

University of Montana

## ScholarWorks at University of Montana

---

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &  
Professional Papers

Graduate School

---

2006

### Resistance on the Imperial Terrain: Constructing a counter-Empire in Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*

Brian Grosenbaugh  
*The University of Montana*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

#### Recommended Citation

Grosenbaugh, Brian, "Resistance on the Imperial Terrain: Constructing a counter-Empire in Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*" (2006). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 827.  
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/827>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

RESISTANCE ON THE IMPERIAL TERRAIN: CONSTRUCTING A COUNTER-  
EMPIRE IN PAUL BEATTY'S *THE WHITE BOY SHUFFLE*

By

Brian Charles Grosenbaugh

Bachelor of Arts, Whitman College, Walla Walla, WA., 1999

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in English Literature

The University of Montana  
Missoula, MT

Summer 2007

Approved by:

Dr. David A. Strobel, Dean  
Graduate School

Lynn Itagaki, Chair  
English

Kathleen Kane, Co-Chair  
English

Jeffrey Wiltse  
History

Grosenbaugh, Brian, M.A., Summer 2007

English

Resistance on the Imperial Terrain: Constructing a counter-Empire in Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*

Chairperson: Lynn Itagaki

Co-Chairperson: Kathleen Kane

Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* ostensibly proffers a new model for black leadership, a role filled by the protagonist, Gunnar Kaufman. Yet the cheeky tone with which Gunnar as frame narrator characterizes such a leader, likening his position as leader of black America to that of a Negro Demagogue and Ebon Pied Piper, immediately casts into doubt the ability of and desirability for a single person to represent such a wide spectrum of particular entities. Instead, what becomes clear is that such a reductive form of representation serves only to stifle the multivalent reality of postmodern life. As Gunnar matures throughout the novel, he begins to recognize that he as an individual becomes co-opted, molded and exploited by an extensive array of mechanisms and institutions.

The forces that Gunnar begins to recognize correspond with the dispositifs and apparatuses that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri diagnose in their book, *Empire*. To Hardt and Negri, the disciplinary society, that society in which the state exercises control over the population through direct juridical intervention, has evolved into a society of control. The society control relies not on outside imposition but rather the self-policing of the body politic to craft normative behavior. In this model, the people being repressed have internalized and propagate the expectations of the dominant caste, a phenomenon Hardt and Negri call biopower. As Gunnar becomes aware of the insidious methodologies that seek to circumscribe or direct his thoughts and actions, he visualizes these controls as strings with himself as the puppet. This awareness leads to a form of fatalism that reveals itself in Gunnar's impromptu call for suicide.

After Gunnar's epiphany, he returns to his Hillside community and focuses on granting a forum to the dispossessed, one in which no one is marginalized and the gritty reality of urban life is celebrated. Gunnar calls these sessions of communal catharsis the MiseryFests, and they embody the essence of what Hardt and Negri claim is necessary to combat the society of control. The MiseryFests make use of the imperial terrain, the flows of information that biopower relies on to police one another, and construct a counter-Empire that truly celebrates diversity.

## Resistance on the Imperial Terrain: Constructing a counter-Empire in

Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*

*“The feeling of pathos is deeply stirred when we see a character in the play facing two alternatives in the course of his action and anticipating a disaster whether he chooses the one or the other. It will be even more pathetic if his sense of honor should be divided into two, like social and personal obligations, and whichever course he may take will cause him inevitably to lose face.”—Chikamatsu Monzaemon*

## Introduction

*The White Boy Shuffle* purports to detail the evolution of a new black leader, Gunnar Kaufman, one who can act as the single voice for black America. This leader supposedly directs the battle of a downtrodden people against agents and institutions of domination. But is a cohesive, national movement or a singular mode of resistance any longer possible? Gunnar claims, “On the one hand this messiah gig is a bitch. On the other I’ve managed to fill the perennial void in African-American leadership” (1). Gunnar presents himself as a messiah figure, as one who can speak for and lead black America, but in doing so he implicitly acknowledges that only a person with messianic capabilities could assume such a role. The cheeky tone with which he characterizes the role he plays, that of Negro Demagogue, suggests that Gunnar feels such a leader unlikely, if not impossible. This prognosis coincides with that put forth by Cornel West, one of the foremost intellectuals and scholars of black America. In his book, *Race Matters*, West argues, “The time is past for black political and intellectual leaders to pose as *the* voice for black America” (West 70). To linguistically pair West’s critique with Gunnar’s proclamation, West says that “[remedying the crisis in black leadership] is neither a matter of a new Messiah figure emerging, nor of another organization appearing

on the scene” (69). The inability for any one person to lead the fight against oppression, as individuals like Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were able to do during the civil rights era, involves both the diffusion and internalization of oppressive structures.

The dispersion of direct methodologies of oppression into rhizomatic structures of internalized oppression that prevent direct confrontation result from the establishment of a society of control, envisioned by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire*.

According to Hardt and Negri, a society of control has replaced the disciplinary society:

“Disciplinary society is that society in which social command is constructed through a diffuse network of dispositifs or apparatuses that product and regulate customs, habits, and productive practices” (H&N 23). These dispositifs or apparatuses, while many and

“diffuse”, offered the revolutionaries of the civil-rights era a concrete paradigm of oppression against which they could focus outrage. As the disciplinary society evolves into the society of control, however, there are no loci of direct oppression. Instead, the society of control relies on individuals to police the body politic, a phenomenon they term biopower: “Biopower is a form of power that regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it. Power can achieve an effective command over the entire life of the population only when it becomes an integral, vital function that every individual embraces and reactivates of his or her own accord” (H&N 24). The oppressed, according to Hardt and Negri, contribute to and reproduce the social model that leads to their oppression. In the society of control, everyone becomes unwittingly complicit. Hardt and Negri label this construct Empire.

The model for active resistance to such an amorphous construct of domination eludes Hardt and Negri, but they understand that opposition strives not for dialectical

opposition but rather establishes a counter-Empire. A counter-Empire, in their mind, must form on the imperial terrain: resistance must utilize the same methodologies and technologies that perpetuate Empire. While Hardt and Negri fail to articulate the “real event” they believe will embody this form resistance, Paul Beatty does just that in *The White Boy Shuffle* through his creation of the MiseryFests. The MiseryFests defy stereotype by revealing life in Hillside in its unadorned, gritty reality; they bring together the polyvalent elements that constitute Hillside and mold them into a collective that truly represents the Hillside experience. Unlike the Stoic Undertakers video, which fuels the society of control by broadcasting a vision of Hillside that is filled with weaponry and fueled by misogyny, the MiseryFests serve as true cinema vérité. They embody what Cornel West refers to as a “politics of conversion”: “Any disease of the soul [nihilism] must be conquered by a turning of one’s soul. This turning is done through one’s own affirmation of one’s worth—an affirmation fueled by the concerns of others. A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion” (West 29). West, like Beatty, understands that real change can only take place at the local level. A national platform cannot accurately represent or redress the grievances of a given community. Hardt and Negri, however, deny the efficacy of the local in forming a constituent counterpower to combat Empire, instead claiming that only the global multitude can withstand such a comprehensive system of domination.

*The White Boy Shuffle*, indebted as it is to Hardt and Negri in diagnosing this incarnation of oppression, successfully demonstrates how a focus on the local, by reappropriating the flows of information, becomes a part of that global multitude. Though Gunnar denies the effectiveness of one person to represent black America, he is uniquely

positioned to represent Hillside. I argue in Chapter 1 that Hillside forces Gunnar to recognize the various ways in which one might construe the implications of what it means to be black and live in an urban ghetto. Gunnar's abrupt transition from Santa Monica to Hillside, in hindsight, grants Gunnar a greater appreciation for the disconnect between Hillside and suburbia. In Chapter 2, Gunnar gains a more complex and nuanced understanding of the ways in which outside forces limit and control individual agency. The disciplinary society, though it remains extant, becomes superseded by the society of control, in which the school and basketball figure prominently. Chapter 3 explores how Gunnar formulates his own brand of resistance to the society of control. For Gunnar, a national platform that seeks to represent black America carries overtones of fascism. By imposing a national agenda, such a platform denies the particularity of experience that has shaped Gunnar's ontological evolution. Gunnar abandons the national stage and returns to Hillside to establish the MiseryFests.

The MiseryFests, I contend, reveal a major flaw in Hardt and Negri's logic, which claims only the global multitude can successfully establish a counter-Empire. Gunnar provides a platform for the people who create the social fabric of Hillside to revel in their individuality, to voice grievances and confess sins and shortcomings. He creates a method for communal catharsis, one that emphasizes the essential humanity of every one of Hillside's constituents. No one is privileged. This representative equality demonstrates the true constituent power that Hardt and Negri seek in their conception of a counter-Empire. Yet a focus on the local, on the locale, still conforms to their proposal for a global multitude. Gunnar negotiates a television contract to broadcast the MiseryFests, and his list of demands ensures that his efforts will not be co-opted by corporate interests.

The imperial terrain now provides Hillside a way to elevate their communal celebrations to a global level. I claim that Hillside, by focusing on the local and reappropriating the flows of information, joins the global multitude; such projects indeed are the only way to constitute a global multitude.



## Chapter 1

## “maybe I was doing it wrong”: Gunnar Discovers Blackness

Gunnar’s early years, the time he spends in Santa Monica and Hillside prior to moving to Boston, demonstrate the desire of nascent subjectivity to find a personal ontology. As frame narrator, Gunnar reaches back in time to alert the reader to his future dismissal of master or metanarratives, that which seeks to encompass or present a universalizing Truth. This narrative intrusion, the initial presentation of a later conclusion, piques the reader’s interest by posing the question: how does Gunnar arrive at this future perspective? As these pages constitute Gunnar’s memoir, “the battlefield remains of a frightened deserter in the eternal war for civility” (2), the teleology remains mostly linear, and his rejection (desertion) its destination. In order to reject, one must somehow desire or accept, to become a part of that against which one later rebels. These early chapters reveal the ways in which Gunnar, at his own initiative and influenced by various other social constructs (his mother and his peers), negotiates the transition from a passive receptacle to an agentic subjectivity (to borrow from Hardt & Negri, which will be explored fully in Chapters 2 and 3) ensconced within a social fabric. Later we come to understand how this social fabric constricts Gunnar’s further individual development, but his later chafing is predicated on his initial conception of self within that construct.

Gunnar’s initial conception of self relies predominantly on local determinism and familial historiographic inculcation. Santa Monica affects Gunnar’s entire ontology, his speech, dress, and, most importantly, his worldview. The place and, more importantly, the people condition Gunnar’s entire conception of what constitutes the real, the

understood way in which people live. Gunnar learns that he is black, through deference and self-imposed negation, but he cannot conceive of what being black encompasses outside of Santa Monica's hermeneutic. Gunnar's understanding of "blackness" owes much to Baudrillard, which I will discuss in Chapter 2; it is enough for now to note that Gunnar and his sisters conceptualize black America through images received via the television and the radio. As if to combat these images, Brenda Kaufman determines to situate her children within a familial context. In the absence of her own, she adopts her divorced husband's geneology and mythology. In both local determinism and Brenda's familial indoctrination, context reveals the power with which it affects the individual. Gunnar yearns for the comfort that a contextual place or acceptance offers.

#### "I's a-comin'": Blackness as Family Lineage

Gunnar's search to situate himself within a greater context finds its origins in his mother's desire to provide for her children a familial lineage. This lineage, however, is both co-opted and corrupted, a strand of historiographic metafiction<sup>i</sup> that surfaces at points throughout the text. Gunnar evinces a latent distaste for his mother's project: "From birth my parents indoctrinated me with the idea that the surreal escapades and the 'I's a-comin' watermelon chicanery was the stuff of hero worship" (5). Brenda, Gunnar's mother, believes in the efficacy of such identification to influence behavior, and so chooses to instill in her children the Kaufman family mythology: "The divorce made Mama, Ms Brenda W. Kaufman, determined to make sure that her children knew their forbears. As a Brooklyn orphan who had never seen her parents or her birth certificate, Mom adopted my father's patriarchal family history for her misbegotten origins" (6).

Gunnar's mom realizes the need to situate her children within a larger narrative, but she cannot do so in relation to her own origins. Instead she appropriates another narrative, the patriarchal instead of the matriarchal. Brenda teaches her children the mythology of the Kaufman lineage to forestall the confusion that comes from an incomplete self-knowledge. Brenda hopes to create for her children a social context against which Gunnar and his sisters might measure their individual development.

This paradigm for the socially constructed individual mirrors Hegel's notion of society: "For Hegel, the individual can have no identity and no purpose apart from the social order within which he exists, and thus a freedom that is defined as autonomy from the social order would be completely vacuous" (McGowan 206). As one of its dominant thematic interrogations, *The White Boy Shuffle* questions the construction of individual identity both within and dependent on a social context. Gunnar evolves his own understanding of the efficacy of Hegel's paradigm throughout the course of the text, but in his early years willfully seeks the model proposed in Brenda Kaufman's early familial, somewhat paradoxical inculcations. As John McGowan notes in his discussion of Hegel, the "individual is always born into a social order (is situated within a family)...", yet Gunnar's family lacks a father (McGowan 206, parentheses in original). The social unit is bereft. Brenda believes in the Hegelian conception of social construction, and her familial indoctrination proves the first demonstration. The mutability of truth comes to the fore: in the absence of her own narrative, she adopts that of her ex-husband. One truth serves as well as another. The capacity to derive an ontological foundation through an adopted context successfully combines the post-structuralist emphasis on the inability to discern ultimate meaning with the Hegelian concept of socially constructed meaning through

context. Whether that meaning has any truth becomes irrelevant; if the understood truth grants comfort and meaning to the individual, the validity of that truth can be seen as immaterial.

The refusal to adhere to any sort of master or totalizing narrative, reified in Gunnar's refusal to be *the* voice of black America, becomes central to Gunnar's self-actualization, but he reaches back from this later perspective to indicate the direction in which his sympathies will move. He claims, "...I am not the seventh son of a seventh son...The chieftains and queens who sit on the top of Mount Kilimanjaro left me out of the will" (5). Gunnar escapes the literary confines of signification by refusing to claim strength or inspiration from black mythologies, both African and African-American. In addition, Gunnar escapes another plane of Hegelian identity construction; if the family serves as the first stage in which the individual negotiates formation through approval or resistance by that social unit, one's race and racial history might serve as another expanded, but finite and exclusionary social tapestry. Gunnar, as he makes clear from his later perspective, intends to forge his own identity, and using Africa as a symbol of past strength effaces the possibility for Gunnar to find his own strength in contemporary America. He continues in the this vein by claiming to be "...black Orestes in the cursed House of Atreus. Preordained by a set of weak-kneed DNA to shuffle in the footsteps of a long, cowardly queue of coons, Uncle Toms, and faithful boodedy-boogedy retainers" (5). Although we haven't yet met them, Gunnar prepares the reader for the family history we encounter, and importantly his resistance to that history. He "shuffles" in their footsteps, and with shuffle featured so prominently in the title, it seems incumbent to understand its use throughout the novel.

For Gunnar, shuffling along in the queue would signify adherence to racial and familial history and expectation. But Gunnar claims to be Orestes in the House of Atreus, a clan infamous for an ancestral crime that leads to a long cycle of murder and revenge. In Aeschylus's play, Orestes ends this cycle by killing his mother, who had plotted his own death, and eventually being absolved of his crime by Athena's court. This allusion proves double-edged in terms of a master narrative: while Gunnar seeks to break the cycle of his ancestral queue, he announces this intent in an allusion to classical mythology, through one of the Western canon's most included authors. Gunnar rejects the trend of African-American signification through his denial of Ellison work in *Invisible Man*, especially the power which Ellison attributes to the seventh son of a seventh son. Shinn parses this attribution in his discussion of Wheatstraw:

Wheatstraw attributes these natural and supernatural talents with being born "a seventh son of a seventh son"--which, according to African American folk beliefs, becomes a "sign of special supernatural or conjure powers" (Schrager 569). It echoes Du Boisian double-consciousness and likewise operates as both a curse and a blessing. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois writes, "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world" (45). Being a seventh son becomes a curse insofar as it alienates and renders black Americans invisible and unseen (the "veil" signifies the color line), yet it also constitutes a blessing in that it bestows a measure of clairvoyance and "second-sight"--i.e., spiritual vision--combining the gospel tradition and,

at least for Wheatstraw, African American folk beliefs in conjuring.

(Shinn 10)

Gunnar refuses all associative powers granted the seventh son: he claims no supernatural insight or ability to conjure traditional powers, nor does he accept the “veil” with which Du Bois and Shinn would seek to circumscribe agency. As if in direct challenge to these racially separatist powers, Gunnar voices this dismissal at the same time he embraces the Western mythological canon, the genesis of the metaphysical master narrative that postmodern fiction subverts. This seeming paradox underscores both Gunnar’s willingness to draw from any source and use it to his own ends, as well as his refusal to be constrained by racial expectation.

