**“Stay Black and Die”: Escaping the Canon in Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle***

“I looked forward to a time at which it would be safe for me to escape. I was too young to think of doing so immediately; besides, I wished to learn how to write, as I might have occasion to write my own pass. I consoled myself with the hope that I should one day find a good chance. Meanwhile, I would learn to write” (37).

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845)

“The literature of a country or of an age, as I have said, is considered, and as a rule is, a fair reflection of the social conditions of that age or country. But conventions, in literature, as in religion, in politics and in social usage, sometimes persist long past the point where they correctly mirror the time. This is particularly true where they are confused by prejudice…This ‘Buy a Book Movement,’ I imagine, was conceived with this idea, that colored people should show their appreciation of those of their own number and those of their outside friends who should take the chance of writing books which treat the Negro fairly ” (176)

Charles Chesnutt, “The Negro in Books” (1916)

“I think that I am most excited about the fact that we will have at our disposal the means to edit an anthology that will define a canon of African-American literature for instructors and students at any institution which desires to teach a course in African-American literature. Once our anthology is published, no one will ever again be able to use the unavailability of black texts as an excuse not to teach our literature. A well-marked anthology functions in the academy to *create* a tradition, as well as to define and preserve it” (31).

Henry Louis Gates Jr., Loose Canons Notes on the Culture Wars (1992)

In his novel published just four years after my final epigraph, *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), Paul Beatty suggests that the canonization that Gates celebrates has resulted in oppressive literary categories that make it difficult to imagine a racially affiliated “self” outside of historically entrenched racial discourse. In the post-civil rights era, African Americans experience unprecedented social freedom. Yet, Beatty’s novel illustrates that literary texts and literary criticism remain so littered with the political intentions of the past that they have become, in some cases, even more restrictive than the social conditions to which they serve as an alternative. In Beatty’s estimation, canonical literary forms freeze African Americans into stereotypes that preclude political action. Beatty’s attitude towards the role of literature in black society represents a startling departure from the attitudes that shaped the earliest texts in the tradition.

As my first epigraph illustrates, Frederick Douglass understands writing as a tool for personal development and maturity culminating in freedom. Douglass’s narrative uses the conventions of the *bildungsroman* to narrate his journey from boyhood to manhood, with a focus on the role that writing would play. Douglass links enslavement, youth, and illiteracy, on the one hand, and freedom, maturity, and literacy, on the other. By the end of his 1845 narrative, Frederick Douglass, the fugitive, has succeeded in, at least metaphorically, writ[ing his] own pass out of slavery.

Just over seventy years later, Charles Chesnutt again looks to literature as a force of development. His focus, however, is on the maturity of the race. My second epigraph comes from a lengthy speech that Chesnutt delivered in support of the “Buy-a-Book-Movement, ” led by Dr. Richard R. Wright, Jr.[[1]](#footnote-1) Wright encouraged African Americans to buy books written by black authors so that black children might *develop* “self-respect” and “become acquainted as soon as possible with the books that tell the story of their race’s *progress* in civilization” (*The Southern Workman* 141, my emphasis). Wright understood literature as both a developing force for black children and a record of the social development of the race.

In his contribution to the cause, Chesnutt lectured on the necessity of supporting black authors so that they might offer more realistic representations of black life to combat the stereotypes so common in literature. Chesnutt’s endorsement of Wright’s efforts to get black books in black homes reveals that, fifty years after emancipation, African American authors struggled to secure audiences to sustain their literary efforts and demonstrate a fully formed and identifiable culture. In 1997, only seventy years after Chesnutt’s speech, the post-civil rights era witnessed the publication of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. While there had been many African American literary anthologies prior to the 1990’s, the prestige of the W.W. Norton Company signaled the entry of African American literature into the center of American academic culture.[[2]](#footnote-2) As the introduction to the volume notes, the shift from the margins to a canonical position beside English and American literatures should also be understood as a moment of maturity similar to that at the end of Douglass’s *bildungsroman* (Gates et al. xxix). With this maturity, African Americans wrote themselves out of the literary margins and into a set of conventions and expectations about what constituted African American literature as a category.

Recent debates[[3]](#footnote-3) about the utility of African American literature as a representative medium suggest that some African American literary “conventions” have continued to persist “long past the point where they correctly mirror the time” (Chesnutt 176). These critical conversations co-exist with contemporary literary explorations by African American writers who engage with the tradition of African American literature even as they question its timeliness. In his 1996 novel, *The White Boy Shuffle*, Paul Beatty satirizes the autobiography of the black artist as a young man. Through his protagonist’s quest to gain public recognition for his decidedly multicultural identity, Beatty argues that literary canonization and racial discourse codify African American literature in ways that continue to perpetuate the very stereotypes that Chesnutt hoped to combat. In this moment of maturity, African American literature is too set in its ways to allow the flexibility necessary to respond to racism in the twenty-first century. I maintain that, in response to this problem, Beatty proposes that black writers escape traditional literary forms by turning to performance poetry in which artists interact with audiences to create literary forms that are responsive and, as Chesnutt explains, “correct for their time.” At the moment of his maturation in *The White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty’s protagonist chooses to run away from his academic and state-mandated affiliations to perform rather than simply write about his black identity.

I analyze Beatty’s depiction of an African American poet and his relationship to literary forms and academic environments in support of my assertion that fugitive figures in twentieth and twenty-first century African American literature indicate the resistance of some black authors to traditional African American literary forms. In his essay, “Black Crisis Shuffle: Fiction, Race and Simulation,” Rolland Murray asserts that Beatty uses *The White Boy Shuffle* to argue that the commodification of black culture has created a form of “blackness” that “is not an authentic ground for communion, but rather a product of mass culture industries such as cinema, television and recorded music”(215). Indeed, Beatty’s novel reflects his concern about the impact of the centralization of black culture on the day-to-day experience of blackness. In this chapter, I pay attention to Beatty’s emphasis on the role of the African American literary tradition in the commodification of black culture.

In particular, I examine Beatty’s depictions of the relationship between literature and stereotypes. Beatty uses the Kaufman family genealogy and Gunnar’s educational experiences to critique both the African American literary canon and academic discourses about race. In the first section, I analyze Beatty’s manipulation of the protest novel. Beatty enlivens the stagnant form by incorporating into the text a variety of fictional documents that serve as props in Beatty’s narrative performance. He infuses Gunnar’s scenes of instruction with irony and meta-commentary to dramatize both the negative impact of the literary canon on black writers and the destructive impact of liberal discourses about race on academic spaces. Beatty further manipulates the form by including scenes of poetic performance in the novel. Gunnar’s poetry evolves in conjunction with his maturation and underscores the point that canonical literary forms perpetuate stereotypes and preclude the use of literature for contemporary political gain. Eventually, Gunnar discards written poetry all together in favor of poetic performance. In the final section, I explore the black imaginary space to which Beatty’s fugitive protagonist retreats. The Bacchanalian Misery Fest functions as a multicultural open mike venue that encourages collective identity performance in a protected space. This space facilitates the shift from artificially categorized literary representations of racial identity toward local multicultural identity performances.

