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An Interview with Paul Beatty

Frédéric Sylvanise

- 1 Paul Beatty was born in Los Angeles in 1962. He likes to be called a Black rather than an African-American writer (see following interview). A poet and novelist, he published two poetry collections and four novels, including *Slumberland*, which was translated into French under the same title in 2009 and *White Boy Shuffle*, his first novel, published in the USA in 1996, translated into French and published under the title *American Prophet* in 2013. Both books received excellent reviews in France. On July 17, 2013, Paul Beatty gave us an interview in the Lower East Side of New York where he has been living for more than 25 years, an opportunity to have him talk about his work, his relation to critical language, African-American writers and scholars, the election of Obama, his experience with slam, his stays in Germany as a sponsored writer and much more.

Frédéric Sylvanise: *The White Boy Shuffle* takes place in L.A. mainly, in Boston also, and back in L.A. You were born in L.A. yourself. Can you tell me just a few words about this?

Paul Beatty: I was born in L.A. and I went to college in Boston. And then I never really went back. I went to New York after that.

FS: Were you playing basketball like Gunnar in *The White Boy Shuffle*?

PB: No, no.

FS: Why go to college in Boston?

PB: No real reason. I was not a great student but I had pretty good SAT scores. I was depressed in L.A. and I got a lot of letters. Colleges would call me and tell me "Come here, come here!" The school in Boston was one of the first to send me something. But I thought "L.A.-Boston, that's a pretty good distance!" It was a good decision that I made to go there though it was not the best. The best decision would have been to take my time but...

FS: How old were you when you moved there?

PB: I was seventeen.

FS: So you were far from your family?

PB: Yes, but I had to get out of L. A., so...

FS: You said you were depressed...

PB: Yes, I had to get rid of a lot of teenage crap.

FS: What was the name of your neighborhood?

PB: The neighborhood doesn't have a name really. It's just West Los Angeles. It's an interesting neighborhood. We moved from Santa Monica to that neighborhood. It was probably nearly 80% White, but the schools probably 60% Black. And there was that neighborhood next to ours that was turning Black really quickly. It was a great neighborhood that we had, there were a couple of Black families on our block, Philippino families too, White families down the street. It's Southern California so it's always diverse. There's something different about Californian diversity. In our neighborhood, there was Robertson Boulevard and beyond that a rather upper class neighborhood called Cheviot Hills. So there was the neighborhood that I lived in (which was mainly houses) and the neighborhood in which I hung out (which was more dense with more apartments). It's weird because you have all these geographical boundaries in L.A. It was a weird neighborhood, very small. You've heard of this band named Fishbone? A couple of those guys came from there. There were a couple of bad stretches there. In a documentary about the band some of the guys there acted like they were from a very tough neighborhood like South Central. It made my sister really angry. There was a gang there and *The White Boy Shuffle* tells something about the formation of that gang. There were always gangs in L.A. The local gang was the PBG's—Playboy Gangsters. I don't know if they're even still around. These things balkanized, you know.

FS: Were you involved in this?

PB: Oh no! I was running from them, that's about it. But it just permeates how you think, how you live your life, the stupid shit you talk about, what you wear, what you can't wear. Especially when you're young because you're outside and you see it, and you know all the rules. My mom had bought me this bomber jacket like a World War 2 pilot jacket and there was this patch of color on it. And I was like "There's too much blue in it." I could tell endless stories about this stupid crap. But it's there, so...

FS: I was wondering about the autobiographical part of *The White Boy Shuffle*. The mother is very present in the book. You told me one day that your mother was very interested in Japanese things. So I thought about her role when you said that L.A. was a very diverse place, because you had access to a lot of different cultures very young.

