

# Understanding Absurdity

## From Satire to Hysterical Realism in Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* and *The Sellout*

By

Inger Marie Lauvås Alver



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Department of Foreign Languages

University of Bergen

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## Samandrag

I denne oppgåva vert to av Paul Beatty sine romanar, *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) og *The Sellout* (2015) analysert og diskutert med tanke på deira sjangertrekk og sjangertilhøyrse.

Oppgåva undersøker sjangrane satire og hysterisk realisme som skildra av Mikhail Bakhtin og James Wood respektivt. Båe romanar har fått stor merksemd in det litterære miljø, særleg etter sistnemnde vann Beatty Booker prisen i 2016 som fyrste amerikanske forfattar.

Oppgåva baserer seg på argumentet om at Beatty sin nyaste roman *The Sellout* i tilstrekkeleg grad skil seg frå andre tekstar klassifisert som satire til å kunne bli plassert i same kategori. For å klårgjera dette skiljet kontrasterer eg romanen med Beatty sin debut roman, *The White Boy Shuffle*. Sistnemnde vert gjort greie for i lys av Mikhail Bakhtin sine karakteristikkar av satire, mens eg vidare argumenterer for at *The Sellout* illustrerer trekk frå hysterisk realisme ved å relatere eksemplar frå teksten til Wood si skildring av sjangeren.

For å undersøke trekk og sjangertilhøyrse er det nødvendig med eit overblikk av satire innan den Afrikansk Amerikanske tradisjonen, i tillegg til definisjonsspørsmåla rundt satiresjangeren. Dette heldt seg som ein raud tråd gjennom teksten og visar kor dynamisk sjangre kan opptre, og illustrerer at det kan vere nødvendig å revidere tidlegare forståingar av tekstar og sjangre. I dei to neste kapitla visar eg korleis romanane demonstrerer trekk frå deira respektive sjanger, før eg vender blikket framover og utover og argumenterer for at hysterisk realisme som sjanger kan vere eit fruktbart rammeverk for å forstå andre situasjonar og kunstmateriale.

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## Introduction

African American literature has experienced a blooming in terms of diversity, size and impact particularly since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The satire genre specifically has been an influential and valuable framework for African American writers to express themselves by, in terms of criticizing issues like slavery and civil rights. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, a shift has been observed concerning the style and effect of the satire genre, suggesting that the previously conceptualized understanding of the genre needs to be revised. In order to explore this shift, this thesis will analyze the renowned African American author Paul Beatty's two novels *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) and *The Sellout* (2015), and investigate whether the novels are rightfully placed within the satire genre, or whether a new term better describes their style. Beatty's texts are both scathingly critical, absurd and unpredictable. Nevertheless, I argue that their approach to pressing issues differs from each other, and that the style of the two novels cannot be aligned as all part of satire as it is typically characterized. As I pursue the question of whether there is a need for a new term applied to texts like *The Sellout*, the term "Hysterical Realism" coined by James Wood in 2000 will be investigated. In my discussion I will highlight and further investigate the ambiguous relationship between satire and realism found in *The Sellout*. Consequently, then, in simple terms, I argue that *The Sellout* should be classified as a hysterical realist text in contrast to *The White Boy Shuffle*, which I argue is rightfully placed within the satire genre.

Paul Beatty's novels both have elements of humor and critique, but they are vastly different in their use of literary devices like the absurd. *The White Boy Shuffle* presents a young man called Gunnar, who struggles to find his role in shifting environments of race and place in America. Gunnar somewhat reluctantly ends up as an African American leader figure who incites his followers to commit suicide in the name of African Americans' fight for equality. *The Sellout*, published nearly two decades later, presents a nonchalant

protagonist and narrator who reintroduces slavery and segregation in an outskirt area of Los Angeles. The events and dialogues of this novel reveal, in my point of view, how the balance of realism and absurdity is particularly different from the first novel and contributes to its pursuit of truth and reality.

Beatty's body of literature consists of poetry collections as well as novels. I chose *The White Boy Shuffle* and *The Sellout* as primary works in this thesis because the contrast between them in time and style is apparent. The novels are worth exploring also because of their similarity – both novels tackle the problem of race in the contemporary United States, although there is a development in Beatty's representation of these. I explore and emphasize the development between the debut and the latest novel through my analysis, which supports my argument of the latter belonging in a different genre. The issues raised in Beatty's novels are communicated through a format of humor and subversiveness, which highlights those issues and challenge readers' preconceptions and attitudes. Both novels question the development of the post-racial era, highlight covert racism in society, for example in regard to education, and facilitate discussions on how people are to interact with such controversies. One such matter that is touched upon by the novels concerns the debate of whether one can expect an explanation of why something is inappropriate or racist from a racial group member to others who are oblivious to that fact. The novels comment on this debate by provoking, challenging and testing racist worldviews by implementing them in their respective contemporary societies and narrate the experience from an African American perspective. Racism and connected societal issues are confronted and highlighted through their implementation in an unexpected setting. The evident unexpectedness in both novels in turn contributes to the humoristic trait, but may also be a factor that helps readers engage with the content in a non-threatening way. This latter element of the novels' possible effect on the

readers advocates for Beatty's choice of framework, as the genres successfully convey controversial and complex issues in a manner that may facilitate change of attitude.

The way Beatty raises these issues in *The White Boy Shuffle* and *The Sellout* are fundamentally different and deserve a thorough analysis. One could speculate whether this change in Beatty's approach happens precisely because many of the issues raised still endure, almost two decades after *The White Boy Shuffle* was written. This change in writing style may also suggest that the literary field acknowledges a need to go further and push harder in literature to achieve equality. This realization seems to have trickled its way into a new way of writing, which emerges on the outskirts of the satire genre's borders. The contrast between the novels also reflects societal changes in between the publications of the two. New ways of protesting have appeared in the fight against racism and oppression since Beatty's debut, like the Black Lives Matter movement from 2013, which initially reflected police violence disproportionately affecting African Americans but has become a movement reaching far beyond the United States' borders (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). The change of genre and style indicates that the genre of satire used in *The White Boy Shuffle* falls short when confronting those issues in the contemporary, as Beatty arguably shifts the format when writing *The Sellout*. The 21<sup>st</sup> century novel is written in a style that I will argue facilitates an approach that confronts and subverts racism and prejudice by way of for instance vernacular language and humor. Although both novels are praised by literary critics and they both raise issues through popular culture, the latter novel seems to go further and insidiously challenge the reader to reflect on his or her thoughts and attitudes while mid-laugh, and by that subtly change people's perspectives.

Hysterical realism is a fairly new genre, and should be explored, especially concerning the tension between this genre and the related satire. The identification of the genre in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a telling feature of a development within the literary field, and

perhaps especially in relation to texts that confront issues of the contemporary in a new way that cannot be completely comprehended or interpreted through existing genres. The recognition of the genre is also telling of the societal development in the United States, and perhaps also internationally – examples are artworks that are proving more absurd, playing with conventional concepts of how a text may provoke and challenge readers and existing worldviews. I will return to the relevance of hysterical realism in this regard in the conclusion.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I present a selection of close readings from *The White Boy Shuffle*, where I focus on discussing how they exemplify and relate to Bakhtin's characteristics of Menippean satire. I include a conversation concerning humor and irony's role in the satire genre, and how they are employed to convey the satirical motive. I continue with close readings that exemplify different aspects of the Menippea, aspects that pertain to the larger themes of the genre, like its challenging of philosophical truths and the use of the absurd.

The absurd is of particular interest when I turn to the second chapter concerning Beatty's most recent novel, *The Sellout*. In this chapter I show how, based on its use and juxtaposition of realism and the absurd, the novel cannot be classified as belonging to the satire genre, but is an example of hysterical realism. To understand this genre I will give an account of James Wood's explanation and what hysterical realism is seen to entail. However, I disagree with Wood's judgement concerning the potential and effect of hysterical realism, and rather argue that the features of the genre that he seems to denounce are in fact effective means to communicate the realism embedded in the genre and its pursuit of truth and reality. To further underscore how and why *The Sellout* should be recognized as a hysterical realist text rather than a satire, I relate the novel to Bakhtin's characteristics of the Menippea and show how the novel's features are substantially different from them.

I conclude with a reiteration of the arguments found in the chapters and speculate whether the new genre is just what the contemporary world (perhaps desperately) needs in terms of interpreting and understanding texts, art and our world in general. I will suggest that the scope of hysterical realism is wider than just its relation to literature and can be found in other fields like music, film and political events. In addition, I relate the literary development from satire to hysterical realism to Beatty's own notions on how satire may work, and how it can become a disadvantage or "a shield" (Beatty, as cited in Tripathi, 2017) as he calls it, against criticism and progress.

## Chapter 1

### Background and theoretical framework

In order to better understand the relationship between Beatty's two novels and the characteristics of the satire genre, an overview of the context of the African American satire is needed. The overview is largely based on Darryl Dickson-Carr's findings in his book *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* (2001), which I find to be the most relevant source for my thesis. The primary works are then introduced further as I present summaries of the novels in addition to an account of their critical reception. I then follow with a discussion concerning the definitions of the satire genre, and of the importance of Mikhail Bakhtin's characteristics of Menippean satire and how they relate to Beatty's novels.

#### 1.2 The tradition of African American satire

The tradition of the African American satirical novel stems from long before the abolition of slavery; prominent African American writers such as Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) satirized the American social hierarchy, influenced by stories of enslaved African Americans and their folk culture (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 38). In his speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" performed on the fifth of July 1852, Douglass, a former slave himself, speaks of what is crucial to inspire and produce change, a motive associated with satire: "At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed" (Douglass, 1852). An essential component of satire is the feature of irony, which encompasses several functions. Linda Hutcheon addresses these functions in her book *A Theory of Parody* and describes one of them as "irony judges" (2000, 53). The evaluative aspect of the literary device implies a writer's attitude towards the text itself, "an attitude which, in turn, allows and demands the decoder's interpretation and evaluation" (Hutcheon, 2000, 53), which is central to the satire genre. Her reference to irony's judging character reflects its ability to facilitate readers'

change of attitude and behavior, which helps one see Douglass' claim of irony's power and importance even in the 1800s.

According to Darryl Dickson-Carr in his work *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* (2001), the enslaved people's tales are what makes the backbone of African American satire. Together with antebellum authors and their literary techniques, such tales are what result in the African American satire novel (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 38), examples of which will be returned to below. However, the collections of folklore in the beginning of the nineteenth century were most often not representative of the African Americans they were portraying; the language used was the language recorded by observers who were mostly white southern writers. In turn, such texts lead to filtered stories influenced by the writers' bias and their perceptions of African American people and culture (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 39).

The biased material played a role as African American writers produced texts to oppose this fallacious image, utilizing dialect as a part of the attempt at subverting demeaning stereotypes and racist images. Charles W. Chesnutt and his collection of tales in *The Conjure Woman* (1899) and Paul L. Dunbar's poetry were written in the so called "Negro dialect". These texts not only functioned to revise the popular folk and trickster tales that were demeaning and biased, but did so within narrative frameworks that normally portrayed the racist stereotypes of black people, whilst cleverly including subtle critiques of the exploitation of African Americans and the American South (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 39). However, Dickson-Carr notes that the choices of the authors regarding dialect language also reflects the editorial policies of the time, which were structured to suppress the idea of diversity within the African American group (2001, 39). Such policies inevitably led to a lack of African American writers whose literature reflected the reality and diversity of African American life, although there are some prominent exceptions to this statement appearing in the turn of the century. An especially important text is W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903,

a watershed one might say, for the African American literary tradition and intellectual thought. It would come to have a defining impact on the movement toward recognition of African American culture and art, witnessed in the text's profound effect on an entire generation that would eventually form the Harlem Renaissance.

The revolutionary arts movement called the Harlem Renaissance spanned from the 1910s through the 1930s and engendered a comprehensive and fruitful collection of literature by African Americans (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 39). This collection, according to Dickson-Carr (2001, 41) has only been surpassed by the Black Arts movement in the 1960s. *The Crisis*, a journal founded and co-edited by W. E. B. Du Bois from 1910 to 1934 was central. Although it was considered property of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) it largely reflected Du Bois' own ideology and ideas, like his resistance against attempts to institute segregated schools and his censure of both the white and the "Negro church" for "unchristian" behavior, especially in terms of white people's treatment of African Americans (Rudwick, 1958, 216). The growing body of literature written by African Americans led not only to an increase in representative discourses on the diverse ontological and political status and experience of this group, but also to prolific satirical texts that effectively critiqued these discourses. Du Bois' speech *Criteria of Negro Art* published in *The Crisis* in 1926 is an example of this, as it explicitly condemns the dominating discourse in the art scene based on white special interests. He specifically mentions such interests materialized in the publishing business, stating that "They want Uncle Toms, Topsyies, good 'darkies' and clowns" rather than diversity and truth (Du Bois, 1926, [22]).

The influence of the intellectual texts and arts in this period reached well beyond the Harlem area and into the American mainstream discourse of the time, although the texts' range were limited as a result of for example publication houses' criteria and society's widespread racist attitudes toward the African American population. Texts published during

the Harlem Renaissance addressed issues affecting African Americans, concerning themes like identity and the construction of race, the crisis in black leadership and the lack of a unified political ideology among the African American community. However, there were also disagreements regarding how the artists of the Renaissance could best influence their audience; some writers were criticized for romanticizing African American's realities and their experiences, other artists whose texts opposed what they perceived as fake representations were criticized for presenting African Americans in a way that could serve the whites' primitive view of them, and undermine racial equality (Dickson-Carr, 2001, p.87). Similarly, Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes that although the Harlem Renaissance succeeded in regard to the creation of a substantial African American body of art, "most critics agree that it failed to find its voice, which lay muffled beneath the dead weight of Romantic convention, which most black writers seemed not to question but to adopt eagerly" (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 156). Langston Hughes was one of such writers who condemned literature that would succumb to the white people's preferences. Hughes referred to this as the racial mountain standing in the way of true African American art, the mountain being constructed by the "urge within the race toward whiteness" and "to be as little Negro and as much American as possible" (Hughes, 1999, 55).

With the turn of the economy during the Great Depression in the 1930s, a substantial portion of African American writers of the time found themselves distracted by a changing society, and many writers withdrew from the literary arts scene. Although the Renaissance's flourishing of arts decreased in the Great Depression, the production of African American literature did not end; some of the most acclaimed texts were published well into the 30s, like Zora Neal Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* published in 1939, and Richard Wright's *Native Son* published in 1940. Analyses of Hurston's satirical works, together with other contemporary satirical novels often reveal, according to Dickson-Carr (2001, 43), a frustration

concerning the inability of readers – blacks and whites alike – to recognize the complex and delimiting system of racial power in the USA, in addition to the inability of perceiving and pursuing the best way to dismantle that system. As we will see, frustration concerning this inability can be recognized in Beatty's works as well, displayed for example in the absurdity of the events and characters' thoughts, a feature that ultimately forces the reader to take a new perspective on issues like for example the use of the N-word.