With *The* *White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty suggests that “maturity” has stifled African American literature. In the early years of the African American literary tradition, literature enabled African Americans and “their outside friends” to craft dynamic images (Chesnutt 176). This was certainly the case for African Americans during the nineteenth-century. As Carla Peterson explains in *Doers of the Word* (1995), “fictional narratives resisted teleology, offering [African American authors] a discursive space for a larger meditation on the ‘economics of freedom’” (149). Henry Louis Gates locates the roots of the expanded discursive space that Peterson describes in the responsive origins of African American narrative. Gates expounds, “Few literary traditions have begun with such a complex and curious relation to criticism: allegations of an absence led directly to a presence, a literature often inextricably bound in a dialogue with its harshest critics” (Gates 2428). Thus, the earliest African American fiction writers used writing to make arguments for social equality, or, at least, to demonstrate the humanity and intelligence of their people.

Valerie Smith makes an even bolder claim than Gates. In *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (1987), she argues that both slave narrators and other black protagonist narrators “affirm and legitimize their psychological autonomy by telling the stories of their own lives” (2). Thus, Smith understands writing as an act of self-creation. However, Beatty’s novel suggests that the discursive space of African American literature has not expanded enough to represent the diversity of African American identity and experience in the post-civil rights period.

Beatty is not alone in his skepticism about the disciplinary forces that inhere within literary communities to police literary texts. Claudia Tate’s *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels:**Desire and the Protocols of Race (1998)* notes that the disciplinary gaze is rooted in local and intercommunity politics (9). In*Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* (2007), Gene Jarrett concludes that literary “deans” police the boundaries of African American literature for their own gain. Thus, traditional African American authority figures are often uncongenial to counter-normative racial identity constructions.

In response, Beatty highlights performance poetry as a medium that enables artists to construct identity narratives that rely on the performance of culture rather than adherence to restrictive categories. Political resistance to master narratives functioned for many years as a central aim of African American literature. This habit left little room for the articulation of black identities or political ideologies that fell outside of or between the racial political discourses currently included in the African American literary canon. By adopting a “collage” approach to narration—the use of a variety of fictional documents to tell Gunnar’s story—Beatty articulates multiple political positions simultaneously and creates a text that defies generic classification.

The novel begins during Gunnar Kaufman’s middle school years in Santa Monica, California. Gunnar and his two sisters are raised by his single mother and have limited interaction with their sexually-abusive father, Rolf Kaufman. In the early chapters, Gunnar narrates his anxieties about his life as the only African American in his middle school class in Santa Monica, California. Despite the rhetoric of racial diversity that permeates the middle school curriculum, Gunnar finds it difficult to feel comfortable in an environment where he is known as “funny cool black guy” instead of by his name.

After realizing that her children have no desire to spend time with other black children, Gunnar’s mother, Brenda, moves her family to a West Los Angeles neighborhood called Hillside (41). Gunnar finds it difficult to fit in socially in his new neighborhood because he never learned how to interact with other people of color in Santa Monica. Eventually, Gunnar becomes friends with Nick Scoby, an academically-gifted and athletically-inclined African American classmate, and Psycho Loco, the leader of the gang with which Gunnar becomes affiliated, the Gun-Toting Hooligans.

Despite his comfort level in Hillside, Gunnar still feels compelled to cycle through a series of reductive black identity stereotypes like “basketball player” and “gangbanger” in order to fit in. These stereotypes are his only options if he wants to be acknowledged in Hillside, just as “funny cool black guy” was the only option for him to be acknowledged socially in Santa Monica. The only true connection Gunnar feels with racial identity comes during the Los Angeles riots in which he participates by helping the Gun Toting Hooligans steal a safe from the Montgomery Ward department store.

After he graduates from high school, Gunnar goes off to Boston University as a married man since Psycho Loco uses some of the stolen money to purchase Gunnar a Japanese mail order bride named Yoshiko. When he arrives in Boston, Gunnar learns that he has become a famous poet. His disgust with the emptiness of the political movements he encounters translates directly to his growing disdain for written poetry, which he understands as political propaganda. When asked to deliver a televised speech, he advocates that people without true political conviction commit suicide. Gunnar’s disenchantment with poetry reflects Beatty’s commentary about literary forms that “fossilize thoughts” rather than affording African Americans flexibility to define their racial identities and political motivations (205).

Gunnar’s best friend, Nick Scoby, tags along to Boston University, but unlike Gunnar, who has the support of Yoshiko, Scoby cannot adapt to the college environment and eventually commits suicide. After Scoby’s death, strangers begin sending Gunnar suicide poems. Moved by Scoby’s and the suicide poets’ commitment to action, Gunnar decides to forsake all his affiliations. He returns to Hillside with his pregnant wife. They hide from the police and become fugitives. Gunnar’s father uses a searchlight helicopter to locate and follow them. The searchlight ensures their visibility.

In a surprising turn, Gunnar and Yoshiko enjoy the illumination. They find that the spotlight associated with criminals on the run from the police makes them feel free. They no longer feel bound by the stereotypes projected onto their bodies because the spotlight marks them as delinquent. Therefore, they feel free to live outside all social rules. They enjoy the visibility so much that Yoshiko decides to give birth in Reynier Park under the light of the helicopter. After this episode, people from the neighborhood return to the spot and, under the illumination of the searchlight, regularly perform monologues for the public. They call these events “Bacchanalian Misery Fests” and envision them as the scaffold for a community of individuals rather than a racial monolith.

Re-packaging the Protest Novel

*The White Boy Shuffle* is a “fugitive form.” Beatty structures the novel like a performance in order to resist the codification that attends the centrality of African American literature. Protest has such a distinctive presence in African American literature that some critics go as far as to assert that all this literature is protest literature. The African American literary tradition has changed a great deal since the nineteenth-century when slave narratives were offered as evidence of the humanity of enslaved people. Nonetheless, scholars like Henry Louis Gates insist that one of the primary goals of African American literature is to respond to master narratives that affirm racial inequality.[[4]](#footnote-4) Resistance to such narratives has resulted in a set of “master counter-narratives” that revolve around a set of stereotypical responses to the more familiar ones. Despite their emphasis on a black protagonist, such narratives underscore and amplify the power of the master narrative. As Beatty illustrates through Gunnar’s commentary, the pressure to respond to the concerns of critics has left much African American literature brimming over with stereotypical images as large as the stereotypes they oppose.

Rather than perpetuate stereotypes in his novel, Beatty resists by using language that is active rather than static. Nick Scoby best explains this idea during a conversation with Gunnar about the distinctions between poetry and music. Scoby says, “That’s why your poems can never be no more than descriptions of life. The page is finite. Once you put the words down on paper, you’ve fossilized your thought” (205). Here, Beatty reveals his concern that literature, “words down on paper,” freezes black culture into oppressive stereotypes. Instead, Beatty’s postmodern novel functions more like a spoken word poem—a performance—than a written poem or a conventional African American novel.

Beatty resists literary categorization by insisting on blurring the lines between literary forms. In his essay, “Paul Beatty’s White Boy Shuffle Blues: Jazz Poetry, John Coltrane, and the Post-Soul Aesthetic,” Bertram Ashe argues that Beatty employs an “improvisational sensibility” to make “music on the page” (113). Rather than understanding Beatty’s improvisational organization as an attempt to mimic jazz, I understand it as a reflection of Beatty’s spoken word background. Beatty stages performances within the novel in order to make the text an active entity that must be negotiated rather than passively read.

