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After a few moments I’d relax and settle into a barely acceptable, simple side-to-side step, dubbed by the locals the white boy shuffle. I wasn’t funky, but I was no longer disrupting the groove. (Beatty 123)

I was beating Godzilla into the sea with a powerful stream of radioactive turtle piss when I awoke to find Yoshiko’s index finger worming its way toward my prostate. Punked for life. (Beatty 173)

Though the words of Gunnar Euripides Kaufman, the reluctant race-man protagonist of Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle*, appear to be about a simple dance step meant to make the rhythmically handicapped look cool, they allude to a critique of masculinity and culture that is repeated throughout the novel. Further, as Gunnar speaks to his wife Yoshiko’s wandering hand, it seems obvious that Beatty may be using his novel to suggest that black males confront and embrace alternative models of gender for their black bodies, lest they and the remainder of black America, continue to be manipulated and destroyed by the psychological impetus to claim a patriarchal legacy embedded within white supremacy.

Almost a decade before Patricia Hill Collins and Mark Anthony Neal critically engaged audiences about the new racism and the “New Black Man” in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* and *New Black Man*, Paul Beatty hipped us to the new racism and radically different black masculinities with the publication of *The White Boy Shuffle*. Whereas Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin created twentieth-century literature invested in the rights of “native sons,” that is, disenfranchised black male characters who sought to be a part of the U.S. by relying on tropes and privileges of masculine identity defined by white men, Paul Beatty takes a decidedly different approach with his novel *The White Boy Shuffle*. Beatty’s novel, written at the end of the twentieth century, rejects the trajectory of native sons and masculine privilege for a postmodern option of dismantling gender hierarchies and binaries on which those trajectories relied.

Notably, in the same way that Ishmael Reed utilized “jes grew,” mumbo jumbo, jazz, and Afrocentricity to discuss the dominance of black culture in the West, Beatty turns to suicide poems, basketball, hip hop, and the failures of black political rhetoric to highlight fundamentally different black sexual politics that could potentially disrupt the groove of white supremacy and patriarchy, save the sometimes tempting benefits of commodified blackness. In doing so, Beatty helps establish a new foundation for African American literature for the twenty-first century, one that depends upon reconsidering the importance of gender and sexuality in African American texts by and about black men. This essay argues that Paul Beatty accomplishes this feat by revisiting the traditional black public sphere and updating it in ways vitally important to contemporary black people by acknowledging the queerness of black male bodies in the U.S., and by challenging past, present, and future black political agendas that would ignore the importance of class, gender, and sexuality for a unilateral focus on race.
Beatty’s use of satire, his chosen means of critiquing gender hegemonies, is as important as the critique itself. As will be shown, satire is a vital part of the contemporary black public sphere. Darryl Dickson-Carr, in *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*, places Beatty’s work alongside the likes of George Schuyler, Rudolph Fisher, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Ishmael Reed, John Oliver Killens, and Cecil Brown. Despite the differing historical politics and the stylistic ruptures and revisions of each author and their work, Dickson-Carr assesses that the commonalities and continuities of the fiction stem from a “few essential characteristics: unremitting iconoclasm, criticism of the current status of African American political and cultural trends, and indictment of specifically American forms of racism” (16). Ironically, it is scholars’ critical focus on race alone that underwrites the innovation of Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle*.

If Dickson-Carr is correct when he states that “racism is but one ideological system interrogated within the African American satiric novel” (32), then it seems imperative to note the existence of a satirical tradition that takes on the ideological systems of gender and sexuality, with as much aplomb as it does race. Implicit within this essay is the understanding of Beatty’s work as aligned with a satirical tradition found in Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and its reconsiderations of masculinity, as well as *The White Boy Shuffle’s* link to its literary predecessor, Fran Ross’s *Oreo*, one of the first black satirical novels with a female protagonist that also revises gender. But Beatty’s identity as a black male within this tradition nevertheless showcases a changing guard in both the black public sphere and in masculinities.

Beatty, in aligning himself with an African American satirical tradition, risks undoing any critique of gender that he makes. As Dickson-Carr notes: “What is worse is that satire has tended to be associated most closely with male writers and is dominated by men. Perhaps inevitably, then, certain types of sexism have dogged satirists and besmirched their reputations almost as frequently as their general iconoclasm” (5). Dickson-Carr is referring to Ishmael Reed and other black male satirists who have created satire in which “women have often been dismissed as sexual objects, decried as ideological femme fatales, and assigned a hefty part of the blame for the demise of civilized discourse” (5). In his analysis of these works and in discussion about the lack of satirical novels written by African American women, Dickson-Carr misses a prime opportunity to state Beatty’s genius of simultaneously changing the representation of African American satire as sexist and introducing a critique of gender using the form itself. Whereas George Schuyler’s *Black No More* has been deemed “the first completely satirical novel written by and about African Americans” (Dickson-Carr 57), and Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* has been read as engaging the “conspiracy of masculinity” (Strombeck 299), *The White Boy Shuffle* is the first contemporary African American satirical novel to understand that considerations of gender don’t mean simply engaging feminism and women, but masculinity and men as well.

*The White Boy Shuffle*, aesthetically positioned as satire, remains a literary appraisal of the complex fate of black masculinity and black masculine culture as it risks succumbing to hegemonic masculinities. The novel’s satirical tone enables Beatty to offer a precise deconstruction of existing masculine paradigms. In black communities and cultures, there are several sacred persons and historical moments about which, with good home-training, one never jokes: slavery, civil rights, and mamas. In fact, early criticism over Charles Johnson’s satirical representation of slavery and protagonist Rutherford Calhoun in *Middle Passage*, as well as controversial legal battles over the legacies of civil rights leaders in black music and film, indicate that perhaps the benefits of good-home training are no longer seen as useful in the fight against
white supremacy. For as Houston A. Baker documents in his essay, “Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere,” African American producers of culture often will find themselves negotiating between nostalgia and critical memory, with some choosing one over the other in lieu of negotiation or balance. In the case of the previously mentioned controversies, nostalgia takes precedence. “Nostalgia plays itself out in two acts. First, it writes the revolution as a well-passed aberration. Second, it actively substitutes allegory for history” (Baker 7). In other words, don’t speak ill of my mama.

Yet Paul Beatty does joke about all three (slavery, civil rights, and mamas) in the prologue and first chapter of The White Boy Shuffle. In his leadership role, Gunnar Kaufman suggests mass suicide as a solution for black America’s disenfranchisement, and he does so in a way that showcases how important public spaces, rather than private spaces, are to the continued resistance to traditional racism and the new racism that is based in gender and sexual oppression:

On one hand this messiah gig is a bitch. On the other I’ve managed to fill the perennial void in African-American leadership. There is no longer a need for fed-up second-class citizens to place a want ad in the Sunday classifieds reading:

Negro Demagogue
Must have ability to lead a divided, downtrodden, and alienated people to the Promised Land. (1)

Beatty establishes that his novel is about the well-intentioned but problematic ways of how African Americans deal with the ever-present issue of racism in the U. S. However, he will not be solemn in his reflection. He uses messiah and bitch in the same sentence, as if to mock the privileging or status that comes with the savior position. He constructs the role of African American leadership as a job rather than as a calling that anyone can apply for, which in itself seems antithetical to messiah-hood. This type of satire allows Beatty to avoid the nostalgia, the romanticization of the past that makes it impossible to move forward and create new models for fear of eliminating the memory and influence of previous successes. In addition to promoting a legacy of integration and more access to opportunities, this nostalgia can also create a censure within the discourse of post-civil rights black people. As Beatty shows, however, this yearning for the past needs to be critiqued.