Although the genre of satire flourished in the Harlem Renaissance period, several writers criticized the satirists for entering the life of white people through the same minstrel technique which previously had dominated the scene. One of these writers was Richard Wright, who criticized satirical texts for being simplistic and made for white folks' entertainment, as opposed to critiquing behavioral and systemic patterns (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 87). Wright's criticism, as told by Dickson-Carr (2001, 87), argues that the texts' critique directed toward the reader was not recognized as such, and instead regarded as pure entertainment. His criticism toward the Harlem Renaissance authors, especially Hurston, includes concerns of their supposed tendency to avoid political statements and how their texts did not reach out to a black audience. However, according to Dickson-Carr (2001, 87) this criticism seems somewhat misplaced, given the substantial number of authors who openly condemned racism in their work. Despite Wright's and others' criticism, the African American satirical tradition hardly ceased; instead it laid the groundwork for the influential writings leading up to the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts and Aesthetic movement.

As society moved forward in terms of race politics in the 1960s, the African American communities and organizations recognized a need for redefining their political strategy and ideology as they saw a possibility for national segregation to be demolished. The debate that followed led to a set of revised approaches to interpreting African American culture and art,

whose boundaries were manipulated and bent by satirists in search of greater diversity in the portrayal of African Americans. The conversation about how to obtain social justice, civil rights and economic freedom led to, in simple terms, a divide between those who believed that racial separatism (also called Black Nationalism) was the best way to achieve their goal, and those who saw racial integration as the most effective means (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 113). Many, of course, held views that fell between these two poles, and despite their common goal, the groups' differing beliefs on the means necessary to reach that goal resulted in "vitriolic exchanges" (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 113). In the middle of this turmoil, several critics expressed what they saw the writer's role of the time to be, that their responsibility was to use the power of the word, to use language to transform ideas into action that would revolutionize the nation's treatment of African Americans (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 115). One of these critics, Amiri Baraka, stated that the "Black artist's role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as (s)he knows it" and pursue a kind of realism that would reveal America as it truly is and then show the reader the means of destroying those oppressive structures (Baraka as cited in Dickson-Carr, 2001, 115).

The utilization of language and literature to create and aid social and political change, a key part of nearly all definitions of satire, continued into the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ishmael Reed, a prominent author of this period writing satirical texts among others, helped promote the realistic and reflective form of literature, which became "an ideal model for all black art" (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 120). During the 60s and 70s a substantial amount of African American art was produced and distributed, which points to the name of the period The Black Arts Movement, also known as the Black Aesthetic movement. The movement encouraged writers and artists to create diverse and rich portrayals of African Americans, which were needed in order to grasp the complexities of their life experiences, free from society's demeaning stereotypes (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 120).

Different opinions on how to best achieve equal social and political conditions for African Americans through art continued to be an issue persisting well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The form of satire expanded to another mode of expression during this time, namely comedy and stand-up in particular. Prominent comedians like Richard Pryor and Dave Chapelle are praised because of their raw portrayals of the real life of African Americans, and as Beatty notes in *The Sellout*, Richard Pryor represents what he calls “Unmitigated Blackness”, that is, not giving in to society’s expectations (2015, 277). The use of comedy or ridiculing to critique societal realities is something that is prevalent in satire, which will be further addressed as different definitions of the genre are presented and discussed below. Firstly, however, I present brief summaries of *The Sellout* and *The White Boy Shuffle*. To offer a glimpse of the development from the 20<sup>th</sup> century novel to the 21<sup>st</sup> century novel, I present an overview of the works’ reception in the literary world.

### 1.3 The White Boy Shuffle

Beatty’s novels have both gained acclaim in the literary community and are concerned with topics like inequality, race and prejudice, and offer a refreshing courage and originality. Beatty’s debut novel *The White Boy Shuffle* was first published in 1996, and intricately presents to the reader the world of an African American boy named Gunnar Euripides Kaufman as he assimilates to a new environment. Gunnar lives in a predominantly white neighborhood during the first part of his life, acclaimed as the “cool black guy” (*TWBS*, 1996, 31). After a dispute about cultural heritage and blackness, the narrator Gunnar and his family – consisting of his mom and two sisters – move to Hillside, a predominantly African American neighborhood. Gunnar is included in a local gang, called the Gun Toting Hooligans, who ironically initially never used guns, for as the narrator notes “Who’d suspect a gang called Gun Totin’ Hooligans in a vicious gangland lassoing?” (Beatty, 1996, 111).

The plot is set in the late half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, offering the reader an African American's perspective on contemporary issues like police brutality and black leadership, and events like the LA riots in 1992 following the acquittal of four white police officers who severely beat Rodney King (History, 2020). As his athletic skills are recognized and further developed, Gunnar eventually attends college on an athletic scholarship, though his recognition is also influenced by his poetic skills. Gunnar's status as a famous basketball player and author of his debut novel *Watermelonin*, leads to a growing fanbase. While somewhat reluctantly and indifferently speaking at a rally against South Africa's Apartheid, Gunnar finds himself criticizing the audience for not being devoted enough to "the cause". He demonstrates his claim by quoting a text by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., before he accuses the audience of not being willing to die for anything, and consequently deducing that they simply are not fit to live either. The revelation causes a growing number of people across the nation to commit suicide in the name of the "cause", including Gunnar's best friend and ally, Nicholas Scoby.

Beatty was already a praised poet at the time of publication of *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996); he had entered the public's attention when he won the first poetry slam championship of the Nuyorican Poets Café (Sandhu, 2016). He subsequently published two collections of poetry, *Big Bank Take Little Bank* in 1991 and *Joker, Joker Deuce* in 1993. The champion title and his first publication contributed to his career being launched and his position as a major voice within the late 20<sup>th</sup> century American literary community solidified, before he turned to fiction in 1996 (Left Bank Books). Beatty's acclaim in the realm of poetry did not, however, automatically result in praise of his fictional literature; his debut novel was turned down by 18 publishers before ending up at Oneworld, a small husband and wife publishing company (Thuillier, 2016). Despite the difficulty with being published, the reception after *The White Boy Shuffle*'s publication foregrounds the growth in acclaim Beatty's literature would receive, with for example Richard Bernstein's review of the debut for *The New York*

*Times* calling it a “blast of satirical heat from the talented heart of black American life” (Bernstein, 1996).

However, Bernstein also recognizes the novel’s flexible position between genres. He remarks on the novel’s fluidity and places the text within the growing genre in American literature, the black Bildungsroman, while in addition recognizing the obvious satirical elements of the novel. In accordance with this fluidity, Bernstein notes in his review that Beatty’s satire slips over the edge into “a kind of nihilistic slapstick”, and that, what he calls the “magical realism” of *The White Boy Shuffle*, results in a less successful piece of work that is not positioned within the readers’ zone of conviction. It would seem that Bernstein observes and identifies the novel’s absurdity as leaning towards “kvetchy political posturing” (Bernstein, 1996) rather than “an antidote to what [Beatty] once described as ‘the defining characteristic of African-American writing: sobriety – moral, corporeal, and prosaic’” (Sandhu, 2016). Other critics, however, like LaMonda Horton Stalling, place the novel firmly within the satire genre, claiming that Beatty deliberately turned to satire because of the genre’s strengths, like allowing the author to deconstruct and revise social concepts (2009). The fluidity between genres that Bernstein mentions, and which is illustrated by the opposing views of the two aforementioned critics, is where I position myself in this thesis as I argue that Beatty’s novel *The Sellout* has too hastily been classified as a satire. The categorization of a text is undoubtedly an ambiguous and complex task, which is why it may be fruitful to examine hysterical realism in the case of *The Sellout*, especially in terms of the novel’s relation to absurdity and realism.

#### 1.4 The Sellout

Beatty’s latest novel, published in 2015, takes its readers on a journey which goes backward and forward in time simultaneously; it plays with concepts dated hundreds of years back in

time and implements them in a modern society. The novel's protagonist and narrator, whose surname is Me, is an extraordinary character. He is the son of an African American psychologist and the subject of many of his father's social experiments. Me lives together with his father in an "agrarian ghetto", located on the outskirts area of Los Angeles in a city named Dickens, which ironically is inhabited by predominantly Black and Latinx people. The name of the city alludes to the 19<sup>th</sup> century British author Charles Dickens, proclaimed for his children's literature, however portraying predominantly white characters and showing oppressive sign-of-the-times attitudes toward other cultures and ethnicities. Me is born and raised there on a piece of land owned by his father while he works for the LAPD as a "Nigger whisperer", an occupation Me eventually picks up after his innocent father is killed in a police shoot-out. The homicide of Me's father stands as an event that causes his search to right yet another wrong in society. Though he recognizes the injustice of police brutality and the treatment of African Americans by authority, Me somewhat reluctantly ends up as a slave owner of Hominy Jenkins, a former member of the *Little Rascals*<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, Me gains recognition in his community as he fabricates a school for whites only, in essence resegregating education, which in turn leads to higher academic results of the children attending the now proclaimed non-white school. The reintroduction of slavery and segregation lands Me in the Supreme Court, smoking weed in an excessively expensive suit. His actions of resegregating his hometown and his status as a slave owner generate confusion and embarrassment in the court room as the judge questions the American system and the deceptive "separate but equal" idea from the late nineteenth century.

At the time of *The Sellout's* publication, Beatty had already developed a fanbase and substantial recognition on the American literary scene, but his acclaim was further heightened as the novel won him the Booker Prize a year after its publication. The novel is praised for its

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<sup>1</sup> *The Little Rascals* is a children's tv-series produced in different formats from 1922 to 1944.

humorous approach to complex racial issues and its deconstruction and disclosure of contemporary oppressive structures. The reception of the novel also raises the question of genre. Most of the critical literature concerning the novel characterizes it as a satire, like Roberta Wolfson does in her essay “Race Leaders, Race Traitors, and the Necropolitics of Black Exceptionalism in Paul Beatty’s Fiction”, where she concludes that “Beatty’s satire bites” (Wolfson, 2019, 642). In Rebecca Vitenzon’s review of the novel in *The Oxford Culture Review*, *The Sellout* is additionally praised and defined for its satirical elements, as it is “filled with pure satiric genius”, “bold and daring” and “witty and biting ironic” (2016).

The characterization of satire must however be contrasted with the author’s idea and explicit remarks that the novel is not a satire. Beatty states that the term satire is an “easy word to just hide behind” and criticizes the genre for creating a space where the reader or reviewer is not confronted with the question of whether one is implicated in misconduct or not, and that the genre rather functions like a shield from confrontation (Beatty quoted in Tripathi, 2017). Beatty also argues that the previous works he has written have not been labelled satirical, despite the similarity in tone between those and *The Sellout* (Tripathi, 2017). It is worth to mention though, that there are scholars who have identified *The White Boy Shuffle* as a satire, like for example LaMonda Horton Stalling. Nevertheless, Vitenzon seems to agree with Beatty’s comment, as she also recognizes a shift in *The Sellout* and other satirical works, noting that the novel is in fact “less a satire and more a report on the current state of racial relations in the US” (Vitenzon, 2016).

I position myself between these two opposing views of whether or not Beatty’s texts are to be considered satirical or not and will suggest that *The White Boy Shuffle* belongs in the satire category whilst *The Sellout* does not, and rather can be identified as belonging in the hysterical realism genre coined by James Wood. Tip-toing on the edge balancing between the genres of satire and realism will be explored further as this thesis discusses the differences

between the genres. The development from the first novel to the next is valuable to explore because it may indicate a shift in how to approach readers who find themselves in an everchanging society, and consequently which writing style or genre that is more fruitful when conveying textual messages in these environments.

### 1.5 Defining satire

As many other literary terms, satire is complex and hard to define. Linda Hutcheon, acknowledged for her work in literary theory on topics such as postmodernism, parody and satire, stresses that satire is “both moral and social in its focus and ameliorative in its intention” (Hutcheon, 2000, 16). Hutcheon explains that although parody and satire are phenomena closely connected and easily confused, her definition of satire differs from her definition of parody by the latter’s dependance on material to repeat “with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” (Hutcheon, 2000, 6). Hutcheon does not place any emphasis on the aspect of humor in her explanation, and excludes it all together from her definition, although many readers of satire would probably expect it to be included.

Other definitions, however, include the notion of humor. One example of this is *The Cambridge Dictionary* (n.d.), which states that satire is “a way of criticizing people or ideas in a humorous way, especially in order to make a political point, or a piece of writing that uses this style”. Hutcheon’s and *Cambridge’s* definitions also differ in their focus on the reactions of and effects on the reader, as the focus in the former is on the features of the genre, while the focus in the latter can be said to be placed on the readers’ response and judgement of whether the material is humorous or not. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2015) also explicitly expresses the aspect of ridicule and scorn, an association which probably aligns well with the public’s understanding of the genre’s focus. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms’* definition states that satire is a “mode of writing that exposes the failings of

individuals, institutions or societies to ridicule or scorn” (Baldick, 2015). The satirical elements may vary in their tone, from tolerant amusement to bitter indignation. *The Oxford Dictionary* further states that the assessment of a material being characterized as satire is often based on incidental elements in a text that may not be considered wholly satirical.

The above definitions’ focus on different elements of satire not only reflects the difficulty in defining the term, but also reflects the variety between the different types of satire, for example Juvenalian, Horatian and Menippean. Juvenalian and Horatian satire are characterized by a bitter condemning approach in the former, and a milder, more indulgent approach in the latter (Baldick, 2015). Juvenalian satire is often determined as following a *generative* model of satire, meaning that the rhetoric is characterized by irony of ridicule “used against exemplars of folly and vice” with an aim of correction, “according to norms of ethical behavior and right thinking” (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 17). Horatian satire, on the other hand, is tolerant in its treatment of human vice and follies, which contributes to irony and amusement rather than outrage (Baldick, 2015). According to Dickson-Carr (2001), the preceding types of satire are relatively rare in contemporary literature; the more common form is Menippean satire, which derives from the philosopher Menippus of the third century BCE and is the model this thesis will be concerned with.

Menippean satire, although it also may be associated with the generative model as is Juvenalian satire, is equally likely to adhere to the *degenerative* model (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 17). Dickson-Carr explains that “[w]ithin the degenerative model, virtually all hegemonies are ridiculed, often through the use of appalling grotesqueries and exaggerations” (2001, 17). This is the model African American satire and iconoclasm tends to follow (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 17), with the icons dismantled ranging from systems of oppression to the very culture that allows for such racism to thrive. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines Menippean satire as “a form of intellectually humorous work characterized by miscellaneous

contents, display of curious erudition, and comical discussion on philosophical topics” (Baldick, 2015). The definition could be characterized as rather wide, and it brings forth an understanding of satire that is again contrasted to Hutcheon’s deliberate avoidance of the humorous aspect. Nonetheless, as the following chapters will show, there are several elements in my primary works that stick out as ridiculous, absurd or ironic. In the following I connect some of the novels’ elements to Menippean satire as it is described by Mikhail Bakhtin. This is to show how both novels do in fact have aspects that relate to the satire genre, but that there are substantial imperative differences that lead me to argue that *The Sellout* rather belongs in Wood’s genre.