PB: Yes, I guess so. I think a lot of people do. But I don't think they take advantage of it though. It comes from a lot of reasons. When I was very young I went to school with mostly White kids. My mom, from the late sixties, early seventies had met a lot of different people at work, Mexican Americans, Asian people, etc. That's the case for a lot of people. When I went to junior high, I was in a mostly Black school and there was this White kid, David. He would track me down all the time. And one day we talked about the Black experience blah blah blah. And he said he didn't know anything about the Black experience. I told him "What? You went to junior high school here and you don't know anything about the Black experience?" The funny thing is that *he* was part of the Black experience to me in a weird way. But I didn't see him the way he did. That was interesting that he should have said that.

FS: Then from Boston to New York... Why move to New York at the time?

PB: I was going to grad school and I don't know why I chose New York. I guess the city had grown on me from visiting. I hated it the first time I came. I enrolled in a writing program and I moved to Brooklyn. It was 1987 I guess, maybe 88.

FS: Did you teach?

PB: A little bit in grad school. A professor at another school died and they asked me to take over his class. It was the first time I taught. Or maybe I had taught undergraduate classes, I guess. So I taught then.

FS: Is New York the best place to write in? Do you have specific places you like to write in?

PB: I write wherever my computer is. But if I move away from that computer, it takes me a long time to get acclimated. Mostly I write in my room and it happens to be in New York so... I think it's easier to write about L.A. when I'm in New York actually.

FS: But you never go back to L.A.?

PB: I used to always go back but now I don't go back very much. When I go back to L.A., I'm at home and it's not easy for me to write about home. It's like being fourteen again so...

FS: Maybe now we could talk about your place in American literature.

PB: I don't have any (laughter).

FS: Your books have been translated in a lot of languages though...

PB: Italian, Norwegian, Dutch, German and a couple of others I think.

FS: You told me the last time you were in France that you admired Kurt Vonnegut... What books by him did you like for example?

PB: There's a couple of books that I liked but I don't remember the titles of, but the first one I really remember reading was *Breakfast of Champions*. I read it when I was really young. It was the funniest book I'd ever read. The tone was so great and it really stayed with me. That and *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller.

FS: Have you met Vonnegut?

PB: No, I don't know anything about him. I know he made some commercials, retirement savings and things like that (laughter). It's just stuff that I like. It's just all there. I don't pick and choose from it.

FS: What is your relationship to other Black writers? By the way, do you call yourself Black or African American?

PB: I don't like the phrase "African American." It's being more something or less something.

FS: Is this something you're being asked frequently?

PB: The question has meanings. I don't necessarily have a consistent answer about it. It's something I'd rather not deal with. I was in college when the word came out. When I was younger, people would say "Afro-American" all the time. It kind of came up in response to Reaganism somehow. I don't know who coined it. I think Jesse Jackson had a lot to do with it. I remember having this conversation with my friends, fairly formal. One of them said: "They want us to identify more with Africa, it should be American African." I'm not sure I agree with that. But I understand the first name thing. I'm more comfortable with the term Black on some level. It's more inclusive, I don't know (laughter).

FS: Are you sometimes invited to readings with other Black writers? Are there meetings organized under the label "Black writers"?

PB: I'm sure there are. I don't get invited to much "Black whatever." But it's kind of like by choice, I think. I'm not that social. I don't go out. I remember I would always meet this guy that ran the Harlem Book Fair who told me he would invite me to a reading there but he never did. I pass by these Black booksellers who sell books on the sidewalks and they never sell my books. That's not necessarily a question of being Black enough. Maybe I'm not popular enough for them, I don't know.

FS: It is strange because you've been translated into several languages but it's very difficult to find your books in American or French bookstores, especially your poetry books.

PB: They're old. I think the second one has just been re-issued. But the first one was on a very small press. A couple of people approached me for a reprint and I said no. I liked what it was. I made my peace with it. I make my best to have my shit published but none of them has sold very well, you know, for whatever reasons.

FS: I've heard of someone called Trey Ellis, a Black writer from New York. Do you know his work?

PB: I do. He wrote a book called *Platitudes*. It was pretty good. It was funny. And he wrote a memoir that was really brave. I'm not into writing personal stuff that much. Not like that. I think it was called *Bedtime Stories*. Really brave and really gutsy, about his wife and kids, stuff like that. Why do you ask about Trey?