From the very beginning, Beatty, in selecting satire as his narrative form, chooses critical memory over nostalgia because of what it represents:

Critical memory, by contrast, is the very faculty of revolution. . . . Critical memory, one might say, is always uncanny; it is also always in crisis. Critical memory judges severely, censures righteously, renders hard ethical evaluations of the past that it never defines as well passed. The essence of critical memory’s work is the cumulative, collective maintenance of a record that draws into relationship significant instants of time past and the always uprooted homelessness of now. (Baker 7)

Satire, then, acts as an artistic device of critical memory. Beatty chooses to engage the critical memory of race men and race leaders in African American culture and history. The object of his critique is simple: unitary leadership. By emphasizing the western values of monothesism with words such as messiah, demagogue, and a reference to the biblical Moses, Beatty can use Gunnar to address the shortcomings of a post-civil rights agenda that depends upon a cycle of passive waiting. It is no coincidence that the ad is in the Sunday classifieds, and that there is a subtle biblical reference to Moses and the Hebrews. The tactic is jarring and effective, and it establishes a mode of storytelling that will allow Beatty to both appreciate black male culture and scathingly critique the commodification of black male corpuses and cultures—a combination that may possibly alter the evolution of black masculinities and African American politics.
The critique becomes all the more damning when placed in the language of product and market. The advertisement for a race man places African American leadership on the market, and it makes the race man a commodity to be bought and sold. Beatty turns to satire specifically because it is a form that will allow him to deconstruct the black public sphere. In stark contrast to other genres, satire allows the possibility of revision. Satire uses wit, irony, and humor to criticize people, institutions, and mores. It deconstructs these elements arguably to build better models. Beatty takes black America’s most conservative expectations of masculinity and leadership and satirizes them until we realize that as the continuous struggle for equality must adapt to generational change, so must conceptualizations of black masculinity.

Most recently, Houston Baker assessed what the pre-integration black public sphere for race men looked like through an analysis of Martin Luther King Jr.’s influence on the civil rights movement. In doing so, Baker documents the traditional spaces that create the black public sphere: prisons/jails, churches, historically black colleges and universities, and black music (19-25); I would add to this list the marginalized black press. Baker also notes that these spaces are often influenced by generational differences that can complicate the black public sphere. *The White Boy Shuffle* uses this classified ad for African American leadership to demonstrate that the black public sphere that Martin Luther King utilized is not the same one on which his children and grandchildren can rely. As Gunnar’s humorous ad reveals—through the mentioning of film rights to his life, the TV *Guide* synopsis of the film, and write-ups of him in *Time* magazine and *U.S. News and World Report*—we must realize that in a post-civil rights era black popular culture and mainstream media intersect with and influence the black public sphere. To keep assuming that the black public sphere is the same now as it was more than forty years ago diminishes the possible strategies in the continuous struggle for equality.

By placing Gunnar’s classified ad at the very beginning of the novel, Beatty compels his readers to consistently contrast past black political agendas with contemporary black politics and leaders throughout the remainder of the novel. Essentially relying on the play between critical memory and nostalgia, Beatty writes of black liberation strategies as remaining unchanged even as black people and the world around them have changed and evolved. The classified ad allows Beatty to deconstruct the investment in simple solutions to complex problems, be they monolithic notions of how to gain true liberation or a containment of the diversity of black experience. The fight for freedom is not as simple as taking out an ad to deliver oneself from subordinated status, but the ad comically comments upon the role of post-integration black politics, capitalism, and commerce in America. Will money truly get you out of this racism situation? Beatty symbolically implies that the initial quest for integration began as a struggle for greater human rights, but has now become an agenda for economic aspiration. The nostalgia of the civil rights era remembers the former, but erases the latter. Only critical memory can expose how later civil rights agendas came to be a more oppositional force that had to be contained by race men, as opposed to being promoted by black freedom-fighters.

African American history is filled with legacies of race men and race leaders. However, what separates one from the other has its basis in motive, agency, and audience. As St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton argued in *Black Metropolis*: “People try to draw a line between ‘sincere Race Leaders’ and all those Race Men clamoring everything for the race, just for the glory of being known” (394). In their subtle distinction between race leaders and race men, Drake and Cayton attempt to set up a historical dynamic where the challenge to racialized social formation does not have to be heroically masculinized; it is a dynamic in which individuals can critique who gets to speak for the race and why. In black America, race men have always been the choice for black communities invested in uplift. Since nation—in this case the black nation—is a macrocosm of family, leadership mantles reflect the position and status
of father in the Western model of family. Even as black women have certainly played vital roles in African American history and politics, it has been the race men who are projected as sincere race leaders interested in what is best for the black nation/family.

In a discussion of hegemonic black masculinities and the African American family, Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Sexual Politics* observes how the dearth of liberating gender possibilities disappears: “By using Black people’s ability to achieve White gender norms as a sign of racial progress, upward social class mobility is increasingly hitched to the wagon of helping Black men gain ‘strength’ within African American families and communities” (183). The race man in African American history showcases a group of people who are neither backwards nor reliant upon women to lead its attempts for liberation. Nostalgia leaves little room to critique such logic, but critical memory conveyed through satire can. Gunnar’s discussion of his qualifications for the job questions, then, the very existence of both race man and race leader: “I didn’t interview for the job. . . . I spoon-feed them grueled futility, unveil the oblivion that is black America’s existence and the hopelessness of the struggle. In return I receive fanatical avian obedience” (1). With this statement, Gunnar establishes himself as the anti-race man. He does not clamor for glory or voluntarily offer his services. He is reluctantly drafted for the position.

In many narratives by race men and leaders, the opposite happens. In black America, the race-man pendulum has existed on two separate planes. In the beginning, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century race men (and women) pursued social equality from mostly religious platforms. Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs, David Walker, and Martin R. Delany, among many others, found a place in the public sphere to argue for the emancipation of black people. During the early twentieth century, the dominant race men, Booker T. Washington, Carter G. Woodson, and W. E. B. Du Bois, approached civil rights from an intellectual and material foundation. The late twentieth century saw race men such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X reach their communities from religious and spiritual foundations of Christianity and Islam. Minor figures, such as Huey Newton, George Jackson, and others, engaged their black communities through material concerns and intellectual ideas. All of these are in keeping with Baker’s designation of the black public sphere. As the anti-race man, Gunnar’s public sphere is less traditional.

Gunnar, poet of the best-selling book *Watermelon*, has “the ear of academics, the street denizens, and political cabalists.” His universal appeal to various groups positions him as “leader of the Black Community” because “there is no better job fit.” Although Gunnar’s self-description “as a poet, and thus expert in the ways of soulful coercion” makes him “eminently qualified” for the race man position, his mocking of that position is telling (1). He expresses a reluctance and disbelief in the messiah approach to liberation. He does not pursue and relish the position, but a needy black population thrusts it upon him.

