

An Analysis of Black Subjectivity in *The Sellout* from the Perspective of Cultural Identity

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Abstract: In 2016, Paul Beatty, an African American writer, made history as the first American author to win the prestigious Man Booker Prize for his fourth novel, *The Sellout*. With biting humor and satire, it tells the absurd story of Me trying to reinstate slavery and segregation in Dickens, leading to his trial in the United States Supreme Court. The novel reveals contemporary US racial discrimination, historical legacy, and social injustice. This paper, based on Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory, uses close-reading to analyze the manifestations, causes, and reconstruction of African-Americans' black subjectivity crisis in the novel from the perspective of their identity dilemma. It reveals the complexity of African-Americans' identity and self-worth quest and their cultural identity re-evaluation and construction in a multicultural context.

Keywords: *The Sellout*; cultural identity; black subjectivity; African-American

1. Introduction to Paul Beatty and *The Sellout*

Paul Beatty, born in 1962 in Los Angeles, is a renowned African American writer. He began his literary career with poetry, publishing two collections: *Big Bank Take Little Bank* and *Joker, Joker, Deuce*. After establishing himself in poetry, Beatty transitioned to fiction, where he has published four novels to date, including *The White Boy Shuffle*, *Tuff*, *Slumberland*, and *The Sellout*. His fourth novel, *The Sellout*, garnered significant acclaim, winning the Man Booker Prize in 2016. This achievement made Beatty the first American author to receive this prestigious award. Beatty's work is distinguished by its incisive exploration of American society, particularly focusing on racial issues and identity. His novels are characterized by the use of satire and black humor, which he employs to challenge social norms and political correctness.

The Sellout is set in Dickens, a run-down, crime-ridden ghetto community on the southern outskirts of Los Angeles, predominantly inhabited by African Americans and Chicanos. Over time, Dickens was gradually wiped off the map as gentrification took hold of the surrounding areas. The protagonist, "Me", is an African American who grew up in Dickens. The novel begins with Me sitting in the defendant's chair at the Supreme Court, charged with violating the Constitution and betraying the abolition of slavery and equal civil rights. Me recounts his experiences after the civil rights movement, including his crimes in 21st-century America. Raised by a father who was a controversial social psychologist conducting a series of mental experiments on him, Me suffered a double tragedy after his father was shot dead by a white police officer and Dickens was erased from the map. To restore Dickens, Me resorted to what can be described as "politically incorrect" measures. He made the elderly black man Hominy his slave, re-implemented racial segregation on the town's buses with white-only seats, and promoted the establishment of school policies that enforced segregation based on skin color.

2. Literature Review

Since its 2015 publication, Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* has gained much attention in the literary world and become crucial in race-related discussions. However, it lacks academic research in China.

A major research trend is analyzing *The Sellout* from racism and identity perspectives. John E. Davies, in his work, focuses on the protagonist's identity-defining attempts in a racially charged environment, analyzing the novel's exploration of blackness and the protagonist's self-discovery journey[1].

Another research topic is white supremacy. Mark Beeuwkes discusses how the novel redefines racism for white liberal audiences[2]. Steven Delmagori explores the novel's satire and criticism of white privilege [3].

Many studies also focus on the novel's use of irony. Suman Lamsal emphasizes how Beatty uses sardonic humor and irony to subvert cultural standards and racial stereotypes[4]. Zhang Li analyzes different types of irony in the novel from three aspects: rhetorical devices, structural characteristics, and historical dimensions [5]. Guo Xin asserts that the implementation and reception of cultural memory shaping deepen with the generation of ironic contexts, interpretive interactions, and confrontational practices [6].

Research on Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* has deepened understanding but overlooked cultural identity's impact on black

subjectivity. This paper aims to systematically investigate this aspect, offering valuable and innovative insights into the novel's exploration of black subjectivity through a cultural identity lens.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 The Origin and Development of Identity Theory

The term “identity” stems from Latin *identitas* and Old French *identite*, rooted in *idem* (identical). It encompasses both externally imposed social roles and internalized self-perception. George Herbert Mead's social behaviorism pioneered modern identity studies, positing that the “Self” emerges through interactions with the “Other.” Building on this, Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory identified adolescence as a critical phase for resolving “Identity vs. Role Confusion,” linking identity formation to lifelong psychological well-being.

Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social Identity Theory expanded this framework, emphasizing group membership as a key identity marker. Individuals categorize themselves into “in-groups” and “out-groups,” often fostering biases against outsiders.

Globalization has further complicated identity dynamics, shifting scholarship toward cultural hybridity and fluidity. Contemporary identities are now seen as multifaceted, evolving through cross-cultural exchanges. Stuart Hall's postcolonial insights highlight identity as a contested process shaped by historical, political, and cultural intersections, rejecting static or singular definitions. In this context, individuals continuously negotiate and reconstruct their identities amid overlapping cultural narratives, underscoring identity's dual role as both a social construct and a personal anchor.

