregation, Hollywood minstrelsy, and slavery. My methodology for interpreting *The Sellout* is to read the novel alongside *Invisible Man* and Beatty's first novel *The White Boy Shuffle*, showing how Beatty revises and expands the African-American satirical tradition in deliberately self-conscious ways. Where *TWBS* ends in an unfulfilling and self-defeating contradiction, *The Sellout* affirms the importance of contradiction and designates that, ironically, only the acceptance of contradiction provides a clear path forward. Where *Invisible Man* confronts the invisibility of the African-American individual in a world of conspicuous racism, *The Sellout* confronts the invisibility of racism in the world of highly conspicuous individuals, and where *Invisible Man* achieves enlightenment only for its protagonist, *The Sellout* seeks enlightenment for the broader group. Lastly, where Ellison trades in the tragicomic and ponders the identifying characteristics of black America in the pre-Civil Rights era, Beatty maximizes the satire and modernizes those same characteristics. Thus, though satirical, *The Sellout* is resurrecting the importance of African-American group identity in the current political zeitgeist as a means for individual and collective self-affirmation.

The following chapters of this thesis will more closely examine those key elements of the text that engage with the resurrection, revision, and redemption of black identity in the 21st century – all while utilizing satiric voicing. Chapter Two will examine

the importance of Dickens as a setting for this novel: both as a literary chronotope and as a political “safe house.” Chapter Three will examine the influence of the narrator’s father on his life, especially as it provides the foundation for the narrator’s revelatory philosophy of “Unmitigated Blackness.” Chapter Four will analyze the psychological downfall of the narrator’s antagonist, Foy Cheshire, as the role of a 1990’s-style “Race Man” is now counterproductive to the racial discourse of the post-Obama era. Chapter Five will visit the role of Hominy Jenkins, mentor and erstwhile slave of the protagonist, who existentially rebukes the effacement of black identity. Lastly, Chapter Six examines the protagonist himself, a character whose self-deprecation and keen awareness of psychological politics make him the timely guerilla warrior of this subversive and satirical anti-racist strategy.

CHAPTER II

DICKENS:

“Don’t no niggers name Dickens live here, so don’t be calling here no more!” (58)

Dickens “aka the Last Bastion of Blackness” (150), a fictional suburb of Los Angeles, is the setting for *The Sellout* and cause for its crisis. Here, in proximity to the epicenter of spectral reproduction, the novel sorts through its concerns about contradiction, (in)visibility, and communal identity. The treatment of Dickens – a town whose name invokes both the devil and Charles, the author and social reformer – reveals that the town is a chronotope, a term by literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin that refers to a place where time and space are narratively “thickened” for political dialogics. The political dialogics embodied in Dickens are sensitive to the post-Obama era, a time when the dominant white discourse in America attempts to efface its racist history and practices under the guise of an alleged post-racialism, and a time when black-friendly discourse debates the ongoing merits of its political agitation. Thus, “Dickens’s evanesce” (66) or dissolution is not an act of urban reconciliation but is instead a gesture of racist revisionism. For whites, formerly undesired plots have newfound value, thus relocating

blacks from formerly redlined neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the restoration and re-inscription of Dickens by the protagonist are moves to re-establish it as a “safe house” of unassimilated, non-white identity.

Although this narrative treatment in *The Sellout* of racism in Dickens is different from those treatments of black space and setting in *Invisible Man* and *The White Boy Shuffle*, those literary precursors identify how powerfully impactful is the segregation and disenfranchisement of setting for the black community. In Ellison’s novel, the titular character IM routinely operates in spaces that are either segregated expressly for African Americans or integrated uneasily and strategically by whites in power. In the battle royal of his hometown, the young African American boys are exploited and literally commodified in a white space. At university, the African American characters participate in the politics of respectability while they deny their own “pride and dignity” (Ellison 145); meanwhile they shun the behaviors of their neighbors in the Trueblood household and the Golden Day. In New York City, African American characters wield nominal influence in the basements of factories, participate symbolically but impotently in political operations, or signify segregation in cloistered neighborhoods. Meanwhile, in Beatty’s first novel, Gunnar Kaufman’s family first hides in the white suburbia outside of Los Angeles, relocates to the African-American enclave in Hillside, transfers to the “multicultural” El Campesino Real High, and finds further racial dissatisfaction in Boston. Nowhere does Gunnar find peace for his African-American subjectivity. All told, in both of these earlier texts, the settings deliberately and conspicuously engage racial segregation, tokenism, or manipulation.

For the setting Dickens, meanwhile, race disappears into the grand narrative of liberalism. Dickens has long been an African-American suburb, but it has become substantially less African-American over time and, in the rising action of the plot, it has been subsumed by greater Los Angeles in the city's latest round of gentrification, "part of a blatant conspiracy by the surrounding, increasingly affluent, two-car-garage communities to keep their property values up and blood pressures down" (57). Like the commodification of blackness in general by the dominant discourse, this is not an act of multicultural inclusion but of economic avarice. White America is geographically appropriating black space because it is now profitable to do so, much as it has culturally appropriated African-American culture for commercial gain. Thus, for the eponymous and anonymous narrator of *The Sellout* – to whom I shall refer as TS – the disappearance of Dickens constitutes an assault on black identity in general.

Thus the satirical narrative of *The Sellout* is nominally about the restoration of Dickens and significantly about the revival of black communal identity in the post-Obama era. TS is a native of Dickens whose father was a black nationalist and psychology professor; thus, TS has the necessary black-positive foundation with which to resist the assimilative tactics of the dominant discourse. However, TS's initial ambition has been only to return to Dickens to operate his father's urban farm. Upon his father's untimely death, TS assumes his father's activity of "nigger whispering" to keep his neighbors from fully succumbing to the untoward neuroses that arise from the contradiction of being marginalized African Americans in the allegedly post-racial era of Obama's presidency. These interventions reach a fever pitch when the town of Dickens is de-incorporated. TS reconnects with Hominy Jenkins, a former childhood Hollywood

actor who wants to reclaim the status and identity of his racially-charged childhood roles. Together they work to re-inscribe, first, the defining borders of Dickens and, second, the demonstrably racist practices that define the black community both historically and currently. Their work draws the ire of Foy Cheshire, an opportunistic race man, and the American legal system. TS ultimately arrives before the Supreme Court in a hearing to consider the legality of racist actions by a black man against the black community that nonetheless result in the improved community outcomes that Civil Rights legislation nominally desired but effectively failed to achieve. His efforts are validated, however, when Dickens is once again recognized on the televised weather forecast. As a whole, then, the novel satirically confronts the enduring legacy and practice of racism, especially as they are practiced in the cultural moments following the election of President Obama, and the complications that arise therefrom both within and without both the collective black community and those specific black settings like Dickens.

The plight of Dickens is important because it emphasizes the contradictory nature of the current state of African-American identity. Despite the culmination, in the election of Barack Obama, of the half-century that has passed since the Civil Rights Act, this presidency has actually raised the bar on what Edwards (2012) calls the “contradiction for black political and cultural imaginaries” (192). This contradiction is evinced in a newfound “poetic, narrative, and visual language of fracture” that speaks to the contradiction between “allegiance to a postsegregation US state” and “nostalgia for a black cultural past” (191). In *The Sellout*, the population of Dickens is lost in this contradiction and its individuals have lost all sense of identity: hence the need for TS’s “nigger whispering.” The backdrop of a black president is an essential development in

this contradiction because it allegedly demonstrates the progressive *bona fides* of a post-racial America, when in fact it simply cloaks the continuation, and possible escalation, of systemic disenfranchisement.

Some critics have preferred to embrace the liberal narrative of post-racialism, despite the contradictions and cognitive dissonances that arise from this position. For many of them, the dissolution of legal racism, as evidenced by the Civil Rights Act, by the election of Barack Obama, and by other “symbolic opening[s] of dominant society” (Cohen 63), has de-necessitated black identity and black cultural traditions. For example, Warren (2011) argues that the “coherence of African American literature has ... eroded” (2) along with the “boundary creating this distinctiveness” of African-American identity (8). In short, he redirects concerns about historical racism to concerns about socioeconomics. In *The Sellout*, the literal boundary of Dickens is eroded, and the coherence of African-American identity along with it. African Americans have no home: post-Civil Rights-era white racism is unsatisfied at its continued segregation of African Americans and now seeks to fully displace them. Yet TS’s strategy is to reverse this type of redirection and to reestablish Dickens as a bulwark against this racist strategy. Meanwhile, Charles S. Johnson, himself an author of literary satire like *Middle Passage*, uses the occasion of Barack Obama’s presidential campaign to question “the truth and usefulness of the traditional black American narrative of victimization” in the post-Civil Rights “coda.” His argument leads Edwards (2012) to conclude that any pretense to “African American literature ... must be understood not only a form of social protest [sic] but also as a record of the successes of the civil rights movement” (196). Yet *The Sellout*

returns to this “traditional black narrative” to dispute claims of the “successes of the civil rights movement.”

Other critics recognize the ongoing process of systemic disenfranchisement. For these critics, African-American solidarity remains paramount, even in a seemingly progressive and post-racial world. Cohen (1997) argues that individual successes make a marginalized group identity more difficult to maintain (15), but these “symbolic openings” reward assimilation and penalize non-conforming identities and behaviors (63). She refers to this semi-permeable racial barrier as “advanced marginalization.” Advanced marginalization allows the dominant society to proclaim full opportunity to members of its previously marginalized groups and thus to conceal institutional barriers that still remain. Black communal identity is a primary concern in *The Sellout*, particularly as it exists in the post-Obama era, expressly because of the deleterious effects of these “symbolic openings.” Although media frequently invoked “The invention of the black president as messianic figure” and viewed a prospective black president “as a solution to the racial rift of the nation” (Edwards, “The Black President Hokum” 33), the existence of President Obama reveals that a truly inclusive and post-racial America is currently a utopian fantasy.¹ *The Sellout* exposes that fantasy and expresses the need for realpolitik in the black community, even if it does so satirically.

The dissolution of Dickens threatens, rather than liberates, its citizens because it dislocates them from their group identity. This political disenfranchisement is the furtive

¹ Therefore the disagreements among contemporary black intellectuals. For example, John McWhorter greets the election of Barack Obama by claiming that “our proper concern is not whether racism still exists, but whether it remains a serious problem. The election of Obama proved ... that it no longer does,” while the backlash against Obama creates space for writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates to bemoan the current iterations of institutional racism.

agenda of post-racialism and racist revisionism: these Dickensians are not really any more welcome in white society than they had been previously. Group identity remains important in this allegedly post-racial America because the dominant discourse still excludes people of color. The absorption of Dickens into greater L.A. is an act of gentrification, one which not only excludes existing residents but replaces them with richer and whiter citizens. The residents of Dickens are not welcome within the “imagined community” of the dominant discourse: they are excluded by “finite, if elastic boundaries” and blackballed from any “deep horizontal comradeship” (Pratt 325). The racism of the American dominant discourse excludes people of color, generally, and African Americans, specifically. Mainstream America may imagine itself as post-racial, but its boundaries continue to exclude people like the residents of Dickens. Civil Rights legislation and “symbolic openings” have seemingly dismantled overt segregation, but they have instead given way to “less formal institutional mechanisms [like] a hostile work or living environment [that] can be just as effective as formal rules in limiting the participation of certain groups” (Cohen 44). Thus, the assimilation of Dickens by the dominant discourse is territorial but not communal; America’s elasticity does not include Dickensians.

Instead, Dickens must assert its sovereignty in defining its own imagined community. This is TS’s key realization: Individuals need inclusion in some imagined community before they can individually achieve peace of mind; thus Dickens must be re-energized. Because of his enlightened background and self-reflexive personality, TS is capable of diagnosing and addressing the broad malaise in Dickens. He understands that the idea of community is essential for the wellbeing of its residents. He intuitively

understands Benedict Anderson's idea that "Communities are distinguished not by their falsity / genuineness, but by *the style in which they are imagined*" (qtd. in Pratt 325), and so he forces Dickens to re-imagine itself. TS seeks to extend his self-awareness to the broader Dickensian community. Its "most prominent characteristic" should be, in the words of John Ernest, the "blended self-consciousness and self-awareness that follows from the unavoidable necessity of addressing issues of race, social justice, and cultural incoherence" (qtd. in Warren 141-142). These are the characteristics and questions that animate TS, and his agenda is to infuse these into his hometown. TS makes all of these issues visible in an effort to stimulate the self-determination of Dickens, even as the dominant discourse tries to erase them from its vernacular.

TS's struggle is as much with Dickens and its residents' disengagement as it is with the homogenizing forces of America. If greater Los Angeles and mainstream America imagine Dickens is gone, and Dickensians themselves agree, then those people of Dickens slowly dissolve as well, robbed by the commodification and "spectral reproduction" that supplants them. If the residents of Dickens first subscribe to the broader notion that it is one of so many faceless and hopeless ghettos in America; if "No one cared. In a way, most Dickensians were relieved to not be from anywhere" (Beatty 58); if they too accept that "black life is seen as rooted in the ghetto, [so] black people are identified with the ugliness, danger, and deterioration surrounding them" (Wideman 420): then they are susceptible to this gentrification and acquiescent self-annihilation. The concern is that they too will see nothing but "the worst of times," will acquiesce to the disappearance of their town, and will politicize their intra-city rivalry over "Too Many Mexicans"; the fear is that they too will surrender like the black community in *TWBS*.

The difference in *The Sellout* is that the protagonist recognizes the importance of the town and its role in stemming the tide of post-racial propaganda, and he influences a different reaction by the local denizens. He sees that Dickens operates as a “safe house” (Pratt 329). Safe houses appear contradictory to the dominant discourse: they seem to reinscribe racial or minority identity even when its participants lobby for multicultural inclusion. However, they can be necessary bastions for the political agitation that is required for the true inclusion of marginalized groups.

In a “post-racial” world that has merely exchanged visible racism for invisible discrimination, Dickens as “safe house” can establish a realpolitik in which non-White identity is affirmed and even privileged. TS describes “racism vortexes” as “Spots where visitors experience deep feelings of melancholy and ethnic worthlessness. Places like the breakdown lane on the Foothill Freeway, where Rodney King’s life, and in a sense America and its haughty notions of fair play, began their downward spirals” (129). Here, as in *TWBS*, Beatty has explicitly connected feelings of “worthless[ness]” to the Rodney King beating;² therefore places like Dickens must become counterbalancing locations of self-worth. Whether called a racism vortex or a chronotope, Dickens is a battlefield for the identities of African-Americans.

This narrative “thickening” is most evident in the novel’s final chapter, “Closure,” which contrasts characters’ reactions to the election of President Obama. On the day of Obama’s inauguration, “[Foy] wasn’t the only one celebrating; the neighborhood glee

² In *The White Boy Shuffle*, Gunnar Kaufman first re-imagines Rodney King’s assault and wonders “if the battery of the American nigger was being recharged or drained” (125). He then contemplates the verdict and riots and opines, “I never felt so worthless in my life ... I suddenly understood why my father wore his badge so proudly. The badge protected him; in uniform he was safe” (131).

wasn't O.J. Simpson getting acquitted or the Lakers winning the 2002 championship, but it was close" (289). This sentence is a two-fold smack-in-the-face, a double-whammy on readers and reality. In Bakhtinian terms, the authorial voice is needling its audience while another voice is relegating national politics to a lower rung than local interests. Before Obama's presidency officially inaugurates the post-racial era, Dickens already suffers from misplaced priorities and apathetic political agency. The election of the first African-American to the highest political position in the land, to the office of the most important person in the world, this would-be gesture of political equality, fails to evoke the same enthusiasm from the black community as did the O.J. Simpson acquittal, which, one, suggested that wealth and fame would work just as favorably for a black defendant as it always does for white defendants and, two, enraged white America, or as does the ultimately insignificant escapism of pro sports (and the one that most clearly commodifies black culture). What matters, in this final chapter entitled "Closure," is that the glee was "close" to those levels. TS's activities will seek to rearrange those priorities and redeem Dickens.