In an effort to resist “fossilization,” Beatty includes images, letters, safe combinations, radio recording transcripts, meta-commentary, and, most importantly, poetic performances to draw attention to the failure of traditional literature to reflect the nuances of black identity in the twentieth century. He relies on a variety of representational strategies to capture the complexity of racial identity in the post-civil rights era. *The White Boy Shuffle* is comprised of documents that serve as stage props. Beatty uses a variety of media forms to illustrate that life must be witnessed and experienced rather than simply narrated. When Psycho Loco makes a highly anticipated discovery--the combination to a safe stolen during the Los Angeles riots--Beatty shows the reader the combination. Beatty evokes Gunnar and Yoshiko’s first romantic evening by including the chorus of Al Green’s “Here I am” (172). Beatty devotes a half page to an inky handprint that Gunnar sends Yoshiko in a heartfelt letter (195). Rather than a conventional protest novel, *The White Boy Shuffle* functions more as a staged production.

From the first sentence of the first chapter, Beatty’s protagonist outlines his strategy for countering stereotypical racial narratives. He undermines those narratives with irony. In a dramatic aside more common to a theatrical performance, Gunnar positions himself as an improbable African American hero. He announces, “Unlike the typical bluesy earthy folksy denim overalls noble-in-the-face-of-cracker-racism aw shucks Pulitzer-Prize-winning protagonist mojo magic black man, I am not the seventh son of a seventh son. I wish I were, but fate shorted me by six brothers and three uncles” (5). The character, himself a writer, breaks the fourth wall by acknowledging that his story does not meet literary expectations.

Beatty’s choice to alliterate and hyphenate “Pulitzer-Prize-winning protagonist” conflates the protagonist and author and serves as meta-commentary, suggesting that African American authors are rewarded for erasing the line between fact and fiction. Beatty draws attention to the weight that fictional representations place on the lives of real African Americans. The conflation also suggests that Paul Beatty himself feels pressure to conform to the unreasonable standards of the literary canon. Gunnar’s sarcasm reveals his contempt for a romanticized African American literary history, as illustrated by his use of sarcastic phrases such as “noble-in-the-face-of-cracker-racism” and “aw shucks.”

While the tone denotes concern that Gunnar will not live up to the standards established by the series of superhuman characters that precede him, his actions align him with the African American literary tradition. By noting that he is not the “seventh son of the seventh son,” Gunnar recalls W.E.B. Du Bois’s description of the black man as a “seventh son born with a veil and gifted with the second sight” (10). Yet, Gunnar’s suggestion that even the gift of double consciousness eludes him is ironic because his entire opening monologue is self-reflexive and later confirms that he does indeed experience double consciousness. Despite his double consciousness, however, Gunnar does not feel connected to a supportive racial family. He illustrates this lack with his comment that fate shorted him by six brothers and three uncles. Thus, in the opening lines of the novel, Beatty suggests that the literary tradition that precedes *The White Boy Shuffle* functions only as an anxiety-producing set of racial stereotypes. These stereotypes haunt black authors rather than establish a racial community united by a literary tradition. As a result of his confusion about his position in the African American literary tradition, Gunnar is resistant. Yet, he feels doomed to repeat old narratives.

Indeed, Gunnar’s use of meta-commentary, lengthy sentences, and compounded adjectives reveal the burden that literary history places on both author and character. The mention of “bluesy earthy folksy denim overalls” recalls Richard Wright’s imperative in “Blueprint for Negro Writing” to record African American folk practices and quotidian experiences rather than mimic Western literature.[[5]](#footnote-5) The image of the “mojo magic black man” recalls the conjure figures that inhabit some nineteenth-century African American literary texts. [[6]](#footnote-6) Gunnar neither considers himself folksy nor magical. Beatty writes this sentence with only one comma and no conjunctions, thus suggesting that generations of stereotypical images pile one on top of the other in the pages of African American protest novels.

Beatty’s concern about the Pulitzer Prize marks his anxiety that he may not be able to live up to his predecessors. Gunnar laments, “The chieftains and queens who sit on top of old Mount Kilimanjaro left me out of the will. They bequeathed me nothing, stingy bastards. Cruelly cheating me of my mythological inheritance, my aboriginal superpowers” (5). Through his comment about the “chieftains and queens on Mount Kilimanjaro,” Gunnar expresses bitterness that he has not received a useable “African” heritage. From the outset, Beatty establishes Gunnar as a self-effacing antihero reminiscent of the unnamed protagonists in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *The Invisible Man.* Like those characters, Gunnar acknowledges his own discomfort with the African American literary tradition that precedes him. In contrast to Johnson and Ellison, however, he mocks the tradition in a way that recalls a staged performance, filled with asides to the audience, rather than the seriousness of Johnson and Ellison.

Despite his disparaging comments about African American literary history, Gunnar Kaufman desires to be part of it. He follows his anxiety-laden first sentence with his “wish” to be a celebrated literary figure. Yet, rather than inheriting a respectable heritage, Gunnar feels “preordained by a set of weak-kneed DNA to shuffle in the footsteps of a long cowardly queue of coons” (5). Beatty uses Gunnar to illustrate African American authors’ desires to signify on the African American literary tradition without being confined by it. Yet, Gunnar’s comment suggests something more.

Not only does Gunnar feel disconnected from the heroic African American figures he mentions in the first sentence, he also feels burdened by less admirable characters. Gunnar irreverently references literary figures such as Bigger Thomas, the “invisible man,” and the “ex-colored man,” who cannot be celebrated for their courage, wise decisions, or loyalty to the race. He mourns the loss of a gallant African American identity rooted in shared political goals. Thus, Beatty’s protagonist regrets that he is embedded in narrative histories that preclude him from constructing an unencumbered image of self.

Literary Genealogy

As a black writer, Gunnar inhabits the crossroads between creating literature and being created by literature. He understands African American figures of the past only as champions who respond to racism by using their abilities to “strike down race politic evildoers,” or cowards who avoid racial confrontations (5). Gunnar cannot relate to either set of characters. In his opinion, the disappointing set of stories that make up the African American literary tradition only emphasizes the differences between his life and the lives of the men in these stories. His life pales in comparison, which accounts for his assertion that he has been “cheat[ed] out of [his] mythological inheritance” (5). The prominence of racial stereotypes and master narratives in African American literature makes this literature useless for Gunnar and his contemporaries.