Ms. Murphy’s family tree assignment codifies the extent of Gunnar’s indoctrination into filial history. In these “caricature American ancestries” designed “...to put a class of rootless urchins in touch with [their] disparate niggerhoods,” most of the students give similarly perfunctory accounts of their family history (11). Gunnar, however, has listened to his mother discuss their familial lineage, and the roll on which he maps out this tree goes for generations. Gunnar becomes a vehicle through which the Kaufman history, as told by Brenda, is disseminated: “With my mother’s hand in my back, her words pouring forth from my mouth, I stiffly yapped like a ventriloquist’s dummy” (12). Gunnar here highlights the incipient dangers associated with indoctrination. He casts himself as a puppet, mindlessly parroting words and phrases told to him by someone else. His use of “yapping” suggests mindless chatter, but also barking dogs. We demand obedience from our dogs, just as the group expects its members to hew

obediently to the party line. Sometimes what the group demands its members uphold is less than truthful; Gunnar presents this family history as truth, but we learn later that much, or all of it, is fabricated. Thus Gunnar (un?)consciously adopts the joyful play of self-reflexive postmodern literature, a historiography proffered as truth to the unwitting.

The Kaufman family mythology demonstrates ingenious attention to precision in its historiography. The line begins with Euripides Kaufman, the first of many names through which Beatty exercises his predilection for double entendre. While Beatty abrogates the sanctioned group throughout, he uses various literary techniques to create his own, amorphous groups. Beatty does this with double entendre, often focused on names, which functions in a manner similar to the pun. Euripides Kaufman exists as the earliest known progenitor of the Kaufman line. His surname is taken from his master's, but his first name carries with it greater significance. Most readers would recognize Euripides as a name from antiquity, others as a famous Greek playwright. Few would realize that the Greek Euripides was an iconoclast most loudly condemned for his elevated portrayal of slaves and women. The Kaufman family tree is filled with hyper-intelligent slaves, unwilling or unable however to transcend the social structures and strictures of their day, a host of "Uncle Toms" according to Gunnar. Interestingly, Gunnar later modifies his understanding of this epithet, asking why only black people and not white people can be traitors to their race (197), but Gunnar notes that women remain notably absent: "Their existence and contributions were cut off like the Sphinx's broad nose, subsumed by the mystic of an astronomical impotency" (23). Thus the legacy of Euripides Kaufman disproportionately emulates one part of Euripides the Greek's legacy, and at the same time highlights its departure from another. Yet neither applies to

Gunnar's father: as a sketch artist for the police, he hardly qualifies as an iconoclast, and as a husband and father who leaves his wife and mother of his children, the psychic misogyny implicit in his absence denigrates rather than elevates: Gunnar's father places himself before either Brenda or his children, In this light, Brenda's attempt to instill an oral history that might positively influence her children seems designed to counter firsthand experience with their direct progenitor.

“cool black kid”: Blackness in the White Sanctuary

In addition, this oral history tries to counter the effects of local determinism, the formative pressures that mold Gunnar and his sisters in Santa Monica, a bastion of liberal thought suffused with a covert racism. As Gunnar notes, “In Santa Monica, like most predominantly white sanctuaries from urban blight, ‘cool black guy’ is a versatile identifier used to distinguish the harmless black male from the Caucasian juvenile while maintaining politically correct semiotics” (27). The underlying contract Gunnar establishes is that it's politically correct to distinguish by color as long as that distinction is qualified by “cool.” Yet this creates a role for the black kid to play: it's not the morose black guy, or the bodysurfing black guy, but the funny, cool black kid, and Gunnar eagerly performs this role. He conforms to the expectation promulgated by the politically correct, but he also uses his blackness to unsettle the other white kids in performing this function: “I learned early that white kids will believe anything anybody a shade darker than chocolate milk says” (28). Gunnar seems to be granted deference in his ejaculations because he is black; to disagree could, to the politically correct, be interpreted as racism or social oppression. But color deference is still color consciousness, and Gunnar remains



aware that he is the only black kid at his school. This awareness certainly informs his ontological development, and it spurs Gunnar to investigate his own conception of what it is to be black; his interpretation reveals the extent to which particularity and local determinism influence worldview.

#### “musicians and athletes”: Blackness Performed

Gunnar bases his whole definition of what constitutes “being black” on commercialized representations that appeal to white Santa Monica: “The only black folks whose names I knew were musicians and athletes: Jimi Hendrix, Slash from Guns n’ Roses, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, the Beastie Boys, and Melody the drummer from Josie and the Pussycats” (35). Gunnar displays an interesting naïveté in this catalog of Santa Monica’s socially-approved ambassadors of blackness. Jimmy Hendrix is black, but also Native American. His music displays a profound homage to earlier blues artists, but Elvis was considered his favorite musician growing up. Slash was born to a black American woman and a white Englishman, and his music focuses entirely on rock and roll, with Jimi Hendrix being one his prime sources of inspiration. The Beastie Boys, however, are not black. They are three Jewish musicians who originally played as a punk band, and gradually moved into rap in the early 1980’s. License to Ill, released in 1986, became the first rap album to reach number one on the Billboard album chart. Although the Beastie Boys were certainly pioneers in a genre dominated by black artists, the aspersion cast at Elvis, that all he did was put a white face to a sound originated by black artists such as Chuck Berry, finds similar traction. While true, another way to view Gunnar’s understanding of blackness through the Beastie Boys is that they transcend race. The

Beastie Boys didn't allow their whiteness to prevent them from exploring a musical genre they found new and invigorating. Black, in this context, is performative; the Beastie Boys defy those who seek to circumscribe endeavors by race, and instead force the audience to consider the product over the producers.

Tony Grimes, local hero to all of Santa Monica, defies racial branding in similar style. In this case, the performative works in contradistinction to the Beastie Boys: "Tony, a freestyle hero with a signature model Dogtown board, was a hellacious skater and somehow disembodied from blackness, even though he was darker than a lunar eclipse in the Congo" (36). Tony, through his skating, moves beyond the confines of racial pigeonholing. Race no longer matters because his performance takes precedence. Gunnar's language in describing Tony as a "hellacious" skater also reveals the impact that his surroundings have on his ability to conceptualize and verbalize experience. "Hellacious" as a characterization has social cachet only in its Santa Monica locale. When Gunnar and his friends see Tony at the local skateshop, they call out, hoping for the celebrity acknowledgement. In response, they would "receive an over-the-shoulder 'What's shakin', dude?' and fight over who he'd acknowledged. 'He called me dude. Not you, nimrod'" (36). Gunnar and his friends already understand the language that forms the discourse community that Tony and most of Santa Monica inhabit. This changes when Gunnar moves to Hillside. There, outside of the environs that had until then formed Gunnar's worldview, his language carries no cultural capital. This feeling, this affirmation that Tony offers, presages the euphoria that Gunnar feels when he has assimilated in Hillside enough for Scoby to call him "nigger." Unlike this later moment of acceptance, Gunnar has not had to strive to acquire such status. He lives this language,

and the “dude” over which he and his friends fight signifies not a release from outcast status, but rather serves as a marker by which one of a motley crew might gain some measure of superiority, might separate himself from his friends, and affirm his place within the social hierarchy.

Gunnar’s mom is acutely aware of the pervasive ideological influence that the social context has on individual identity formation. When Christina, Gunnar’s sister, returns from YMCA camp thinking all the kids had been happy about going to “white” camp instead of “Y” camp and thus feels excluded, Gunnar’s mom asks if they’d rather go to an all-black camp: “We gave an insistent ‘Nooooooo.’ She asked why and we answered in three-part sibling harmony, ‘Because they’re different than us’” (37).

Gunnar’s mom realizes that her desire to protect her children from the unpleasantness of the ghetto has caused her children to adopt this view of black people as somehow different from them. This realization prompts her to leave Santa Monica and move to Hillside. By surrounding her family with other black people, she forces Gunnar and his sisters to understand what it means to experience life from this perspective, ensconced within this urban context. Brenda exhibits a startlingly acute understanding of the repercussions of local determinism on ontological development. She realizes that Gunnar and his sisters understand blackness only in terms of media representation, and she desires her children to recognize the complexity of black social structures that such representations elide. Brenda realizes that such awareness can evolve only through proximity, and so relocates her family to a representative locale, Hillside.

“slowly I turn”: Relative Blackness

The protean nature of young Gunnar's identity reveals itself through the series of mental letters that he composes on the way to Hillside. For each friend to whom he writes, Gunnar adopts a voice and a style suited to that individual's tastes. This reifies the particularity of experience even within a common physical and social milieu, the fact that Gunnar and his addressee have engaged in a common activity unique to them and to which he can now refer. This solidifies the bond between them, but it also indicates Gunnar's willingness to adopt a tone or style that he thinks the other will find pleasing. He ends his letter to Ryan Foggerty, whose last name bears a remarkable resemblance to the lead singer from Creedence Clearwater Revival, John Fogerty, with "Rock and roll will never die. Be cool, Gunnar" (37). To Steven Pierce, Gunnar sends the final word on an apparent longstanding debate over who was the funniest Stooge, and he signs off, "'Susquehanna Hat Company?' Slowly I turn, step by step, Gunnar" (37). This is a fairly complex and subtle juxtaposition of ideas: Susquehanna Hat Company alludes to an old Abbot and Costello routine, and both Abbot and Costello and the Three Stooges produced movies in 1944 that include the phrase, "Slowly I turn, step by step, inch by inch" (Day). The phrase originated in burlesque and vaudeville shows, and gradually became assimilated into pop culture. Compared to "Rock and roll will never die. Be cool," Gunnar chooses to assume a much more sophisticated and complex voice. He tailors his own level of intellectual engagement to suit the audience to whom the letter is addressed. While this can be dismissed as simply playing to an audience, it underscores an insecurity in Gunnar that forces him to conform to expectation. Each friend sees him in a different way, and he modifies his behavior accordingly.

Gunnar's last two letters, to Eileen Litmus and David Schoenfold, bespeak similar degrees of behavioral modification. Although Gunnar never relates his tryst with Eileen, his letter, "I never told anyone. I know you didn't. XXOXOXX, Gunnar," makes clear that something happened (30). While this degree of intimacy would seem to demand more of a letter, Gunnar demonstrates his poetic abilities in this meaningful encapsulation. Both he and she have kept their liaison a secret, and his allusion to their mutual fidelity in regards to this compact does more than any emotional or overwrought description of his feelings. To David Schoenfold, however, Gunnar reveals a significant rung in his climb towards individual realization: "David, somehow through being with you I learned that I was black and that being black meant something, though I haven't figured out exactly what" (40). Gunnar composes this mental letter on his way to Hillside, the site that his mother has chosen to instruct her brood as to exactly what being black means. Interestingly, this admission follows another, less positive aspect of difference between Gunnar and David: "I, like most folks, wet my brush, then put on the toothpaste, but I copied him because he was white and I figured maybe I was doing it wrong" (39). The tacit understanding in this juxtaposition is that even though he doesn't know what it means to be black, he innately believes it to be less informed than his white, Jewish counterpart. Instead of thinking that David is doing it wrong, Gunnar assumes that he is the one who errs, an assumption no doubt tacitly promulgated by Gunnar's surrounding influences.

Upon arrival in Hillside, Gunnar is immediately exposed to a world devoid of any recognizable social markers; both his language and his dress betray his contextual alienation. In Santa Monica, Gunnar's "...language was three foot swells that broke left

to right” (35). This language enables Gunnar to communicate and identify with Tony Grimes, the deracinated hero, yet becomes an insurmountable obstacle in Hillside. Gunnar refers to his prior self, his first incarnation as “White Gunnar”: “White Gunnar was a broken-stringed kite leaning into the sea breeze, expertly maneuvering in the gusty gales... White was the expulsion of colors encumbered by self-awareness and pigment” (35). This is the first time that Gunnar mentions strings, a metaphor that resurfaces at key moments later in the text and which will receive more thorough treatment in Chapter 3. The strings, like those that guide a string puppet, direct movement; in *The White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty forces the reader to consider whether all action and thought derive from the direct influence of local determinism and social expectation. In this paradigm, the social constructed individual becomes a puppet, devoid of free will and agency. Yet here the strings are broken, and the kite wends its way expertly through the buffeting winds. The image here is much like the picture of the bodysurfer, an object bobbing or floating through exterior pressures and forces. But white Gunnar, the Gunnar of Santa Monica, has not yet been encumbered by the awareness of pigment. He tells David that he understands that he is black, but he doesn’t yet know what that entails. In this light, instead of the strings being broken, the Gunnar of Santa Monica has been so inured to the social pressures that “being black” includes that he is blissfully unaware of those strings. As he matures and his self-awareness becomes more complex, those strings become manifest. His move to Hillside, as his mother intends, is the first step towards this self-conception.

“talk proper like a motherfucker”: Blackness as Semiotics

Gunnar's first foray into Hillside illuminates the particularity of semiotic systems such as language and dress codes. The first person with whom he speaks in Hillside, a boy with a pressed T-shirt and khakis, responds with bewildered amusement:

I stopped him and asked for directions to the nearest store. He squinted his eyes and leaned back and stifled a laugh. "Damn, cuz. You talk proper like a motherfucker." Cuz? Proper like a motherfucker? It wasn't as if I had said, "Pardon me, old bean, could you perchance direct a new indigene to the nearest corner emporium?" My guide's bafflement turned to judgmental indignation at my appearance. "Damn, fool, what's up with your loud-ass gear? Nigger got on so many colors, look like a walking paint sampler..." (41)

Gunnar's comparison highlights the degree of disparity between the social and linguistic norms of Hillside and Santa Monica. To someone from Hillside, the language of three-foot swells sounds as foreign as upper-crust Queen's English. In fact, Gunnar is so obviously out of place, so benign, that his advance is met with a stifled laugh instead of any sort of defensive measure. The boy is baffled, not antagonized, which exemplifies the severity of Gunnar's cultural disconnect.

When Gunnar's mother moves her children to Hillside to instill some "blackness" in them, the performative, not the essentialist ostracizes Gunnar and his sisters. Gunnar "learn[s] the hard way that social norms in Santa Monica were unforgivable breaches of proper Hillside etiquette" (52). Strings that were formed by his Santa Monica environment, strings that Gunnar could not before see, still dictate Gunnar's language and

body movement. He had been taught to look people in the eye, but in the ghetto he finds this to be a direct affront: “My sisters and I had no idea how to navigate our way around this hardscrabble dystopia” (48). The fact that Gunnar characterizes his new environs as a dystopia reveals a worldview and ideology formed by the white, middle-class attitude of Santa Monica. Not only do his language, dress and mannerisms reveal his Santa Monica upbringing, his perception of reality reproduces that of the dominant white majority who view Hillside, or any other ghetto, as a dystopia rather than a reality.

“dressed to oppress”: Blackness to the Police

But Gunnar becomes quickly disabused of any real sense of performative distinction in his first encounter with the Hillside police department. To the police, all black people, boys especially, are potential felons who must be dealt with, preemptively if deemed necessary. Knowing that the Kaufmans are new to the neighborhood, a “black-and-white Welcome Wagon” with two mustachioed police officers reveal to Gunnar what it really means to be black and in the ghetto. After speaking with his mom, the officers ask to speak with Gunnar alone, and she responds with a smirk, “happy that I was finally getting a bitter taste of her vaunted ‘traditional black experience’” (46). These officers, the “LAPD, dressed to oppress,” make plain the role they expect the black youth of Hillside to fulfill. They assume that he’s a gangbanger because he occasionally ran afoul of the Santa Monica police for engaging in youthful indiscretions, and they take his flippant answers as fact. As the interrogation goes on, Gunnar tries to extricate himself from the situation, tries to float away, but he has his plan for aerial escape leak out in a gaseous expulsion: “My would-be out of body experience hovered there, wafting in the



flatulent fumes. I wasn't going anywhere; I felt like a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade balloon—tethered, and grounded to reality by fishing lines looped through my nose and eyeballs" (47). This formal introduction to life in Hillside, to his mother's traditional black experience, forces Gunnar to feel the tethers that formerly were not attached to the kite to which he likens his time in Santa Monica. Although Gunnar himself does not feel a part of the community, the police treat him as they do the rest of the Hillside denizens.

“come correct”: Blackness for One

While the police might characterize Gunnar as the same as all the other black kids in his neighborhood, Gunnar himself understands his liminal position: “My inability to walk the walk or talk the talk led a series of almost daily drubbings. In a world where body and spoken language were currency, I was broke as hell” (52). Gunnar is driven to isolation as a result of his inability to relate to the other inhabitants of his new neighborhood. He's been able to pick up catchphrases and an assortment of ghettoisms, but his character remains formed by his Santa Monica experience, and every attempt at making use of his new vocabulary rings hollow. He doesn't have the experience to offer authenticity to his utterances: “The Hillside tribe wasn't going for no ghetto fakery. If I wanted to come correct, I'd have to complete some unspecified warrior vision... The gods of blackness would let me know when I was black enough to be trusted” (53). In making this statement, Gunnar exhibits proper usage of his new vocabulary, the realization that he needs to “come correct.” Such a phrase alludes to the adherence to commonly understood codes of ghetto-correctness, but immanent also is the idea that you have to be yourself. The ghetto does not abide fakery. Nor does the ghetto accept self-conscious

overtures: “Trying to foist myself on these people wasn’t going to work; I needed a more transcendental approach to locating my soul” (53). This realization leads Gunnar to his first serious bout of introspection; he understands that he must find within himself some measure of internal truth, of individuality, in order to be accepted by those who surround him. While this definitely bears witness to a step forward in terms of self-actualization, the motivation behind this position is a desire to be accepted, to conform to a perceived ghetto code. Gunnar still seeks comfort within a given context, but he understands that this only comes through locating his soul, through being true to that which he considers personally important.