FS: Because if you look at the 20th century, you can see that you had the Harlem Renaissance movement in the 20s and the 30s, then you had the Black Arts Movement in the Sixties but today there seems to be no real Black literary or aesthetic movement. I was wondering if it was because the status of Blacks had changed in the country or if writers were more individualistic today... And so I was wondering about your potential link with Ellis.

PB: I think it's a combination of things. I think it's literature in general. You don't have movements anymore. You have people in New York and people outside of New York basically (laughter). That's kind of like what it is, you know. That kind of things says something about the generation. I'm not a group person anyways, so... I'm comfortable with it. If you go to a bookstore, do you still have the Black literature section?

FS: Not that much, and I was surprised about this. When I was living in New York, in the mid-1990s, you had a lot of these African-American literature sections, these Black studies sections... Now I can only see the Literature and Fiction section and the poetry section.

PB: Amazon seems to be pretty racialized. This "If you like this, you'll like this" kind of way. It's like that a little bit. In non-fiction, you still get some of that Latino studies, Native American studies, but not that much with fiction anymore.

FS: What do you think of this way of sectioning things?

PB: I might have said something different twenty years ago. But I'm old now. For me, if it makes things easier to find a book, there's no problem. And there's no reason why a book shouldn't be in two places at the same time. I'm not insulted by it. Put it that way.

FS: The same could be said about the way universities are organized. Black studies departments probably gave a voice to a lot of people that were in the shade before and at the same time sectioning reproduces the ghettoization at work in society...

PB: I think it's always the case in the university but now there's going to be even further ghettoization or balkanization. I think it's always going to happen. Some people have different opinions about it. Skip Gates in Harvard will probably say "I'm going to

hire the best” but whatever he does is done in with an African-American perspective. But some people don’t like that.

FS: People like Gates or Cornel West almost became stars. Is it for the better?

PB: It depends. I think it’s for the better for Gates. There are things that he says that I like and others that I don’t. I saw him two or three years ago. One of my students was publishing something in a magazine called *Transition* and he was there. At some point he said something like “I wanted to be famous!” [laughs]. It was refreshing to hear. When it’s a motivating force, you make decisions kind of along those lines, you know. He hasn’t done any harm, so...

FS: Let’s go back to your writing activity. You wrote novels, poetry, you also practiced slam, right?

PB: Yeah, I guess I did things like slam stuff.

FS: I was wondering if you considered that there was a rupture between those things or if they were the continuation of one another.

PB: It all comes out of my little fingers, so it definitely is a continuation. When I first started writing poetry, I was just writing poetry. I do not consider myself a slam poet or anything. I just read, and when I read I never raise my voice. What happened is I won the first slam thing in New York or whatever and at the time it was just people reading, having fun. And then it turned into something different, which you could see would happen and then I was really uncomfortable with it. It became derivative, like a lot of art a lot of the time. I would read my 30-40 page-long poems and I was uncomfortable being associated with something I hated. Some people would say “You’re not like these people” and it would make me feel good or something. It would bring people along for some kind of intellectual side. It generated some kind of publicity. There was a little tour that I did for a while (six months, maybe). I realized these people were just doing something I was not in favor of, which is what? I guess they were trying to write... but there was another agenda there I wasn’t comfortable with. I was in Central Park once for a reading and there was this big crowd. One of the participants started to read and the first thing out of her mouth was “I’m from the projects” [laughs]. What does that have to do with anything? It’s just like these music competition shows, MFA programs and a lot of these things. It just becomes about something else. So I did a thing: I went to Berlin for the first time in 93. I had never heard of “spoken word” before. Because I’m not involved with that shit, I don’t pay attention to it. What the fuck does this even mean? We did this reading. I did my thing with these other poets. And people started asking questions. And they answered something like “We’re New York’s most radical poets blah blah blah.” And I said “No! This is the safest crap you can possibly do!” I got so angry! But it helped me start to draw these lines and think about who I like to be around with. There’s just a pandering there. And this is not a pandering related to any slam poetry but I got angry about it. And I was becoming uncomfortable with my poetry because I started to have responses, instant feedback and things like that. Some of the poems I was writing were against that but a lot of people didn’t hear that. They just heard what they wanted to hear and see. A lot of people wanted to be famous and there’s nothing wrong with that. I started writing *White Boy Shuffle* and I said “OK, that’s what I wanna do!”