As "Closure" illustrates, Dickens is a contradictory locale because black identity in post-Obama America is contradictory. The politics of post-racialism aims to efface both the black community and individual black identity, and the election of President Obama inadvertently facilitated that effacement. Thus, TS recognizes that the solvency of Dickens is a necessary prerequisite to the solvency of the black community and to the downstream wellbeing of individual African Americans. Although his strategy "exacerbates the very inequality it seeks to counteract" (Williams), that is because he recognizes that social location is a significant contributor to a practical racial identity and,

further, that having recognizable forms of de facto segregation “is not simply a vehicle for injustice but perhaps a way of tracking and responding to it” (Taylor 115). Rather than sacrifice Dickens in the name of post-racial color blindness, TS insists that Dickens re-imagine itself as a “safe house” from which its marginalized constituents can regroup and restore a realpolitik of affirmative political action.

CHAPTER III

DR. F.K. ME: PATRIMONIAL PSYCHOLOGY

In many ways *The Sellout*, both the novel and the character, predicts and engages with the ideas and attitudes of current events and current discussions of race in America. The reaction to Barack Obama's presidency, the reactive election of Donald Trump, and the widespread examples of "White people regularly call[ing] the police on black people who are doing nothing wrong not only because of misplaced fear, but as a method of regulating access to shared space" (Mohdin): these all question the post-racial motives and operations of white America in the post-Obama era. Predicting this latter-day political climate, *The Sellout* self-consciously seeks to redeem black identity and awaken the black community during the Obama years but before their aftermath. The novel will adduce, amidst its jaw-dropping satire, that America can only move forward from its racist legacies and practices by confronting them – by making racism conspicuous again. And the protagonist will demonstrate these practices because of the patrimonial lessons of his father, lessons that ironically seemed outdated to a young TS but appear relevant to an adult, post-Obama TS.

Section 1: Patrimonial Legacies

Because of its emphasis on illuminating racism, *The Sellout* engages the concerns of an older generation of African Americans and makes them relevant for the post-Obama generation. Voices from this older generation include Ralph Ellison, who clearly recalls that during segregation he “went to the movies to see pictures, not to be with whites” (136), and the father of contemporary writer Darryl Pinckney, for whom integration “had little to do with sitting next to white people and everything with black people gaining access to better neighborhoods, decent schools, their share” and who insists that “Black life is about the group.” In the novel itself, Dr. F.K. Me, father of the eponymous protagonist of *The Sellout*, articulates the militant black-positivity of an earlier generation and imbues his Afrocentric attitudes into his son. These race-conscious attitudes enable TS to diagnose the malady afflicting Dickens and to dispense with an effective treatment. Unlike the protagonists of *Invisible Man* and *The White Boy Shuffle*, TS receives a clear and proactive message from his paternal guide.

By contrast, the eponymous and anonymous protagonist of *Invisible Man* spends his novel searching for an explanation of his patrimonial birthright. IM spends his novel running, from home to university to New York City, where he is bamboozled by the manipulative, seemingly post-racial politics of the Brotherhood. Only at the novel’s close, when he surrenders himself to the underground, does he stop running. As he narrates his retrospective story, he recognizes that “I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves. I am only ashamed of myself for having at one time been ashamed”(15); these emotions weigh heavily on black identity and are one contributing

cause to black participation in post-racial politics. His shame is one reason why he is only able to interpret his grandfather's dying words, his patrimonial birthright, as "a constant puzzle" (16). IM spends his story running from his black identity, despite his grandfather's hypnagogic reappearance to laugh at the letter to "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" (33). Only from the safety of his underground lair is IM able to self-advocate for "what I called myself" (573) and is he able to identify as "a little bit as human as my grandfather" (580); too long he had worried that "I could no more escape than I could think of my identity ... When I discover who I am, I'll be free" (243). IM's story reveals the disorientation and dangers that emanate from misplaced identity and misunderstood patrimony.

Just like IM, the Kaufman family in *TWBS* has run from African-American history and has lost its identity because of that dislocation. On first account is the family's geographical relocation to the white suburbs of Los Angeles. On second account is the family's long history of "groveling" (11) and "bootlicking" (15), a history that culminates in the employment of Gunnar's father Rolf in the LAPD.³ In short, the patrimonial legacy of *TWBS* is simply disgraceful. Rolf is neither the traitor nor the spy that IM's grandfather is: instead Rolf is a race traitor. When Gunnar achieves poetic and political heights, his father is his greatest critic; Rolf's declamation that "I refuse to let you embarrass me. You can't embarrass me with poetry and your niggerish ways" echoes throughout the book (137). For Rolf, any expression of nonconformity with the dominant

³ Leader-Picone notes how Gunnar is disqualified as "Beatty's opening chapter reveals that Gunnar's heritage makes him an atrocious choice, perhaps the worst one possible, as a leader for the black community" and that, ultimately, "Beatty's opening thus removes any illusions the reader might harbor that the novel will represent the unity achieved by filling the gap in African American leadership as a boon for the community" (144).

discourse is suspect, especially when that nonconformity is an expression of African-American cultural tradition. Although Rolf himself is an extreme example of cultural dislocation, his disaffection illustrates a broader concern that African Americans are either forced to abandon their cultural identity or to suffer the consequences of disenfranchisement.

The satirical remedy in *TWBS* to black disenfranchisement is self-annihilation or “hara-kiri” (202). Rolf’s final patrimonial act is the inscription of his own death poem: “Like the good Reverend King / I too ‘have a dream,’ / but when I wake up / I forget it and / remember I’m running late for work” (226). Much like the enduring inability of the protagonist of *Invisible Man* to understand his grandfather’s message, Rolf Kaufman only slowly recognizes his role in the machine of racism but still has no recourse. Recognizing that “*we the machines inside the machine*” does him no more good than Lucius Brockway (Ellison 217). Rolf only redeems himself in death, much as IM only redeems himself in hibernation; these respective patrimonies do nothing to advance a social justice agenda.

By contrast, *The Sellout* articulates a more active counterdiscourse to the racism encountered in all three of these novels. The nature of racism has changed from novel to novel – first overt, then subtle, and now invisible – but so too has the response to it. *The Sellout* is able to contend that the African-American community must produce its own identity, ontology, and epistemology – its own “*logos*” – because white society and its white *logos* have no interest in changing their racist practices. But the novel only arrives at this conclusion because of the critical eye developed by previous generations of African-American agitators.

This novel builds on the theories of post-Civil Rights black cultural critics to gather a language for its political counterdiscourse. The challenge is that the solidarity of the African-American community has been undermined by the machinations of cultural appropriation and advanced marginalization. The mainstream cultural appropriation of black culture has neutered authenticity within black communities, and leftist politics have shifted focus to populist economics. The first black president spent most of his time in office suppressing his cultural baggage, despite the prediction by Ellis (1989) that black artists and, by extension, black people “no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black” (235). But in *Becoming Black*, Michelle Wright (2004) instead emphasizes that blackness has always been defined as “antithetical to the American nation” (64); hence the name “Dickens” conjures the devil. Therefore she also articulates the power and necessity of the black counterdiscourse, espoused by DuBois and others, that recognizes that white racist *logos* is an “antidialectic” that cannot be reasoned with and that will not ever make room for blackness (78). The inclusion of “The black representative,” a commodified individual whose individual success substitutes for systemic social justice (Gordon 75), is not an amendment of the American dialectic but is instead a subterfuge by it. Hence the ultimately racist implications of the “symbolic openings” in the dominant discourse are most evident through the lens of a self-determined black *logos*.

Thus *The Sellout* must contend with this newest tactic of white racist America: post-racialism. White “*logos*” refers not only to the literal words of white supremacist logic but also to the cultural practices that inscribe it. Currently, contemporary white *logos* has

disempowered the black counterdiscourse through strategies of advanced marginalization: the inclusion of select black individuals in the name of equality and meritocracy, coupled with the more widespread exclusion of people of color who do not conform and kowtow to the supremacy of white culture.

Fortunately for Dickens, TS recognizes the nefarious nature of this newest stage of white racism and builds upon the Afrocentric patrimony of his activist father. In contrast to the perplexing and disagreeable father figures in *Invisible Man* and *TWBS*, the patriarch of *The Sellout* is clear and demonstrative. The ideological confrontations in this novel emerge from the shadow of a highly black-conscious, black-positive patriarchal figure.

Dr. F.K. Me leaves indelible messages in TS's life: both his physical black skin and his psychological black *logos*. Both speak to the irony of his name, an irony that speaks to the double burden left with TS. TS's father is a psychology professor at a local community college who emigrated from Kentucky and embraced life in the Farms in Dickens, but who, as the "sole practitioner of the field of Liberation Psychology" (27), "was more interested in black liberty" than in maintaining his inner-city farmland (28). He homeschools TS and reenacts famous psychological studies, especially those related to child development, on the youngster, but he modifies them to encourage a pro-black, anti-white identity. In addition to these experiments, he also chastises TS for his brief interest in a Batman comic book by arguing, "See, if you weren't wasting your life reading this bullshit, you'd realize Batman ain't coming to save your ass or your people!" (31). Revealed here is that his father worked to plant seeds of self-determination and racial pride, even if TS was ultimately "a failed social experiment" who preferred the

Barbie and Ken playset (“the white people got better accessories”) to the black hero and experience playset in his father’s reinterpretation of Kenneth and Mamie Clarks’ doll experiments (35). The father in this novel prepares its protagonist to directly confront race and identity; TS will use these tools to confront the invisible, inconspicuous racism of the “post-racial” Obama era and to redefine the contradictions that define black identity at this time.

Section 2: F.K. Me – Filial Pieties

TS finds many of the tools that he needs in his father’s rearing of him, especially in the ironic and irreverent lessons that Dr. F.K. Me provides. Crucially, the burden of these lessons influences TS’s choice to refer to this retrospective section of his novel as “The Shit You Shovel.” In general, TS’s relationship with his father is complicated and contradictory. TS routinely questions his father’s Afrocentrism, yet he clearly builds upon that counterdiscourse in his own agenda for Dickens. The unorthodox and occasionally ironic relationship between the two provides the means for TS’s unorthodox and ironic agenda for the restoration of Dickens.

This title, “The Shit You Shovel,” combined with an aside in the narration, yields fertile connections to the greater concerns of this essay, especially those concerning representation and (in)visibility in the African-American community. In the aforementioned aside, TS complains that, “Like any ‘primitive’ Negro child lucky enough to reach the formal operational stage, I’ve come to realize that I had a shitty upbringing that I’ll never be able to live down” (29). This potshot accosts the long-running metonym of White racism that the mask of the Black face permanently bars the Black person from

achieving full subjectivity. Its satire exposes the pedantry and paternalism of much psychological research, and it also unifies this African-American narrator with a common Eurocentric trope of puerile Freudian abuse. To give fuller voice to this scion's perspective, this section of the novel is named for a comment of his father's that "People eat the shit you shovel them" (53, 55). In a fictional childhood that combines psychological experimentation with urban agrarianism, this crude platitude is awfully apropos. The Sellout makes sense of this expression by stating "That like the pigs, we all have our heads in the trough" (53). TS recognizes that it takes very little for individuals to accept their roles in the world. They are the "zombies" of the Golden Day in *Invisible Man*, the unquestioning log-rollers in *The White Boy Shuffle*. Pedagogical philosopher Paulo Freire argues that educational systems prescribe roles onto students that limit their critical thinking and impede their ongoing praxis of inquiry-driven development. *The Sellout* will contend that post-racial groupthink, as projected by the dominant discourse onto the black community and as absorbed and practiced by the disaffected denizens of Dickens, poses a similar threat.

The titular "The Shit You Shovel" has an outsized significance for the identity of The Sellout: its resonance is grounded in the protagonist's relationship with his father, and it will affect his relationship with Dickens. Platitude that it might be, TS acknowledges that "I think about all the lines of ad infinitum bullshit my father shoveled down my throat, until his dreams became my dreams" (55). This particular line resonates on many levels. The first is the semantic and syntactic overlay: "The Shit You Shovel" has become "[the] bullshit my father shoveled." The general cliché has evolved into something more particular. The verb tense has shifted to reflect a historical fact instead of

an ongoing, voluntary routine. “The Shit,” by no means positive but more specifically obligatory and unavoidable, becomes “bullshit,” far more pejorative and decidedly mendacious. And the agent has become “my father,” the implication that the mundane action is hereditary and patrimonial. Of course, it is. TS is black in America because his father was black in America. Being “Black” in America is a societal construction that excludes African Americans from equal participation. In a Bakhtinian reading, “my father” is a double-voiced construction. Yes, this is the fictional sperm-donor for *The Sellout*, but “my father” is also code for “my predecessors,” genetic, political, and literary. The “ad infinitum bullshit” represents not only the imagined fictional history between father and son, it also represents the false Hegelian dialectic of white racism and its unreachable synthesis.

The second resonance involves the metaphors of the throat as speech and of swallowing as identification. As the second subordinate clause suggests, what TS is ingesting from his father is informing and developing his present and future identity. Whereas *Invisible Man* swallows his blood and his pride in the *Battle Royal*, and whereas Gunnar Kaufman quotes Mishima (“Sometimes hara-kiri makes you win” (202)), TS will swallow his father’s black-positive politics and identity. His father is a “Liberation Psychologist,” an idea that is itself rich in heteroglossia. First it references Afrocentric nationalism, yet it also suggests a transcendent liberation from psychology itself. In this second sense, this professional title is a demarcation; the product of this psychological intervention, TS, is freed from the shackles of outdated psychologies. Indeed, while the “Theory of Quintessential Blackness” is an allusion to the real *Nigrescent Psychology* of William Cross, *The Sellout* will ultimately amend its precepts with a final, higher stage of

“Unmitigated Blackness.” As a result of his indoctrination into his father’s psychological theories, TS will internalize many of his father’s motivations and aspirations. Eventually TS will regurgitate this “ad infinitum bullshit” by assuming his father’s mantle of “nigger whisperer” and by fostering his politics of communal Black pride.

The third element of this quote is the trope of dreams. As an allusion to *Invisible Man*, these dreams reference the various contents of IM’s briefcase and the echoing revelations of his grandfather. As a reference to the batons of Black leadership, all dreams post-1963 hearken to Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech in Washington, D.C. While the connotation of “dreams” is typically positive and uplifting, and whereas MLK is always the gold standard of African-American leadership, this allusion is also possibly subversive. Cameron Leader-Picone reveals this critical possibility in an essay about *TWBS*: it “suggest[s] that the fantasy of a return to civil rights-era leadership unduly limits African Americans and has resulted in a cultural stagnation that verges on self-destruction” (149). This has an application to *The Sellout*. For TS, when “his dreams became my dreams,” he must proceed cautiously. He must emerge from his father’s tutelage and legacy, “emerge” in the sense of Cross’s Nigrescence Theory, with the same racial self-confidence, but he must not be limited by the same ideological boundaries. TS’s father is limited by his antagonistic relationship with Foy Cheshire, his friend and plagiarist. His father cannot bring himself to admonish Foy because, as he says, “our people are in dire need of everything except acrimony” (49). In the post-racial setting of *The Sellout*, this protagonist and erstwhile leader must recognize and develop new strategies for achieving equitable civil rights – not least of which is dethroning Foy Cheshire and his ilk.