Gunnar, as the anti-race man, is a revision of race men that bridges the spiritual, intellectual, bodily, and the material ethos of past. By making the race man of the twenty-first century a poet and basketball player, Beatty demonstrates the importance of culture and the imagination to the black public sphere and liberation. As Arjun Appadurai has argued:

The image, the imagined, the imaginary—these are all terms which direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice. No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people) and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices . . . a form of negotiation between sites of agency (‘individuals’) and globally defined fields of possibility. (274)
Although creativity was a vital part of the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, it has always been seen as a side gig in the black political machine. Even as black cultural nationalism of the 1960s reiterated the need for art to be useful and revolutionary, and despite the popularity and appeal of Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, and Nikki Giovanni, to name but a few, the serious work was always seen as left to the race men (not poets). Thus with Gunnar, Beatty resists the legacy and importance of the traditional race man who would make culture and imagination a secondary focus. Because cultural artifacts can be produced and legitimated by the masses, and don't depend upon some form of institutional or communal support as political rhetoric does, freedom and liberation directed by culture and imagination can produce multiple and diverse voices as opposed to those of individual authority figures.

Through Gunnar’s recounting of the Kaufman lineage of masculinity and of his calling as a poet, Beatty exposes how cultural producers have been marginalized on the borders of political uprisings and movements despite the fact that they have played major roles. In relating to his elementary school classmates the story of his family tree, a young Gunnar reveals the intersections between politics and culture. Being the “number-one son of . . . an ass-kissing sell-out house Negro who was indeed a seventh son,” Gunnar has knowledge about the “surreal escapades and ‘I’s a-comin’ watermelon chicanery” of his forefathers whose “resolute deeds and Uncle Tom exploits were passed down” (5). His paternal heritage reads like a spook who sat by the door, a who’s who of black history and culture: Euripides, a lucky-charm relative who sold out Crispus Attucks; Swen, a slave who allows himself to be recaptured into slavery so that he can write a great plantation ballet; Franz, a servant who becomes a seeing-eye companion for his blind master; Wolfgang, the stencil artist who paints the segregation signs for Jim Crow and helps white businessmen distort aspects of black culture unto the creation of Amos and Andy; Ludwig, who Tin-Pan-Alleys black culture through the 1960s; Solveig, the Newsweek correspondent who disses Coretta Scott King; and Gunnar’s father Rolf, a Brown v. Board of Education baby who goes to work for the LAPD as a sketch artist. In divulging the Kaufman lineage, Gunnar presents a tradition of black masculinity that uses cultural imagination as a form of negotiation between sites of agency. Each Kaufman male has made attempts to be a part of the United States by accessing specific masculinities validated by white supremacy through cultural forms. Gunnar’s quest, then, is to determine whether he will make the same negotiations that his forefathers made.

Mama’s Baby

When Gunnar proclaims that “in the quest for equality, black folks have tried everything. We’ve begged, revolted, entertained, intermarried, and are still treated like shit” (3), he uses the race man’s public space to suggest mass suicide as a solution to black folks’ problems. In this he speaks a scary kind of half-truth, because black people have not tried everything. As Toni Cade Bambara attests in her essay “On the Issue of Roles,” every measure invested in preserving masculine privilege has been tried: “The usual notions of sexual differentiation in [gender] roles is an obstacle to political consciousness, that the way those terms are generally defined and acted upon in this part of the world is a hindrance to full development. And that is a shame, for a revolutionary must be capable of, above all, total self-autonomy” (101). The early focus on Gunnar’s family life in the novel seeks to tackle Collins’s new racism. Beatty uses satire to deconstruct the absurd privileging of masculinity in revolutionary thought and action.
The White Boy Shuffle does not write about its subject matter in a vacuum without examining the importance of black women’s subjectivity in past and contemporary constructions and performances of black masculinity. A brief study into the historical nature of Gunnar’s name reveals Beatty’s decision to take on the influence of black women on masculinity, as opposed to the rhetoric about black women and black masculinity. Gunnar’s first name is a fitting nod to a pivotal figure in American race studies and discourse, the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal. His book, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy, links white supremacy to the poverty of many black Americans during the mid-twentieth century. Yet it was also Myrdal’s writing of black culture and family as “a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture” (928) that needed to conform to the standards of white family and culture in America which caused controversy and became the foundation for the controversial “The Negro Family: The Case For National Action,” also known as The Moynihan Report. This document argued the black family’s “matriarchal structure” as the root for its civil and economic inequalities. It is both texts’ argument that the act of naming slaves after their owners created a handicap for black families because it ensured the erasure of a black paternal heritage deemed necessary for the construction of a functional family and a normal black masculinity in the Western vein. Historically, the institution of slavery dictated that the mother determined the status of the son, but in The White Boy Shuffle Beatty revises that determination to the father, as, according to Myrdal, access to the father’s name and law would mean a functional heteronormative family resembling the white family. However, Beatty reveals the fictions of sociological assessments of the black family and black men in his revision.

Once readers contextualize Gunnar’s name with the introduction to the Kaufman legacy, as well as with Gunnar’s note on the absence of women in the ancestral stories (“Every once in a while a woman’s name tangentially floated from my mother’s lips as a footnote to some fool’s parable, only to dissipate with the vegetable steam” [23]), it becomes further evident that Beatty is inverting the old black saying “mama’s baby, papa’s maybe” into “mama’s maybe, papa’s baby” to critique Myrdal, and symbolically make fun of white social scientists’ influence on black political agendas. Hortense Spillers dissects the historical results of what happens to black communities when black women become a footnote and vegetable steam as the Kaufman women do:

> The African-American woman, the mother, the daughter, becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated—the law of the mother—only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from mimetic view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the father’s name, the father’s law. (278; original emphasis)

In this sense, the fiction of white supremacy can be maintained as long as the black mother is misrepresented or erased. Ironically, in the representation of Gunnar’s family, the whiting out of so-called matriarchal structure in his black family has created conformists and conventionality rather than revolutionaries. Thus, when the Kaufman male legacy conforms to Western notions of gender to claim what is rightfully (and whitefully) so, the rights of a man, including complete liberation from racial oppression, become hindered.