FS: OK. Do you read the languages you've been translated into?

PB: No, not really, German a little bit. When you hear stuff in another language, you kind of know if it's good or not. When I heard passages from *Slumberland* read, I thought the translator did a fantastic, fantastic job! I thought "It sounds better in German than it does in English!" [laughs]. You can get a sense of this. I have nothing against orality, there are some nice aspects to orality, but I'm against it as the primary aspect of rhyme you know. I think it's a little insulting. There's something about it that I'm not comfortable with.

FS: And why did you go to Berlin by the way?

PB: The first time I went was because of this tour. It wasn't a great experience but I learned a lot. It was the second time I had been abroad. It was 1993 so it was a little bit of a different place. I learned a lot about myself and when I found out about all this crap, and how much I was gonna be a part of it, I thought "What am I gonna do to extricate myself from this kind of crap?" Then the guy who had organized this tour, who was from East Berlin, called me in California and asked me if I wanted to come to Berlin for a year because he could sponsor me. I didn't have any money, I didn't have a job so I did it. I had a rough year in Germany but... I've gone back many times and all that has changed.

FS: Now about *White Boy Shuffle*, there is something mysterious about the title for me and for the translator also apparently...

PB: I don't even remember if I found the title before I wrote the novel or if I had started. I was in L.A. and I was talking to my sister about house parties. We were young and so on. I told her "I don't dance, I can't dance." And she said to me: "You just do the White boy shuffle." And I was like "That's the perfect fucking title!" It was the perfect title about being supposed to be able to learn how to do something and not being able to learn it. I know there's a scene about the boys dancing in the novel. That's where the title comes from and for me it fits that little in-between "doing something and not being able to do it."

FS: Scoby is a fascinating character. Was it inspired by anyone in particular?

PB: The name comes from a friend. That was his little code name. How they met in the book comes from how we met in drama class in junior high, but nothing about him is like my friend, nothing. Psycho Loco is sort of based on a friend of mine. This is a word we would use. *Loco* is like a weird word in L.A. I guess.

FS: It means "crazy" in Spanish.

PB: Yeah, it means crazy and now it has a little bit of a gang connotation. Like the sunglasses, they used to be called "locs," which is a short for *loco*. It's still there. It's even more prevalent now than when I wrote the book. You talk about West Side Locos for example. So I guess those two guys are not based on anybody.

FS: Something struck me when I read the book—the end is extremely depressing... You have two deaths, it's really dark. Do you think you would write something so pessimistic today? This was written a couple of years after the L.A. riots...

PB: I'm sure I would not write the exact same thing. I don't feel any different or maybe a little different. At least I don't think I'm any less pessimistic or any more optimistic necessarily. It's like *Slumberland*. It starts off on the almost exact opposite. Maybe not the opposite but 45 degrees away... It's a different thing and each time it's a fundamental thing of just being *erased*. It's all *passé* now. It's the same thing but from a

different point of view. I would not write the same thing because I'm a different person. Different times also. I can't see it as depressing. I can see it as pessimistic though.

FS: The thing that I felt when I read that is that it was very hard for a young Black male at the time to find a place in America; it hasn't changed that much probably. The character goes back to L.A. and it's almost like a defeat in a way. And at the same time it's probably better than staying in Boston.

