The Sellout

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PAUL BEATTY

Paul Beatty was born in Los Angeles and moved to the East Coast for higher education, graduating with an MFA in creative writing from Brooklyn College and an MA in Psychology from Boston University. In 1990 he was named Grand Poetry Slam Champion at the Nuyorican Poets Café, which helped him to secure his first book deal. In addition to *The Sellout*, he is the author of *Tuff*, *Slumberland*, and *The White Boy Shuffle*, along with two collections of poetry. *The Sellout* was the first book by a non-Commonwealth author to win the Man Booker Prize after the rules for eligibility were amended; it also received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. Beatty lives in New York City with his wife, Althea Amrik Wasow, to whom *The Sellout* is dedicated.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The main event to which *The Sellout* is responding is the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Published at the end of Obama's two-term presidency, the novel critiques the idea that the election of a black president signals the end of racism and a triumph of racial progress. Other significant historical events include certain Supreme Court rulings such as *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), which ruled that the descendants of slaves did not count as US citizens, and *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which upheld the constitutional acceptability of segregation. The Civil Rights Movement is also of major importance in the novel, particularly events such as Rosa Parks' protest and the ensuing bus boycott, along with the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling (1954) that declared segregation unconstitutional, and the famous integration crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas, that followed. The "Little Rock Nine" were the first nine black students to enroll in a previously all-white high school, and they were initially blocked from entering by the governor of Arkansas himself.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Sellout is part of a long and illustrious tradition of African-American satire. This includes such works as *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) by Wallace Thurman, which was a Harlem Renaissance novel critiquing racial politics within the black community through dark humor. Like *The Sellout*, Claude McKay's controversial *Home to Harlem* (1928) depicts working-class black people and experiments with the representation of racial stereotypes. Perhaps the most important figure in the African-American satirical tradition is Ishmael Reed, whose most famous novel, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), lampoons religion, various black leaders, class tensions, and respectability politics. Reed's campus novel *Japanese By Spring* (1993) takes aim at academics in a manner reminiscent of *The Sellout*'s presentation of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals. Fran Ross' *Oreo* (1974) is another satirical novel that, like *The Sellout*, revolves around its central character's search for her own origins and identity.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Sellout*
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 2015
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Literature, 21st Century African-American Fiction
- **Genre:** Satire
- **Setting:** Dickens, a fictional city in Los Angeles
- **Climax:** When Foy Cheshire shoots the narrator
- **Antagonist:** Foy Cheshire
- **Point of View:** First person from the perspective of the unnamed narrator, who is the book's central character

EXTRA CREDIT

No Laughing Matter? In interviews, Beatty has mentioned that he is surprised that the book is so uniformly read as simply a satire, as much of the narrative is in fact realistic and serious.

Cynical Wisdom. Beatty has said that he was not surprised by the election of Donald Trump and that to him, "Trump's America has always existed."

PLOT SUMMARY

In the prologue, the narrator admits that, though this may be surprising to hear from a black man, he has never committed a crime. Nonetheless, he now finds himself handcuffed inside the Supreme Court after receiving a letter informing him that his case was selected to be heard. He spent the previous day walking around Washington, DC. Now, sitting in the Supreme Court, he smokes marijuana from a pipe, reasoning that the crime he has been charged with is so extreme that he will not be prosecuted for anything as minor as pot smoking. After inhaling, he exclaims: "Equal justice under the law!" The court session begins. The narrator's case is named "Me v. the United States of America."

In Chapter One, the narrator explains that his father was a social scientist and the founder of something he called

Liberation Psychology. They lived in **Dickens**, a "ghetto community" on the outskirts of Los Angeles. The narrator's father spent decades as interim dean of the Psychology department at West Riverside Community College, and would use the narrator in his experiments. The narrator's father was known as "the Nigger Whisperer" because of his habit of spending time on the streets, encouraging his down-on-their-luck neighbors to improve their lives.

When the narrator was young, he assumed he would lead an average life and stay in Dickens. However, both his father and Dickens disappear, leaving him with no idea who he is. The narrator's father is killed by the police. At first, the narrator feels sure that his father is going to leap back to life and explain his death as just another way of teaching his son about the plight of the black race. Growing up, the narrator did not know his mother; he tracks her down later in life and learns that her name is Laurel Lescook.

The narrator is granted a $2 million settlement after the wrongful death of his father at the hands of the police. He feels relieved on the day of his father's burial. He reflects again on the difficulties facing black people, and concludes: "fuck being black." Five years after the narrator's father's death, Dickens is quietly removed from the map of California. Signs announcing the town's existence are also removed. The narrator takes over his father's role of "Nigger Whisperer," however he isn't very good at it. He studies agricultural science at UC Riverside in the hope of turning his father's land into an ostrich farm.

When Dickens disappears, the narrator goes to help an elderly man named Hominy Jenkins. The narrator is also having an affair with a woman named Marpessa Delissa Dawson who he has known since childhood. Hominy tries to hang himself, but the narrator cuts him down. In gratitude for having saved his life, Hominy then starts calling the narrator "Massa" and acting like his slave. The narrator tries to free Hominy several times, but Hominy refuses to be freed. The narrator pays some white dominatrices to whip Hominy for over $200 an hour.

The narrator decides to put Dickens back on the map, and reinstalls a sign announcing the city's existence. He attends the next meeting of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals, a group his father founded. The "lead thinker," Foy Cheshire, tells the group that he rewrote *Huckleberry Finn*, excising the N-word in order to read it to his grandchildren. During roll call, Foy never uses the narrator's name but instead refers to him as "The Sellout." The narrator and Foy argue about the use of the N-word. The narrator thinks it's ridiculous that Foy and the other Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals want to ban the N-word, "disinvent the watermelon," and erase the existence of all other racist ideas and stereotypes. The narrator announces that he's "bringing back the city of Dickens," and everyone laughs at him. However, one member, King Cuz, takes the narrator aside and admits that he is in favor of the proposal. Foy accuses the narrator of trying to take over the Intellectuals and swears that he will not let the narrator "fuck my shit up."

The narrator decides to paint boundary lines around Dickens, and as soon as his neighbors realize what he is doing, they all start to help. A police officer teases the narrator, giving him a missing poster she's made for the city of Dickens. The narrator thanks her and sticks it up with a piece of chewing gum.

The narrator recalls the development of his romance with Marpessa. When he was 17 and she was 21 they rekindled their childhood friendship; she was his date to his high school prom. Marpessa has a child whose middle name is Bonbon, which was the narrator's childhood nickname. On April 2, Hominy's birthday, the narrator and Hominy are on a **public bus** that Marpessa is driving. Marpessa tells the narrator she dumped him because he is a "sellout." Later, they talk about why they first fell in love.

The narrator has signed Dickens up to Sister Cities Global, a matchmaking service for cities. Ms. Susan Silverman, a "City Match Consultant" for the company, calls the narrator and tells him she can't find Dickens on the map, but that this doesn't matter. She tells him that the three cities with which Dickens would be most compatible are Juárez, Chernobyl, and Kinshasa. The narrator says he accepts all three, but Ms. Silverman replies that all three cities rejected the match, including Kinshasa, because Dickens is "too black." Hominy is so disappointed that he attempts to sell himself, but nobody buys him. The narrator ends up choosing to match Dickens with three cities that also no longer exist, including Döllersheim, Austria, known as "the Lost City of White Male Privilege."

The narrator goes to Chaff Middle School for Career Day to teach a group of students at Chaff Middle School about agriculture, giving them a lesson on castration. He suggests to his friend Charisma, who is a teacher there, that the school be racially segregated. Charisma tells him to "go ahead," but adds that "there's too many Mexicans." Hominy loves the idea of re-segregating the school, hoping that it will encourage white people to move to Dickens.

The narrator once "foolishly" told his father that there was no racism in America. In response, the narrator's father took him on a trip to a random small town in Mississippi, where they linger by a gas station and engage in "reckless eyeballing." The narrator's father ends up having sex with a white woman he'd been ogling, and while he is gone the narrator is forced to pee outside after being turned away from the gas station bathroom.

The narrator goes to Marpessa's house; King Cuz is standing outside along with Marpessa's brother Stevie, who has just gotten out of prison and is also a feared gangster. The narrator puts up a sign announcing that The Wheaton Academy Charter Magnet School of the Arts, Science, Humanities, Business, Fashion, and Everything Else will soon be constructed in Dickens. The image the narrator attaches features only white students. When Foy sees the image, he declares it is the work

of "the forces of evil," adding: "This is war."

The narrator and Marpessa have sex, and the two of them begin going on dates again. However, Marpessa also makes the narrator perform stand-up comedy, telling him she will only have sex with him if he makes her laugh. Eventually he is successful. Marpessa tells him that Charisma believes the re-segregation policy is working out successfully.

At the next meeting of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals, Foy announces that he has a "secret weapon" to be used against the Wheaton Academy: a book called *Tom Soarer*, which he calls a WME: "Weapon of Mass Education." Foy inscribes a copy for the narrator, addressing it: "To the Sellout, Like father, like son…" The narrator realizes that even if Dickens were to be recognized as a city again, there would be no fanfare—barely anyone would even notice. Still, over the next few months the narrator enjoys re-segregating the city. He invents an event named "Whitey Week," a celebration of white contributions to the "world of leisure." He feels slightly nervous about segregating the hospital, as he knows this likely will lead outsiders to notice his work for the first time.

The narrator goes to watch Hominy perform at the LA Festival of Forbidden Cinema and Unabashedly Racist Animation. The audience finds Hominy, who is completely deadpan and sincere, hilarious. Later, the narrator asks himself who he is, and realizes that he is "as lost as I ever was." Nobody attends the next meeting of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals. Foy stages a protest outside the Wheaton Academy, singing We Shall Overcome and then shooting the white students' school bus with his gun. Foy points the gun at the narrator, then at his own temple, and then, finally, shoots the narrator. Hominy cries and attends to the narrator while he bleeds.

The narrator is picked up by an ambulance, and when asked who his lawyer is he points to an advertisement for Hampton Fiske. At the grand jury indictment, Judge Nguyen tells the narrator that his case will go the Supreme Court. The narrative then jumps forward again to the session of the narrator's Supreme Court case in Washington, DC. Fiske is wearing a bell-bottom jumpsuit, and gives a speech about what it means to be black. The narrator tries to smoke another joint, and he decides to leave the room while Fiske continues speaking. He sits on the steps of the Supreme Court and makes a pipe out of a soda can. He reflects that "Unmitigated Blackness" means accepting that "sometimes it's the nihilism that makes life worth living."

In the end, Foy is found innocent of attempted murder, but the narrator wins his civil suit against him. Hominy kisses the narrator and tells him that he's "quitting" slavery, and that they will discuss reparations the next day. Marpessa and the narrator watch TV, and during the weather report Dickens is included along with the other cities in the area. The narrator is so happy that he cries. On the anniversary of his father's death, he and Marpessa go to open-mike night at Dum Dum Donuts. The black man performing standup chases out a white couple, calling them "honkies" and telling them: "this is our thing." The narrator closes with a memory of the day "the black guy" is inaugurated as president. Foy drives around Dickens waving an American flag. When the narrator questions him about it, Foy tells him he'll "never understand," and the narrator agrees.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The narrator is the main character of the book. We never learn his first name, although we know that his last name is Mee, that his childhood nickname was "Bonbon," and that Foy Cheshire calls him "The Sellout." The narrator was born and raised in **Dickens** by a single father, a psychologist who performed strange and cruel experiments on his son. The narrator's mother was a woman named Laurel Lescook. When the narrator's father is killed by the police, the narrator struggles to live up to his legacy. His decision to rescue Hominy from hanging himself puts him in the reluctant position of being Hominy's slaveholder, a role he eventually comes to accept, even if he never embraces it, because it makes Hominy happy. The narrator is tried for slaveholding at the Supreme Court in a case called *Me v. the United States of America*; at the end of the novel, he is acquitted and returns to a "Welcome Home" party in Dickens that resembles one of the happy memories of his childhood. The narrator is often presented as meek, unassuming, and plagued by uncertainty. He asserts that he is "no one special" and is less egotistical than several of the characters, such as his father and Foy. However, the narrator comes into his own through his mission to bring back Dickens. His efforts to re-segregate the city and put it back on the map end up allowing him to win back his childhood sweetheart, Marpessa Dawson. He also has a strange ability to grow almost magically-delicious fruit, and his **satsumas** play a crucial role in winning over Marpessa as well. At the end of the novel, the narrator remains rather lost and mystified by the bizarre world around him, but is nonetheless happy to have brought back Dickens and been reunited with Marpessa.

The Narrator's Father – The narrator's father is a psychologist, the founder and only practitioner of a school of thought he calls "Liberation Psychology." He is dedicated to improving the lives of black people, and is known as "the Nigger Whisperer" in **Dickens** for the role he assumes in crisis intervention, talking to members of the community who are in a bad way. The narrator's father is shown to be a genuinely innovative researcher (though this often means treating his son, who is his guinea pig, in cruel and strange ways), but his work is never rewarded—he remains "Interim Dean" of the psychology department of West Riverside Community College for the narrator's entire life. This is no doubt in part because Foy Cheshire steals all his ideas. The narrator's father and Foy have a contentious relationship; they are the cofounders of the Dum

Dum Donut Intellectuals, and although Foy continually uses and betrays the narrator's father, the narrator's father remains loyal to Foy. Like his son, we never learn the narrator's father's first name. He is killed by the police during an altercation at an intersection in Dickens. He dies with his hand clenched into a fist, the gesture symbolizing Black Power.

Marpessa Delissa Dawson – Marpessa is the narrator's childhood sweetheart and on/off girlfriend. She grew up in **Dickens** and, like the narrator, enjoyed going to Hominy's house to watch *Little Rascals* movies as a child. She is three years older than the narrator, and when she begins to date boys as a teenager, the two lose touch. She marries MC Panache and has a baby when she is still young, which helps propel her into her career as a bus driver. The narrator involves Marpessa in his plan to give Hominy "racism" for his birthday by getting her to put up a sign on **her bus** asking passengers to give up their seats for white people. During this project and the ensuing re-segregation of Dickens, Marpessa decides to get back together with the narrator. The end of the novel sees them happily reunited.

Foy Cheshire – Foy Cheshire is an academic, "fading TV personality," and the cofounder of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals. He is extraordinarily vain, and although his work centers around black people, he seems more interested in becoming rich and famous than fighting for racial equality. Furthermore, he explicitly tries to avoid confronting stereotypes and racism directly—thus taking the opposite approach to the narrator and the narrator's father—by rewriting classic literature to remove any racial slurs or references to slavery. Foy stole the narrator's father's ideas and pretended they were his own, yet still called on the narrator's father when he had a mental health crisis years later. Foy dislikes the narrator, who he calls "the sellout." He believes that the narrator is on "the wrong side" because he embraces segregation, yet refuses to understand that the narrator is only doing this in an effort to bring back **Dickens**. At the end of the novel, Foy has another crisis and threatens to shoot himself, before ultimately shooting the narrator. He escapes prison time on grounds of insanity.

Hominy Jenkins – Hominy is an elderly man and extreme manifestation of the "Uncle Tom" figure (a reference to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). A former child actor and the last living member of the "Little Rascals," Hominy has spent his life playing racist caricatures. As a result, he appears to have internalized racism to the point that he attempts to lynch himself; when the narrator saves his live, Hominy voluntarily enslaves himself to him. Hominy is not a very good worker, and the part of slavery he seems to like is simply the subservience itself. He is enthusiastic about the narrator's plans to re-segregate **Dickens**. Although Hominy is an odd figure, he is beloved by the narrator, Marpessa, and other residents of Dickens. At the end of the novel, Hominy quits slavery and promises that he and the narrator will need to discuss reparations.

The Black Justice – The black Justice on the Supreme Court is never named, but only identified by his race. He is horrified by the idea of the narrator keeping a slave because he believes in progress and "the system." However, the Justice himself is hypocritical, because he has gained an enormous amount of money and power through presiding over a legal system that discriminates against black people.

Laurel Lescook – Laurel Lescook is the narrator's mother. He grew up not knowing her, and the only information he had about her was from an article in *Jet* magazine when she was named "Beauty of the Week." When he eventually tracks her down, she remembers the narrator's father as a creepy man who harassed her.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Hampton Fiske – Hampton is the narrator's lawyer. He dresses in 1970s attire and dedicates himself to representing the "Wretched of the Earth" in court. The narrator admires his skills as an attorney, and Hampton ends up winning the Supreme Court case *Me v. the United States of America*.

Kilo G – Kilo G was a real rapper who appears in the novel under fictional circumstances. The narrator credits him with starting the genre of gangster rap through reciting an altered version of an Alfred Lord Tennyson poem while high on crack and shooting bullets in the air.

Murray Flores – Murray Flores is a crisis negotiator and Police Captain who had been a friend of the narrator's father. He tells the narrator the truth about his father's death.

King Cuz – King Cuz, whose real name is Curtis Baxter, is a local gangster and member of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals. He is enthusiastic about the narrator's plan to re-segregate **Dickens**, and has a long-running goal of opening black Chinese restaurants.

Officer Mendez – Officer Mendez is a police officer in **Dickens**.

MC Panache – MC Panache is another local gangster and the husband of Marpessa. When Marpessa reveals that she has gotten back together with the narrator, Panache says he doesn't blame her, because he would have sex with the narrator himself if it meant getting to eat the narrator's delicious fruit.

Laura Jane – Laura Jane is a white actor and part-time submissive whom the narrator hires to dance with Hominy at his birthday party on **Marpessa's bus**. She and Marpessa get into an argument about race and class.

Susan Silverman – Susan Silverman is a matchmaker from Sister Cities Global.

Charisma Molina – Charisma is Marpessa's best friend and the assistant principal of Chaff Middle School. Although she is

Mexican-American herself, she is often heard muttering the phrase "Too many Mexicans." She helps the narrator to re-segregate **Dickens**, (correctly) assuming that it will improve her school.

Nestor Lopez – Nestor Lopez is a former childhood friend of the narrator's and another farmer in **Dickens**. Although he and the narrator were once close, they grew apart with age, "as black and Latin boys are wont to do."

Sheila Clark – Sheila Clark is a young black student at Chaff Middle School. She enthusiastically participates in the narrator's presentation on Career Day, volunteering to castrate a calf.