Gunnar’s patrilineal stories also allow Beatty to mock the position of the race man in African American history. Like the savior Jesus Christ, the race man in African American history and culture is as close to an immaculate conception as one might come. The race man springs forth, either influenced by his inability to save or rescue the women in his life and/or community from dangerous perils, or he has some line of male counsel that has helped him to the path out of thin air with a
mission to uplift the black nation. Unlike emasculated or degenerate black males, mama has nothing to do with this fine example of moral black masculinity. As Hazel Carby explains in *Race Men*, one need only examine the narratives of the most quintessential race men to see how these heroic burdens have played out over time in black America:

Du Bois clearly believed that women (and, I will argue, certain men whom he regarded as having compromised their masculinity) could become the mediators through which the nation-state oppressed black men. . . . This “hereditary weight” is the burden imposed on black men by history. . . . Under this weight of betrayal by black women, most black men stumbled, fell, and failed to come into the full flowering of black manhood. (33)

Burdened and betrayed by black women, the race man has to protect and dominate. However, the anti-race man seeks total self-autonomy, and can only be a revolutionary through an androgynous lineage. With *The White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty shows Gunnar as a leader who comes of age influenced not by rhetoric about the black woman, but by his black mother's love and parenting. Gunnar as the anti-race man does not intend to protect black womanhood, primarily because he recognizes that black womanhood or black women have already devised their own means of self-protection. Gunnar's mother, unlike Gunnar himself, who knows and can claim his father's name if he so desires, has an uncertain and ambivalent lineage. She reflects the historical loss of heritage embedded in slave experience and the black woman's subordinated gendered position in marriage—the loss of name in both cases. Gunnar's mother is an orphan from Brooklyn who does not know her parents and has never seen her birth certificate. She mirrors the traditional antebellum slave heroine who does not know her birth date or place. Nevertheless, she manages to eliminate the uncertainty of her bloodline by embracing the Kaufman lineage and playing a role in the alteration of it. As Gunnar notes of his known familial history,

Kaufman lore plays out like an autogamous self-pollinating men's club. There are no comely Kaufman superwomen. No poetic heroines caped in Kinte cloth stretching welfare checks from here to the moon. No nubile black women who could set a wayward Negro straight with a snap of the head and a stinging “Nigger, puh-leeze.” The women who allied themselves with the Kaufman legacy are invisible. (23)

By pressing the issue of strength in black females and its absence in a male Kaufman line, Beatty confronts the controversial findings of Myrdal's report that stigmatized black women as emasculating matriarchs. Additionally, the Kaufman legacy might be said to resemble that of most women during the race man's (their husband's or comrade's) life. Though they may one day upon the death of the race man come to be made visible in the legacy of those lives, their secondary position is clear. To disrupt the law of the father's name that renders women invisible, Beatty challenges the assumed insignificance of a woman's name in acts of constructing black masculinity and black families.

In this measure, Gunnar's narrative rewrites the Kaufman legacy in a manner especially cognizant of black mothering. Gunnar cannot tell how he becomes the black leader without acknowledging his mother. As a young man, Gunnar described himself as “the funny, cool black guy. In Santa Monica, like most predominantly white sanctuaries from urban blight, 'cool black guy' is a versatile identifier used to distinguish the harmless black male from the Caucasian juvenile” (27). A far cry from the race man of black uplift lore, Gunnar is the post-civil rights beneficiary of integration into the suburbs of coastal California. His connection to blackness is not rural, Southern, urban, or Northern. He will not access authentic blackness in the South, new blackness by migrating north, or amend it by returning south or going back to Africa. His migratory identity is post-civil rights: he has to migrate
from the suburbs to the 'hood. Gunnar's mother directs him toward his path as a race leader. When Gunnar and his sisters admit to their mother that they'd rather not go to an all-black camp, his mother steps in:

She asked why and we answered in three-part sibling harmony, “Because they're different from us.” The way Mom arched her left eyebrow at us, we knew immediately we were in for a change. Sunday I was hitching a U-Haul trailer to the back of the Volvo, and under cover of darkness we left halcyon Santa Monica for parts unknown. (37)

Hoping to infuse some cultural pride into her kids, mother Kaufman moves her family to inner-city West Los Angeles. Though this experience could be read as the search for an authentic black self, Beatty uses the geography in the text to explore more fully the quiet knowledge that West-Coast blackness is a narrative that has yet to be fully explored in the African American grain. With his attention to Asian and Latin communities' proximities and cultural influences, Beatty takes on “blackness.” After moving her family, mother Kaufman's work does not stop there. Gunnar discloses his mother's efforts at encouraging them to get to know their new surroundings: “Mom was not the kind of matriarch to let her brood hide up under her skirt, clutching her knees. . .” (49). The future anti-race man's acknowledgement of his mother is important because it reevaluates the son raised by a single-mother logic, the importance of the father figure, and the notion of the nuclear family. All of these ideals, though not in the way that sociologists and economists have theorized, will influence this particular race leader and his future constructions of black masculinity.

In returning to the question of black female subjectivity and its influence on black masculinity, Gunnar's narrative takes a notable turn from that of race-man autobiographies in that he reveals his mother's role and her rescuing him from blacklessness, among other oppressions, in his very construction of masculinity from the onset. Further, Gunnar's lack of commentary about the divorce of his parents, his coded reference to molestation by his father, and his general ambivalence towards a Kaufman lineage enable a rewriting of the fictitious role of the emasculating matriarch in black oppression. In a middle-class family that has dedicated itself to preserving the father's name, the dysfunctional matriarch cannot explain why the Kaufmans are no longer married. Beatty uses the unanswered questions in the narrative, along with Gunnar's revelations, to make readers aware of the mother's presence without its domination. Gunnar cannot become the future race leader without the very thing his mother gives to him in their move out of suburban, multicultural Santa Monica: race and culture. Gunnar's disclosure of his mother's influence rewrites familial and mainstream black masculinity so that he can create a new self. Hortense Spillers notes how empowering the historical influence of black female subjectivity can be on black male communities:

Therefore, the female, in this order of things, breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an “illegitimacy.” Because of this peculiar American denial, the black American male embodies the only American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself. . . . It is the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of “yes” to the “female” within. (278; original emphasis)

By having Gunnar write his mother into his Kaufman legacy, so that his son might one day know the importance of her subjectivity to his own, Beatty allows Gunnar and his descendants to say yes to the female within. With his father's name and his mother's break into the imagination, an androgynous lineage forms, and a revolutionary race leader is born.
New Black Men: Cool Pose versus Punk Life

Current performances of black masculinity are caught up in the white-boy shuffle, otherwise known as hegemonic masculinities. Patricia Hill Collins relates how hegemony in gender patterns impedes black freedom:

It becomes hegemonic in that the vast majority of the population accepts ideas about gender complementarity that privilege the masculinity of propertied, heterosexual White men as natural, normal, and beyond reproach. In this fashion, elite White men control the very definitions of masculinity, and they use these standards to evaluate their own masculine identities and those of all other men, including African American men. (186)

Gunnar’s nonconfrontational style is a stance most black men take throughout their lives so that they might carry the banner of traditional tropes of black masculinity. Some social sciences propose that black men have managed to create tools to assist them in fashioning a black masculinity that both compliments and resists white men’s definitions of masculinity. In Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America, Richard Majors and Janet M. Billson reflect some of Collins’s concerns by stating that despite the history of racism and discrimination, black men have “defined manhood in terms familiar to white men: breadwinner, provider, procreator, protector” (1). Majors and Billson examine elements of black male culture and compare them to these traditional discourses of masculinity:

Some African-American males have channeled their creative energies into the construction of a symbolic universe. Denied access to mainstream avenues of success, they have created their own voice. Unique patterns of speech, walk, and demeanor express the cool pose. This strategic style allows the black male to tip society’s imbalanced scales in his favor. Coolness means poise under pressure and the ability to maintain detachment, even during tense encounters. (2)

In cool-posing, the goal is also to mask or resist any acts of penetration: physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. In returning to the earlier reference of Yoshiko’s wandering hand straying towards Gunnar’s prostrate, the symbolic act of penetration poses an imminent threat to the cool pose. It is the cool-posing strategy that Beatty challenges with his satirical discourse of being punked for life. Beatty recognizes the culture of cool-posing and the sociological discourse surrounding it; rather than buying into it, he satirizes the inconsistency of the strategy by positioning Gunnar as the “cool black guy” in white suburban Santa Monica, and as the whitest Negro in urban Hillside where his “inability to walk the walk or talk the talk led to a series of almost daily drubbings” (52). Beatty uses Gunnar’s fluctuating cool to question the symbolic universe of a black masculinity that simply reacts to white racism and white masculinity without considering the affects of such detachment to the individual and his community. Despite attempts to refashion this already unstable masculinity, the negative psychological impact of such strategies persist since hegemonic masculinities remain the basis for the revision. Beatty’s consideration of being punked for life devises a strategy of masculinity in which white hegemonic masculinities are not foundational.