Beatty underscores the tension between the African American literary tradition and Gunnar’s everyday life with his mother’s recollection of the Kaufman genealogical history, which reads as a satire of African American literary history. His ancestor, Euripides Kaufman, is a cunning salesman who is able to buy his way out of slavery at the age of nine by charging people to rub his head for luck (8). Further, he saves his own life by betraying other African Americans (10). Thus, Euripides is a character who takes advantage of the commodification of the black body by selling his own body to buy his freedom rather than emphasizing his own humanity. This story suggests that the genre of the slave narrative exploits the black body as much as it functions as a petition for black liberation. In another scene from Gunnar’s family history, Swen Kaufman is a free man who travels south and willingly becomes a slave just so he can have the freedom to elevate his experience of slavery to high art. Swen is a dancer who lives and works on a plantation because he finds it a rich source of artistic inspiration (13). His plantation musicals reify stereotypes of slavery for both his personal pleasure and the pleasure of his white audience. Here, Beatty invites the reader to consider that neo-slave narratives and other art forms dramatizing plantation life celebrate slavery and perpetuate stereotypes. Beatty’s tale of Wolfgang Kaufman suggests that literature produced during the Civil Rights era dramatized the struggles of those in the movement and secured a measure of fame for the authors. Wolfgang works as a stencil artist during this period (18). His signs maintain the distinctions between “white” and “colored” facilities for all but Wolfgang, who was known to slip into the white bathroom when necessary (18). As elite leaders of the movement, men like Wolfgang were granted more social access than most African Americans.

All of Gunnar’s ancestors are named for famous European artists, and all use their art to negotiate the boundaries between personal freedom and social restriction at the expense of other African Americans as well as their own personal pride. Beatty invites readers to make connections between Euripides’s narrative, early slave narratives, Swen’s story, neo-slave narratives, and texts that emphasize the distinctions between black culture and white culture during the Civil Rights era. This satirical literary history suggests that such literature has reinforced restrictive narratives rather than offer narratives that protest injustice.

Gunnar’s relationship with his father also reflects Beatty’s opinions about the influence of the African American literary tradition on black writers. Rolf Kaufman functions as a parody of the black artist who perpetuates damaging stereotypes about African Americans. Rolf is a police officer for the Los Angeles Police Department, known for its association with racial violence. Rolf is Gunnar’s only connection to a genealogical narrative that connects him to slavery, and represents the history of racial violence that penetrates and scars Gunnar’s psyche, making it difficult for him to construct his own sense of identity. Rolf’s job is to regulate society. Although he has limited interactions with Gunnar, he finds ways to remind his son that he is a “Kaufman” and must act accordingly (92). For example, he honors Gunnar’s request for a basketball, but he also sends a book, *Heaven Is a Playground* (92). The book is described as “a sports journalist’s treatise on a pack of inner-city Brooklynites who spend the better part of their days scampering around a basketball court known as the hole” (92). Gunnar continues, “Inside my father had scribbled a note: ‘Read this and remember you’re a Kaufman, and not one of the black misfits sociologically detailed herein’” (92). Gunnar’s father uses a literary text replete with stereotypes to warn him against becoming a particular type of black man. Beatty uses almost every character in the novel to reinforce the idea that literature perpetuates stereotypical images of African Americans.

Rolf’s assertion of his last name as a standard for Gunnar’s behavior represents his role in trying to force his son to conform to social order. Gunnar must fit himself into stereotypical narratives but is not allowed to choose which narrative he must conform to. Instead, Rolf insists on choosing for Gunnar. He is not permitted to become a “basketball guy.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Further, Rolf uses the word “sociological” which is similar to the word “anthropological” that appears in the title of the collection of Gunnar’s published poetry. Here, Beatty suggests that texts become spaces where humans are converted into scientific objects of study without their consent.

Since Gunnar’s mother is an orphan who adopted the Kaufman family history as her own, Rolf is Gunnar’s only connection to black American history (6). Gunnar’s abuse at the hands of his father characterizes his relationship to African American history as violent. Gunnar’s history derives from his progenitor, an abuser and a police officer who enforces social restriction. Gunnar laments, “His weakness shadowed my shame from sun to sun. His history was my history. A reprobate ancestry that snuggled up to me and tucked me in at night. In the morning it kissed me on the back of the neck, plopped its dick in my hands, and asked me to blow reveille” (21). Beatty uses the homophone pair sun/son to make the point that the shadow of shame is passed through generations from son to son and is felt around the clock, from sunrise to sunset. Even Gunnar’s most intimate moments, before falling asleep at night and before rising for the day, are haunted by memories of his father’s sexual abuse, which Beatty likens to traumatic stories of African American history.

Gunnar’s conflation of those two sources of grief, his father and his familial history, suggests that he believes them to be one and the same. Both his history and his father have molested him. Both demand military-like conformity to racial stereotypes, as indicated through his imagined trumpet playing of a military call to arise. Gunnar simultaneously mourns the loss of a usable past and an accessible caring father, either or both of which could have provided him with a more consistent narrative for his life. Instead, the shame that Gunnar feels casts a “shadow.” He has internalized the ghostly specter of genealogy that leaves emptiness at his core. Rather than having a guiding ancestral history that pushes him towards greatness, he has a “reprobate” ancestry that predestines him for damnation. Gunnar must flee this history rather than be emotionally stunted by it. By offering this literary history as Gunnar’s genealogical narrative, Beatty directly connects Gunnar’s anxiety as a poet to literary history.

The Canonical Classroom

Beatty suggests that the institutionalization of literary study codifies reading in ways that conflate African American literature and African American life. Such conflations reify restrictive stereotypes. Thus, narratives of racial strife overshadow the contemporary quotidian experience of real African Americans. As Hortense Spillers explains in “All the Things That You’d Be By Now if Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother,” in the past African American individuality was overlooked because the African American “individual” operated as a synecdoche for the masses (378). In short, every black person *is* the race (Spillers 378).

This concept informs Beatty’s depiction of Gunnar’s elementary school family tree presentation. Beatty uses this scene to raise questions about the use of African American literature in the classroom. In his classroom, Gunnar’s history, a literary history, is discussed in relation to black history month. This practice ensures that literature will be reduced to racial politics. Although Gunnar is ashamed of the Kaufman genealogy, the reception of his ridiculous family stories clarifies the way African American literary history can seemingly stand in for African American family history. When the students in Gunnar’s elementary school class are asked to create “family trees,” “most kids could only go back as far as their grandparents” (11). Gunnar’s fanciful genealogical renderings make him a classroom star because, as Spillers suggests, Gunnar’s stories stand in for the lost history of his black classmates. Beatty uses the Kaufman family legacy as a parody of African American literary history to suggest that African Americans must choose between affiliation with buffoonery, the unreality of the “poster board Negro heroes,” or nothing at all (11). Gunnar must either accept a set of restrictive protocols that force him to sacrifice a part of his own potential—all of the Kaufmans are “cowards” and “race traitors”—or mourn the loss of a guiding identity narrative. Whether he accepts or rejects the genealogical narrative, he loses. Gunnar’s dilemma reflects the condition of post-civil rights African Americans who inherit a body of protest literature whose broad strokes reduce their individual lives to political positions. This problem is intensified when literary scholars with political agendas, like Gunnar’s teachers in Santa Monica, use literature as a “political marionette” rather than a true celebration of literature for its own sake as Henry Louis Gates asserts in *Loose Canons*.

Beatty suggests that outside the context of political movements for black liberation, African American literature appears to be a series of negotiations between self-sacrifice and cowardice. Just as Gunnar’s family history captivated all the African American students in his class because it filled the gaps in their own family trees, African American literature stands in as the representational history of the day-to-day experiences of the race. But, African Americans can no longer turn to African American literary history for a “blueprint.” Beatty’s text marks the grief surrounding the loss of a unified political movement and suggests that, when taken outside of its historical context, canonical African American literature cannot provide African Americans with a model for developing a black identity and culture.