Clyde – Clyde is the black attendant at the gas station in Mississippi.

Rebecca – Rebecca is the white woman with a penchant for black men whom the narrator's father seduces in Mississipi.

Stevie Dawson – Stevie Dawson is Marpessa's brother. He is a gangster who was recently busted out of prison.

Fred Manne – Fred Manne is the courtroom illustrator during the narrator's Supreme Court hearing. The narrator thinks the illustration Fred does of him is "ugly."

Topsy / Butterfly Davis – A black sorority girl who attends the LA Festival of Forbidden Cinema and Unabashedly Racist Animation wearing blackface, and later goes home with Hominy and the narrator.

Judge Nguyen The judge at the narrator's trial, who predicts that the case is bound to go to the Supreme Court.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

PROGRESS VS. REGRESS

The Sellout challenges the idea that the story of the contemporary United States is one of racial progress in any straightforward sense. Many things that are supposedly confined to the past—including slavery, segregation, and blackface—appear in the novel, suggesting that these parts of history are not really over, but instead linger in different forms in the present. Examples of progress and regress (that is, going backwards) become completely mixed up, indicating that progress is never a direct linear phenomenon but rather is always accompanied by backlash, regress, and the return of pieces of history that were presumed long gone.

The novel begins and ends with the narrator's Supreme Court case, *Me vs. the United States of America*. The narrator places this case in a lineage that includes *Dred Scott v. Sanford* and *Plessy v. Ferguson*, two cases in which the Supreme Court ruled in favor of upholding racial discrimination. The story of the Civil Rights movement is often told through the series of Supreme Court cases that dismantled racial discrimination, but *Dred Scott* and *Plessy* remind us that not all cases led to progress. The narrator's own case, in which he—a black man—is charged for owning a black slave, takes this idea of regress to absurd, comic proportions. In the novel, then, the Supreme Court (and the U.S. government as a whole) is not posited as an instrument of justice, but rather an institution that has inhibited the path to progress at least as much as it has enabled it.

The character of Hominy Jenkins is one of the most important ways in which the novel explores the idea of regress. Hominy is an elderly man who tries to hang himself in a scene that bears a strong resemblance to lynching. Instead of being lynched by a mob, however, Hominy attempts to lynch *himself*, thereby introducing the fact that he is bizarrely determined to resurrect the worst elements of America's treatment of black people and inflict them on himself. This continues when, after the narrator saves Hominy's life, Hominy insists on enslaving himself to the narrator, who he begins calling "Massa." The idea that a black man would voluntarily lynch or enslave himself is obviously absurd, but the novel uses this comic absurdity to challenge understandings of racial progress. The trauma of America's historical treatment of black people lingers in the present, causing black characters like Hominy to behave in nonsensical, self-sabotaging ways.

Another major example of regress in the novel is the narrator's effort to re-segregate the city of **Dickens**. Following Dickens' removal from the map, the narrator decides that the only way to reinstate the city is to re-segregate it. This again challenges the idea that progress is linear. The narrator's desire to bring back Dickens is a desire to bring back something that already existed but was taken away—but it's an open question whether or not this counts as a desire for progress or regress. Hominy hopes that re-segregating the city will encourage white people to move to it. He points out that this is the opposite of "white flight," what he humorously calls "Ku Klux Influx." White flight might be considered part of a regress narrative, as it is a sign of increased racial segregation that leads to the economic depression of areas that white people have left. On the other hand, the "Ku Klux Influx" the narrator seeks is arguably just another name for gentrification, a very real phenomenon that also defies easy categorization as either progress or regress. Gentrification means increased economic prosperity, but it also involves the destruction of existing communities (usually those of people of color). As the narrator's actions show, it is also closely tied to racial re-segregation. The narrator's explicit efforts to re-segregate Dickens may initially appear absurd, but in fact these efforts reflect the impact of gentrification in real

life. This shows that the desire for economic prosperity and white "influx"—which some people would consider indicators of progress—are directly tied to the regression of racial equality.

The narrator's ambivalence about the inauguration of Barack Obama at the end of the novel encapsulates the text's relation to the tension between progress and regress. As Foy Cheshire celebrates Obama's inauguration with a sudden display of patriotism, the narrator looks on in bemusement. The implication of this is that unlike Foy, the narrator is not convinced that Obama's presidency is proof that America has progressed to a point of racial equity. When Foy tells the narrator that he'll "never understand" and the narrator agrees, the narrator appears to resign himself to the nonsensical combination of progress and regress that defines life in America. He refuses to join in with Foy's celebration of the apparent progress of Obama's election because he knows that pure progress is not possible.

BLACKNESS, ORIGINS, AND HOME

When the narrator is a child, his father teaches him to ask himself two questions: "Who am I? And how may I become myself?", pointing out that this is "basic person-centered therapeutics." The narrator returns to these questions throughout the novel, and they take on a number of different meanings. Following his father's death and the removal of **Dickens** from the map, the narrator is left feeling lost, without a sense of identity and home. The search for one's origins is a common literary trope and is particularly prevalent in African American writing, due to the severing of identity and ancestry that occurred during slavery. In *The Sellout*, this search takes a comic turn through the literal way the narrator's hometown is erased from the map. However, questions over the author's identity and the concept of blackness more broadly are nonetheless a serious dimension of this comic novel, but the book ultimately leaves them as questions rather than providing any real answers.

One of the central ways that the novel explores the narrator's origins and identity is through the figure of his father. As with the narrator, we never learn the father's first name, and their last name, "Mee," is comically generic due to its proximity to the word "Me" (and the narrator even adopts the spelling "Me" for his Supreme Court case *Me vs. the United States of America*). Both the narrator and his father are in this sense identity-less. Indeed, the withholding of their names could be understood as a reference to the practice of renaming enslaved people. During slavery, the enslaved were not allowed to use their original African names, and were usually given the surname of the slaveholder. This aimed to erase the identity of the enslaved, and prevented both the enslaved and their descendants from tracing their ancestry.

The narrator did not know his mother; the only information he has about her is from the biographical note under her "Beauty of the Week" feature in *Jet* magazine. This reverses the stereotype of the absent black father, though it preserves the idea that the narrator is prevented from knowing his origins through the absence of one parent. Any connection the narrator has to his origins through his father is in turn broken when his father is killed by the police. The narrator's father's death demonstrates how ongoing racism and police brutality damage black families, creating absences and leaving people feeling lost.

In general, "home" is a difficult concept in the novel. The narrator's hometown, Dickens, is a ghetto that is viewed with such disdain by the wider world that it is literally deleted from the map. This is a comically extreme example of the poor treatment to which majority-black communities in America are subjected. Dickens' erasure suggests that the hatred directed toward black ghettoes is so intense that many people would rather that they simply did not exist. Dickens' rejection is not limited to the borders of the United States, either. When the narrator attempts to match Dickens with a "sister city" from another country in order to put it back on the map, the matchmaking service indicates that it is most compatible with Juárez, Chernobyl, and Kinshasa, three cities known for being especially violent and undesirable places to live. However, even these cities do not want to associate with Dickens. Crucially, representatives from Kinshasa reject Dickens because it is "too black." The fact that an African city calls Dickens "too black" indicates that blackness is not simply a marker of African descent. Rather, blackness is produced by the diasporic spread of people of African descent and, in particular, by slavery. Indeed, the trauma and identity erasure caused by slavery can be understood as why Kinshasa refuses to associate itself with American blackness.

Just as the narrator feels lost and disconnected from his origins and home, so does he feel confused and ambivalent about what it means to be black. Toward the end of the novel, when he witnesses a black comedian kick a white couple out of his show by claiming: "This is our thing," the narrator wants to ask: "So what exactly is *our thing*?" Here the narrator appears to be jealous of the comedian's understanding of blackness. Rather than achieving any certainty about his own home, origins, and racial identity, the narrator ends the book even more lost about these questions than he starts it.

STEREOTYPES AND ABSURDITY

The Sellout satirically manipulates stereotypes to the point of absurdity in order to challenge our understandings of race, gender, sexuality, psychology, history, and other serious, complex topics. In doing so, it forces the reader to confront their own assumptions and indirectly critiques the norms of representation, particularly when it comes to issues of race and blackness. By exaggerating

stereotypes to the point of absurdity and scandal, *The Sellout* illuminates how nonsensical these stereotypes really are.

In the prologue, the narrator references a large variety of stereotypes about black men. For example, the novel opens with the narrator's claim that the reader will be surprised to learn that he has never participated in criminal activity. By explicitly presuming that the reader holds stereotyped views, the novel forces the reader to confront the expectations and stereotypes that they might have. Later in the prologue, when the narrator discusses having a large penis and smoking marijuana inside the Supreme Court, the reader is again forced to reflect on the stereotypes that circulate around black men. The beginning of the novel may be shocking and absurd, but it is also familiar, because these stereotypes are deeply ingrained in the public imagination. While we as readers might disavow that we believe in these stereotypes, they remain recognizable and therefore meaningful, showing the harmful effect that they carry despite their ridiculousness.

The abundance of stereotypes in the novel suggests that the best way to fight them is not necessarily to avoid them altogether. At one point, while looking at photos of Butterfly and her sorority sisters in various forms of blackface and other stereotypical racial costuming, the narrator observes that the problem with stereotypes isn't necessarily inherent to stereotypes themselves—it is that people constantly return to the same very small number of them. This flattens the reality of different races and cultures by limiting them to only a handful of stereotypes, rather than acknowledging the diversity within any particular group. Indeed, we could read *The Sellout* as emphasizing this diversity through its display of so many different stereotypes, many of which contradict one another. In this way, the novel directly confronts stereotypes, pushing them to their extremes while simultaneously undermining their power.

The danger of turning away from stereotypes completely is especially emphasized by Foy Cheshire's efforts to erase them. Foy rewrites children's books in order to make them less racist, and the narrator suggests that Foy and the other Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals would "disinvent the watermelon" if they could (referencing the stereotype that black people love watermelon). The narrator believes that attempting to ignore and erase stereotypes is not a viable solution to the problem of racism. After all, problems persist even if we pretend they do not exist.

Of course, irony, satire, and absurdity also play a crucial role here. By deploying stereotypes *satirically*, the novel is able to confront stereotypes while demonstrating how ridiculous they are. Indeed, exaggerating stereotypes to the point of absurdity is one way of investigating how stereotypes operate and what role they serve. If various types of prejudice and bigotry are inherently absurd at their core—since they involve flattening different groups into ridiculous parodies of their true humanity—then an especially powerful way to highlight this absurdity is through the medium of extreme satire, as Beatty employs throughout the book.

CRIMINALITY, AUTHORITY, AND THE LAW

The Sellout explores the tense relationship between black people and legal authority, highlighting the often-absurd nature of the American legal system. Due to its discriminatory treatment of black people, the law is shown to be an arbitrary, destructive force that has drifted far from its supposed goal of implementing justice. The novel also explores how, because of the criminalization of ordinary black people in America, the idea of criminality has taken on an inherent racial inflection. Yet just as the text emphasizes that racism will not be solved by ignoring racial stereotypes, it suggests that simply attempting to be respectable and law-abiding will similarly not defeat discrimination.

In the prologue, the narrator explores the impact of legal discrimination on the psychology of black people. He suggests that "the only time black people don't feel guilty is when we've actually done something wrong, because that relieves us of the cognitive dissonance of being black and innocent, and in a way the prospect of going to jail becomes a relief." Although there is an edge of irony and humor to this statement, the overall point is actually serious. Because simply existing as a black person is so often treated as a criminal act, black people are left with a profound sense of "cognitive dissonance" wherein they are made to feel guilty and paranoid even when they have done nothing wrong. While it may be an exaggeration to say that going to jail is a relief, it is in fact plausible that, for some people, this is actually true. The legal system targets black people in such a way that—particularly for those without resources and opportunities—jail can sometimes seem inescapable. The seeming inevitability of being sent to prison thus means that, when it actually happens, it can indeed be something of a "relief."

The novel features many references to ways in which black people's existence has been criminalized in America. For example, the narrator's father takes him to Mississippi to participate in "reckless eyeballing" in order to prove that racism still exists. "Reckless eyeballing" refers to when black men look at white women in an apparently desirous manner—a simple and innocent act that has in many cases been punishable by death. The word "reckless" indicates that something as ordinary as looking at another person becomes a charged and dangerous act for black men.

The example of reckless eyeballing also shows how black people must navigate the dual threats of a discriminatory criminal justice system and the vigilante acts of racist individuals. Although lynching is sometimes posited as a thing

of the past, *The Sellout* is haunted by the ongoing threat of lynching and other forms of violence against black people. Indeed, there is a connection drawn between vigilante acts and the unjust, inhumane treatment of black people by the police, most notably the shooting of the narrator's father. While not a lynching in the traditional sense, the father's death could be considered a form of lynching insofar as it was an act of brutality inflicted on him simply because he was black. The lack of accountability and responsibility associated with the police in the book suggests that there is no meaningful difference between police officers and random racist members of the public in this sense.

Aware of the extent to which black people's mere existence is treated as criminal, the narrator at times chooses to embrace criminal activity. Perhaps the most comic and absurd example of this is when he chooses to smoke marijuana inside the Supreme Court, reasoning that the more serious crime he is charged with (holding a slave) will mean that nobody cares about something as minor as pot smoking. In a sense, the narrator's decision to smoke marijuana also suggests that there is no point in taking great effort to avoid engaging in criminal activity when one will be treated as a criminal regardless. Although the scene in which he smokes marijuana is comic, it is serious in its rejection of respectability and conformity to the law as solutions to the mistreatment of black people by legal authority.

GENDER, SEX, AND HYPERSEXUALIZATION

Alongside exploring racial stereotypes, *The Sellout* also confronts stereotypes relating to race and gender. In particular, it explores the hypersexualization imposed on black people—meaning the racist stereotype that black people are aggressively or excessively sexual—and the way this affects their experience of their own sexuality. As a black man, the narrator is perceived as sexually aggressive by the outside world. While the only woman the narrator has sex with in the novel is Marpessa, his childhood sweetheart, he does at times appear to have internalized stereotypes about his own hypersexuality and sexual aggressiveness. At other times, his behavior directly contradicts these assertions, for example when he calls himself "frigid." Overall, the novel subtly critiques both the hypersexualization of black people and the sexual aggression often associated with masculinity.

In parts of the novel, the narrator acknowledges and even appears to embrace sexual stereotypes about black men. The prologue is filled with phallic imagery, and in the first paragraph the narrator refers to "my gigantic penis." Elsewhere, he notes that in **Dickens**, "penis envy doesn't exist because sometimes niggers just got *too much* dick." This suggests that perhaps sometimes people are happy to embrace stereotypes that are positive or advantageous to them. On the other hand, there is certainly irony in the narrator's tone here. Rather than truly embracing stereotypes about black men's large penises, he is arguably making fun of these stereotypes and taunting those who feel threatened by them. After all, stereotypes about black men's penises arguably reveal far more about the insecurities and fantasies of nonblack people than they do about black men themselves.

However, stereotypes about male sexual aggression are sometimes shown to be more plausible. The narrator's father, for example, is presented as a lothario who had a habit of sleeping with his students. The narrator's mother, Laurel Lescook, remembers his father as a creepy man who harassed her. Similarly, Foy Cheshire is said to have blown all his money on drugs and women. For both the narrator's father and Foy, fame and success are ways of getting women to sleep with them. Indeed, the narrator's father has a particular penchant for young women, including his own students and teaching assistants. In this way, the narrator's father is shown to be rather predatory. Similarly, at one point in the novel the narrator admits: "like most black males raised in Los Angeles, I'm bilingual only to the extent that I can sexually harass women of all ethnicities in their native languages." Even Hominy, who is otherwise meek and emasculated (he even requests that the narrator cut off his penis and stuff it in his mouth, as was sometimes done during lynching), enthusiastically flirts with Butterfly, the sorority girl young enough to be his granddaughter. Almost all the men in the novel display some kind of sexually aggressive behavior, often directed at women much younger than them, and these details suggest that there may be some truths in stereotypes about male sexual aggression.

At the same time, masculinity is subject to critique in the novel, through the book's depiction of how masculinity forces the narrator to conform to a way of being that feels alien to him. Toward the end of the novel, he admits to being "frigid," using this word in the same "obnoxious way men in the free-love seventies projected their own sexual inadequacies onto women." This sentence shows how society's idea of masculinity can be an oppressive force that attempts to mask "inadequacies" through the imposition of negative stereotypes about others. By applying these sexist negative stereotypes to himself, the narrator embraces his own "inadequacies" while suggesting that there is no room within masculinity for him to admit these openly. The only way to express his feelings of insecurity is by comparing himself to a woman.

Despite the narrator's self-deprecating analysis of his frigidity, Marpessa assures him that she likes that he is not as aggressively masculine as other men. She confesses that she fell in love with him when they went out to eat together and, unlike the other black men she knows, the narrator did not insist on sitting facing the door. Marpessa finds it appealing that the narrator does not feel the need to aggressively assert his

own masculinity and appear tough and dangerous. Furthermore, her love of the narrator's **satsumas** and her use of his childhood nickname, "Bonbon," indicate that she prefers the sweet, nurturing side of the narrator, qualities that are typically associated with femininity more than masculinity.

Both sexual stereotypes about black people *and* masculinity are under critique in the novel. As a result, it can sometimes appear that the narrator accepts stereotypes about black men as true—however, the reality is more complex. Sometimes the narrator embraces such stereotypes ironically in order to lampoon the insecurities that created the stereotypes in the first place. However, at other points the novel critiques black masculinity not as a specific phenomenon but as a part of masculinity in general, showing how the demands of masculinity can have a constricting, damaging effect on both men and women.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

DICKENS

Dickens, the fictional "ghetto community" where the narrator grew up and the entire novel is set, is a city within the greater Los Angeles area. The vast majority of Dickens' population is black, with a small number of Mexicans. Shortly after the death of the narrator's father, Dickens is quietly removed from the map of California. While the residents remain in place, the narrator feels that the municipal erasure of Dickens means it has "disappeared"; his mission to "bring back Dickens" forms the backbone of the novel's plot. Part of the narrator's attachment to Dickens connects to the importance of origins and home. After the death of his father and the disappearance of Dickens, the narrator is left completely rootless, lost, and confused. This sense of rootlessness caused by the loss or erasure of home is a major theme in African-American literature and culture. In *The Sellout*, it is literalized by Dicken's sudden removal from the map, an act that also speaks to the way in which black people (and especially poor black communities) are treated as disposable by the American authorities. There is so much stigma associated with being from Dickens that some residents are relieved when Dickens disappears, because they no longer have to admit that they come from the city. However, over the course of the novel the narrator inspires pride and enthusiasm among his fellow "Dickensians" through acts such as his decision to paint a border around the city.