To accomplish this, Gunnar establishes his own version of Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) in the Montgomery Wards Department Store. The spirit of Gunnar’s introspective soul-searching can be seen as analogous to Thoreau’s, but he undertakes this mission in plastic simulation, in a shopping mall. Instead of working to feed himself, Gunnar situates himself in a tent and spends his days reading Kant, Hegel, and the Greek tragedies, metaphorically feeding his mind. This is the stage on which he first encounters the Gun Totin’ Hooligans (GTH), and it’s ironic that he first comes across the GTH while reading Homer’s *The Odyssey*. That Gunnar is reading of Odysseus’s search for home resonates symbolically with his own situation: he, like Odysseus, has embarked on a journey to find his home, or to find himself so that he can then situate himself within his new environment. Upon first seeing the gang members, Gunnar notes that “each kid was dressed from head to toe in various shades of blue... Dodger blue handkerchiefs bloomed like cotton autumn delphiniums. What did the Venice Beach queers say about dark blue hankies in the right rear pocket—was it dominant or submissive?” (55). Although Gunnar

wants to locate his position within the Hillside community, he cannot break free of the social conventions that first described his reality. Hillside, however, is so radically different than Santa Monica that the codes with which Gunnar was once familiar have absolutely no bearing on life in Hillside. Instead of trying to recall what the “Venice Beach queers” understood handkerchiefs to signify, Gunnar needs to realize that those conventions no longer apply. The pocket in which the GTH place their handkerchiefs means nothing; the color, however, means everything. Blue means that the GTH is part of the Crips, whereas red would signify their rival gang, the Bloods.

#### “Cuz or Blood?”: Blackness Affiliated

This sort of coding means nothing to Gunnar; he doesn't even know that he should know what blue signifies. He approaches the Hooligans in typical Gunnar fashion, quoting William Tell and assuming that they will understand. This actually speaks well for the efficacy of Gunnar's introspective sojourn; he realizes that he needs to be himself, but his nascent understanding of Hillside culture does not provide the check that should harness his advance. After some initial “Who's on first?” misunderstandings with Pumpkin, a nice nod to the Abbot and Costello routines referenced in his earlier letter to Steven Pierce, the GTH question Gunnar's affiliation: “Whaddup, fool? You Cuz or Blood?’ My shiftless free will leaned lazily against my brain stem and flipped a coin on its clammy palm... ‘What is Blood?’ I answered” (56). This is not the answer a group of Crips wants to hear, and Gunnar nearly gets an arrow through the eye. Having avoided death, the GTH proceed to administer a rather clinical beating, which Gunnar misconstrues as some sort of initiation: “Maybe this was one of those jumping-in rituals

I'd seen on the PBS documentaries entitled *Our Youth at Risk* or something equally forlorn" (57). Gunnar yearns for acceptance, to attain some sort of contextual meaning, and he mistakenly believes this is the moment that his blackness will be ratified by others in a social group. After undergoing this rite, Gunnar believes he will have achieved their acceptance: "The secret password would be whispered in my ear, and the sacred soul shake taught. I'd raise off the linoleum floor with swollen lips and gang affiliation..." (57). Gunnar receives no password, there is no consensual contract to the beating, and instead he is left a bloody pulp. Gunnar embarks on a path that will eventually lead him to like-minded individuals, but his first run-in with the GTH carries with it no greater symbolic meaning.

The reality of Gunnar's situation, one in which his alterity must be embraced in order for him to find any sort of meaningful context or relationship, becomes clear in his first days at Manischewitz Junior High. After meeting with the receptionist and reviewing his file, Gunnar sits in homeroom and analyzes the students as they enter the classroom. In doing so, he understands his displacement: "In the middle of this unadulterated realness I realized I was a cultural alloy, tin-hearted whiteness wrapped in blackened copper plating" (63). The tin heart to which he refers recalls the Tin Man in L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1932), an image that aptly describes his stilted movement through the Hillside dystopia. He needs oil to lubricate his joints, to lend fluidity to his thought and movement, and the realization of that need enables Gunnar to embrace his liminal position. After this flash of enlightenment, Gunnar begins to make friends with the more academically inclined students, the nerds. He and they meet in "...designated safe houses on the ghetto geeks' underground railroad..." (64). Gunnar's phraseology

recalls the underground railroad that escaped slaves traveled while making their way from Slave States up to the free North: this linguistic denotation parallels the persecution faced by African-Americans during slavery with the persecution that the geeks and nerds, the socially inept and ostracized, receive from the kids in Hillside who understand, embrace and propagate social mandates. Having embraced his cohorts in geekdom, Gunnar is able to move beyond their company: “I was cooler than this, I had to be—I just didn’t know how to show my latent hipness to the world” (65).

“He called me ‘nigger’”: Blackness Accepted

Gunnar’s transition from cultural alloy to full-fledged member of the Hillside begins with self-acceptance, but interest in someone else’s personal interest propels that understanding forward. Gunnar, as demonstrated in his Waldenesque stay at Montgomery Wards, finds comfort in philosophy and literature. This is the world in which Gunnar, when able to exist without the overriding concern of conforming to the expectation of others, chooses to exist. Gunnar refuses to adhere to the dominant caste’s expectation that has those in control “passing [him] from school to university to employer to jailer...” (61). Gunnar lives in his own world, and he finds a sympathetic and kindred soul in Nicholas Scoby. Scoby goes to class, but he remains oblivious or willfully ignorant of “life’s lesson plan.” Instead he lives in music, much as Gunnar lives in books. The first words that Gunnar hears advance this perception: “Dig it. This nigger’s tonality is wow. Like hep. Like hepnotic. It’s contrapuntal glissando phraseology to bopnetic postmodernism. Blow, man, blow. Crazy” (66). Scoby displays, through his musical appreciation, a similar love of language and its malleability. “Hep” refers back to the

hepcats of the jazz era, but it becomes modernized through its association with “hip.” This parallel is furthered through his use of “hepnotic” to describe “hypnotic,” with the inferred “i” in hep serving an analogous function in “hepnotic.” The contrapuntal nature of jazz provides the perfect metaphor for Gunnar’s own syncopative nature, one in which he refuses to conform to expectation. While this becomes more fully realized later, Gunnar understands that Scoby exists in a similarly liminal position. As such, Gunnar feels comfortable exposing his own neophyte understanding of jazz. After doing so, the two agree to partner in their dramatic assignment. Scoby agrees by saying, “Yeah, nigger, let’s get together later this week, Cool? Later,” to which Gunnar responds, “He called me ‘nigger.’ My euphoria was as palpable as the loud clap of our hands colliding in my first soul shake...and I skated away cool, dipped my right shoulder toward the ground, and with some dapper spinal curvature pimp-daddied back to my seat ” (67). Gunnar echoes the way in which he felt when he and his friends were acknowledged by Tony Grimes, but instead of the characters being deracinated, this exchange is almost predicated on race. Gunnar, after coming to terms with his own contrapuntal existence, finds another whose worldview matches his. And unlike his tin-hearted former self, the Gunnar post-soul shake can pimp-daddy back to his seat. His acceptance loosens the joints that previously had been constrained by a nervous desire to be accepted, or at least not to stand out.

## Chapter 2

## Why the Cops Give Gunnar a Basketball, or

## Transitioning from a Disciplinary Society to a Society of Control

In Chapter 1, we see how Gunnar begins to understand what it means to “be black,” and how he seeks to situate himself within this often socially-defined group. Black, as Gunnar realizes, goes far beyond any essentialist notion indicated by phenotype; “being black” has more to do with the performative rituals agreed upon and assumed by members of the Hillside community. Upon moving to Hillside, with its initially foreign rituals and practices, Gunnar yearns for acceptance, a validation dependent on his internalization and reproduction of these customs. Gunnar succeeds in his desire to assimilate into the Hillside community, but he begins to understand the constraints that this acceptance places on him as a socially defined subject. These constraints reveal themselves to be multifarious, more insidious than simply those imposed by the police arm of the disciplinary society, the “welcome wagon” that first forces Gunnar to realize the tethers that shackle his actions. The subtle coercions of which Gunnar becomes aware embody two theoretical models that operate in conjunction with more traditional disciplinary apparatuses: the notion of hegemony that Antonio Gramsci puts forth in his *Prison Writings* and the conception of a society of control, as defined by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire*. By understanding how hegemony and the society of control infiltrate the very ontology of those who are being policed, we can appreciate how and why Gunnar grows disillusioned by the very pursuits and pastimes that offer an initial ontological foundation. This initial foundation develops

in direct response to Gunnar's growing awareness of the ways in which more traditional arms of the disciplinary state seek to influence behavior and order society so as to maintain current socioeconomic conditions.

The most poignant example of the disciplinary society in regulating social norms, aside from the obvious role played by the police, involves the pressure exerted on Gunnar throughout his childhood by the school. According to Hardt and Negri, "Disciplinary society is that society in which social command is constructed through a diffuse network of dispositifs or apparatuses that produce and regulate customs, habits, and productive practices...through disciplinary institutions (the prison, the factory, the asylum, the hospital, *the university, the school*, and so forth (H&N 23, emphasis added). Gunnar understands early on the power that academic institutions have in conditioning individuals to abrogate their individuality in favor of socially sanctioned normativity. Ms. Cegeny serves as the first vehicle through which such a controlling methodology exerts itself. Her name draws the reader's attention to her actions; miscegeny, a noun referring to interracial copulation, indicates a sensibility separated from racial constraints. She further cements this mindset through obvious ploys, such as wearing a shirt that reads "**Black, White, Red, Yellow, Brown, Human**" (28). On days that she wears this shirt, she embodies Gunnar's paradoxical assessment of multiculturalism: "Everything was multicultural, but nothing was multicultural" (29). Such a statement, that one needs to look beyond the color of another's skin and realize that all races are human, should signify a willingness on her part to treat every child in her class as such. Yet when she wears this shirt: "...she seemed to pay special attention to [Gunnar], Salvador Aguacaliente (the silent Latin kid who got to go home early on Cinco de Mayo), and



Sheila Watanabe (the loudest Pledge of Allegiance sayer in the history of American education)...” (28). By taking care to note the minority students on this particular day, Ms. Cegeny contradicts the stated aim of her shirt, to see past color. Were she to exemplify such colorblindness, she would treat all her students the same.<sup>ii</sup>

While Hardt and Negri and also Gramsci claim the school serves an ideological function in conditioning students, Louis Althusser understands ideology in a different way, one that pays special attention to practices and rituals. Louis Althusser articulates a mode in which ideology becomes at once more clearly delineated and perhaps purposefully obfuscated. The way in which Althusser proposes to define ideology embodies the sort of self-reflexive play that many attribute to the postmodern aesthetic: thus the “ideology of ideology” (Althusser 696). Althusser finds ideology not inherently in the esoteric or nebulous machinations of State Apparatuses, but rather in the actions that these institutions engender; speaking of the ideology of ideology, Althusser notes:

...the “ideas” of a human subject exist in his actions, or ought to exist in his actions, and if that is not the case, it lends him other ideas corresponding to the actions (however perverse) that he does perform. This ideology talks of actions: I shall talk of actions inserted into *practices*. And I shall point out that these practices are governed by the rituals in which these practices are inscribed, within the *material existence of an ideological apparatus*, be it only a small part of that apparatus: a small mass in a small church, a funeral, a minor match at a sports club, a **school day**, a political party meeting, etc. (Althusser 696, italics in original, bold added)

The logical rejoinder to Althusser's argument that ideology does not direct one's actions invokes one of the ideological apparatuses in which Althusser locates directing rituals, the same one against which Gunnar rebels: the school. The school demands conformity on the part of its students, from pre-school through high school with strictly disciplinary enforcement and through college by other coercive measures, which recall Gramsci's Individual State Apparatuses and Hardt and Negri's society of control. Having had proper conduct mandated from pre-school, how can one's actions ever be attributed solely to free will? <sup>iii</sup>

Althusser's primary claim is that "ideology interpellates individuals as subjects," but he attributes to the individual a great deal of agency. This attribution ignores the effect that outside forces have in conditioning that individual: "The individual behaves in such and such a way, adopts such and such a practical attitude, and, what is more, participates in certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatus on which "depend" the ideas which he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject" (Althusser 696). This, then, is where I disagree with Althusser; he claims that the individual acts with perfectly free will, and these actions, upon being "freely chosen," places that individual within an ideology. Sometimes, however, there are nonconformists, "bad subjects' who on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatuses" (Althusser 701). While Althusser does recognize the subjection of the power to the State, he does not go so far as to say that the individual is coerced into accepting this subjugation: "...the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order so that he shall

make the gestures and actions of his subjection ‘all by himself’” (Althusser 701). This definition comes close to identifying the coercive nature of state apparatuses, but stops short. I find very helpful, however, Althusser’s understanding of ritual as a demonstration of the degree to which ideology has been internalized by the subject, and shall make use of this point of identification. With reference to ritual within the school, students might perform these rituals with varying degrees of eagerness in order to gain the approval of teachers and administrators.

Sheila Watanabe, the other minority figure recognized in Ms. Cegeny’s hypocritical attempt at colorblindness, underscores how sons and daughters of immigrants might utilize Althusser’s notion of ritual to demonstrate the extent to which they have internalized their adopted culture. Sheila is the “the loudest Pledge of Allegiance sayer in the history of American education,” and the intimation is that she so fervently believes in America, *is so fervently American*, that she cannot help but belt out the lines (29). The Pledge of Allegiance serves as a perfect example of those rituals that Louis Althusser claims to constitute an ideology. Althusser’s definition of Ideological State Apparatuses corresponds to those apparatuses that Hardt and Negri claim to enforce the disciplinary society. While I differ with Althusser in his understanding of ways in which these apparatuses influence the development of the subject, I think he rightly notes the ways in which the subject demonstrates compliance with an ideology through participation in the rituals prescribed by that ideology. In Sheila’s case, by being the loudest sayer of the Pledge of Allegiance in the history of American education, she indicates that she has internalized the normative rituals prescribed by the school. These

rituals serve as a measure of compliance, and Sheila evidences the thoroughness of her assimilation.

While this could just be a case of a middle school student being loud, Ms. Cegeny offers Sheila another chance to prove her Americanness in similar fashion. In her effort to be multicultural, Ms. Cegeny has her class study the abacus as an example of Asian styles of calculation. After doing calculations both on an abacus and a Seiko calculator, Gunnar asks: “‘Isn’t the Seiko XL-126 from the same culture as the abacus?’ Ms. Cegeny’s response was, ‘No, we *gave* this technology to the Japanese after World War II. Modern technology is a Western construct.’ Oh. To put me in my place further, Sheila Watanabe hummed ‘My country ’tis of thee, sweet land of liberty’ loud enough for the whole class to hear” (29-30). The operative phrase “to put me in my place further” forces the reader to reconsider the spirit in which Sheila shouts out the pledge of allegiance. Watanabe is a Japanese surname<sup>iv</sup>, and Ms. Cegeny, in claiming that technological innovation is the sole province of the West, denies the capacity of a foreign/Japanese culture to evolve without the patronage of Western intellectual charity. Sheila, however, endorses this viewpoint through her pointed superiority to Gunnar. Unlike Gunnar who questions Ms. Cegeny’s characterization, Sheila proves willing to discount her own culture in favor of her adopted country. Sheila Watanabe wants to be seen not as Japanese, but as American, hence her choice of “America,” the title of the song for which “My country ’tis of thee” is the first line. Sheila demonstrates a conscious choice on her part to adopt the rituals prescribed by the school. Her choice to sing the song loudly should not be seen as a choice she makes that places her within this ideology, but rather her recognition of an ideology that celebrates this choice. Sheila Watanabe pointedly subscribes to this ideology in order to

demonstrate her alignment with the state's apparatus; her actions are motivated by a desire to conform rather than the actions of a subjective individual to whom a random ideology conforms, as Althusser would have it.

The receptionist for the dean at the next school that Gunnar attends, Manischewitz Junior High, introduces the reader to the holistic nature of the disciplinary apparatuses (of which the school functions only as one arm), and emphasizes the extent to which relations of production underpin the entirety. Gunnar arrives early on his first day to “the smelting factory of young widgethood” (59), a description of the scholastic endeavor that indicates a jaded understanding of its ultimate intent. Widgets are used in economics classes as the hypothetical products produced by a fictitious corporation; as he describes school as a smelting factory of young widgethood (as opposed to, say, adulthood), Gunnar highlights the goal of education: the goal is not the liberal idea of advancing one's understanding of the world in terms of complexity or nuance, but rather conditioning the student to participate in a market economy. Gunnar literally details the commodification of the individual. This perception reinforces Gunnar's earlier appraisal of the rationale behind Wellness Week, in which city officials evaluate students “to ensure that America would have an able-bodied supply of future midlevel managers ready to lead the reinforcement brigades of minimum-wage foot soldiers to their capitalist battle stations” (30). Gunnar's appraisal, however, has been modified in accordance with his new Hillside residence and the expectations of its residents. In Santa Monica, the health officials want to ensure the future capabilities of “mid-level managers,” but in Hillside the outcome of education is “widgethood.” The students at Manischewitz are denied any personal agency; they exist as mere goods, ready for exchange, assumedly at

the direction of those mid-level managers produced by the more affluent Santa Monica school district.