A revealing anecdote is TS's trip to the deep South with his father, which he recounts only later in the novel because of its complicated and contradictory messages about racial identity in contemporary America. After "foolishly [saying] to my father that there was no racism in America," TS's father whisks him away for a spontaneous trip to find "direct discrimination based on race" (174). TS and his father drive to deep Mississippi, the Old South – placeholder of unpleasant African-American history – and TS "looked around for the racism" (174). Ignorant of the more subtle and nefarious post-racial manifestations of racism, TS identifies "three burly white men," one darned in a "*No Niggers in NASCAR* T-shirt." This is visible racism. Yet this episode proceeds to dissemble expectations and operations of racism while simultaneously defying tropes about rural yokels. These same white men identify TS's would-be wolf-whistle as the "Bolero" by Ravel and argue "the merits and manifestations of sexuality" (177). They are undisturbed by Pops' tryst with a local white woman. They welcome TS's business. Meanwhile, the black gas station attendant, described in all the retrospective glory of full-service lube stops, engages with a black friend in a strategically sophisticated game of chess. But "the black Kasparov" denies bathroom privileges to TS expressly because he has been patronizing the white general store instead of the Black gas station; he tells TS, "Buy black or piss off. Literally" (179). Racial identity is suddenly commodified in a way that TS may not have envisioned when he chose the Barbie and Ken playset.

Yet TS learns a bigger lesson because of this crass capitalism. He finds urinary relief outside of an old, abandoned lavatory labeled WHITES ONLY. The bathroom is fetid, gross, and full of "The acrid stink of unflushed racism and shit" (179). In this circumstance TS sees clearly a choice – and his choice is to pee outside, "Because

apparently the rest of the Planet was ‘Colored Only’” (179). The symbolism is clear and unites this episode with the dialectical concerns of Michelle Wright. The vestiges of racist white *logos* are irredeemably narrow-minded and soiled. However, they are still “unflushed” and non-whites must still contend with them. Should African Americans and other people of color enter, hold their noses, and pretend that there is “no racism in America,” all in the name of inclusion? No, they should design and promote an alternate ideology. The outdated racism of the Old South is visible and olfactory; it is racism that you can see and smell. Contemporary, post-Obama racism is neither: it is disingenuous capitalism, biased meritocracy, and creeping gentrification that its victims can only feel, but it dissolves bastions like Dickens and dislocates its victims.

In *The Sellout*, the protagonist’s father deliberately exposes him to the implications of his black identity. Whether through “Liberation Psychology” or experimental field trips, his father painstakingly grounds him in a black *logos* that he will subsequently revise and refine. This upbringing is unlike those in either *Invisible Man* or *TWBS*, and this difference leads to a different outcome in this novel. Because of his upbringing, TS is especially qualified to identify the racism in post-racial America and to bring balance back to the identities of his neighbors in Dickens and, by extension, America.

Section 3: Amending “Liberation Psychology” with “Unmitigated Blackness”

As a militant “Liberation Psychologist,” Dr. F.K. Me railed against a generation of more overt white racism. The field of psychology even offered its own counterdiscourse, its own black *logos*, as a means of confronting this white racism. The

black *logos* of the novel builds on William E. Cross's Nigrescence Theory, which theorized a progression of stages of black identity in a racist world.⁴ Because *The Sellout* contends with an allegedly post-racial America, its counterdiscourse must both restore and augment the black political consciousness of earlier eras for the current political climate. Therefore Dr. F.K. Me's greatest patrimony is his "Liberation Psychology," and TS's greatest contribution is his amendment of "Unmitigated Blackness," a philosophical screed that rejects all "spectral forms of blackness" in favor of a conspicuous, insouciant, and unrepentant black existence.

"Unmitigated Blackness" is, therefore, the clearest articulation of TS's contemporary black *logos*. In an homage to Cross, "Unmitigated Blackness" is an extension of Dr. F.K. Me's "theory of Quintessential Blackness." In the most literal reading of "Unmitigated Blackness," then, blackness is not mitigated because it does not need to be so: despite Wideman's worries, black life is not pejoratively "ghetto." Blackness is fine. This is the core of black *logos*: Let white *logos* believe that blackness is its antithesis, and let blackness choose its own best path. More saliently, let contemporary white *logos* argue for the erasure (or "mitigation") of blackness in the name of "post-racialism," and let blackness assert its own identity and importance. Thus, when the narrator further defines "Unmitigated Blackness" by arguing that, despite a

⁴ Cross (1978) hypothesizes that black identity travels through five phases of self-consciousness: Pre-Encounter, in which the individual ignores racism in the world yet has internalized much of its negative *logos*; Encounter, wherein the individual experiences some rejection that catalyzes a new worldview; Immersion/Emersion, in which the individual retracts from the dominant discourse, fully absorbs his minority culture, and returns both more open and more critical; Internalization, wherein the individual is comfortable in his own racial identity and is confident in interactions with all persons; and Internalization-Commitment, in which "This 'ideal person' has not only incorporated the new identity but is struggling to translate personal identity into activities that are meaningful to the group" (18).

superficial appearance of “a seeming unwillingness to succeed,” this stage “is simply not giving a fuck” or, more academically, “It’s the acceptance of contradiction not being a sin and a crime but a frailty like split ends and libertarianism. Unmitigated Blackness is coming to the realization that as fucked up and meaningless as it all is, sometimes it’s the nihilism that makes life worth living” (277), he is affirming black identity. This affirmation is especially timely in the contemporary era because “advanced marginalization” – this practice of selective inclusion and widespread exclusion that is the hallmark of “post-racialism” – “is fraught with contradictions, manipulating, in particular, the social cleavages that exist within marginalized groups” like black America (Cohen 63). TS is foregrounding the centrality of “contradiction” to the history, identity, and solidarity of the black community.

The narrator has also deliberately moved blackness from a unique racial identifier to a broad existential representative; “blackness” is nihilism, it is void, yet there is meaning in that void: the ultimate contradiction. This rediscovered meaning revises and extends the theses of earlier African-American novels. In *Native Son* by Richard Wright, the protagonist Bigger Thomas’s blackness is nothing but void.⁵ In *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, the protagonist claims, “I’ve illuminated the blackness of my invisibility – and vice versa” (Ellison 13). Where Ellison seeks to give visibility to invisibility, Michelle Wright argues that the void itself can be meaning. In her reading of Aime Césaire’s *Cahier*, the protagonist of that novel “finds something where he once thought was nothing. Hegel’s void has been converted into a powerful and complex essence” (M.

⁵ In *Native Son*, the protagonist Bigger Thomas answers the question “... what it was you wanted to do so badly that you had to hate them” with the retort “Nothing. I reckon I didn’t want to do nothing ...” (R. Wright 327).

Wright 106). The black identity and existence that had been void in Hegel's racist dialectic are now located as the contradiction inherent in African Americans' political dispositions. When TS admits that, "Dumbfounded, I stood before the court, trying to figure out if there was a state of being between 'guilty' and 'innocent' ... Why couldn't I be 'neither' or 'both'?" (Beatty 15), he is rejecting these choices as antidialectics. Much as he does in his other assertions of political binaries, this character is pointing to the absurdity of the standards extended to black America, and he is demanding a self-defined reassessment of those standards.

TS is offering a rebellion that is psychological, philosophical, and political, yet one that is different from his literary predecessor Invisible Man (IM). The story of *Invisible Man*, for example, is the overt action of illuminating the invisibility of his black subjectivity. IM recognizes that his self-conception has long been manipulated by black and white America alike, "So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an *invisible man*" (Ellison 573). His rebellion is to identify with the full resonance and contradiction of invisibility: he is material, he is conspicuously black against the backdrop of white society, yet he is overdetermined and unrecognized. The story of *The Sellout* is the overt action of illuminating "the cognitive dissonance of being black and innocent" (Beatty 18), a cognitive dissonance that arises because anti-black racism has become invisible but has not been resolved. TS's rebellion, therefore, is to identify the current contradiction in America: American society, including its populations of color, needs reminders of its racist history as ongoing catalysts for any social justice. Certainly this exact rebellion is absurdist and fictional, but its implications are relevant

and real. They may be even more important for the marginalized black community because white society and white *logos* will not ever change course of its own volition.

With “Unmitigated Blackness” TS is also hinting at ways to read his satirical novel. Theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, already a well-used tool for *Invisible Man* (Lyne 180), argues that “The prose art [has] a feeling for its participation in historical becoming and in social struggle” (331), and *The Sellout* explicitly suggests that it itself operates beyond the sphere of entertaining literature: “Unmitigated Blackness is essays passing for fiction” (277). The distinction implies that many works of fiction – *The Sellout*, say – are actually persuasive essays whose purposes are documenting real-world concerns and arguing for interpretations of and solutions to those concerns. That these prose arts might be “passing” from one category to the next – like light-complexioned African Americans passing into white society – emphasizes the arbitrariness of these divisions. Finally, the “passing” nature of this language conjures Bakhtin’s concept of *heteroglossia* (double-voicedness), the idea that novels, as opposed to poetry, feature language that resonates across meanings and multitudes.

There is a power struggle in *heteroglossia* that also exists in the counterdiscourse of *The Sellout*. Bakhtin contends that “Language is not a neutral medium ... it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process” (294). Just as *Invisible Man* reconstitutes the identity of an individual black man from the overdetermination and “overpopulat[ion]” of the masses, *The Sellout* expropriates the racist white logos that Michelle Wright finds in the writings of Jefferson, Hegel, and Gobineau. This expropriation is difficult: anti-black racism has dominated Western and

American history.⁶ Further, this racism has now hidden itself in plain sight. As a result, the case against racism appears more difficult to make.

TS's hijinks, generally, and his theory of "Unmitigated Blackness," specifically, work to exhume a conversation about racism and its effects in an era in which the dominant discourse imagines their dissolution. The response to racism is a critical component of black group identity and black individual subjectivity. This was clear for Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*, and it has been clear to Paul Beatty since his first novel *The White Boy Shuffle*. Sadly, the situation in *The Sellout* is more comparable to that in *Invisible Man* than sixty-five years of American history might be willing to admit. The novel itself manipulates many of the tropes and contemporizes many of the character archetypes from *Invisible Man*. And it seeks to illuminate the paradoxes and contradictions that face African Americans. For contemporary communities like Dickens, these challenges involve the antidialectic of white superiority and the resulting practices of marginalization. This Obama-era novel recognizes that the seemingly dialectical development of post-racialism is a red herring whereby white America both continues its antidialectical position towards black America and maintains political control even as it loses its majority status, and TS recognizes that only drastic methods of racial reinscription can change this course of history.

⁶ For example, Rolf Kaufman's assault on Gunnar produces the narration, "Soon my body stopped bucking with every blow. There was only white – no memories, no visions, only the sound of voices" (138). Rolf is not ventriloquizing whiteness, he is participating in its production. Just as in the racist Hegelian dialectic, the white thesis leaves no room for Black existence. This total whiteness leaves Gunnar dislocated from any source of Blackness and thus wholly disconnected from any identity.

CHAPTER IV

FOY CHESHIRE:

“... never called me by my proper name, but simply yelled, ‘The Sellout!’”

Foy Cheshire is the primary antagonist in *The Sellout*. He is a false prophet who trades in an outdated and counterproductive mode of black activism. Where TS argues against “spectral forms of blackness” and in favor of “Unmitigated Blackness,” Foy attempts to erase and mitigate his own blackness and the authenticity of the unassimilated African-American community. His is an inauthentic mask of black radicalism: his political bravado protects a damaged inner psyche. His political activism is ultimately for personal gain, both political and psychological, and TS’s ironic politics leave him devastated and denuded.

Foy Cheshire trades in an outdated model of identity politics that helps him at the expense of the black community. Ironically, he uses his visible black identity as a justification for the indignity he feels emotionally. Although Ellis (1989) had posited that contemporary African-Americans “no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage” (235) and that they “aren’t

flinching before they lift the hood on our collective psyches now that they have liberated themselves from both white envy and self-hate” (238), Foy does not behave as such. He flinches from, and revises, the history at the core of his American identity. He promotes group assimilation at the expense of an erasure of black identity.

Foy’s own assimilation includes a conversion to the American ideal of individual exceptionalism. His aggregation of personal wealth and fame justify all of his behaviors. He exemplifies the archetype of “the exception, different from the rest of [the African-American] people” that cultural critic bell hooks criticizes (235); his individual success as “the exception” proves the inferiority of the group.⁷ This is similar to Lewis R. Gordon’s notion of “the black representative” (75) in that the acceptance by white society of individual African Americans assuages its sense of racism, even if those individuals are allegedly agitating for social equality. In the world of *The Sellout*, white society is happy to accept Foy: by erasing black history Foy makes black identity spectral, thus the failure of any individual to assimilate and succeed is idiosyncratic, not racial. Effectively he is “espous[ing] the norms and values of dominant whites,” and he reaps rewards in both the white and the black communities (Cohen 60). Foy and individuals like him have achieved personal success in this “post-racial world,” but that success is despite their community, not because of it. As such, they have little interest in rallying a grassroots activism in African-American and non-white communities.

Other characters in African-American literature have willingly traded group identity for individual success, and the most appropriate analogue to Foy is Brother Wrestrum in *Invisible Man*. Brother Wrestrum sacrifices his group identity as an African

⁷ hooks prefers the idea of “exceptional” individuals who overcome structural impediments to succeed in white society.

American in order to advance his individual success in *The Brotherhood*. Wrestrum is what Gordon (1997) calls a black “masochist,” a black figure who cannot see himself being seen as the Other in the white crowd. Wrestrum wants to downplay his Blackness, and he is concerned that IM is overtly displaying the manacles that had been worn by Brother Tarp. He argues that “I don’t think we ought to dramatize our differences ... That’s the worst thing for the Brotherhood – because we want to make folks think of things we have in common” (392). The Brotherhood is an early incarnation of a colorblind society. Like post-racial America, it discourages group identity even as it perpetuates institutional racism and African-American self-promotion (despite its socialist claims to the contrary). Even the narrator recognizes the disgusting nature of Wrestrum’s definition of success.⁸ Indeed his betrayal by Wrestrum propels IM toward his psychological awakening; so too will Foy’s ultimate meltdown illustrate the failures of his politics to the world of *The Sellout*. Beneath these veneers of progressive social activism lie the frail egos of damaged men.

At his egotistic worst Foy follows in the path of other literary Lucifers from the African-American satirical tradition. He is akin to the black politicians in George Schuyler’s *Black No More*, especially those like Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard who personally benefit from the visibility (but not the productivity or resolution) of racial agitation (Schuyler 65). Foy also resembles Dr. Bledsoe in *Invisible Man*. As Dr. Bledsoe scolds and expels Invisible Man from his university, he removes his “mask,” drops the curtain, and reveals some of the gravest criticisms about the African-American “big

⁸ The narrator says, “It had never occurred to me that the Brotherhood could force anyone to shake my hand, and that he found satisfaction that it could was both shocking and distasteful” (394). By contrast, consider the views on desegregation by David Pinckney’s father.

man.” Dr. Bledsoe asserts, “I don’t owe anyone a thing, son. Who, Negroes? . . . When you buck against me, you’re bucking against power, rich white folk’s power, the nation’s power – which means government power!” (Ellison 142); then he contends that he will hold onto the power he has carved out for himself by any means necessary.⁹ “Government power” is especially pernicious: not only does it privilege whites, it legitimizes “the exception.”

Even worse, though, is Foy’s avaricious connection to Papa Zeringue in *Middle Passage* by Charles Johnson. Foy profits from the erasure of history, an erasure that hamstringing the political agency of the African-American community. Papa Zeringue literally enslaves Africans for personal gain. Papa Zeringue is a powerful black crime boss in antebellum New Orleans, and this position of stature, earned against obvious racist odds, earns him the admiration of the black community: to the casual observer, he is “a Race Man to be admired” (Johnson 198). Papa Zeringue’s admirable qualities appear to be his diverse holdings, his political savvy, his Afrocentric business ethics, and his Black patronage. Yet his desire for personal gain, his mistaken “equating of personal freedom and racial pride with fantastic wealth and power [that] had gotten the blighter in over his head” (203), leads him to make “the greatest betrayal of all” – “Buy[ing] and sell[ing] slaves when he himself was black” (150). Papa Zeringue has prioritized his own wealth and ambition over those of his brethren in the black community, yet he has attempted to cloak those unforgiveable crimes in superficial acts of racial activism. The same will be said about Foy Cheshire.