3.2 Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity Theory

Cultural identity is a significant concept in postcolonial literary criticism theory. Stuart Hall, a notable contemporary cultural theorist, provides an interpretation of contemporary cultural identity, emphasizing that it is “far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past; they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power”[7].

Stuart Hall presents two modes of thinking about cultural identity. One is a stable, immutable collective identity shaped by shared history and symbols. The other includes diverse, fragmented factors alongside shared experiences, constantly changing and influencing identity. Cultural identity must address its uniqueness and variability, not just be confined to historical experiences. Cultural identity is a question of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’. It belongs to the past as much as it does to the future. It is not something that already exists, transcending time, place, history, and culture.

Moreover, Hall also emphasizes cultural identity's link to social power structures. At the race, class, and gender intersection, identities are built and rebuilt in discourse, media, and education. In modern capitalist societies, cultural identity often serves as a tool to resist oppression.

Black subjectivity encompasses the life experiences, consciousness, and self-awareness of black people, influenced by personal identity, history, culture, politics, and power structures. It stresses understanding these experiences from the black perspective, resisting simplification into racial stereotypes or external definitions. It also reflects black people's struggle for dignity, identity, and humanity within racist structures. As a complex dynamic process of self-assertion and cultural practices, black subjectivity is supported by Hall's cultural identity theory, whose emphasis on fluidity, historicity and power relations helps us better grasp how black communities shape and reshape their cultural identities in globalization.

4. The Crisis of Black Subjectivity in The Sellout

The novel is narrated from the first-person perspective of the black youth, Me, and tells the story of his growth in Dickens, his connection to the community, and a series of behaviors that are labeled as “criminal”. In Beatty's writing, the characters in the novel all exhibit, to varying degrees, a crisis of black subjectivity. On the one hand, the black characters face the dilemma of individual identity, having to contend not only with the stereotypes and discrimination imposed by the external society but also with an inner struggle to construct their own sense of self. On the other hand, the black community is not a unified whole; instead, there exists a fragmentation of identity within it.

4.1 The Dilemma of Individual Identity

4.1.1 Me's Self-Seeking Dilemma

In Me's growth, he was an experimental subject for his father's ideas, distorting his self-awareness from the start. His father's death from a stray bullet over police dissatisfaction made him realize his marginalized status as a black in a racially biased society. Me then devoted himself to college, seeking self-redemption and identity in knowledge. Yet, identity confusion remained. After graduation, returning to Dickens, he expected belonging but found his hometown erased from the map.

“I was my father’s child, a product of my environment, and nothing more. Dickens was me. And I was my father. Problem is, they both disappeared from my life, first my dad, and then my hometown, and suddenly I had no idea who I was” [8]. It seems that only by reconnecting with Dickens can he once again know who he is. Thus, in an attempt to reconstruct his self-awareness, Me resorted to extreme and absurd actions. However, these behaviors appeared out of place in the context of society. While they were a manifestation of Me’s intense desire for identity recognition, they failed to lead him to a clear sense of self and instead, further exacerbated his black subjectivity.

4.1.2 Hominy’s Identity Distortion

Hominy, the sole surviving actor from *Little Rascals* (1920s-1960s), was seen as a caricatured black figure by Dickens residents, symbolizing shame and a past of bondage. His childhood stardom was largely due to the racist era he lived in. After Dickens disappeared, without fans, his black subjectivity became distorted. He thought returning to a slave-like status was the only way to regain his sense of existence. Post-Dickens’ disappearance, he embraced the “slave” role as he did his *Little Rascals* performance. Also, Hominy blindly admired and catered to white culture. He mimicked their behaviors, language and lifestyles, adopted their etiquette, pursued material pleasures they valued, and tolerated their discriminatory remarks and actions to gain white society’s recognition.

His heart is filled with contradiction and struggle. On the one hand, he cannot change his black heritage, and on the other hand, he yearns for and strives to emulate white culture. This internal conflict leads him deeper into a sense of self-confusion.

4.2 The Fragmentation of Group Identity

4.2.1 The Disappearance of Dickens

“But the city of Dickens’ disappearance was no accident. It was part of a blatant conspiracy by the surrounding, increasingly affluent, two-car-garage communities to keep their property values up and blood pressures down” [8].

Dickens’ decline, caused by surrounding gentrification, reflects black subjectivity erosion. Once the black community’s core with historical memory and cultural heritage, its marginalization led to residents losing identity and belonging, with history blurred. Its disappearance also exposes deep societal issues like systemic oppression and inequality, causing the black community’s social status to drop and their culture and identity to risk erasure. This crisis is seen in the city’s physical loss and the denial of black history and culture’s importance.