The school system, as perceived by young Gunnar, exists not to educate the youth, but rather to prepare its constituents for a lifetime role in a market economy. As such, Gunnar wants to know how such a system classifies him, and he convinces the receptionist to let him view his academic record:

Despite his race, subject possesses remarkable intelligence and excellent reasoning and analytical skills. His superb yet raw athletic ability exceeds even the heightened expectations normally accorded those of his ethnicity. Family background is exemplary, and with the proper patriotic encouragement Gunnar Kaufman will make an excellent undercover CIA agent. At a young age, he already shows a proclivity for making friends with subversives and betraying them at the drop of a hat. (61)

The initial phrase, “Despite his race,” indicates a continuing tendency to judge ability based on racial stereotypes. Black, according to the state, still means intellectually deficient but athletically superior; the standard against which black is judged, one assumes, is white America. The state regards Gunnar’s family background as exemplary: Gunnar’s father works for the police department and his mother is a nurse at a free clinic for treating sexually transmitted diseases. While Gunnar’s father works for an obvious arm of the disciplinary state, his mother’s work at a free VD clinic recalls the role of the hospital in treating victims of the plague that Foucault analyzes in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 551-554). Foucault writes, “Underlying disciplinary projects the image of the

plague stands for all forms of confusion and disorder; just as the image of the leper, cut off from all human contact, underlies projects of exclusion” (Foucault 553). Venereal diseases, especially AIDS, serve as a more than adequate analog for the plague, and Gunnar’s mother actively engages in identifying and recording those who are infected. Such identification, especially in the early 1990’s, surely leads to social exclusion. While the free clinic appears as a service to society, Foucault and Hardt and Negri all identify this function as an apparatus of the disciplinary state. While the CIA by mandate functions outside the borders of the state, its activities influence world events and thus solidify or increase the power of the state. Gunnar’s file, instead of recording his academic potential and how he might evolve as an individual, indicates only the service he might provide the state in furthering a disciplinary society.

Apart from official files, the school imposes its own judgment on superficial signifiers such as dress and language choice, and then forces on those that it considers deviant a program designed to keep them in a lower social stratum. Gunnar, however, understands that such a reductive labeling doesn’t conform to the reality that he experiences as a new student at Manischewitz. At homeroom, “[he] couldn’t classify anyone by dress or behavior. The boisterous were just as likely to be in the academically enriched classes as the silent” (63). Gunnar interprets his classmates’ behavior with more nuance and complexity than demonstrated by the school. According to school officials, if a student does not participate in the forms that imply obedience to the school’s dictates, that person becomes labeled delinquent. Ritual here, to maintain the vocabulary put forth by Althusser, encompasses more than actions. Gunnar implies that these “gangbangers,” apart from their extracurricular activities, are guilty of numerous breaches of social

behavior, particularly codes of dress, speech, and attitude. Ritual expands to incorporate general behavior, not simply participation in mandated actions like the Pledge of Allegiance. And because they don't, these individuals are labeled "deviants." After thus labeling such students, the school takes steps to ensure that these students will not have the credentials to advance academically: "During spring registration I stood in line behind sloe-eyed bangers and listened to kind liberal guidance counselors derail their dreams. 'Buster, I know you want to take Graphic Design, but I'm placing you in Metal Shop...it'll be a good prerequisite for license plate pressing'" (65). Gunnar claims that these students have aspirations, that they have dreams capable of being either nurtured or retarded. The school, however, remains intent on confining these non-conformists to a category that culminates in prison, where inmates press license plates. Rather than offer these students a chance to improve themselves according to their own desires, which taking Graphic Design would surely do, the guidance counselors force them into shop, teaching them a vocational skill that effectively prevents upward mobility.

Gramsci recognizes the role that vocational schools serve in ratifying the status quo, and argues that they serve only to perpetuate social differences. In this Gramsci recognizes a system designed to prevent class mobility:

For [the school] is organized ever more fully in such a way as to restrict recruitment to the technically qualified government stratum, in a social and political context which makes it increasingly difficult for 'personal initiative' to acquire such skills and technical-political preparation. Thus we are really going back to a division of juridically fixed and crystallized



estates rather than moving towards the transcendence of class divisions.

(Gramsci 318)

By relegating the “sloe-eyed bangers” to shop rather than allowing them to participate in their chosen elective, the school proves the power that it has as an arm of the disciplinary state to organize society so as to deny upward mobility. The student has “personal initiative,” yet is thwarted based on superficial signifiers of non-conformity. Cultural stereotypes doom these students to their “juridically fixed estate.” Gunnar recognizes this stereotyping and he begins to be filled with a growing sense of resentment toward the perpetrators of racial and class reification.

Gunnar’s antipathy toward the institutions that seek maintain racial and class differences reveals itself on stage at the Shakespeare Festival. The Festival provides the Manischewitz students a venue to break free from cultural stereotypes; instead, however, Ms. Cantrell voluntarily recurs to racial typecasting: “Our teacher, Ms. Cantrell, determined to show that her impoverished Negro thespians could compete with kids at the well-funded oceanfront and Valley schools, entered us and notified the media that her domesticated niggers would soon be on parade. In a predictable attempt to inject some cultural relevance, she decided to do Othello...” (66). The phrase, “domesticated niggers,” is particularly troublesome; the idea behind such a characterization is that Ms. Cantrell’s students have become conditioned to such a degree that they adopt the attitudes and worldviews of the dominant race. The phrase harkens to the divide during slavery between those slaves who worked in field and those who worked in the house. While the slaves in the field performed rough and manual labor, those in the house would be

dressed as servants and expected to act in a refined and deferential manner. Yet the phrase also implies the taming of wild animals and their incorporation into human society, the domestication of the dog being one example. In both cases, the subject abandons her initial worldview and conforms to dictates of her new master. The students, however, have no say in the parts chosen for them. Ms. Cantrell, given Shakespeare's entire oeuvre from which to choose, selects the one play with a black lead.

Gunnar make clear that the black kids are not only expected to perform Othello, but also that the judges and the audience expect them to fail at this performance. Such a failure reaffirms racial stereotypes and creates a paternalistic sense of superiority between the moneyed, predominantly white schools and Manischewitz. When Scoby falters over his lines, "The crowd started cheering him as if he were one of those kids stricken with cystic fibrosis taking his first baby steps on a telethon at two o'clock in the morning..." (70). The judges and the audience infantilize the Manischewitz students with their patronizing encouragement. After Scoby fails to remember his lines, "He [slinks] off the stage, his face hidden in his hands, his ears ringing with deafening applause for failing" (71). Cultural difference and superiority have been reaffirmed in Scoby's aborted attempt, and the crowd applauds.

After watching the audience's insipid condescension and the way in which the Manischewitz students conform to expectation, Gunnar mounts the stage and engages in his first act of cultural disobedience. Ms. Cantrel had assigned her students a predictable play, and they had faltered as expected. Gunnar rejects the role that the judges, the audience and Ms. Cantrel foist upon the Manischewitz students: "I was growing allergic to the powdery mask of Elizabethan whiteface" (71). Feeling like a blackface actor in a

minstrel show, an actor at whom the audience feels free to guffaw, Gunnar abandons his complicity in the spectacle. He chooses instead a monologue that captures the indignant anger he feels on perceiving the paternalistic, infantilizing, condescending stance adopted by the judges and the audience: “What does thou know me for? A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking whoreson...one-trunk inheriting slave...beggar, Nigger...I will beat you into clamorous whining if thou deny'st the least bit of my addition” (71). The spirit of Kent's response to Oswald captures nicely the fury Gunnar feels at being made sport for the enjoyment of the audience; yet instead of one man answering another, as happens in the original, Gunnar directs his question “What does thou know me for?” rhetorically to the judges. Gunnar uses Kent's response to Oswald, who has turned against Lear, as the answer to his own question. Gunnar, in effect, asks the audience how they view him, and answers for them: pretender, slave, beggar, a “Nigger.” Gunnar adds this last on his own, capitalized for emphasis, but the characterization encapsulates the spirit of the litany. This understanding sparks the fury to which Gunnar viscerally reacts, and the crowd responds with stunned silence. This public rejection of the part white America expects of him is the first of many, and it cements the budding friendship Gunnar shares with Scoby.

Gunnar recognizes that direct conditioning on the part of the educational system serves as an extension of the disciplinary nature of the state. He realizes that a variety of disciplinary forces, Individual State Apparatuses as Gramsci calls them, work in concert to maintain social and economic divisions. While the police operate as the most overt agent of state domination, the school shapes young minds to inhabit preordained niches:

the sloe-eyed gangbanger will never be anything else, despite the desire on his part to learn Graphic Design. These instruments of the disciplinary state exert direct pressure on individuals, and Gunnar rebels against the pigeonholing. Having demonstrated his resentment toward such obvious devices, Gunnar works to create for himself his own paradigm for ontological security. He willingly takes part in the things that he enjoys most: basketball, street poetry, his friendship with Scoby and with Psycho Loco. As he matures, however, Gunnar comes to understand that even these acts in which he willingly participates result in a ratification of the status quo. To understand how this operates, we must look to Hardt and Negri and their conception of the society of control.

## Section II: Emergence of the Society of Control

The disciplinary society, as formulated by Hardt and Negri, utilizes various state apparatuses to impose its will on its constituents. Building on Foucault's work, Hardt and Negri use this paradigm of control as the foundation on which they build their concept of a society of control. While distasteful, the methodology of the disciplinary society remains fairly straightforward. In addition to direct and overt policing, however, the society of control infiltrates the mindsets and worldviews of its constituents so that they willingly acquiesce to and reproduce the very conditions that maintain subjugation. Hardt and Negri term this internalization and reproduction *biopower*: "Biopower is a form of power that regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it. Power can achieve an effective command over the entire life of the population only when it becomes an integral, vital function that every individual embraces and reactivates of his or her own accord" (H&N 24). As Gunnar begins to

understand the ways in which the state operates as a disciplinary society, he also becomes aware of the more subtle ways by which the society of control instills in the population the desires and customs that dictate action and ontology: Gunnar conceptualizes this manner of control as strings that control the movement of the puppet he increasingly feels himself to be.

Communication and its methods of transmission serve as integral components of a society of control; the communication industries put forth images and ideas into the ether that create and reinforces their audience's understanding of place and people. Before Gunnar and his sisters became a part of the Hillside community, their view of black people was that "they're different from us" (37). As their actual contact with black people had been very limited to that point, this understanding can be attributed to images broadcast into their Santa Monica environs. Hardt and Negri look to the communications industry as a primary instrument in the development and propagation of subjectivity: "One site where we should locate the biopolitical production of order is in the immaterial nexuses of the production of language, communication, and the symbolic that are developed by the communication industries" (H&N 32). The Stoic Undertakers, in filming their newest video, aspire to be as violent, as hedonistic and misogynistic as can be. While they consider this the rapper's ultimate lifestyle, it propagates negative stereotypes. Not only does their video reinforce these stereotypes, it creates subjectivities: aspiring rappers will see the style and content on television, and they will replicate this supposed ideal in an attempt to attain commercial success<sup>v</sup>. The audience, at one point Gunnar and his sisters, can easily mistake this fiction for reality, and thus the broadly

understood and marketed reality becomes reduced to merely the simulacra of race and place.

The scene that Gunnar witnesses, the ghetto ideal that has been internalized and sought after by its denizens, explicitly replicates the relationship between the intrepid white explorer of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Africans they encountered in country. Gunnar makes direct comparisons between the two, but in other instances he measures his language and imagery to produce a more nuanced connection. His initial impression is that his "...street was a soundstage and its machinations of poverty and neglect were Congo cinema verité" (76). Africa, to Gunnar, has been transplanted to Hillside, but his characterization is interestingly paradoxical: cinema verité strives to capture the reality of a place, but Gunnar's relation of Hillside reality in no way resembles the Hillside in the video. The location that should be genuine has been transformed to represent that which it is not. Gunnar does not typically see flamethrowers and Uzis on a typical day. But as Jean Baudrillard notes, the representation of an object on screen comes to replace its objective reality; in filming Hillside in such a way, the Stoic Undertakers create a distorted vision of the neighborhood that exists as reality in the minds of its viewers and producers.

In addition to instilling and reinforcing notions of the ghetto in the minds of consumers, the actual filming of the video revels in classicism and minstrel performance. There exists a rift between the elites and the masses, which Gunnar describes in hyperbolic fashion: "Local strong-armed youth bore the director over the crowds in a canopied sedan chair, his seconds shouting out commands through a bullhorn" (76). The image recalls scenes of Roman ostentation, in which slaves, often obtained in foreign

wars, transported the wealthy through the streets, safely ensconced in their sedan chairs to minimize contact with the masses. The director removes himself from actual contact even from those he ostensibly directs; he has seconds to do the actual work for him. Pete “Hush Money” Brocklington, the local councilman, walks the streets and brags “to the passersby about the loads of money pouring into neighborhood coffers. [Gunnar] only saw the bulge in his pocket” (77). The symbiotic relationship between corporations that exploit a place or a people for profit and the local government that facilitates this process reveals itself. The director receives the lion’s share of the profits from the shoot, signified by his sedan chair stature, as does the councilman.

Instead of benefiting the community, only the director, the Stoic Undertakers, and the councilman receive financial remuneration. The Stoic Undertakers video provides the first filmic representation of Hillside in *The White Boy Shuffle*, and in Chapter 3, I contrast this representation with the vision put forth in the MiseryFests. In this instance, the Hillside community remains as deprived as it was before filming: “My tribe wrestled for the rights to broken doughnuts and oily ham ’n’ cheese croissants, then scattered back to our hovels, triumphant from a good day’s hunt. Plastic cups clattered in the gutter; paper napkins and signed release forms fluttered about the village like lost leaves” (79). Far from being enriched by this experience, Hillside resembles a wasteland. In fact, the community can be seen as worse off than before the video took place. The community remains in the same financial straits as before, and now this backwater vision of violence will play on the screens of impressionable people across America. This negative vision creates the “reality” that will now inform the general population’s understanding of

Hillside. Projects of a similar nature undoubtedly inform Gunnar's initial impression of Hillside as a "hardscrabble dystopia."

The rappers who make this all possible willingly participate in the spectacle, and they knowingly acknowledge their complicity in modernizing past images of minstrelsy. Bwana directly references the historical precedent, and the director answers by encouraging even more caricature: "The curled lips snapped back into watermelon grins like fleshy rubber bands. 'How was that, massa? Menacing enough fo' ya?' 'You got 'em pissing their pants in Peoria. Now one more take, and this time make sure they defecate their dungarees in Dubuque'" (77). Unlike self-styled forms of resistance, the Stoic Undertakers take their cue from the director; although Gunnar never specifically mentions the director's race, Gunnar's characterizes the crew as "Hollywood ethnographers" (79), which leaves the impression that he and they are white, and in addition Gunnar sets up the Riefenstahl relationship with the Nuba, further emphasizing the colonial relationship. The director is the one instructing the rappers to act more menacing. While Bwana might want the scene shot to make it look as if the sun is bleeding, the director wants him to make to make it even bloodier. The director wants the consumers in Dubuque and Peoria, the American heartland, to recoil in fear. In casting the ghetto as a ruthlessly savage jungle, as dangerously exotic, the kids in Middle America will be more inclined to spend their money on this vicarious thrill that reinforces preconceived notions about the inner city and black people.

Rap exists as one of the few avenues that the corporate America offers inner-city youth to escape their ghetto existence. While the superstructure makes available this opportunity to small numbers of successful rappers, their success predicates itself on



furthering racial stereotypes, as well as disguising the fact that few other opportunities exist. Thus we see the convergence of the disciplinary and the society of control, in which the school disallows avenues of advancement (offering Metal Shop instead of Graphic Design) while elevating professional basketball as a viable alternative.

#### Basketball as Authorized Panacea

The postmodern continuation of the disciplinary society that Hardt and Negri diagnose, the society of control, gradually reveals itself to Gunnar. This form of oppression does not rely on outside institutions to police society's Others, but rather relies on shaping the minds and desires of those same people to comply with an ideal preordained by those who stand to profit. Such pressures arise throughout Gunnar's childhood years, particularly after his move to Hillside. In fact, his first contact with a Hillside resident, the boy who claims Gunnar talks "proper as a motherfucker" and criticizes Gunnar's "loud-ass gear," his "jambalaya wardrobe" (41), illustrates the way in which social critique molds the choices of those in a specific environment. Such a critique implies that a sanctioned code of speech and dress exists, and Gunnar, having been adapted to Santa Monica norms, does not conform<sup>vi</sup>. The same applies to ebonics and other linguistic constructions that differentiate Hillside from Santa Monica. The ability of social beings to police themselves, without reliance on the disciplinary arms of the superstructure, exemplifies Hardt and Negri's understanding of biopower.

Hardt and Negri, moving past Foucault and onwards to Deleuze and Guattari, locate an ontology within the social production. The concept that Hardt and Negri propose applies to immaterial labor, the evolution of the proletariat from factory workers to creators and disseminators of information: "Deleuze and Guattari present us with a

properly poststructuralist understanding of biopower that renews materialist thought and grounds itself solidly in the question of the production of the social being... They focus our attention clearly on the ontological substance of social production” (H&N 28). Thus the ontology of social production has to do with one’s manipulation of media and information in order to form the opinions and desires of the bios, the individuals who constitute the biopolitical: “The great industrial and financial powers thus produce not only commodities but also subjectivities. They produce agentic subjectivities within the biopolitical context: they produce needs, social relations, bodies and minds—which is to say, they produce producers” (H&N 32). A point of primary significance that evolves from this relies on Hardt and Negri’s formulation of the term, agentic subjectivity: Gunnar seeks (needs, although not in the material sense that Hardt and Negri imply) social acceptance, and the validation of his individuality comes from another individual, Scoby. Scoby serves as an exemplary icon of an agentic subjectivity: while his ontology is derived from his appropriation of jazz and basketball, Scoby maintains a degree of agency (challenged, however, later in the novel, after he and Gunnar move to Boston). Gunnar seeks a similar form of subjective agency, of ontological grounding, and he realizes his own ontological foundation through basketball.