⁹ Dr. Bledsoe: “I’ve made my place in it and I’ll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am” (142-143).

_____ e e _____ c _____”¹¹ (218). In this particular meeting, Foy reveals his disdain for the true issues plaguing Dickens, although it Foy’s guest Jon McJones¹² who delivers the hatchet job to America’s contemporary African-American communities. Self-hatred is key to these characters’ revisionist agendas and conservative politics. Foy and these other characters effectively perform the role of *Mumbo Jumbo*’s “Talking Android” to perpetuate the agenda of the dominant White *logos*.

Foy’s political correctness serves only himself and the racist dominant discourse, not communities of color like Dickens. Race and racism are his talking points, but he only pays them lip service: he effects no positive change, nor would he want to. Like Agamemnon Beard and Dr. Bledsoe, he already sits comfortably atop the status quo. Foy’s primary activism during the course of events in *The Sellout* is his revision of White literary texts. These revisions serve only to undercut Black identity by erasing its historical foundations. Foy becomes a “self-righteous guardian of blackness” (97), but one who insists on a Pollyannaish, revisionist version of blackness. Where *The Sellout* ultimately advertises the notion of “Unmitigated Blackness” to accept the contradictions in black identity and work forward from there, Foy fears those contradictions and works to cloak them. Foy’s revisions¹³ will allegedly allow his grandchildren and other African-

¹¹ Bill Cosby, Colin Powell, and Condoleeza Rice. Although the second hangman-style name is a letter short for “Colin Powell,” the next page includes dialogue by “C _____ n _____ w _____” (219).

¹² *The Sellout* notes that McJones is “a snobby Negro who covered up his self-hatred with libertarianism; I at least had the good sense to wear mine on my sleeve” (218).

¹³ Foy revises and re-imagines *Huckleberry Finn* as “*The Pejorative-Free Adventures and Intellectual and Spiritual Journeys of African-American Jim and His Young Protégé, White Brother Huckleberry Finn, as They Go in Search of the Lost Black Family Unit*” (95). Other revisions include “*Uncle Tom’s Condo* and *The Point Guard in the Rye*” (165); “*The Dopeman Cometh*” and “*The Great Blacksby*” (166); “*The Old Black Man*

Americans to approach classic American white novels without fear of their racial discourse (or lack thereof) and will thus save them from miscomprehensions of the novel's literary aims. In short, he is dumbing-down complexity and patronizing African-American readers: he is excising, rather than unpacking, the contradictions of black identity. His re-imaginings, his post-racial renderings, are as detrimental to the historical record as the romanticization of the Old South. Nonetheless he profits by the inclusion of his "politically respectful edition[s]" (96) in schools.

Foy's *modus operandi* pits him as a foil for TS. He criticizes TS as a "sell out" even when he himself manipulates the concerns of the black community for his own personal gain. In this way Foy's own agenda is "faux," a fraud perpetuated upon individuals (like Dr. F.K. Me) and community alike. Further, like the lingering grin of Lewis Carroll's disappearing Cheshire Cat, Foy dissolves blackness and black identity even as his own celebrity remains. Foy's self-serving agenda emphasizes the communitarian mindset of TS, thus acting as a foil for "The Sellout." His acts of revision are the opposite of TS's acts of remembering, and the reader must decipher which is the more efficacious between them.

When Foy reveals his ultimate revision in an effort to resist The Sellout's phony Wheaton Academy, he also reveals his utter misunderstanding of Black counterdiscourse. For Foy, Wheaton Academy's visible segregation threatens his meal-tickets of racial revisionism and the politics of respectability; thus he unveils *The Adventures of Tom Soarer*, on the cover of which is "a preppy black boy ... armed with a bucket of whitewash, [standing] bravely in front of a wall splashed in gang graffiti ..." (217). At

and the Inflatable Winnie the Pooh Swimming Pool, Measured Expectations, Middlemarch Middle of April, I'll Have Your Money – I Swear" (217).

his press conference Foy shouts “the character of Tom Soarer will galvanize a nation to whitewash that fence!” (217), a stunning *lapsus linguae* that reveals Foy’s racial self-hatred and White envy. Foy sees the gang graffiti through a White lens; he fears such “Eruptions of Funk”.¹⁴

The climax of Foy’s activism is his attempt to reintegrate Chaff Middle School. In this effort Foy further reveals his utter falseness. Although Wheaton Academy is revealed as a ruse, the functional Chaff Middle School is achieving newfound success despite its history as an underperforming inner-city school. Yet success brings publicity, and this publicity reveals the *de facto* segregation of the school. Now that it is successful, Foy wants to integrate it with White students. This is the double-standard of racist logic: students of color are systematically excluded from high-performing White schools unless they can show themselves to be “exceptions,” but White society cannot allow communities of color to enjoy any successes by themselves. Effectively this is scholastic cultural appropriation, and Foy spearheads the effort.

However, this episode pushes Foy over the psychological edge. As his protest spirals out of hand, he points his gun at his own temple, grabs a bucket of white paint, and proceeds to dump “the pail of unstirred and semi-hardened stain over his head” (259). Our narrator intervenes with the “nigger-whispering” advice from earlier in the novel: “Foy . . . you have to ask yourself two questions: Who am I? and How may I become myself” (260). The Sellout draws upon his father’s psychological wisdom to diagnose Foy’s self-immolation:

¹⁴ “Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison” is an essay by Susan Willis.

“I seen it a million times,” my father used to say. “Professional niggers that just snap because the charade is over.” The blackness that had consumed them suddenly evaporates like window grit washed away in the rain. All that’s left is the transparency of the human condition, and everybody sees right through you. The lie on the resume has finally been discovered. (259)

The “charade” has been Foy’s single-minded pretense that racism must be erased at all costs, especially from history. His revisionist tactics speak to the inferiority complex that he has internalized, while his celebrity performances re-enact racist stereotypes as much as does “whatever’s on ESPN right now” (279). His “blackness” is the void of Hegel, not the self-empowering “blackness” of the African-American counterdiscourse: he works to “mitigate” his blackness to resolve the contradiction, when in this world only “Unmitigated Blackness” and its embrace of contradiction will vindicate black identity. His activism to rewrite the canon speaks to his concern about how the dominant discourse stereotypes his people, and his protest of pro-minority bigotry reveals a concern that non-Blacks will see his success as a result of affirmative action and not of his own merit. Like the “*Chamaeleo africanus tokenus*” in the Supreme Court, Foy is “angry that [TS has] fucked up his political expediency” (20) by exposing his fraudulent agenda.

When Foy dumps white paint over his head, he erases any claim to black identity just as he has been erasing African-American legacies. This exterior skin graft, this expression to be *Black No More*, reminds us of Optic White: “If it’s optic white, it’s the right white” (Ellison 217). Foy is surrendering to the notion that visible and conspicuous

whiteness, especially that made to government specifications, is the only acceptable existence.

In some ways Foy is a victim of white racism, and his is a fragile ego that lacks the positive group identity that TS hopes to restore to Dickens. The psychology of Foy's self-destruction is only made clear as the novel's Quest for the Holy Grail is resolved. When Hominy and friends are finally able to view the lost *Little Rascals* movies, the movies that Foy Cheshire had taken pains to remove from the public record, they are unimpressed by its casual racism until the last show on the reel – “Nigger in a Woodpile – Take #1” (280). After seeing “a nappy little black head [pop] up sporting a wide razzamatazz grin [and shouting] “It’s black folk!,” they hear “the director offscreen yelling, ‘We’ve got plenty of wood, but we need more nigger. C’mon, Foy, do it right this time. I know you’re only five, but niggerize the hell out of this one” (280-281). This traumatic evidence suggests that Foy’s attempts to revise history emerge not for the benefit of the community but only for himself, out of his sense of shame for his role in this racist show. He has not learned from the IM’s opening remarks about being ashamed. Instead Foy Cheshire has internalized a shame of being manipulated as “black folk!”

Because of his selfishness and self-hatred, because of his belief in The Exception, Foy’s internal shame is only abated by the external success of another individual. At the novel’s diegetic end, its chapter entitled “Closure,” we also read about “the day after the black dude was inaugurated” (289). On this day “Foy Cheshire, proud as punch, [was] driving around town in his coupe, honking his horn and waving an American flag.” When The Sellout asks him why, Foy suggests that “the country, the United States of America, had finally paid off its debts.” Ironically there is no closure here. For one, the events of

the novel follow this “Closure” chronologically, so it is not what it claims to be. Second, the legacy of the Obama era is defined not by social equality but by the widening inequality of post-racialism. The Sellout recognizes the limitations of one symbolic election, but Foy basks in it just like he basks in its limited, personal significance. This is because Foy subscribes to the Great Man theory of leadership one that is sacrosanct within the white American dominant discourse, that a single person can change the destiny of the multitudes. Foy believes in The Exception, not the group.

Although Foy imagines himself working for the improvement of the African-American psyche, although he tells Dickens that he has its interests at heart, he is ultimately working to claim fame and fortune for himself. His deposits are shallow and meaningless, though; he has denied his internal black identity to offset the shame of his experience in *Little Rascals*. Like IM’s destruction of the coin bank, Foy has lost the use of that history. Instead he becomes a self-promotional public agitator, akin to a real-world celebrity like the conservative talk-show host and “Race Man” Tavis Smiley. It is ironic that Foy christens the novel’s narrator as “The Sellout,” since Foy is the most selfish character at heart: Foy’s politics sell out the black community for his own selfish gain.

CHAPTER V

HOMINY JENKINS:

“... as old as the slur itself” (189)

Hominy Jenkins is simultaneously the mentor and slave of TS, and this is but one of the contradictions that defines his version of black identity. Hominy’s many contradictions are instructional and inspirational for the novel’s hero. In an era when black identity is increasingly diluted and commodified into inauthenticity and effaced into “spectral forms of reproduction,” Hominy plainly and proudly represents the unresolvable contradictions at the heart of black culture. He blurs performance and reality; he recognizes that the erasure of black history is an existential threat to himself; and, just as TS defends black identity in post-racial America via “Unmitigated Blackness,” so too does Hominy irreverently defend that most dehumanizing pantomime of racism, blackface. Similarly, Beatty’s use of Hominy is an irreverent retort to Ellison’s worries in “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” that the “‘darker’ entertainer” is a reduction to the “grotesque and the unacceptable” that veils “the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask” of blackness (47-49). Yet in *The Sellout* Hominy exposes those

ambiguities not despite but because of his mask, and his fully-realized contradictory existence is catalytic for TS's defense of Dickens and of blackness.

Hominy makes clear that much of the contradiction that imbues black identity is a result of the performative masks that African Americans have to wear in a white public sphere. In many ways, Hominy is less a character and more a metonym throughout the novel. His individual quest serves as a proxy for the larger vision of cultural and historical redemption that TS enacts. Hominy's involvement in this novel aligns with the claims of Willis (2017) about Toni Morrison's novels: "... the salvation of individuals is not the point. Rather, these individuals, struggling to reclaim or redefine themselves, are portrayed as epiphenomenal to community and culture; and it is the strength and continuity of the black cultural heritage as a whole which is at stake and being tested" (686). Hominy is an "Eruption of Funk" the likes of which the post-racial era cannot endure: he is "fitted ... into the outlines of the minstrel tradition [but] it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see [his] dignity and capacity ... emerge" (Ellison "Change the Joke" 50). Although an older white America created Hominy, post-racial America hopes to efface him: just as Foy Cheshire and others would erase Jim from *Huckleberry Finn*. The erasure of uncomfortable black history – mostly by the dominant discourse to assuage its own guilt, but also sometimes by the African-American community to pacify its own traumas – is also the erasure of Hominy; thus, Hominy's persistent agitation to reclaim what has been lost is key to Dickens' resurrection.

As a mentor to TS, Hominy invokes not only Jim but characters from *Invisible Man* and *TWBS*. From *Invisible Man* it is the Vet at the Golden Day, in all of his enigmatic wisdom, who prefigures Hominy. As a young college student IM encounters

the Vet, but he is not ready to hear and digest the Vet's message when this "insane" man speaks to Mr. Norton about Invisible Man:

"You see," he said turning to Mr. Norton, "he has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life. *Understand*. Understand? It's worse than that. He registers with his sense but short-circuits his brain. Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he doesn't digest it. Already he is – well, bless my soul! Behold! a walking zombie! Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!" (Ellison 94)

The Vet is expressing the ways in which IM endures the racist taunts and demands of society without contemplating the deeper systemic resonances of his willing participation. IM's only emotional response is the initial shame that he feels for having slaves as forebears. Further, in the terms of Michelle Wright, this Vet is also ventriloquizing the expectations of white society. IM's visage is a mask to white society: the mask is a trope that engages the Jeffersonian "veil" that covers black humanity and dehumanizes it. The "Negative" is the antithesis in the White racist dialectic that Hegel constructs out of Black faces. Lastly, the Vet's claim that "Nothing has meaning" corresponds with TS's argument that "sometimes it's the nihilism that makes life worth living." In the context of the speech itself, the Vet is arguing that IM's lack of critical thinking deprives his sensory inputs of meaning. But in a greater context, this claim can be read with a different emphasis: nothingness – the void – has meaning to us. In this sense it connects to TS's conclusive rationale for "Unmitigated Blackness."

So too does Scoby, the plainspoken mentor in *TWBS*, suggest a radical counterdiscourse like “Unmitigated Blackness.” He is a peer of the protagonist, unlike Hominy and the Vet, and he is more plainspoken than they. Scoby emboldens Gunnar Kaufman and guides him through the mysteries of black group identity. Most significant here to this argument about the contradictions of racial identity is the moment in which Gunnar asks Scoby, “And what exactly does ‘stay black’ mean, Nick?”; to which Scoby replies, “It means be yourself, what else could it possibly mean?” (155). Gunnar’s question reveals his awareness of what Appiah (1996) calls ascriptive racial performances. Scoby’s answer suggests his own deep understanding of identity, one that, per the Vet in the Golden Day, IM lacked. Scoby employs an important re-reading, one that Michelle Wright would call a counterdiscourse and praise for its universality and inclusivity.¹⁵ Scoby’s “Stay black” does not imply a limited, masked stereotype: instead it is revised as a limitless individualism. Symbolically blackness is also the void, a nihilism that seemingly erases meaning. Yet here Scoby, elsewhere TS, and earlier the veteran in *Invisible Man*’s Golden Day redefine this nothingness as an all-important *raison d’etre*. For each of them, the thought of nothingness is not crippling but is instead inspiring. It is a *carte noire* that is free of the white negative. Gunnar articulates this notion himself: “The most important lesson I learned at El Campesino was that I wasn’t in arrears to the white race ... I owed them nothing” (155).

¹⁵ Bernard Reginster, professor of philosophy at Brown University, says, “The injunction to be yourself is essentially an injunction no longer to care or worry about what other people think, what other people expect of you, and so on and so forth, and is essentially a matter of becoming sort of unreflective or unself-conscious or spontaneous in the way in which you go about things” (qtd. in Christian 151-152).

