Melissa Kwan

Reversing Archival Footage: Analyzing Civil Rights Humor in *The Sellout*

America holds certain images of the civil rights movement in its collective consciousness. Rosa Parks, defiantly refusing to relinquish her seat on the bus. The Little Rock Nine, pioneering high school integration following Brown v. Board of Education amidst violent protests. We revere these images and memorialize them in our history textbooks, viewing them as symbols of progress and heroism in our ongoing struggle with race. Thus, the racial shenanigans and role-reversals featured in Paul Beatty's satirical novel *The Sellout* may seem like a blasphemous attack on the images we treasure in our American canon. The narrator is a slaveowner and a segregationist — and black. Beatty's descriptions of reverse-segregation also include pointed parodies of civil rights moments. Instead of Rosa Parks, we have Hominy, a black man who longs to give up his seat to a white person. Instead of the Rock Nine, we have the Dickens Five, a squadron of white students eager to force its way into the all-minority Chaff Middle School. On first read, these blatant reversals might seem like cheap attempts at unsophisticated racial humor. One might say they're funny simply because they're so absurd. What might we possibly gain from laughing at them?

Jonathan Miller's theory of humor offers a framework with which we might begin to answer this question. He characterizes humor as a subversion of categories, a temporary respite from reality that forces us to re-examine the rules we impose on ourselves and the roles they play in our lives (Miller 16). By momentarily lifting the constraints that govern our daily lives, humor forces us to confront the lenses with which we interpret the world — if only for a moment. Miller refers to this brief romp in categories as "carnival time" (Miller 16): inherently transient, a break rather than a new status quo. The purpose of humor, he argues, is not to eliminate the rules,

but to re-evaluate why they exist. Laughter catalyzes reflection, ensuring that "we are not so much the slaves of the rules of life as the voluntary survivors of them" (Miller 16). Counterintuitively, humor is not so much a dismissal of significance as it is a vehicle for contemplation.

By taking America and flipping the stereotypes, Beatty forces us to challenge racial categories we thoughtlessly take for granted. His civil rights parodies strike us as disrespectful precisely because we treat the movement with such reverence. In fact, our tendency to idealize civil rights heroes causes us to forget the ways in which their progress fell short. This "look how far we've come" mindset may be comforting, but it is naïve and ultimately counterproductive. Interpreted through Miller's theory of humor, Beatty's racial category subversions force us to reexamine how our idealized narrative of the civil rights movement masks how underlying racial problems persist in the present.

At first glance, Beatty's invocations of civil rights watershed moments might seem like cheap digs at humor. Take his satire of Rosa Parks, a figure who he parodies with a bumbling volunteer slave in the form of Hominy Jenkins. Hominy, a black man in voluntary enslavement, desires nothing other than "racism" for his birthday (Beatty 128). To grant this wish, the narrator contrives a reverse-Rosa Parks situation in which his slave must give up his seat for a white woman (Beatty 128). Hominy justifies his actions by arguing that "that seat … was her birthright, and his gesture was a tribute, a long-overdue payment to the gods of white superiority" (Beatty 131). Hominy's eagerness to adopt the language of racist America is confusing at best and dangerous at worst. Beatty's treatment of educational segregation seems equally problematic. In his description of the "Dickens Five," he trivializes the struggles of the Little Rock Nine: Although the Dickens Five "braced themselves for the pillory of rocks and

bottles as they ran the gauntlet and into history," they found themselves being asked for "autographs" and for "dates for the junior prom" (Beatty 252). These parodies seem to minimize the concerns of those who dedicated their lives to a historic movement, needlessly provoking racial tensions in an already tenuous world.

In fact, the characters in the novel express exactly these concerns. Marpessa chastises the narrator for being a "race pervert," expressing the narrative of progressiveness that we so frequently invoke when discussing race: "It's the god-damn twenty-first century, people have died so I could get this job, and I let your sick ass talk me into driving a segregated bus" (Beatty 130). It is easy to sympathize with her perspective — do those who sacrificed so much for our society really deserve to be mocked? When read through this lens, Beatty's satire might seem like a needlessly offensive campaign for cheap laughs. Foy Cheshire echoes this sentiment, calling the narrator's segregated school system a "racist joke that mocks the hardworking people of this and all communities by placing a carrot on a stick and holding it up in front of old horses too tired to run" (Beatty 255). He has a point. Are we, as a society, not weary enough already? With the weight of history upon us, perhaps the last thing we need is an insensitive joke.