Basketball serves as a major vehicle in Gunnar’s individual and ontological development. It provides him a venue in which to develop his inherent yet latent athletic prowess, yet this opportunity reveals itself only after Gunnar moves from Santa Monica to Hillside. In Santa Monica, “Participation in organized sports was looked down on as the taboo dominion of society’s underprivileged. During Proletarian Pastimes Week, instead of playing sports we learned the rules” (73). This attitude seems peculiar to Santa

Monica, a beachside community in which surfing and skateboarding are considered appropriate pastimes. The idea that basketball should be confined to the proletariat, the impoverished who have no other means to escape the confines of economic privation, becomes conflicted once Gunnar reaches high school. At El Campesino Real High, Gunnar is only one of many urbanites bussed in to augment the athletic department: “I wasn’t the basketball team’s only hired gun. In hopes of dominating Valley basketball, the El Campesino Real Conquistadors brought in Anthony Price from Gardena, Anita Appleby from Torrance, and Tommy Mendoza from Echo Park” (156). El Campesino Real is an elite high school, hardly the domain of society’s underprivileged to which organized sports is relegated in Santa Monica (73), but the school feels passionately enough about its athletic department’s performance to import star players. The object lesson appears to be that the elite need winning to cement their status as elites, and if that means a degree of cheating, or bussing, then that is what they are prepared to do. While Gunnar willingly plays for El Campesino Real, he never adopts the sense of urgency to win that prompts this strategy.

Basketball begins, for Gunnar, as an activity that cements the friendship he and Scoby form through the Shakespeare Festival. After Gunnar’s impromptu rejection of the “Elizabethan whiteface” that he finds so smothering, Scoby invites Gunnar to join him and others playing basketball at lunch. Scoby and the rest spend each lunch break at the park, but the school forbids their play; they must scale a chainlink, barbed wire fence to do so. We see combined here the disciplinary society and the society of control. The interplay between the two, however, deserves especial note: the kids who scale the chain link fence feel as though they defy the mandate of the school, the disciplinary society, yet

their goal falls fully within the dictates of the society of control. The society of control instills in black youth the idea that financial wealth can be gained only through rap or basketball instead of entrepreneurship or some other capitalist enterprise. While seeming to rebel, their actions and desires in fact reinforce this postmodern paradigm of control.

Basketball and music become inextricably linked for Scoby. The pairing proves apt in that both music and basketball rely on rhythm: “The music set the tempo and provided the ballplayers with a grooveline around which to improvise” (73). Jazz uniquely matches the basketball ideal in that syncopation, hitting the offbeat, provides the offensive player the most effective means of beating a defender off of the dribble. While Gunnar never displays an affinity for music and remains pointedly inept at dancing, his poetry certainly subscribes to a similarly syncopative style. At one point, Gunnar is alone after a missed basket and Scoby passes him the ball. Because he’s going so fast towards the rim, Gunnar, without realizing he’s doing anything special, dunks the ball and hangs on to the rim. After an inauspicious beginning to the game, Gunnar amazes the others through his natural athleticism. As Gunnar prepares to receive corporeal punishment for ignoring Mr. Uyeshima, Patrick tells Mr. Uyeshima about Gunnar’s dunk: “...I’d received three of the prescribed five swats when Mr. Uyeshima asks if I really did dunk. I said yes and he sent me back to class with a stinging pat on my tender behind” (75). While the official school policy prevents the boys from playing basketball at lunch, Mr. Uyeshima gives tacit approval to their truancy based on Gunnar’s newfound abilities. Mr. Uyeshima exercises his authority as a member of a disciplinary society, but his approval encourages a mode of expression granted by the society of control; his punishment

actually encourages this supposed “transgression.” While the basketball players feel as if they rebel, their actions reify an act encouraged by the society of control.

Gunnar finds freedom and friendship in his first contact with basketball. The freedom he feels, the improvisation and the unleashing of his latent athletic skills, leads him to recognize another desire he has but might otherwise not have realized. This understanding twines itself around the first feeling of true friendship he experiences after moving to Hillside:

I thought of Swen Kaufman taking his lashes for his farcical dreams of being a dancer and realized that I had taken my swats for the sake of friendship. Not some semper fi cultish fraternal bonding or a Huck Finn Nigger Jim “love the one you’re with” friendship, but because I had met a special motherfucker whose companionship was easily worth a middle-school beating. “Gunnar, haz una oracion utilizando la palabra ‘escribir,’ por favor.” “Yo voy a escribir poemas como Octavio Paz y Kid Frost.”

(75)

Swen Kaufman, though his history proves fictitious, serves as a role model worthy of Gunnar’s emulation. Swen liked to dance, and he didn’t allow himself to be censored by any social or racial expectation. Gunnar, in recalling Swen’s *raison d’être*, indicates that he has begun to realize his own ontological place in the world. It starts with basketball, but this realization moves easily into Gunnar’s claiming another goal of his, one previously only hinted at: he wants to be a poet. After Gunnar solidifies his friendship with Scoby, he feels enough self-confidence to explore his other individual desires. He

doesn't want to be a poet because he feels it will gain him acceptance, as he hoped when getting beaten by the Gun Totin' Hooligans in Montgomery Ward's, he wants to be a poet because he wants to be a poet. He doesn't need to justify or account for this; he just needs to recognize that desire within himself, which his first experience playing basketball allows him to do.

Gunnar's newly expressed desire to play basketball leads to condemnation by his father, who, like those in the Santa Monica school system, view basketball as the realm of the proletariat. After asking his father for a basketball, a police cruiser drives by and deposits a basketball and book entitled *Heaven Is a Playground*. This moment offers a rare zeitgeist, a moment in which an arm of the disciplinary society relinquishes its care of the oppressed into the arms of the society of control. The police actually give Gunnar a basketball. And the book, written by a sports journalist, details the life of ghetto players who play basketball in a New York playground known as The Hole. The Hole is a blacktop court famous in basketball circles for hosting the very best basketball players who haven't made it to the NBA. A note accompanies the book, which reads, "Read this and remember you're a Kaufman and not of the black misfits sociologically detailed herein" (92). The message Gunnar's father sends appears somewhat contradictory: he gives Gunnar the ball for which he asks, but he tells him not to stay a streetballer. If Gunnar wants to develop his skills and become a basketball player, his father tells him that financial remuneration is the only justifiable rationale behind this endeavor. Either he should make it to the NBA, or he isn't worthy of being a Kaufman. Gunnar's father doesn't understand or admit to the joy an individual might derive through simply playing the game at a high level. If Gunnar doesn't make money doing what he wants to, that

endeavor is not worthy of a Kaufman. He would become, as have the men who play in The Hole, sociological misfits. To engage in an activity that doesn't produce capital signifies them as such; Gunnar's father reinforces the measure by which he judges success, and that is monetary accumulation, not personal fulfillment or happiness. Gunnar, however, does not want to play basketball because he views it as his sole means to escape the ghetto; he wants to play basketball because he enjoys the game, he treasures the friendship that has come about because of basketball, and he desires the opportunity to explore his nascent ability.

This exchange highlights the way in which the society of control exerts its power. The biopolitical creates the conditions that instill in Gunnar a desire to play basketball; Scoby and everyone else play at lunch, and Gunnar wants to be a part of the group. That passion, however, remains co-opted by market forces that reify the current socioeconomic structure. The note that Gunnar's father sends him serves to remind Gunnar that he must engage this endeavor only with monetary accumulation as a motivating factor. The paradox, however, is that financial success through basketball has nothing to do with why the society of control sanctions basketball as an appropriate endeavor. Basketball, for the society of control, fulfills the same function as the carnival in Mikhail Bahktin's dissection of Rabelais's *Pantagruel* in Bahktin's larger work, *Rabelais and his World*. According to Bahktin, "one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (Bahktin 686). The carnival allowed the peasants to throw off all of the yokes and proscriptions imposed upon them by the Church and the ruling class. However, by taking part in this

annual celebration of the body and of their own freedoms, the peasants condoned the oppression under which they lived for the majority of the year. In this same way, the freedom that basketball offers both Gunnar and Scoby serves to confirm their own complicity in a society of control. Gunnar eventually realizes this. Gunnar sees the strings that control his actions and desires; Scoby never does. So whether basketball will ever lead to pecuniary wealth for the players remains immaterial; the simple fact that Gunnar uses basketball as an escape from other social pressures affirms the validity of a system that exerts such pressures. Instead of questioning the lack of social institutions such as universal health care or a real network to care for the dispossessed, those most oppressed by the dearth of such institutions fill their time playing basketball. Despite this, basketball remains an industry hugely important to corporations, agents and coaches who reap substantial profits.

The commodification of basketball receives thorough treatment throughout the novel, but more than ghetto youth making money off of the game, Gunnar realizes that an extensive network of companies that make shoes and apparel take advantage of aspiring players. The first instance in which this becomes explicitly manifest is when Gunnar seeks to buy his first pair of basketball shoes. Gunnar never hesitates to characterize reality in hyperbolic terms, and his foray into the shoe store, Tennies from Heaven exemplifies this tendency; Gunnar describes the shoe store as “A sneaker emporium where the walls were lines with hundreds of shoes and salesmen dressed in silk sweatsuits patrolled the floor, handing out brochures, shaking hands and checking credit ratings” (88). At the store, Gunnar is unable to try on more than one shoe of any single brand at a time, and he has to sign a release before entering the area of the store in which



the best and most expensive sneakers are sold. The release states that “if [Gunnar’s] new sneakers are forcibly removed from [his] feet and the crime received any media attention, [Gunnar] would blame the theft on the current administration and not on niche marketing” (89). The very fact that the sneaker company insists on such compliance indicates an understanding on its part that it in fact engages in niche marketing. This marketing, a tactic that increases the value of the shoe based on consequentially increased social capital, leads to dispossessed youth committing crimes in order to attain a product granted cultural value.

Once Gunnar realizes through intensive practice his own ability to play basketball, he gets invited to participate in an elite basketball camp, and here he begins to understand that the true commodity is the player himself, not the shoe that the player wears. The players at this camp are deprived of any sense of individuality; they exist as numbers, and the numbers indicate their value in relation to the other players. Gunnar writes to his mother, “Thanks for the Nabokov, it’s appropriate in this place with these bossy white men slobbering over skinny kids” (143). Gunnar most likely refers to Nabokov’s *Lolita*, but the salivating indicates a desire to possess, to consume the dollar-value that athletes at the collegiate level embody. College athletes generate revenue for the colleges for which they play, and the recruiter for Raleigh State makes this clear: “I was sitting in the bleachers when a white man wearing a Raleigh State shirt sat next to me. He didn’t say anything, but he took out his wallet and opened it so I could get a good look at what was inside, a brick of hundred-dollar bills” (149). Capitalism reduces all who participate to producers and consumers, which paradoxically eliminates any basis or desire for racial discrimination. As producers who generate revenue through their play,

and having willingly submitted to the hierarchical ranking system, the players become commodities that coaches feel licensed to buy and trade in hopes of securing their services.

The depersonalized way in which the coaches at Gunnar's basketball camp treat the players leads to Gunnar's dissatisfaction with and then rejection of such an objectifying ideology. Gunnar confesses this discontent to Scoby: "...this place makes me feel like a racehorse. Every morning I get up at six o'clock to get weighed, fed, and put through my paces" (146). This characterization appears acutely apt: coaches metaphorically saddle their careers to the players on the court, hoping to ride them to victory and contract extensions. They view each player in terms of cost and benefit: "The coaches are asking about you too. How tall are you? What's your quickness to speed ratio? As you can see, they really want to get to know you as a person" (144). Having been ostracized before finding friendship, Gunnar values personal relationships, and he recoils at the dehumanized way in which the coaches view both him and Scoby. His disillusionment leads Gunnar to reject the structure that produces this worldview. After playing against the number one ranked player, Leon Tremundo, and not getting dunked on, the coaches try to upgrade Gunnar's stock: "The coaches tried to offer me jersey number eight (apparently I don't penetrate enough), but I turned them down" (149). Gunnar's method of resistance is to refuse validation from a system that seeks to exploit him. Unlike his roommates, Gunnar can see life as larger than basketball. Gunnar will again return to extrication as one of the few methods of resistance available toward the end of the novel, but this refusal offers Gunnar's first formulation of extrication as a mode of resistance.

Gunnar's roommates, however, have become conditioned to their role within such a commodifying system, and they exemplify Hardt and Negri's society of control. Not only do Gunnar's roommates want nothing else other than to play basketball, they structure their entire worldviews around and through the language of this prescribed outlet: "...these guys use basketball as a metaphor for everything. Touch is like, 'Yeah, she cute, but she don't make my starting five'" (147). For Gunnar's roommates, basketball has become ontology, and they cannot recognize that in doing so they perform the role dictated by oppressive, though self-imposed, mechanisms of command. The time Gunnar spends at the camp encourages him to recognize this method of social oppression, which reinforces his perception of the organized basketball team as a confining collective. In his first high school game, Gunnar prepares to shoot a potentially game-winning free-throw when a voice from the crowd shouts, "'Come on, Gunnar, we need these.' We? I didn't even need these free throws. I missed the first one purpose...I had the power to make them cry or send them home clucking like chickens" (116). The crowd pleads with Gunnar to make a free throw to satisfy them; Gunnar, however, though part of the team, feels no personal investment: "When he freed me from a playful headlock, I wanted to shout, 'But Coach, I really don't give a fuck'" (116). The only impetus for him to make the free throws is so that the crowd can celebrate, and this demand for performance disillusioned Gunnar.

The commodification of basketball players at camp, the recognition that basketball exists as a tool of a society of control, and the sublimation of the individual to a collective will all lead Gunnar to reject basketball as a project. Scooby's crisis in dealing with the pressure of perfection, the expectation of performance, illuminates for Gunnar

the social force that basketball exerts on both him and Scoby: “Successful niggers can’t go back home and blithely disappear into the local populace. American society reels you back into the fold, ‘Tote that barge, shoot that basketball, lift that bale, nigger ain’t you ever heard of Dred Scott?’” (119). Gunnar explicitly links the society of control that conditions black youth to play basketball with the disciplinary society that Dred Scott embodies. What Beatty presents so directly to the reader with the police cruiser that gives Gunnar his first basketball finally reveals itself to Gunnar, in this case with a much more poignant analog. The fold to which American society reels black people is no different than the position they occupied under slavery. This understanding prompts Gunnar’s public acknowledgement of this position and his subsequent refusal to propagate its retrograde ideals through his participation.

In Gunnar’s last high school basketball game, the press creates a spurious rivalry between Gunnar and Scoby in order to hype the game, and which provokes Gunnar to openly declare his view of the role society asks him play. To Gunnar, basketball has become a minstrel show in which he performs for the amusement and approval of others. To drive home this point, he changes the names in the starting lineup to Anthony “Rastus” Price and Anita “Aunt Jemima” Appleby. Both Rastus and Aunt Jemima are iconic examples of corporations employing blackface to sell their products. The announcer then calls out Gunnar “Hambone, Hambone, Have You Heard” Kaufman: “I lurched from the sideline...my big feet flopping in front me, my back bent into a drooping question mark. My gloved hands slid along the floor, trailing behind like minstrel landing gear...I stood at center court and gave a hearty ‘Howdy, y’all” (164). The crowd erupts with laughter; the people understand his likening basketball to minstrel

performance, especially as he is the “hired gun” for El Campesino Real, and they applaud his resistance. Nothing, however, changes; the game goes on, and Gunnar watches from the bench. While the crowd might applaud Gunnar’s social critique, it still wants to see the game.

## Chapter 3

...stay black, or die<sup>vii</sup>: Two Constructs for Resisting the Society of Control

The tone of *The White Boy Shuffle* shifts dramatically in the final section, "...stay black, and die." What had been a lighthearted, satirical witnessing of current modes of domination and control turns deadly earnest: Gunnar advocates suicide to all those selfish apathetic human beings who unwittingly comprise and reproduce the society of control, and Scoby along with scores of others follow that advice. Gunnar and Yoshiko return to Hillside where Yoshiko gives birth to a baby girl. The birth takes place in Reynier Park, with the whole community invited, and the event spawns the MiseryFests. The overriding concern in the latter stages of *The White Boy Shuffle* asks how one might combat the hegemonic nature of a society of control, and Gunnar proposes two options: complete extrication from such a society (suicide) or the co-option of its exploitative methodologies and their transformation into affirmations of communal catharsis and self acknowledgment: the MiseryFests. The MiseryFests successfully demonstrate how resistance forms and multiplies on the imperial terrain, exploiting the channels of communication to proffer a model for other communities to emulate.

Hardt and Negri note two particular methodologies of domination, the disciplinary society and the society of control. The disciplinary society relies on strategic imposition, the invasion of state apparatuses that regulate social norms. The society of control, as Hardt and Negri understand it, represents the postmodern evolution of the disciplinary society; external domination becomes internalized, so that the body politic actively reproduces the normative behavior formerly dictated by policing apparatuses.