#### 1.6 Characteristics of Satire

To be able to grasp the different aspects of Menippean satire it is helpful to explore the different features of such works, as they have been by Mikhail Bakhtin. He addresses the classic form of Menippean satire in his work *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984). An example of a satiric feature as identified by Bakhtin is how Menippean satire is exceptionally fantastic and extraordinary in the sense of its freedom of plot and invention (Bakhtin, 1984, 114). He states that “in all of world literature we could not find a genre more free than the menippea [satire] in its invention and use of the fantastic” (Bakhtin, 1984, 114). The plot is characterized by events and discourse of a fantastic nature, meaning that they are liberated from the limitations of historical precision and, to some extent, realistic situations. The convincing argument of suicide which the protagonist in *The White Boy Shuffle* makes may be an example of this, leading his followers to collectively commit suicide, making him the “bellwether to ethnic hara-kiri” (Beatty, 1996, 2). The novel is not restricted by the plausibility of this actually happening, but rather functions as an exaggeration of the African American’s frustrations in the quest for equality.

Another feature especially closely linked to Beatty's works is what Bakhtin identifies as the most important characteristic: how the bold and unrestrained use of the fantastic in Menippean satire creates extraordinary situations for the purpose of searching, provoking and testing philosophical truths, through the use of manipulation of perspective (Bakhtin, 1984, 114). The shift in perspective is striking in Beatty's works; in *The White Boy Shuffle* readers are invited into a young black man's world, while he navigates his way through society's systemic racism on the one hand, while unrealistic expectations are laid upon him on the other. The protagonist's perspective becomes a means to subvert the stereotypes of black masculinity, and a counterweight to what LaMonda Horton Stalling recognizes as problematic ways contemporary art portrays young black adults and hypermasculinity, like in the 1991 film *Boyz n the Hood* (Stallings, 2009). Manipulation of perspective is also prominent in *The Sellout*, in which Beatty playfully and powerfully toys with concepts and positions historically restricted to white people – particularly the slave owner's position, which is assigned the African American narrator.

Other traits identified by Bakhtin prevalent in the novels and of interest to Beatty are concerned with the perspective on reality offered to the reader and the discussion of what is "natural". One of the traits is described by Bakhtin as the Menippean text's use of "experimental fantasticality", meaning "observation from some unusual point of view", which leads to a "radical change" of the observed phenomena (Bakhtin, 1984, 116). The "radical change" can be illustrated through an individual's change in own behavior and/or attitude, but can also point to how a shift in point of view may reveal absurdity or unfairness in a concept not recognized as such by the majority – resulting in a radical change of perspective or experience of that concept. Another feature related to these topics is the organic combination of, according to Bakhtin, the fantastic, the symbolic and at times, the mystical-religious elements, with "crude slum naturalism" (Bakhtin, 1984, 115). The ambiguous relationship

between satire and realism is here highlighted and will be further investigated throughout this thesis.

The Menippean satire also often contains scandal scenes, eccentric behavior, inappropriate speeches, or as Bakhtin puts it “all sorts of violations of the generally accepted and customary course of events and the established norms of behavior and etiquette, including manners of speech” (Bakhtin, 1982, 117). There are numerous instances in *The Sellout* and *The White Boy Shuffle* in which the narratives and its characters display inappropriate behavior or use of language. The novels’ use of inappropriate language can be interpreted as a means of ridiculing the social activity of constructing an idea which is agreed upon as, and identified as, inherently inappropriate. An example of this is Beatty’s use of the n-word in the two narratives, reflecting the ongoing and age-old debate of whether literary and artistic content should be allowed or able to include the racial slur and possibly whether the author’s ethnicity makes a difference or not. Beatty’s most recent novel, as well as his debut, both refer numerous times to the slur; in discourse and thoughts of the narrators and particularly in *The Sellout’s* commentary on movements seeking to sanitize writings of the past and avoid or replace the use of the racial slur. The comment is cleverly exemplified through the character Foy Cheshire and his criticism of the reprinting of slurs in classics, as Beatty has Cheshire rewriting classics and other texts while replacing derogatory terms, like his text *The Adventures of Tom Soarer* (Beatty, 2017, 217). Twain’s novel is utterly unrecognizable, which according to Rebecca Vitenzon, “demonstrates the absurdity of attempting to alter or obliterate history” (2016). Cheshire’s attempt consequently pinpoints the sanitization trend so characteristic of contemporary American discourse on racial issues.

When related to Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle* and *The Sellout*, perhaps the most fitting of all of Bakhtin’s features of Menippean satire is his comment on how it often includes elements of a social utopia (Bakhtin, 1984, 118). The subgenre Menippean satire

may touch upon the connotations of the term utopia; of unrealistic expectations or visions, and the more hopeful connotations linked to the definition of utopia as “a place of ideal perfection especially in laws, government and social conditions” (Merriam-Webster). The novels relate to the utopian in different ways, but perhaps the most prevalent is *The White Boy Shuffle*'s commentary on oppressive structures through Gunnar. The narrator's depiction of the logical outcome to a society (seemingly) not interested in changing oppressive systems and structures contributes to the creation of a social utopia. Gunnar alludes to such a utopia by stating that “Nothing works, so why suffer (...) when the immediate gratification of suicide awaits?” (Beatty, 1996, 2). The comment generates a perception of how the only state in which an African American experiences non-oppressive structures is in the afterlife. Bakhtin's feature is however more clearly outlined in *The Sellout*, in which the tone for the most part is ironically positive, especially toward segregation, hinting to the protagonist's creation of a social utopia where the historically oppressed are the ones making the rules.

In Bakhtin's concluding remarks, the multi-style and multi-tone characteristic of Menippean satire is underlined, as well as the focus of Menippean texts engaging with current events and topics. These different characterizations unite and form a “deep internal integrity of this genre”, but at the same time however, involves a great plasticity and capacity to absorb small genres and “to penetrate as a component element into other larger ones” (Bakhtin, 1984, 118). Bakhtin's perspective and the characteristics of satire in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* will be of further interest as I argue for placing *The White Boy Shuffle* within this traditional understanding of satire.

As the tradition of African American satire has evolved, the diversity of works within the genre has also drastically expanded, to the point that there are now additional terms being introduced to the field. In terms of Beatty's work, I am left wondering whether the satire genre is wide enough for both *The White Boy Shuffle* and *The Sellout*, seeing how they seem

drastically different concerning their interaction with elements like absurdity and realism, which leads to a profound contrast in reader experience. I will argue that Beatty's debut novel should be recognized as a satirical novel, as the genre is explained in the framework of Bakhtin and other critics above. *The Sellout*, however, I argue extends the limitations of the genre to the point that it is more rightfully placed in a category related to realism, or perhaps best described as a hysterical realist text. Although I return to hysterical realism as a genre in chapter 2, a short explanation is needed already here, that hopefully suffices to understand the contrast between the two genres in relation to the novels. The "big, contemporary novels" identified by Wood that would pertain to the hysterical realism genre are criticized for what he recognizes as excessive language use, lack of sufficient characterization, and that they are defined by their permanent storytelling. In addition, Wood claims that the conventions of realism are implemented and overworked, which together with the preceding features result in what he then terms hysterical realism. The exaggeration of realism pertains to *The Sellout*, for example, in its hyperbolic construct of resegregation when the narrator forges a white school by building a plywood fence around a construction site.

## Chapter 2

### *The White Boy Shuffle* and Satire

When encountering a text, the reader brings with her a set of expectations related to her prior knowledge of textual material and their frameworks and devices. Some of this knowledge is based on genre conventions and results in certain expectations of how a text should behave in order to fit within its accredited genre, expectations that ultimately aids the reader in interpreting it. As Hayden White notes in his essay “Commentary: Good of their Kind”, genres provide “‘virtual contexts’ available for the reader or observer of new phenomena to actuate in thought or imagination” (2003, 372). The boundaries of these contexts are dynamic, and this aspect is further accentuated as White argues in his essay that rather than focusing on “the impossible” within a genre, “we should recognize that art like culture in general is always examining and testing the boundaries between the possible and the impossible” (2003, 374). *The White Boy Shuffle* by Beatty is such an example of a piece of art that engages with the boundaries of genre.

However dynamic the genre in question acts, I argue that Beatty’s novel *The White Boy Shuffle* follows the main scaffolding of satire. I will specifically discuss features found in the novel to see how they comply with Bakhtin’s characteristics of Menippean satire. As a part of this I also consider possible consequences of these features on the readers, through exploring the ramifications of humor and irony and the effect of absurdity. In order to distinguish the satirical from the non-satirical, I will explore fundamental elements of the satire genre, including irony, Bakhtin’s characteristics of the Menippea and the rhetorical method defined by Dickson-Carr as “reductio ad absurdum” (2001, 26).

In the following I turn to the satiric features of humor and irony, as included in several definitions mentioned above. I explore Beatty’s use of humorous elements in *The White Boy Shuffle* and how they may facilitate a reader’s realization of the absurdity of racial hierarchy

and related social issues. Possible effects humor and irony might have on the concepts communicated to the reader is also of interest, especially in terms of political and social discourse. The feature recognized by Bakhtin of the *Menippea* having a more comic approach to irony than traditional Socratic irony is relevant when examining humor's impact on the *Menippea*, in addition to other features like its use of inappropriate language (Bakhtin, 1984, 114, 117). The novel is closely related to the rhetorical element of *reductio ad absurdum*, which I explore through different situations and elements in the text. I tie the rhetorical force to particularly three of Bakhtin's characteristics of the *Menippea*: how the *Menippea* reflects a "crude slum naturalism", the *Menippea*'s experimental character which facilitates observation from a different point of view, in addition to how it tests and provokes philosophical truths, which will be explored by the novel's use of the rhetorical force of absurdity.

## 2.1 Humor and irony

The protagonist Gunnar grows up in a predominantly white neighborhood and attends "Mestizo Mulatto Mongrel Elementary, Santa Monica's all-white multicultural school" (*TWBS*, 31), a name which humorously points to a contradicting message. The description of the school is inherently conflicting and ironic – the discrepancy between the element of multicultural and the element of all-white is indisputable. The most common element in definitions of irony refers to the discrepancy between the literal meaning of an utterance and the intended meaning of it, or as Claire Colebrook puts it in her book *Irony*, "[s]aying what is contrary to what is meant" (2004, 1). Although Colebrook points out how this explanation is rather simple and broad, it serves as a clue for how to understand the complex concept of irony. According to Roger J. Kreuz and Richard M. Roberts, irony has over time come to include four distinct types that all deal with the discrepancy noted by Colebrook: Socratic

irony, irony of fate, verbal irony and dramatic irony (1993, 98-99). Other types have been identified, but Kreuz and Roberts claim in their article “On Satire and Parody: The Importance of Being Ironic” that these four stand as basic descriptors of ironic states (1993, 97). The discrepancy signaled in the school’s name and description presented above is clearly and explicitly communicated, which points to one of these ironic states, namely irony of fate. Kreuz and Roberts describe this type of irony as when an interlocutor draws attention to, and most often signals explicitly, the “peculiar relationship between two events” (1993, 99). The goal of this type of irony is to comment on the state of affairs, which corresponds with the objective of satire, although the explicitness of such commentary varies.

The irony, then, is conveyed through the signaling of Gunnar’s experience of cultural homogeneity while pointing to the contradictory name of the school. The obvious contradiction promotes its humorous aspect, and as it is signaled explicitly it is hard to miss or misinterpret. The name may also allude to the favorable image of being welcoming toward other cultures and ethnicities by referring to a racially mixed background through three different expressions of the concept, “Mestizo Mulatto Mongrel”. These terms, however, are, and perhaps especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, recognized by many as controversial and derogatory. The terms have connotations tied to oppression and racism, as they label descendants of white and black, or otherwise mixed heritage different than their parent’s race and/or ethnicity. Precisely because they all refer to a mixed background it is difficult to lump them together as one group, as done in the school’s name. Referring to people by such terms points to another of Bakhtin’s characteristics, namely of inappropriate speech and social expectations (1993, 117). Although the objective when using these terms likely is to provoke and make a point, the utilization of them nevertheless may be received as inappropriate.

The name and description of the school may also function as a commentary on how communities and institutions are largely segregated despite the constructed image of cultural

and ethnic openness. As an African American in this all-white community, Gunnar does not know any other African Americans, except for his family and a few celebrities, stating that “the only black folks whose names I knew were musicians and athletes” (*TWBS*, 39). This statement echoes Roberta Wolfson’s argument of *black exceptionalism* – how a few lucky black individuals are elevated by the white authority to hold a higher status, or become “tokenized black celebrities” (2019, 623), while diverting attention away from the fact that the majority still endure discrimination in different aspects of society.

Gunnar’s childhood then, may be characterized by him growing up culturally like a white boy in many contexts, and that he seems to exist in the gap between different cultural and ethnical groups. Gunnar is by the white community proclaimed the “cool black kid”, a tag functioning as a “versatile identifier used to distinguish the harmless black male from the Caucasian juvenile while maintaining politically correct semiotics” (*TWBS*, 31). Here Beatty seems to point to the desire to be considered politically correct, while also explicitly and somewhat discriminatingly defining others as different than (in this case) the majority. Existing in between cultures is a recurring theme in the novel, which continues to characterize Gunnar’s young adulthood as he shifts social and physical environments from sports jock to poet, from Santa Monica to the hood, and then from there to an upper-class white high school, and finally to college in Boston.

The theme of cultural and ethnic affiliation surfaces also in another situation, where Gunnar and his siblings are seemingly unaware of their ethnic affiliation, or perhaps too aware of their cultural background and their affiliation to the Santa Monica community. These perceptions are illustrated in their response to their mother when she suggests going to an all-black camp, as they exclaim “Noooooo”, before explaining “Because they’re different from us” (*TWBS*, 41). This statement’s humorous character is largely based on its ironic features. The irony here is conveyed through a tension that indicates dramatic irony, which

according to Kreuz and Roberts (1993, 99) relies on the tension created when readers possess knowledge that the person making the utterance seemingly does not. Readers of the *The White Boy Shuffle* understand the ethnic characteristics of Gunnar and his family, and that they obviously are not different from the children attending such a camp. The disparity between Gunnar's affiliation to the white community and the black community is also a scathing point of how readers and indeed people in general may consider an individual to be more alike their own race and/or ethnicity than the community in which they grew up.

The characteristic knowledge gap in dramatic irony, here between Gunnar and his siblings' utterance and the readers' knowledge, require readers to have a mental representation of this discrepancy. Some may call this type of irony for unintentional verbal irony, a term related to this discrepancy in the manner of intentionally stating something opposite of their actual beliefs (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993, 99). In this case verbal irony is prominent if one considers Beatty as the creator of the statements and his knowledge of Gunnar's ethnic background, juxtaposing Gunnar's misconceptions of his own identity and ethnicity with a humorous indication to the indisputable similarity between him and the camp participants. The ironic aspect of the situation is either way accentuated by Beatty toying with the notion that Gunnar, an African American, has to assimilate to the black culture of LA. As Gunnar then moves with his family to a predominantly black and Latinx neighborhood called Hillside, or "the hood" as he calls it, he is quickly made aware of the contrast between his own worldview and the worldview of his new neighbors.