PB: I have a hard time talking and writing about this thing, because these words "defeat," "redemption," "depression," "finding place," that's what these books are about but they're about something else. Because we use those words but we never talk about what they mean, you know. I remember when Obama got elected a good friend of mine had an American flag in his car. So I said: "I'd never known you to have an American flag." And he said: "I feel like this country has paid its debt." And I said: "What are you talking about? To who?" "To African Americans!" "What about everybody else? What about Native Americans? What about Japanese Americans? What about the environment?" I know what he means. I think these things are dangerous sometimes. The construction of language is the construction of experience sometimes. I never know what anything means. I know what something feels like on some level even though I cannot name it. I can joke about it to convey that feeling for example. It's like when you watch something on the news, like the Trayvon Martin thing. You can hear things like "Did they get justice?" But what does fucking justice mean in this sense? I think we gotta talk a little differently somehow. I'm not sure that it's possible. I understand what you mean when you say "it's depressing," but...

FS: What I meant is that I couldn't expect this kind of end from the rest of the book. This is my way of saying that I was surprised but that was awkward obviously. I think it is a very good end because it is unexpected.

PB: Yes, it's like everybody wants something but nobody talks about what they want. Sometimes you're asking for something but you don't know necessarily what you're asking for. Obama is kind of a good example. On some level the president is the crown jewel of quality. So you get that, but it's not what you want. It's not only about him being Black, it's about a ton of stuff.

FS: I hear a lot about post-raciality these days. It seems to be some kind of fashionable thing. Do you have to say anything about it?

PB: I don't believe in anything post-anything. Maybe post-modernism to a certain degree because it's steeped in it, you know.

FS: The election of Obama had to with it.

PB: Yeah but it's even before that. I remember at the time I was writing *White Boy Shuffle*, I was in Minnesota and there was a guy with his girlfriend there who asked me if I was one of those "New Negroes." That was a mean way to phrase it. And what the fuck does this mean? This constant effort to credit, to re-humanize yourself or to see yourself, to write yourself or to envision yourself as anyone else in a way, it never ends. New Negro, post-racial, post-soul... I understand what those things mean, sure. What people are doing is different from what people were doing before me, but I don't think it's that different. These expressions don't really have much meaning for me. They're different because I want them to be different. I don't know what these post-expressions mean. It's like "politically incorrect." I understand that these people try to define these things, but well... And I don't read that much scholastic work so...

FS: I was about to ask you about this. Do you read any African-American theory or...?

PB: No.

FS: There's this scholar from Chicago named Kenneth Warren who wrote a pamphlet entitled *What Was African American Literature?* two years ago.

PB: That's very funny.

FS: His thesis is that you cannot use the term African American today because it has simply been obsolete since the Civil Rights Movement. Do you think this has a meaning?

PB: Yes, it definitely has a meaning. It's not irrational.

FS: But Gates went on him and asked if he thought that there was no more racism in the U.S.

PB: So is it what this guy says?

FS: No, but his theorization is kind of awkward...

PB: There's a thing, an idealism, how people want to see themselves... There are things that I read and I completely understand why people like this because it fits in what they want to believe about themselves, about society. There's nothing wrong with that. But it's about this thing of being comfortable about being reaffirmed and it's usually being reaffirmed as a good person. It's the history of a lot American literature I think. It's not just about color. But the context that we're talking about is often about color. There's a thing about slam poetry about what you can like and what you can't like, what's OK to like... I don't have a set way that I feel about this. I like this, I like that, there are some people that I like more than others, you know...

FS: The thing is that doing this, he was sort of underlining the emergence of new writers. At the end of an article, he was quoting a certain number of writers that were Black but that could not be considered African American any longer because they were not necessarily talking about Black things... He was quoting Percival Everett, Trey Ellis, Colson Whitehead. He was not quoting you, though.

PB: Some people see me in that school also. Those kinds of categories are in there and I talk about them and make fun of them, but I'm sometimes on both sides of those things. I see what those people are saying. What we're talking about now is something that I try to talk about with these labels. Things are murkier and simpler sometimes than we want them to be. I think there are no fucking answers. This idea of race as a burden, people want an answer, people want an end... I don't know what they want, you know. They want to be recognized. It's interesting to see what Kanye and Jay-Z are doing. It's not avant-garde but they try to be hip-hop at the MoMA or something. Maybe not at the MoMA, maybe at the Met. Because the MoMA is usually twenty years behind! It's interesting but that's age-old, people wanting that kind of acceptance. That's really age-old.