Eventually, the narrator decides to re-segregate Dickens in order to bring back the city. This process starts with **Marpessa's bus**, before spreading to Chaff Middle School and other public institutions. Although it may seem counterintuitive to resurrect a majority-black city through segregation, the narrator's plan is successful, suggesting that segregation may not be inherently harmful if it is done in service of black communities, rather than as a way of entrenching racial inequality. At the end of the novel, the narrator returns to a "Welcome Home" party in Dickens after his Supreme Court case in Washington, DC. "Welcome Home" here has a double meaning—not only is the narrator being welcomed to his home, but Dickens itself is being welcomed back, as on the day of the party it is included in the weather report, revealing that the narrator's plan to bring it back was successful. The overall arc of the novel thus takes the form of a homecoming story akin to Homer's *Odyssey*, with the added twist that home itself—while it may physically exist— is something that must be searched for and resurrected.

MARPESSA'S BUS

The narrator's sweetheart Marpessa Dawson is a bus driver, and her **bus** is the backdrop against which their romance is rekindled. The narrator's all-consuming, devoted love for Marpessa means that even something as ordinary as a municipal bus can become a site of excitement and joy. The narrator reflects on how riding public transport carries stigma in Los Angeles, and the bus thus represents the ordinary, poor, downtrodden people who are the novel's main subjects. At one point, Marpessa asks the narrator if he is ashamed that she is a bus driver, but really the opposite is true—he loves Marpessa so much that this love extends to everything about her, including the bus. Perhaps on account of the narrator's biased perspective, Marpessa is presented as a particularly extraordinary bus driver, one who stands up for herself to rude passengers and who impresses the students at Chaff Middle School with a *Fast and the Furious*-style presentation.

The bus gains further significance as a symbol through its role in the re-segregation of **Dickens**. Buses were important symbols within the Civil Rights movement, from Rosa Parks (who famously refused to give up her seat to a white passenger) to the Freedom Riders (who rode throughout the South protesting segregated bus terminals). The narrator begins re-segregating Dickens by putting up a sign on the bus requesting that passengers give up their seats for white people. This was originally simply meant as a birthday present for Hominy, who asked for "racism." However, the bus segregation eventually inspires the broader re-segregation plan and thus plays a pivotal role in bringing back Dickens. In this way, the bus serves as a microcosm of Dickens as a whole.

SATSUMAS

The narrator grows several different crops on the farmland he purchased with the settlement money from his father's death, including watermelons, marijuana, and satsumas (a kind of citrus fruit). The fruit the narrator grows is so delicious that some people faint when they eat it. In this sense it is almost mystical or supernatural in nature. Indeed, the ability to grow such delicious fruit is one of the strange skills that makes the narrator extraordinary, even as he doesn't qualify as a hero in any conventional sense and claims that he is "no one special"—and so the satsumas come to represent the character's odd uniqueness. When Stevie and King Cuz catch the narrator hanging around outside Marpessa's house, he tells them that it is because he wants to show her a picture of his satsuma tree—a comically innocent excuse revealing the narrator's often sweet, childlike nature. Because no one can resist the narrator's fruit, the men do not care that he is essentially stalking Marpessa. When Marpessa finally decides to take the narrator back, she drives up with satsuma juice all over her face, in a moment with clear sexual undertones. The narrator may not be traditionally masculine or sexually assertive, but the satsumas show that his love for Marpessa is perhaps even more powerful for its innocent sweetness.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Picador edition of *The Sellout* published in 2015.

Prologue Quotes

> This may be hard to believe, coming from a black man, but I've never stolen anything. Never cheated on my taxes or at cards. Never snuck into the movies or failed to give back the extra change to a drugstore cashier indifferent to the ways of mercantilism and minimum-wage expectations. I've never burgled a house. Held up a liquor store. Never boarded a crowded bus or subway car, sat in a seat reserved for the elderly, pulled out my gigantic penis and masturbated to satisfaction with a perverted, yet somehow crestfallen, look on my face.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This paragraph is the very beginning of the prologue, and thus the introduction to the novel. With this list of stereotypes about black men, the narrator taunts the reader, forcing us to confront our own relationship to racial stereotypes. It may not be true that the reader will find it "hard to believe" that the narrator has never committed a crime simply because he is black; at the same time, racial stereotypes affect everyone, whether in conscious or unconscious ways. Almost everyone has been exposed to the kinds of stereotypes the narrator lists here, and thus will be familiar with them even if they do not personally believe them to be true.

This quotation is also important because it introduces the theme of criminality, authority, and the law. By alluding to the fact that racist stereotypes associate black people with illegal behavior, the narrator shows how black people can end up feeling (or being treated as) guilty and criminalized even if they have never done anything illegal.

> But I don't feel responsible anymore. I understand now that the only time black people don't feel guilty is when we've actually done something wrong, because that relieves us of the cognitive dissonance of being black and innocent, and in a way the prospect of going to jail becomes a relief. In the way that cooning is a relief, voting Republican is a relief, marrying white is a relief—albeit a temporary one.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

There is a black woman in the Supreme Court who has been berating the narrator while making references to black pride and American history. The narrator knows that she wants him to feel guilty, but, strangely, he actually feels relieved from guilt for the first time in his life. The fact that he has been charged with a terrible crime (which has not yet been revealed) and is on trial in the Supreme Court relieves him of the "cognitive dissonance" created by being both black and innocent in the face of a racist society that criminalizes black people.

The narrator compares the relief this brings to "cooning," voting Republican, and marrying a white person. Although each of these acts is distinct and must therefore provide a different kind of relief, all involve embracing a power structure that oppresses black people. "Cooning" refers to when a black person behaves in a foolish, stereotypical

manner in order to entertain or appease white people. By linking this to voting Republican and marrying white, the narrator suggests that all three acts degrade a person even while they may provide "temporary" relief from the psychological stress of black existence.

He's demanding to know how it is that in this day and age a black man can violate the hallowed principles of the Thirteenth Amendment by owning a slave. How could I willfully ignore the Fourteenth Amendment and argue that sometimes segregation brings people together. Like all people who believe in the system, he wants answers. He wants to believe that Shakespeare wrote all those books, that Lincoln fought the Civil War to free the slaves and the United States fought World War II to rescue the Jews and keep the world safe for democracy, that Jesus and the double feature are coming back. But I'm no Panglossian American. And when I did what I did, I wasn't thinking about inalienable rights, the proud history of our people. I did what worked, and since when did a little slavery and segregation ever hurt anybody, and if so, so fucking be it.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Black Justice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

The justices of the Supreme Court are finally hearing the narrator's case, *Me v. the United States of America*. While the narrator's lawyer Hampton Fiske is speaking, the black Justice begins to shift uncomfortably and eventually demands: "Nigger, are you crazy?". The narrator explains that the black Justice believes in the system, and in this passage shows how this means believing in progress. The narrator lists a series of historical ideas that are commonly taught and believed, yet are not all true.

Many of these ideas—such as Lincoln fighting the civil war to free the slaves and America entering World War II to save European Jews—present the United States in a positive light, as a country that stands for justice and freedom. More specifically, they suggest that the nation operates on a path of linear justice, becoming more progressive and just over time. The narrator's embrace of "a little slavery and segregation" flies in the face of this progress narrative. If the United States is becoming more fair, free, and progressive every day, why would a black man hold a slave in the 21st century? The narrator's rhetorical question ("since when did a little slavery and segregation hurt anybody") is tongue-in-cheek, but the narrator's critique of the black Justice's belief in progress is serious.

Chapter 4 Quotes

In a way most Dickensians were relieved to not be from anywhere. It saved them the embarrassment of having to answer the small-talk "Where are you from?" question with "Dickens," then watching the person apologetically back away from you.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator's father has been killed by the police. Five years later, Dickens is removed from the map of California by the authorities of neighboring cities, who hope that erasing Dickens will help keep their own property prices up. The narrator is devastated by Dickens' erasure, but not all "Dickensians" feel the same way. The stigma associated with living in Dickens is so extreme that many people would rather be from nowhere than from the city. The word "Dickensian" is usually used to describe situations that resemble the novels of Charles Dickens, and especially the urban poverty and abjection that he often portrayed. Calling the people of Dickens "Dickensians" thus wittily points to the bleak and destitute nature of the city.

Chapter 7 Quotes

"If you ask me, Mark Twain didn't use the word 'nigger' enough," I mumbled. With my mouth filled with at least four of America's favorite cookies, I don't think anyone understood me. I wanted to say more. Like, why blame Mark Twain because you don't have the patience and courage to explain to your children that the "n-word" exists and that during the course of their sheltered little lives they may one day be called a "nigger" or, even worse, deign to call somebody else a "nigger." No one will ever refer to them as "little black euphemisms," so welcome to the American lexicon—Nigger!

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is—reluctantly—at a meeting of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals. Foy Cheshire has complained about the amount of times Mark Twain uses the n-word in *Huckleberry Finn*, and boasts that he rewrote the book, replacing the word with "warrior" and the word "slave" with "dark-skinned volunteer." The narrator does not usually participate in the meetings, but he is annoyed by Foy's argument, as he believes that it involves denying the reality of the world. Although the history and present reality of racism in America is painful, the narrator believes that simply ignoring this reality will not make it any better.

Another important aspect of this quotation is the fact that the narrator's mouth is full and that he "wanted to say more," but doesn't. Throughout the novel, the narrator stops himself from saying what is on his mind. Even when he "wants" to speak, the narrator usually stops himself. In this passage, the cookies are a physical representation of the force stopping the narrator from truly expressing himself.

❝ Those pompous Dum Dum niggers wanted to ban the word, disinvent the watermelon, snorting in the morning, washing your dick in the sink, and the eternal shame of having pubic hair the color and texture of unground pepper. That's the difference between most oppressed peoples of the world and American blacks. They vow never to forget, and we want everything expunged from our record, sealed and filed away for eternity. We want someone like Foy Cheshire to present our case to the world with a set of instructions that the jury will disregard centuries of ridicule and stereotype and pretend the woebegone niggers in front of you are starting from scratch.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Foy Cheshire

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

At a meeting of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals, the narrator silently mocks Foy Cheshire for his decision to rewrite *Huckleberry Finn* with the n-word and the word "slave" taken out. The narrator becomes more and more irate, claiming that people like Foy and the other Intellectuals want to erase history. This passage lays out why the narrator objects to the practice of ignoring stereotypes. He believes there is something inherently ridiculous about this project, as shown by his claim that the Intellectuals want to "disinvent the watermelon."

On a more serious level, the narrator also compares the beliefs of Foy and his allies to that of other oppressed groups in the world in order to highlight the flaws in Foy's argument. Most oppressed groups fight for their history to be memorialized. Indeed, it is usually the oppressor who tries to erase this history in order to cover up their own crimes. Yet in the case of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals, it is as if Foy wants to conceal the awful history of white people's oppression and persecution of black Americans.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ "That's gay," countered her Latino nemesis, who was juggling the gonads with one hand.

"Juggling is gay!"

"Calling people who call you 'gay' just because you called them' gay' is gay!"

"Okay, that's enough." Charisma scolded. "My God, is there anything you kids don't think is gay?"

The fat boy thought for a long moment. "You know what's not gay...being gay."

Related Characters: The Narrator , Charisma Molina, Sheila Clark (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166-167

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has given a presentation at Career Day at Chaff Middle School. He demonstrates how to castrate a farm animal, and a little girl called Sheila Clark volunteers to perform the castration. Afterward, the narrator speaks with Charisma Molina, Marpessa's best friend and the assistant principle of the school. The narrator and Charisma overhear Sheila and another student teasing each other about doing things that are "gay." This exchange again complicates ideas about progress and the notion that younger generations are more progressive than older people.

Initially, it seems as if the children are homophobic, as they repeatedly use "gay" in a seemingly insulting manner. However, the revelation that "being gay" is "not gay" adds a comic twist to this impression. For Sheila and the boy, "gay"

has become a signifier detached from its original meaning. In other words, "gay" might mean bad or embarrassing, but it no longer means homosexual, and the implication is that members of the younger generation do not think homosexuality is bad or embarrassing.

"Segregate the school." As soon as I said it, I realized that segregation would be the key to bringing Dickens back. The communal feeling of the bus would spread to the school and then permeate the rest of the city. Apartheid united black South Africa, why couldn't it do the same for Dickens?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

Charisma has mentioned that ever since the narrator put up a sign telling passengers on Marpessa's bus to give up their seats to white people, the bus has become the safest and most peaceful place around. She admits that she wishes Chaff Middle School would become more like the bus. Suddenly, the narrator tells Charisma to segregate the school, and as soon as he does so he realizes that this will also solve the problem of bringing back Dickens. The narrator's reasoning at first seems ridiculous. Conventionally, segregation is thought of as imposing the opposite of a "communal feeling."

Yet here the narrator proposes that the "communal feeling" created within black and brown communities is more important than the cross-racial community that is supposedly fostered by integration. His comment about South Africa is somewhat sarcastic, considering that apartheid had such a harmful impact on the country's black citizens. At the same time, this comment also raises the question of whether there could be a positive version of segregation—a version that did not involve unjust treatment but preserved the feeling of community and solidarity created by black-only spaces.

During Black History Month, my father used to watch the nightly television footage of the Freedom buses burning, the dogs snarling and snapping, and say to me, "You can't force integration, boy. The people who want to integrate will integrate." I've never figured out to what extent, if at all, I agree or disagree with him, but it's an observation that's stayed with me. Made me realize that for many people integration is a finite concept. Here, in America, "integration" can be a cover-up. "I'm not racist. My prom date, second cousin, my president is black (or whatever)."

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator tells Charisma that she should segregate the school, he realizes that segregation is the key to bringing back Dickens. He reflects that the assumption that segregation is inherently bad might be mistaken. He then remembers his father's critique of integration. While the narrator's father does not appear to have advocated for *segregation*, he was skeptical about the extent to which integration actually works to bring about racial equality. As this quotation shows, surface-level racial progress can disguise the persistence of real racism. From this perspective, the narrator's embrace of segregation and other seemingly regressive projects makes more sense.

Chapter 13 Quotes

"You're supposed to wolf whistle! Like this…" Recklessly eyeballing her the whole way, he pursed his lips and let go a wolf whistle so lecherous and libidinous it curled both the white woman's pretty painted toes and the dainty red ribbon in her blond hair. Now it was her turn. And my father stood there, lustful and black, as she just as defiantly not only recklessly eyeballed him back but recklessly rubbed his dick through his pants.

Related Characters: The Narrator , The Narrator's Father (speaker), Rebecca

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator recalls a memory in which, after he claimed

that he did not believe there was any racism in America, his father drove him all the way to a random town in Mississippi to engage in "reckless eyeballing"—the practice of black men staring at white women. The narrator's father told his son to whistle, but—unable to whistle properly—the narrator ended up whistling the tune of Ravel's *Bolero*. Frustrated, the narrator's father demonstrates how to do it himself, with cartoonish lechery. This is one of the moments in the novel during which stereotypes are taken to the most extreme degree. The image the narrator describes seems more like a racist cartoon than a real scene—yet at the same time the stereotype is comically overturned, as the narrator's father is not beaten by white men for his actions, but instead has his ogling returned by the white woman herself.

Chapter 17 Quotes

I'm frigid. Not in the sense that I don't have any sexual desire, but in the obnoxious way men in the free-love seventies projected their own sexual inadequacies onto women by referring to them as "frigid" and "dead fish." I'm the deadest of fish. I fuck like an overturned guppy. A plate of day-old sashimi has more "motion of the ocean" than I do. So on the day of the shooting and drive-by orange-ing, when Marpessa stuck a tongue suspiciously tangy with satsuma tartness into my mouth and ground her pudenda into my

pelvic bone, I lay there on my bed—motionless.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Marpessa Delissa Dawson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has been hanging around outside Marpessa's house. One night, he takes her a picture of his satsuma tree and some fresh satsumas. Marpessa's brother Stevie, along with King Cuz, find the narrator outside her house. Marpessa then pulls up with satsuma juice all over her face. Marpessa and the narrator kiss and then sleep together, but in this passage the narrator admits that he is "frigid" and stays completely still while having sex. This emphasizes the idea that the narrator does not conform to the masculine stereotype of a sexually aggressive and virile man. Indeed, it is telling that he uses a word that is usually applied to women ("frigid") in order to describe his own sexual inadequacies, suggesting that there is an inherent emasculation within his predicament.

Chapter 19 Quotes

I'm not so selfish as to believe that my relative happiness, including, but not limited to, twenty-four-hour access to chili burgers, Blu-ray, and Aeron office chairs is worth generations of suffering. I seriously doubt that some slave ship ancestor, in those idle moments between being raped and beaten, was standing knee-deep in their own feces rationalizing that, in the end, the generations of murder, unbearable pain and suffering, mental anguish, and rampant disease will all be worth it because someday my great-great-great-great-grandson will have Wi-Fi, no matter how slow and intermittent the signal is.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has learned that his segregation policy is already starting to improve life in Dickens. He is at a meeting of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals, where the members are discussing whether on some level slavery was worth it because they would rather be born in the present-day United States than in Africa. This infuriates the narrator, and in this passage he emphasizes how ridiculous the Intellectuals' reasoning is.

The narrator's anger is palpable in this quotation, which is one of the most serious moments in the novel. While he arguably exaggerates the position of the Intellectuals for comic effect, his words indicate that their reasoning is more common and dangerous that many people would perhaps like to admit. Indeed, the idea that slavery may on some level have been "worth it" is arguably silently woven into most narratives about racial progress in America.