Hardt and Negri term this phenomenon biopolitical production, and their conception roughly equates to Gramsci's notion of hegemony. As Gunnar evolves, he grows aware of these more subtle methods of coercion; he visualizes these methods of control as strings that direct his actions. Scoby's deterioration after their move to Boston prompts Gunnar to explore ways to thwart the puppet-master. The two models of resistance he conceptualizes correspond to recommendations offered by Hardt and Negri in the fight against Empire, namely desertion and reappropriation; but, as we will see, *The White Boy Shuffle* takes their theoretical proposal and proffers certain incarnations of its real (albeit fictional) world praxis. In addition, the successful model of reappropriation put forth in the MiseryFests reveals a major flaw in the reasoning that undergirds Hardt and Negri's vision of a global multitude. Instead of global citizenship, I argue that *The White Boy Shuffle* illustrates how a focus on communal citizenship, a global multitude writ small, when broadcast through co-opted flows of information, achieves the same counter-Empire that Hardt and Negri confer only on the global multitude.

Resistance to the society of control differs from traditional modes because the individual, even in modernist opposition, remains complicit in postmodern structures of biopolitical domination. There is no legitimated agent of domination, but rather the rhizomatic network that encompasses much of social interaction. Such diffusion structurally prohibits direct attack; even the dialectical approach, the presentation of an alternative ethos or paradigm, still takes the form of oppositional positioning. Instead of attack, according to Hardt and Negri, we must remove ourselves from complicity:

Whereas in the disciplinary era *sabotage* was the fundamental notion of resistance, in the era of imperial control it may be *desertion*. Whereas

being against in modernity often meant a direct and/ or dialectical opposition of forces, in postmodernity being against might well be most effective in an oblique or diagonal stance. Battles against the Empire might be won through subtraction and defection. This desertion does not have a place; it is the evacuation of the places of power. (H&N 212)

In a society in which oppression exerts itself through hegemonic and biopolitical coercion, resistance cannot take the form of direct, physical attack against an ISA. Desertion, the method of resistance propounded by Hardt and Negri at this stage of their argument, involves removing oneself from a self-policing body politic. As we will see, Scoby realizes this complicity and subsequently his only available escape route: suicide, desertion according to Hardt and Negri. Yet though he advocates suicide as an effective method of extrication, Gunnar cannot countenance this method of resistance for himself, nor decry those who desire to stay alive. Instead he creates the MiseryFests, which provides a real world example of Hardt and Negri's second prescription for resistance; in looking at the successful model of resistance put forth in *The White Boy Shuffle* and comparing it with *Empire*, we witness in Hardt and Negri's construct for resistance certain proscriptive assumptions or strictures that impede the implementation of their model's real application.

The second form of resistance advocated by Hardt and Negri hinges on their argument that the biopolitical structures that form their conception of postmodern Empire inherently carry within them their own modes and methods of resistance; by co-opting the channels of communication, the multitude can use already established infrastructures



to enact a postmodern emancipation, a counter-Empire. The bios become central in combating Empire:

The creative forces of the multitude that sustain Empire are also capable of producing a counter-Empire, an alternative political organization of global flows and exchanges. The struggles to contest and subvert Empire, as well as those to construct a real alternative, will thus take place on the imperial terrain itself—indeed, such new struggles have already begun to emerge.

(H&N xv)

While these new struggles to contest and subvert Empire never become concretely illuminated, the MiseryFests demonstrate how an alternative political organization takes shape on the imperial terrain. The imperial terrain involves the global flows and exchanges, and we have seen how the Stoic Undertakers use this terrain to broadcast images of Hillside that reify preconceived stereotypes of urban life. This ghetto stereotype valorizes violence, misogyny, classism and conspicuous consumption. The MiseryFests use these same channels of communication to broadcast an alternate vision of Hillside that focuses on the essential humanity of all its disparate inhabitants. The particularity of Hillside, broadcast as it is via the MiseryFests, allows the multitude access to this one vision of resistance. While seeming to fit Hardt and Negri's conception of an alternative politics of resistance, this emphasis on the local actually contradicts their injunction for a global citizenship that transcends national and racial boundaries.

*The White Boy Shuffle* illustrates how a focus on global citizenship as a prerequisite for counter-Empire ignores the rhizomatic potential extant within a series of

localized and particular forms and forums, especially when combined with Hardt and Negri's idea of reappropriation of the imperial terrain itself. In disparaging celebrations of the local, they write:

Today's celebrations of the local can be regressive and even fascistic when they oppose circulations and mixture, and thus reinforce the walls of nation, ethnicity, race, people, and the like. The concept of the local, however, need not be defined by isolation and purity. In fact, if one breaks down the walls of the local (and thereby separates the concept from race, religion, ethnicity, nation, and people), one can link it directly to the universal. (H&N 362)

The MiseryFests certainly reinforce walls of ethnicity and race: "To ensure that the Friday nights didn't turn into a trendy happening for whities bold enough to spelunk into the depths of the ghetto, Psycho Loco stationed armed guards at the gate to keep out the blue-eyed soulsters" (220). The desire to maintain the purity of the Hillside locale, however, arises from a past history of white appropriation, what bell hooks terms "eating the other." Gunnar, in the television contract he signs that benefits the community instead of a single person, as well as by limiting access to the audience, works to resist the appropriative tendency of the dominant.

While Hardt and Negri might term Gunnar's exclusionary policy fascistic, their desire to remove all walls of the local in order to establish a global multitude reveals its own brand of fascism. By advocating the breakdown of all walls of the local, of all "race, religion, ethnicity, nation, and people," Hardt and Negri refuse to allow for any

particularity of experience. Instead of recognizing a spectrum of discrete identities that together form the multitude, they would desire to strip each individual of everything that makes her unique. These stripped down individuals, reduced to nothing but the common fact of being *homo sapiens sapiens*, represent the ideal constituents of their global multitude. *The White Boy Shuffle* offers a different paradigm, one that still conforms to Hardt and Negri's call for global citizenship; yet *The White Boy Shuffle* differs in that it concentrates on the essential humanity of its members, one that emphasizes rather than elides the various experiences that make each person different, even within the same locale.

The MiseryFests achieve global citizenship and the people of Hillside political agency through Gunnar's reappropriation of the flows of information. Hardt and Negri write, "If communication has increasingly become the fabric of production, and if linguistic cooperation has increasingly become the structure of productive corporeality, then the control over linguistic sense and meaning and the networks of communication becomes an ever more central issue for political struggle" (H&N 404). By exporting a vision of Hillside true to its constituents, the MiseryFests allow people all over the world to see what life is like for those who live in Hillside. If every community could do this, there would a multitude of particular representations that together would define Hardt and Negri's global multitude. Instead of sacrificing particularity for global citizenship, global citizenship should celebrate every member in all his or her uniqueness; this would be far less fascist than forcing everyone to self-identify according to common denominator.

In discussing reappropriation and managing the flows of information, Hardt and Negri repeatedly return to issues of control; this should not, however, be interpreted in

terms of a binary or dualistic form of exclusionary power politics. Control, it seems, means something more akin to freedom, especially the freedom for autonomous self-conception and reproduction. Hardt and Negri make clear that this freedom is intrinsically linked to communicative production:

In this context reappropriation means having free access to and control over knowledge, information, communication, and affects—because these are some of the primary means of biopolitical production. Just because these productive machines have been integrated into the multitude does not mean that the multitude has control over them. Rather, it makes more vicious and injurious their alienation. The right to reappropriation is really the multitude’s right to self-control and autonomous self-production” (H&N 406-407).

The Stoic Undertakers make explicit how partial control over channels of production reproduces the affects that alienate. Yet total control over these networks, even at the behest and benefit of the multitude, linguistically carries traces of fascism and binary forms of exclusion. Autonomous and individual reproduction must create an all-inclusive multitude. Yet throughout *The White Boy Shuffle*, various pockets of community (the Gun Totin’ Hooligans, the basketball team, schools and student organizations) attempt to control their members by forcing them to conform to preconceived norms and strictures.

Cornel West’s *Race Matters* and the Pitfalls of Racial Representation

Cornel West's vision of the current crisis in black America identifies many of the orchestrating mechanisms of the society of control, and his exploration of their concomitant effects reveals character studies and traits particular to black America. Through West, we can see how those who seek to represent the condition of black America assume their hegemonic role within the society of control. As Gunnar begins to realize the coercive nature of these agents of Empire, he too sees these tools as caricatures, many of which exhibit traits noted by West. The Harvard recruiter embodies what Cornel West refers to, in terms of black scholars, as race-distancing elitists: "They often view themselves as the 'talented tenth' who have a near monopoly on the sophisticated and cultured gaze of what is wrong with black America. They revel in severe denigration of much of black behavior yet posit little potential or possibility in Afro-America" (West 64). The recruiter takes Gunnar to a chic Hawaiian restaurant at which his manners conform impeccably to finishing school mores; his gold-ringed pinkies avoid any contact with the stem of his wine glass. After the dinner,

He popped open his pocket watch and suggested we drive to his house for a nightcap. I was mesmerized; this was the first nigger I'd ever seen who owned a pocket watch and the only one I'd ever heard say 'nightcap.' On the drive over I held his timepiece to my ear, listening to its springs work as if I were an eighteenth-century Pacific islander hoping to trade beads for a metal cricket. (157)

Gunnar views himself in this scenario as he viewed the "Riefenstahl Nubians" who participated in the Stoic Undertakers video: he becomes, in this recruiter's presence, one

of the colonized, amazed by the technological prowess of a Eurocentric civilization. But Gunnar, however, recognizes his role in the anthropological relationship the recruiter establishes, that of the observed. The awareness grants him the power of perception: whereas the recruiter seeks to impress by trinkets, Gunnar's recognition of the colonial relationship enables him to play the expected part and at the same time dispassionately observe and mock the recruiter's increasingly desperate tactics.

Curiously, the mockery that Gunnar's internal monologue reveals when faced by such ostentation replicates the same vision that Gunnar himself inspires in others in his first foray into Hillside: "It wasn't as if I'd said, 'Pardon me, old bean, could you perchance direct a new indigene to the nearest corner emporium?'" (41). Gunnar has evolved his personal ontology such that it mirrors the same worldview of those who initially rejected his Santa Monica formed self. This understanding of difference allows Gunnar to recognize the hierarchical classism with which the Harvard recruiter hopes to impress Gunnar.

This attitude, this severe disjunction between academia and the urban reality of black existence, becomes apparent in the colonial implications nascent in the recruiter dangling the pocket watch. The recruiter exists only to exploit, and he treats Gunnar as inherently uncouth, unenlightened. Yet Gunnar does not need to interpret the recruiter's actions in order to reach this conclusion; the recruiter makes this explicit:

"I got mine, you get yours. Those poor people are beyond help, you must know that. The only reason I and others of my illustrious ilk pretend to help those folks is to reinforce the difference between them and us. There's a psychological difference to being the helper and not the helpee.

You know the phrase ‘Each one, teach one’?” “Yup.” “Well my motto is, ‘Each one, leech one.’” (159)

The scene that culminates with this admission and Gunnar’s subsequent rappelling from Cheviot Heights to his home in Hillside foreshadows Gunnar’s later abandonment of academia. Gunnar realizes that the objectification he witnesses at the summer basketball camp is no different than the way in which universities and colleges view their scholars. The link becomes apparent when Gunnar, after his superb SAT scores, begins to receive letters addressed “Dear Scholar” instead of “Whaddup to the best point guard in the nation.” As a basketball player worthy of recruitment, colleges assume that Gunnar cares for nothing else; the slang greeting, “Whaddup,” and the flattery directed toward “the best point guard in the nation” patronizes Gunnar as being unidimensional in their attempt to secure his basketball services. Yet once his SAT scores reveal his intelligence, universities appeal to Gunnar’s assumed vanity as an intelligent human being by referring to him as “Scholar” in their attempt to secure his SAT score on their average for incoming freshmen. A higher average would increase their scholastic rating. Commodification becomes even more foregrounded as the Harvard recruiter realizes his sales pitch is not working: “‘Gunnar, there are fringe benefits to going to Harvard. Corporeal hors d’oeuvres, if you will.’ [Gunnar] snickered as the recruiter’s sales pitch grew more desperate. ‘I’m going to be frank with you. If I get you to attend Harvard, I get seventy-five thousand dollars, exactly enough to buy a new motor home’” (158). The recruiter has just called out his wife, a white woman, to sashay and seduce the young black man into acquiescence. After this fails, he tells Gunnar how much money he

personally will receive if Gunnar chooses to attend. Though the reason is never elaborated upon, presumably the university receives federal funding for affirmative action policies, and Gunnar is a prime candidate. The recruiter cares nothing for advancing any sort of black agenda, for embodying Du Bois's vision of the talented tenth<sup>viii</sup> who would use their intelligence and success to uplift the other ninety percent. Instead, the recruiter wants only to increase his own net worth.

West's characterization of "race-distancing elitists" receives direct treatment in *The White Boy Shuffle* through this idea of the "talented tenth." Beatty, perhaps unjustly, conflates the idea of the "talented tenth" with an Afrocentrism that denies the true nature of African culture, and he does so quite literally. While Gunnar is at basketball camp, one of the players is dating a woman from a TV show called *Talented Tenth*:

You know, the show where a bunch of seddity motherfuckers be saving the community by rewarding exemplary African-American citizenship with a piece of fried chicken. "By deciding to wait until marriage to have sex, Leroy and Martha are celebrating traditional African values. Here go a thigh, a wing and a biscuit." Notice they don't never say nothing like "Lucinda decided to have a clitoridectomy. Wow, that's African, have some chicken gizzards, mmmmm." (145)

This passage utilizes ebonics to a degree that Gunnar typically eschews. "Be saving" and "don't never say nothing" typify the language that white America associates with black speech. In much the same way, *Talented Tenth* uses fried chicken as a reward for ostensibly African behavior. Clitoridectomies would be sensible only within an African



culture that prizes such ceremonies of womanhood; to African Americans, Gunnar insinuates that such a practice is somehow repugnant, or at least not something to which African American women aspire, as they do in a culture that values such a practice. The point is that the hundreds of years that African Americans have existed apart from such cultures have evolved a “race,” more explicitly a sensibility, that is discrete and unique: hence the American in African American. The current situation of black America cannot be solved by a return to African cultures; the rift cannot be undone. Instead of a return to African cultures, which Gunnar’s insistent dismissal of Afrocentrism denies, black America needs to seek an alternate path that treats the extant conditions of the postmodern existence in which black America finds itself ensconced.

As Gunnar feels rightly repulsed by the selfish motivations of the Harvard recruiter, at Boston University he recognizes and rejects a second type of scholar identified by Cornel West, the race-embracing rebel. West writes of these scholars:

“...race-embracing rebels express their resentment of the white Academy (including its subtle racism) by reproducing similar hierarchies headed by themselves, within a black context...yet, unlike Du Bois, their rebellion tends to delimit their literary productivity and sap their intellectual creativity. Hence, rhetoric becomes a substitute for analysis...Much, though not all, of Afrocentric thought fits this bill.” (West 65)

Afrocentrism has already been thoroughly abrogated by Gunnar and Scoby<sup>ix</sup>, and Gunnar carries this jaded attitude toward Afrocentrism with him to Boston University. Here he comes into contact with the “race-embracing rebels” that Cornel West identifies. The

organizations of which these scholars are a part, Ambrosia and to a certain degree Concoction, lead Gunnar to recognize the fascism inherent in group indoctrination, an indoctrination presided over by one whom Cornel West would describe as a race embracing rebel, Dexter Waverly, the head of the citywide black student union, Ambrosia<sup>x</sup>. No insightful analysis of the current conditions faced by its members, or any black folk for that matter, comes out of the Ambrosia meeting. Instead, the group shouts hollow slogans of black nationalist pride: ““But are you ready to die and kill for your people?”” (183). These slogans are voiced and answered, much as Dexter conducts the rally against M’m’mofo Gottobezezi, and the group exerts obvious pressure on the individual to rotely participate. This scripted participation results in Cornel West’s condemnation for intellectual apathy. Gunner, however, bristles at the expectations placed on him. The rhetoric is bombastic, and, as West indicates, replaces any sort of creative or intellectual analysis of real world problems and solutions. And as we later learn completely, the bombast is unfounded in any personal sentiment; Dexter admits this hypocrisy through being the first to commit suicide. But the rhetoric, as West notes, proves spellbinding, even to Gunnar: “I wanted to dislike Dexter—it was obvious he was a charlatan—but I was awestruck at how such an ugly motherfucker, with an eczema condition so severe that when he furrowed his brow tiny flakes of skin fell to the lectern, could hold an audience spellbound with a single gesture” (183). In describing Dexter’s physical description, Gunnar adds another layer to our impression of Dexter as race-embracing elitist: the black skin that Dexter so proudly uses as a cornerstone of his identity literally flakes off. Such a man, Beatty implies, one who uses race as a wedge or a tool for differentiation, doesn’t deserve the black skin he or she wears. Instead of

allowing every black man or woman to act individually, Dexter attempts to impose an agenda, and thus usurps the freedom for which he ostensibly fights.

The members of Ambrosia, in addition to having their worldviews molded by the slogans they repeat, reveal a deep complicity in propagating the economic structures of the society of control. The group exists to capitalize, in a monetary sense, on past racial injustices, and they encourage every member to join in this endeavor. When Gunnar arrives at his first meeting, “Harvard, BU, MIT Negroes were wearing loud African garb over their Oxford shirts and red suspenders, drinking ginger beer and using their advertising skills to plan how best to package the white man’s burden. ‘No alcohol, brother,’ someone shouted. I chugged my beer, burped, and took a seat in the back...” (183). The description of the clothing worn by its members, dashikis worn over Oxford shirts and red suspenders, resonates vividly. The daily garb of Ambrosia members seems to be those Oxford shirts, yet they mask their chosen attire with African costumes<sup>xi</sup>. As the Oxford shirts and red suspenders traditionally resemble garb worn by white establishment types, dashikis that worn by traditional Africans, the group literally wears a black uniform over a white uniform. In this vein they plan on how best to package the white man’s burden<sup>xii</sup>.