Miller's theory of humor helps us reframe what appears to be a cheap attempt at humor as a thoughtful subversion of categories. Humor, in Miller's eyes, advances our society by forcing us to examine the constraints we place on ourselves in daily life. He cites the traditions of Christmas as prime examples of beneficial category subversion: for example, "masters serve and servants sit at table" (Miller 16). Without these occasional subversions, we allow ourselves to become complacent in our existing structures. When we lapse into "automatic pilot" (Miller 16) and adopt a mindless routine, we lose the critical consciousness that allows us to evaluate what we're doing in the first place. Beatty's satire is thus a holiday from conventional wisdom about

racial attitudes in America, forcing us to confront our own attitudes towards the civil rights movement. We note, however, that this holiday is just that: a holiday. Beatty is by no means advocating for the permanent return of segregation or the delegitimization of civil rights heroes. He is, however, encouraging us to question what goes into our racial "rules of thumb" in the first place.

As a rule of thumb, we believe that the civil rights movement pitted black activists against white oppressors. We assume that blacks were excluded from white institutions, whites resisted integration with blacks, and blacks rallied to fight for equality. Beatty's satire subverts those assumptions. In the bus scene, Hominy reverses our concept of the bus protest by actively renouncing his rights. Beatty juxtaposes the noble Rosa Parks — the "Mother of the Modern-Day Civil Rights Movement" — with the laughable Hominy, the "Grandfather of the post-racial civil rights movement known as 'The Standstill'" (Beatty 227). The contrast of "Movement" with "Standstill" is a tongue-in-cheek jab at our tendency to congratulate ourselves on just how far we've come. In the Dickens Five scene, Beatty swaps "white flight" for the "Klu Klux Influx," with the white parents suddenly demanding the forced integration that "many of their parents had so vehemently protested against a generation prior" (Beatty 252). By switching the typical roles of white and black, Beatty embodies Miller's concept of turning the "world upside-down" (Miller 16).

This race subversion ultimately forces us to reevaluate our assumption that the civil rights movement fundamentally altered race relations in America. We would expect that the reinstallation of segregation would be an extreme deviation from reality. Ironically, however, these measures do little to change the status quo. Dickens is already so segregated that the narrator needed to hire a white woman for Hominy to encounter a singular white person to whom

to give up his seat (Beatty 133). It's so segregated that the all-white "Wheaton Academy Charter Magnet School of the Arts, Science, Humanities, Business, Fashion, and Everything Else" (Beatty 192) has no students. Segregation may seem like a complete overhaul of progressive policies, but in Dickens, it has barely any real effects. As the ineffectual instances of segregation in Dickens demonstrate, the state of race in America has not fundamentally transformed as a result of the civil rights movement. The signs may change, formalizing the illusion that society has become more progressive. But signs only have as much power as their underlying sentiment. As the narrator's father asserts, "You can't force integration, boy. The people who want to integrate will integrate" (Beatty 167). Thus, the category subversion reveals the sinister ways that segregation manifests itself under the veil of progressivism.

This outward progressivism perpetuates our self-congratulatory narrative of the civil rights movement, allowing our racial blind spots to remain undetected. As the narrator suggests, America holds the "scratchy archival footage of the civil rights struggle" in a "sacred canister" of its collective memory (Beatty 18). In history books and popular cultural alike, the civil rights movement is a cosmic struggle of good against evil, depicted in stark black-and-white film with historical reverence. We must pay homage to the "incessant Black History Month loop of barking dogs, gushing fire hoses, and carbuncles oozing blood" because, as the narrator quips, "[h]uman carnage is always filmed and remembered in the highest definition" (Beatty 18). Beatty's overblown descriptions suggest that the way we memorialize the movement is often more performative than productive. If our tributes ultimately fail to achieve tangible progress, it doesn't matter whether we view them in the "highest definition." While we can't help but idolize the heroes of the civil rights movement, this idolization causes us to forget the ways in which their efforts fell short. We would be naïve to think that segregation ended with Rosa Parks or the

Little Rock Nine: even if outward displays have changed, implicit versions of segregation have risen to take their place. Moreover, our post-civil-rights-era glorification has gone so far as to corrupt our memory of history itself. For example, while we typically view the Little Rock Nine as the symbolic victory for integration, the narrator's father reveals in his "what happened after" game that the governor chose to close every school in the vicinity rather than comply with the new integration laws (Beatty 257). As the narrator's father quips, "If n- wanted to learn, then no one was going to learn. And speaking of learning, notice they don't teach you that part in school" (Beatty 257). Our idealized narratives occlude our understanding of the movement's shortcomings, hindering our ability to recognize the ways civil rights issues manifest themselves in the present.

Beatty's disruption of categories thus represents more than an insensitive grab for laughs. By mocking what is sacred in our history, he challenges our perceived norms of the civil rights movement and forces us to grapple with the oversimplification of our collective American memory. What emerges is a stark portrait of the racial problems that continue to plague our country despite changes in legislation. "Whites Only" signs may be relics of the past, but the underlying structures that enabled those signs are still very much in place. While we should celebrate and memorialize our civil rights heroes, we should be careful not to let congratulations slip into complacency. The best memorial is not a documentary or a museum; it is progress itself.

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Works Cited

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