Chapter 22 Quotes

"This is me at the Compton Cookout . . . I'm the third 'ghetto chick' from the right." I stole a glance at the snapshot. The women and their dates blackened and Afro-wigged, toting forties and basketballs, smoking blunts. Their mouths filled with gold teeth and chicken drumsticks. It wasn't so much the racist ridicule as the lack of imagination that I found insulting. Where were the zip coons? The hep cats? The mammies? The bucks? The janitors? The dual threat quarterbacks? The weekend weather forecasters? The front desk receptionists that greet you at every single movie studio and talent agency in the city? *Mr. Witherspoon will be down in a minute. Can I get you a water?* That's the problem with this generation; they don't know their history.

Related Characters: The Narrator , Topsy / Butterfly Davis (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

At the LA Festival of Forbidden Cinema and Unabashedly Racist Animation, Hominy performs to an adoring crowd. Some of the audience members are black sorority girls dressed in blackface. One of them, Butterfly, comes home with the narrator and Hominy, sitting on Hominy's lap on the drive back. Here the narrator describes the photos she shows him and Hominy of her in various other blackface costumes. He humorously proposes the idea that stereotypes themselves are not inherently offensive, but what is problematic about them is their limited nature, which does not reflect the full range of "types" that exist in the black community.

Many of the other stereotypes the narrator lists are just as insulting as Butterfly's costume, and thus we can assume that his argument is only semi-serious. At the same time, it is true that one of the main problems about stereotypes is that they reduce the diversity of a given group to a handful of stock characters. If there really were such a proliferation of many different stereotypes in circulation, they might better reflect the diversity of human experience, and thus end up being less offensive and harmful.

Chapter 24 Quotes

Unmitigated Blackness is essays passing for fiction. It's the realization that there are no absolutes, except when there are. It's the acceptance of contradiction not being a sin and a crime but a human frailty like split ends and libertarianism. Unmitigated Blackness is coming to the realization that as fucked up and meaningless as it all is, sometimes it's the nihilism that makes life worth living.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 277

Explanation and Analysis

In the middle of his Supreme Court case, while Hampton is giving a long and impressive speech, the narrator—who is already very high—sneaks out to smoke weed on the Supreme Court steps. He thinks about the different levels of blackness, concluding that the ultimate level is "Unmitigated Blackness." In a sense, his description of Unmitigated Blackness reads somewhat like a manifesto. *The Sellout* embraces contradiction, human frailty, and nihilism, all of which might not inherently be associated with traditional ideas of blackness in America. However, here the narrator suggests that they actually have an important connection to black identity in its most fundamental, "unmitigated" form.

Chapter 26 Quotes

That's what I liked about the man, although I didn't agree with him when he said, "Get out. This is our thing." I respected that he didn't give a fuck. But I wish I hadn't been so scared, that I had had the nerve to stand in protest. Not to castigate him for what he did or to stick up for the aggrieved white people. After all, they could've stood up for themselves, called in the authorities or their God, and smote everybody in the place, but I wish I'd stood up to the man and asked him a question: "So what exactly is *our thing*?"

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 287-289

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator and Marpessa are at the open-mic night at Dum Dum Donuts. A black comic onstage has chastised a

white couple for laughing at his jokes, telling them to leave because this is "our thing." After this incident, the narrator reflects that he wished he'd asked the comic: "What exactly is *our thing*?" This is yet another example of the narrator wanting to say something but stopping himself. Indeed, the very question he wanted to ask conveys his fundamental uncertainty and jealousy of those who have more certainty. He has spent the whole novel trying to preserve his own black community and reject Foy Cheshire's attempts to erase stereotypes. Yet still, he feels confused about what "our thing" is, suggesting that he will always be confused about what exactly blackness is.

Closure Quotes

"Why are you waving the flag?" I asked him. "Why now? I've never seen you wave it before." He said that he felt like the country, the United States of America, had finally paid off its debts. "And what about the Native Americans? What about the Chinese, the Japanese, the Mexicans, the poor, the forests, the water, the air, the fucking California condor? When do they collect?" I asked him.

He just shook his head at me. Said something to the effect that my father would be ashamed of me and that I'd never understand. And he's right. I never will.

Related Characters: Foy Cheshire, The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

In the short, final section of the novel, entitled "Closure," the narrator jumps back in time, recalling the day when Obama was inaugurated. Foy Cheshire was driving around in his car, waving the American flag. In this passage, the narrator recalls the conversation he had with Foy. This conversation reveals the narrator's skepticism not only about the extent to which Obama's election truly was a moment of racial triumph, but also about the idea of celebrating black progress while forgetting about other oppressed groups. Foy's reply is typically condescending, but the narrator admits that there is some truth in it.

The final sentence of the novel—"I never will"—shows the narrator embracing his own uncertainty. This conflicts with the sentiment he expressed in the previous chapter, in which he admitted to being envious of the black comedian's certainty about what "our thing" is. The narrator is ambivalent about everything, including his own ambivalence. At the very end of the novel, he suggests that there is simply no other way to be.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

The narrator says that it although it may be hard to believe because he is a black man, he has never stolen, cheated, robbed a house, held up a liquor store, or "pulled out my gigantic penis" and masturbated in public. Nonetheless, he now finds himself inside the Supreme Court, his car left illegally parked on Constitution Avenue. The narrator is here because he received a letter telling him that his case had been selected to be heard by the Supreme Court, signed by "the People of the United States of America." Yesterday he walked through Washington, DC, visiting the Lincoln Memorial and wondering what the statue would do if it were to come to life now.

The novel begins with a provocation to the reader. The narrator's assertion that it will be hard to believe he hasn't participated in criminal activity presumes that the reader believes in racial stereotypes. This forces us to confront our own—perhaps subconscious—beliefs and expectations surrounding race. The narrator's words imply that even those who do not believe themselves to be racist may be complicit in upholding racist assumptions and symptoms.

The narrator also visits the Pentagon and the national Mall, where he sees a white boy lying on the ground in such a position that it makes it look like the Washington Monument is his penis. He goes to the zoo, where a woman and her boyfriend comment that the gorilla, who is called Baraka, is "presidential." The woman starts crying and claims that some of her best friends are monkeys, which makes the narrator laugh. His walk through DC taught him that in contemporary America, just as in Ancient Rome, "you're either citizen or slave… guilty or innocent."

The novel is set against the backdrop of Barack Obama's presidency, and questions whether the election of the first black president truly constituted a moment of progress. The gorilla's name is a reference both to Obama and to the writer Amiri Baraka, who was one of the most important figures in the Black Arts Movement. The woman's words point to the racist stereotype equating black people to monkeys.

Back in the Supreme Court, an officer tries to get the narrator to sit up straight in his chair, but instead he comes crashing to the floor. The narrator is wearing a suit for the first time, which he thinks makes him look like a criminal. When the narrator first arrived at the Supreme Court, this officer searched him with a dog while they both stood under a sign reading "EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER THE LAW." Now the narrator figures that the crime he has been charged with is so awful that no one will bother to prosecute him for marijuana possession, so he cleans and fills his pipe. The officer lights it for him and he blows a huge cloud of smoke in the air.

The absurdity of the narrator's decision to smoke marijuana inside the Supreme Court reflects the absurdity of the American legal system itself. Due to racial discrimination, there has never been "Equal Justice Under the Law" in America—instead, black people are often criminalized for their very existence. Perversely, the narrator now finds a kind of freedom through having been charged with a crime more serious than marijuana possession.

The narrator's case is "the latest in the long line of landmark race-related cases," including *Dred Scott v. Sanford*, which ruled that the descendants of slaves could not be United States citizens, and *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which upheld racial segregation. Feeling high, the narrator shouts "Equal Justice Under the Law!" He thinks about the fact that people have died for this goal of equal justice, and that most of them—whether innocent or guilty—have never made it inside the actual Supreme Court building. He thinks that the sign declaring EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER THE LAW above the Supreme Court indicates insecurity.

In this passage, the narrator challenges the assumption that Supreme Court rulings have gradually moved in a progressive direction. Both cases the narrator cites caused the entrenchment of racist discrimination, halting progress and even causing regress. The narrative of progress is comforting, particularly in light of the people who have died trying to bring about equality—however, it is misleading.

When the narrator was younger, he believed that the problems of the black American community would be solved if only the community had a good enough motto. He reasons that other communities have mottos, from the Chickasaw nation to the police force. As a child, the narrator attempted to use his knowledge of Latin in order to invent a motto for black people. His first ideas was "*Black America: Veni, vidi, vici—Fried Chicken!*" followed by "*Semper Fi, Semper Funky*," and then "*Unum corpus, una mens, una cor, unum amor*," which means "One body, one mind, one heart, one love."

In a style typical of the novel, the narrator blends two seemingly distinct realms of culture—Latin mottos and stereotypes about black Americans—to comic and thought-provoking effect. While none of the mottos he invents seem to have much potential to instigate political progress, the usefulness of a motto is rooted in the importance of having a sense of collective purpose and direction.

At first the narrator was pleased with this last attempt, but then remembered that the black community objects to being thought of as a monolith. He says that, secretly, "every black person thinks they're better than every other black person." Now the narrator isn't sure if the community needs a motto, though he thinks that it would be smart to make money offering to translate individual people's mottos in Latin for them. He could set up shop at a tattoo parlor so his customers could immediately get their new motto tattooed on them. The narrator translates phrases like "strickly dickly" and "you snooze, you lose" into Latin in his head.

In certain ways, the narrator is presented as an anti-hero. He does not possess above-average intelligence, looks, courage, or morality. On the other hand, the narrator does possess a range of odd skills, such as his knowledge of Latin, which sets him apart from the community of characters in the novel.

The narrator's lawyer, Hampton Fiske, takes his pipe from his hands and sprays some air freshener to cover the smell of pot. The narrator is too high to greet Hampton verbally, so he just nods. Hampton is "an old-school criminal defense attorney" who prefers to represent only the most desperate people, those he calls "the wretched of the Earth." When the crimes of which the narrator was accused were first read aloud in district court, he struggled to understand why he couldn't be considered both guilty *and* innocent. Eventually, he pleaded "human," and Hampton quickly asked that the trial be heard in the Supreme Court.

Although we do not yet know the crime with which the narrator has been charged, his desire to be considered both guilty and innocent is important and sets a precedent for the narrative to come. As a satirical novel, "The Sellout" uses humor, irony, and absurdity to challenge any simple understanding of right and wrong. Here the narrator suggests that to be human is to be both guilty and innocent.

Back in DC, a black woman in the front row of the Court berates the narrator while she discusses the history of black people in America. Then she slaps him in the face. The narrator knows that she wants him to feel guilty, and he keeps expecting a feeling of "black guilt" to descend on him, but instead nothing comes. He is shocked to feel no guilt for the first time in his life. He makes one last attempt to access guilt by closing his eyes and picturing the Civil Rights movement. However, the images in his head become distorted, transforming into a mix between a zombie movie and Coke advert.

Inappropriate emotions are one of the main sources of humor in the novel. The narrator's inability to feel guilt points to the wayward nature of lived human experience. Although most people would like their emotions to line up with their circumstances and principles in an appropriate manner, this often does not turn out to be the case.

The Supreme Court justices enter, and Hampton drags the narrator to his feet. The black Justice is "absentmindedly" wearing a $50,000 Rolex watch. The narrator feels that at this point he is unsure whether he is the plaintiff or the defendant. His case is named "Me v. the United States of America." The narrator's family name was originally Mee, but his father decided to change it to Me. While Hampton speaks, the black Justice fidgets uncomfortably in his seat. Eventually, he cannot help but blurt out: "Nigger, are you crazy?" He asks how it's possible that a black man in today's world can own a slave.

The fact that the narrator is being charged with slaveholding is absurd, but here this absurdity is juxtaposed with the absurdity of the black Justice's lavish lifestyle and extremely informal way of speaking. There is also a possible connection between the hypocrisy of a black man owning a slave and the hypocrisy of the justice earning a high income by presiding over a legal system that discriminates against black people.

The black Justice "believes in the system" and therefore is horrified. The Justice wants to believe in progress, but the narrator himself rejects this, thinking: "Since when did a little slavery and segregation hurt anybody." The narrator is very high, and accidentally says "… so fucking be it" out loud. The black Justice stands up, looking like he wants to fight. He shouts that the narrator's parents must have raised him better than to embrace segregation and slavery. He shouts: "let's get this hanging party started!"

Here the novel again challenges any easy mode of distinction between right and wrong by presenting two mistaken points of view side by side. The narrator's thought that "since when did a little slavery and segregation hurt anybody" is comically false, but the black Justice's belief in "the system" and progress is also misguided.

CHAPTER 1

The narrator's father was a social scientist, the inventor and "sole practitioner" of what he called Liberation Psychology. They lived on a farm in **Dickens**, a "ghetto community" on the outskirts of Los Angeles. The narrator's father spent twenty years as the interim dean in the psychology department of West Riverside Community College. Although he loved living on a farm, he was a far better psychologist than he was a steward of animals. The narrator served as his father's "case study," the subject of his experiments.

The phrase "Liberation Psychology" is an adaptation of Liberation Theology, a movement of Christian theology that uses Christian doctrine to advocate for the empowerment of the poor and oppressed through radical changes to the structure of society. The application of this idea to psychology suggests that the narrator's father uses his scientific research in order to fight against racism.

When the narrator was a baby, his father placed objects representing whiteness into his cot while firing a gun and shouting racist insults, in order to teach the narrator to associate these symbols of whiteness with racism. When the narrator was eight, his father used him to test how the "bystander effect" works within the black community. He dressed the narrator in stereotypical clothing and then beat him in the middle of a busy intersection. Rather than standing by, strangers got involved and started beating the narrator also. After the experiment was over, the narrator's father apologized for not accounting for the "bandwagon effect."

The narrator's father's desire to fight racism through scientific experiments ironically causes him to abuse his own black son. The "bandwagon effect" shows that black people not only have to deal with the cruel indifference of strangers (described by the bystander effect) but an extra level of violent hatred. (The bystander effect is when people witness a crime being committed or someone being hurt and do nothing, assuming that someone else already has intervened.)

During another experiment, the narrator's father donned a Ronald Reagan mask, posing as a "white authority figure." He then interrogated his son about black history, and when the narrator got anything wrong or was too slow to answer, his father gave him an electric shock. The narrator began to bleed, and he fantasized about Batman saving him from his father's cruelty. Eventually the narrator pooped his pants.

This is one of the moments in the novel where satire is blended with genuinely disturbing content. While the narrator's father's experiment is comically absurd, it also points to very serious and real issues surrounding parental abuse of children. Notably, Batman is another kind of "white authority figure," but one that the narrator now dreams of saving him from his black father.

When the narrator was twelve, his father replicated a famous study of racial consciousness in black children using black and white dolls. The narrator's father made the test more elaborate by asking the narrator to pick between two entire doll worlds. One featured Ken and Malibu Barbie in the Barbie Dream House, and the other featured Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Harriet Tubman running through a swamp chased by a pack of dogs and members of the KKK. The father explained that the figures in the second world were running "toward freedom." He had made Harriet Tubman by painting a Barbie black, turning her into "Plantation Barbie."

Throughout the novel, many of the most serious moments and figures from black history are lampooned and made ridiculous. This challenges the idea that such moments and figures need to always be treated with solemnity. While the book obviously does not question the importance or brilliance of figures such as Malcolm X and Harriet Tubman, it suggests that sometimes their legacy can be regarded with humor rather than only somberness.

The narrator picked the white doll world because the white dolls had better accessories. Crushed, the narrator's father burned his findings. Shortly after, he began to teach his son about farming. The narrator stresses that not all his memories of his father are bad. In **Dickens**, the narrator's father was known as "the Nigger Whisperer." When a Dickens resident was in a bad way, he would approach the person and embrace them like an old friend. The narrator says his father had a talent for "approaching the unapproachable."

The narrator's father may not have been a particularly scrupulous scientist, but—like his son—he possessed unusual skills that made him exceptional within his community. The phrase "Nigger Whisperer" is a deliberately scandalous reframing of horse whispering, a practice of communicating with horses through knowledge of horse psychology.

The narrator claims that when he was six, he witnessed the birth of gangster rap. The rapper Kilo G, who was high on crack, began reciting Alfred Lord Tennyson verses turned into rap lyrics while firing his gun. A SWAT team arrived but couldn't stop laughing and thus failed to shoot him. The narrator's father arrived and calmly whispered to Kilo G, who immediately handed over his gun. His father refused to allow the police to arrest him until he had finished reciting the poem. The narrator's father explained that he had whispered that Kilo G needed to ask himself two questions: "Who am I?" and "How may I become myself?"

In this passage, the narrator reinvents the birth of gangster rap. Kilo G was a real rapper signed to Cash Money Records in the early 1990s. While the story the narrator tells about him isn't real, it contains elements that are comparable to the true history of how gangster rap evolved as a genre, from the diverse range of its influences (from poetry to the crack epidemic) and the repressive, hostile reaction of the authorities.

The narrator assumed that he would stay in **Dickens** and live an average life. He hoped to marry Marpessa Delissa Dawson, his childhood sweetheart and "one and only love." He felt that the questions "Who am I?" and "How may I become myself?" did not apply to him. The narrator was a product of his father and of Dickens, but then one day both his father and Dickens disappeared—leaving him with no sense of who he was or how to become himself.

The search for a lost home is one of the most important themes of the book. It takes on literal significance in the plot through the disappearance of the narrator's father and of Dickens, but is also a broader theme common in African American literature. Due to the legacy of slavery, much of the black literary tradition addresses the loss of origins and home.

CHAPTER 2

The only words of this chapter are: "Westside, nigger! What?"

Beatty also satirizes genre conventions with this comically short slang phrase.

CHAPTER 3

The narrator lists the laws of "ghetto physics." Halfway through his junior year of college, he rides his horse to a meeting of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals, a "neighborhood think tank" his father founded. At an intersection, he finds his father's body lying face down with his hand clenched into a fist. The narrator brushes dirt from his father's face. A police officer present asks if the narrator is his father's son, and then tells him that as he was about to die, his father warned the officers: "you don't know who my son is!" However, the narrator tells the officer: "I'm no one special."

"The Sellout" may be an absurd and surreal comic novel, but it addresses many of the most important and serious issues of contemporary America. After a life spent fighting racism, the narrator's father is killed in an act of police brutality. The fact that he lies dead with his hand in a fist shows that, until the very end, the narrator's father stood up to racist authority on behalf of himself and other black people.