#### Resistance: Cutting the Strings of the Society of Control

Gunnar has already made clear his connection between slavery and basketball with his reference to Dred Scott, and he envisions a manifestation of this controlling ideology in terms of puppet strings. The society of control operates through more than socially sanctioned activities: even groups conceived in opposition display a tendency to

police their member's actions and perpetuate the same ideology they claim to oppose.

Gunnar's experience with SWAPO and Ambrosia awakens his awareness of the extent to which others seek to orchestrate his thoughts actions. Scoby, however, remains blind to these controlling machinations. Gunnar notes:

If I blur my eyes I can see the black strings attached to my joints and stretching to the skies. Ah, the freedom of fatalism. Now I can do what I want and blame it on the puppet-master...Nicholas sees the strings, but he spends all his time looking for a pair of scissors. Every now and then the puppet-master hands him a pair of wooden scissors—Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Sarah Vaughn, an open jump shot—and Scoby thinks he's free, thinks he's clipped his strings. The slack string is just a slack string" (194)

Whereas Gunnar in Santa Monica "...was a broken-stringed kite leaning into the sea breeze, expertly maneuvering in the gusty gales" (35), Gunnar in Boston has matured enough to realize that his ontological precepts are grounded in the expectations of the dominant society. As we see through Hardt and Negri, these expectations infiltrate, anticipate, and usurp so-called outlets of resistance. Scoby thinks he follows his own path, but his free will merely chooses from among sanctioned activities: these activities equal the slack string. Scoby thinks he clips the strings, but his seeming freedom remains tied to expectation. Even Gunnar's street poetry becomes implicated: sprayed onto the physical edifices of his own neighborhood in an apparent act of rebellion, the text is photographically captured and converted into book form for exploitation. Everything in

which Gunnar believes has been either authored or corrupted by the dominant social caste and a materialistic culture. These are the strings that Gunnar comes to understand, the methodologies of the society of control, and they penetrate even his acts of resistance.

The rally sponsored by SWAPO and Ambrosia to protest M'm'mofo Gottobelezi follows Gunnar's watershed moment of enlightenment, and Gunnar uses this platform to sound out the ramifications in his impromptu call for suicide. This marks the first public appearance that Gunnar makes following the publishing of his book, *Watermelanin*, the first time he truly appreciates his newfound stature. Instead of cultivating this newfound role, Gunnar begins to question the social paradigm that produces both the masses and the people who seek to lead them. Gunnar views such a person, as he does John Brown, as inherently dictatorial: "Spittle sprayed from his mouth, his tussled hair hung over one eye, his fist pounded the rostrum. He reminded [Gunnar] so much of Hitler at a Nuremburg party rally that [he] had behind [him] to check the stage for bunting with swastikas and steamrolled black eagles" (197). The comparison of a rally given to protest oligarchical governments to a Nazi rally speaks to the latent fascism that Gunnar sees in collective struggle. An individual as part of a group must abandon individuality in order to conform to group expectation, hence the demand that Gunnar drink only ginger beer at the Ambrosia meeting.

Gunnar's vision of a protest against oligarchy as analogous to a Nazi rally speaks to his deep sense of irony; the crowd gathers to hear a small number of leaders tell them how to feel about a certain issue. There is no insight into the conditions that produce such leaders, no democratic analysis, merely stale slogans of the kind Dexter Waverly shouts "in a huge game of Simon says" (197). The crowd repeats the words like children playing

Simon says, and in doing so they reveal in themselves the same mindset that produces an oligarchical leader of the kind they have gathered to protest. To return to our original instance of indoctrination, the crowd performs exactly as Gunnar acts when he relates his family history to Ms. Murphey's class: "With my mother's hand in my back, her words pouring from my mouth, I stiffly yapped on like a skinny ventriloquist's dummy" (12). Indoctrination moves from the family, locus of Althusser's first ideological foundation, to all of black America who gather in order to be told what to think.

Gunnar takes the stage and he wants to present himself as a seasoned revolutionary, but he cannot confine himself to formulaic adages; he realizes that candor instead of oft-repeated aphorisms or racial clichés offers the best means of taking advantage of his now prominent position. The recognition that he stands, at the podium and in front of a televised audience, in a position that he fundamentally discredits, initially forces Gunnar to falter. Scoby breaks Gunnar's trancelike state by shouting out, "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse" (199), which dissipates the apprehension that has frozen Gunnar. The line refers to Scoby's own stage fright at the Shakespearean Soliloquy Championship, the time when Gunnar broke with his stereotypical rendition of *Othello* and instead gave a recitation from *King Lear* that captured his nascent anger at being typecast and condescended to by the private school students and the judges. Scoby's line, however, has gained added cachet in the interim: if Gunnar treats much of the audience as fools, which his characterization of the crowd suggests, each member of the crowd carries a copy of his newly published book. The people who buy his book literally serve as a purse from which Gunnar and, more importantly, the publishing

company that has capitalized on Gunnar's extracted and commodified poetry, take money.

As a published poet, Gunnar becomes complicit in the society of control; Scoby's line prompts Gunnar to do more than just speak, it prompts him to think. Even Gunnar's minor act of rebellion, spraypainting his poetry on the walls of Hillside, becomes a tool to drain money from those who might otherwise spend it elsewhere. And Dexter Waverly, the man who wants to create revolution, becomes the salesman for the publishing companies who commodify Gunnar's poetry. Gunnar begins to realize the pervasive nature of the society of control; if the people who buy his book are fools, then he too is a fool for producing the product that drives their purchase. In the face of this newfound understanding of his complicity, Gunnar's first reaction is complete extrication: suicide. While this epiphany derives in part through Gunnar's realization of his own complicity, he also realizes that the stage he is supposed to take, the role he will ostensibly fill, also serves the society of control. By airing grievances, a group can be mollified into thinking that it has made a real difference, and the movement thus becomes absorbed by the very concepts it seeks to combat.

As Gunnar indicates, the civil rights movement has become robbed of its potency by its initial successes, a similar stance to that which Cornel West claims. The movement has (d)evolved into one in which the people who lead want nothing more than to preserve their status as leaders, and so the revolutionary zeal that propelled Martin Luther King and Malcolm X has been defused: "That's why today's black leadership isn't worth shit, these telegenic niggers not willing to die. Back in the old days, if someone spoke up against the white man, he or she was willing to die... What we need is some new leaders.

Leaders who won't apostatize like cowards" (200). As Gunnar goes against any populist sentiment in his assessment of black America, as he brazenly challenges those who the other leaders seek to pacify through mindless platitudes, Gunnar unwittingly fulfills his own prescription for a black leader. The crowd recognizes this, and it bestows on Gunnar the role that he has just repudiated. The crowd, like Gunnar's internal debate over what stance or tone to adopt, decides that they too prefer honesty to platitudes.

Gunnar's newly minted role as leader of the black community, followed by Scooby's suicide, causes Gunnar and Yoshiko to return to Hillside, where Gunnar's conception of resistance begins to take form. Gunnar and Yoshiko take up residence in Suite 206 of the La Cienega Motor Lodge and Laundromat. Gunnar's book of poetry, *Watermelanin*, has sold enough copies to make them both economically solvent, but he and Yoshiko refuse to purchase a permanent home; to do so, as discussed earlier, would amount to their complicity in the social and economic structure that contributes to the disenfranchisement of minorities and the impoverished. Gunnar seeks to extricate himself from this system, another form of desertion, and living in a constant state of impermanence serves as one method of resistance. As Yoshiko approaches the end of her pregnancy, she and Gunnar decide to have the baby in Reynier Park instead of a hospital. This evidences another way in which Gunnar and Yoshiko remove themselves from the disciplinary society in which the hospital is a prime functionary. For despite the rise of the society of control, the disciplinary apparatuses remain extant.

#### The MiseryFests

Gunnar and Yoshiko's choice to have the baby in the park serves as a means to gather the entire community; when Psycho Loco questions the decision, Gunnar replies,



““You know, I think she’s doing it as a way of replacing Scoby. Giving something back to the community” (217). Not only does this decision help replace Scoby, “giving back to the community” denotes a desire on the part of Gunnar and Yoshiko to repay the community for the ontological security that they themselves derive from Hillside. Hardt and Negri provide an excellent analysis of the ways in which the society of control manipulates individual agency and subjectivity. They also claim that a counter-Empire exists within its controlling apparatuses and methodologies, but they never delineate its theoretical or political incarnation. Instead, they pine for but never articulate a “real event”:

Certainly, there must be a moment when reappropriation and self-organization reach a threshold and configure a real event. This is when the political is really affirmed—when the genesis is complete and self-valorization, the cooperative convergence of subjects, and the proletarian management of production become a constituent power. This is the point when the modern republic ceases to exist and the postmodern posse arises. (H&N 411)

The great success in pairing *Empire* with *The White Boy Shuffle* lies in the MiseryFests, the “real event” that Hardt and Negri seek but cannot define. The MiseryFests, unlike the rally, harness the constituent power necessary to propose a counter-Empire; rather the collective power of Hillside’s constituents reaches a critical point that takes advantage of the reappropriated imperial terrain that broadcast the MiseryFests.

The MiseryFests reveal urban life in all its complexity, grotesquery and vitality, and the raw reality that networks broadcast throughout the nation stands in contradistinction to the faux-reality created in the Stoic Undertakers video. Significantly, the birth of Gunnar's baby kicks off the MiseryFests, and Gunnar holds his child defiantly so that the hovering police helicopter can recognize the power of that moment: "Thus behold the only thing mightier than yourself" (219). This declaration responds to the note attached to the cigars dropped by the helicopter, written in Gunnar's father's hand: "Congratulations from the Los Angeles Police Department. Maybe this one will grow up with a respect for authority" (219). The police force best exemplifies the power of the disciplinary society, and Gunnar's proclamation suggests that sheer, unadulterated humanity intrinsically possesses greater power than such policing mechanisms. One method that black America, specifically the Hillside community, can utilize to fight oppression is to revel in the human-ness that constitutes urban life.

With the birth of Gunnar's child and the kickoff of the MiseryFests, we see reproduction on both a physical and biopolitical plane, one that recognizes and welcomes the marginalized. While the confessional nature of the MiseryFests hints at a forum for purely individualistic cleansing, the networks have arranged to broadcast these open-mikes to the rest of the country; or rather, Gunnar manipulates the networks's desire for ratings to economically aid Hillside, but also to elevate the awareness of both black and white America by broadcasting the reality of Hillside life across the country. While this, like the photos of Gunnar's street poetry, only approximates the visceral reality of existence in Hillside, the ability for displaced and marginalized peoples from Hillside to voice their story adds to the multi-layered understanding of life in Hillside. The

representatives of Hillside life include welfare cheats, panhandlers, recovered addicts, current users, drug dealers and gangbangers. These are the dispossessed whom Hardt and Negri seek to incorporate:

As bell hooks says, in its best form radical postmodernist practice, a politics of difference, incorporates the values and voices of the displaced, the marginalized, the exploited, and the oppressed. The binaries and dualisms of modern sovereignty are not disrupted only to establish new ones; rather, the very power of binaries is dissolved as ‘we set differences to play across boundaries.’” (H&N 141)

These people constitute Hillside; they create the social fabric. As a forum for biopolitical reproduction, those who take part in and witness the MiseryFests find an open, tolerant, inclusive paradigm for social interaction. This forum treats equally both current users and recovered addicts; it breaks down the boundaries that would otherwise separate and define, truly allowing differences to play across boundaries.

In order for the MiseryFests to retain this sense of open play, no one person can act as either voice for or representative of the community, and Gunnar uses the anniversary of Scooby’s death to withdraw as a focal point. In tribute, Gunnar chops off his right pinky with a one hundred thousand watt crunch: “Staring at the space where my finger used to be, I held my hand high above my head. The blood ran down my arm, and what didn’t pool in my armpit puddle next to my sneakers. I lowered my head, then exited stage left, the soles of my shoes sticking to the floorboards as if I were walking in yesterday’s spilled soda” (223). This final act recreates the image of Gunnar’s minstrel-

esque rejection of the “civil war” game between him and Scoby. Gunnar’s final performance serves a similar notice of repudiation: as a “black leader,” Gunnar is expected to give voice to the black people, but he sees this as an impossible task for any one person. A community might air its grievances, as Hillside does, but that shouldn’t make it a Mecca of black nationalism. To truly achieve a form of national unity, every community should engage in similar projects. Instead, people view Hillside as the sole locus of rebellion: “Spiteful black folk and likeminded others continue to immigrate to Hillside, seeking mass martyrdom” (223). That people “continue” to immigrate to Hillside suggests a prolonged period of immigration instead of an immigration spurred by the government’s admission to Svelte Guy, the third atomic bomb. This very immigration, this coronation of Gunnar as leader of black America, leads him to abandon the stage.

We can better understand this seeming paradox by looking at Hardt and Negri’s conception of the postmodern militant and witnessing how Gunnar’s actions conform. The direct confrontation sixties-styled militancy designed to combat the disciplinary apparatuses no longer works against such a diffuse system of domination. No COINTELPRO or FBI exists as a principal agent against whom one might oppose in oppositional or dialectical fashion. Power exercises itself by rhizomatic means, with the people policing the people, and so instead Hardt and Negri propose militancy by committee:

Today the militant cannot even pretend to be a representative, even of the fundamental human needs of the exploited. Revolutionary political militancy today, on the contrary, must rediscover what has always been its

proper form: not representational but constituent activity. Militancy today is a positive, constructive, and innovative activity...In other words, resistance is linked immediately with a constitutive investment in the biopolitical realm and to the formation of cooperative apparatuses of production and community. (H&N 413)

Gunnar criticizes the institutionalization of today's black leadership precisely because it claims to be representational, all the while striving to preserve that status instead of actually represent black America. Gunnar uses his status as newly minted black leader to construct the MiseryFests as a cooperative apparatus of production and community. He recognizes the primacy of the community in biopolitical production, and he fulfills the role of the postmodern militant in creating this forum for constituent activity. By leaving, he prevents any one person from being the focus.

#### Piez de Resist ance

Two forms of resistance emerge from *The White Boy Shuffle*: suicide and communal catharsis. As Gunnar notes, suicide does not have to be interpreted within a strictly Western hermeneutic, as in giving up; instead, Gunnar invokes Mishima, who claims that "sometimes hari-kiri makes you win" (202). Suicide can also, however, be interpreted in a different light, one that coincides nicely with Hardt and Negri's notion of Empire as an oppressive ideology both situated in and reproduced by the very constituents ruled by its rhizomatic forces. I argue that Gunnar symbolically understands this coercive power as those strings that dictate thought and action. And as Gunnar

reminds us through Scoby, those activities that Scoby mythologizes, those institutions that he feels offer him freedom, only distract from the pervasive form that Empire now takes. Scoby recognizes his own complicity in reproducing these postmodern incarnations of power, yet he cannot extricate himself from that with which he so thoroughly identifies. Scoby viscerally understands this, but he cannot formulate any form of disentanglement apart from a total extrication from the biopolitical: suicide. This offers one method of resistance: knowing that virtually every action one takes only reifies the diffuse apparatus of control, removing oneself through suicide eliminates complicity.

While Gunnar initially advocates suicide, he begins to understand an alternative route that reinfuses the biopolitical with a novel form of resistance: love. Communities of love enable us to link Hardt and Negri with Cornel West. West terms this ethos a politics of conversion, and he predicts this phenomenon will occur within communities: “The politics of conversion proceeds principally on the local level—in those institutions in civil society still vital enough to promote self-worth and self-affirmation” (West 30). The MiseryFests embody this prescription, a communal phenomenon that begins with a physical birth and evolves to the point at which drug dealers, welfare cheats, panhandlers and gangbangers all receive absolution; as Gunnar points out, “The most poignant nights were the ones when the recovered addicts stepped into the light to soak up the warm applause and address the crowd. ‘I want to thank all my cool outs who stood by me, but mostly I want to thank self for not giving up on self’” (220). Thus recovered addicts become reborn in the same way that Yoshiko brings her and Gunnar’s newborn into the community. The politics of conversion allow formerly ostracized members of one community to come back to that community and experience affirmative love.

