

"To Be A Problem"
ENG 26 Section 1
Fall 2007

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the watermelon remix

a companion to Paul Beatty's The White Boy Shuffle

notes:

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GROWN

the following
pieces respond to
a poem on page 105
of Beatty's text

Disclaimer/Warning: Poem a bit harsh. Contains unfriendly language. Please do not be offended... it just flowed out of me.
Dedicated to hoodrats everywhere.

Home Grown (the remix)

Homegirl comes out of the bedroom
and walking on verrrrry tired legs
looks at the rest of her naked friends
sprawled out on the dingy apartment's living room
floor
knocked the f*ck out
as gansta rap from the night's party still pours from
the speakers

who are these b*tches
she's always rolled with
played double dutch with
shared sex partners with

what are they really like when none of the others are
around

do they...
wish they were virgins?
secretly hate Karrine Stephens?
wanna be respected (for once)?
watch romantic comedies on the sly?

Homegirl thinks aloud to herself. "Well,
one thing I know about these chickenheads
is that they can't judge me."

one of the girls untangles herself from two guys,
"Heffa I ain't no chickenhead..."

-Chantel Liggett

Commentary on "Purple"

Stephanie chose to add another definition of color to Beatty's color passages on pages 34-35. I feel that her take on purple is appropriate since Gunnar painted pictures of the symbolism of each color as it related to the black community. Stephanie talks about domestic violence, which wasn't a primary issue that was raised but it still just as important. She starts of explaining the traditional view of purple, which is often associated with royalty. She adds to her definition the colors, "ravishing reds" and "best blues", which create purple.

In her second paragraph, she makes a turn to bring up a different area in life where purple arises, in the bruises of victims of domestic violence. This purple is created with "green envy", "raging red", and "a rainbow of color." I must add that Stephanie's use of personification gives strength to her description.

Janeria Alexis Pullen



Purple

She's the color of kings and queens and all those that are noble: she's royal. Made from only the best blues and most ravishing reds, she epitomizes wealth and extravagance. They say only the most delicate and precious things in nature are purple: lavender, orchid, lilac, and violet flowers. Purple is the color of wisdom, dignity, independence, creativity, mystery, and magic. She's the definition of power, nobility, luxury, and ambition. Purple is peace of mind.

But where's the peace of mind when you've been branded by purple bruises? Where's the dignity in being hunched over with purple pain? Where's the warm energy in purple penitence?

Purple came in with the delicacy and charm of a flower. She was the perfect balance of cool blue and warm red. But that night, she was nothing but a bastard of blackness. He busted in with the green of envy in his eyes, spewing words that colored every end of the spectrum. The raging red pinned her to the wall and held her against her will. A rainbow of color pervaded through every inch of her body and soul until finally, Purple thundered over her with a distinct gloom, frustration, and sadness that left her lying in a pool of purple rain.

-Stephanie Darand

Commentary on "Home Grown (the Remix)"

Chantel's humorous and disturbing remix of "Home Grown" provides interesting grounds for interpretation. The first detail that strikes the reader is the contrast in gender of the subjects of the poem. While maintaining the overall theme of questioning the true nature of those who one claims to be friends, it portrays this reflection through the eyes of a female. At first glance, it would appear that Beatty's "young g," and Chantel's "homegirl" are dealing with the same issues. However, as the poems unravels, the reader discovers that Chantel seeks to highlight the plight of the youthful female as much more serious than that of the adolescent male. This is exemplified by her substitution of "wish they were virgins?" for "take bubble baths?" While the boys ponder trivial matters, girls question significant life decisions. Chantel also seems to imply that a certain false pretense surrounds female relationships when she substitutes "they can't judge me" for "y'all are niggers who care." The boys are secure in their friendships, while the girls mask their true feelings.