In *The Sellout*, Hominy Jenkins understands that he owes nothing to white people. Existentially he must challenge their erasure of him and his authentic, albeit complicated, representations. In contrast to the plurality of his neighbors, Hominy does not willingly acquiesce to the assimilation of Dickens. Unlike Foy Cheshire, he does not opportunistically participate in post-racial America's destruction of black identity. As such, Hominy plays a significant role in the novel's discussion of the group foundation of individual identity and of the importance of home, history, and heritage to individual identity. In fact, despite the absurdist behaviors and pronouncements of Hominy, he is rebellious in a way to which cultural critic bell hooks petitions. hooks (2008) worried as early as the 1980's that social justice movements were in a bind. She writes that:

Increasingly, young black people are encouraged by the dominant culture (and by those black people who internalize the values of this hegemony) to believe that assimilation is the only possible way to survive, to succeed ... [Therefore] It is crucial that those among us who resist and rebel, who survive and succeed, speak openly and honestly about our lives and the nature of our personal struggles, the means by which we resolve and reconcile contradictions. (228-229)

Hominy plays a critical role in this equation, both in his guidance of *The Sellout* and in his own redemptive quest. Too many residents of Dickens have become quick to discount their own hometown: "It saved them the embarrassment of having to answer the small-talk 'Where are you from?' question with 'Dickens'" (58). These residents have digested the stories from the dominant discourse about their world, and they too have dismissed it. By contrast, Hominy is as open and honest about his subjectivity, as a black man in racist America, as he possibly can be.

Hominy's honesty and authenticity begin with his name and proceed through to his career and sheer existence. Hominy – the dried and processed corn – is itself a symbol of the American South and the racist history epitomized there. Therefore Hominy the character functions in Dickens in similar ways to the racist totems in *Invisible Man*. Specifically, as a culinary complement, Hominy signifies upon the sweet potato in *Invisible Man*; as such, IM's "admission of loving soul food" (Gordon "Of Tragedy" 82) is described as "freedom ... I no longer had to worry about who saw me or about what was proper" (Ellison, 264). Hominy the character does not ever worry about either of these concerns, despite his descriptions as: "gray haired relic to Uncle Tom's past" (Beatty 66); "last surviving member of the Little Rascals" (67); "ol' Remus" (69); "a sort of *Little Rascals* stunt coon" (71); "personif[ication of] American primitivism" (87); a "Living National Embarrassment. A mark of shame on the African-American legacy, something to be eradicated, stricken from the racial record, like the hambone, Amos 'n' Andy, Dave Chappelle's meltdown, and people who say 'Valentine's Day'" (76). While other characters and individuals consciously try to diminish their blackness, Hominy amplifies his. Where Foy Cheshire has redefined himself against the trauma of his childhood Hollywood acting, Hominy has defined himself as that stereotyped role. The satire is that Hominy's lifelong self-association with that *inauthentic* spectral reproduction has become an *authentic* identity of black positivism. He is proud to be himself, and he is a black man in racist America, and he is comfortable with any contradictions inherent in that subjectivity. This contrasts with the character MC Panache, himself a contemporary stereotype of commodified blackness, a rapper-cum-actor, who is currently enduring the contradiction between authenticity and

inauthenticity. Panache articulates the trap for the working black actor: “I’ve had directors tell me, ‘We need more black in this scene. Can you black it up?’ Then you say, ‘Fuck you, you racist motherfucker!’ And they go, ‘Exactly, don’t lose that intensity!’” (282). Hollywood, a primary manufacturing center of, and key distribution center for, commodification and spectral reproduction, puts black identity in a particularly difficult bind. Working actors like Panache appear to be at the mercy of this reproduction, both in terms of identity and in terms of trade. Meanwhile Hominy, who is far removed from Hollywood as both labor and product, can embody the contradictions inherent in his subjectivity and perform them as a satiric ideology.

Though he himself is comfortable, Hominy is the embodiment of uncomfortable history. As TS seeks to restore Dickens, he recognizes that he must restore its history. Although he chastises the African-American community for “want[ing] everything expunged from our record” (98), he recognizes the antithesis in Hominy:

Feigned or not, sometimes I'm jealous of Hominy's obliviousness, because he, unlike America, has turned the page. That's the problem with history, we like to think it's a book -- that we can turn the page and move the fuck on. But history isn't the paper it's printed on. It's memory, and memory is time, emotions, and song. History is the things that stay with you. (115)

Whether it is obliviousness or a lack of self-consciousness, Hominy is an existential representation of racism, a Faulknerian homage to the power of the past. America cannot simply wish racism away. African Americans must deal with the contradictions of their lives in contemporary America, and they must not ignore their past. Unlike the rest of America, Hominy has “turned the page” on righteous indignation because he understands

that both Dickens, as a bastion of African-American identity, and the lost *Little Rascals* tapes, as mementoes of racism past, are crucial to his self-being. Ironically, though Hominy himself has processed these memories, his existence is itself a disruption to everyone else's wishful thinking of post-racial egalitarianism.

Hominy understands his dependence on Dickens. The dissolution of Dickens in *The Sellout* represents that effacement of black identity and a tacit assumption of assimilation, and Hominy senses that he disappears with it. Hominy is the incarnate vestige of racism, but racism is hidden and displaced in post-racial America. Until racism is unveiled – both in its structural disempowerment of Dickens and in its public transmission on film – then Hominy appears as an outlier rather than as the linchpin that he is.

Hominy's holism depends on his blurring of performance and reality. The disappearance of Dickens, the dissolution of black group identity, and the dissimulation of the *Little Rascals* films conspire to push Hominy into an existential crisis. His response is to lean on *The Sellout*:

"Because when Dickens disappeared, I disappeared ... I just want to feel relevant. ... sometimes we just have to accept who we are and act accordingly. I'm a slave. That's who I am. It's the role I was born to play. A slave who just also happens to be an actor. But being black ain't method acting. Lee Strasberg could teach you how to be a tree, but he couldn't teach you how to be a nigger. This is the ultimate nexus between craft and purpose, and we won't be discussing this again. I'm your nigger for life, and that's it." (77)

Herein Hominy articulates the importance of place in the psychological construction of self. If black communities disappear and become invisible, then so too do black individuals. Certainly this speaks to the legacy of *Invisible Man* and its trope of (in)visibility. For IM himself, his dark skin makes him conspicuous as Other in a white world, yet the Otherness of his black identity makes his individuality invisible, unreadable, and undesired in the white world. In this “post-racial” publication era of *The Sellout*, meanwhile, African-American identity is slowly effaced and lost. In this moment, the success of any one individual African American fulfills, at the very least, the need of what Gordon (1997) calls “hav[ing] blacks,” whereby the inclusion of one black, “the black representative,” denecessitates responsibility for the majority of black individuals who are still excluded (75). At worst, individual success proves to be the “exception” (as bell hooks calls it) that proves the racist rule that African Americans are inferior. In effect, in either circumstance, overdetermination of African-American individuals still exists. Now, however, the racism that formerly made individual African Americans invisible is now itself invisible. Dickens is a bastion of that institutionalized racism; its invisibility is a triumph for the “invisible hand” of racism.

Hominy’s speech echoes further. When he claims to seek relevance, he is speaking as a synecdoche for African-American history. The erasure of black history is a victory for historical white racism, contemporary white revisionism, and Foy Cheshire’s opportunistic and counterproductive grandstanding. This erasure is also a commensurate loss for the generational identity of the African-American community. As an embodiment of the most public and most lamentable collaboration with institutional racism, Hominy’s insistence that his authenticity be recognized and recognizable speaks to a need to

uncover and consider the miscarriages of the past, not least of which is the current trend toward more “spectral forms” of blackness.

When Hominy continues that “... sometimes we just need to accept who we are and act accordingly. I’m a slave. That’s who I am. It’s the role I was born to play,” the double-voicedness, the authentic African-American Signifyin(g), in this excerpt reaches a fever pitch. To “act accordingly” operates on no fewer than four distinct levels. First is Hominy’s indulgence of racist white doctrine. As an African American, his is a limited, disenfranchised, and essentially lesser existence and he would do well to operate in that stratum; acting a slave is the basest manifestation of this doctrine. Second is Hominy’s self-identity as an actor. He is an actor and must do what actors do: blur the lines between character and reality (a blurring that is also shared by the novel format, hence Bakhtin’s concerns with the “internally dialogized word” (330)). Third is the African-American sensibility that black individuals have to be “twice as good” to achieve a similar level of success as a White peer. Fourth and foremost, though, is an intertextual exchange with *TWBS*. When Scoby defines “stay[ing] black” as “be[ing] yourself,” he wants that to mean acting in an unself-conscious way. For most people, being an actor means being quite self-conscious of one’s behavior, but for the best actors it means losing oneself to the role.

Yet it is Hominy’s “role” that resonates most loudly. As in the above interpretations of “act[ing] accordingly,” “role” can suggest the pretense of acceptance of white superiority, the literal sense of character-acting, and the burden of being an African American trying to make it in this country. Further, “role” evokes a sense of the performative that supports each of those interpretations and further dehumanizes the

actual individual. Hominy is not free to be himself, certainly not now that the borders of Dickens no longer shield him from the white world.¹⁶ His hope now is that “I’m your nigger for life, and that’s it.” Affixing himself to TS affords Hominy a stability that otherwise dissolved with Dickens. TS, raised in Black Liberation Psychology, may feel temporarily lost, but he also has an internal compass to provide direction. Lastly, Hominy’s use of “nigger” digs deep. By playing a slave in real life, he achieves a self-deprecating role greater than any that Hollywood denied him in the past. Of course, slaves are also utterly nameless and without identity – the ultimate invisible African American, the faceless racial epithet. Gordon (1997) evaluates the ceaseless trope of invisibility by commenting, “If a black is overdetermined, then to see that black is to see every black. The blacks’ individual life ceases to function as an object of epistemological, aesthetic, or moral concern ... The black becomes an opportune, economic entity” (75). If a black individual’s identity is reduced to, first, a generic black person and, second, a mere economic cog in the service of American industry, then he is left no choice but to function as either an economic actor in this world or as a rebel. Ever the contradiction, Hominy’s “role” of slave operates as both simultaneously: the slave is the most dehumanized, mechanized form of humanity possible, but to be a slave in post-racial America is to rebel against the would-be ethos of this era. In the statement “I’m your nigger for life,” Hominy also recognizes an equivalent sense of black identity within TS as he feels within himself. As an extension, this particular version of black identity refuses to admit inferiority or to assimilate into white society. “... and that’s it” is

¹⁶ As *The Sellout* expresses, “The black experience used to come with lots of bullshit, but at least there was some fucking privacy ... these days mainstream America's nose is all up in our business” (230).

Hominy's ultimatum, his nomination of TS as an anti-leader for the African-American community and his acceptance of his own existential contradiction. Hominy's support, for his own identity and for TS's, encourages TS to wage his campaign to redeem blackness in spite of racism.

Hominy's participation in these machinations involves public melodramatic performances that unsettle those around him. The performative nature of his behaviors is utterly conspicuous and makes other self-conscious of their own public performances. In turn, onlookers become aware that their performative masks are merely tropes and not true identities. When *The Sellout* replaces signs on the #125 bus with signs that read "PRIORITY SEATING FOR SENIORS, DISABLED, AND WHITES" (128), Hominy rides the bus with the hope of bequeathing his seat to a White rider in a gesture of racial subservience. This would be an ultimate act of masking, the dissimulation of one's own sense of self-worth as an African-American individual. Eventually Hominy is able to "sacrifice himself" and to have "relinquished his seat in a manner so obsequious, so unctuously Negro, that the act was less an offer of his place than a bequeathal," and in this act the narrator notes Hominy's mien:

... the look of contentment on Hominy's face as he shuffled to the back of the bus was a pout turned inside out. I think in part it's why no one protested his actions. We recognized the face he was wearing as a mask from our own collections. The happy mask we carry in our back pockets ... that subservient countenance inherent in all black lepidoptera and people. That autonomic eager-to-please response that's triggered anytime you're approached in a store and asked, "Do you work here?" The face

worn every moment you're on the job and not in the bathroom stall, the face flashed to the white person who saunters by and patronizingly pats you on the shoulder and says, "You're doing a fine job. Keep up the good work." The face that feigns acknowledgement that the better man got the promotion, even though deep down you and they both know that you really are the better man and that the best man is the woman on the second floor. (131-132)

Everything, every trope that is embodied in Hominy, resolves and results in this "mask" and this "face." Captured in this passage is the reminder that African Americans are expected by white society to comport themselves in specific ways in public. While this comportment is not the dehumanization of blackface, it is the self-deprecation of minstrelsy and subservience. Despite the would-be dissolution of Jim Crow,¹⁷ despite the alleged acceptance of "post-racial" America, black Americans are not accepted as full-blooded people with fully rounded characters. At this late stage they are still expected to perform an appreciative, domesticated, unchallenging role.

Yet Hominy and TS do everything in their power to note the inauthenticity of post-racialism and the reality of black life in Dickens. When they rebuild the highway sign for "DICKENS – NEXT EXIT," Hominy claims, "The whip feels good on the back, but the sign feels good in the heart" (88). This statement reveals the contradictions that Hominy embodies. Playing the slave and inviting masochism show the performative role

¹⁷ As duBois recalls, "the black man is a person who must ride 'Jim Crow' in Georgia" (qtd. in Cohen 95) – and *The Sellout* suggests that the simple act of riding the bus is itself contemporary Jim Crow.

of Black identity in relation to White society. Meanwhile the emotional response to the re-incorporation of Dickens shows the real effect of communalism.

Hominy's emotional wellbeing is tied not only to the restoration of Dickens but also to the redemption of his professional acting career. Acting a slave may be Hominy's way of reclaiming his professional niche. After commoditizing and profiting from the careers of Hominy and "the great pickaninnies that preceded him," Hollywood abandons them for more palatable forms of Black exploitation: it "had all the blackness it needed in the demi-whiteness of Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier, the brooding Negritude of James Dean, and the broad, gravity-defying, Venus hot-to-trot roundness of Marilyn Monroe's ass" (68). No longer is Hominy's role on *Little Rascals* in vogue, but not because Hollywood and America have found social equality. Rather, Hollywood broadcasts an increasingly dissimulated versions of black identity. True blackness, truly black *logos* that is unashamed and unself-conscious of itself, is unacceptable; "demi-whiteness," black identity diluted with Optic White values and aesthetics, is the extent of Hollywood's progressiveness. Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier are not threateningly violent versions of blackness, nor are they reckless caricatures of inferiority. Rather, they are "paragons of good blackness" (Beatty, *Hokum*, 105). They are "acceptable" versions of blackness, "demi-white" versions that suggest a total assimilation into white culture. They are following a script: both the one that Hollywood produces and the one that white culture demands. That these real-world men were politically active is irrelevant; on-screen they represent domestication and fealty to the dominant discourse. Their star power is bastardized by James Dean, visibly white but somehow capturing "Negritude" (as will White entertainers in a variety of media). Lastly, the physical attractiveness of

Marilyn Monroe, defined by TS as the sexiness of her *gluteus maximi*, evokes a stereotypical quality of African-American women and starlets. Ultimately, black aesthetics are acceptable only in white packaging; so too are black actors in Hollywood's increasingly post-racial narrative.