4.2.2 The Identity Dilemma of Black Community

The internal division within the black community further exacerbates their identity crisis. Foy, on the surface, appears to be concerned with black culture and social issues, actively participating in community discussions and playing an important role in the *Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals*. He claims to fight for the rights of black people. However, he has benefited personally by stealing F. K. Me’s creative ideas and has never made any substantial contributions to the black community. His revision of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—justifying it as an effort to eliminate racial slurs—seems more driven by a desire to maintain a facade of political correctness than by a true commitment to addressing the complexities of black culture. In his quest for personal success and social stature, Foy appears more focused on earning recognition from the predominantly white society, while overlooking the genuine needs of the black community.

5. Causes of the Crisis of Black Subjectivity in *The Sellout*

The crisis of black subjectivity in *The Sellout* stems from the compounded effects of historical trauma, neo-racialism, and the clash with white cultural hegemony. These interconnected causes reveal how the legacy of slavery, systemic racism, and white supremacy continue to shape black identities in contemporary America.

5.1 Historical Trauma

Me’s upbringing reflects the intergenerational transmission of trauma from the history of slavery. F. K. Me’s thoughts and behavior are largely a response to and a rebellion against the historical trauma of slavery. He is acutely aware of the oppression and humiliation that black people have suffered throughout history, and he seeks to awaken black subjectivity and racial pride in his own way. The bizarre and distorted psychological experiments and education he imposes on Me stem from his deep concern for the fate of black people and his thorough reflection on the legacy of slavery. Father’s actions emphasize one central point: he wants Me to remember the racial history and recognize the racial reality.

5.2 Neo-racialism

The racism in America does not end with the abolition of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, but is replaced by a new form of racism: “This country isn’t quite as comfortable as it looks” [8]. and “the only tangible benefit to come out of the civil rights movement is that black people aren’t as afraid of dogs as they used to be” [8]. But it does not truly rescue them from

the dire circumstances of living as second-class citizens beneath white people. On Los Angeles buses, people avoid sitting next to them, using safety questions if they have to. New racism grows more covert, permeating society and impacting Black people's identity and subjectivity.

5.3 White Culture Shock

Despite Civil Rights Movement progress, white culture's impact remains entrenched in the US. White developers' role in erasing Dickens symbolizes mainstream white culture's influence. Black intellectuals like Foy, pressured by white culture, sought recognition via conformity. Hominy's admiration for white culture reflects individual struggles. Post-segregation-law abolition, the black community faced cultural shocks and identity crises. Whether through land expropriation, community disappearance, or seeking status by conforming to white culture, they've struggled against white cultural and economic oppression. This conflict has caused traditional cultural identity loss and deepened inner confusion.

6. Reconstruction of Black Subjectivity

In *The Sellout*, the process of reconstructing the community and reconfiguring cultural heritage deeply reveals the process of rebuilding black subjectivity. Me not only restored the physical presence of Dickens but also enhanced the sense of belonging and group identity among its residents. Furthermore, by re-examining the history of racial segregation, residents of the black community gradually come to realize that their cultural heritage and historical memory are essential foundations for constructing national identity.

6.1 Rebuilding Community

To reclaim Dickens, Me placed a directional sign for Dickens at the highway exit and sprayed paint along the town's boundary line. "Unsolicited, groups of truant teens and homeless would stand guard over the line,"[8]. and the police "often escorted me from their patrol cars. Checking my boundary for accuracy against old editions of *The Thomas Guide*" [8]. "Sometimes I'd chance across an elderly standing in the middle of the street, unable to cross the single white line. Puzzled looks on their faces from asking themselves why they felt so strongly about the Dickens side of the line"[8]. The community reconstruction of Dickens not only restored the physical presence of Dickens, but also helped reshape the black subjectivity of its residents, strengthening their sense of collective belonging.

6.2 Reconstructing Cultural Heritage

Given that both personal and group identities are constantly shaped by historical legacies, African Americans need to confront the suffering they have endured to understand and face the past, reclaiming their identity from history. Me's work on the racial segregation in Dickens reopened old wounds for black people. Through deep reflection on history, they gradually came to realize that even if Dickens were to disappear, it would not erase their cultural heritage. The memories and painful past are not a source of shame, but a necessary condition for constructing national identity.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper uses Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity to analyze Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*, offering a profound exploration of the crisis of black subjectivity in contemporary American society. The novel intricately portrays the complexities of black identity through the personal struggles of characters, such as Me's search for self and Hominy's distorted understanding of racial identity. In addition to these personal struggles, the symbolic disappearance of Dickens and the fragmentation of its community powerfully symbolize the disintegration of a unified black identity in the face of historical oppression and contemporary challenges.

The root of this black subjectivity crisis is deeply embedded in the historical trauma of slavery, the ongoing influence of neo-racism, and the overwhelming dominance of white cultural norms. African Americans have long been haunted by these intertwined legacies, which continue to shape their experience in a society that often marginalizes and misrepresents them.

Despite these challenges, Beatty conveys hope via the community's efforts to rebuild belonging. Me's revival of Dickens and ensuing collective reflection signify reclaiming black subjectivity, asserting agency and pride. *The Sellout* implies past scars can transform into self-discovery and collective identity-building forces.

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