Gunnar’s classroom experiences prove the lie in the fantasythat racial problems can be solved by liberal discourses that embrace “colorblindness”—the assertion that individuals need not see meaning in skin color. Instead, Gunnar’s experiences suggest that colorblindness only perpetuates stereotypes by removing the topic of race from day-to-day conversation, thereby making it impossible for real people to challenge stereotypes. The authority figures associated with Gunnar’s formal education in 1980s Santa Monica, California train him to reduce himself to a stereotype rather than to explore the diversity of black identity.

Beatty likely chooses Santa Monica because the city has a unique history of radical politics. Although most leftist political movements are associated with the working class, labor groups, and student movements, Santa Monica hosted a rare group of solidly middle-class citizens who formed a left-leaning political coalition, Santa Monicans for Renters’ Rights, and voted members of the coalition into controlling positions on the city council (Kann 18). Unfortunately, as Mark Kann explains in *Middle-class Radicalism in Santa Monica*, the “quiche and Perrier” liberals reverted to more traditional forms of elitism after they rose to power (225). Thus, Santa Monica embodies the tenor of white liberalism behind Beatty’s rendering of Gunnar’s experience in the classroom.

Whereas the ambivalent middle-class white characters speak of acceptance and empowerment for people of color, their day-to-day practices, like those of the real people in Santa Monica in the 1980s, “gravitated toward the rituals of mainstream ‘bourgeois’ politics” (Kann 225). Ms. Cegeny, Gunnar’s teacher, singles out the non-white students. She opts to wear a t-shirt proclaiming the humanity of ethnic groups while “pay[ing] special attention to [Gunnar], Salvador Aguacaliente and Sheila Watanabe” (28). In addition, “she take[s] care to point out the multiculturalist propaganda of colorblindness “posted above the blackboard” (29). The tension betweenthe pretense of not seeing race and the reality of paying race “special attention” confuses Gunnar. As a result, he is self-conscious about race but lives in a world that refusesto allow him to discuss it directly. Gunnar, therefore, cannot resolve his concerns.

Beatty uses Gunnar’s social life in Santa Monica to dramatize the ways in which the refusal to acknowledge race in meaningful ways results in an environment filled with placeholders that flatten individuals into stereotypes. In the classroom, Gunnar occupies the position of “funny cool black guy” because it alone provides a description approaching his actual identity while “maintaining politically correct semiotics” (27). Beatty describes the multicultural classroom as an environment where “funny cool black guy” erases Gunnar’s name, personality,and even physical characteristics. Even Gunnar’s doctor turns to Gunnar during his exam to ask, “Oh, you’re one of those funny cool black guys aren’t you?” (31) The stereotypical identity imposed on Gunnar becomes inextricable from his person. It is so much a part of him that his doctor can diagnose it. Beatty uses the doctor’s ironic comment to draw attention to the falsehood inherent in the refusal to “see” color. The rhetoric of colorblindness denies the complexity of difference, which makes it difficult for Gunnar to understand himself as more than a stock character in Santa Monica’s multicultural play.

Despite the pervasiveness of colorblindness, Gunnar is aware that he exceeds the boundaries of the identity assigned to him in the classroom. Thus, Gunnar dislikes the confinement of academic spaces and imagines escaping to the colorful freedom of his weekends:

We’d make plans to spend the weekend at the beach, sunning in the shoreline’s warm chromatics and filling in the childhood’s abstract impressionism coloring books with our own definitions of color, trying our hardest not to stay inside the lines. (34)

On these weekends, Gunnar enjoys the freedom to shift his color according to his mood. He revels in the ability to live outside color “lines.” He describes the pleasure of his experience of the shoreline in terms of color; “warm chromatics” feature prominently in his fantasy and form a contrast to his colorless classroom. He enjoys the freedom to discard rigidity for impressionism. On the beach, Gunnar is no longer frozen into a stereotype based on the “color” of his skin while people pretend that color does not exist. To underscore the value of color, Beatty connects Gunnar’s emotions with each of four colors, “Blue, Psychedelic, White and Black.” In doing so, Beatty includes “blue” and “psychedelic,” which are not associated with race. These colors, which disrupt racial-political discourse, describe both the concrete pleasures of childhood, “slurpee blue tongues” and splashing in the “blue of the ocean,” and disorderly manic feelings associated with childhood: “when you’re young, psychedelic is a primary color and a most mesmerizing high” (35). Gunnar’s childhood pleasures exist outside of the confinements of racial discourse. The colors are tethered to active moments in his life—his flesh. Thus, his “real” life is placed in opposition to academic discourses associated with literary canonization.

Yet, Gunnar also expresses an acute awareness of the consequences of American life in black and white. He describes white as “the expulsion of colors encumbered by self-awareness and pigment” (35). His thought suggests that whiteness represents the freedom to live without the self-reflexivity that comes from understanding how a person sees another person in a raced body. White is the freedom to live without color. Even more tellingly, Gunnar describes black as a space of abandonment and confusing restriction. He laments, “Black was an unwanted dog abandoned in the forest that finds its way home by fording flooded rivers and hitchhiking in the beds of pickup trucks and arrives at its destination only to be taken for a car ride to the desert” (35). For Gunnar, being black reduces him to a dog that is unwanted in the only space he understands as home. His attempts at acceptance by the majority are futile efforts since to fight to return home will only result in the creation of an even more daunting obstacle—“a car ride to the desert.” Gunnar understands blackness as alienation. Just as his genealogical history imposes an identity on him, his formal education shapes his perception of himself. Beatty connects both experiences to the African American literary tradition.

Gunnar sees himself as both a child and psychedelic rebel, in black and white. Yet, he must live in a world that reduces him to “funny cool black guy.” Despite such restrictions, Gunnar had the consolation of being able to color outside of the lines as a “beach bum” who breaks the law on the weekends. Nevertheless, his weekend escapes to live outside the color lines bring him to the attention of the Santa Monica police department for breaking the law (47). The forces that seek social order discipline Gunnar for stepping outside of his boundaries. Regardless, Gunnar performs a variety of active, multifaceted, and sometimes universal cultural practices that he describes as blue and psychedelic. Despite the colorblind academic setting that reduces his life to literary history, Gunnar understands that he exceeds the boundaries of the literary canon and liberal rhetorics that permeate his education.

Poetic Blackness

Beatty strategically positions poems and poetic performances throughout his novel in an effort to illustrate that conventional African American literature does not provide the freedom of expression necessary to represent contemporary African American identity. Gunnar’s feelings of confinement, which he associates with the African American literary tradition, reflect Beatty’s own difficulties using traditional forms of African American literature to articulate racial identity in the post-civil rights era. Both Gunnar Kaufman and Paul Beatty are poets.[[8]](#footnote-8) Like Gunnar, Beatty moved from Los Angeles to Boston to attend Boston University. He completed a degree in psychology, eventually earning a master’s degree in the subject. He eventually fled the restrictions of his degree program in pursuit of a setting--a creative writing program-- that would provide him freer expression just as Gunnar flees Boston. Performance poetry with the Nuyorican Poetry group provided the avenue through which Beatty’s talent first captured the public eye. Thus, like Gunnar Kaufman, Paul Beatty turned to spoken word poetry as a medium for self-expression.