The narrator knows he is supposed to cry, but he doesn't. He cannot help thinking that his father's death was another "trick" to teach him about the oppression of black people. The narrator does not feel strongly about his racial identity. He once tried to write "Californian" as his race in the census, but after being chastised by a black man he changed it to "Black, African-American, Negro, coward." The narrator reflects that some kids grow up desperately longing for an absent father, but that his "problem was that Daddy was always home."

The narrator's father's efforts to teach his son about black identity, race, and racism seem to have backfired. Rather than inheriting his father's passion for justice, the narrator feels ambivalent about his race. His eventual decision to write "coward" as part of his racial identity on the census shows that, unlike his father, he is rather meek and avoids having to assert himself when he can.

After the police draw the chalk outline and take the evidence photos, the narrator takes his father's body into Dum Dum Donuts and requests his father's usual order. The narrator slurps his milkshake while the rest of the Intellectuals look on skeptically. The narrator's father founded the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals when he realized that the donut shop was the only local business not pillaged in the riots. The narrator's father began giving presentations about economic inequality between the races, even using an overhead projector, while the other patrons looked on in horror. One of the first people to make a comment was Foy Cheshire, an assistant professor of urban studies at UC Brentwood whose first book was named "Blacktopolis: The Intransigence of African-American Urban Poverty and Baggy Clothes."

The narrator's father's decision to begin giving academic presentations inside a donut shop shows that his scientific research was inextricably rooted in the community in which he lived. Far from the stereotype of the academic who remains within the "ivory tower," the narrator's father chose to spread his knowledge to the people of Dickens, even if this meant giving presentations to unsuspecting patrons of Dum Dum Donuts. Also note the comic juxtaposition of "Dum Dum" with "Intellectuals" in the group's name.

The narrator's father quickly became friends with Foy, and the two cofounded the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals. However, over the years Foy got famous while the narrator's father remained in obscurity. Foy got his own talk show during which he interviewed "B-list Celebrities," while the narrator's father claimed that Foy stole his ideas. One of these ideas included a cartoon called *The Black Cats'n'Jammin' Kids*, which made Foy a fortune. However, he blew the money on drugs and women and eventually had his possessions seized due to tax evasion. Before long, Foy asked the narrator's father to "nigger-whisper" him out of suicide. He agreed, and never told anybody about Foy's troubles.

Foy Cheshire is the main villain of the novel. Foy is a hypocrite; although he, like the narrator's father, conducts research on urban black communities, rather than giving back to the community he revels in his own wealth and acclaim. Foy steals ideas from the narrator's father, and then relies on the narrator's father to rescue him from suicide. The narrator's father's willingness to do so while preserving Foy's dignity and reputation shows that, despite his flaws, he is the far better man.

Although the narrator's father was an atheist, Foy nevertheless prays over his dead body, embracing it. Yet the narrator suspects that "deep down he was happy my dad was gone." Then the narrator takes his father's body away on his horse. People cry out for "the Nigger Whisperer," but their cries go unanswered. The crisis negotiator, Murray Flores, was a friend of the narrator's father. Off the record, he tells the narrator that two officers gave his father a ticket, to which his father replied: "Either give me the ticker or the lecture, but you can't give me both." The officers raised their guns, the narrator's father ran, and they shot him four times in the back. Flores then tells the narrator that in the whole history of the LAPD, zero officers have been convicted of murder while in the line of duty.

The idea of "the Nigger Whisperer" may at first appear ridiculous and offensive (since it implies that black people are like animals who need a special kind of human to understand them). However, this passage shows that the narrator's father's role is actually deeply valued and needed within the community, in part due to the problem of police brutality. Given that police are killing black people without consequences and "leaders" like Foy are self-interested and hypocritical, the ordinary people of Dickens desperately need an alternative to help them deal with difficulty and trauma. This role used to be filled by the narrator's father, but is now vacant.

While he was alive, the narrator's father had a habit of sleeping with his teenage students. The narrator's mother was a *Jet* magazine "Beauty of the Week" named Laurel Lescook. For a long time, the only information the narrator had about her came from her *Jet* profile, which listed her as a student from Florida who liked "biking, photography, and poetry." Years later, he found his mother, who was working as a paralegal in Atlanta. She remembered the narrator's father as a man who creepily harassed her.

While the narrator's father often performed heroic deeds within the community, he was far from a hero in any straightforward sense. Not only did he abuse the narrator, but he also harassed women and slept with his students. Men who are seemingly heroic can nonetheless mistreat women and children in private.

Using the $2 million settlement he is awarded after his father's death, the narrator buys the farm that his father had always dreamed of purchasing. The farm comes with three horses, four pigs, a goat, and twelve stray cats. When he and his father did farm work during his childhood, the narrator figured they were living out the unrealized promise of Reconstruction: "Forty acres and a fool." His father used to tell him: "People eat the shit you shovel them!" In the present, the narrator buries his father and feels relieved that he is now no longer under his father's persistent, critical gaze. He doesn't miss his father, but there are questions he wished he'd asked while he was alive. The narrator laments: "Fuck being black," thinking of the disadvantages heaped upon black people.

The narrator's reference to Reconstruction is significant. The novel consistently undermines the idea of linear progress, and the history Reconstruction and its aftermath dramatically disrupt the idea that racial progress in America has been linear. During Reconstruction, efforts were made to provide rights and opportunities to newly freed slaves, including the "Forty acres and a mule" policy the narrator references here. However, many of these were not delivered, and the backlash against Reconstruction was so intense that it overshadows any progress made in the first place.

CHAPTER 4

Five years after the narrator's father's death, **Dickens** is "quietly removed" from the map of California. The surrounding cities conspire to erase Dickens in order to keep their own, higher property prices up. Most citizens of Dickens are relieved not to be from anywhere, because it spares them the shame of admitting they're from Dickens. Rumors state that the country removed Dickens' charter due to the political corruption in the city. The police and fire stations are shut down, as is the school board.

The sudden disappearance of Dickens takes literally the idea that governmental authorities would rather ignore or even erase black communities than attempt to support and assist them. The stigma against Dickens is so strong that residents would rather be from nowhere than from the city, showing that a sense of "home" is not something everyone necessarily wants, when that home is explicitly seen as negative.

Following the death of the narrator's father, the neighborhood is left searching for the next "Nigger Whisperer." The narrator assumes the role because he has nothing else to do. However, he does not possess his father's same talent for it. Sometimes he tries to start with a joke, but this doesn't always work. Everyone in the neighborhood thinks that the narrator majored in psychology at college. However, he actually majored in agricultural studies, hoping to turn the farm into an ostrich hatchery and sell the birds to rappers. It soon became clear that this plan wasn't viable, so instead he focused on the two crops of "most cultural relevance": watermelon and weed.

Starting with his own father, the narrator has always been surrounded by people who place particular expectations on him—expectations that he either can't or doesn't want to meet. Now that his father is dead, the narrator is being compelled to assume his place, but the two men have little in common. Whereas the narrator's father had a robust and enthusiastic knowledge of human psychology, the narrator is more drawn to working with animals than people.

The narrator sells watermelons in different shapes, even making a special edition during Easter with "Jesus Saves" written on the lines of the rind. His watermelons are so good that there are rumors some people have fainted upon tasting them. However, watermelons don't grow year-round, so the narrator's "mainstay" crop is marijuana. He brings his weed to house parties and likes to think that Gregor Mendel, George Washington Carver, and his father would be proud.

Here we learn of another strange skill the narrator possesses alongside his knowledge of Latin: the ability to grow insanely delicious fruit. The reaction of the community to his watermelons exaggerates the racist stereotype about black people's love of watermelons to a point of surreal absurdity.

CHAPTER 5

After **Dickens** was erased, the person who needed the narrator most was an elderly man named Hominy Jenkins. Back in the day, the narrator's father had sent his son to take care of Hominy during the many times he recklessly tried to commit suicide. Hominy is the last surviving member of the Little Rascals, and is an actor whose career never took off like he hoped. When the narrator was young, he and his lifelong friend Marpessa would go to watch *The Little Rascals* at Hominy's house. The narrator has been in love with Marpessa since these days. Although he didn't realize it as a child, the narrator now knows that Hominy is both "angry" and "crazy."

Much of the novel blends fact and fiction to create a surreal portrait of a world that is both familiar and bizarre. "The Little Rascals" is a real movie, based on the series called "Our Gang" which aired from the 1920s-1940s. Many people look back on these movies with sentimental nostalgia, but the story of Hominy shows that the reality is more disturbing. Although Hominy is a fictional character, there are many real black child actors whose roles in movies like this were racist caricatures.

Hominy's entire acting career consists of shots of him getting covered in white substances (eggs, paint, pancake flour) or being electrocuted. In one such electrocution scene he says: "Yowza! I done discobered electbicidy," which was "the longest line of his career." After the other neighborhood kids stopped coming to the *Little Rascals* viewings, Marpessa stayed, even though she was 15. Eventually, however, she became more interested in boys and stopped coming. The first breast the narrator ever saw belonged to one of his father's teaching assistants, who he found naked on his own bed after she had had sex with his father. The narrator muses that "Freudian hermeneutics doesn't apply to **Dickens**."

Throughout the novel, the narrator tries to create a normal life for himself within the surreal chaos of Dickens. For example, he has a lifelong, devoted crush on Marpessa, who is literally the "girl next door"—but does not see a woman naked until one of his father's teaching assistants sits on his bed uninvited. It is telling that the narrator suggests that such an event should not be analyzed through "Freudian hermeneutics," meaning Freud's theory of how sexuality develops through the family before (usually) adjusting to something more "normal."

One night, the narrator hears Marpessa say the name "Hominy" in his dreams. He wakes and runs to Hominy's door, where he finds a note saying "I'z in de back," which is his "memorabilia room." The narrator finds Hominy naked and hanging from the neck. Hardly breathing, Hominy requests: "Cut my penis off and stuff it into my mouth." He is holding a can of kerosene and a lighter, which the narrator confiscates. He then cuts down "the self-lynching drama queen." While caring for Hominy's wounds, the narrator reads his biography, which includes his roles as "Messenger Boy, Bell Boy, Bus Boy, Pin Boy, Pool Boy, House Boy, Box Boy, Copy Boy, and Delivery Boy."

Having spent his life playing caricatures who are placed at the receiving end of racist jokes, Hominy has internalized racist ideology such that he now enacts it on himself. This is taken to a comic and disturbing extreme when he attempts to lynch himself. While Hominy's actions are darkly funny, they also point to the profound and unsolvable difficulty of dealing with racial trauma and the legacy of anti-black violence. His way of dealing with these things may be ridiculous, but perhaps there is no easy or right way.

The narrator asks: "Why, Hominy?" Calling the narrator "massa," Hominy replies that he wanted to "feel relevant." The narrator tells Hominy that he's not a slave and that he is not Hominy's master, but Hominy replies that sometimes it's better to just accept that he is "a slave who just also happens to be an actor." The narrator laments that Hominy is now completely crazy, choosing to take literally the cliché: "I owe you my life, I'll be your slave." However, Hominy makes the narrator promise that he will never institutionalize him.

The moment when Hominy decides to voluntarily enslave himself to the narrator is one of the most extreme and comic examples of racial regress in the novel. Through its absurdity, it calls into question what obligations we have to people who voluntarily surrender their freedom, inflict pain on themselves, and/or assert their own inferiority compared to others.

Hominy says he wants to thank the narrator for saving his life, and then he asks that the narrator beat him. The narrator asks if he cannot do something else, and Hominy asks him to "bring back **Dickens**." In a dissociative episode, the narrator beats Hominy, an act that traumatizes him for life. Afterward, Hominy advises the narrator that his efforts to reinvigorate Dickens have thus far been misguided. In a similar way to the problem of not being able to see the forest for the trees, the narrator "ain't seeing the plantation for the niggers."

The challenge of bringing back Dickens forms the central plot of the novel, with many other subplots woven in to this main story. In a way, the narrator's mission is comparable to traditional narratives in which a hero returns home (such as the Odyssey*). This quest takes on a strange new form in* The Sellout*, however, as in order to "find" home, the narrator must also resurrect it.*

CHAPTER 6

The narrator finds slaveholding a tricky business. Hominy has no skills other than subservience, and spends his days at "work" doing whatever he feels like. Sometimes Hominy poses as a footstool, but most of the time he watches the narrator carry out his farming work. The narrator regularly attempts to free Hominy, but Hominy refuses to be freed, arguing that "true freedom is having the right to be a slave." Most of the time, slaveholding causes the narrator more anguish than anything, but on rare occasions Hominy will bring the narrator a pitcher of cold lemonade and the narrator feels that it is all worth it. The narrator tries to get Hominy a therapist, but Hominy complains that all the therapists he saw listed were white.

In some ways, Hominy's situation resembles that of a sexual submissive—someone who derives pleasure from behaving in a servile, slave-like manner. This pleasure is often sexual, but does not have to be. In Hominy's case, the satisfaction he gets from being a slave does not appear to be erotic. Rather, he believes that being a slave will help him be "relevant" and exercise his "true freedom." Although his behavior is bizarre, from a philosophical perspective his argument about freedom is compelling.

The narrator regularly takes Hominy to a BDSM club, where he pays for Hominy to be whipped by dominatrices. Although all of them happen to be white women, Hominy doesn't mind. The sessions cost $200 an hour plus "racial incidentals," extra charges for the use of racial slurs and insults. Driving home from a session, Hominy and the narrator discuss the other Little Rascals. Some believe the Rascals are cursed, as aside from Hominy they have all died unusual, premature deaths.

The idea that the Little Rascals are cursed is perhaps outlandish, but it is related to the well-known phenomenon of child stars facing difficulties later in life, whether in the form of mental health problems, drug and alcohol abuse, or other issues. In Hominy's case, his problems are compounded by the racist nature of the roles he played as a child.

During the drive, the narrator realizes that the signs indicating where to turn off for **Dickens** have been removed. He commissions new signs and asks Hominy if it feels better to get whipped or look at the new signs, and Hominy replies that "the whip feels good on the back, but the sign feels good in the heart." In another spot, the narrator hand-draws a sign that says DICKENS in blue letters. He hopes to one day have enough courage to make two more signs, one advising: "WATCH OUT FOR FALLING HOME PRICES," and the other warning: "CAUTION—BLACK ON BLACK CRIME AHEAD."

The link between Hominy's two desires—to be a slave and to see Dickens come back—is not immediately obvious. Yet as the narrator's homemade signs reveal, Dickens represents many negative stereotypes about black people and communities. Perhaps Hominy's embrace of slavery is therefore related to his embrace of these negative stereotypes, and thus to his desire for Dickens to return.

CHAPTER 7

The narrator calls the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals "the closest approximation [**Dickens**] had to a representative government." Since the narrator's father's death, the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals have essentially turned into a Foy Cheshire fan club. Foy complains that he recently tried to read *Huckleberry Finn* to his grandchildren, but had to stop because the book featured so many uses of the n-word. He decided to rewrite the novel, replacing the n-word with "warrior" and the word "slave" with "dark-skinned volunteer." His words attract support from the crowd.

Foy's relationship to race, racism, and American history is the polar opposite of Hominy's. While Hominy embraces the ugly reality of racial oppression to the point that he literally enslaves himself, Foy goes to the other extreme by trying to deny that this history ever took place. He also represents a kind of extreme of "political correctness"—avoiding the language of offense without actually doing anything about the lived injustices that are the source of such offense.

The narrator doesn't like attending these meetings. After his father's death there was a brief possibility that the narrator would become the next "lead thinker," but the narrator declined and the role went to Foy instead. Foy calls the narrator "The Sellout," never using his real name. At today's meeting, Foy proposes that the group vote to put his revised version of *Huckleberry Finn* on middle-school syllabi. For the first time in ten years, the narrator speaks during a meeting, asking which term—"black folk" or "black folks"—is the correct one.

We never learn the narrator's first name, though other identifiers such as his last name (Mee) and nicknames are provided. Foy's dismissive labeling of the narrator as "The Sellout" suggests that he believes the narrator is betraying his father's legacy. Yet note that we never learn the narrator's father's first name either. Perhaps the narrator in fact inherited *his lack of identity from his father.*

The narrator believes that the members of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals are "wereniggers," a term he uses to describe people who slip from corporate elegance to inner city "howling" at night. Foy chastises the narrator for not taking Mark Twain's use of the n-word seriously, to which the narrator replies that he doesn't think Twain used the word enough. He thinks that adults should explain the existence of the n-word to black children, as they are likely to be called it at some point in their lives. He curses the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals for wanting to "disinvent" stereotypes rather than acknowledge their existence.

The narrator often presents himself as unintelligent and unassuming—recall when he told the officer he was "nobody special." On the other hand, in moments like this it is evident that he is more clear-sighted than most of the other characters in the novel. The group of men at Dum Dum Donuts may style themselves as "intellectuals," but the narrator's reasoning in this passage is obviously superior to theirs.

The narrator says that he would rather be called "nigger" than a word ending in "-ess" like "Negress" or "giantess." Someone murmurs "problematic," which the narrator thinks is the word black intellectuals use when they feel insecure. Foy tells the other members to respect "this sellout," who is the son of the group's founder. When making presentations, the Dum Dums use software Foy invented call EmpowerPoint. Yet the narrator decides to use an old projector instead to make his presentation. He draws a diagram of a square, placing binary opposites such as "White Americans / Dickens" and "The Best of Times / the Worst of Times" on the inside and outside of the square.

As this passage shows, much of the humor in the novel comes from playing around with names and titles. On one level this is simple wordplay—connecting the town of Dickens to the writer Charles Dickens, and the famous first lines of his novel A Tale of Two Cities*—but on another it is a way of exploring the power and meaning of language. The narrator's thoughts about finding words that end in "-ess" more insulting than the n-word, for example, raises questions about why particular words related to particular targeted groups are considered more offensive than others.*

The narrator announces that he is "bringing back the city of **Dickens**," and everyone laughs. Foy turns over a nearby portrait of the narrator's father and asks the narrator why he hopes to bring Dickens back. The narrator doesn't answer, instead choosing to "space out" for the rest of the meeting. After it's over, the "notorious gangbanger" and Dum Dum member King Cuz, formerly known as Curtis Baxter, approaches the narrator. He says he wants to talk, and drags the narrator outside.