Throughout Beatty’s text, there will be moments when Gunnar and his friends are presented with strategies of manhood that rely on cool-posing or being punked for life. In some thinking on gender and sexuality, dismissing the established norms of masculinity as set up by white institutions is to be punked for life. As Mark Anthony Neal writes in his consideration of black masculinities of alternative gender narratives: “How willing am I to undermine my status within traditional black masculinity by claiming politics that most ‘Strong Black Men’ would consider the politics of a ‘punk-ass’?” (29-30) To Beatty’s credit, he allows his fiction to showcase how strategies should be adopted based on the situation rather than on a misguided dependency on a fixed symbolic universe. Beatty challenges racialized
social assumptions about black masculinity. He provides Gunnar and his readers with the counter-narrative of being punked for life. What exactly does it mean to be punked for life? The OED references the “punk” principally as being: “a passive male homosexual, a catamite; a tramp’s young companion or ‘gunsel’” (”punk” defs. 2a, 2b); the punk is also “a person of no account, a worthless fellow; a young hooligan or petty criminal” (“punk” def. 3a) Throughout black masculine culture, and within these parameters, the word has a weight that fluctuates. Punked for life, then, is a state of being that assigns an individual to outsider and outlaw status: it is a degradation of maleness as measured against the norms of white masculinity. But Beatty’s satire, even as it uses punking as derogation, also makes positive the notion of being punked for life.

Beatty fashions Gunnar’s Bildungsroman with an eye toward deconstructing the race man, but also as a way to dismantle configurations of hypersexual black masculinity. Because hypermasculinity and sexuality have been said to be a defense mechanism for the emasculation of the black male, Beatty’s satirical presentation of Gunnar’s relationships with nonfamilial women in the text help construct an ambiguous sexuality for Gunnar that transgresses binary models of sexuality and explodes the white-boy shuffle of hegemonic masculinities. Nowhere is this more hilariously displayed than in the comic setup of Gunnar as a sexually uninterested “Archiekins” to the Hillside bullies, Fas’ Betty and Vamp a Nigger on the Regular Veronica (51).

The White Boy Shuffle takes as its material for black satire the golden era of the white teen love triangle. Gunnar is akin to the clumsy white Archie who, though not really interested in dating during these preteen years, is deeply entrenched in the crisis of black masculinity at an early age. Fas’ Betty and Vamp a Nigger Veronica are the exact opposites of sweet Betty or snobbish Veronica in the comic strip. When Gunnar gets an invitation from Fas’ Betty to participate in a childhood game of “hide-and-go-get-it,” his participation in the theater of black hypermasculinity is explored. In answer to Betty’s invitation, Gunnar’s response defies the cool-posing script of urban black males: “But I’m the only boy. That’s not fair, two against one” (80). He soon panics and attempts to flee the scene. Gunnar has thus apparently not yet assumed the mythos of black male sexual power and potency. Further, by using Archie to parallel Gunnar’s life, Beatty cleverly exploits what really underwrites the premise of hypersexualized black men: white masculinity. If Beatty were seeking to simply make Gunnar a man, the protest would be unnecessary, as Gunnar would submit to sex with no complaints. But Gunnar represents an inversion of the values in the Archie comics, as well as a rejection of hypersexual black masculinity. Throughout the long history of the Archie series, Beatty and Veronica have waited and allowed Archie to choose between them. He maintains control over his masculinity as well as over their femininity, as the strip adheres to white, middle-class theories of both gender and sexuality. Archie is made masculine by women’s desire for him, but he will become a man when he can select the proper mate to begin his family. Betty and Veronica become the binaries of white womanhood: bad girl versus good girl.

In African American communities unconcerned with adhering to heteronormative models of gender and sexuality, these simple gender dynamics can be replaced with alternative models that could refashion black hypermasculinity and dismiss the relevancy of good girl versus bad girl for women. Because the basic foundation for hypersexual black male and female representations depends upon an opposing asexual or neutered point of reference, Beatty must deconstruct or destroy normative models as opposed to reverse the hierarchies that exist within them. Such is the case with the presentation of the triangle formed between Gunnar, Fas’ Betty, and Vamp A Nigger Veronica. Beatty writes the young women as aggressive women who may be violent and criminal. Though Gunnar protests their early actions, he does participate in sex with them and admits his own pleasant response to the experience: “I walked
home basking in the warmth of newly tumble-dried clothes, singing ‘Oh Happy Day’ at the top of my lungs” (83). Sardonically, Fas’ Betty and Vamp A Nigger Veronica redefine the boy’s loss of virginity in black vernacular: Gunnar is “deboned” and “bitch-dipped” (83). Beatty makes it clear that white control over self-definition and sexuality has little power in the ‘hood. Fas’ Betty and Vamp A Nigger Veronica contribute to Gunnar’s masculinity, as opposed to emasculating him, while maintaining control over their femininity and sexuality. By creating non-heteronormative moments such as this ménage à trois with gangstresses, Beatty can develop a black male character that is neither asexual nor hypersexual. Gunnar quite literally becomes a punk in that he is the companion or gunsel of two young women who might be deemed “tramps,” and thus, he is on his way to becoming punked for life.

Gunnar’s developing masculinity and his budding relationship with the Hillside gang, Gun Totin’ Hooligans, also allows Beatty to revise and embrace black punks into alternative performers meant to deconstruct hegemonic masculinities. Immediately after Gunnar’s passage into manhood with Fas’ Betty and Vamp a Nigger Veronica, Gunnar meets Juan Julio, also known as Psycho Loco—leader of the Gun Totin’ Hooligans. They bond over Gunnar’s sexually inspired rendition of “Oh Happy Day,” and Juan Julio/Psycho Loco blurs the divisions between the spirit and the flesh, queer and straight: “His mother used to tell me how Juan Julio’s voice was the best missionary religion ever had. On Sundays he’d sing with the choir and his baritone would make the babies stop crying and the deacons start” (83). Later Gunnar reveals how the Juan Julio who sings in the House of God is very different from Psycho Loco, leader of the Hillside street gang, the Gun Totin’ Hooligans: “I’d heard how as a strong-arm man-child for a loan shark, when he tired of a debtor’s sob story on why that week’s payments were late, he’d heat his crucifix with a nickel-plated lighter and press the makeshift branding iron into the victim’s cheek and scream, “Now you really have a cross to bear, motherfucker!” (84) As a criminal, Psycho Loco certainly represents one definition of punked for life, but Beatty also complicates the criminal aspect of Psycho Loco by giving him a spiritual dimension.