As a result of his educational experiences informed by the literary canon, Gunnar’s first poem is constrained and bound to Hillside, the poor neighborhood filled with people of color to which his mother relocates the family. Gunnar produces the poem after being sexually abused by two neighborhood girls (82). Once again, Gunnar’s connection to the African American experience is associated with a sexual assault thereby suggesting that violent narratives of African American history are imposed on the character against his will and result in psychological trauma. The poem that Gunnar produces is a concrete poem that appears as a series of staggered blocks reminiscent of bricks or city blocks. To underscore the connection of the poem to the confinement Gunnar feels in Hillside, the poem is spray-painted on the side of a wall with the same stencil that his “great-great-uncle Wolfgang used to do his Jim Crow handiwork” (86). Here, Beatty highlights the connections among the segregation that accompanied Jim Crow racism, the segregation of Hillside from the wealthy community at the top of the hill, and the segregated literary canon. The black artist is mandated to have intercourse with the black community and thus produces work inextricable from his local community. This is a difficult situation for Gunnar because it does not reflect the reality of his life since he grew up in Santa Monica rather than Hillside. Gunnar’s “educational experiences” have forced him into a stereotype that does not reflect the totality of his life experiences.

Gunnar’s poem reflects his dilemma. The speaker describes his process of “searching for ghetto muses” (86). Instead of finding the Greek muses that he seeks, he can only find inspiration in his friend who “picked up a jailhouse phone” and says “Yo nigger, you got to come down and get me out.” (86). Gunnar is not moved to celebrate the “concrete” or “s.o.s a.p.b. 911 electronic prayers” (86). Instead, his muse is the person who tries to escape confinement (86). It is important to note that this figure uses vernacular language to articulate his desires, just as Gunnar relies heavily on vernacular language in his poetry. Beatty does not suggest that black writers either adopt or reject vernacular language or black culture. Instead, he advocates that being forced to choose between “Thalia,” the muse or “the rusted barbs of a shopping cart” limits the range of the black poet. Similarly, codifying literature into racially distinct canons does not make sense to Beatty.

Gunnar’s poetry continues to reflect his feelings of confinement. His next occasion for poetry is the funeral of one of his fellow Gun Toting Hooligans. The poem, “Elegy for a Vicious Midget,” emphasizes Pumpkin’s diminutive size. His “homunculus casket” denotes that he was not given the opportunity to fully develop. Gunnar’s poetry is similarly stunted by external limitations. In the text that follows the poem, Gunnar reflects on the practice of “duel[ing] in impromptu verse; tankas at seven paces or sestinas at noon” (105). This phrase is contradictory since complex poetic structures like tankas and sestinas cannot very well be produced impromptu. Thus, poetry that is supposedly a spontaneous production is actually planned down to the syllable. Similarly, the violence of Hillside appears to be spontaneous and unavoidable, yet it is actually an organized response to social structures as limiting as the structure of a sestina. The confinement of Hillside leads to violence, and it should not be celebrated. Beatty’s humorous descriptions of using poetry as a weapon likens poetry to violence and suggests that the arbitrary boundaries around literature do more harm than good. Segregated literature intensifies stereotypes and injures rather than liberates people of color.

Gunnar’s description of poetic dueling is immediately followed by a poem that, unlike the one about “ghetto muses” or Pumpkin’s elegy is not embedded in the storyline of the novel. The stand-alone poem, “Home Grown,” suggests that living in a stereotyped community prevents its members from getting to know themselves or each other. The “young G” in the poem comes to the realization that he does not know what the men “he’s grown up with/traded comic books with/been tested for VD with” are “really like” (106). He only knows that they are “niggers who care” (106). Beatty uses the racial epithet to flatten the men. The “care” the speaker describes is not personal affection since the men do not really “know” each other. Instead, they are reduced to an externally defined community that generally “cares” about the same things. They can only access a superficial understanding of their “cares.” The men are described as “asleep under a blanket of smoke” that simultaneously connects them and confines them (105). They are disconnected from the world outside the smoke and prevented from seeing each other. Segregated and stereotyped literature creates a “blanket of smoke” around black writers, which defeats the purpose of black literature to record the quotidian experience of black people and resist injustice. Beatty’s satirical use of poetry in gang fights and the “Home Grown” poem suggests that conventional African American literary forms perpetuate stereotypes that efface the individual identities of African Americans.

As the story progresses, Gunnar increasingly loses faith in conventional poetry. After learning about the jury’s decision in the Rodney King trial, Gunnar experiences “a rage that couldn’t be dealt with in a poem” (131). He goes on to explain, “ Even at its most reflective or its angriest, my poetry was little more than an opiate devoted to pacifying my cynicism…the American poet was a tattletale, a whiner, at best an instigator (131). Gunnar is skeptical that poetry can combat racism. Instead, he believes that it functions as an empty discussion much like “colorblindness” in Santa Monica. Scoby pushes Gunnar’s skepticism even further. While they are looting a store, Gunnar recites, “What happens to a dream deferred” (134). Scoby answers, “Fuck Langston Hughes. I bet when they rioted in Harlem, Langston got his” (134). So, while Gunnar understands poets as empty mouthpieces, Scoby suggests that the poet is a traitor who deserves to “get his” in revolutionary moments. Again, Beatty characterizes conventional literature as a problem rather than a solution to racism. Langston Hughes, in Scoby’s estimation, is someone who deserves punishment rather than celebration. These moments reveal a line of inquiry concerning the relationship between African American literature and racial politics. Beatty suggests that literature--in this instance poetry--is not only impotent but also misleading. Gunnar does not write any new poems after the Rodney King riots. Instead, the poems embedded in the novel after the riot scenes are, tellingly, poems that Gunnar wrote in his past that readers use to make assumptions about him.

When Gunnar attends the first meeting of his creative writing class at Boston University, he learns that his poetry has been used to erase his individual identity and replace him with a stereotype. Unbeknownst to him, a literary magazine has published his poetry. Outsiders have studied his poetry for years without his knowledge or consent (179). The sight of his classmate’s book, *Ghetto-topia: An Anthropological Rending of the Ghetto through the Street Poems of an Unknown Street Poet Named Gunnar Kaufman*, sends Gunnar running from the building (179). Referring to Gunnar both by his name and as an “Unknown Street Poet,” the title suggests that both his identity and the significance of his work are lost. Instead, outsiders reduce him to a nameless occupant of an unspecified “ghetto” to be dissected for anthropological study. Gunnar feels exposed by strangers’ appropriation of his poetry. Beatty depicts Gunnar’s sense of exposure by having him strip naked and run from his Boston University classroom (179). These scenes demonstrate that Gunnar’s written poetry reduces him to an agent in other people’s life decisions and political positions. African American literature, even when created by African Americans to reflect their contemporary experiences, can be codified in destructive ways through academic study. In Beatty’s estimation, African American conventional literature reduces racial identity to a set of flat narratives.