Foy and the other Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals seem to believe that the narrator is dishonoring his father by seeking to bring back Dickens. Yet considering the amount of time the narrator's father devoted to the community, it seems like that he would want his son to bring it back. Again this shows Foy's difference to the narrator and his father—Foy wants to avoid or erase anything negative associated with blackness in America.

King Cuz admits that he likes the narrator's plan to bring back **Dickens**. He says he started coming to Dum Dum meetings because he liked the narrator's father. He leaves, advising the narrator to think about his plan for black Chinese restaurants and to "get some pussy" because he is too uptight. Foy enters and tells the narrator to ignore Cuz, because "pussy is overrated." Foy hosts a series of television programs with names like *Blacktotum* and *Just the Blacks, Ma'am*. Foy warns the narrator: "I know what you up to." He warns the narrator that he will not let him mess with the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals. The narrator replies with Cuz's catchphrase: "No doubt, nigger."

King Cuz's comments about the narrator needing to "get some pussy" suggests that the narrator is out of place in a hypermasculine, sexualized world. While Foy may claim that "pussy is overrated," recall that he originally blew his fortune on drugs and women, suggesting he does not actually believe his own advice. The narrator, meanwhile, has thus far expressed little interest in sex, or in any woman except Marpessa.

CHAPTER 8

The narrator buys a line-marking machine and white spray paint, and paints a border around **Dickens**. At first, people who see him do it think he's a performance artist or simply crazy. However, after a while it becomes clear that he is marking the boundaries of Dickens, and suddenly huge groups of Dickensians start helping. Sometimes, after the narrator finishes for the day, someone else picks up the spray paint and keeps going. Before long, the border is finished.

Drawing a line around Dickens may seem like a simplistic and even childish way to begin bringing the city back, but as contemporary political debates around immigration show, many people believe that in order for a place to exist, it must have a clear (and strictly enforced) border.

A police officer called Officer Mendez teasingly makes a wanted poster for the narrator. The poster begins: "MISSING: HOMETOWN. Have you seen my city? Description: Mostly Black and Brown." The narrator gratefully sticks up the poster with chewing gum. In the first few days after the border is painted, the narrator feels nervous about crossing it, in part because it reminds him of the chalk line drawn around his father's dead body. However, he likes the "artifice" of the line, and realizes that his decision to "quarantine" Dickens is a good start in bringing back the city.

The end of this chapter shows that the narrator feels ambivalent about borders. He understands that the border he has drawn around Dickens is arbitrary and artificial—however, rather than worrying about this, he actually likes it. Perhaps this is because having artificial and arbitrary borders is a trait shared by "real" cities, which makes Dickens seem like one of them.

CHAPTER 9

Sometimes a terrible smell known as the Stank, which comes from a nearby oil refinery, descends on **Dickens**. Two weeks after the border is finished, both the narrator and Hominy are woken up at 4 am by the Stank. Hominy offers the narrator some hash, and the narrator decides to ride the **bus** to the beach in order to escape the Stank and see Marpessa. A calf wanders in through the open door, also hoping to escape the smell. Hominy tells the narrator that his birthday is next week, and the narrator wonders "what to get the slave who doesn't even want his freedom." The narrator asks Hominy to take the calf back out, but Hominy refuses.

Hominy and the narrator's relationship is constructed on a pattern of mutual wish-fulfilment. While Hominy may not be a good worker, he does occasionally bring the narrator things that make him happy, such as cold lemonade or hash. Similarly, the narrator seeks to fulfil Hominy's desires, even if this means paying for him to be whipped at over $200 an hour. Needless to say, this is also a comically absurd inversion of the usual master/slave dynamic.

The narrator catches the 5:43 am #125 westbound **bus**, driven by Marpessa. Years ago, Marpessa marred a "has-been gangster rapper" named MC Panache, which makes her assume—in the narrator's eyes, wrongly—that she and the narrator have broken up. The narrator tries to sit near Marpessa, but after she tells him "Fuck you" he goes to the back of the bus. The narrator reflects on the shame associated with riding the bus in Los Angeles, a city where "walking is akin to begging in the streets."

While there may be an overall stigma attached to riding the bus in Los Angeles, the narrator does not seem to care about this very much personally. Rather, his love for Marpessa means that he enthusiastically takes her bus, even if this means facing stigma from the public and getting cussed out by her.

The municipal bus system is called the RTD, which is supposed to stand for Rapid Transit District, but to people like the narrator it stands for "Rough Tough and Dangerous." When the narrator was seven, he wrote a scientific paper about whose personal space was invaded the most quickly on the bus, concluding that the answer was women. Black men were the least likely to have anyone sit next to them. The narrator watches a newcomer to LA, thinking about all the people who move to the city "aspiring to be white."

The narrator's scientific paper raises an interesting point about the way the oppression of women (including black women) differs from the oppression of black men. Women are subjected to intrusive and disrespectful invasions of their personal space, but black men are more likely to be feared and stigmatized. Although they are very different, both are harmful.

A passenger who keeps pressing the stop button calls Marpessa a "fat fucking cow," which the narrator knows she will not tolerate. However, he does not see what happens because he falls asleep until the last stop. Getting up, he asks Marpessa if she misses him, and she replies that she misses his plums. The narrator remembers when they "rekindled [their] childhood friendship on the **bus**" when he was 17 and Marpessa 21. They caught each other up on their lives over the two-hour bus route. Eventually, Marpessa agreed to letting the narrator take her to his high school prom. He was in a graduating class of one, making him and Marpessa the only attendees.

Much of the novel is vulgar, bizarre, and shocking, but in contrast, the narrator's relationship with Marpessa is rather sweet and innocent. The narrator finds respite from the strange and hectic nature of the rest of his life through his devotion to Marpessa, which has endured since he was a child and retained its childish purity. The humorous image of a prom with only one attendee is also a joke about the stereotype of young black people dropping out of high school.

Early the next morning, the narrator had his first kiss in the back of a pick-up truck his father was driving. His father kept turning around and signing "fuck her already" with his hands. While they were dating, Marpessa and the narrator declared books, authors, artists, and silent movies "theirs." They especially loved Kafka. Back in the present, Marpessa opens the **bus** doors and asks after Hominy. The narrator tells her that he has an idea that he needs her help with. Then he sees that she has what looks like a pregnant belly and asks if she is pregnant, to which she replies: "Bonbon, don't play yourself."

This passage continues to emphasize the innocence and sweetness of the narrator and Marpessa's relationship, in contrast to their surrounding context—including the vulgar behavior of the narrator's father. Rather than inheriting his father's womanizing ways, the narrator has a more respectful attitude. The fact that he and Marpessa share a love of books, art, and silent movies shows that he respects her as an intellectual equal.

The narrator is thrilled that Marpessa has called him by his childhood nickname. She apologizes for treating him rudely before, blaming it on the stress of her job. Years before, Marpessa had a baby, whom she gave the middle name Bonbon. When the narrator asks about Hominy's birthday present, Marpessa tells him to "get the fuck off the **bus**." The narrator boasts that it was he who painted the line around **Dickens**. He declares that he's "bringing the city back. Bringing you back, too!" Marpessa wishes him luck and drives away. The narrator lights his blunt and a nearby white boy asks where he got it. He replies: "I know some Dutch coffee shop owners."

The word Bonbon means candy in French (and other European languages). It comes from the repetition of the word "bon," meaning good. The fact that this was the narrator's childhood nickname suggests that others thought of him as sweet and cute—and perhaps still do. The humorous exchange at the end of this passage also undercuts the stereotype of black people as drug dealers.

CHAPTER 10

Later Hominy and the narrator are riding the **bus**, and Hominy feels like he cannot wait to give up his seat to a white person. A woman with dreadlocks gets on the bus and wishes Hominy a happy birthday, telling him that "Happy Birthday, Hominy!" was emblazoned on the front of the bus. Hominy tells the woman that his birthday present is a sign on the bus telling passengers that seating is reserved for "seniors, disabled, and whites." When the narrator had asked what Hominy wanted as a present, Hominy replied that he wanted "some racism."

Hominy's wish for "some racism" is obviously ridiculous, even in the context of his seemingly masochistic personality. At the same time, the narrator's desire to give him whatever he wants—even if it is something as absurd as a sign on the bus demanding racial discrimination—is somewhat sweet. It points to the remarkable depth of the narrator's love for Hominy.

The narrator recently realized that Hominy and Rodney King have the same birthday, April 2. He wonders if LA contains "racism vortexes" and mulls over the history of racist incidents in the city. A man on the **bus** claims that he is offended, and the narrator asks what he means, claiming that offence isn't a real emotion. Marpessa is driving, having agreed to "convert the #125 bus into a rolling party center" out of love for Hominy. The angry man calls the narrator a "race pervert" and claims that he has "set black people back five hundred years." Meanwhile, Hominy finally gets his wish of giving up his seat to a white woman.

The man's accusation that Hominy is a "race pervert" strengthens the association between Hominy's desires for racism and erotic masochism. This association raises the question of which desires are considered acceptable and which aren't. Part of the problem in this instance is that Hominy's desire for racism isn't just affecting himself, but other members of public (and, by the man's logic, black people at large). Rodney King was a black man who was brutally beaten by LA police in 1991, sparking many riots in response.

After the white woman stays on the **bus** for the entire three-hour route and back again, Marpessa suspiciously asks the narrator if he knows her. Marpessa calls the woman to the front of the bus, and the narrator is stunned by how beautiful the woman is. Suddenly Marpessa demands that everyone she doesn't personally know disembarks. When the woman tries to leave, Marpessa stops her and asks her name. The woman replies: "Laura Jane." The bus has suddenly been transformed into a moving party with an open bar, casino, and DJ. Laura Jane dances with Hominy, who grips the overhead pole.

Although it is not made explicit why Marpessa is so suspicious of the white woman, it may have something to do with the fact that the woman is riding the bus in Dickens when she is white. This highlights the dramatic extent of racial segregation in the city, and calls into question whether things really have advanced that much since the Jim Crow era (as wells as whether the narrator's "re-segregating" idea might not be so absurd after all).

Laura Jane tells Marpessa that she is an actress who works part-time as a submissive to pay the bills. She explains that she's often turned down for roles because she's "not suburban enough," which is code for looking too Jewish. She adds that it makes her wish she was black because black people get all the roles. Marpessa starts strangling her in response to this. Marpessa then goes on a rant about the racial logic of advertising. In the middle of this Laura Jane claims to be offended, saying that Marpessa is "a beautiful woman who just happens to be black," and scolding her for thinking race is the problem, rather than class.

Laura Jane voices many of the misguided views white people typically hold about race. For example, she mistakenly believes that being black would provide her with an advantage, rather than cause her to face further discrimination in most other areas of life. She also disingenuously diminishes the significance of race ("who just happens to be black") and believes that focus on race distracts from the more important goal of focusing on class.

Laura Jane kisses Marpessa's forehead, then returns to Hominy. The narrator stops Marpessa from hitting Laura Jane, which leads Marpessa to accuse the narrator of being "a fucking sellout." She claims that this is why she broke up with him. Marpessa drives the **bus** onto the beach and into about a foot of ocean. Laura Jane strips off her clothes and leaps out into the water. Hominy asks if they are in **Dickens**, and the narrator replies that "Dickens exists in our heads." Hominy then asks when they are going to get his *Little Rascal* films from Foy, and the narrator promises that they will once they get the city back.

People accuse the narrator of being a "sellout" for different reasons. However, each time the accusation is made it is based on the idea that the narrator is somehow betraying his race. Foy makes the accusation because the narrator does not subscribe to Foy's own views about blackness, whereas Marpessa calls him a sellout because he defends Laura Jane against her, thereby betraying her.

Marpessa sees the narrator staring lustfully at Laura Jane's naked body and curses him for "fiending after some white bitch like every other LA nigger." Marpessa asks when the narrator fell in love with her, and he replies it was when she complained about the way black women are described in literature in the Dum Dum Donuts book club. Marpessa pointed out that black women are always identified by the food metaphors describing the shade of their skin—"Honey-colored this! Dark chocolate that!"—and declared "that's why black literature sucks!"

Marpessa criticizes the narrator for being weak-willed, and he loves her for being the opposite—standing up for herself and being unafraid to voice her opinion (even when she is in the minority). This reverses the stereotypical idea that men find strong-minded women off-putting, and that men are themselves naturally more dominant.

The narrator does not believe that Marpessa ever loved him, but then she tells him she fell in love with him when they went out to eat and, unlike other black men, he never insisted on sitting with his face to the door.

The end of this chapter suggests that, despite her complaints, perhaps Marpessa does like how the narrator is humbler and more unassuming than other men. The idea of sitting facing the door is a tradition of chivalry—that the man should be watchful to keep the woman safe—but also of suspicion and paranoia, which plays into stereotypes of black men leading violent lives.

CITY LITES: AN INTERLUDE

The narrator has always been fascinated by sister cities. Cities sometimes become sisters as a sign of reconciliation, sometimes in a kind of "shotgun wedding," and sometimes to deliberately "piss off their mother countries." Cities that have a hard time finding their "soul mate" use a matchmaking service called Sister City Global. Two days after Hominy's birthday, a City Match Consultant from the company named Susan Silverman calls the narrator and tells him they couldn't find **Dickens** on the map. When the narrator explains the situation, she says it doesn't matter, and that they will still find Dickens a match.

The book's satirical take on the concept of "sister cities" lampoons the somewhat childish nature of international relations. The idea that cities would have a matchmaking service shows that relations between different cities and countries can be no less petty than the relationships between individual people looking to go on first dates.

Susan tells the narrator that **Dickens**' three most compatible cities are Juárez, Chernobyl, and Kinshasa. The narrator is confused because Chernobyl isn't even a city, but nonetheless enthusiastically accepts all three. Susan replies that sadly they have all rejected Dickens—Juárez because Dickens is too violent, Chernobyl because of the city's pollution, and Kinshasa because Dickens is "too black." The narrator is too embarrassed to tell Hominy about his failure, so he lies to make it seem like Dickens is still getting a sister city.

The fact that Kinshasa—the capital city of the Democratic Republic of the Congo—rejects Dickens for being "too black" may at first appear little more than an ironic joke. However, it also relates to a theory that "blackness" as a concept (rather than, for example, being of African descent) emerged from slavery. This is supported by the fact that descendants of slaves can face stigma even from other black/African people, and that "blackness" as a concept was only invented in the context of a contrast to "whiteness."

Hominy is so disappointed that he attempts to sell himself, standing on an auction block in the narrator's driveway for a week. The narrator attempts to get him to move by warning him that Frederick Douglass or a group of Quaker abolitionists are on the way, but Hominy stays in place. He declares that he refuses to work for a master "who can't manage a simple task such as finding a sister city." The narrator points out that Hominy doesn't do any work for him anyway.

Hominy certainly gives the experience of being enslaved a different twist. Rather than being forcefully subjected to the narrator's whims, Hominy himself sets the terms of his enslavement and seems to believe that the narrator needs to deserve the privilege of having him as a slave—a perversely empowering gesture.

In the end the narrator decides to match **Dickens** with three cities that also "disappeared under dubious circumstances." The first is Thebes, the set from a 1923 silent movie. The second is Döllersheim, Austria, which was the birthplace of Hitler's grandfather. Hitler bombed it into oblivion in an effort to disguise his own Jewish roots. After much competition from various contenders, the narrator names the Lost City of White Male Privilege as Dickens' final sister city. Many people deny that this city exists, while others blame the city for its own disappearance. The narrator assures the city that it has an alliance in Dickens, "the Last Bastion of Blackness."

The Lost City of White Male Privilege highlights the ways that race is or is not considered "real." Race as we understand it is a human construct—although people point to biological factors including skin color as part of what constitutes race, the categorization of people into different racial groups is a social system invented by humans. The Lost City of White Male Privilege is thus arguably only as real as people think it is.

CHAPTER 11

Charisma Molina whispers: "Too many Mexicans," a phrase that the narrator suggests has become a kind of mantra in America. The claim that there are too many Mexicans is, he thinks, an excuse for black people to "remain stuck in our ways." Charisma is the assistant principal of Chaff Middle School and Marpessa's best friend. When she claims that there are "too many Mexicans," it is the first time the narrator has ever heard a Mexican-American say this.

By this point in the novel, the reader has probably become accustomed to characters making unexpected, perverse statements about race—from Hominy's love of racism and slavery to Charisma's claim that there are too many Mexicans. While funny, these statements also convey the insidious and alarming nature of internalized racism.

Career Day at Chaff is normally depressing, and does more to scare the children away from the represented careers than encourage them. Charisma has asked the narrator to give a more exciting presentation than the previous year, when he was so boring the students threw his own tomatoes at him. The narrator is reluctant to come back, but agrees after Charisma tells him that Marpessa will be there. On that day, Marpessa doesn't so much as look at the narrator. She gives a *Fast and Furious*-style presentation, zooming her **bus** around at hyperspeed. The children are captivated, and one white teacher is so moved by Marpessa's presentation that he starts to cry.

This passage subtly mocks the figure of the sentimental, self-righteous white teacher who works at a school with a largely black and Latin student population. Although Marpessa's "Fast and Furious"-style Careers Day presentation may be cool, it is not particularly instructive. However, the teacher's sentimentality causes him to shed a tear anyway.

The "pastoral" section of Career Day begins with a presentation by Nestor Lopez, whose family were the first Mexicans to move into the **Dickens** farms. As a child, the narrator always thought Nestor was cool, but over time they drifted apart, "as black and Latin boys are wont to do." Nestor gives a rodeo presentation, and the narrator is next. The students preemptively start yawning and complaining. The narrator brings in a calf for the students to pet, which they do with fascination and enthusiasm. The narrator is happy that his presentation is a hit, and tells the students he is from Dickens. However, they object that they have never heard of the place.

This passage shows the shocking speed with which major societal change can be accepted. While the narrator and many other "Dickensians" think about Dickens all the time, the younger generation—who assumedly grew up in a world where Dickens already didn't exist—never knew it was there in the first place. Just as a new reality can quickly become the norm, so too can history be forgotten.