Beatty’s depictions of Psycho Loco and The Gun Totin’ Hooligans are masterful in their critique of black hypermasculinity of the 1990s. During this decade, films such as Boyz n the Hood, Menace II Society, Juice, New Jack City, Jason’s Lyric, Straight Out of Brooklyn, and Above the Rim, to name but a few, survey urban black masculinity in both liberating and problematic ways. Like most of the male protagonists of those films, Gunnar finds himself having to navigate between violent masculinities and his own definition of self: “There were the bands of bored Bedouins who roamed Hillside, silently testing my resolve by lifting their T-shirts, revealing a bellybutton and a handgun tucked in their waistband. . . . In response I’d lift my T-shirt and flash my weapons: a paperback copy of Audre Lorde or Sterling Brown and a checkerboard set of abdominal muscles. ‘You niggers ain’t hard—calculus is hard’ ” (96). To be a hard nigger encompasses not only the brandishing of weapons, but the acceptance of a certain physical and emotional posing and impenetrability meant to stave off the painful and suffocating oppressiveness of racism and poverty. With Gunnar’s words, Beatty juxtaposes physical cool-posing with the intellectual and cultural braggadocio of one who might be considered a punk.
In Todd Boyd's *Am I Black Enough for You?*, a cultural critique of black popular culture and masculinity, Boyd captures the predicament of the fictional Gunnar and many urban black men at the end of the twentieth century: “Caught between the historical representation of Black masculinity and the contemporary version, I couldn't quite decide which was more authentic. Now I know” (xv). Much like Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle*, but published a year after Beatty’s creative work, Boyd focuses on the positive elements in the black masculine culture of Los Angeles by examining black popular culture through the concerns of black male youth: rap music, geographical spaces of black maleness in Los Angeles, a cinema of nihilism in 'hood films, and basketball as an embodiment of blackness. In ways that are dramatically positive and overwhelmingly optimistic, Boyd presents an unheralded class view of “the” black male popular culture. However, Boyd basically conceives of black male culture as predisposed to binary heterosexual representations caught between Uncle Tom ( spineless, sexless, impotent) and John/Jack Johnson (super performer in athletics, sex, and labor). In addition to those types, Cornel West’s “Race and Sexuality” adds a third, Bigger Thomas (the mean and predatory craver of white women), also known as the Othello complex. Were these tropes of black masculinity the only possible configurations, we would be left to wonder how to deal with a black male culture that produces NWA, Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, and Eazy-E, and then changes them into Negroes with Assets. Paul Beatty offers fictional, but no less real, possibilities for black masculinities that can change the joke and slip the yoke.

Rather than rely on traditional precepts, or assume that one authentic representation must be used over another, Gunnar works toward a new self. As Toni Cade Bambara suggests of revolutionary struggles, “It perhaps takes less heart to pick up the gun than to face the task of creating a new identity, a new self, perhaps an androgynous self, via commitment to struggle” (103). Beatty’s fictional work and characters move outside the spaces of nihilism. Gunnar’s weapon of choice is poetry, and the poets he cites work in opposition to historical and contemporary representations of black masculinity. Each poet provides Gunnar with critical foundations meant to challenge hierarchical gender practices. In this measure, Beatty’s dedication to blurring the boundaries of false categories and classification of masculinities ensure that Gunnar and his friends do not perform the cookie-cutter roles that have already been written for black men.

A number of novels and films featuring black men offer few critiques of troubling masculinities, maintain stereotypes, and continue to contribute to the anxiety over what Phillip Brian Harper sees as the dominant culture’s conception of “a perennial ‘crisis’ of black masculinity whose imagined solution is a proper affirmation of black male authority” (x). Opposed to falling victim to the perennial crisis, Beatty comically represents it in Gunnar’s education process: “It was mandatory for every male student at Phillis Wheatley High to attend the monthly ‘Young Black and Latino Men: Endangered Species’ assembly” (112). The notion of men of color as an endangered species adequately reflects the rhetoric of crisis. During this monthly assembly, guest speakers of local businessmen, community activists, former or obscure athletes, and ex-cons would offer motivational speeches. The assembly showcases how miseducation of black people includes internalized racism and racial subordination, as well as miseducation about gender and sexuality. Proper affirmation of black male authority should no longer be offered as the only viable solution to the race problem.

When Pumpkin, a fellow gang member, is shot and killed in a corner-store robbery on Halloween, Gunnar finds himself in an unexpected emotional space with Psycho Loco, one in which they can both express the sadness and pain brought on by the detriments of hegemonic masculinities via gang culture. Rather than go home and be alone, Psycho Loco transgresses the boundaries of hypermasculinity in Gunnar’s bathroom:
He must’ve forgotten to close the door, I thought, and walked to the bathroom. Psyco \[sic\] Loco was standing naked, looking at himself in the mirror. Eye to eye with his demons and crying so hard he had tears on his knees. I pulled back the shower curtain and handed him a bar of soap. He stepped into the mist . . . and said “Don’t go nowhere, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, trying not to embarrass either of us by acknowledging Psycho Loco’s pain. (97; original emphasis)

This scene has an emotional linkage to the previous instance in which Gunnar says, “You niggers ain’t hard.” Gunnar and Psycho Loco’s friendship occurs because both can move beyond cool-posing with each other. Early in their friendship, Gunnar and Psycho Loco bond over spirituals and Psycho Loco’s appreciation of Gunnar’s poetry, and later over the loss of a friend. While Psycho Loco may be providing Gunnar with street knowledge and credibility, as well as heteronormative capital, Gunnar teaches him the complexities of alternative masculinities—intelligence, feeling, and cultural awareness.2

But it is Beatty’s parody of hip hop culture and hypermasculinity as represented by the Gun Totin’ Hooligans that moves readers from an assessment of the black male crisis and proper affirmation of black male authority to a queering of black masculinity directly influenced by both historical and contemporary notions of punk(ing). Beatty’s creation of the Gun Totin’ Hooligans as a former dance troupe turned into a nonviolent neighborhood gang is the perfect vehicle for these considerations. With the Gun Totin’ Hooligans, Beatty deploys punk-life, rather than the thug-life of rap icon Tupac Shakur, as a way to dismiss proper male authority that would devalue or rank one black masculinity over another. Beatty turns to the traditional definitions of punk to construct the Gun Totin’ Hooligans and their relationship with Gunnar. At any point in the story, Gunnar and Gun Totin’ Hooligans morph into some definition of punk. Before the homo-thug or DL brother became a popular figure of the imagination, Beatty arranges for the thugs of the Hillside gang to take on less-celebrated models of black masculinity. One might even say his critique against the traditional discourses associated with punking realigns the value system of both hypermasculinity and punking within the margins of those spaces in The White Boy Shuffle.