Although James Dean and Marilyn Monroe may devalue some aspects of an African-American aesthetic, blackface is the most virulent form of racist appropriation. Therefore Hominy, this African-American character who revels in racist stereotype, is a predictable candidate to discuss this trope. Hominy is a guest speaker at "the L.A. Festival of Forbidden Cinema and Unabashedly racist Animation." A pack of sorority girls stands to ask a question, but is booed by the audience for being in, as "a tall, bearded white boy" recognizes, "non-ironic blackface" (240). The audience is alarmed when Hominy asserts ignorance about the term and idea of "blackface," an ignorance that the narrator explains:

For Hominy blackface isn't racism. It's just common sense. Black skin looks better. Looks healthier. Looks prettier. Looks powerful ... Because if imitation is indeed the highest form of flattery, then white minstrelsy is a compliment, it's a reluctant acknowledgment that unless you happen to really be black, being "black" is the closest a person can get to true freedom. (240-1)

Hominy totally inverts the racist power of blackface in a way that can only occur in satire. Traditionally, blackface is a vehicle by which white racists dehumanize African Americans. Perhaps they even infantilize African Americans in that they achieve "true freedom" from adult, white concerns by donning the "happy mask" that Hominy reveals

on Bus #125. However, Hominy redefines the term, much like other “Groups that experienced marginality ... [but] still claim as part of their identity that characteristic formerly used to justify their exclusion” (Cohen 40). Hominy is psychologically secure in his performative art of acting: “Hominy” even sounds like a dialectical “harmony”: he is at peace with himself, thus he perceives no threat from blackface. For racists, African-American identity is something that should be effaced in an effort to join the dominant discourse. For Hominy, African-American identity is something to which to aspire. “Being ‘black’ is the closest a person can get to true freedom” is Hominy’s way of exulting black identity: it is an escape from a debilitating white *logos* that impedes the progress of all involved. If, as Michelle Wright has argued about DuBois’s critical writings, the prevailing White *logos* is one “that attempts to prevent or that resists synthesis” (78), then black identity might provide a productive escape. In this light, Hollywood’s “demi-white” production of African-American culture is another “spectral form of reproduction”: not cultural appropriation but instead a more palatable, but just as aspirational, version of blackface.

The traditional view is that blackface dehumanizes African Americans to nothing more than a mask. Although Hominy disputes this by reinterpreting blackface as a tribute to African-American ideals, the “mask” remains an important trope in African-American writing because it is more often a means by which African-American agents engage with, and disguise themselves against, the white community. DuBois speaks of this mask as a veil: “the veil that signifies both the Sein (being) and Schein (seeming) aspects of the Negro American subject’s existence because it points both to the guise and the face that lies behind it” (Wright, 83). The trope protects disempowered African Americans and

their actual discontents from the scrutiny and backlash of the white dominant discourse. A problem emerges, however, when the “actors” wearing the mask lose sight of its performative aspects and confuse it with their real identity (Wright, 102). This is similar to Gordon’s (1997) concern about African-American masochists (people who cannot see themselves being seen as others), and it conjures questions about “popular culture representations” and whether they are “expression[s] of strength from a community” or “exploitation[s] of the local tragedies” (Kalich 83). Thus, being “masked against himself” is a product of the dissolution of the trope and of the blurring of performance and reality.

As for the sorority girls in “non-ironic blackface,” their African-American sister provides a seemingly practical and earnest evaluation of her situation – which, of course, Beatty is satirizing. Before she speaks for herself, TS wonders “if she, too, was acting, if she felt free. If she was aware that the natural color of her skin was actually blacker than ‘blackface’” (241). As with Hominy’s assertion that “It’s the role I was born to play,” there is a consideration that “being ‘black is the closest a person can get to true freedom.” The woman herself, Butterfly Davis nee Dr. Topsy, recognizes the absurdity of her situation and anticipates TS’s question; to this implicit question she replies, “I’m pre-med. And why? Because these white bitches got the hookup, that’s why. The old girls’ network exists, too, now, and it’s no fucking joke. If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. That’s what my mama says, because racism’s everywhere” (243-244). She, too, sees the racism in post-racial America; her reaction is to ingratiate herself in the current racial climate, not out of a naïve post-racialism but out of a conscientious realpolitik. Her choice is not unlike TS’s boyhood preference for the Barbie and Ken playset, itself seemingly practical not political, yet revealing the structural inequalities that belie its “practicality.”

Butterfly's cavalier attitude toward racism suggests that she is another character who is perhaps comfortable enough in her identity to ignore the racist implications in her surroundings – yet she violates the injunction of Dr. F.K. Me against “breed[ing] a false sense of familiarity” with white people (271). On one hand, she seems to counteract the example of Black masochism (Gordon 1997), in that she recognizes her Otherness yet pretends not to; yet on the other, her tokenism assuages white guilt and legitimizes racist misbehavior.

Notwithstanding, Butterfly redeems Hominy. She has researched the lost *Little Rascal* tapes, Hominy's Holy Grail, and has traced them to Foy Cheshire. Her binder includes spaces for those six missing films, and TS tries “to see through the redaction's blackness and back into time” (245). Those tapes are the most convincing evidence of the reality of America's racist past, near enough to have been filmed and curated by its greatest mythmaker, Hollywood. America's white *logos* has manipulated the past to eradicate its complicity in a legacy of human rights violations; that the blackness of redaction obscures black *logos* is only a final *coup de grace* in revisionist history.¹⁸

The lost *Little Rascal* tapes are to Hominy what Hominy is to Dickens. They are evidence of an intentionally forgotten past, but a past that must resurface if Hominy is to find closure and if the people of Dickens are to chart a path forward. Their disappearance is a mystery, whereas Dickens's disappearance is undisguised. Hominy believes “the widespread rumor that Foy Cheshire had ... purchase[d] the rights to the most racist

¹⁸ In a satirical way, blackness also obscures Hominy's trespassing: The Sellout finds Hominy and Butterfly swimming together in Foy's pool and notes that “no nosy neighbors had bothered to call the police. One old black man looks like all the rest, I suppose” (249). The Black invisibility of *Invisible Man* reigns as large in contemporary L.A. as it did in post-war New York City.

shorts in the *Our Gang* oeuvre” (97). In this role Foy Cheshire continues his antagonism: first, by stealing ideas from TS’s father; second, by mocking TS and his vision for Dickens; and third, by extending his revisionist history from the literary canon to the early days of film. These missing tapes are the most indemnifying and irrefutable documents of white racism; thus they are the key component in Hominy’s quest to restore his identity, an identity based on those lowest performative debasements by African Americans for white pleasure.

At first, the missing tapes seem anti-climactic, yet the final episode literally and figuratively sets Hominy free. The first few episodes merely illustrate “racism [that] is [as] rampant as usual, but no more virulent than a day trip to the Arizona state legislature” (280), the last episode raises the bar. The episode, “Oil Ty-Coons!,” features an unnerving plot development: the three black characters, played by Buckwheat, Hominy, and – surprisingly – Foy Cheshire, become rich by using other black children to fill oil cans “with crude drop by black drop” (281). As *The Sellout* has made clear as a text, this plot twist is anything but, and it is in fact all too obvious. First is the crude sight gag: white *logos* expects black characters to have black blood, not red. This notion rationalizes acts of dehumanization. Second is the idea of overdetermination: these characters are selfish and manipulative, and these characteristics validate white society’s like treatment of them. Third is the spirit of commercialism: black people are merely commodities to be exploited. In sum, black Americans are barred from the dominant discourse pseudo-biologically, psychologically, and economically.

For Hominy, though, this episode is liberating. He frees himself with a kiss: “I quit ... Slavery. We’ll talk reparations in the morning” (283). These documents of

unbridled racism restore his sense of identity; they represent the foundational element that balances his individualism with his place in the group. This balance braces him against the contradictions of his existence. He is an actor who reads from a script and a free man who directs his own actions. With a full accounting of the terrible and humiliating history that precedes him, he can assert his own agency and make his own social justice. Hominy has long been an example of contradiction: first, of how African-American people have been debased by white society; and second, of how African-American performance has fueled the racism of white audiences. Now he is also an example of how that history is but Brother Tarp's broken leg chain: a germination of identity but not a barrier to self-determination.

Like Dickens, Hominy is a contradiction within post-racial America. He performs an early, inauthentic reproduction of blackness for so long that it becomes his authentic self, only now it is offensive to a Hollywood and an America that both erase their racist histories and efface blackness. Although Hominy locates his identity crisis in the dissolution of Dickens, Dickens has newfound value to white America, whereas white America would prefer to redact Hominy. Therefore Hominy plays an important role in both *The Sellout's* and TS's agenda: his ambiguously ironic role-playing makes him inscrutable and incomprehensible,¹⁹ two key ingredients in "Unmitigated Blackness."

¹⁹ From Gibson (2010): "Those who are incomprehensible to the public are erased, while those who are familiar stereotypes of 'authentic' blackness are publically praised and rewarded. Their recognition and remuneration give the appearance of acceptance of heterogeneous black subjects, but in *Erasure* [by Percival Everett] at least they are overdetermined echoes of invisibility" (367).

CHAPTER VI

TS: THE SELLOUT HIMSELF

To “act accordingly,” the protagonist of *The Sellout* exudes and embraces contradiction. Although he ultimately arrives at the theory of “Unmitigated Blackness” and practices that theory by making racism visible in Dickens, his quest is one born of an identity crisis. His crisis begins on an individual level but eventually widens to include communal concerns. These individual and communal identity crises exist because of the contradictions inherent in African-American identity in post-Obama and allegedly “post-racial” America. They are represented by the framing questions in the text – “Who am I? And how may I become myself?” (39) and “So what exactly is *our thing*?” (288) – questions that beg for answers broad and inclusive, because authentic black experience, both individually and communally, is complicated and various. The only constant is that black experience is informed by the totality of African-American history, and any action to dismiss, detach, or “whitewash” that history is deleterious to the psychological wellbeing and political agency of the individual and the group. Thus, TS – indoctrinated by his “Liberation Psycholog[ist]” father, motivated by Hominy, and disgusted by Foy Cheshire – recognizes and restores the interconnectedness of the black subject, the black

community, African-American history, and all of the contradictions that cleave those entities together.

Section 1: An Exceptional Individual, but no Exception

Before he can advocate for all Dickensians, TS must understand his individual psychological, patrimonial, and political position. His quest is driven by the therapeutic “nigger-whispering” questions that he inherits from his father. He defies all stereotypes and efforts to overdetermine his character, because he is not a performer of Hominy’s caliber, a nationalist of his father’s generation, or a charlatan of Foy’s ilk, so he must chart a seemingly unexplored course through the cognitive dissonances of contradiction. He makes this clear in the novel’s first sentence, a sentence self-aware of its own satirical ventriloquism: “This may be hard to believe, coming from a black man, but I’ve never stolen anything” (3). Before he can repair Dickens, he must become comfortable with the contradictions in his own subjectivity.

The protagonists of *Invisible Man* and *TWBS* have also searched for answers to existential questions. For IM, the question is, “How does it feel to be free of one’s illusions?” (Ellison 569), and for Gunnar Kaufman the question is, “And what exactly does ‘stay black’ mean?” (Beatty *TWBS* 155). As also regards the driving questions in *The Sellout*, these questions address the complicated and unresolved issues surrounding Black identity in an ever-changing, yet perpetually racist America.

IM attempts to find his place in a world that routinely and completely denies his individuality and identity. He frames the linear narrative of his story, his naïve odyssey, between a Prologue and an Epilogue from which he espouses a cynical, world-wearied

reflection. Early he proclaims, “Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of ones form is to live a death” (Ellison 7). IM’s identity is “formless” for much of the novel: it is formless because he struggles to understand his communal and historical identity. IM admits to looking everywhere for his identity (15), and in this process he kowtows to Dr. Bledsoe, dean of his African-American college; Mr. Norton, White trustee of that same college; Mr. Emerson, Kimbro, and Lucius Brockway, purveyors of Optic White paints; and Brother Jack, white apparatchik of the Brotherhood. In his encounters with all of these characters, IM is an incomplete man; he is a sycophant, a denier, and a “tool” (564). He does not realize himself as a traitor or a spy – the pro-black identity of his grandfather – until later.

IM is unable to reconcile himself with the totems of racism that he encounters, and this inability prevents his own apotheosis. When he is angered by the racist bank he finds in Mary’s boarding house, he hides it in his briefcase. He can understand neither the “plunge” of Brother Clifton (434) nor the Sambo dolls, those which Clifton made “dance all the time” with “the black thread [that] had been invisible” (446). He finds Brother Tarp’s leg link paradoxically unsettling and insignificant. Only at the novel’s end does he realize that these symbols, which he has hidden in his briefcase, give him some power. These items are the material embodiment of white racism; his embarrassment about them merely gives them more power; his understanding – as the Vet says – illuminates “the simple facts of life” of black subjectivity (94).

In his final dream, IM answers Jack’s question “How does it feel to be free of one’s illusions?” with the response, “Painful and empty” (569); this response shows his gradual recognition of his true identity. He is now cognizant of the machinations of white

racism and of his role in the dialectic between white and black, yet he is unable to act and can instead only “hibernate.” His frustration with the situation, initially defined by his inability to determine “whether I had been part of a sellout or not” (480) and climactically represented in his inability to stem the tide of Ras’s riot, does not explode with agitation, but rather implodes. He had himself acknowledged earlier that “no one man could do much about it ... All our work had been very little, no great change had been made ... I’d forgotten to measure what it was bringing forth” (444), and at the novel’s end he recognizes his own impotence. IM may ultimately become as radically self-aware as is TS, but unlike TS he effects no measurable change. He does, however, leave advice which, I might argue, TS accepts. IM opines “that (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves: Not like an arrow, but a boomerang. (Beware of those who speak of the *spiral* of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy)” (Ellison 6). His mistake may have been to imagine a linear progression of racist disarmament, a mistake that TS circumvents.

Paul Beatty’s first protagonist, Gunnar Kaufman of *TWBS*, is so disenchanted and disaffected by the ongoing racism in America that he suggests mass suicide as the only reasonable response. Gunnar’s family history and his slow assimilation into a black-majority community make him an unlikely and ultimately counterproductive leader. Raised in a white suburb, Gunnar and his sisters parrot the logic of black self-hatred, a logic fostered by their self-loathing father, by insisting on their difference from other black children.²⁰ Although Ellis (1989) had postulated that “The culturally mulatto *Cosby*

²⁰ “Mom asked if we would feel better going to an all-black camp. We gave an insistent Noooooooo.’ She asked why and we answered in three-part sibling harmony, ‘Because they’re different from us’” (36-37).

girls” are as authentically “as a black teenage welfare mother” (235), the Kaufman family, like *TWBS* as a whole and Foy Cheshire in *The Sellout*, suggests that authentic blackness requires a comfortable internalization of pro-black identity. Because they deny their own black identity in a bid for greater assimilation into white America, the Kaufmans themselves participate in the dissolution of concrete forms of blackness.

Though Gunnar is able to reconnect with an African-American community, his outsider status gives him a unique perspective on racial issues. Much like IM, Gunnar finds himself “running in place”: “... living out there was like being in a never-ending log-rolling contest. You never asked why the log was rolling or who was rolling the log” (102). Because Gunnar *is* different than his Black peers, he is better-positioned to identify and articulate the oppressive conditions that they must overcome. Ultimately he acknowledges how inertia is the greatest impediment to him and his community: “I had grown accustomed to running in place, knowing nothing mattered as long as I kept moving” (102). *Invisible Man* also uses this metaphor of running, when the protagonist’s grandfather appears in a dream and encourages him to read the letter in his briefcase. For *TWBS*, Gunnar’s nihilism emerges from the idea that “nothing mattered” – white racism and black social struggle combine to create an intractable situation for African-American individuals and their communities.²¹

Gunnar’s claim that “I wasn’t in arrears to the white race ... I owed them nothing” (155) assumes an overwhelmingly defeatist tone when he arrives at his suicidal call-to-arms. His expression of emancipation is “a nihilistic inversion of the organic ideal

²¹ Gunnar’s name is itself an allusion to Gunnar Myrdal, author of the influential 1944 text *An American Dream: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. Ralph Ellison, in “*An American Dilemma: A Review*,” laments Myrdal’s patronization and disenfranchisement of black America.

of grassroots activism [and] an affirmation of self-annihilating complacency” (Leader-Picone 145). Gunnar muses in his epilogue:

It's been a lovely five hundred years, but it's time to go. We're abandoning this sinking ship America, lightening its load by tossing our histories overboard, jettisoning the present, and dry-docking our future. Black America has relinquished its needs in a world where expectations are illusion, has refused to develop ideals and mores in a society that applies principles without principle.
(225)

Much as Hegel finds white Europeans' dominance in the “negation of the negation,” Gunnar identifies this same logical inconsistency as the great impediment to black acceptance and equality. Where Marcus Garvey proposed a return to Africa, Gunnar argues that the solution is to leave the dialectic entirely rather than play the antithesis, the opposite, the Other in Hegel's unfair and inconsistent dialectic. In contrast to Gunnar Myrdal, the outsider who attempted to reconcile American racial discourse, Gunnar Kaufman is a repatriated expatriate who gives up on the Hegelian dialectic entirely.