-Donald Depass

Commentary on "Your Problem Is"

Dedicated to all the runaways

Home Blown

little nobody drops her backpack on the dirty sidewalk
and through frightened tear stained eyes
peers at her tattered sisters
curled in the ditches outside the abandoned warehouse
asleep against the city back drop of constant agitation
on the run from pilfering men of innocence
who are these runaways
she's shed tears with
rummaged for food with
prayed for strength with

what were they really like before life abandoned them to destitution
did they ...
lick creamy ice cream?
climb the monkey bars on the playground?
play double-dutch?
chase fireflies at dusk in their back yard?

little nobody whispers into darkness. "Psst!"
All I know is that it's us against the world

One small child raises her head and murmurs back
"And that's all you need to know."

-Michelle Anne Chinenye Oyeka



Donald's remix to "Your Problem Is" provides a message that we as college students can easily relate to, as most of us have been in the situation where "everyone knows what's best." He uses the same approach as Gunnar- listing random and remote people in his life- to show the wide range of people who, in Gunnar's case, claim to know him, and in Donald's case, claim to know what is best for him. Unlike Gunnar's poem, as Donald's poem progresses, he uses more personal individuals, such as "the great aunt who doesn't know my name," to show that even those closest to you, cannot know what is best for your life. Donald has taken the theme of Gunnar's poem and expanded on it, in the sense that because no one really knows him, no one can possibly know what is best for him.

-Jade Sheree Miller



Your Future Is
(Your Problem is Remix, p.172)

Please tell me how...

the next-door neighbor, your best friend's, sister's cousin,
Ms. Cleo the psychic, the admissions officer,
the athletic director, the ROFC recruiter,
the frat president, the academic advisor,
the local "elite," the guest speaker
the second grade basketball coach, the camp director
the 3rd cousin I met when I was two, the great aunt who doesn't know my name,
individuals who claim to be 'my people,' those who only recently reappeared in my life,
those who weren't there when I needed them most, those who dismissed my ambitions

all know what's best for me, when I don't?
How can they claim to know what I want, when I have yet to decide?

-Donald Depass

Commentary on "Home Blown"

Michelle Oyeka changes Gunnar's poem about a boy just hangin' with his crew to a slap in the face. It's gut-wrenching to realize that there are young girls (and boys) forced to live on the streets and adapt a lifestyle that one shouldn't have to live. With the statement "All I know is that it's us against the world", (and throughout the piece) Oyeka raises the question of why should youth live with the burden of being alone? What part do we, as humans, play in the life of a runaway? Do we assist in pushing them away? Or are we giving them the option to live their life while having a secure place to stay? Are we involved in being a part of the world that's against them? Or are we there with them through thick and thin? Struggles like these make a young child jump from the sucking on a bottle to learning how to survive on the level of an adult. We need to take better care of our youth. We need to care.

-Elisabeth Esther Nicole Michel

Home Grown Remix

Young child puts down her doll
for a moment
And through innocent eyes
Checks out her crack-addicted
mother
Sprawled out all over the kitchen
floor
Under a blanket of white dust
Tucked in by the noises of the
ghetto

Who is this woman
She's talked with
Played dress-up with
Lived with

What is she really like
When no one's looking
Does she...
Paint?
Read the Bible?
Write poetry?
Wish upon falling stars?

The young girl cries out to her
mother. "Mommy! All I know is
that you really do
love me."

Her mother lifts her groggy head
and shouts back, "And that's all
you need to
know."

Jade Sheree Miller



Commentary on "Imagine"

The original version of this poem talks about images people want to see - images with which most readers of The New Yorker are probably familiar - bed & breakfasts, birchwood bureaus, etc. I think Mike's poem mirrors that. Society wants to see him "wearing a suit" or when he's feeling more casual, in a cardigan and some Birkenstocks. A lot of the images he talks about are part of the American Dream and the last line seems to make fun of that. "Tell society I did it!" sounds sarcastic like, if this is your idea of a good life, I feel sorry for you. Another suggestion that this type of life isn't really something Mike approves of is the use of "cluttered" in the second line. His life isn't filled or brimming with gratuitous bank accounts, it's cluttered with them, a more negative term.