In avenging the death of Pumpkin, the Gun Totin’ Hooligans seek to retaliate against another gang, the Ghost Town Black Shadows, in a manner cognizant of transgressing gender: “Two days after Pumpkin’s funeral I was in Psycho Loco’s living room helping him choose an appropriate eye shadow to go with his molé brown skin and the tight blue chiffon dress he was wearing. We’d narrowed it down to the chartreuse cinnamon and the peccadillo plum. Admiring his lusty visage in his compact, Psycho Loco flapped his false eyelashes, blew himself a kiss, and went with the peccadillo” (106). The point that Beatty makes with his representation of Psycho Loco and the Gun Totin’ Hooligans in drag is clear: were black masculinity as transgressive as it professes to be, then moving outside the confines of heteronormativity to something other than hegemonic masculinities would not require cool-posing or defenses of one’s heterosexuality. These bad men don’t have to apologize for being in drag, or offer prefatory statements about their heteronormativity. Beatty’s attention to drag is reminiscent of RuPaul Charles’s confirmation of the importance of performance and drag in variant possibilities for masculinity:

As I write this I am not wearing a wig, I am not wearing a pair of high heels, and I have not lost my mind. I’m looking gorgeous in Timberlands, oversize baggy pants worn down low, and a homeboy flannel shirt. Just as I have explored different female looks—black hooker, gender fuck, and supermodel—now I am exploring different drag male looks—J. Crew preppy, sexy homeboy, and executive realness. (xi; original emphasis)

While historically most gangs limit the exploration of various masculinities, the Gun Totin’ Hooligans allow their young black males, because they are the most dysfunctional, to simultaneously explore different masculinities, such as hypermasculinity and queer masculinity. However, the Gun Totin’ Hooligans are not the only way that Beatty’s novel contemplates gender anarchy. He moves from queering black masculinity with Gun Totin’ Hooligans to dismissing proper affirmation of black masculinity with his characterization of Gunnar’s best friend, Nick Scoby.
Nick Scoby: Improvise Gender or Die Trying

While some contemporary hip hop culture has offered a number of cool-posing aficionados such as Curtis “50 Cent” Jackson, whose “Get Rich Or Die Trying” is about capitalism and cool-posing to the end, literary hip hop culture like The White Boy Shuffle offers an alternative via its secondary characters. Like Psycho Loco, Nick Scoby teaches Gunnar important lessons. The two meet in drama class, a venue that stands outside black heteronormative masculinity. It is a fitting meeting space, however, since, like Gunnar’s friendship with Psycho Loco, it underscores the place of performativity in the lives of black men. The early exchanges between Gunnar and Scoby showcase the limitations of performing monolithic black masculinity. Before Gunnar realizes his “innate” ability as a basketball player, Scoby challenges Gunnar to rethink the boundaries of his previously suburban, black male body when he insists upon including Gunnar in a playground game of basketball:

“Nick, I ain’t no ballplayer.”
“I know you ain’t. I seen you looking at those sonnets, drool dripping out your mouth. You either a poet or a homosexual.”
“Oh shit, that’s fucked up. Why can’t I be both?”
“True. Well, you can be a ballplayer too. If you want to hang with me, you’re gonna have to play ball.” (72-73)

Gunnar and Nick both challenge each other with respect to accepting stereotypes, one-upping each other in the exchange. Gunnar challenges the division Nick makes between artistic identity and sexual identity. However, Nick’s statement subtly tips the scales of gender revolution. It imagines a space where a black man can be a poet, a homosexual, and a basketball player without being represented as emasculated. It also does not assert that a choice has to be made to be one or the other if their friendship/black brotherhood is to continue. In this dialogue, Beatty presents a representation of black masculinity that is not in defense of itself.

Scoby, originally from the West Side of Chicago, is described as “a thuggish boy who sat in the back of the class, ears sealed in a pair of top-of-the-line Sennheiser stereo headphones and each of his twiggish limbs parked in a chair of its own. Rocking back and forth in his seat and seemingly oblivious to Ms. Cantrell and life’s lesson plan, Nicholas Scoby seemed like an autistic hoodlum. . . . Much to the dismay of those who paid attention to the burned-out teachers, Scoby was a straight-A student” (66). Scoby is important to Beatty’s narrative because, like the Gun Totin’ Hooligans, his presence suggests the need for more flexible definitions of black masculinity. Instead of dressing in drag, Scoby commits suicide and writes a suicide poem as a way to suggest that black men bravely step into the void and create new genders.

Superficially, Scoby represents authentic black masculinity of both the past and present. He is poor and urban, adopts the cool pose, has a reputation as a phenomenal basketball player, and listens to jazz. Beatty’s creation of Scoby as a jazzman is key to how we must read the author’s fictional rejection of authentic black masculinity, for Scoby is not a jazzman. He does not play, but he loves to listen to the music. While discussing jazz with Gunnar and after hearing Gunnar rattle off some popular white jazz musicians, Scoby proclaims, “Fool, that ain’t jazz any more than Al Jolson and Pat Boone is soul” (67). It seems initially as if Scoby’s more authentic blackness will make him the foil to Gunnar’s Tin Pan Alley lineage. Beatty further plays with Scoby’s authentic blackness and Gunnar’s lack of blackness when he has Gunnar introduce himself with his full name, and Scoby perceptively replies, “You dark asfuck for someone with Teutonic blood” (67). Scoby’s acknowledgment of the Swedish etymology of Gunnar’s name reveals him to be as intelligent and well read as Gunnar on things black and nonblack, though Beatty’s novel extends well beyond basic conversations of authentic and essentialized blackness.
Cornel West insists that “black men have different self-images and strategies of acquiring power in the patriarchal structures of white America and black communities. . . . For most young black men, power is acquired by stylizing their bodies over space and time in such a way that their bodies reflect their uniqueness and provoke fear in others” (Race Matters 88-89). However, Beatty shows the problem with West’s argument through Scoby’s body. Scoby, like many black males, can acquire power by stylizing his body, but he can also lose that power if his body and style are ever commodified or restrained. Whereas Gunnar describes himself as corporeally broke (52), Scoby carries the burden of embodying all that is supposed to be black masculinity. After playing a few games of basketball with Scoby, Gunnar explains why Scoby remains so highly regarded on the basketball court: “He never missed. I mean never” (95). Scoby’s perfection of black masculinity is presented via his perfection on the basketball court, the stereotypical domain of black males. As the text reveals, sometimes that can be too much of a burden.

In opposition to Kaufman men Euripides, Swen or Wolfgang, Scoby resents attempts to commodify the unorthodox genius of his black body: “Man, I’m tired of these fanatics rubbing on me. . . . People have buttons with my face on ’em. . . . I’m not no fucking Tiki doll, no fucking icon” (118). Scoby’s aversion to the way people have idolized him for what he can do with a basketball stems from concerns for his subjectivity and identity. Society’s value of his body conflicts with what he sees as his value and self-worth. In a compelling discussion of dreams that recurs throughout the text, Scoby pays a price for representing the real and reiterates an earlier point that Beatty’s text challenges. In a discussion of dreams meant to invoke race man Martin Luther King, Scoby says,

Yeah, I have a dream. Dream and a half, really. You ever hear of a Brocken specter. . . . Your own glory. As you look down at your shadow, there’s a corona around your head. Even if you’re standing next to a gang of niggers looking at they own Brocken specters, you can only see the glory around the shadow of your head. (69; original emphasis)

These references to dreams are directed toward Gunnar Kaufman, potential race leader, and they deliberately invoke all of the race men who tragically or violently died in pursuit of race-man dreams. As Hazel Carby has argued about W. E. B. Du Bois and others, race men adhere to a belief that “that black people and black cultural forms did not exist in opposition to national ideals, but, on the contrary, embodied those ideals” (45). But as Scoby divulges, something personal is always exchanged for communal objectives.