Although Gunnar's childhood is different from the majority of other African Americans, Beatty illustrates through statements from schoolmates, teachers and others how this "culturally white" childhood does not eliminate or prevent prejudice and racist approaches. At the multicultural all-white school for example, a doctor performing physical examinations on the school children advocates for a "colorblind" and non-discriminatory

approach to others, meaning that one should not say “things like ‘Black people are lecherous, violent, natural-born criminals’” (TWBS, 35). The Doctor and his obvious, although perhaps subconscious, degrading preconceptions of African Americans may act as a metaphor for the larger white group that holds such prejudices, although they may not express those explicitly or even be consciously aware that they have them. The statement also involves irony, where there is a tension between the utterance itself and the hidden meaning. The tension created here would best be described as verbal irony, characterized by a person intentionally uttering the opposite of their convictions, a speech act that closely resembles sarcasm (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993, 99). There is a discrepancy between the Doctor saying that you should in fact *not* say the discriminatory statement and the implicit message of the utterance. The message refers to the fact that many people, including the Doctor, do hold such prejudices, and how the Doctor in fact *does* convey those in this particular utterance.

The adjectives used by the Doctor to describe “Black people” are moreover not only derogatory but also generalizing. The aspect of holding such attitudes but not necessarily expressing them explicitly, that is, avoiding *saying* them, is not addressed and thereby becomes a loophole. The ironic aspect of the statement may consequently help to decode the message as a humorous reference to people’s misconceptions of themselves and others as open and anti-racist. The irony of the Doctor’s utterance may however also function as a muted expression of anger or aggression toward an establishment, like medicine or the elite, that is considered worthy of ridicule, criticism or contempt. This is exemplified through the Doctor’s statement, which shows discriminatory attitudes and discourse that Gunnar as an African American has to endure. However, the expression of anger is only accessible for those who are able to decode the ironic statement. The capability of an interlocutor to interpret an ironic utterance differs as it is heavily influenced by one’s cultural capital and discursive communities, which I return to below.

The rhetorical force of humor may also facilitate other understandings, specifically in relation to political and ideological attitudes as a humoristic approach may promote a reader's ability to identify the ideologies behind them. As Villy Tsakona and Diana E. Popa note in their editorial essay "Confronting power with laughter", such an approach fosters "a more reflexive and critical stance toward [those ideologies]" (2013, 7). Tsakona and Popa conclude that content conveyed through political humor "could make people (more) aware of a variety of political problems and to incite them to reflect and deliberate on potential solutions" (2013, 7). They further note that one's ability to correctly decode the ironic and humorous content is largely based on the recipient's own sociocultural context, previous experience with similar content and the background knowledge she may draw from when perceiving and evaluating the content (Tsakona & Popa, 2013, 3). Perhaps especially when it comes to African American cultures, knowledge of symbols, metaphors and humor influence a reader's ability to comprehend ironic messages. Tsakona and Popa mainly investigate political humor specifically, but their accounts on the possible effects of such humor are relevant to satire. Indeed, does not satire's characteristic of an extramural focus, that is, of issues that transcends the boundaries of the text itself, lead to political commentary in some kind of way? Political humor may help recipients reach solutions to problems, and in addition could "even force us to see things from a different perspective" (2013, 7).

*The White Boy Shuffle* is packed with ironic messages, which may cause the reader to laugh, but also to recognize disparities in common utterances that signal inappropriate or racist language and attitudes. The ironic utterances in the novel may be characterized by the different types presented by Kreuz and Roberts, and lead readers to detect the (often) hidden, implied message of a statement. Other statements that successfully convey their ironic quality is for example when Gunnar refers to band-aids as "'flesh'-colored" (TWBS, 63). The irony in this statement is based on the disparity of a generalized name that clearly only fits for a

fraction of the world's population. The disparity is even more clearly conveyed through the apostrophes added around the word "flesh", signaling its misleading feature. Humor and irony may also lead readers to detect loopholes, weaknesses or flaws in political ideologies or philosophies. Tied to such a critical approach and arguably more crucial in the novel is what Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* describes as the search for philosophical truths.

## 2.2 Challenging and testing philosophical truths

The testing of truths may be found in several situations in *The White Boy Shuffle*, but perhaps the most prevalent one is the testing of African Americans' fundamental value as human beings, of concepts like "whiteness" and "blackness," and of racism as an ideology. The events and dialogues in the novel accumulate to a climax where masses of African Americans commit suicide as a nihilistic response to authority's inaction in the quest for equality. The underlying philosophical truth being tried in this specific situation is perhaps hard to determine, but it may refer to provoking and testing the truth of racial hierarchy and the perceived democratic possibility for achieving societal and systemic change. How, then, is the search for philosophical truth accomplished? According to Bakhtin, the search for truth is most often done in Menippean satire through the creation of an extraordinary, fantastical situation, in which one may provoke and test philosophical truths, often through manipulation of perspective (1984, 114). Bakhtin notes that the fantastic does not embody the truth but rather functions as a mode for provoking and testing the underlying philosophical truth and argues that this trait is the most important one in the genre (1984, 114). In the case of *The White Boy Shuffle*, critics such as Wolfson and Stalling have noted that the novel in addition pursues discussions on topics regarding blackness and masculinity, offering some unusual and freeing takes on the black male throughout the text. In the following I investigate the truth of racial hierarchy and the concepts of "blackness" and "whiteness".

Attitudes and utterances form a constructed racial hierarchy that unfolds in the novel, a construct particularly evident as Gunnar experiences shifting cultural environments. Caught as a complicit in safecracking (171) with The Gun Totin' Hooligans, the local gang of Gunnar's neighborhood, Gunnar agrees to attend El Campesino Real High, "an elite public high school" (*TWBS*, 169) characterized by its white upper-class values. As Gunnar is once again an African American at a predominantly white school, the racist attitudes of the adolescents and employees of the school shine through in several situations, indicating the established hierarchy. A schoolmate of Gunnar's challenges him to test him on the capitals of any country in the world, but as soon as Gunnar goes beyond the Eurocentric focus, he is not able to answer, and frustratingly demands "Well, ask me some real countries" (*TWBS*, 171). Gunnar proceeds with confronting the schoolmate about what such "real countries" might be, explicitly commenting on the issue of not recognizing countries as "real" because there are no "real people" living there – a label which Gunnar appropriately translates to "white people" (*TWBS*, 172). The emphasis on the word "real" is also communicated through the name of the high school, as it is named a "Real High". The name comments further on the distinction between the "Mongrel" school and the "Real High", which emphasizes attitudinal differences in how one may perceive schools that historically have had students from predominantly one race. The interaction between the Gunnar and his schoolmate (in addition to the school's name) functions as yet another medium for the novel to signal (subconscious) prejudice, which asks of the reader to reflect on issues related to such every-day racist utterances that often are trivialized.

The novel explores and tests the concepts of "whiteness" and "blackness" as Gunnar reflects on the social system and hierarchy at El Campesino Real High. These categories are signaled through different means, one being Scoby's comment to Gunnar regarding how the non-white students assimilate and impersonate the white people, as he warningly tells him to

“stay black” (*TWBS*, 171). Naturally, Gunnar’s status at the El Campesino is different from that in Hillside as he at this point has adapted to “the hood”, although he still wears his pants just “a bit too tight” (*TWBS*, 105). Gunnar’s position at the new high school is characterized by him being an underdog and perhaps more importantly, an outsider by default, although the position of being an African American at a predominantly white school is familiar to him. Despite being in a similar situation in Santa Monica, the outsider position Gunnar finds himself in at El Campesino is new for him. The reader understands that as he assessed himself to be more alike the white kids at the Santa Monica school than the black kids at camp. Gunnar’s social position in Hillside is also of contrast to his position at El Campesino; he was supposed to feel like an insider at Hillside, but he never quite assimilated fully to the ways of the hood. The casual, carefree life of his classmates in the “whiteness” category at El Campesino is something he is envious of, which accentuates the alienation and the outsider status he endures. Affiliation to ethnic groups and what social status one obtains is further explored below.

The disparity between the status and position of an African American (blackness) and a white person (whiteness) is clearly and scathingly declared through the “prosaic commandments of domesticity” (*TWBS*, 170), which points to the racial hierarchy long-since introduced:

Thou shalt worship no god other than whiteness.

Thou shalt not disagree with anything a white person says.

When traveling in the company of a white person, thou shalt always maintain a respectful distance of two paces to the rear.

If traveling by car for lunch at McDonald’s with three or more white human deities, thou shalt never ride in the front seat nor request to change the radio station. (*TWBS*, 170)

The commandments refer to whiteness as some kind of deity, which creates an image of the consequently large contrast between the earthbound and the deified. The constructed division between the value of black people and white people is reinforced by the commandments, which might also metaphorically be speaking of society in general. The commandments also reflect the actual experience of what life is like for Gunnar. The manipulation of perspective in this situation – the perspective of an African American at a white upper-class school, an inside perspective on the outsider position – underlines the genre’s focus of promoting philosophical reflection (Bakhtin, 1984, 115), here crucially on readers’ own attitudes and prejudices.

The concept of social status and the change between the insider and outsider status is further overturned as the plot evolves. During the novel, readers find Gunnar in several different environments where he is confronted with the issues of his affiliation, and whether or not he is considered an insider or an outsider. A key point when discussing the element of affiliation is how the novel constructs the issue to be other characters’ confusion regarding the protagonist’s affiliation, while it is seemingly not that big of a problem for Gunnar himself. The need to place others into categories like white or black is highlighted by the novel’s presentation of representatives’ thoughts and actions from these environments, which will be further exemplified below. However, to understand how identity and in-group versus out-group status is subverted, I first present the main environments and how a reader might evaluate Gunnar’s status.

The protagonist of *The White Boy Shuffle* toys with every notion of how you are supposed to act and be like in your community or race. During his first thirteen years of living in Santa Monica, Gunnar is considered an outsider by others and indeed by his own mama, as a result of his skin color. When punished for his failure to recognize his out-group status, he encounters another environment where he is considered an insider by others but feels no

immediate personal affiliation to. He learns to gradually assimilate but is not fully an insider of the environment, before placed in a community similar to Santa Monica. In all these communities Gunnar displays uncommon and unexpected traits to other group members, like writing poetry while being in a gang, or spending time in the library while also enjoying playing basketball. Throughout the novel the issue of affiliation and identity prevails. At a poetry workshop at Boston University, Gunnar addresses the issue by stating “I felt like I’d been outed and exposed by my worst enemies, white kids who were embarrassingly like myself but with whom I had nothing in common” (*TWBS*, 197). The issue of identity is further remarked on by a fellow student at a black student union gathering, as he suggests that Gunnar should rather join Concoction, the “organization of mixed-race kids who felt ostracized by both white and colored students” (*TWBS*, 205).

In addition, the whiteness-blackness division is cleverly shown through students’ and employees’ reactions to Gunnar. An example of such a reaction occurs when the receptionist at El Campesino Real High offers to give Gunnar lunch money, to which he replies “Just stop patronizing me and do your job. Treat me as an individual, not like some stray cat that you feed once a day” (*TWBS*, 169). Placed in the blackness-category, he is automatically assumed to be poor and unintelligent. The receptionist’s offer may also signal the demeaning idea of African Americans needing to be saved by white people, connected to imperialism and colonialism’s idea of the “White Man’s Burden”. Dialogues in the novel cleverly illustrate the presumption of unintelligence, for example when Gunnar’s SAT scores are judged too high for an African American individual, and proclaimed “a mistake” (*TWBS*, 173). Presumptions are also challenged in the novel, like when Gunnar’s extensive vocabulary proves too difficult for the receptionist to understand (*TWBS*, 169). The cultural and economic difference between “the hood” of Hillside and the upper-class white community of El Campesino is acutely expressed through Gunnar’s remark that he “often found [himself]

short of breath from the change in economic and cultural altitude” (*TWBS*, 169). The cultural differences are further noted as Gunnar sarcastically states that attending an all-white high school had the opposite effect to decreasing the likelihood of committing another felony, and rather increased the consciousness of his position as an “inner-city colored child” (*TWBS*, 169). The reception of Gunnar at El Campesino demonstrates the social norms that uphold and confirm the concepts of whiteness and blackness as two distinct groups with differing intrinsic value.

In addition to a commentary on racial hierarchy, the novel also confronts a social hierarchy. This hierarchy is ironically demonstrated by the African American Harvard recruiter, as he desperately needs to get Gunnar’s (the unapologetically intelligent and resilient black poet/basketball player) attention. The interaction between the two leads to this hierarchy being revealed and challenged. The Harvard recruiter explains that the poor people (of Hillside in particular) are beyond help, and that “The only reason I and others of my illustrious ilk pretend to help those folks is to reinforce the difference between them and us” (*TWBS*, 175). An absurdity comes to mind while reading this passage, as the very system that oppresses this group of people is purposefully upheld and reinforced by an African American himself, although he is a part of the initial designated losers of the social equation. The passage in addition toys with the notion of culturally “whitifying” oneself, as Gunnar jokingly notes how the recruiter is the first African American that he has seen owning a pocket watch and hear say “nightcap” (*TWBS*, 174). The fact that the example of an exception from the racial hierarchy is a whitified African American underscores the truth of the hierarchy as communicated in the novel, namely something that essentially is impossible to escape unless one substantially alters behavior and attitude. The recruiter benefits from this social scenario as he is able to “pass” as white, and is accepted, celebrated and elevated as an intellectual exception to the larger society. The ironic aspect of the interaction challenges this hierarchy

and reflects irony of fate. The Harvard recruiter, a respectable, bespectacled intellectual is in effect asking Gunnar, a poor citizen of Hillside, “the Petri dish for criminal vermin” for *help*, because he wants the monetary reward for Gunnar’s attendance. The peculiar relationship shows the tables turned, which challenges the hierarchical relationship. Even though the recruiter condemns Hillside and its inhabitants (the lower-class, poor non-white people), he is nevertheless dependent on such a person to reach his own goal, which consequently puts Gunnar in the position to deny the bigwig his wish.

The novel’s engagement with concepts of whiteness and blackness is associated with the feature of the Menippea concerned with reflecting a “crude slum naturalism” (Bakhtin, 1984, 115). The search for truth fears no slum and takes in the novel place on the high road as well as in violent gang fights, trans-dressing, shoot-outs, college and while on suicide watch. An example of such crude slum naturalism in the novel is illustrated in the last days of Scoby’s life. Conveyed through these days is the desperation of Scoby’s mind which results in the tragic decision of committing suicide. The devastating act is lead up to by scenes and remarks made by the protagonist which pose the problems with being a successful, or should I say a too successful, African American. Scoby is unable to miss a shot, and as his career unfolds his fans start to become suspicious and resentful toward him, which lead them to start rooting for his *failure* as opposed to his – and indeed in a way their – success. Gunnar expresses his worries concerning Scoby and the reactions of the white crowd, stating that “Scoby is going insane. The scrutiny he is undergoing is unbelievable” (TWBS, 211). Through Scoby’s situation, the novel comments on the embedded understanding that society cannot accept a perfect African American (basketball player). The idea that black exceptionalism can only go so far is echoed by Gunnar as he states that the white audience, consisting of sportswriters, scientists and others, is “praying that Nick’s attempt will roll in and out of the rim and the universe will return to normal” (TWBS, 212). The normal that

Gunnar speaks of alludes to the established social hierarchy discussed above. The essence of naturalism is expressed through this remark as it focuses on what should be the normal or natural situation for Scoby. In addition, the novel comments on the alleged “unnatural” situation which depicts an African American being better-than, and indeed close to athletic perfection, foreshadowing what happens when that so-called natural position is defied. The concepts of black exceptionalism and naturalism are underlined as Gunnar notes that the media longs for perfection but “couldn’t accept the perfect athlete” (*TWBS*, 179). Scoby is further mystified and alienated as the media postulates that the reason he makes the shots is by invoking African gods. Scoby is left with the realization that his value is based on the success he makes, and furthermore, only the success that is accepted and considered appropriate and deserved by the white majority.