Hardt and Negri find within the biopolitical the coercive forces that perpetuate Empire, but they (paradoxically) locate resistance within exactly those same agentic subjectivities. Defining the new militancy that can combat the pernicious effects of Empire, they write, “In other words, resistance is linked immediately with a constitutive investment in the biopolitical realm and to the formation of cooperative apparatuses of production and community... This militancy makes resistance into counterpower and makes rebellion into a project of love” (H&N 413). And while Hardt and Negri, along with Baudrillard, condemn methods of communication as tools of Empire, which now include the internet along with television and the screen, they demand a co-opting of those same hegemonic tools on the part of the multitude as necessary to bring about their project of love. At the root of this lies language and other semiotic systems: “If communication has increasingly become the fabric of production, and if linguistic cooperation has increasingly become the structure of productive corporeality, then the control over linguistic sense and meaning and the networks of communication becomes an ever more central issue for political struggle” (H&N 404). Gunnar has this epiphany, and it leads him to allow the MiseryFests to be broadcast via television throughout the country. Yet the networks remain passive carriers instead of directors:

The networks caught wind of the MiseryFests’s popularity and offered a bundle of money for the rights to broadcast weekly installments. We accepted the best offer and divvied it up among all the households in Hillside, and the television station agreed to the following conditions:

- Build the Reynier Park Amphitheater and pay for its maintenance
- Build huge video screens throughout the neighborhood

- Use only colored camerapersons and support staff
- All broadcasts must be live and unedited
- Stay the fuck out of the way (220-221)

Baudrillard would undoubtedly raise objections regarding the pervasion of the video screens and their use, one that would question the reality of a world in which the lens communicates reality to the very community the MiseryFests purport to represent. Gunnar's deal, however, conforms to the dictates put forth by Hardt and Negri. Hillside has taken a method of communication formerly used to broadcast videos of the Stoic Undertakers, a video in which violence, misogyny and caricature are glorified across America and taken as representative of the neighborhood, and transformed that image into an unadulterated and gritty reality. Gunnar's efforts take a locality and give it a literal stage on which its member might coalesce and take pride. Hillside has become a family. To return to the epigraph, Chickamatsu postulates, "It will be even more pathetic if his sense of honor should be divided into two, like social and personal obligations, and whichever course he may take will cause him inevitably to lose face" (Chickamatsu). Throughout the novel, Gunnar resists the pressures that conforming to the social places on him as an individual. At the end, however, Gunnar remains true to his personal obligations as an individual, and at the same time his adherence to his own personal obligations winds up benefiting Hillside's social and physical fabric. The two must not be mutually exclusive, but rather the exaltation of the individual results in the exaltation of the communal.



## Conclusion

*The White Boy Shuffle*, despite diagnosing the enveloping matrix of the society of control, ends in birth and affirmation. Beatty suggests that pockets of resistance can be formed, and Beatty's style and tone along with this prescription exemplify postmodern "midfiction." Hans Bertens, working off of Alan Wilde, also focuses on the local in his description of midfiction: "Midfiction attempts to affirm in the face of the void, although its 'assent' is 'local, limited and temporary'" (62). This literature, argues Bertens, has not "given up referentiality and meaning," but instead "still seeks to be referential and sometimes even tries to establish local, temporary and provisional truths" (65). This, then, describes the finale of *The White Boy Shuffle*, which finds Gunnar organizing the MiseryFests, but also locked in his hotel room with his wife and daughter. Gunnar's choice of such a liminal existence evidences another means through which he can extricate himself and his family from the society of control: by refusing to purchase a house, as might be expected of a successful author, he avoids the ancillary financial obligations that would bind him to a mortgage and validate an exploitative banking system.

Gunnar, Yoshiko and Scoby form an enclave in which communal catharsis and individual recognition, an attempt to strengthen local bonds, take priority. Beatty, in ending this way, reinforces concepts put forth by Jean-Francois Lyotard: "Thus the society of the future falls less within the province of a Newtonian anthropology (such as structuralism or systems theory) than a pragmatics of language particles. There are many different language games—a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to institutions in patches—local determinism (Lyotard 72). The concept of local

determinism, like West's environmental determinism, precludes the potential for a cohesive, nationwide racial movement. Such theories do much to explain Scoby's extreme psychic terror at being transplanted from Hillside to Boston. As Scoby deteriorates, so does the possibility of evoking a single black America. There is no black identity, no single black experience, rather an aggregate of locally determined subjective realities.

The postmodern world has become particular, contingent; therefore postmodern politics become the politics of the local as opposed to the modern idea of a totalizing narrative or movement. As Zygmunt Bauman writes: "Emancipation means such acceptance of one's own contingency as is grounded in recognition of contingency as the sufficient reason to live and to be allowed to live. It signals the end of alterity and to the abhorrence of ambivalence...The relation opened up by the act of emancipation is marked by the end of fear and the beginning of tolerance" (Bauman 13). The spirit with which Bauman proposes his concept of emancipation involves his attempt to move from tolerance to solidarity. Gunnar, however, seems content with tolerance, even ambivalence: "Black America has relinquished its needs in a world where expectations are illusions, has refused to develop ideals and mores in a society that applies principles without principle" (225).

While *The White Boy Shuffle* crafts its social critique around the plight of Gunnar and black America, the cogent insights of Hardt and Negri's analysis extend to more than one racial group. All of America, indeed all of the world, finds itself enmeshed within the society of control. The recent implosion of the sub-prime lending market demonstrates the blind eye with which a rapacious capitalism wreaks destruction. Predatory lending

techniques, designed to entice and then entrap, do not care what color or race their customers. To misquote Gunnar, such financial institutions amass principal without principle. Gunnar recognizes the multifarious ways in which the society of control seeks to entangle and control, and he discovers how to resist on the imperial terrain itself. It is incumbent on all, individuals, communities and racial groups alike, to identify and resist the ways in which the society of control entraps.

## Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Trans. B. Brewster. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivken and Michael Ryan. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004. 693-702.
- Baudrillard, Jean. "Precession of the Simulacra." Trans. Philip Beitchman, Paul Foss and Paul Patton. *A Postmodern Reader*. Ed. Linda Hutcheon and Joseph Natoli. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993. 342-375.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Rabelais and his World." Trans. Helene Iswolsky. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivken and Michael Ryan. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004. 686-692.
- Beatty, Paul. *The White Boy Shuffle*. New York: Picador, 1996.
- Bertens, Hans. "The Postmodern *Weltanschauung* and Its Relation to Modernism: An Introductory Survey." *Approaching Postmodernism*. (1986): 9-48. *A Postmodern Reader*. Ed. Linda Hutcheon and Joseph Natoli. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993. 25-70.
- Butler, Judith, Ernest Laclau and Slavoj Zizek. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso, 2000.
- Foucault, Michel. "Discipline and Punish." Trans. Alan Sheridan. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivken and Michael Ryan. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004. 549-566.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*. Ed. David Forgacs. New York: New York UP, 2000.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.
- hooks, bell. "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance." *The Consumer Society Reader*. Ed. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt. New York: The New Press, 2000. 343-359.
- Lhamon, W. T. *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip-Hop*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998.
- McGowan, John. "Excerpts from *Postmodernism and Its Critics*." 42-43, 49-53, 64-70, 80-81, 86-88. *A Postmodern Reader*. Ed. Linda Hutcheon and Joseph Natoli. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993. 203-222.
- Shinn, Christopher A. "Masquerade, Magic, and Carnival in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," *African American Review*, Summer, 2002.

West, Cornel. *Race Matters*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>i</sup> For a definition of historiographic metafiction, see Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism*:

Historiographic metafiction...use parody not only to restore history and memory in the face of the distortions of the "history of forgetting"...but also, at the same time, to put into question the authority of any act of writing by locating the discourses of both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network that mocks any notion of either single origin or simple causality. (129)

<sup>ii</sup> This passage goes further in its exploration of racial stereotyping: Gunnar labels Salvador Aguacaliente's heritage as Latin, but Cinco de Mayo is a specifically Mexican holiday. As a Latino, Salvador Aguacaliente could be from any Central or South American country. The refusal to interrogate his actual origins, to explicitly recognize the country from which he hails, serves to characterize all Latinos as Mexican. Such reductionism is racist and patently offensive to all Latinos, Mexicans included. Furthermore, Cinco de Mayo is not a national holiday in Mexico; it is a regional holiday. Although most Americans think of it as Mexico's Independence Day, Cinco de Mayo "commemorates the victory of the Mexicans over the French army at The Battle Of Puebla in 1862. It is primarily a regional holiday celebrated in the Mexican state capital city of Puebla and throughout the state of Puebla, with some recognition in other parts of the Mexico and especially in U.S. cities with a significant Mexican population" (Mexonline.com). The popularity of Cinco de Mayo in the United States stems in large

---

part from efforts made by beer and chip companies to commodify the holiday. The reification of such efforts in a school policy that allows Aguacaliente to go home early speaks not to a sympathetic understanding of his country's history, but rather to the institutionalization of America's deluded understanding of Mexico's actual history.

<sup>iii</sup> Althusser's response is that "you and I are *always already* subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects" (Althusser 699). The always already to which Althusser refers is predicated on the fact that even at conception, parents exist to whom that individual/fetus contains within herself a subjective individuality. But because another recognizes the individual/fetus/newborn, that newborn individual does not possess the cognitive capabilities to distinguish herself from another.

Lacan's understanding of the mirror stage reinforces this interpretation of subjectivity, one that attains wholeness only through physical development (Lacan 442). That development does not end at the mirror stage, but rather the mirror stage indicates the degree to which the subject constantly reveals itself to the individual. This evolution by necessity must incorporate input from the disciplinary apparatus, in this case the school, that Althusser suggests merely provides the ritual with which we associate our actions. This leads to the question: at what point does the ritual cease to be a programmatic arm of the state apparatus, or at what point does the subject willingly participate in the ritual? I would argue that this point remains different for each individual, but the point at which the individual realizes the influence that this

---

disciplinary arm exerts on her own actions serves as a satisfactory point to determine an active subjectivity.

<sup>iv</sup> Starting with Ms. Cegeny, Paul Beatty asks the reader to pay specific attention to the names with which he chooses to label the characters in this scene. As we have discussed, Ms. Cegeny serves as a phonetic analog to miscegeny, but her ideological praxis, the way in which her actions contradict her shirt's stated aim, creates an ironic disjunction. The same is true of Salvador Aguacaliente; *Aguacaliente* means "hot water" in Spanish, yet he is characterized as a quiet student, one who seems unlikely to get into much trouble. Sheila Watanabe appears to be a similarly nuanced choice in names. Sheila's first name exists in baby boomer's slang as a title representative of all women, typically with a negative connotation. The phrase, "Don't be such a Sheila," implies that the addressee should adopt a stronger, more masculine stance. Watanabe, as mentioned, indicates a Japanese heritage, which makes her approval of Ms. Cegeny's statement so troubling and therefore so ripe for examination. Watanabe, because of the first, third and fourth syllables, sounds very much like "wannabe." As she is a woman of Japanese descent who appears eager to demonstrate her affinity with the institutionalized vision of Western ascension, she might well be thought of as a "wannabe." But Gunnar, through his dissension, displays a degree of dissatisfaction with this ideology. He evinces an inherent distaste for group assimilation, for the willing participation in the rituals that would have him, as it does successfully with Sheila Watanabe, accept and parrot that which is promulgated by this disciplinary arm of the state.

<sup>v</sup> See Jean Baudrillard's *Precession of the Simulacra*. This phenomenon demonstrates how Baudrillard conceptualizes the hyperreal: the Stoic Undertakers achieve commercial



---

success with a certain aesthetic, and others hoping to achieve the same measure of success duplicate their actions in their everyday life. The projected fiction (ie. Uzis and flamethrowers, violence and misogyny) becomes adopted and replicated in everyday life. Reality becomes a hyperreality.

<sup>vi</sup> Although bell hooks, in “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” convincingly demonstrates the desire on the part of suburbia to consume the exotic nature of the ghetto, brand that aesthetic with a mainstream cachet, and then market the same style back to the ghetto for profit.

<sup>vii</sup> The title to the final section of *The White Boy Shuffle*, “...stay black, and die,” bespeaks the complex layering that comes to the fore in Gunnar’s ascension to “full-time Svengali and foster parent to an abandoned people” (1). This allusion to an old saying in the black community, attributed by some to Thurgood Marshall, reveals the nihilistic stance that Gunnar comes to adopt: “All I gotta do is stay black and die.” The sentiment is multivalent, with various authorities spinning it in as many ways. The obvious reading that leads to existential nihilism, that no one person can be demanded by others to do anything he or she does not care to do, evidences Gunnar’s rejection of collective struggle. A black individual is not required to participate in anything; he or she does not even have to participate in the state, to pay taxes, if we pair this statement with a more inclusive cliché.

Yet others, most notably Samuel Delaney, view this statement in more positive terms. Delaney, often considered by mainstream publishing as the first black science fiction writer, though he himself disputes this label, embodies the fractured identity that postmodern theory widely recognizes: he is black, gay, and a writer, although he refuses

---

to be essentialized as any one of these (Imarisha). Delaney chooses this same phrase for his memoir, *Stay Black and Die*, though he does so for widely divergent reasons; he sees in this pronouncement a need to reappropriate the achievements and gains made by black people: “Especially now when there is so much covert energy loose in the system to appropriate all the things black people do that are not egregious in some manner, to take the color label off of it, I just think it’s important at this point for black people to sometimes remind people that the ordinary and extraordinary things that we do are done by black people” (Imarisha). By insisting on his identity as a black man, by forcing the rest of society to recognize this position, Delaney refuses to allow his own achievements, indeed any black achievement, to be sublimated by the dominant class/race.

To return to those who consider Thurgood Marshall as the author of this phrase, such attribution reinforces the way in which Gunnar’s vision of the individual coincides with Marshall’s position as an advocate for individual rights. Not only was Marshall integral in creating the conditions that fostered the nationalistic racial discourse of the civil rights era, he championed individual rights for all. Juan Williams notes, “[Marshall] worked on behalf of black Americans, but built a structure of individual rights that became the cornerstone of protections for all Americans. He succeeded in creating new protections under law for women, children, prisoners, and the homeless” (Williams). This attitude toward individual agency mirrors Gunnar’s own position; the textual justification for this claim is based on Beatty’s subtle tweaking of “All I gotta do is stay black and die.” The section heading elides the first five words through ellipsis, which eliminates the “I” from the assertion. But Beatty adds a comma, which hearkens back to the advice Scoby offers Gunnar before embarking on his weekend outings with the white kids from

---

El Campesino Real: “‘Stay black, nigger,’ Scoby would call out as I boarded the bus... ‘And what exactly does “stay black” mean, Nick?’ ‘It means be yourself, what else could it possibly mean?’” (155). The injunction to be yourself, to act as you see fit and not how others would have you act, sets the tone for the final part of the novel.

<sup>viii</sup> The term was coined by W.E.B. Du Bois, and it represents his vision of racial uplift. To Du Bois, “The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races” (Du Bois). Du Bois proposes an altruistic vision of humanity in which those who achieve success within the dominant paradigm will use that success to aid the cause of the masses. His idea was not to create cogs in a capitalist system who achieve financial success, but to create men who feel the burden of their community, their history and their race. But as West notes, the unprecedented rise of a rapacious capitalism that emphasizes individual pleasure and gain precludes such noble sentiments. West notes that “The civil rights movement permitted significant numbers of black Americans to benefit from the American economic boom...And for most who had the ingenuity to get a piece, mass culture (TV, radio, films) dictated what they should do with it—gain peace of mind and pleasure of body from what they could buy” (West 55). For West, the success of the civil rights movement enabled black Americans, formerly prevented by a variety of measures from participating in a capitalist economy that valorizes pleasure and its attendant commodities, to reap a degree of material comfort. Once this happened, those able to acquire possessions were loath to relinquish them in order to help other black Americans

---

who had not yet reach the same economic stratum. DuBois formulated his concept the “talented tenth” during a time in which only a small percentage of black America knew material comfort; the ideal world that DuBois projected could not, however, compare with the material comforts gained immediately after the successes of the civil rights movement and the apathy those comforts engendered.

<sup>ix</sup> Gunnar takes great pleasure in appearing to be a misguided tool of the white establishment in order to poke fun at the New African Politicized Pedantic Yahoos, or NAPPY. He would appear confused and eager for enlightenment until called upon: ““You, the proud young warrior obviously of Watusi stock, what white propaganda infests your fertile African mind?” ‘How can a bunch of people like yourselves...be so fucking stupid?’ In Afrocentric slapstick, an offended neophyte would smash a bean pie in my face and ban me from the promised land” (96). When Scoby first introduces Gunnar to jazz, he tells Gunnar his plan to listen to the entire canon alphabetically, but “No faux African back-to-the-bush bullshit recorded post-1965” (67).

<sup>x</sup> “The black student union was originally called Umoja, but the name was changed because of the whites’ inability to pronounce the Swahili word for unity” (183). Gunnar immediately identifies a major contradiction in the stated agenda of Afrocentric unity; the ostensible purpose of such a gathering would be to introduce people to one another who might empathize with a common endurance or struggle. Afrocentric thought exists not to smooth away African vestiges in order to endear its participants to the white majority, but rather to find solidarity in a common heritage. The goal is not to transform African-Americans to make them palatable to this majority; Ambrosia, however, does exactly this.

---

<sup>xi</sup> This costuming literally reproduces a detestable phrase commonly used to describe educated black Americans who participate in capitalist society: Oreos. The phrase signifies one who resembles the cookie, i.e. is black on the outside and white on the inside.

<sup>xii</sup> The meaning here corrupts the title of Kipling's poem, "The White Man's Burden," in much the same way that Kipling's intent in writing the poem has been reinterpreted in light of post-colonial theory. An unapologetic advocate of the British Empire, Kipling addressed the poem to an America that he saw taking Britain's place on the world stage. Though an advocate for Empire, Kipling saw colonial actions in a benevolent light that only now seems Eurocentric, demeaning and debasing to subjects toward whom Kipling felt strong humanistic feeling. The white man's burden, according to Kipling, was to do everything in the colonizer's power to uplift the people around the world whom, according to the understanding of the day, existed in states of impoverishment. To the members of Ambrosia, the white man's burden stands now as bearing the weight of past injustices, of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. The members clad in Oxford shirts intend on taking advantage of current guilt to capitalize for personal gain. As the recruiter for Harvard suggests, they use their advertising skills to become gentrified robber barons.