FS: There's the same thing in England with Dizzee Rascal...

PB: Don't know him.

FS: He makes this sort of avant-garde hip-hop. He got a number 1 record when he was only seventeen. He was part of the opening ceremony at the Olympics in London in 2012.

PB: Oh, OK, that's really funny.

FS: He was playing in front of a hundred thousand people.

PB: I understand that. It's something I'm struggling about. I'm not vocal about what I'm doing. I know it doesn't work but I would like my work to speak for itself. But you see

these guys and they're not really speaking for their work but for their artistry or something. Speaking for their being artists, not for their work. I don't know Kanye and Jay-Z's music at all and I don't follow them but I like to see how they're contextualized.

FS: I'm really interested in relationships between the arts and I was wondering if you had read your poetry or part of your novels with accompanying musicians or if you would like to do this.

PB: No, I hate that. I tried once and I'm not musical. For me it's all there on the page. I think people try to force these things and it's so rare that that works. And people like it as a concept and that's enough to carry something but to me it's very rare. It makes sense on some level, poetry and music, but it's always terrible. Always, always terrible. A friend of mine told me that he had only heard one poet that did it and that's Amiri Baraka. He said he was the only person that could do it. I don't know if that's the case but probably it's because Amiri knows music. At least on a theoretical basis better than most people. So maybe that's why he can do it, you know. I never read with music. I have no interest in doing so. The first time I was reading poetry, there was this guy Seymour Stein that used to run Sire Records. He talked to me and said "Come to me, we'll do a record!" But this is not something I wanna do. And I'm very stubborn.

FS: I understand that you may not want to do this if it's not working. I saw something like this on East 25th Street in the mid-1990s. There was this guy reading his poetry along with a saxophone player and for some reason sometimes it worked and sometimes it did not work but I think it's the most difficult thing to do!

PB: [Laughter]

FS: The language of words and the language of music almost do not have anything to do with each other.

PB: You could make a case and write a dissertation on what they have to do with each other but I agree. Oh, no, I'm gonna contradict myself right now. One of my favorite things is... Do you know who Steve Allen is? He was like a comedian and he used to have his own talk show in the mid-60s, late 60s. I guess he is not alive anymore. He was a little different, funny guy, a little political in a weird way. He had Kerouac on his talk show. Steve Allen is playing the piano while Kerouac reads...

FS: Yeah, I have the CD...

PB: And it is beautiful. So it's not that it can't work, but it works in that sense. In that little case, it works. I love that! Part of the bit that I love has nothing to do with what they're doing but about Steve Allen's reverence for Kerouac that I absolutely love. So I'm not saying you should never do these things. An excellent example of poetry and music working together is William Parker's *Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield* featuring Amiri Baraka.

FS: Just to finish with the interview, can you talk a little bit about the new book?

PB: It will be entitled *The Sellout*. It is set in a fiction town modeled on Compton. I have a friend who is a principal in Compton and my sister teaches in Compton. Sometimes you drive there and you see people on horseback, that's where it is set. It's about this kid and this old guy. It's also about this phrase "You set Black people back five hundred years" that is said by some people who feel embarrassed by the action of other Black people. A friend of mine told me one day: "Why doesn't anyone ever say 'You advanced black people five hundred years?'" So the book is about setting people back—black people, five hundred years. Maybe there's an advancement too, I don't know.

FS: It reminds me of Langston Hughes going to the USSR in the 1930s to make a Soviet-financed movie with a whole African-American crew. The thing was a complete mess and soon everybody called each other “the shame of the race.” And Hughes made a lot of fun of that expression.

PB: [laughs]. They were using it ironically?

FS: No, they were serious about it! It resembles the expression “Set people back five hundred years” I think.

PB: Anyway, I feel pretty good about the book now, which I never say, very rarely. We’ll see, we’ll see...

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FRÉDÉRIC SYLVANISE

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