The element of crude slum naturalism in the novel is also expressed through the absurdity of “The American Dream”, communicated through a protagonist that supposedly has achieved just that dream, to be a famous basketball star and published poet. However, the novel communicates the reality of the situation; how one is, even in the position of proclaimed athlete and author, just another replaceable, expendable African American. The Dream that many Americans adore and cling to is not the reality for most African Americans. The novel comments on this issue by juxtaposing African American success to the fate of Dred Scott<sup>2</sup>, as Gunnar states:

I realized that sometimes the worst thing a nigger can do is perform well (...)

Successful niggers can’t go back home and blithely disappear into the local populace.

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<sup>2</sup> Dred Scott was an enslaved man who unsuccessfully sued for his freedom in the Supreme Court in 1857 although he and his family had spent years in Missouri, where slavery was illegal.

American society reels you back to the fold. ‘Tote that barge, shoot that basketball, lift that bale, nigger ain’t you ever heard of Dred Scott?’. (TWBS, 131)

The novel suggests that if an African American does become successful, as Gunnar notes, the success is not everlasting. Secondly, it is controlled by your white superiors and fans, who will reel you back in if you try to escape the African American fate, a fate that can only be skewed in your favor if you have enough money (TWBS, 96). The excerpt points particularly to the fate of Scoby, a man elevated and destroyed by the white crowd, to the point of depression and suicide. He is reeled back into his place when his talents are considered too good, in order to get the American society back to normal, that is, a normal founded on oppressive conditions and systems. The fate of Scoby and his experience of fatalism is underlined by a chapter heading in the novel “...Stay Black, And Die” (TWBS, 193). The chapter heading refers to a conversation between Scoby and Gunnar, where they discuss what it means to “stay black” (TWBS, 171), which is answered by Scoby “It means be yourself, what else could it possibly mean?” (TWBS, 171). The honest and forthright answer, however, seems to be the implied message conveyed in the chapter heading – that what being black entails is to die, either literally by brutality or metaphorically by a nihilistic, hopeless world view only to result in death.

Related to the depiction of crude naturalism is another of Bakhtin’s features found in the novel, namely how the *Menippea* deals with current and topical issues (Bakhtin, 1984, 114). The novel’s depiction of the Rodney King verdict of 1992 and people’s reactions in the aftermath seems to accurately and appropriately communicate an experience of the racist treatment of African Americans. Bakhtin points out that the inclusion of current and topical issues points to the journalistic aspect of the *Menippea*, and functions to acutely echo the ideological issues of the day (Bakhtin, 1984, 118). I suggest that in *The White Boy Shuffle* the features of naturalism and addressing current issues work together to sufficiently

communicate the most pressing issues of the time, for example racism and gender discussions. Another pressing issue that is included is the problem of police violence disproportionately affecting African Americans, exemplified through Gunnar being beaten into a coma by his father, the police officer, and his colleague. This situation in itself is a completely absurd scene as it is the protagonist's own father who beats him. Gunnar's supposed-to-be loving father becomes the face of the brutal police force inflicting violence upon African Americans in particular. Consequently, the inclusion of such issues promotes readers' engagement with and understanding of stereotypes and prejudices that undoubtedly are familiar to many African Americans. Colored by the inclusion of controversial issues and events, the novel's communication of racism and related issues seems to be received as even more provocative and unethical to the reader as the text evolves, which is further stimulated by the absurd in the novel.

### 2.3 The Absurd

The plot of *The White Boy Shuffle* may easily be said to include some absurd events and dialogues, but just as important are the consequences of such absurdity and what they reveal. The absurd is an essential rhetorical force within African American satire, which refers to "reductio ad absurdum", translated literally to reduction to the absurd (Dickson-Carr, 2001, 26). The phenomenon is based on the notion that if concepts or ideas that are initially considered appropriate and decent are implemented into other contexts, the new surroundings will cast a new light on the concepts and reveal their absurdity for observers. The etymology in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2011) of the term absurd reveals its characteristics and how it may affect interlocutors when implemented, effectively and accurately described as out-of-tune and awkward. The phenomenon of reductio ad absurdum is comparable to other features of satire brought forward by Bakhtin, namely the experimental fantasticality which results in

observation from a different point of view, related also to the feature of “crude slum naturalism” (Bakhtin, 1984, 114) in certain contexts. Another feature Bakhtin mentions, and which is especially relevant to *reductio ad absurdum*, is how the Menippea provokes and tests philosophical truths, as shown above. These phenomena are linked together in the following investigation of the absurd in *The White Boy Shuffle*.

The novel constructs an absurd, fantastic situation that reveals and criticizes the demeaning acts that by many are still perceived appropriate or disregarded as innocent humor. At the last basketball game Gunnar plays for El Campesino, ironically against Scoby’s team, Gunnar prepares his rebellious act. He puts on a pair of white gloves, smears cold cream on his lips and draws his jacket over his head. He sits on the bench as his team players are introduced according to the changes he has made to the reading sheet, which result in their names being called out with additional racially derogatory nicknames like “Rastus”, “Aunt Jemima” and “Nigger-T” (*TWBS*, 180). Included in the presentation of Gunnar is the tag “all-American”, which clearly communicates his status as he wants it to be perceived. He is, in fact, despite his different cultural traits and multifaceted identity, truly all-American, as thoroughly presented in the line of ancestors narrated in the first pages of the novel.

The description of him as an all-American male also plays on Wolfson’s concept of black exceptionalism, meaning how African Americans are elevated and suddenly regarded as fully American when they prove themselves to be of interest and of worth to the white authority (Wolfson, 2019, 621). The additional sobriquet used when he is introduced to the court, his very own racial reference, refers to the comic strip character of Hambone<sup>3</sup>: “Gunnar

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<sup>3</sup> A character created by James Pinkney Alley appearing in the comic strip *Hambone’s Meditations*, first published in the Memphis newspaper *Commercial Appeal* in 1916. The character was heavily depicted in a stereotypical way with a corresponding derogatory imitation of African American Southern speech (Frink, 2018).

‘Hambone, Hambone, Have You Heard’ Kaufman” (*TWBS*, 181). The focus Beatty places on the racial references to minstrel-like figures creates an absurd situation and signal the manipulation and exploitation of black talent in sport, art and music industry. The context additionally promotes the absurd as the scene takes place on a basketball court, characterized by Wolfson as a historically *necropolitical* space (2019, 619), a term explained as a “tool of oppression that entrenches the social death and civic exclusion of black people”. The setting serves as an arena where athletic African Americans are celebrated, where their racial ethnicity somehow suddenly is irrelevant. However, by nicknaming the players of the team using historically laden terms, a focus is put on the identity of the players, whom are all white except for Gunnar, and consequently how these terms in this unusual context are considered inappropriate and ridiculous to the laughing crowd. The comparison between Gunnar and Hambone effectively signals the absurdity of reducing someone to a stereotype, as readers and indeed the crowd obviously know Gunnar to be both an intelligent poet and extraordinary athlete.

The novel continues the absurd situation by Gunnar presenting himself to the crowd looking like the traditional minstrel performers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, as he acts and poses like the infamous Jim Crow figure. The situation toys with our conceptions of stereotypes, as Gunnar dresses up like the figure that for centuries represented the dreadful, violent oppression of African Americans in the US. He additionally makes the crowd laugh and causes the reader to engage with a situation that for most people is very uncomfortable and wrong<sup>4</sup>. The situation echoes the etymology of the word absurd and serve the tone-deaf association to the term. The absurd may here prompt satire’s extramural goal, that is,

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing, the act of blackface has blown up even in the Scandinavian countries, causing distress and discussions among leaders and laypeople.

prompting readers to (re)consider issues that go beyond the textual boundaries of the novel, as the issue of stereotypes and the practice of blackface sadly is, as Erinn Wong states in her article “Digital Blackface” (2019), a contemporary issue. The *reductio ad absurdum* technique is however based on the presumption that readers do in fact evaluate the situation as absurd. This is not a given, which Kreuz and Roberts point out: “The presence of satire in a text may be even more difficult to detect than the presence of parody because what is absurd to one reader may be perfectly acceptable to another” (1993, 105).

The minstrel-like show that Gunnar puts on is a remarkable example of such a situation that is dependent on interlocutors’ conception of what is to be considered absurd, as the act suddenly becomes offensive to Coach Logan. Roberts and Kreuz’s inference is further underscored by the novel as different characters react in different ways; while the crowd laughs and chants Gunnar’s name, Coach Logan finds the act disturbing and inappropriate on the basketball court. However, he paradoxically calls on Gunnar afterwards to “sit and shut [his] monkey ass up” (*TWBS*, 181). The situation is a perfect example of *reductio ad absurdum*, as the context causes the minstrel-like blackface act to be considered unacceptable to Coach Logan, while in the same situation not considering other degrading acts like utilizing racial slurs as unacceptable or derogatory. In light of contemporary society, the contrasting reactions may also illustrate political correctness, or “woke culture”, in the sense that specific behavior is considered inappropriate. In this example, that political correctness illustrates how the concept may cause one to overlook the reason why it is offending or wrong, and thus not regard other behavior, e.g. the racial slur of monkey, as inappropriate. The event at the court underlines the contrast between the African American and the white experience, as it shows how only in the context of being offensive to white people, here Coach Logan, is blackface viewed as something else than innocent humor. The situation also underscores everyday racism that is not necessarily detected by people who are not victims of such acts.

This disparity is accentuated by Coach Logan's two contrasting reactions, being offended by blackface and calling Gunnar a monkey, and highlights and reveal the absurdity of them both. The use of *reductio ad absurdum* and implementing a Jim Crow figure in an unusual setting in time and space, and having an African American parody himself may thus stimulate observation from a new point of view that can foster understanding and change.

The absurdity of the narrative's climax also accentuates the gravely serious matters in the novel. The protagonist points out the hopeless situation of African Americans and, according to him, how the last resort for the movement for ethnic equality is to simply commit suicide. The experience of nihilism expressed through the novel is underscored by Gunnar's argumentation as he gives a speech at a rally against South Africa's Apartheid. He refers to Martin Luther King Jr., who leads him to the epiphany that waiting for equality is useless and hopeless. Gunnar further argues that white people have never seen African American lives as equally valuable to theirs, and "if they don't know that by now, then they ain't never going to know it" (*TWBS*, 221). The contemplations and revelations raised by the comment serve another of Bakhtin's features, of how the genre promotes "ultimate questions" (Bakhtin, 1984, 115), which combines bold invention with broad philosophical reflections. Beatty catches readers' attention by explicitly challenging white authority and the supposed state of equality that has fooled Americans for centuries and raises the question of what an African American life is worth. The novel continues to promote such questions by presenting absurd reactions of the world to inequality and injustice, exemplified through the desperate action of suicide resulting in media coverage and awe, as opposed to reflection or, what most likely was hoped for, change.

In the aftermath of Gunnar's speech, masses of African Americans across the nation commit suicide. The absurdity of the situation is revealed by a reporter asking Gunnar whether this act means "that black people have given up?" (*TWBS*, 222), a wording that

discloses that there is in fact an equality fight for them to give up on. Gunnar answers by juxtaposing a soldier's suicide to save others with the suicides of African Americans, and quotes author Yukio Mishima: "'Sometimes hara-kiri<sup>5</sup> makes you win.' I just want to win one time" (*TWBS*, 223). The context of collective suicide that is being broadcasted nation- and world-wide suddenly creates an absurd situation that gets loads of attention, and seems to be the object of curious, gloating viewers. The suicides themselves are presented in a matter-of-factly manner, described as "stacks of death poems and obituaries that arrived in the afternoon mail" (*TWBS*, 234), juxtaposing them with regular mail that most would categorize as dull or tedious. The juxtaposition seems to only accentuate the absurdity of the situation, as the reader recognizes how the consequences of Gunnar's speech are in contrast highly abnormal and grotesque. The element of African Americans dying is in this situation turned into something absurd and extraordinary, although death has been the outcome of masses of innocent, young African Americans for centuries, echoed by the fate of Martin Luther King Jr. in Gunnar's speech. The absurdity of the context helps paint the picture of death and mental health problems disproportionately affecting African Americans, only recognized as outrageous and extraordinary when it becomes a *self-inflicted* death. This picture reflects the ultimate questions posed by the genre and stimulate readers to reflect on the ultimate philosophical positions conveyed, like a human being's intrinsic value and the glorification of death. The climax in combination with the novel's fantasticality promotes a different point of view when observing and contemplating the message of the situation, which fosters the scornful critique of society's evaluation of people's fundamental worth. The second novel to be analyzed, *The Sellout*, also utilizes the force of absurdity and confronts and challenges

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<sup>5</sup> A traditional Japanese form for suicide, associated with the term altruistic suicide introduced by Emile Durkheim.

readers' conceptions of established concepts, but as will be shown, it employs them in a substantially different manner.

## Chapter 3

### The Sellout

The following is a typical example of a piece of text that at first glance is assessed absurd, but at a closer look embodies what I will argue is the genre of hysterical realism. The reader will immediately recognize the gravely serious tone concealed in the bizarre inquiry.

“Massa”

“Hominy, stop.”

“I want to thank you for saving my life.”

“You know I’d do anything for you.”

(...)

“Then beat me. Beat me to within an inch of my worthless black life. Beat me, but don’t kill me, massa. Beat me just enough so that I can feel what I’m missing.”

(...)

“They say it took three sheriff’s deputies to pull me off his black ass, because I whipped the shit out of that nigger.” (*The Sellout*, 2017, 78)

The protagonist of Beatty’s most recent novel *The Sellout* (2015), with the surname Me and depicted in this excerpt as a middle-aged African American man, demonstrates what many readers would understand as complete absurdity or irony of fate (i.e., the peculiar relationship between two events); an African American man becoming the slave owner of another African American in contemporary USA. However, if one looks closely at the excerpt, the absurdity of the situation somewhat crumbles to the ground as oppression, violence and whiplashes and stories of slavery in fact are not absurd at all; quite the contrary, it is something that has been the reality, manifesting in different ways and forms, for African Americans for hundreds of years. I will return to the excerpt in more detail below. First, however, I will address the

emergence of the term hysterical realism and an introduction to the central character of Hominy Jenkins presented above.