The narrator tells the children that he is going to demonstrate castration for them. He explains the three different kinds of castration, miming each one on the calf. A young black girl named Sheila Clark volunteers to do the castration, and carries it out smoothly. She holds up the calf's bloody testicles triumphantly. Marpessa drives away. Charisma tells the narrator that ever since he put up the signs on **Marpessa's bus** telling passengers to give up their seats for white people, the bus has become the safest place in the city. She tells him that "the specter of segregation has brought Dickens together."

Throughout the novel, expectations are upended when things do not progress in the way that they are "supposed" to—meaning that they fall outside of, or even reverse, accepted logic. This is particularly true when it comes to race. Here, Charisma suggests that rather than making life harder for people in Dickens, segregation has actually created a safe and peaceful environment in the microcosm of the bus.

Charisma explains that she wants the school to become like **Marpessa's bus**. When the narrator was a child, everyone in **Dickens** was black. Marpessa didn't realize her best friend was Mexican until Charisma's mom picked her up from school. Charisma herself exclaimed: "Oh fuck, I *am* Mexican! *¡Hijo de puta!*" Charisma gathers a group of students and discusses their bleak career prospects in Spanish. Although the narrator can only speak other languages "to the extent that I can sexually harass women of all ethnicities," he understands that Charisma is warning the children that they are doomed.

This passage suggests that knowledge about one's own racial identity can vary greatly depending on one's social circumstances. Although Charisma was born into a Mexican family, the fact that she went to school in Dickens meant that both she and the other kids around her assumed she was black. This shows that racial identities are more flexible and subjective than we might assume. The narrator's comment about his skill with language also addresses the stereotype of men, and particularly black men, as being sexually aggressive.

Under Charisma's orders, the students make an enormous bonfire of books and set fire to them. Charisma tells the narrator that the books were given to the school by Foy Cheshire under an initiative called "Fire the Canon!" in which he rewrote every book on the curriculum. They include *Uncle Tom's Condo*, *The Point Guard in the Rye*, and *The Great Blacksby*. The narrator joins in with the torching. The kids tease each other for doing things that are "gay," and one of them concludes that the only thing not "gay" is actually being gay.

At the beginning of the novel, Foy Cheshire seemed extremely powerful and influential. However, it is now revealed that his ideas are not as popular as it first appeared. In fact, Charisma resents Foy's "fire the Canon!" initiative so much that she stages a book burning, which recalls the burnings that historically take place under repressive, totalitarian governments.

It starts raining heavily, and everyone scrambles to leave. The narrator tells Charisma that she should segregate the school, and as soon as he does so he realizes that segregation is also the answer to bringing back **Dickens**. People assume that integration is a good thing, but integration is often used as an excute to cover up the continued existence of racism. After giving it some thought, Charisma tells the narrator to go ahead and segregate the school, but warns him that there are "too many Mexicans." The narrator is inspired to adopt a new career: City Planner in Charge of Restoration and Segregation.

A central paradox of the book appears in this passage: in order to achieve the "progress" of restoring Dickens, the narrator decides to employ a tactic of regress by bringing back segregation. Of course, the narrator's goal in the first place is a confusion of progress and regress, as resurrecting Dickens is a mission of bringing back something that once already existed.

CHAPTER 12

It rains all summer, and the narrator frets over his crops and his plans for segregation. Hominy loves the idea of re-segregating the school, hoping that it will lead to reverse white flight—what the narrator calls "Ku Klux Influx." However, Hominy does not have any practical tips for how to actually reinstitute segregation. On top of practical difficulties, the narrator is also afflicted with uncertainty and guilt. He sits in his car and thinks about his plans.

To some extent, what the narrator calls "Ku Klux Influx" is actually just gentrification. The two concepts are slightly different, however—rather than being instigated by segregation, gentrification normally causes *it. At the same time, gentrification could convincingly be described as the precise opposite of white flight—and so Beatty's brutal renaming of the phenomenon strips away any comfortable euphemisms about what is really going on when communities of color are displaced by wealthy whites.*

When the narrator was a child, his father briefly considered sending him to a "fancy prep school." However, his father then read a dubious study stating that black children performed better in segregated schools. The narrator now considers that the home schooling he received from his father was "a most segregated education," and suddenly he understands how to segregate the school. The narrator gets home to find Hominy standing protectively by the **satsuma** tree. Hominy discovered his love of satsumas while working on *The Little Rascals*. The narrator's satsumas are in bad shape. He has never whispered to the plants before, but after Hominy leaves he talks to them for hours.

The idea of re-segregation in order to improve life for black students may sound ridiculous—particularly given the failure of "separate but equal" policies and the failure to provide adequate education for black children under Jim Crow. However, some studies have in fact shown that black students perform better in segregated schools, so long as those schools have adequate resources (which historically was obviously not the case).

CHAPTER 13

The only time the narrator experienced "direct" racial discrimination came after he told his father racism did not exist in America. That night, the narrator's father woke his son and took him on a trip to "deepest, whitest America," to a random Mississippi town. The narrator's father took them to a dilapidated general store. Three white men were standing outside, alongside a black attendant named Clyde. As Clyde filled up the gas, the narrator's father asked if he and his son could hang around for a while, and Clyde agreed.

Again, the narrator's father is not afraid to expose his son to danger in order to teach him a lesson. The book is critical of this kind of parenting model, suggesting that it is more traumatizing than enlightening. On the other hand, the book also criticizes the overly protective, delusional practices of Foy, who literally attempts to edit the racism out of the world for his grandchildren.

The narrator's father explained that they were there to engage in some "reckless eyeballing." Thanks to his instruction in black slang and his knowledge of Ishmael Reed, the narrator knew this referred to the act of black men looking at Southern white women. The narrator's father took out a pair of binoculars and began staring at a woman (Rebecca) sweeping her porch, exclaiming: "Look at those tits!" He then told the narrator to whistle at her.

The narrator's father's recklessness in this scene is extreme. "Reckless eyeballing" led to the gruesome deaths of many black men through lynching, including the prominent case of Emmett Till. In many of these instances, it wasn't true eyeballing, but merely the suspicion or false accusation that led to lynching occurring.

The narrator tried to whistle, but had never learned how. He managed to shoddily whistle Ravel's *Boléro*, which infuriated both the white men and his father. His father exclaimed that he was supposed to wolf whistle, and let out his own spectacular whistle while reckless eyeballing Rebecca. She responded enthusiastically, and the narrator's father handed his son $5, saying he would be back in a minute. While the pair were gone, the three white men discussed the situation in a good-natured manner. One commented on Rebecca's preference for black men, while another responded "at least she knows what she likes," teasing the first man for being bisexual.

Again, the expectations of what will happen in this scene are violated in an extreme and comic way. Not only does the narrator's father's lesson to his son fail, but the whole trip ends up turning into little more than an excuse for the narrator's father to have sex with another woman. Furthermore, rather than reacting angrily, the white men seem to have a neutral or even positive regard for these interracial relations.

The narrator was relieved that he was not killed, and went into the store to buy a Coke. He was reminded of a racist joke he didn't fully understand. He realized he needs to pee, and asked to use the restroom. The attendant told him that the restroom was for customers only; when the narrator objected that his father just bought gas, the attendant pointed out that the narrator was not his father. He then directed the narrator to an abandoned bus station where there was a bathroom across the street. The narrator walks over to the dirty and smelly bathroom, but backs away when he sees a sign saying "Whites Only." He ends up peeing on an anthill outside.

In the end, the narrator's experience of "direct" racial discrimination has nothing to do with interracial sex at all. It is rather the very thing that he is now trying to bring back in Dickens: segregation of public facilities. It is significant that the narrator takes the "Whites Only" sign seriously despite the fact that the bus stop is abandoned in the first place. This points to the power of official, authoritative language and signs.

CHAPTER 14

After Marpessa married MC Panache, the two of them moved to an affluent black neighborhood named the Dons, ten miles north of **Dickens**. Before they broke up, Marpessa and the narrator would dream of moving there together. After she got married, the narrator would sometimes drive up there and sit outside her house. He spends a lot of time there during the rainy summer while he is planning to segregate the school. He drives up one night and is surprised to see the #125 **bus** parked outside her house. He can see that his sign indicating "priority seating" for whites is still up.

The narrator's love for Marpessa is so intense that he is happy to sit in his car outside her house just to be near to her. Depending on one's interpretation, this is either romantic or creepy. Indeed, during this time of stress over his plans to re-segregate Dickens, a link forms between the narrator's two, seemingly impossible goals: bringing back Dickens and getting back together with Marpessa—two ways of coming "home."

The narrator then feels a gun pressed against his head and sees that it is held by Marpessa's brother Stevie. Stevie drops the gun and embraces the narrator in a "bear hug." King Cuz is standing nearby. Cuz tells the narrator that MC Panache managed to get Stevie out of prison. Stevie asks the narrator what he is doing outside Marpessa's house, and the narrator replies that he wanted to show Marpessa a picture of his **satsuma** tree. Stevie tells the narrator that the **bus** is there because Marpessa thinks that what the narrator did to it is "special." The narrator gives Stevie an almost-ripe satsuma, and Stevie announces: "That's what freedom smells like." He then asks the narrator about the black Chinese restaurants.

Compared to Stevie, King Cuz, and MC Panache—all "gangbangers," some of whom have spent time in prison—the narrator is remarkably innocent. This innocence is emphasized by his supposed desire to show Marpessa a picture of his satsuma tree. Indeed, the satsumas themselves seem to represent the sweetness of the narrator and of his love for Marpessa.

CHAPTER 15

All the neighborhood children gather in the narrator's front yard, driven by the Stank. The narrator's **satsuma** tree clears the air around his property "like some ten-foot-tall air freshener." The next day the children come back, asking if the satsumas are ready yet. Hominy tells them a story about a black child who "turns white" by putting flour on his face. The kids are not sure if Hominy is joking or not, but they are still captivated by his "minstrelsy."

Although it at first seemed unlikely, the narrator is now having a more and more positive impact on the community. Not only has the segregation of the bus created a peaceful environment that may now be replicated at the school, but his satsuma tree helps local children escape the Stank, and symbolizes hope, nourishment, and opportunity.

The narrator gives everyone gathered around his house milk and one **satsuma** each. The crowd quickly strips the rest of the tree in a frenzy. The narrator then shepherds a young girl to Chaff Middle School. Once there, he looks across the road at the fake construction site he's established for the Wheaton Academy Charter Magnet School of the Arts, Humanities, Business, Fashion, and Everything Else. He has blown up a watercolor painting of the Center of Marine Sciences at the University of Eastern Maine and attached it to the front of the construction site. The painting features white students whose images were taken from the websites of other private schools. A sign promises that the Wheaton Academy is "Coming Soon!"

In the end, the narrator realizes he does not even need to bring real white people to Dickens in order to re-segregate Chaff and the rest of the city. Simply the thought of this new, wealthy, white school arriving in the community will—he assumes—be enough. Again, this points to the somewhat artificial nature of race while also emphasizing the powerful impact that ideas *of race have on society. White students do not actually have to come to Dickens—the point is that people* think *they are coming.*

The mother of some Chaff students is asking Charisma what her children need to do in order to get into Wheaton. Charisma tells her that they need to be white, though then she adds: "But you didn't hear it from me." Marpessa drives up in her bus, her face covered in **satsuma** juice. She says: "Okay, Bonbon, you win," and takes the joint out of the narrator's mouth to smoke herself.

It might be surprising that simply eating the narrator's satsumas should have such a transformative impact on Marpessa. The fact that she has satsuma juice all over her face conveys the erotic undertones of this exchange, yet it is also clear that there is something deeper going on.

CHAPTER 16

Later that day, Foy Cheshire arrives to take photographs of the Wheaton Academy. He asks the narrator who is responsible for the school, claiming that "only the forces of evil would stick an all-white school in the middle of the ghetto." He believes it is the work of a CIA conspiracy against him or an HBO documentary about him. Someone throws a **satsuma** at Foy's head, and when the narrator goes to help him, Foy pushes him away. Foy stands up, puts on sunglasses and declares: "I shall return, motherfucker!"

Now that the tide has turned against him, the reader might be inclined to feel sympathy for Foy. Indeed, the narrator appears moved by this sympathy, which is why he offers to help Foy. Foy's rejection of this help shows that his ego trumps any other consideration. It is even suggested that he only cares about the re-segregation plans because he thinks they are part of a conspiracy against him.

CHAPTER 17

The narrator claims that he is frigid, because when he was sex he lies completely still. When Marpessa kisses him with lips that taste of **satsuma**, he freezes, "motionless." However, she doesn't seem to mind. The narrator asks if they are getting back together, and she replies that she is thinking about it. Marpessa is the only person to "diagnose" the narrator—even his father claimed to have no idea what was wrong with him. Marpessa, on the other hand, once declared that the narrator has "Attachment Disorder," a condition involving problems with social attachment. The narrator concludes that it was "a miracle" he and Marpessa were together as long as they were.

The narrator's "frigidity," even now that he has finally won Marpessa back, is difficult to explain. Considering he loves her so much, the fact that he would he suddenly be "motionless" when they have sex suggests a continued sense of anxiety or insecurity. The mysteriousness of the narrator's behavior helps emphasize that Marpessa is the only person to truly understand him.

Marpessa points out that people didn't really love **Dickens** even when it existed. The narrator then realizes that it was Marpessa who threw the **satsuma** at Foy. Marpessa boasts that she "hit that stupid motherfucker square in the face." Although they've had sex for the first time in seventeen years, Marpessa now insists that they take things slow. They begin going on dates on Mondays and Tuesdays, sometimes going to open-mic nights at the Plethora Comedy Club. Occasionally the narrator performs at the nights, and Marpessa tells him to improve his jokes, saying that she refuses to go out with the only black man in the world without a sense of humor.

Marpessa and the narrator may be back together, but the challenge of winning her over is not done. Indeed, Marpessa makes the narrator prove himself through certain tasks, again highlighting the parallel between the narrator's love for her and his desire to bring back Dickens. Both goals create a kind of quest that requires the narrator to use his skills and prove his worth.

The narrator claims that LA is a "mind-numbingly racially segregated city," and says that the stand-up comedy world is the most segregated of all. The Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals host the open-mic night, entitled "the Comedy Act and Forum for the Freedom of Afro-American Witticism and Mannerisms That Showcase the Plethora of Afro-American Humorists for Whom…" There is more to the title, but the narrator has never managed to read it in full. The narrator calls the club the Plethora for short.

One of the reasons the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals are so funny is that they take themselves deeply seriously. Even their attempt to put on a stand-up comedy night turns into an overly serious, protracted account of the talents of the race. The ultimate effect is that the Dum Dums are funny, but not in the way they intend to be.

Marpessa may think the narrator is unfunny, but the narrator claims his father was far worse. His father used to perform at the Plethora, and would tell jokes in the form of academic papers. He would even give references at the end of the joke. The narrator now dreads the nights when Marpessa makes him perform. One night, he finally tells an "original joke" and Marpessa cracks up laughing. The narrator runs straight from the stage into **Marpessa's bus** and strips naked. Marpessa boards the bus and tells the narrator that even though it's still early, so far the school segregation is working. Eventually, Marpessa and the narrator have sex.

As the novel draws to a close, a happy ending appears to be in sight. The narrator's ability to tell a funny joke is not only a personal triumph that allows him to finally have sex with Marpessa again—it also represents a way that he breaks with the legacy of his father. Whereas the narrator's father was incapable of telling a joke effectively, after some trial and error his son ultimately succeeds, thereby exceeding his father's precedent in this case.

CHAPTER 18

In November, the narrator turns his attentions to growing a potato crop. He knows that he is unlikely to be successful because California is too warm. To make matters worse, the segregation project becomes difficult when he gets "segregation block." He and Hominy are digging together and trying to come up with ideas. Hominy suggests concentration camps, but the narrator replies that it's already "been done." Hominy then suggests an apartheid system, and then an Indian-style caste system. The narrator appreciates the help, even if none of it is useful.

In this passage, the narrator has an experience similar to writer's block, but which affects his plans for segregation. This is amusing because it suggests that segregation is a process requiring creative and innovative thinking rather than a straightforward or natural process of separating the races. We might assume that racist acts are a matter of almost instinctual cruelty and hate, but implementing them into policy actually requires concentration and innovation.

While digging, the narrator is careful to avoid the spot where his father is buried. Nothing has grown in that area of land either before or after the narrator's father's death. The narrator surveys the land, each section divided by crop. He realizes that as a farmer, he's a "natural segregationist." He asks Hominy what day it is, and on learning it's Sunday tells him that he is going to the meeting of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals.

At this point the meaning of this part of the novel, "Apples and Oranges," becomes clear. The phrase "Apples and Oranges" is often used to denote things that are fundamentally different and therefore incompatible and even incomparable. Just as the narrator separates his fruit crops, so will he attempt to racially separate humans.

CHAPTER 19

There are only about ten people at the meeting. Foy has recently been in the news because his many children have decided to sue him for the anguish caused by his frequent media appearances. The narrator concludes that there is "no doubt the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals [are] dying." He sits down at the back next to King Cuz, and reads that ever since the appearance of the Wheaton Academy, housing prices and graduation rates have risen.

The narrator's aim of bringing back Dickens through segregation is working, with the added bonus that the city is becoming more prosperous and successful. Following the typical hero/villain dynamic, as the narrator's fortunes rise, Foy's fall.

Foy begins speaking, saying that he has a "secret weapon" he plans to use against the Wheaton Academy. He holds up his own rewritten novel, *Tom Soarer*, announcing that it is "a WME, a Weapon of Mass Education!" In desperation, Foy has called three famous African American leaders to join the meeting, whom the narrator will not name for legal reasons. Then an argument emerges among the members about whether they would rather be born in the United States or in Africa. The narrator is furious that anyone would suggest slavery was worth it just so he can now enjoy the luxuries of contemporary American life.

The conversation about slavery at the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals meeting again brings up complex questions surrounding progress versus regress. The Intellectuals' argument that although slavery was awful, they would rather have been born in the United States than Africa, suggests that slavery was, in some perverse sense, part of a broader narrative of progress—an idea the narrator finds abhorrent.