I like the use of the catalogs in both stanzas. It helped emphasize that these are all the things that should make up a "good life". He brings the newspaper back in the penultimate line which I thought was a good touch and a nice reference back to the original poem. Good job Mike :)

-Amanda Louise Turner

Imagine my life
Cluttered with gratuitous
Bank accounts, trophy homes and wives,
Birkenstocks and cardigan sweaters
long work weeks at the office and sober weekends
Long months at home and long family trips to Mount Rushmore

Imagine me
Wearing a suit
Not ordering off the dollar menu
Parenting: not eating cookies off the floor
Tying my shoes
Reading the newspaper

Then tell society I did it!

-Mike Posner

Commentary on "Home Grown Remix"

My favorite part of this poem is the second stanza because Jade leaves it ambiguous until the third stanza whether the mother is asking the child the questions of the child is asking the mother the questions. This establishes a reciprocity that isn't even present in Gunnar's version. Another notable line is the first question in the second stanza, "Who is this woman?" Even more than Gunnar's question, Jade's poem calls into the entire question the entire mother-child relationship. From the child's point of view, what makes this woman my mother? Why was I born to a crack-head and not a millionaire? Jade did a great job of keeping Gunnar's structure and I think engaging even deeper questions using his formula. Good Job!

-Michael Robert Posner

"Street Grown"

Remix of "Home Grown" (p. 105-106). Dedicated (once again) to my Haitian youth...no scratch that. This is dedicated to the ones that think problems and success don't start until adulthood.

young patnè* puts down his scrap instrument for a moment

and through hardened eyes
checks out his scantily clad comrades
each hovering into balls in various corners
asleep under the protection of their hideout
tucked in by the haggling of street vendors

who are these boys
he's toughened up with
been beaten with
been tested for AIDS with

who are they in the dark

do they...
play with their sisters' dolls?
stop and stare at the setting sun?
like to do laundry?
spy on the neighbors through the crack in the wall?

the young patnè rousts his boys. "***Gade!
Sel sa'm konnin de nou
se ke nou se neg ki pran souin yon lot."

one of his boys hauls up his weary head and
mumbles back,

"Manchè, sé sel sa ou bezwen konnin."

*patne: Basically means partner, buddy, etc.

**These Creole words are not word for word translations of Beatty's text, but they retain the same meaning of the young G's declaration to his boys and the boy's response to the young G.
Post reply

-Elisabeth Esther Nicole Michel

Commentary on "The New Yorker"

The original version of this poem mocks other people's expectations of what a poem should look like. I like how Amanda mocks those who claim to have superior motives in helping their fellow man. It forces people to remember that they should give with their hearts and not just their wallets. My favorite part is when she comments about those who try not to "feel guilty as the pull out their wallets." This gives evidence to man's reluctance to aid those in desperate need. I also liked the miss South Carolina comment. It pointed to a lack of empathy for others by those to wrapped up in their own day to day lives. By choosing to take a stance from the original poem and expound on it with a new twist further elaborates the indifference people share. Her use of sarcasm cuts through the careful facades of society and delivers blunt truth to its audience. Good use of sarcasm room mate.

-Michelle Oyeka

The New Yorker

Inspired by
Merva Kilgore's Death Poem
(p.213)

To people that chose to be
indifferent

pretend you care
about the people dying
in countries you and Miss Teen
South Carolina
couldn't point to on a map
from diseases you'll never
contract.
even though they don't look
anything like you
and don't have access to half
your resources
which isn't your problem
try not to feel guilty
as you pull out those checkbooks
-Amanda Louise Turner

Commentary on "Street Grown"

Thought it was great. Loved the
use of Creole :)

This remix is different from
Kaufman's version of "Home
Grown" in that it doesn't
portray those in the poem as
potheads waking from their
slumber, but men who have been
reared by the streets. It's a
very different take, changing
the meaning completely. This can
also be seen in the change of
words, the most obvious being
the use of Creole towards the
end, identifying a specific
audience this is for and/or a
specific group the poem was
written about. In addition to
this, towards the end of the
poem, using the words "weary"
instead of "groggy" and
"mumbles" instead of "shouts"
leads the reader to infer that
these men have been through many
trials and tribulations,
consequently, they are so
downtrodden they have become
weary, or tired, worn out,
exhausted with life. They don't
even have enough strength to
shout back their response,
instead they mumble, which can
sometimes sound like an
inaudible whisper and this tells
it all.