In the preceding examination of *The White Boy Shuffle* several of Bakhtin's characteristics of the Menippea, such as testing philosophical truths and experimental fantasticality have been analyzed and exemplified through a closer look at scenes and dialogues in the novel. Some of these characteristics may also pertain to Beatty's most recent novel *The Sellout*, but a pivotal difference is *The Sellout's* relation to, and use of absurdity. Many of the overarching themes of *The White Boy Shuffle* and *The Sellout* are connected to each other, but although these are novels written by the same author only some 20 years apart, I argue that established terms for the satire genre are not as easily applied to *The Sellout*, and that it therefore cannot be placed in the same genre as Beatty's debut novel. I find that the closer one looks at the events and dialogues of *The Sellout*, like the excerpt above, the more a reader will recognize that the ideas and experiences it represents are far from the world of the absurd. Consequently, I argue that features of the novel instead relate to James Wood's term hysterical realism, although I do not agree with his concluding remarks concerning its potential. In this chapter I examine whether hysterical realism with my additional interpretation is better applied to the novel. Firstly, an overview of Wood's genre is presented, with related commentary by other scholars and additionally my understanding of how the genre works. I then turn to a selection of close readings to illustrate how *The Sellout* encompasses features of hysterical realism, and lastly demonstrate why the novel cannot be placed within the satire genre as *The White Boy Shuffle* is.

### 3.1 Hysterical Realism

James Wood first introduced the term "hysterical realism" in his review of Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*, which appeared in the July 24, 2000 issue of *The New Republic*. Since

then, it has been re-visited by several writers and critics, many of whom agree with Wood's remarks that the realist conventions of texts like Smith's are being "exhausted and overworked" (2000). Although hysterical realism is understudied, the tendency which Wood identifies and describes is nonetheless worth pursuing, and I will address it the same way he does, as a new genre. Wood argues that "the big, ambitious contemporary novel" pursues vitality at all costs, characterized by permanent storytelling which results in stories that "defy the laws of persuasion" (2000). He further identifies a style of writing in these texts that is "not to be faulted because it lacks reality – the usual charge against botched realism – but because it seems evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself" (2000). The style of writing Wood talks of is described as involving elements and inventions that vandalize each other, resulting in a product that is incredible, in the sense that it is hard to believe. He seems to point out that in between established genres there emerges a gap, consisting of texts that "[a]s realism, [are] incredible; as satire, [are] cartoonish; as cartoon, [are] too realistic" (2000).

Wood furthermore underscores that the style of writing in hysterical realism involves isolated elements that may be believable, but that the abundance of unconvincing possibilities results in a perception arguably categorized as absurdity rather than realism. He accentuates what he identifies as the problem with the big, ambitious contemporary novel, namely that it is too concerned with storytelling. Wood characterizes it "a perpetual-motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity. It seems to want to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence" (Wood, 2000). A result of this, according to Wood, is characters that end up as "not really alive, not fully human" (2002). The focus on the (missing) characterization is a large part of Wood's criticism of these texts, as he accuses the novelists for not spending enough time and space on developing their characters. He claims that their characters have "a showy liveliness (...) that almost succeeds in hiding the fact that they are without life"

(Wood, 2000), which underscores Wood's accusation of the inability of such texts to produce believable characters.

Wood further problematizes the antics and eccentricities, or the velocity of the contemporary novel. His objection to the style of writing, according to Jeffrey Staiger (2008) in his essay "James Wood's Case against 'Hysterical Realism' and Thomas Pynchon" in effect questions a pair of postmodernism's guiding doctrines, "that language creates reality and that the richer the language the richer the creation" (648). According to Wood's argumentation, the extremist language in novels like *White Teeth* becomes the downfall of the delicacy of the texts, exemplified through Smith's book which he claims descends into "cartoonish (...) restless extremism" (2000). The novels accused of adhering to the genre of hysterical realism are characterized by a "fear of the sincerity and empathy required for getting close to the ultimate reality of people" which results in characters that "exhibit behavior, not agency" (Staiger, 2008, 639). That is, figures not believable as independent characters but rather figures put in a narrative to serve the author's purpose. The consequence of never-ending storytelling and insufficient character-building surfaces in the way readers respond to the material. These responses are recognized by Staiger, as he explains "So we respond as to a cartoon, something not really real, but a cartoon so hugely fleshed out that it nevertheless satisfies our need for realism" (2008, 644).

Wood's article did not go unnoticed. According to Staiger, the obvious objection to Wood's critique of such texts and their authors, namely that Wood disparages them for not doing what they are in fact not attempting to do, is not enough. Staiger claims this because Wood "goes so far as to make the case that they should want to do it" (2008, 640), that is, to avoid exaggerations and eccentricities that disturb the message and the building of characters, as this would in his view result in inferior material. However, Staiger argues that rather than flat, as described by Wood, the characters who inhabit novels within this genre, like those by

Pynchon, DeLillo and Smith, are opaque – their authors offering us readers as much view of them as we would have of people who enter our own lives, thus making the supposed unreal in fact realistically portrayed (2008, 642). In addition, according to Staiger, Wood ignores the “wacky elements” of the big, contemporary novel, which deprives him of the chance of encountering “something new and strange and possibly great” (2008, 640). Another opposition to Wood’s remarks concerns the criticized writers’ intentions, who, it seems, value the portrayal of character secondary to capturing the big picture (Staiger, 2008, 638). Connected to the communication of the bigger picture and consequently the embedded serious issues, is the question of how to successfully convey those issues in a style of writing described as excessive and exaggerated. I will return to this aspect of the genre below as I present close readings of *The Sellout*.

Wood’s review and consequently the introduction of the term itself is perceived as rather negative according to Lev Grossman in his article “What Ever Happened to Hysterical Realism?” (2012) in TIME magazine. Grossman further notes that the term hysterical realism has “a certain crudeness and aggressiveness” (2012) to it. Nonetheless, as Grossman’s, Staiger’s and other articles show, the term has stuck in the literary community. Smith herself recognizes Wood’s point in her answer in *The Guardian*, classifying hysterical realism a “painfully accurate term for the sort of overblown, manic prose to be found in novels like my own” (2001). Her description directly relates to Beatty’s *The Sellout*, which is frantically busy, packed with humor and ironic features. Although I argue that the term is highly relevant in the examination of *The Sellout* with characterizations that are applicable to the novel, I understand Wood’s conclusion to be flawed. As part of his conclusion, Wood opposes the eccentricities of the novels and claims that they disrupt the conversation about the serious issues raised by the texts. However, I rather understand the eccentricities and the “hysterical” as accurately capturing and challenging issues and concepts demonstrated in the

texts, specifically in Beatty's *The Sellout*. I further understand the implementation of (seeming) absurdities and the juxtaposition with normalized everyday situations as a means of confronting the issues and thoughts in a new context. In addition, the eccentricities in language that Wood concludes hinder the characterization and cause a perception of velocity, I rather view as implemented and employed to confront and reveal the truth that is found in the novel and its characters. To illustrate this, I will present a selection of close readings of *The Sellout* that exemplify the confronting of truth. In addition, my analysis includes close readings that show how the novel embodies other features of Wood's genre, like its construction of characters.

### 3.2 How *The Sellout* encompasses features of hysterical realism

The characterization in *The Sellout* exemplifies a feature of hysterical realism concerning the genre's unbelievable, "not really alive" characters (Wood, 2005). Several of the characters in the novel are portrayed and reduced to stereotypes associated with the African American which may strengthen the perception of them as unbelievable, perhaps especially in regard to the character of Hominy Jenkins. The novel portrays several characters, but the most important is arguably the protagonist and narrator Me and Hominy, his older friend and eventually slave. As the novel unfolds, the reader gets to know the characters and the absurd situations they find themselves in, for example in the roles of master and slave, reintroducing segregation and Me in Supreme Court, prosecuted for slaveholding.

Hominy is a former child actor who starred in the infamous racist children's show *The Little Rascals* and is now an old man living in Dickens, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Los Angeles. The narrator describes the character of Hominy as "bat-shit crazy" (TS, 69), "unstable" (TS, 66) and obsessed with his childhood fame which he is desperately trying to sustain. Hominy is a victim of prejudice and racism, which is revealed and highlighted

through the narrator's point of view as events of Hominy's life are rendered racist and derogatory. Examples of racism in Hominy's roles in *The Little Rascals* include imitations of African American speech typical of the 20<sup>th</sup> century portrayals of them, comparable to the speech errors in the Hambone cartoons referred to in *The White Boy Shuffle*, and scenes like dressing Hominy up as a monkey. Me addresses the latter incident as he scathingly points out that the Hal Roach Studios probably "just opened up the timeless cookbook of Classic American Stereotyping and turned to the one-step recipe for Negro Monkeyshine: 1. Just add tail" (*TS*, 71). Although Hominy appears unpredictable to the reader, many of the traits of his character follow the stereotypes of the African American slave.

The introduction to Hominy reveals a man who seems to have suffered a self-fulfilling prophecy, as racist attitudes connected to his childhood fame posing as the little black kid transcends into his behavior and thoughts. These integrated racist attitudes lead not to anger against the white authority but to a submissive slave-state. Hominy shows traits of different African American stereotypes described by Laura Green in her essay "Negative Racial Stereotypes and Their Effect on Attitudes Toward African-Americans" (n.d.), including the sexual behavior of the Savage, the ineptitude of Jim Crow and the "naturally lazy" Sambo trait. The latter figure is characterized as a simple-minded, submissive, so-called happy slave, traits that are expressed through the character of Hominy. The Sambo stereotype in turn functioned as a justification of slavery as illustrated by Bishop Wipple's Southern Diary, 1834-1844: "They seem a happy race of beings & if you did not know it you would never imagine they were slaves" (Baskon, 1988, 42). The inappropriate sexual behavior Hominy expresses as he thrusts his pelvis against the TV as he and the neighborhood's children watch *The Little Rascals*, and the almost fetish-like joy he seems to feel when being beaten or otherwise physically punished are examples of features that relate to the stereotypes and in the novel accumulate into an improbable character. The distressing situation of Me beating

Hominy becomes even more absurd, or incredible, as Hominy shows “teary-eyed joy and (...) thankfulness (...) as he crawled, not away from the beating, but into it (...) his black body welcoming the weight and sizzle of my whip with groveling groans of ecstasy” (*TS*, 79). The story of Hominy presents a man whose self-image relies on the role he considers he was meant to play, namely, to be a slave.

However strange the character of Hominy Jenkins is to the reader, the absurdity of the character and his traits paradoxically only seem to accentuate the reality of the questions and challenges they pose. The emphasized submissiveness of the character and his eagerness to fulfill what he perceives as his destiny, explicitly shown through the statement “I’m a slave. That’s who I am. It’s the role I was born to play” (*TS*, 77), are arguably a pair of the details that move the character out of a reader’s zone of conviction. Hominy’s statement may seem unconvincing, but the questions of power relations, historical events and race issues they pose are all but unreal. This aspect echoes the aforementioned possible objective of writers of the genre of hysterical realism, where unconvincing details and characters are justified and intentionally used as means to achieve a critique or new perspective on a pressing issue. In addition, opposing Wood’s negative attitude toward the excessive details and improbable characters, the question is not that of verisimilitude, but rather if precisely because the characters are exaggerated, and allegedly therefore incredible, they contribute to successfully communicating the utter realism of the issues at hand.

The problem with hysterical realism as Wood describes it is its connection to realism, as hysterical realism in his view is not able to express realistic portrayals and address serious issues even though it seems to want to. The way such novels address these issues then, is by exaggeration and shocking the reader with conceptual connections, like the connection between the power-relation between Hominy and Me shown in the excerpt and the enduring racial issues of power and subservience. The simplistic but chaotic character of Hominy may

then serve to highlight aspects of negative stereotypes that are prevalent still and paradoxically contribute to the communication of the realism and absurdity connected to controversial subjects in the novel. Related to Wood's explanation of the term is a pivotal component of *The Sellout*, namely how the events, dialogs and situations are essentially realistic and therefore cannot be defined as inherently absurd, although they may be perceived that way – seeing how they all refer to realistic situations that have either been the case in the past or are still prevalent in contemporary USA. However, readers may be fooled by the vitality of the components and be persuaded by the elements' chaos, intensity and exaggeration, which points to Wood's description of the eccentricities of the genre. Nevertheless, I argue that the realism of the components is detected and acknowledged as the reader processes and interprets the bigger picture and message of such novels.

There are several elements that relate to Wood's genre in the excerpt presented at the beginning of the chapter, including the fundamental absurdity of Hominy's shocking inquiry of physical punishment. Preceding this passage is Hominy's attempt to commit suicide by hanging himself, which Me rescues him from. Thankful to his savior, Hominy then declares himself a slave to Me, creating an absurd power-relationship between the two. The elements of shock in the excerpt start off as Hominy refers to Me as "Massa", a culturally and historically laden term used when addressing the (often white) master, generally not heard in other contexts than historical accounts or art depicting slave stories before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The excerpt then goes further in shocking the reader as it includes the brutality of the treatment of African Americans, like beatings and whippings. Additionally, it includes an overt statement describing attitudes toward and perceptions of African Americans, "Beat me to within an inch of my worthless black life" (*TS*, 78). This latter element is particularly shocking because the derogatory attitudes presented are told by Hominy, an African

American himself, in which he proclaims his life as a “worthless black life” (*TS*, 78) with an underlying message that he deserves to be beaten.

The protagonist’s reaction contributes also to the absurdity and shocking effect of the excerpt, as Me does not abstain from the inquiry, but shows an uncontrollable rage similar to the rage and animal-like behavior described in the Savage African American stereotype. The narrator only refers to the beating in retrospect, disclosing how badly he whipped Hominy by explaining that three men were needed to pull him off, continuing with “because I whipped the shit out of that nigger” (*TS*, 78). The racial slur used when referring to Hominy also emphasizes the absurdity of the situation, as the actions of Me closely resemble the image of a cruel slave master, an image that usually shows the master as white. The fact that readers are only experiencing this situation through the characters’ behavior and direct statements rather than through the narrator’s interpretation or inner dialogue, except for the last statement in the excerpt by Me, also affect the response of the reader. The circumstances of the excerpt can to some extent be perceived as real, but the extremely uncomfortable content of the situation, that of violence and degrading, racist language by a member of the targeted group, leads to a perception of implausibility. However, the behavior of the characters does not need to be plausible for them to affect the reader, as they nevertheless promote reactions that most likely will relate to awareness, surprise and realization of the trauma African Americans have endured, possibly manifesting in laughter, repulsion, sadness or all of the above.

The excerpt’s focus on the peculiar power-relationship between Me and Hominy furthermore illustrates Dickson-Carr’s phenomenon of *reductio ad absurdum*, a rhetorical force emphasizing a concept’s inherent absurdity as it is portrayed in a different context. However, there are multiple layers to the rhetorical force’s aftermath in the novel, involving reflection on philosophical issues, new perspectives and illustrations of realism. The incorporation of a master-slave relationship and practices like whipping that in contemporary

contexts are considered outrageous and morally wrong promote readers' reflection on the issue. The setting, both concerning the temporal and the spatial context, may prompt new perspectives on such practices that were legal only some centuries ago and prevalent for a long time after the abolition of slavery. In fact, public flagellation was issued as punishment in the Delaware jurisdiction area as late as in 1962 according to *The New York Times* (1964), although such a sentence was rarely imposed. The absurdity of Hominy asking to be beaten and talking about himself in a degrading way, declaring his black life as worthless, accentuates the roles African Americans have had (and arguably still have) through hundreds of years of slavery as they were considered the lower caste in society.

