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Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*: Teaching True Diversity

Marcela Fuentes

As a writing teacher, graduate student, and person of color in a homogeneously white area, I sometimes cringe at my students' and peers' lack of awareness, despite their claims to a "multicultural education." They are not racists, nor do they believe they are culturally superior. Instead my students and co-workers are guilty of "eracism" (Beatty 29). They so thoroughly want to promote equality—we're all humans, we're all the same—that they tend to ignore cultural and ethnic experiences instead of understanding them. The problem is that if we gloss over our differences, we become invisible. Their attitudes bring to mind Kate Duffy's provocative essay, "Paul's Case (with Apologies to Willa Cather)" published in a recent issue of *Pedagogy*. In this essay, Duffy reports that a black student in her first-year composition class chose to fabricate his personal narrative, writing about being a victim of a cross burning, because he felt it addressed the racism he had experienced in the only way he believed his white teacher would value. In the process of relating and investigating this story, Duffy reveals that her own daughter was often the victim of thoughtless anti-Semitism. She encourages us to acknowledge and validate less obvious experiences of marginalization—and that includes color blindness:

The big issues appear to be crystal clear: SLAVERY—BAD; HOLOCAUST—BAD; PREJUDICE—BAD.

It's the finer points that escape us: pinky pale Band-Aids marked as "flesh tone," cultural or

ethnic stereotypes used as mascots or product labels, state-mandated testing in the public schools during the Jewish High Holy Days. Every day you start all over again. (114)

Although her article deals with writing, Duffy makes a good case for why, as teachers, we need to consider the ways we are incorporating "multiculturalism" into every classroom.

In response to these "finer points," including eracism, I offer to *LAJM* readers a book recommendation for their upper-level students: Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*. I admit that I love this new book (2nd edition published by Picador USA in May 2001) for a lot of reasons: its inner-city magical realism, its fearless critique of multicultural education, and its humor. Beatty, a poet and a satirist, will give our students a funny taste of what it's like growing up "diverse" under the edicts of political correctness and multiculturalism. Unlike the traditional canon of multicultural writers like Toni Morrison, Richard Wright, or Sandra Cisneros—whose works tackle overt racism—Beatty's novel puts a fresh spin on the subtle faces of prejudice in today's society and the often contradictory messages sent out by teachers, friends, and the media. The novel puts readers in an uncomfortable place by making them aware of their own attitudes and ideas, while also pointing to where these perceptions might come from. This discomfort is the very thing that can truly change the way readers (hopefully, students) view themselves and each other.

The White Boy Shuffle presents a valid, more accurate alternative of intercultural and interracial understanding. The book shows the conflicted nature of diversity in its truest form—the experiences of the main character, Gunnar Kauffman, poet and basketball player extraordinaire, struggling to find his place in both the multi-ethnic community of his West Los Angeles neighborhood and his affluent white high school. Assimilation is a major theme, and Beatty uses it to show how conspicuous it feels to be the “Other.”

Of interest especially to teachers is that the novel deals with many school-related issues: from being bused into an affluent school district, to the politics of athletics, and even to college recruitment. Students will be able to relate to at least some of these situations. Beatty has an especially incisive perspective on multicultural education. Gunnar’s first memories of school, at a liberal elementary school in Santa Monica, are as follows:

My early education consisted of two types of multiculturalism: classroom multiculturalism, which reduced race, sexual orientation, and gender to inconsequence, and schoolyard multiculturalism, where the kids who knew the most Polack, queer, and farmer’s daughter jokes ruled. The classroom cross-cultural teachings couldn’t compete with the playground blacktop lessons, which were cruel but at least humorous. Like most aspects of regimented pop-quiz pedagogy, the classroom multiculturalism was contradictory, though its intentions were good. (28)

This kind of reflection can be a great starting point for students to begin exploring the different meanings of culture and socialization in and out of the classroom. The novel foregrounds many problems inherent with institutional

multiculturalism in a way that students can understand.

I suggest *The White Boy Shuffle* for high school seniors and possibly juniors. This is an excellent book for study on many different levels, but it definitely challenges readers’ maturity. The novel is more than a coming-of-age story; it is a satire and a cultural critique. In addition to its quirky take on today’s educational system, the novel is chock full of historical, social, and cultural references, which could provide a context for outside research or at least class discussion. Students who must actively seek out explanations for what Beatty touches on in the novel will become more familiar with cultural and social norms outside their own experiences. This is an important step in discovering diversity.

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Another issue with *The White Boy Shuffle* is its language. The good news: Beatty forces readers to work by throwing all kinds of language at them. At times the language is very high—Gunnar Kauffman describes getting beat up by neighborhood toughs as “almost daily drubbings”—so students will have to start picking up their dictionaries if they want to understand Beatty’s point. The (potentially) bad news: Beatty also depicts street and student life (including profane speech and off-color humor) with pull-no-punches accuracy. Understandably, this can present some problems, but if this is the way students talk, why should we as teachers be afraid to acknowledge it? If our mission is to include “real world” issues like diversity and multiculturalism, we shouldn’t be squeamish about dealing with student culture in the classroom. This is perhaps the heart of the novel: to embrace diversity we must deal with our diversity.

In “Paul’s Case,” Kate Duffy says she “used to believe that if I had a liberal attitude and my students appeared to be a tolerant bunch, I could say to a minority student (whether that student was a minority of race, religion, culture, age, or sexual preference): ‘Oh, sure—write about it—they’ll understand’ ” (114). Like her, I know my students are generally good, bright kids who are properly contemptuous of “racists” (those K.K.K. boogeymen Duffy’s student wrote about). My co-workers are even more well meaning. I find it disheartening that even with these positive attitudes in place—and they help a lot!—it is still hard to convey the real-life experiences of minorities to an audience who can only reference racist icons and who may not understand the significance of “minor” daily slights. It would be nice to give these people a little background in multiculturalism in a way that isn’t so distant or contrived. Books like *The White Boy Shuffle* close the distance between real experience and classroom approximation. Students deserve it—and I think they’d appreciate it.

Works Cited

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About the Author

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