Political Performance

Just as Beatty’s novel approximates performance, Gunnar chooses to discard written poetry in favor of poetic performance. Gunnar is disillusioned by the emptiness of racial politics. He realizes that he is not truly invested in any political movement despite the political life of his poetry. It upsets him that other people insert him and his poetry into their political agendas. Like the young G in “Home Grown,” Gunnar realizes that he is invested in “care” but does not really know about what he cares. He has allowed his life to be reduced to liberal stereotypes of political action that are completely disconnected from his real life. As a result, Gunnar decides to tell the truth when he is invited to give a speech at a political rally in support of black rule in South Africa (200). Rather than supporting the cause, he admits, “I am not willing to die for South Africa, and you ain’t neither” (200). By doing so, Gunnar seeks to kill the unifying stereotypes that adhere to black literature and the black body. Gunnar continues by paraphrasing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “I ain’t ready to die for anything, so I guess I’m just not fit to live. In other words, I’m just ready to die. I’m just ready to die” (200). By referencing King, Gunnar recalls an era when African Americans were more united by a political movement than in the contemporary period. This juxtaposition illuminates the truth of Beatty’s suggestion that stereotypical black identities connected to past political movements are incongruous with black identity in the post-civil rights era. Gunnar’s suggestion that he is “ready to die” reflects Beatty’s sentiments that the practice of projecting stereotypical narratives onto black bodies must end.

After Scoby dies and leaves Gunnar a poem as a suicide note, Gunnar begins receiving more death poems. These poems represent the death of the black body that serves as a canvas onto which others paint stereotypical images. The death poems signify the end of literature that pays homage to past political movements. Instead of replicating counter-master narratives, Beatty advocates that black writers forge new paths through literature that adopt alternative narrative strategies to represent contemporary African American life. For example, Beatty includes the obituary of “Merva Kilgore” a “prolific writer” who kills herself after being asked to sing “one of those old Negro spirituals” (211). The writer eliminates the body limited only to spirituals as a method of representation. Another obituary, for Carlton Malthus, cites that he killed himself after being “accused of being too black” to appreciate a beer that he developed (210). Carlton kills the body that does not represent the entirety of his experience but instead freezes him into other people’s expectations. Thus, the death poems are metaphors for writing that resists stereotypes about black people rather than perpetuate them. Beatty proposes that black artists should kill limiting narratives.

Black Fugitive Impulse

In order to disassociate himself from stereotypes, Gunnar decides to completely abandon all attempts to fit into traditional racial, social, and educational frameworks. Gunnar and Yoshiko go into hiding rather than constantly move from stereotype to stereotype and take refuge in the La Cienega Motor Lodge (211). Having no fixed address they enroll in a “correspondence college,” thereby eschewing any fixed narratives associated with either local neighborhood or the academy. Although they refuse to fix their bodies in any particular physical location, Gunnar’s history finds him when his father begins to follow him around in a helicopter while shining a spotlight down on him to ensure his visibility. Oddly enough, the searchlight provides Gunnar and Yoshiko with more freedom by exposing their hideout. The couple use the light to “take midnight strolls” during which Yoshiko conducts identity experiments. The light from the helicopter turns the darkness of midnight into a stage upon which Yoshiko pretends to be “a newly discovered blues musician.” While such a unique composite identity as a Japanese blues singer might remain unnoticed in the shadow of identity stereotypes, the searchlight makes Yoshiko’s performance visible. In darkness, death, or life outside of the codification of the literary canon, there is room to create new identities. Here, Beatty draws attention to the value of performance. Yoshiko’s flesh life explodes stereotypes about Japanese women.

Gunnar and Yoshiko become so enamored with the illumination of the searchlight that they decide that Yoshiko should give birth in its glow. When they invite the locals to witness the birth of their baby in Reynier Park, Psycho Loco correctly interprets the public birth ceremony as another identity performance. He inquires, “What kind of black man would let his wife give birth in the park?” (217). The searchlight penetrates the darkness of the fugitive space that Gunnar and Yoshiko occupy—a space outside of all affiliations and laws. By bringing a child and the neighborhood into this space, they hope to make the stage for identity performance available to everyone.

After Yoshiko gives birth, Gunnar’s mother instructs him to use his favorite cereal bowl to collect the placenta, a “quivering bloody mass of now useless organ” (219). Gunnar offers the “pulpy organ” to the officers manning the spotlight helicopter and mocks, “Thus behold the only thing mightier than yourself” (219). Yoshiko follows with, “*Roots*, right?”(219) In this moment, Beatty uses Alex Haley’s *Roots* to represent a black aesthetic that relies on the body as the locus of identity and authenticity. By offering the “quivering” and “useless” placenta instead of the new baby, Gunnar underscores the death of this aesthetic. Like his favorite cereal bowl, the old aesthetic is comfortable and juvenile. Gunnar discards it as he transitions from the teenager who loved the cereal bowl into fatherhood. Since his wife gave birth under the illumination of the spotlight, the new baby gets to enjoy the fugitive’s freedom. His mocking act makes the officers aware that the body confined by hegemonic authority is dead. Yoshiko’s questioning of the origin of the quote implies that the *Roots* framework for understanding identity is a barely legible memory.

Since the birth is such a successful event, Gunnar and Yoshiko use the searchlight as a spotlight during the Bacchanalian Misery Fests, a weekly occasion for members of their community to perform on stage. Beatty marks the Misery Fest as an opportunity for identity performance that disarms the textual constructions of identity that Gunnar has confronted in genealogy, classrooms and, ultimately, African American literature. In an interview with *BOMB* magazine, Paul Beatty connects the Misery Fests in the novel to the poetry slams in the Central Park held by the Nuyorican poets**.** This connection aligns the Misery Fest with the performance poetry scene, a space that, for better or worse, is frequently positioned in opposition to academia. In an article in the journal *Oral Traditions*, Felice Belle, a former host of the Nuyorican Friday night slam, attempts to downplay the division between slam poetry and written poetry. Yet, she validates the logic of the divide with her argument that slam poetry speaks for the common man in a way that other forms of poetry cannot. Belle asserts, “It is this relevance to the lives of everyday people that makes the slam poet an integral part of the genre” (“The Poem Performed”). Annette Saddick takes Belle’s contention a step further. She asserts that African American performance arts, particularly rap music, get characterized as “dangerous” because performance has an inherent power to disrupt conventional discourses of race and class. She explains, “One of the central reasons that hip-hop artists, music, and culture as a whole have been criticized as ‘dangerous’ lies in the power of the performing body to subvert traditional, hence safe, modes of representation in America” (“Rap’s Unruly Body”).

Following course, Beatty designates the Bacchanalian Misery Fest, a neighborhood performance venue, as the only space in which Gunnar can express himself freely. Unlike the confinement of Hillside, a neighborhood constructed by economic factors, the Bacchanalian Misery Fest is a community of choice. People of color from a variety of backgrounds participate in the spectacle. As such, Gunnar can perform an identity that feels “his” rather than attempt to conform to the racial identities and affiliations projected onto him by others. In fact, these performances do not appear to be poems at all. At some point, Gunnar invites children on the stage to sing and local drug addicts on stage to give monologues that explain their behavior. He follows his final poetic performance, a spoken rather than written poem, with action, by reciting the poem and then cutting off his own finger in memory of Scoby. This symbolic castration ensures that Gunnar does not have to be like the Kaufman men who came before him. The “castration” suggests that he is more like his mother, an orphan without a genealogy. This act represents Gunnar’s departure from the literary tradition.