From these literary predecessors emerge *The Sellout* and its protagonist, a man who “if [he] had [his] druthers ... couldn't care less about being black” (43). Yet his novel and his mission are about reclaiming black identity in a post-racial world and about restoring the visibility of white racism in a world that has allegedly disowned it. His father's death is the catalyst for his political activism. At the scene of his father's homicide, TS imagines his old man preaching, “... Just because racism is dead don't

mean they still don't shoot niggers on sight'" (43).²² Prior to his father's death, TS had distanced himself from his father's "Liberation Psychology" and had preferred to believe that his individual identity would satisfy the needs of post-racial America; this is why Foy Cheshire brands him "The Sellout," because he does not continue his father's political remonstrations (95).²³ The irony for TS, however, is that his blackness – and his father's seemingly outdated psychology and nationalism – will become all the more important in post-racial America.

Before he can extend his therapeutic quest to all of Dickens, TS must make peace with his own identity, despite the contradiction of being, first, a black man in America and, second, a black man in "*post-racial*" America. The first step is his personal reconciliation with his upbringing. TS re-envisioning the political "bullshit that my father shoveled down my throat" as the literal "Shit You Shovel": TS intends to redevelop the farm as a farm. He admits that "I chose to specialize in the plant life that had the most cultural relevance to me – watermelon and weed. At best, I'm a subsistence farmer" (62). Subsistence farming implies self-reliance and self-sustainment: American individualism at its finest, but one that foregoes the rich rewards of Eurocentric capitalism. His nod to "cultural relevance" is itself a confession of his tether to his African-American identity and community, even at a time when he is still divorced from the politics of black existentialism.

²² This example of anti-black police brutality recalls Frantz Fanon's concern that "In the colonies it is the policeman and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-betweens, the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression" (qtd. in Cohen 44).

²³ TS is similar to the protagonist Thelonius Monk in Percival Everett's *Erasure*, who may try "to please himself by disassociating himself from 'race' altogether ... [by] mistakenly believ[ing] that his staunch individualism" could save him from a racial identity in post-racial America (Gibson 364).

TS's efforts to create a life for himself during the years of the Obama presidency is a defining feature of his crisis. In effect, his mission cannot be divested from its zeitgeist. Even his horticultural agenda is couched in relation to this first African-American president: "you'd think that after two terms of looking at a dude in a suit [that black president] deliver the State of the Union address, you'd get used to square watermelons, but you never do" (63). Indeed, TS's square watermelons are self-referential and invitingly symbolic. The first suggestion in that sentence is that people have not gotten used to seeing a black president: President Obama has not ushered in a new normal.²⁴ For many viewers, this president is the exception to his race and not merely an exceptional person of his race; this distinction perpetuates the white racist dialectic that presupposes black inferiority. Indeed, the "square watermelons" are an added dig to this conversation, an additional act of ventriloquism. "Square" is slang reference to someone who has been pacified and assimilated, often an African American who has adopted "white" model behaviors. "Watermelon" remains a metonymic trope for the coon-ing pickaninny, the figure of the cast-iron bank that IM finds at Mary Rambo's. White racist America still views President Obama as such. However, "square" can work in the opposite direction, too. In combination and opposition, the "square watermelon" is aberrant and unusual; it defies norms and expectations; it sets its own standards and creates its own friction. It is the "square watermelon" in the round hole of racist stereotype and performance. Much as black *logos* creates an entirely different dialectic

²⁴ Later, the college student Topsy will argue that "racism's everywhere," with one exception: "Within those fucking frames [of Obamas on White House lawn] at that instant, and in only that instant, there's no fucking racism" (243-4). That still photograph removes the Obama family from reality; it may be hopeful, but it is artificial. In this way this moment is akin to *The Cosby Show*, which Ellis (1989) treats as ...

toward racial synthesis and harmony, so too does the square watermelon redefine possibility in an otherwise static world of white racist discourse. Otherwise, like the proverbial square peg in the round hole, it will create a logjam that demands attention.

TS is a “square watermelon” in this final sense because he agitates in counterpoint to Foy Cheshire, that exemplar of the Black “exception.” Foy Cheshire uses his position of power only for self-aggrandizement. His politics work to efface the history of racial difference and inequality; this effacement is unwittingly in concert with the agenda of 21st-century white *logos*. When Foy revises *Huckleberry Finn*, TS responds:

That's the difference between most oppressed peoples of the world and American blacks. They vow never to forget, and we want everything expunged from our record, sealed and filed away for eternity. We want someone like Foy Cheshire to present our case to the world with a set of instructions that the jury will disregard centuries of ridicule and stereotype and pretend the woebegone niggers in front of you are starting from scratch. (98)

TS feels that historical revisionism does not serve the communal wellbeing of the African-American community. Instead the desire for strong central leadership betrays the black community both by disenfranchising its multitudinous voices and by reducing its historical concerns to politically correct sound bites. Instead of answering the foundational questions of his father's Liberation Psychology, “Who am I? And how may I become myself?,” the revisionism of Foy Cheshire and other recent black leaders denies black identity in the name of American equality. *TWBS* parodies this naïve colorblind

politic by suggesting black suicide as a rejection of American equality; *The Sellout* lampoons the very notion of equality by re-emphasizing the legacies of inequality.

It takes a “square watermelon” to incite the uncomfortable conversations that resuscitate Dickens. It takes a character who knowingly assumes the roles of slaveholder and segregationist, despite being African-American himself. It takes a character who knows black history to “sell out” the colorblind vision of post-racial America.²⁵ When he defends himself, TS claims, “I’m no Panglossian American. And when I did what I did, I wasn’t thinking about inalienable rights, the proud history of our people. I did what worked ...” (23). He is neither Pollyannaish nor nihilistic; he is neither self-isolating nor self-destructive; instead he is practical.

II. Satiric Boomerangs

TS recognizes the practical importance of Dickens to the wellbeing of the individuals who live there. Through his burgeoning comfort with his own identity, through his assumption of communal responsibility through crisis intervention, and through his contradictory relationship with Hominy, TS redevelops Dickens as a “safe house” for the hearts, minds and bodies of its marginalized population. He encourages group members “to think of issues in terms of the rights and entitlements of the community” and to recognize that “Marginal group members, who individually have little political power, are able to pool their resources and thus gain greater collective power”

²⁵ Again, the protagonist of *Erasure*, Monk Ellison, must also confront these contradictions of race, racism, and identity: “As Ellison learns more about the success [of his own satirical novel], he begins to understand that ‘selling out’ his artistic principles – invariably bound to his nonracial aesthetics – ironically means that he must both acknowledge and exploit his ‘race’” (Gibson 364-5).

when they build “indigenous structures” of “mobilization” (Cohen 51-53). TS’s satiric re-inscription of segregation and racism are intended to be these “indigenous structures,” but this process is neither easy nor popular – at least not at first. Only when its relevance becomes self-obvious do TS’s friends and neighbors appreciate his agitation.

First, TS must physically restore Dickens. After he and Hominy restore Dickens’ highway identifiers, he proceeds to “whiteline” Dickens according to its pre-existing borders in *The Thomas Guide* maps. Of first note is that various anonymous community members help him in the task, but unlike the stupefied assistants of Tom Sawyer or “Tom Soarer,” TS’s helpers simply understand his mission and volunteer their time. Despite the arbitrary nature of civic boundaries, passersby identify the implications of these boundaries on their identities.²⁶ Even TS admits an alarming allocution about his handiwork, even though he had merely been adding white lines to streets already painted with yellow ones:

... I, too, was hesitant to cross the line, because the jagged way it surrounded the remnants of the city reminded me of the chalk outline the police had needlessly drawn around my father’s body. But I did like the line’s artifice. The implication of solidarity and community it represented. And while I hadn’t quite reestablished Dickens, I had managed to quarantine it. And community-cum-leper colony wasn’t a bad start. (109)

This passage reveals a number of double-voiced ideas. The “chalk outline” may be personally significant to TS, but it reverberates symbolically, too. The “chalk outline”

²⁶ The Sellout notes “Puzzled looks on their faces from asking themselves why they felt so strongly about the Dickens side of the line as opposed to the other side” despite identical levels of stress and disarray, and he wonders, “And why was that? When it was just a line” (109).

represents the crime and danger that the white community imagines is rife in non-white communities. It represents the death of the black community as a whole as that community struggles to retain its identity in the face of 21st-century racial politics. “Whitelining” hearkens the racist real estate policies of redlining. “Whitelining” coupled with the “chalk outline” signifies how the exclusion from white privilege creates an inclusion of black community. As Michelle Wright argued about Cesaire, if the white community seeks exclusion and the black community seeks unification, then a newfound black *logos* must lead the way – just like TS’s experience with the outhouse in the Deep South illustrated. Likewise, the “artifice” of this simple, unassuming line reveals the artificiality and arbitrariness of so much epistemology – not least of which are race and racism. Again, white *logos* operates in differentiation and negative definition; perhaps black *logos* can offer holism and positivity.

When TS replaces signs on the city bus for Hominy’s birthday, here too does he accentuate the negativity of racism as a means to goad his neighbors. However, as with his city lines, his outing of invisible and intractable racism re-awakens his neighbors to the complicity of their own “sleepwalking.”²⁷ Nevermind the implicit counterdiscourse that white people don’t ride the bus anyway; TS’s ex-girlfriend Marpessa claims that “those damn signs you made have fucking set black people back five hundred years” (130). Importantly, though, S contradicts her: the signs “set black people five hundred years ahead of everybody else on the planet.” His father had thought too small,²⁸ Gunnar

²⁷ Invisible Man warns of “sleepwalkers” (Ellison 6).

²⁸ Hominy convinces the narrator to think in terms of another paradox, “That saving Dickens nigger by nigger with a bullhorn ain’t never going to work ... that you have to stop seeing us as individuals, ‘cause right now, massa, you ain’t seeing the plantation for the niggers” (79-80).

Kaufman thinks too nihilistically, IM too naïvely, and Foy Cheshire too selfishly; but TS foresees how these short-term tactics are part of a long-term strategy.

His reflection on five hundred years of African-American history is what leads to a critical development of his counterdiscursive black *logos*. He has occasion to wax philosophical in reply to a conservative's claim that "*You'd rather be here than in Africa*" and to consider the interconnectedness of the historical black experience in America with the present one:

I'm not so selfish as to believe that my relative happiness, including, but not limited to, twenty-four-hour access to chili burgers, Blu-ray, and Aeron office chairs is worth generations of suffering. I seriously doubt that some slave ship ancestor, in those idle moments between being raped and beaten, was standing knee-deep in their own feces rationalizing that, in the end, the generations of murder, unbearable pain and suffering, mental anguish, and rampant disease will all be worth it because someday my great-great-great-great grandson will have Wi-Fi, no matter how slow and intermittent the signal is. (219)

Here TS tackles the excesses of America's individualistic ethos: self-centeredness, opportunism, and exceptionalism. For all the cheekiness here, these thoughts re-situate the concerns of contemporary African Americans in their history of forced diaspora. Individual gain comes at the expense of communal diminution. In the novel *Middle Passage*, Charles Johnson writes about the enslaved Africans from the Allmuseri tribe; after their time on the slave ship they are "no longer Africans, yet not Americans either" (Johnson 125). Such is arguably also the case for the African-American characters and

community in *The Sellout*. The citizens of Dickens have lost sight of their identity, as race and racial history have been swept away by the tide of post-racialism. However, they are not truly allowed to participate in America's individualistic culture because they are black. Ultimately they are left in an identity purgatory, a malaise that leads to a lack of both political agency and self-determination.

The cheekiness of TS's comments also deserve examination, especially in the text's function as satire. They constitute a hybrid construction, which Bakhtin (1981) defines as:

... an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two 'languages,' two semantic and axiological belief systems ... It frequently happens that even one and the same word will belong simultaneously to two languages, two belief systems that intersect in a hybrid construction – and, consequently, the word has two contradictory meanings. (304-5)

Bakhtin's theory invites critics to tease out the multi-varied meanings of individual words and phrases within the novelistic discourse. It argues that the language itself vibrates with an internal conflict between discrete meanings in potentially oppositional discourses.

Thus, there are several layers of meaning in TS's evaluation of Jon McJones's "*You'd rather be here than in Africa*" comment. First, the narrator takes the direct stand that "my relative happiness ... is [not] worth generations of suffering." This explicit ideology is couched initially in the negative ("I'm not so selfish as to believe ..."), and then it is buried more deeply, by the impertinent cynicism of the character-narrator, in his

arbitrary enumeration of societal luxuries and in his scientific detachment from the experiences of the Middle Passage. The satirical language also creates unexpected symmetries, first between the luxury of the contemporary characters' "twenty-four-hour access" and the misery of "idle moments" during the Middle Passage and legacy of slavery, second among the itemized pros and cons. Chili burgers (and cheap, processed foods) would seem to alleviate the rampant disease of malnutrition, yet actually cause many of today's most common diseases. Blu-ray movies, with their Hollywood fictions and performative stereotypes, create (and falsely soothe) the mental anguish that comes with a paradoxically hyper-connected, schizophrenic, and racially-disconnected societal structure. Plush, ergonomic Aeron office chairs appear to be the antithesis of unbearable pain and suffering, yet they promote atrophied muscles and unmotivated political responses. These symmetrical disconnects reveal *The Sellout's* disdain for the placating and pacifying nature of contemporary culture and commercial convenience.

Other individual words resonate in two Bakhtinian voices simultaneously. "Idle" conforms to the character's ceaseless sarcasm, but it is also a reference to racist arguments about laziness among African-Americans. "Rationalizing" pokes fun at the narrator's academic father while also imagining an inhuman degree of perspective on the part of the slaves enduring the Middle Passage. Both of these terms allude to the long-standing argument within the African-American community about the agitation for its political and social equality, the argument most famously and reductively depicted as that between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois. Washington would certainly chastise anyone imagined as "idle," and from his perspective perhaps that idleness is manifested in the "rationalizing" and reasoning of DuBois.

The last joke in the passage is about our great 21st century technology, Wi-Fi. Wireless Fidelity allows access to the internet, a seemingly endless trove of edifying knowledge, a seemingly beneficial opportunity for interconnectedness and social activism, yet also a seemingly endless morass of mindless if not deleterious entertainment and distraction. The term “wireless” allows us to move around without cords and cables: that is, with no strings attached, or with no tethers or traces to others. “Fidelity” – faithfulness – refers technologically to the quality of the signal being (wirelessly) transmitted, but, in a passage connecting today’s generation with earlier (and enslaved) generations, it begs for grounding an individual’s identity in her connection to her community and its environs.