-Yessenia Castillo



the rest of the patch

the following poems
were inspired by
other poems from
Watermelanin, suicide
poems from followers
of Gunnar Kaufman,
and prose passages
from *The White Boy
Shuffle*

Commentary on "I am Not a Problem"

One of the things that stuck out the most to me was how Yessenia transformed the poem into a more personal matter. The very first line of Gunnar's poem is "how can..." and Yessenia's is instead "Tears form when..." The "how can" could really be from, about, or to anyone, but crying is brought about by some thing you personally feel. Gunnar used examples like "jehova's witness, the editorial page, the urban planner" which are rather far removed from him, and all of his examples were like that. But instead Yessenia used examples like "Pastors, parents, siblings, friends". She used people that she comes into direct contact with, speaks to, and knows by name. I think this is an interesting point. The stereotypes and negative expectations in our lives don't just come from outside our personal worlds; they come from within them as well.

I also liked the change in the title and overall meaning from "how can you relate to me?" to "how can you point the finger at me?" I especially liked the small bit she added at the end that if you constantly blame everyone, you end up being the one to blame too. When Yessenia wrote "...Abide by your beliefs..... alone." To me it meant that when you are so high up on your soap box telling everyone else what the matter with them is, you end up doing it alone. I think they are powerful words.

-Christine Mychal Hunt

I'm Not a Problem

Poem dedicated to everyone

Tears form when.....

Pastors, parents, siblings, friends,
strangers, news anchors, politicians,
history books, aunts, uncles, grandparents,
classmates, authors, singers, directors,
professors, future spouses, doctors,
lawyers,

people who know nothing about you and
will never know anything about you,

people who stick to preconceived
stereotypes and generalizations,

those with enough power to change the
world,

tell me I'm a problem when they judge me
from stereotypes

when I'm not like everyone else.

Call me a sinner when we live in a sinful
world and it gets increasingly difficult to

Abide by your beliefs..... alone.

-Yessenia Castillo

*Rewritten from "Give Me Liberty or
Give Me Crib Death" pg. 221*

Remorse lies
Not in the consciousness
Of a murderous parent
Who lulls a child born into poverty
To divine sleep
With a jugular lullaby
Sung by a ravenous tube

And suffocating love
Applied with pillow and pressure
Or with garbage bag

Remorse lies
Not in the oppressor's eyes
Nor in the eyes of the ones
Who have abandoned us

Instead
They calculate their gain
For it is as Tupac says

One less hungry mouth on welfare
One less potential problem

-Janeria Pullen



Commentary on "Give Me Liberty"

In The White Boy Shuffle, Scooby kills himself with the encouragement of Gunnar's poems and interviews glorifying suicide as "winning by straight taking yourself out" (Beatty, 204). The poem "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Crib Death" revisits this theme by evoking the image of a slave parent who would rather carve into and suffocate their child than let the slave owner use the child's life for profit. This poem depicts the process of death as triumph and defiance, a slap in the face of the master. In Janeria's version, however, the triumphant mood of the verse no longer exists. Her poem has a tragic feel, aided most by the phrase "Sung by a ravenous tube." In Gunnar's version, "sung by sharp blade" (222) is much harsher, and gives the parent a spiteful I'm-gonna-show-you-Massuh-you-just-wait-and-see personality, while the parent in Janeria's poem is almost pitiful, starving and poverty-stricken.