Scoby’s dream of a Brocken specter reveals the limitations of being a race man and an authentic black man. Once one accepts that role, then possibilities for a more radical self and society are threatened. Scoby’s dream to be able to see himself, his own individual glory even in the presence of a group however much like him, means something to him. It means that a person can still have some part of himself that does not have to be obstructed, deformed, or crowded by a group’s societal or nationalistic aims. This is why Scoby’s interest in jazz is more about destroying essential and authentic notions of race and gender rather than perpetuating them. Scoby’s interest in jazz is Ellisonian: “For true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group” (Ellison 234). Scoby’s Brocken specter is a visual metaphor for the sonic purpose of jazz.

As a student of true jazz, Scoby understands the value and lessons of improvisation that create the art form. However, because he does not play an instrument, he cannot improvise as a jazz musician can, and due to his gift of never missing he cannot improvise with his body as other athletes can. In each case, commodification signals the death of artistry and improvisation. Beatty’s critique on the commodification of black masculine bodies and culture occurs with the connection between basketball, jazz, and Nick Scoby. Like jazz, basketball presents unlimited ways for black men to improvise stylistically on the court, be it via athletic moves or appearance. Basketball culturally represents what jazz was to black male culture of the early
twentieth century. However, for Scoby, basketball does not hold the potential for improvisation of identity and art because it has been so commodified by racial discourse and capitalism.

Gunnar recognizes these issues at the Nike basketball camp, a camp that demonstrates the way white universities and shoe companies profit from erasing individual identity to create hegemonic masculinities or robots and workers who will labor to make Nike and the universities even richer. As Gunnar notes of the camp coaches’ interest in Scoby, “The coaches are asking about you too. How tall are you? What’s your quickness-to-speed ratio? Shit like that. As you can see, they really want to get to know you as a person” (144). In a contemporary, urbane version of the antebellum slave market, the Nike camp filters out and strips away everything but the athletic ability of the black male body so as to leave room for no other identity other than that of ballplayer.

Although Scoby does not attend the Nike camp with Gunnar, they are later recruited to attend and play basketball for Boston University. Neither Gunnar nor Scoby find the Northeast any less restrictive in its ideas and classification of black men. Caught between white constructions of black masculinity and African America’s monolithic versions of the same, Scoby turns to jazz again and again. He soon proclaims his fanatical attention to the music of Sarah Vaughan and Chikamatsu’s play: “Sarah’s not one of those tragic niggers white folks like so much. . . . I know what it feels like to live in a world where you can’t live your dreams. I’d rather die too. . . . They fuck up your dream. They fuck up your dream” (194). Scoby’s dream has already been mentioned in relation to the conversation about the Brocken specter: to realize one’s identity in a group without losing the communality of the group.

Throughout the novel, Beatty explores the Rodney King verdict and L.A. riots, the importance of hip hop culture, the potential threat of imprisonment to black bodies, the influence of Eastern culture on black male culture, and the culture of death and mourning surrounding young black males as a way to prepare readers to view Scoby’s suicide outside the designs of Western tragic modes.

In a suicide note to Gunnar, Scoby writes of his decision: “Homes, there’s a cloud bank floating this way. Dude, I can see the halo around my head” (207). Scoby realizes his dream in death because he could not do so in life. Scoby’s suicide invokes Huey Newton’s use of revolutionary suicide for the Black Panthers. Beatty’s authorial decision to have Scoby commit suicide is meant to reflect Scoby’s conscious belief that

Revolutionary suicide . . . means . . . we have such a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible . . . because the revolutionary must always be prepared to face death, and hope because it symbolizes a resolute determination to bring about change. Above all, it demands that the revolutionary see his death and his life as one piece. (Newton 3-6)

Scoby’s act refuses to separate life from death, and it offers him the improvisation he could never get on the court—change. Although Beatty’s satirical depiction of revolutionary suicide through the death poem is meant to be humorous, it is also a metaphorical solution to the commodification of black male bodies. Gunnar does not have to commit suicide to avoid this commodification because he finds a way to improvise, but other black men are not as fortunate.

When readers reflect upon the death poem that closes out Beatty’s novel, it becomes evident that Scoby’s suicide should be read outside of Western tropes that regard the act as tragic and immoral. The suicide poem penned by Gunnar’s father, Rolf Kauffman, returns readers back to the initial implications of Scoby’s dreams for a new subjectivity and identity: “Like the good Reverend King / I too have a dream,’ / but when I wake up / I forget it and / realize I’m running late for work” (225). The irony of Rolf’s statement is that it confronts the nostalgia and romanticization of black life in post-integration eras. Pursuit of the American dream is not necessarily the pursuit of freedom and equality. The first is very often a distraction from obtaining the latter. Scoby’s suicide, and Rolf’s, allow an improvisation on
identity as an individual and within groups (African Americans and black men) in ways that could not happen in basketball or police work.

In the same way that Charles Johnson writes of slaves jumping from ships in *Middle Passage*, or Toni Morrison writes of Sethe killing Beloved, Beatty’s writing of Scoby’s death and the solution of suicide demands that black men resist the spiritual and emotional death caused by commodification (hegemonizing masculinities) and choose life by creating a revolutionary self that may be androgynous, even if the invention of such a self would be viewed as suicidal in a society based on the Father’s law. In Scoby’s case, life is not simply living and breathing. It is the autonomous process of deciding to be free from the ideological and physical tyranny of others. In the end, Beatty’s satire implores African Americans to resist accepting hegemonic masculinities and be willing to improvise gender and sexuality to supplant oppressive regimes of white supremacy.

### Notes

1. Rosa Parks’s suing of Outkast for the duo’s song that uses her name in its hip hop anthem meant to symbolize their own musical rebellion, and Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton’s call to boycott the film *Barbershop* for its satirical commentary on civil rights leaders are but two contemporary examples.

2. Psycho Loco arranges for Gunnar to marry a mail-order Asian bride, Yoshiko. The arranged-marriage side-plot again allows Beatty to critique the dialogues of masculinity tied into the role of men as providers, protectors, and procreators. It is a critique of the institution of marriage, and the role the institution has played in cementing detrimental ideas of gender. Beatty lessens the political incorrectness of the arranged marriage and Gunnar’s role in it by having Psycho Loco, not Gunnar, order Yoshiko. Psycho Loco also challenges the expected power dynamic within such a marriage by having Yoshiko continuously punk Gunnar. Much like the interactions with Betty and Veronica, who attend the wedding and befriend Yoshiko, Beatty uses these satirical relationships to offer Gunnar a masculinity that does not depend upon white hegemonic masculinities.

### Works Cited