Another ramification of the absurdity of this master-slave relationship is how it is based on Hominy's conviction that his only purpose, or rather possibility, is to be a slave, a conception which serves the characteristic of realism in Wood's description of the genre. One way the relationship poignantly serves the genre is through the embedded determinism in his conviction, which is a feature associated with realism. This complies with Wood's comment on how hysterical realism borrows from realism itself, even though the message of Hominy's declaration also may result in other understandings than determinism. Hominy's perception of his destiny may also function as what I identify as a provocation concealed in absurdity. I argue that this entails a provocation that prompts the reader to reflect, realize and hopefully achieve personal development concerning prejudiced attitudes one might have, and by that exposing the unfiltered reality of a reader's mind. Consequently, then, the situation and the relationship between Me and Hominy might seem incredible and ridiculous. However, although the relationship may seem absurd, the determinist and provocative elements both serve the feature of the genre that Wood describes as evasiveness of realism while borrowing from realism itself.

As the novel unfolds, it illustrates hysterical realism further in its relation to realism. The novel is seemingly evasive of reality while implementing realism itself, for example when (re)introducing slavery in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and as Me (reluctantly) accepts his new role of “Massa” and becomes the owner of another African American man. The novel comments on this relationship as it intricately brings to readers’ attention how common these roles were, and reveals how they arguably still are, although not defined or recognized as master and slave. However, an emphasis must be made concerning Me’s role, as African American slave owners were profoundly exceptional. The commentary on these roles and how one may find underlying traces of them in contemporary USA is exactly what may be interpreted as the intended message, or ethos, of the novel. I borrow Hutcheon’s use of ethos in this context as she refers to it as “the ruling intended response achieved by a literary text” (2001, 55). I interpret the ethos to entail a combination of the author’s intended response of the text and the ruling actual response of its readers. The master-slave relationship is at first perhaps considered outrageous to both readers and the protagonist himself, but the ethos eventually becomes clearer as small comments are made by the narrator as the inclusion of supposed absurdities are revealed as realistic situations either of the past or the present.

Because the nature of an African American master-slave relation was and is exceptional, the relationship between Me and Hominy creates an absurdity that puts the relation in relief for the reader to react to and reflect on in terms of its reality. *The Sellout*, then, functions as an antidote to one of the defining characteristics Beatty mentions of African American writing, namely that it is “prosaic” (Beatty as cited in Sandhu, 2016). The novel’s references to real situations and practices make the situations and dialogues imaginable, supporting the novel’s link with realism. The absurd will always stand in reference to reality, but an important point to make is that in the case of *The Sellout*, its absurdity additionally interacts with genre conventions. The distinctions between different genres are perhaps hard

to determine, especially when that determination is clouded by the different implementations of devices like absurdity and irony. Nonetheless, the novel's interaction with and use of the absurd arguably does not make it a parody – rather, the novel's juxtaposition of realism and absurdity causes the text to stay within the bounds of the hysterical realism genre.

A situation that demonstrates absurd elements but in turn borrows from realism occurs when Me is shot by Foy Cheshire at a protest against Me segregating the local school. The event mimics the Little Rock Nine, as five white children pursue to reintegrate the segregated school. The situation becomes heated which results in a gunshot to Me's gut, which he compares to his father's murder in the hands of police: "we'd both been shot in the gut by gutless motherfuckers" (*TS*, 261). As Me and Hominy are questioned by the emergency medical technicians after the shooting, the novel overtly conveys the underlying unequal power dynamics based on race that accumulates in slavery, as the deputy states "He says he's his slave (...) Been working for him, according to this crazy fucker, the last four hundred years" (*TS*, 263). The latter element of the deputy's statement is perhaps the most important part, as it signals the overwhelming duration of slavery in addition to making a point of how these structures are still existing. The statement also underscores the realism of Hominy's position, paradoxically because his position is considered absurd at first but rather functions as a representation of the real experiences of African Americans throughout the American history. There is also a sense of rupture in the statement. The absurdity of the sentence abruptly collapses as it dawns on the reader that it is not absurd at all, but rather horribly true – racism prevails still, manifested in for example zoning regulations. Hominy's comment then, becomes an example of *The Sellout's* features that are not parodic, absurd or hysterical, but rather embody truth and reality.

The same situation also effectively signals the juxtaposition of normalized behavior and events with abnormal circumstances perceived as absurd; the shooting of Me and the

declaration of enslavement by Hominy respectively. Both elements are, if stripped down from cultural context, fundamentally absurd. In the former element a man gets shot by another man, by a member of the same racial affiliation as the victim. In the latter, a man is a slave for another man, perhaps perceived particularly absurd because the “master” does not want him to be. The juxtaposition of these two events may affect the contrast between them to diminish, and the reader to perceive them both as absurd, even though the former is largely a part of the normalized violence toward African Americans in contemporary USA<sup>6</sup>. The normality of the shooting is exemplified through the sheriff deputy’s behavior as she calmly squats next to Me, while “poking gently at [his] wound with the butt end of her flashlight” (*TS*, 626), assessing the bullet wound to be “superficial, really” (*TS*, 262). Me answers this declaration with a scornful comment that “[a]nyone who’s ever described a bullet wound as being superficial has never been shot” (*TS*, 262). The dialogue shows the disparity of life experiences and expectations of the two. In addition, it exemplifies the ordinariness of the gun violence and the absurdity of calling a gunshot wound superficial, which indicates normality, while the victim is bleeding in the gutter (*TS*, 626). In this way, the novel illustrates and confronts the reality of racially motivated violence juxtaposed with (the absurd) racial subservience in contemporary context by the allusion to a historical account of slavery.

Camouflaged as evasiveness of reality is also the plot component of Me (re)introducing segregation in his local community of the former city of Dickens. The pivotal aspect here, though, is how this action instead of evasiveness of reality is rather the opposite, an uncovering of the state of affairs in contemporary USA, specifically in the L.A. area. Me accurately expresses this on several different occasions in the novel, like when he asks, “How

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<sup>6</sup> According to Amnesty International, African Americans, particularly young African American males, accounted for 58,8% of deaths by firearm in 2017, despite making up just 13% of the population (Amnesty International).

do you racially segregate an already segregated school?” (TS, 169), or addresses the post-racial idea by stating “(...) in a *supposedly* unsegregated section of Los Angeles, California” (TS, 127, emphasis added), or lastly, explicitly conveys that “L.A. is a mind-numbingly racially segregated city” (TS, 204). All these instances convey to readers that the conditions expressed in the novel are by no means evasive of reality, they rather point out and identify (societal) areas where segregation and former established power structures still prevail. The intricate demonstration of actual affairs may also pertain to what I interpret to be the overarching intended message of *The Sellout*. The message, based on this analysis, is related to the supposed evasiveness of reality and the supposed absurdity of the novel’s features, namely that the issues addressed are not hysterical, misleading or absurd at all, but rather an accurate account of the characters’ realities, successfully communicated through the use of the hysterical realism genre.

The resegregation of Dickens is another example of how serious issues are confronted by use of irony and absurdity. Me and Hominy spend months resegregating the city of Dickens, putting up signs and painting a line all around the city. The irony of fate concerning these acts become especially clear as the novel includes material and restrictions that imitate the ones implemented during the former segregation in the US. An example of such material is the different signs enforcing racial discrimination that Me, posing as a social scientist, presents to business owners. The signs are to be displayed in the businesses’ windows and read

“BLACK, ASIAN, AND LATINO ONLY; LATINO, ASIAN, AND BLACK ONLY; and NO WHITES ALLOWED” (TS, 225). Me is astonished by how many of the business owners choose the latter sign, and the signs’ reported effect is that it makes the customers feel special, “[i]t’s like [the customers] belong to a private club that’s public!” (TS, 225). The irony of the situation comments on the flipped relationship between the superior and the inferior in a

typical segregated society. The resegregation of Dickens now means racially discriminating the Caucasian race, underscoring the superiority of the African Americans, Latinx people and other minorities. Although the historical situation concerning who is discriminated against is reversed, the act of excluding other people based on their race is in itself an absurd image in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, the absurd image simultaneously challenges readers' conception of how and why it is regarded as such, that is, absurd, and the situation leaves a heavy ironic mark on the situation: it reveals to the reader how one group of people is just as easily segregated as another, highlighting the absurdity and irony of segregation as a whole.

The narrator additionally brilliantly points out the underlying rules of society when it comes to the privileges engendered by whiteness, as he lists them up according to their degree of whiteness. The only information revealed here is the truth of how the color of your skin, more specifically one's degree of whiteness, will affect your life experiences. The lowest form of whiteness reads "Regular Whiteness" where one gets the "Benefit of the Doubt", "Higher Life Expectancy" and "Lower Insurance Premiums" (*TS*, 227). The second level of whiteness is named "Deluxe Whiteness", where one among other privileges get "Warnings Instead of Arrests from the Police" (*TS*, 227). The latter privilege poignantly reminds the reader of the fate of Me's father and indeed the vast amount of such examples from our contemporary period<sup>7</sup>. The final category the narrator lists is called "Super Deluxe Whiteness" which is characterized by privileges like "Jobs with Annual Bonuses", "Legacy admissions to College of Your Choice" and "Not Responsible for Scratches, Dents, and Items Left in the Subconscious" (*TS*, 227). The list comments on the race situation in the American society today, and scornfully identifies and communicates white privilege in a language that is

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<sup>7</sup> One such example occurred on the 25th of May 2020, George Floyd was killed by a police officer in Minnesota, repeatedly crying out for air while bystanders documented the incident, which led to a summer filled with Black Lives Matter protests all around the world.

understandable to virtually all readers. The identified privileges are not exaggerated or absurd, they rather address inherently unjust underlying attitudes and systems that are normalized.

Although the examples above relate to hysterical realism, Wood's concluding remarks of the genre do not do *The Sellout* justice. As mentioned, the genre is perhaps first and foremost evaluated as a negative label to be put on contemporary works that are accused of being loud and rich in language, but unfortunately, or perhaps consequently, not in substance. However, the preceding list, which reveals an (arguably subconscious) normative system pertaining to the values associated with different degrees of whiteness, shows that the novel does in fact address and confront serious issues. Although I acknowledge that there are some aspects of Wood's explanation that are not fully applicable to the *The Sellout*, I find that the novel nonetheless is far from being a satire, which I address in the following.

The inevitable turmoil that occurs as a new term or genre is introduced to the literary community includes criticism and ambiguity, but perhaps most of all a continuous dynamic development of the term. The ambiguity of hysterical realism may be hard to grasp, and to understand the genre it is perhaps easier to distinguish what the "big novels" Wood (2002) writes about, like *The Sellout*, are not. Kreuz and Roberts comment in their article on satire and parody on the confusion and difficulty when categorizing texts, and state that less prototypical texts are categorized on the basis of their family resemblance, and that confusion in genre classification emerge when there is confusion and incompetence about the features defining a genre (1993, p.98). They further note that "This confusion has been particularly evident in the case of two closely related genres: satire and parody" (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993, p.98). Beatty himself specifically states that *The Sellout* should not be considered satirical, and that it was never meant to be categorized as such, as he comments: "but it's not satirical, really, to me" (Tripathi, 2017). Beatty's clear take on it underscores how difficult it is to

place the text within the traditional genres. There are elements in the text that echo Bakhtin's discussion of satire, but as I argue, it does not fit as well as with *The White Boy Shuffle*. The established terms and genres become insufficient when dealing with texts like *The Sellout*, as it is profoundly absurd and humoristic but simultaneously biting confronts and acknowledges latent realities in a way that cannot be classified as satirical or parodic. In the following I show how elements of the Menippean satire do not work in the case of *The Sellout*.

The list of privileges related to one's degree of whiteness presents a content that is not exaggerated or humorous. It is neither particularly ironic nor of a fantastic character, all central features of satire. It does, however, relate to the genre of satire in the sense that it comments on societal factors and hence has an extramural focus. Accordingly, the privileges listed are all but unreal, they rather paint a picture of the life experiences of the white majority, and by that implicitly convey the contrasting experiences of minority groups. This means that the list is not absurd by way of its content – the descriptions are essentially valid, but the attitudes and the division it represents are absurd. The reader understands that the acknowledgement of such privileges and their contrasting opposites for minorities underscores the irrationality of one group possessing privileges that others do not, based predominantly on their racial affiliation. The list then, becomes not a satirical element, as it is not exaggerated or fantastic, but rather on the contrary is conveyed to, and accepted by the reader as something legitimate. The list in itself may thus rather touch upon conventions within the realism genre, although it is difficult to place it firmly there as the narrative context of the list is fundamentally absurd: the (re)segregated school implements "Whitey Week" (*TS*, 226) where you can experience the "tunnel of whiteness" (*TS*, 227) and choose between several "race wash options" (*TS*, 227). The combination of (what at first look is assessed as) absurd elements and acknowledgements of truth and realities makes it impossible to place the

novel within neither genre. The unconventional setting though, supports Wood's description of hysterical realism, as it is eccentric and seems to paint a cartoonish picture of whitewashing people.

There are in addition some pivotal components of *The Sellout* that cannot be aligned with the characterizations identified by Bakhtin of Menippean satire. One characteristic of the Menippea is that it is unusually free from history and realism, hence it is fantastic (Bakhtin, 1984, 114). The components that *The Sellout* builds upon are however influenced by their historical allusions, and are, according to the way I interpret the novel's ethos, intentionally included precisely to show the link between historical practices and contemporary structures. Examples of components linked to historical events and issues range from the larger themes of the novel like (re)segregation and slavery, but also smaller, though no less important components, like the list of privileges presented above. The list communicates one such link by alluding to the racial differences concerning access to higher education, as the "Super Deluxe Whiteness" involves "Legacy admissions to College of Your Choice" (*TS*, 227), which suggests that non-whites are not as likely to experience such admissions. The fact that these practices all have historical roots cause them to not adhere completely to the element of fantasticality, although the aspect of implementing them in a contemporary context may arguably be regarded as such. If, however, one argues that the fantasticality of this implementation justifies the novel's categorization as a satire, an opposition could be made as to how the supposed fantastic is actually used to accentuate the inherent realism of the elements, thus signaling its *lack* of fantasticality.

The list of privileges pertaining to white people also challenges another of Bakhtin's characterizations concerning the comic aspect of Menippean satire. The content of the list may be perceived as surprising or refreshingly honest, but the ramifications of the narrator's observations are all but of comic character. The privileges identified rather reflect the very

real and upsetting underlying differences in life-experiences between the races. Although a reader's reaction to the list may be affected by its shocking effect, which may lead to a surprised laugh or snicker, as the list ends she understands the graveness and seriousness of what it actually communicates. The list serves as an identification of unfair, unjust privileges and treatments of people based on race, communicated through a concrete medium, that is, an organized list in writing, and in a language that efficiently exemplifies their consequences in everyday situations. Several other scenes in the novel serve as similar reminders and revelations of heartbreaking realities rather than comedy. Although absurd circumstances and the elements of surprise and unexpectedness may cause an initial reaction to be confused with humor, I would argue that most of the novel's scenes eventually generate seriousness rather than comedy. Examples of such scenes are when Me's father is shot by police (*TS*, 42), Me is introduced to overt racism in a nameless Mississippi town (*TS*, 174-179), and the discussion of Me's violations of rights in Supreme Court (*TS*, 274). As a reader I recognize that all of these instances involve comic elements, like Me not knowing how to wolf whistle at a white lady and instead whistles Ravel's Boléro, but I also recognize how their communicated message relates rather to the gravity of the situations.