After one of the Intellectuals calls **Dickens** a "hellhole," King Cuz leaps to the city's defense. The narrator is surprised to hear Cuz speak for the first time at a meeting. The narrator takes his father's picture from the wall and slips out. While he is untying his horse, Foy comes out and gives him a pitying look. The narrator asks Foy if he owns the old, racist *Little Rascals* movies; Foy angrily shakes his head in response. Foy places a copy of *Tom Soarer* in the narrator's saddlebag. It is inscribed: "To the Sellout, Like father, like son…"

The Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals claim to fight on behalf of black people, yet in reality they are classist and disdainful of much of the black population—as is revealed by the comment comparing Dickens to a "hellhole." It is now clear that Foy's nicknaming of the narrator is deeply ironic, since it is actually Foy himself who is the sellout.

The narrator rides off, annoyed. He realizes that even if he does achieve his goal of bringing **Dickens** back, no one will greet the news with "fanfare or fireworks." He realizes that the only reward he will get for bringing back the city is "Hominy's wide smile."

Bringing back Dickens might be progress, but it is a rather unexciting kind: returning to the way things already were in the first place. At the same time, the narrator will achieve his ongoing goal of making Hominy happy.

CHAPTER 20

The narrator admits that he secretly found re-segregating **Dickens** quite fun and "sort of empowering." He and Hominy would go around town sticking up signs that read "COLORED ONLY." Sometimes the narrator would dress in his father's lab coat, explaining that he was from the Federal Department of Racial Injustice and that he was carrying out an experiment. He invents the idea for "Whitey Week," a 30 minute-long celebration of white people's contributions to "the world of leisure."

At first it seems completely strange and perverse that the narrator should find re-segregating Dickens empowering. However, the key difference between his acts here and the historical practice of segregation in the America is that this time, the segregation policies are being instituted by—and remain under the control of—black people.

The narrator has gained permission to re-segregate the hospital, which is named after Martin Luther King, Jr., because the director was a friend of his father's. In the dark of night, the narrator and Hominy paint "The Bessie Smith Trauma Center" on the glass doors and put up a placard saying "WHITE-OWNED AMBULANCE UNITS ONLY." The narrator is paranoid about getting caught, and although Hominy assures him that nobody cares about what black people do, the narrator insists that this has changed in the internet age. Now, on top of everything else, black people are robbed of their own privacy.

This passage draws attention to the fact that the internet does not make a substantial appearance in the book. Indeed, there is an absence of many forms of technology; in the span of the book, there is hardly a single instance in which a character writes an email, sends a text message, or even makes a phone call. This gives a sense of time collapsing or going backwards, which contributes to the progress versus regress theme.

Later, the narrator hears that his amendments to the hospital have made the patients more "proactive" about their healthcare, asking any doctor who treats them: "Do you give a fuck about me? I mean, do you really give a fuck?"

The chapter ends on a darkly optimistic note. The narrator and Hominy are "successful" insofar as patients are demanding more of their doctors, but there is no indication that the doctors do indeed "give a fuck."

CHAPTER 21

Traditionally, Hood Day is when local gangs go out looking for trouble, the only time of year when they leave their own neighborhoods. However, now most members of one of the gangs have been displaced to a much further away area of Los Angeles, meaning that when they confront each other they are too tired from travel to have a real fight. The narrator explains that although the word "hood" is now used to refer to any neighborhood, in the past, it only meant one place in LA: **Dickens**. During the confrontation between the gangs, Marpessa tells MC Panache that she is sleeping with the narrator. Panache replies that if he could get some of the narrator's pineapples he'd have sex with him as well.

Again, a joke emerges through thwarted expectations, as we expect MC Panache to react furiously toward the narrator. Throughout the novel, moments like these recur, when what we have been led to believe will be a climactic moment fails to materialize. With little fanfare, the final obstacle to the narrator and Marpessa being together has been removed. Panache's comment about the narrator's pineapples reemphasizes the narrator's increasingly high standing in the community.

CHAPTER 22

The narrator claims that black people are rarely cast in films because they "pop," meaning they look too good on screen, making their white co-stars look washed out. He is at the LA Festival of Forbidden Cinema and Unabashedly Racist Animation, watching old footage of Hominy. After the screening is over, the host announces that the last living Little Rascal is present, and invites Hominy onstage. Hominy is given a standing ovation and gives a speech about his time working on *The Little Rascals*. A group of female college students from the Nu Iota Gamma sorority raise their hands and ask a question in unison.

Just through its name alone, the LA Festival of Forbidden Cinema and Unabashedly Racist Animation challenges ideas about linear progress in new ways. As is well known, making something "forbidden" often increases its appeal, which helps explain why racism can increase in societies where it is seen as taboo. Furthermore, some people are nostalgic and sentimental about old art forms, even if they are connected to racist ideas.

The women, who are themselves black, are dressed in what one audience member calls "non-ironic blackface," which earns them jeers from the surrounding crowd. Speaking into the microphone, Hominy says that they didn't use to call it blackface, just "acting." The crowd settles down, and someone asks if it's true that Foy Cheshire owns the rights to the *Little Rascals* movies. Hominy addresses the narrator as "master," which makes the audience turn round to stare at the narrator, wanting to get a look at a real life slaveholder.

Again, it is disturbingly unclear where Hominy's "performance" ends and his real personality begins. If blackface used to just be called acting, then is Hominy's voluntarily enslavement a kind of performance art? This question points to the insidious complexity of internalized racism and self-hatred.

The lights dim and the screening of racist cartoons begins. The crowd watches and laughs at the cartoons for two hours, but when the lights come up again everyone starts to feel guilty. After, Hominy sits in the lobby signing memorabilia. The narrator had forgotten how funny Hominy is, and now reflects about how existing as a black person in the past was the best form of comedy training, as humor was a way to escape cruelty and violence. Hominy poses for a photo with the Nu Iota Gamma women.

This passage explores the powerful but tragic connection between black identity, racism, and comedy. For many black people in the past, humor was a survival mechanism. This adds another layer of guilt to the experience of watching racist cartoons; not only are they offensive, but they capitalize on the way black people have been forced to use humor to escape abuse.

One of the women, who the narrator nicknames "Topsy" but whose real name is Butterfly, says that there was only one moment in history without racism: a single second when someone took a photo of the Obamas in front of the White House. A white man tells Hominy that he's "the last real nigger," adding he means it with the hard "r." Hominy thanks him. Butterfly shows Hominy copies of the ledgers for all the *Our Gang* and *Little Rascals* movies. The narrator snatches them from her, and is shocked to find that there were actually 227 movies made, not 221 as he previously thought. The entries for films shot in late 1944 have been blacked out.

Again, past and present seem to be completely confused. The characters have just spent the past two hours watching old racist cartoons, there are women in blackface, and a white man is using the n-word with abandon. However, perhaps this only seems strange if one accepts the narrative of linear progress that the book opposes. As Butterfly semi-seriously suggests, there may have only been one single moment in history without racism.

The narrator sees a list of names of people who have checked out the ledger—including Foy's. Hominy gets in the car and puts his arm around Butterfly's shoulders. As they drive, Butterfly sits on Hominy's lap and shows a picture of a blackface event she attended named "the Compton Cookout." The narrator looks at the picture and feels disappointed in the "lack of imagination" in the costumes. The people featured have picked up on only a couple of stereotypes about the black community, neglecting many others. In other photos, Butterfly is not dressed in blackface but as other ethnic stereotypes.

This passage explores a new side to the issue of racial stereotypes—perhaps stereotypes themselves wouldn't be such a problem if people weren't fixated on such a small number of them. If there were a vast proliferation of stereotypes rather than only a handful, the books suggests, they might be less harmful.

Hominy, Butterfly, and the narrator arrive at Foy's house on Mulholland drive. The narrator correctly guesses that the passcode for the gate is 1865, and thinks "black people are so fucking obvious." He lets Hominy and Butterfly go in together, and runs off alone. He spots Foy's luxury car and sees Foy sitting nearby in a lawn chair, typing and talking on the phone. The narrator asks what he is writing, and Foy replies that it's a book of essays called *Me Talk White One Day*. The narrator asks when he last had an original idea, and Foy replies: "Probably not since your dad died."

One of Foy's villainous traits is the fact that he has no shame. We might expect an academic who made his name through scholarship on the poor black community to try and hide his wealth. However, Foy flaunts his money and fame, and is even unashamed about his unoriginality. He seems to possess no moral compass, only a desire for power.

Back at Foy's house, Butterfly and Hominy are skinny dipping in the pool. Hominy pretends he can't swim, gripping Butterfly to stay afloat. The narrator recalls his father's words—"Who am I? and How may I become myself?"—and concludes that he is "as lost as I ever was." He considers getting rid of his farm and using the land to make a giant wave pool so he can surf in his backyard.

The ending might seem like a happy one in which the narrator has achieved his goals, found "home," and defeated his enemy. However, these achievements do not seem to make much of a difference to the narrator, making the novel's conclusion more ambivalent than triumphant.

CHAPTER 23

Two weeks later, the "*New*-ish *Republic*" magazine has a cover story called "The New Jim Crow," which asks if "Public Education [has] Clipped the Wings of the White Child?" The narrator's father taught the narrator that every time a magazine features a rhetorical question on its cover, the answer is always "no." A week after the issue is released, five white children attempt to reintegrate Chaff Middle School, but Charisma stops them. Chaff has become the fourth-highest-ranked public school in the county, while white parents begin to withdraw their children from their own schools and insist on a return to the practice of bussing to force reintegration.

The fact that white parents are now demanding their children be admitted to Chaff Middle School highlights how segregation and personal advantage are intertwined. When white people originally opposed integration during the Civil Rights era, it wasn't just racial mixing they were rejecting—it was the idea that their children would no longer receive better opportunities than others.

The white children who go to Chaff are known as "the Dickens Five." Charisma stands with her arms across the entrance to the school, saying: "No Anglos allowed." Hominy is at Chaff that day, having been invited to "tutor Jim Crow." Foy is also there, on the side of the white children. He claims to have evidence that one of the children has ancestors from the Great Rift Valley in Kenya. The Dickens Five then turn around and spot the image of the Wheaton Academy, and immediately gravitate toward it. Foy warns them that it is "a graven image" and nothing more than "a racist joke," but the students, mesmerized, reply that it "looks so real."

The "Dickens Five" is a reference to the "Little Rock Nine," the nine black students enrolled at a formerly all-white school in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, following the ruling of Brown vs. Board of Education. *The fact that Foy sides with the Dickens Five shows that his view of racial politics is flimsy and misguided. He acts as though integration is an inherent good, even when this means siding with white students whose behavior is entirely self-interested.*

The narrator's father always taught him to think about what happened after a given event. He would remind the narrator that after the school integration crisis that took place in Little Rock, Arkansas, the governor of Arkansas chose to shut down every high school in the city rather than integrate them—though this part is rarely taught. Charisma asks: "When does shit ever end?" and the narrator replies: "It doesn't." Foy and his supporters begin to sing "We Shall Overcome." Like most people, they only know the first verse, so Foy uses cue cards for the lyrics of the rest. Foy then shoots a gun at his own Mercedes Benz. He then aims his gun at the narrator.

It is now clear that the narrator's suspicion of the idea of linear progress originates with his father. The narrator's father was correct in asserting that nothing ever "ends" on a simple note of lasting progress. Instead, as the narrator indicates, "shit" never ends.

Foy then points the gun at himself, and with his free hand pours white paint over his body. The narrator sees that Foy is in a moment of extreme crisis, and cautiously tells him to ask himself two questions: "Who am I? and How may I become myself?" The narrator expects a tirade in return. Instead, Foy shoots him, and the narrator finds himself lying on the ground, clutching his own blood. Hominy attacks Foy, screaming: "Give me back my *Little Rascals* movies, motherfucker!" He then cradles the narrator, crying.

At first it seems as if the narrator is doomed to repeat his father's interaction with Foy, wherein the narrator would choose to be the bigger person and help Foy despite Foy's ingratitude. However, Foy appears to have reached some kind of breaking point; where he could tolerate the narrator's father, Foy hates the narrator himself so much that he shoots him.

The paramedics arrive, and when they ask the narrator about his next of kin, he replies that he has a girlfriend but that she's married. Hominy then announces that "I is something closer than family." The sheriff's deputy remarks that Hominy claims to be the narrator's slave, and asks Hominy about his welts from being whipped. The deputy asks if the narrator has a good lawyer, and the narrator points him to an advertisement for Hampton Fiske.

This is the moment when the narrator first gets into trouble with the law for slaveholding. Hominy's comment about being "closer than family" recalls the perverse arguments some slaveholders gave about the supposedly loving bond between themselves and their slaves.

The narrator tells Hampton that his farming schedule means he cannot afford to do jail time. In court, Hampton argues that as a farmer, the narrator is "an indispensable member of a minority community." The prosecution objects that the narrator is actually an "evil genius" guilty of "unabashed slaveholding," and that he should really be charged with "crimes against humanity." Hampton offers Judge Nguyen a nectarine from the narrator's farm. The judge gives a long speech; he concludes that the court will convene tomorrow but that regardless of the verdict, the case is certain to go to the Supreme Court. He takes a bite of the nectarine and sets bail at "a cantaloupe and two kumquats."

Once again, the narrator is saved by his fruit. Like drugs, the fruit the narrator grows is so enticing and addictive that people behave in strange ways in hopes of securing more. On the other hand, as Hampton's argument demonstrates, the narrator's ability to grow such delicious fruit also symbolizes his contributions to the community.

CHAPTER 24

The narrative returns to the Supreme Court scene. The narrator expected the air-conditioning in the Supreme Court to be terrible, because in famous courtroom movies everyone is always sweating. He shouts, "You can't handle the weed!" at the courtroom illustrator, Fred Manne, and then announces: "I'm so fucking high right now…" The picture Fred has drawn of the narrator is ugly, and the narrator asks if he can change it. After a break, the narrator returns to court to find a small white boy who has shown up to cheer him on. The narrator reflects on whether or not it's really true that race is "hard to talk about."

The narrator's experience at the Supreme Court is one of the most surreal parts of a remarkably surreal book. This scene is a jumbled mess of stereotypes and reversed stereotypes, in which both the narrator and the reader's expectations for what the court should be like are completely unraveled.

Hampton gives a speech that concludes with the claim that the central question under consideration is "what do we mean by 'black?'" He delves into different theories of blackness, describing the different "stages" of being black. The narrator rolls himself another blunt and sneaks out quietly. He sits on the steps of the Supreme Court, fashioning a pipe out of a Pepsi can. He thinks there should be a Stage IV of black identity called "Unmitigated Blackness."

We might expect Hampton's speech to be another climactic moment, perhaps similar to the courtroom speech Atticus Finch gives at the end of To Kill a Mockingbird. However, the narrator leaves instead, and thus once again the sense of climax evaporates. In its place we are left with the quiet, contemplative scene of the narrator on the steps.

Unmitigated Blackness could be taken as "unwillingness to succeed," which could also be interpreted as "not giving a fuck." It involves embracing the meaninglessness of life and concluding that "sometimes it's the nihilism that makes life worth living." The narrator sits smoking weed under the "Equal Justice Under the Law" sign and stares at the stars. He thinks of the Washington Monument as "a giant middle finger to the world."

The extent to which The Sellout *embraces total nihilism (the belief that life is totally meaningless) is ambiguous. There are certainly points throughout the novel wherein a nihilistic approach is presented as more appealing or logical (particularly in comparison to moralizing self-righteousness). Yet the absurdity of the book is also arguably not full-fledged nihilism, but instead pointing towards some kind of distant ideal.*

CHAPTER 25

The narrator's "Welcome Home" party may well have turned into a going-to-jail party. He arrives home to find everyone in his den, watching *Little Rascals* movies with Hominy. Foy was cleared of attempted murder on grounds of insanity, but the narrator won the civil suit against him. Foy was forced to sell his possessions in order to pay his lawyer's fees, but the narrator was able to take the only thing he wanted in the first place—the *Little Rascals* movies. While they watch the long series of racist movies, King Cuz says it's no surprise Foy went insane, and Stevie comments that Hominy deserves a lifetime achievement award at the Oscars.

The narrator's "Welcome Home" party not only welcomes him back to his house and to Dickens, but also to his childhood. At this point, it appears as if time has reversed and plunged the narrator back into his happy memories of watching the Little Rascals *movies with Hominy and the other neighborhood kids. The novel's happy ending is thus a scene of reversal—a final challenge to ideas about linear progress.*

The narrator goes outside to cuddle his animals. Hominy joins him and tells him that he's quitting slavery, adding: "We'll talk reparations in the morning." Marpessa calls the narrator inside, and he finds both her and Charisma lying on the bed. The TV is on, playing the weather. The announcer includes **Dickens** in the forecast. Marpessa laughs "maniacally," and the narrator bursts into tears over the fact that "Dickens is back on the map."

This passage establishes a connection between the narrator achieving his goals of bringing back Dickens and winning over Marpessa and Hominy's decision to quit slavery. Perhaps now that the narrator has fulfilled his deepest desires, his and Hominy's dynamic of mutual wish-fulfilment must end. The idea of Hominy's reparations—that is, payment to former slaves, or the descendants of slaves—is another darkly comic nod to issues that still plague American society today.

CHAPTER 26

On the anniversary of the narrator's father's death, he and Marpessa go to Dum Dum Donuts for open-mic night. The narrator recalls a night when a white couple came to the club and laughed along with the rest of the audience at all the jokes. The comedian onstage asked them: "What the fuck are you honkies laughing at?" He shouted at them to leave, declaring: "This is our thing!" The narrator thinks about the fact that he stayed silent during this whole episode, and admits that he is always frightened by what he might say if he speaks. He wished that he'd been able to ask the comedian: "What exactly is *our thing?*"

The novel may end on a happy note plot-wise, but the narrator's father's favorite two questions remain unanswered: Who am I? and How may I become myself? The narrator is still unsure about who he is, and—as the question he wanted to ask the comedian reveals—what blackness is. As someone who suffers from chronic uncertainty, the narrator envies the comedian's conviction when he talks about "our thing."

CLOSURE

On the day after "the black dude" was inaugurated, Foy drove around waving an American flag. The narrator asked him why, pointing out the ongoing injustice in America. Foy shook his head and told him that he would never understand. The narrator says that Foy was right: "I never will."

This passage reemphasizes the narrator's uncertainty, but—through the contrasting depiction of Foy's jingoism, particularly with what we know of Foy's approach to race—suggests that uncertainty is perhaps the superior approach.

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