A crucial site of this re-envisioning of black identity and of this questioning of inauthentic, reductive, and “spectral forms of blackness” is Chaff Middle School. TS’s pragmatic political agenda allows him to diagnose that the failures of Dickens’s schools result from their loss of identity. It matters not whether the blame is greater for whitewashed curricula or for revisionist racial history. What matters is that TS “realized that segregation would be the key to bringing Dickens back” (168). Just like with public transportation, part of the satire is that Dickens and Chaff Middle School are already segregated from White America. TS makes this *de facto* segregation more conspicuous when he separates *the wheat from the chaff* with his ruse for the “The Wheaton Academy Charter Magnet School of the Arts, Science, Humanities, Business, Fashion, and Everything Else” (192). When parents, enticed by the pristine aura of the signs and “eager for their children to join the ranks of the giant Anglo kids,” ask Assistant Principal Charisma Molina about an admissions test, Charisma duplicitously directs the parents’

attention to the consistent identifier of the poster – the students’ whiteness – and responds, “Well, there’s your answer. Your child can pass that test, they’re in” (193). Post-racial or not, by definition this cannot be inclusive if it does not include black students.

TS’s exposure of white exclusivity serves to motivate the black community. Dickensians realize that they are not excluded because they are poor and “woebegone,” but *because* of historical and racial prejudice. Charisma’s data-collection suggests that TS’s figmentary school is serving a greater purpose for the community:

Charisma had intuitively grasped the psychological subtleties of my plan even as it was just starting to make sense to me ... Because she knew that even in these times of racial equality, when someone whiter than us, richer than us, blacker than us, Chineser than us, better than us, whatever than us, comes around throwing their equality in our faces, it brings out our need to impress, to behave, to tuck in our shirts, do our homework, show up on time, make our free throws, teach, and prove our self-worth in hopes that we won’t be fired, arrested, or trucked away and shot ... I did sympathize with [Booker T. Washington’s] and Charisma’s need for an on-call

Caucasian panopticon. (208-209)

The real “nefarious shit” (as Foy calls the school (196)) is that issues of equality and inequality are fraught with complexity and freighted with implication. TS’s usage of “equality” is particularly complicated here. Contemporary society professes a post-racial, and color-blind equality. For example, on Hominy’s birthday busride, the white actress-come-stripper Mary Jane argues to Marpessa that “it isn’t race that’s the problem but

class” (138). This post-racial mentality surfaces in stories of individual success, of the “exception” or the “someone” who reaches success in the white discourse and internalizes the white discourse that the playing field is level. *The Sellout* satirizes this double-standard. The historical Booker T. Washington has become a trope for the internalization of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant work ethic as a means of achieving economic equality first and social equality second; even IM means to ventriloquize “social responsibility” before he inadvertently and inadvisably calls for “social equality.” TS is contending that “the Caucasian panopticon” serves a proactive function in the black community by goading superlative assimilative behaviors. *The Sellout* is contending, however, that the loss of public discourse about the societal structure of white racism limits the ability of the disenfranchised black community from actively pursuing systemic change. The suggestion of racism that was explicated in Peggy McIntosh’s “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” still holds true: individual black people remain tokens of the black community as a whole. Or, as TS reminds readers, “Regardless of your income level, the old adage of having to be twice as good as the white man, half as good as the Chinese guy, and four times as good as the last Negro the supervisor hired before you still holds true” (181).

What these Chaff Middle School episodes make clear to TS is what he struggles to articulate at the Supreme Court. He is no “Panglossian American”: Instead he is revealing the veil; it still exists in society, despite efforts to disguise it and make it transparent. The politics of Booker T. Washington’s extreme patience, much less the post-racial validation of the “exception,” must be replaced by the politicized action of the hoi polloi. Disenfranchised people must acknowledge, broadcast, and contest the system

that disenfranchises them. These actions will not emerge from acts of assimilation or acculturation but instead from “the arts of the contact zone”: literary and political arts in the “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (Pratt 319). As such, TS builds on these pragmatic politics by accelerating his acts of social disobedience.²⁹ He claims that “driving around with Hominy as my Igor was sort of empowering, even though we were mocking the notion of being powerless” (224). The culmination of their exposure is another line, this time at the hospital, “a line that’s as close to the Yellow Brick Road as the patients will ever get,” one that leads to a choice among the back alley exit, the morgue, and the junk-food vending machines (231). TS reflects, “I didn’t solve the racial and class inequalities in health care, but I’m told patients who travel down the brown-black road are more proactive ... [that] 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?” (231).

These tactics reveal two things. Regarding the hospital, TS recognizes his own contribution: he is not solving systemic racism, but he is reigniting the conversation about it at a time when white *logos* has otherwise been succeeding in silencing it. Further, he is empowering individual black subjects to advocate for themselves – and in psychological

²⁹ First they used Hominy’s “local fame and adoration” to “stick a COLORED ONLY sign in the storefront window of a restaurant or beauty shop” (225). Then The Sellout offered prospective segregationists the option of three signs; he “was surprised how many small-business people offered to pay me to display the NO WHITES ALLOWED sign”; and he was further surprised when entrepreneurs called him back to say “The customers love it. It’s like they belong to a private club that’s public!” (225). He and Hominy vandalized similar signs at the movie theater and library, then invited sedition at the swimming pool by erecting a segregation sign and “a chain-link fence that the kids loved to hop” (226). With permission from the director, they rechristen the local hospital “*The Bessie Smith Trauma Center*” in homage to stories of the singer’s death resulting from the refusal to treat her by a Whites-only hospital (229).

terms that would make his own father proud. This advocacy creates a stark contradiction with the identity crises earlier in the novel. TS had used the core questions of his father's psychology – “Who am I? And how may I become myself?” – to provide a salve for himself and for his fellow Dickensians. But he admits that “Up until the city's disappearance ... I was an every-other-month crisis negotiator, a farmer doing a little nigger-whispering on the side. But since Dickens's erasure I found myself in my pajamas, at least once a week ...” (59). He recognizes the importance that the foundation of a viable and visible Dickens has for the wellbeing of its residents. But, at the behest of Hominy, he recognizes that he needs to act more broadly.³⁰ Although Foy has argued that “the character of Tom Soarer will galvanize a nation to whitewash that fence!” (217), TS remembers his father's admonition that “Batman ain't coming to save your ass or your people!” (31). Therefore TS himself, though villainous acts, galvanizes his neighbors against the real villain of white racism. TS is not a community leader by design, but by necessity; his father's Liberation Psychology simply prepares him as the hero, and his own personality enables him to operate effectively to decentralize these heroic acts of racial consciousness.

TS's defense of Dickens turns to a broader psychological defense of black identity. After witnessing a black comic expel white audience members by insisting “This shit ain't for you. Understand? Now get the fuck out! This is our thing!” (287), TS ponders the question, “So what exactly is *our thing*?” (288). “[T]he beautiful Supreme

³⁰ Hominy convinces the narrator to think in terms of another paradox, “That saving Dickens nigger by nigger with a bullhorn ain't never going to work ... that you have to stop seeing us as individuals, 'cause right now, massa, you ain't seeing the plantation for the niggers” (79-80).

Court Justice from the Upper West Side” arrives at a similar question: “... this case suggests we ask ourselves not if separate were indeed equal, but what about ‘separate and not quite equal, but infinitely better off than ever before.’ *Me v. the United States of America* demands a more fundamental examination of what we mean by ‘separate,’ by ‘equal,’ by ‘black.’ So let’s get down to the nitty-gritty – what do we mean by ‘black?’” (274). Both of these questions speak to the difficulty both in defining and in assessing the value of group identification.

The dangerous extreme of group identification is tribalism, and, for TS, the comic strays too close to this extreme. White *logos* is based on exclusion; black *logos* is based on inclusion and acceptance of contradiction. TS’s acts of exclusion are ironic because the non-white residents of Dickens are already separated in practice. His acts are problematic expressly because they treat inequality with greater inequality in order to ameliorate that inequality. Finally, these acts are not instances of identity politics – TS does not act *because* he is black. Rather, he acts because he and his fellow Dickensians are disenfranchised *because* they are not white.

The population of Dickens is disenfranchised, and they are disenfranchised expressly because they are from Dickens, and the are in Dickens expressly because they have not been assimilated by the white dominant discourse. The erasure of Dickens does not suddenly provide equality, as the individualist ideology of post-racial America might suggest. Rather, the erasure eliminates the last vestiges of solidarity and revolution from that community. The erasure further cements the *de facto* inequalities in the system and removes any recourse. “Race” may not be genetic, but it is a practical reality: whether because locale and context create modern-day “race” (Taylor) or because the praxis of

racism instantiates it (Wright 79). As the character Judge Nguyen asserts, “He’s [TS is] painting everybody over, painting this community purple and green, and seeing who still believes in equality” (266). Dickens is not even solely African-American, but it remains a chronotope for the institutional white racism that discriminates against people of color. The counterdiscourse to racism first requires an identification of racism and second requires a construction of group identity by the oppressed. While racism has eroded the rights of Dickens and erased its own record, TS has worked to accentuate its practice and legacy. While post-racialism has decried the identity politics of group identity, TS has reestablished a communal coherence. TS has made racism visible again, he has exposed the inauthenticity of “spectral forms of blackness,” and he has rallied his community against it.

There is no magical closure for racism. There are only practical steps to ameliorate it. The most crucial of these is the acceptance of “Unmitigated Blackness” and its self-loving, pro-black, wholly contradictory message. TS remembers his father’s comments about the illusory nature of closure: “In all his years of study and practice, he’d never heard a patient of color talk of needing ‘closure’ ... He said people mistake suicide, murder, lap band surgery, interracial marriage, and overtipping for closure, when in reality what they’ve achieved is erasure” (261). America imagined that the election of President Obama would provide closure for its criminal history of slavery and racism, so it promulgated a new idea: post-racialism. TS makes clear that post-racialism is simply the erasure of the past, and that this erasure is counterproductive, disingenuous, manipulative, and harmful. This erasure makes inequalities more severe and intractable by pulling the rug out from under the feet of marginalized communities. In the book’s

final chapter, ironically named “Closure,” TS ends the text by saying, “And he’s [Foy’s] right. I never will [understand]” (289). TS will not understand the mistaken worldview of Foy and his ilk, the worldview that the election of an African-American president somehow offsets and effaces a history of racism. Instead TS will illuminate, in a way that IM could not, the machinations of racism and the importance of group solidarity to deflect that “boomerang.”

CONCLUSION

TS's efforts to make racism visible again serve multiple purposes. First, it exposes the disingenuous nature of "post-racialism" and the racist core of white *logos*. Second, it mobilizes the community of Dickens and heals the cognitive dissonances that arise from its citizens' ahistorical sense of contradiction. Third, it creates space for his counterdiscourse, his black *logos*: "Unmitigated Blackness." Not only do these efforts reveal the ongoing marginalization, commodification, and spectral reproduction by white America of black communities like Dickens, but they also incentivize a realpolitik that enables black America – and potentially other non-white communities – to define for itself its own identity and its own agency.

Nowhere is this revelation clearer than in the courtroom scene with Judge Nguyen. Although *The Sellout* ends with the ironic chapter "Closure," the first chronological courtroom scene may be the most illuminating for its overall theme. Judge Nguyen clearly interprets the crucial consideration in TS's practical jokes. The judge, presiding over TS's grand jury hearing in a pleasingly and conspicuously multicultural courtroom, closes with an articulation of these concerns:

“[TS has] pointed out a fundamental flaw in how we as Americans claim we see equality. ‘I don’t care if you’re black, white, brown, yellow, red, green, or purple.’ We’ve all said it. Posited as proof of our nonprejudicial ways, but if you painted any one of us purple or green, we’d be mad as hell. And that’s what he’s doing. He’s painting everybody over, painting this community purple and green, and seeing who still believes in equality.” (266)

Judge Nguyen – aptly named to satirize the “model minority” stereotype – makes clear that TS has revealed a racist hierarchy. No matter Americans’ declarations of colorblind equality for *others*, no American wants to be perceived as different and *Other*. Purple and green are conspicuous and unsettled and unsettling – they are *Other* – even when other racial proxies are post-racial and passive. Despite America’s claim of multicultural acceptance, its historical racist *logos* demands assimilation or rejection. Not only has TS exposed the dominant discourse’s rejection of the African-American community as *Other*, he has also provided a counterdiscourse of black *logos* that affirms unassimilated, non-white identity and that rejects the homogeneity and coherence of the dominant discourse as *Other*. The multi-hued cast of this grand jury hearing, who charge TS with “racially discriminat[ing] against every race all at the same time” and who must consider “the very existence of white supremacy as expressed through our system of law” (265), are especially sensitive to the implications of assimilation and the gestures of inauthenticity – the “selling out” – that accompany it.

Similarly, TS’s philosophy of “Unmitigated Blackness” is itself contradictory, because it de-emphasizes “blackness” as a racial identifier yet also acknowledges the importance of historical racism. Contradiction is at its core: “It’s the realization that there

are no absolutes, except when there are” (277). The list of trailblazers of “Unmitigated Blackness” is as multi-hued as Judge Nguyen’s courtroom; each member is distinguished by his or her artful reimagining of social boundaries. In a sense, TS’s philosophy and practice maintain Kwame Anthony Appiah’s arguments that no individual should be constrained by the racial “scripts” imposed by society and that each individual should instead “live with fractured identities” (62). But, as Judge Nguyen has espoused, TS has also called the bluff on color-blind, nonprejudicial ways and revealed that racial identity remains a very real and very substantial factor in any individual’s subjectivity. Any pretense to the contrary, *a la* “post-racialism,” leaves individuals and their communities in a neurotic vacuum of spectral identity. TS’s reinstatement of guileless segregation invites Dickensians and Americans to consider the balance of personal agency and environmental limitation in any individual’s, and especially any African-American individual’s, subjectivity.

TS’s antics have also identified the role of communities in responding to the existential crises of their members. The involvement of the legal system, white-dominated as it may be, shows that the dominant discourse of American society has been awakened and must redefine the boundaries of its community. Now, however, is a moment for black America, or minority non-white America, or simply socially disenfranchised America, to define its collectivity on its own terms.

This collective identity has political purposes. Taylor (2006) claims that “identities are not just chosen or played with but used in struggles for dignity and survival” (114) and also argues that social location is a significant contributor to, and measurement of, this practical racial identity (115). Hence, Dickens is a determinant for

the identities of its residents, and TS recognizes that. By painting the community purple and green, he has color-coded the inequalities that they suffer. Now they themselves recognize those inequalities and can respond; so too must white society process the cognitive dissonance of its alleged post-racialism and its practically-enforced racism. During the Civil Rights era, there was political traction within and without the African-American community for positive change, in no small part due to the visible, concrete documentation of racism. Ever since, increasing entropy, via commodified blackness and spectral forms of reproduction, has diminished communal gains and emphasized individual success – the onset of advanced marginalization. This, perhaps, was the mistake that Trey Ellis made in “New Black Aesthetic” when he argued that “... a cultural mulatto ... can also navigate easily in the white world” (235): he inadvertently but quite aptly limited this navigation to an individual level. White society is eager to welcome the black “Exception” to assuage its own conscience, but it is unwilling to accept “Unmitigated Blackness” because truly heterogeneous multiculturalism would dismantle white *logos*.

The post-Obama era has limited cross-cultural success to a limited few. TS recognizes that his community – Dickens specifically, African Americans generally – will certainly not thrive and possibly not survive this nominal multiculturalism. Neither Batman nor President Obama is coming to save Dickens. As the son of a “Liberation Psychologist,” he has the foundations in both Afrocentric ideology and in psychological therapy to address Dickens’ existential crisis. In answer to the questions, “Who am I? And how may I become myself?” (39) and “So what exactly is *our thing*?” (288), in answer to critical concerns about the commodification of blackness and spectral forms of

reproduction, TS responds clearly: I am a black man in a marginalized black community in an institutionally racist, but nominally post-racial, white America, and my practice of “Unmitigated Blackness” is the solution to that contradiction. In his call for people to “a more recreational conception of racial identity,”

Appiah (1996) had encouraged his ascriptive individuals to “practice irony” (62); *The Sellout* certainly obliges.

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