The instances mentioned above pertain to "the most important characteristic of the menippea as a genre" (Bakhtin, 1983, 114), namely that it uses fantastic, extraordinary situations for the purpose of testing philosophical truths, as illustrated in the close readings of *The White Boy Shuffle*. However, the situations in *The Sellout*, although they arguably challenge philosophical truths like racism and class, are, as I have argued above, not inherently extraordinary, or fantastic. Resegregation comes to mind as an example of this, as the concept of segregation cannot be classified as extraordinary, as the practice was introduced in the American society centuries ago, with de facto segregation still existing. Relating to the characteristic of Bakhtin concerning how the Menippea is fantastic, the

content and message of the novel's situations and dialogues rather illustrate realism. The situations do not involve fundamental extraordinariness, although elements may be implemented in an unfamiliar setting or be presented through an unusual point of view. Although the genre of hysterical realism also is described as involving issues clouded by eccentricities, I would argue that the combination of eccentricities in setting and language only elevate the seriousness of confronting the topics and issues raised in the situation. The confrontation is underscored by the novel's revelation of their often-fundamental absurdity and unjustness by juxtaposing them with accepted normality. The novel does the opposite of relying on extraordinariness to convey its message. It rather presents a scathing critique and awareness of the discriminatory system of the society it echoes, which results in the literal and figurative trial of concepts like segregation.

Looked at from a different point of view, however, the whole intention of segregating the community may also be regarded as a form of antiphrasis – the absurdity of resegregating the city in the quest for the utopian dream may suggest the protagonist's sarcastic attitude toward the concept. If looked at from this perspective, the resegregation of Dickens may signal the novel's message of revealing the absurdity of resegregating something that is already (although unofficially) segregated. This perspective also signals the novel calling out the idea of a post-racial era by showing the very plausible outrage caused by the revelation of contemporary practices that maintain and endorse segregation.

As my analysis shows, there are several aspects of the novel that do not fit with the satire genre as described by Bakhtin. These elements include *The Sellout's* focus on realist conventions and the portrayals of them, its use of the absurd when communicating overarching messages, and the addressing of serious issues through a narrative world camouflaged by absurdity, eccentricities and surprise to name a few. According to these features, the reader understands that it is not enough to simply call it a satire. I have therefore

argued that the novel expands the limits of hysterical realism as it is described by Wood, in terms of *The Sellout's* confrontation with societal issues. I furthermore recognize that it is fully able to address those in a way that successfully conveys their seriousness, even though they are presented through a perhaps absurd or hysterical setting. However, Wood's introduction to and acknowledgment of a need for a new genre stands as a turning point for contemporary literature in this category. The genre of hysterical realism encompasses art and events that are too complicated and intricate to be dismissed as simply absurd or ironic. There are several contemporary works of art that may be classified as hysterical realism, works that are not done justice to if placed within other genres like satire or parody, which consequently, and perhaps most importantly, does not create a sufficient framework for the receiver to interpret the information through. The new understudied genre then, becomes specifically relevant in our time, to be able to comprehend and interpret texts thoroughly.

## Conclusion

### Absurd Realities

In this thesis I have explored the satire genre within the African American tradition and advocated for the application of the relatively new genre hysterical realism (presented by Wood) to one of Beatty's novels. To explore the gap between satire and hysterical realism I investigated the development and contrast between two of Beatty's novels, where I argued for the satire label for *The White Boy Shuffle* and the hysterical realism label for *The Sellout*. I started my first chapter with an overview of the African American satire tradition, which included different epochs relating to evolving politics and the use of literature to comment on the contemporary, specifically periods relevant in the development of satire as we know it. However, the discussion of different definitions of satire and how they might influence readers' and writers' conceptions of it showed that there are many ways of understanding the genre. To be able to investigate the satirical character of *The White Boy Shuffle* in the second chapter, then, I chose the characteristics described by Bakhtin as my lens when working with close readings of the novel. Some specific attributes of satire were emphasized linked to the novel, like the inevitable component of irony and the associated outcome of humor, the use of fantasticality and the novel's play with the rhetorical force of *reductio ad absurdum*. The discussion illustrates that *The White Boy Shuffle* adheres to the overarching characteristics of satire as Bakhtin has operationalized it.

The following chapter explored the genre of hysterical realism and how it could be applied to Beatty's most recent novel, *The Sellout*. This third chapter illustrates how the novel encompasses several of the features mentioned by Wood as traits of the genre, like its excessive details and language use, as well as its lack of believable character building. I argued also that the novel's use of absurdity in combination with elements of realism resulted in a revelation of truth while confronting established attitudes and ideas. One such example is

the novel's challenging of segregation as a practice, and perhaps most importantly, challenging its so-called non-existence in the so-called post-racial era of the United States. Accordingly, the third chapter demonstrates how *The Sellout* challenges established ideas and concepts related to race. The chapter addresses and illustrates how Beatty plays with racist practices and so-called progressive movements and attitudes in the novel (like rewriting classical literature to replace derogatory slurs) and wraps them in a new context, one that reveals and highlights the absurdity of the practices and movements' existence. The discussion of these features is based on my revision of Wood's assessment of hysterical realism. I view the genre to involve a potential of societal critique in its combination of absurdity and realism, which goes beyond the use of excessive language, permanent storytelling, and absurd details described by Wood in his article.

Two decades have passed since Wood's coinage of hysterical realism and, although several scholars picked up the term, it is a relatively understudied concept in the broader literary community. However, the need for the genre is arguably relevant not only for the contemporary literary community but also in other fields of society, like music, art, and maybe even in relation to political events. Perhaps especially when it comes to the American society, people are surrounded by elements of the absurd, like the many conspiracy theories flourishing. On some philosophical level, hysterical realism may be exactly what makes it possible to interpret and understand what for many is considered an absurd political landscape during and in the wake of the rule of the 45<sup>th</sup> president. The absurd political landscape (or is it indeed best described as hysterical?) is still a most real landscape, which signals the combination of the hysterical and the real embedded in the genre name.

One example from this landscape is the infamous capitol insurrection on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2021, and specifically the Q shaman, or Jacob Anthony Chansley, which adds to a complex situation, to say the least (NPR, 2021). The whole situation may be called

unbelievable or absurd, but paradoxically, the fundamental reality of it conflicts this conception. The situation involves several elements that reflect the political landscape and the absurdity it entails, like the conspiracy theory QAnon referenced to in Chansley's alias, as well as his outfit, including a bearskin headdress, horns, and blue, white, and red face paint. Perhaps the most morally provocative, upsetting element of the insurrection is the mock noose put up in front of the Capitol, not unlike those used in the American lynching tradition (Dalsheim & Starrett, 2021, 30). The interpretation of the act of constructing the noose is arguably final – there is no ambiguity as to what it referred to, especially as it was put up by predominantly white rioters in favor of Mr. Trump, who presumably supported his racist attitudes which emphasizes the noose's painful message of racism. The abundance of the many absurd elements in the situation creates an image that is almost impossible to fathom, but the reality of it forces us to. The nature of this event, namely the combination of absurdity and realism is one of the pivotal elements of hysterical realism, and I suggest that the framework is valuable for understanding the complexity of the incident and audiences' reactions to it.

The exploration of hysterical realism's features during this thesis has convinced me that the genre is moreover able to decipher other artworks of the contemporary. The most prominent example from the music industry is arguably Donald Glover's, also known as Childish Gambino, song and music video "This is America" released in 2018 (Glover, 2018). Although I will not analyze the whole video, there are some aspects I will draw from that applies to the hysterical realism genre and its broader scope and relevance. The music video of "This is America" is packed with features of hysterical realism discussed in this thesis, with references to and confrontations with the reality of African American experiences. These include (mainly gun) violence and a mix of allusions to the history of slavery and contemporary events of discrimination and prejudice.

Perhaps one of the most prominent allusions occurs in the opening scenes of the video, where Glover positions himself in the characteristic pose of the Jim Crow figure, before shooting a tied man with a sack over his head in front of him, and whose appearance strikingly looks like the father of Trayvon Martin<sup>8</sup>. This image in the first couple of minutes of the video, in combination with the lyrics and music exemplify the traits of Wood's genre. The situation is in itself absurd; an African American man in the role of the oppressive, prejudice-based minstrel character Jim Crow, who fatally shoots another, defenseless African American man. The gun is then carefully handled and wrapped in a red cloth whereas the victim's body is dragged along the floor. In addition to what is happening in this situation, there are several other elements in the shot that contribute to the experience of it as absurd. An example is the details of Glover's outfit; his pants, as many have pointed out, arguably mimic those of the confederate soldiers' uniforms in the Civil War. The combination of the allusions of his pants and the other elements of his appearance, like his afro and bare upper body, clearly emphasizes Glover's skin color and ethnic heritage, and in turn underscores the commentary on identity, race and political history. As the soundtrack shifts from an upbeat, joyful sound to a trap-beat tune as Glover's shot is fired, the tone of the image suddenly changes (Glover, 2018).

The contrast that is created in the scene as the shooting (that has discriminatory undertones) is put in a new context where both the victim and the executioner is of the same race, which is a feature that was also discussed in relation to *The Sellout*. What makes the scene for some people uncomfortable to watch is its confrontation of real, distressing truths

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<sup>8</sup> Trayvon Martin was another victim of gun violence when he at seventeen years old was fatally shot in 2012. The incident would prove to be a turning point in the African American community and lead to the initiation of the Black Lives Matter Movement by Garza, Cullors and Tometi (Black Lives Matter, n.d.).

that reveal the existence of oppression and prejudice still, or in other words the scene's realism. Such confrontations are plentiful in *The Sellout*, like its commentary on the deceptive separate but equal doctrine. The originality and fearlessness that the novel displays may only cause its readers to actually engage with material and attitudes that perhaps would not be challenged otherwise. The abundance of elements that critique societal relations and their contribution to the material's questioning and confronting of those issues causes Glover's music, lyrics and video to, from my point of view, pertain to the hysterical realism genre. If one was to simply categorize this material as satirical or parodic, it would downplay all the other layers to the video and song's message, like the effect of juxtaposing hysteria and realism. The combination of these elements may cause an experience of the situation as intense and perplexing, but the political commentary is almost impossible to miss. The essence and message of the employed elements are all but unreal or absurd, and they contribute to the motive of the genre as confronting reality through features of (seeming) absurdity. Determining Glover's song and video to be satirical or parodic could also lead to a misinterpretation of the complicated message as simply absurd or ironic rather than an exploration of its complexity brought by elements that in fact mirror actual events or ideologies.

Another example of material that may benefit from the framework of hysterical realism in its interpretation is the motion picture *Get Out* (2017), written and directed by Jordan Peele. The motion picture shows a young African American male's perspective as he meets the family of his white girlfriend in a looming environment that eventually shows to be a horrific situation. During his stay, the main character is hypnotized into "the sunken place" (Peele, 2017), a psychological space of paralysis and submissiveness. Perhaps most directly linked to the genre is the terrifying scenes of the film where the main character is about to be lobotomized and thereby controlled by a blind, white elderly man who purchased him, and

who most of all desires the main character's vision. This scene is at the surface an entirely absurd situation: it is a fundamental racist, fantastical and bizarre practice set in a contemporary context juxtaposed with other scenes where race issues are explicitly raised and commented on, like for example racial profiling as the main character is pulled over while driving with his white girlfriend. However, as the hysterical realism genre demands, the film calls for a deeper dive into the actual elements of the scene. The realism of the situation is shockingly accurate – it illustrates and comments on how African Americans have been exploited in different ways for their physical qualities, for example physical labor during slavery and African American exceptionalism in sports. The commentary on the exploitation of African Americans' physical abilities was also illustrated and problematized by Beatty in *The White Boy Shuffle* through the characters of Scoby and Gunnar.

These examples of contemporary artworks that could potentially benefit from the genre of hysterical realism indicate the importance of the shift Wood recognized in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The investigation conducted throughout this thesis underscores that shift and argues for further investigation of works of the like that engage with absurdity and realism through a format in which language and events might deceive at first glance. Both of Beatty's novels have been classified as satires by critics and this thesis has explored the satire genre in relation to *The White Boy Shuffle*. However, a genre is never bulletproof, and its borders may be flexible. Consequently, as the findings of this thesis have shown, the vague space between genres and consequently the shift from one to another are undoubtedly worth looking at. The development from *The White Boy Shuffle* to *The Sellout* indicates one such shift. The themes and issues raised in the novels are juxtaposed, but, as I have argued, there is an obvious difference in the way the latter uses the literary force of the absurd. This difference is made explicit as *The White Boy Shuffle* is categorized as a satire by literary critics like LaMonda Horton Stallings, while Beatty firmly states that *The Sellout* is not, and perhaps should not, be

considered satirical: “Sometimes, yeah, the book is definitely about that, but it’s not satirical, really, to me” (Beatty as cited in Tripathi, 2017).

As I am concluding my discussion, it is perhaps worth asking why Beatty insists that the novel is not a satire. In an interview with Amrita Tripathi in 2017, Beatty makes several comments concerning the issue of classification, and he shows his contempt for what he calls hiding behind the genre.

You can just hide behind that word. You can say something is a satire, okay, but what does that really mean? Where’s the invective? It’s an easy word to just hide behind and not have to really deal with or confront, whether, as a reader or as a reviewer, one is implicated or not. It’s a word that’s like this shield. (Beatty, as cited in Tripathi, 2017)

The negative effect of the satire label clearly conveyed in these statements also indicates a difference in how the audience should recognize *The Sellout* compared to the debut novel. It appears that Beatty addresses the issue of the satire label being used to excuse a piece of literature, an approach that is signaled through the perspective of one of Beatty’s students, as Beatty notes “(...) whenever he says something that makes people really uncomfortable with, he’ll go like you know, that’s all satirical, as an excuse, y’know what I mean” (Beatty, as cited in Tripathi, 2017). As with the examples above from the music, film and political field, it is simply not enough to call them satires if one is to follow Beatty’s notions, because that label serves more like a shield than as a format for revelations, transformation and realism.

The difference in how the novels interact with literary devices and societal issues supports the approach of this thesis as it has followed and explored Beatty’s prompt of not defining *The Sellout* a satire. Of course, the issue of authorial intent versus literary reception and consequently which of those that should be accentuated arises in these instances.

However, as this thesis has argued, it is nonetheless worth following Beatty’s judgement and

explore another genre, in this case hysterical realism, in relation to *The Sellout*. The findings of the close readings presented in the chapters indicate profoundly different reading experiences of the two novels and a significant development between *The White Boy Shuffle* and *The Sellout*. Consequently, I approached *The Sellout* through the lens of hysterical realism and analyzed evidence from the novel that exemplify the genre, like its usage of the absurd to rather confront realism. These are elements that could have been missed, misinterpreted, or misunderstood if simply categorized as satirical. Hysterical realism as it has been described in this thesis is therefore in my perspective a valuable genre for audiences to be able to decode complex and absurd material. However, Wood's genre remains understudied, even though its acknowledgement of absurdity in contemporary works, however, are, as shown in relation to *The Sellout*, indispensable. Consequently, hysterical realism and its scope needs to be further explored and operationalized. The genre's link to absurdity is indeed a telling aspect of the world we live in today.

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