Instead of abiding by racial stereotypes, all members of the Hillside community begin to occupy the fugitive space that Gunnar and Yoshiko have uncovered. Even intergroup stereotypes are dismantled. Gunnar explains, “The neighborhood’s stigmatized groups got a chance to *kvetch* and defend their actions to the rest of the neighborhood” (220). Allowing members of the community who are despised or invisible to speak is yet another way to demonstrate the complexities that are compressed by mainstream narratives of racial identity. The stage serves as a black imaginary space where all community members perform their complex interiority for everyone to see. In contrast to static images proffered by literature, live performances challenge stereotypical depictions of members of the community. They cannot be disconnected from their speaker or misappropriated by outsiders as Gunnar’s written poetry had been because Gunnar restricts access to the Bacchanalian Misery Fest. Anyone who has insider knowledge of the community is permitted to participate, and eventually “colored folks from all over Los Angeles crash Hillside to take part in the spectacle” (220). However, Gunnar is careful to “ensure that Friday nights didn’t turn into a trendy happening for whities bold enough to spelunk into the depths of the ghetto” (220). By preventing outsiders from attending, he eliminates the danger of misappropriation.

Although Gunnar denies strangers entry, the performances air on television as a counterpoint to the Rodney King video. Rather than broadcasting an image that freezes the black body into an abusive narrative, Beatty promotes repetition of images of raced individuals performing their diversity and individuality. Rather than betraying members of his community to promote stereotypes for his own benefit, as his artistic forbearers did, Gunnar uses his art to celebrate his community and dismantle stereotypical representations of residents of Hillside. The community that Gunnar and Yoshiko construct with the Misery Fests is a community of individuals who choose their affiliation rather than having it thrust upon them by birth and social position. Gunnar’s and Yoshiko’s escape from the narratives perpetuated in literature and academic spaces opens a discursive space large enough for the entire neighborhood to occupy.

A space of critique

In “The Idea of Black Culture,” Hortense Spillers laments that black culture has become too “mainstream” to function as a position of critique. If, as Spillers suggests, black culture has achieved mainstream status, then the concept of double consciousness that drives Du Bois’ critique in *The Souls of Black Folks* can no longer exist in the same form. In short, one no longer feels one’s twoness. Instead, Beatty’s novel suggests that everyone can now feel multiplicity. As such, it is time to shift attention awayfrom empty stereotypes toward distinguishing the individual realities of racial identity. Thus, Gunnar’s escape from his affiliations in favor of a fugitive lifestyle achieves the position of critique that Spillers advocates. This position is now occupied by those who dare perform a multifaceted identity. Only by running away from the mainstream and retreating into a black imaginary space can African American artists usher the nation toward humanity.

Outside of the racial protocols fostered by African American literature, fugitives perform the complexity of their individual identities. In his moment of maturity, Gunnar Kaufman escapes the confines of African American literature and turns inward to create a black identity that enables him to acknowledge all parts of himself. Through Gunnar, Beatty proposes that strategic withdrawal into the black imaginary establishes a position of critique that holds the nation accountable while protecting the black psyche. Conventional African American literature can no longer facilitate this self-absorption because, as Gunnar’s educational experiences indicate, even liberal discourses that pretend to be radical are misappropriated by the mainstream. His retreat into the imaginary space is a rejection of double consciousness—a rejection of a life lived viewing the “self” through the eyes of the “other.” Instead, Gunnar chooses a self-centered existence that celebrates his multifaceted American personality. The Bacchanalian Misery Fest transforms the gaze of the other into a television camera—a one-way lens. Thus, Gunnar cannot see the “other.” Therefore, he cannot read the audience’s faces and register their reactions. Their assessments are no longer important.

This space, away from social pressure and African American literature, is the fugitive’s retreat, an imaginary space. Unlike the other fugitive protagonists, Gunnar’s black imaginary is public and racially exclusive. He is a community leader. Thus, Beatty’s fugitive does not revel in the illusion of autonomy. From his position on stage, Gunnar gains the critical distance from mainstream American identity necessary to offer a national critique.

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1. Dr. Wright was a sociologist by training. He served as editor of the *Christian Recorder,* an African American periodical and voice of the African Methodist Episcopal church,from 1909 to 1936. Wright became a bishop in the same church. He also served as president of Wilberforce University for one year in 1941. For more on Richard Wright Jr,, see Kevin Modesto’s biographical essay, "’Won't Be Weighted down’: Richard R. Wright, Jr.'s Contributions to Social Work and Social Welfare.” For more on the *Christian Recorder,* see chapter 2 of Julius Bailey’s *Race Patriotism: Protest and Print Culture in the A.M.E. Church.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more on this see Gates’ “The Master’s Pieces: On Canon Formation and the African American Tradition.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89.1 (1990): 89-111. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In *What Was African American Literature?* (2011)*,* Kenneth Warren contends that African American literature is a product of a particular historical period characterized by the strictures of Jim Crow racism More recently, the March 2013 “Theories and Methodologies” section of *PMLA*was devoted to responses to Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African American Literature*? [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In his essay, “Talking Black: Critical Signs of the Times,” Gates asserts that African American literature is unique because of its relationship to its critics. The scholar discerns, “Few literary traditions have begun with such a complex and curious relation to criticism: allegations of an absence led directly to a presence, a literature often inextricably bound in a dialogue with its harshest critics” (Gates 2428). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Richard Wright’s 1937 essay, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” was published in the literary magazine *New Challenge*. In the essay, Wright condemns his contemporaries for neglecting to produce literature for an African American audience with the explicit goal of preserving black folkloric expressions in favor of “escaping the harsh lot of their race” by producing writing that mimicked the conventions of the Western tradition. In Wright’s estimation such literature only functioned to beg the question of “Negro humanity”

   rather than using literature as a tool in the development of a Black Nationalist identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example, Charles Chestnut’s short stories collected in *The Conjure Tales* and *The Wife of His Youth* contain conjure figures who assert supernatural power that disrupts the social power of white authority figures. Even more specifically, we might consider this line as a reference to Frederick Douglass’ victory over the brutal overseer Covey that he attributes to a protective “root” he was given by an older slave. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more on the role of basketball and stereotypes in the novel see Tracy Curtis’ “Basketball’s Demands in Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Paul Beatty denies the connection between himself and Gunnar Kaufman; nevertheless, it is difficult to overlook the similarities between their lives. Paul Beatty was interviewed twice by BOMB magazine, once by Christian Haye in 1994 and again in 2000 by Rone Shavers. When asked in the second interview if he was similar to Gunnar Kaufman, Paul Beatty responded: “In terms of the more obvious things—mom and two sisters, L.A., New York. But most of it isn’t, 95 percent of it is made up. Tuffy is more like me, I think, than Gunnar Kaufman from *The White Boy Shuffle*.” Also of note, Beatty admits that the Bacchanalian Misery Fest is a “reflection on the Nuyorican thing.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)