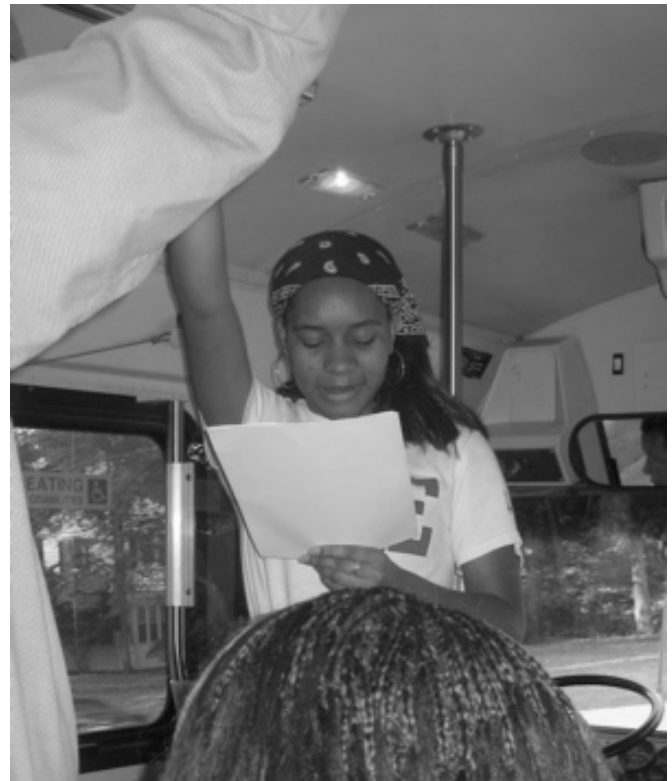
Nevertheless, a parallel between the two poems can be seen at their ends. In Gunnar's, the slave owner "calculates his losses/forecasts the impact on this year's crop" (222). In Janeria's remix, those who have contributed to the oppression and abandonment of the family "calculate their gain...One less hungry mouth on welfare/One less potential problem." Although the slave owner viewed death as a loss while the oppressors viewed it as a gain, the fact remains that neither of them care about or are sensitive to the loss of a child's life and the devastating situations of the parents. In this way, Janeria preserves the powerful message of Gunnar's poem, that if we (we being the oppressed and taken for granted minority community) don't take care of or stand up for each other, no one will, because society doesn't give a damn about our lives.

-Chantel Liggett

Commentary on "Wandering Appropriation of Greek Mythology"

Christine sticks closely to Gunnar's format in "White Boy Shuffle." Weaving the gods and goddesses of Greek mythology into her poem, Christine is able to balance between telling a "story" and being poetic all at the same time. She does switch up a lot of things (i.e. the speaker of Christine's poem says she's doubtful after the phone call she receives from her sister, whereas the speaker in Gunnar's poem reflects on the inspiration he receives from his incarcerated friend). My favorite aspect of Christine's version is when she reworks the "ham radio signals/s.o.s. a.p.b. 911 electronic prayers" stanza with her own contemporary equivalent.

-Stephanie Darand



Wandering Misappropriation of Greek Mythology

This poem is dedicated to nomads.
(p.85)

I raise my eyes to the sky
From the start
Searching for a home

Themis carries me past picket fences
and
Cookie cutter buildings of the same
shapes

And colors, and drops me of like a
soccer mom
To fend for myself in the labyrinth of
Culs-de-sac, community pools, and
Development

Outside, trying to hear the voices
I hear nothing
The empty driveways are silent
And the girl scouts look at me
Like I'm crazy

Upon the high order of Cronus
My parents toss me and my sisters into
The first floor of an apartment building
Neighbors with the strange little boy
with no shoes, and
Underneath the couple blasting Hip Hop
all weekend.

The ever watchful Theia
Points out dinners with collard greens
Playtimes with double dutch
Past all the 7-11's, Sheetz, and Wawa's
On the web of highways

On my bed
I place my head to the pillow
But dream nothing

by Christine Mychal Hunt

No imaginings of soon-to-come invites
to house parties
No laughter

Not even the excitement of riding the
NJ Transit

I have a notion that if
I could translate
The phraseology of Tayonna Rodgers,
Boneeda Ramirez, and Sara Hara
The rolling r's, cut-off words, and
drawn out sounds
I'd find Mnemosyne there in the end
To help me remember where I'd end up
hiding my Rosetta Stone

All the while the children of Tethys
gather
In the halls of Coeus
To the ringing of bells and follow
Pre-planned processions, all part of a
ruse
To keep me out

My ham radio signals
s.o.s a.p.b 911 electronic prayers
To the goddess Rhea's voicemail
Go unanswered

Last night my sister picked up a cell
phone

"Mom wants to know when you'll be
home."

And I was doubtful

