Racial Mythologies, Neoliberal Seductions, and the Fictioning of Blackness: An SOS from "Old Lem"

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They don't come by ones
They don't come by twos
But they come by tens.

Sterling Brown, "Old Lem"

It may seem counterintuitive to decry the "Age of Ferguson" in a forum so-named. That Ferguson happened and stands as a watershed moment in the contemporary imaginary is undeniable. But Ferguson, as Tony Bolden argues in "The Racial Contract: Ferguson as Metonymy—Why Now?", is metonymic, the most recent iteration of an unbroken assault against black bodies in the US, assaults that serve an unstated but irrefutable racial contract. That we can now add to the list of unjustified acts by police officers two killings in two days—Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Minnesota—makes the point all too well. Invoking Charles Mills, Bolden maintains that while the cumulative accomplishments of progressive politics during the 1960s made significant advances in undermining this racial contract, ultimately it was not dismantled entirely. Rather, it was rewritten and, correspondingly, reproduced. Bolden's line of reasoning, along with ongoing public conversations about race by some of our best thinkers, encourage me to continue grappling with the expectation that those of us who claim to "stay woke" must figure out how we

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might best forge ahead.[1] It seems to me that a critical, perhaps first, step is deliberate consideration of the ways current black writing and writing b(l)ack in the "Age of Ferguson" may be contributing (unknowingly or otherwise) to a new racial mythology formed more by conditioning than historicity and more as a reimagined racial contract than a new world order.[2]

The assumption that people contribute to mythologies about themselves to their own detriment is not applicable only to the black American. Wole Soyinka makes a similar argument in his most recent book, *Of Africa* (2012), in a chapter titled "Fictioning of the Fourth Dimension." There, he articulates four schools of "fictioning"—"one is the purely driven adventurer's; the second the commercial . . . ; the third the internal, power-driven fictioning by their successors" (53); the fourth, he argues, is done most often by the African himself. And "the extreme and dogmatic of this school often . . . drop into the same ancient pit of self-gratification, ultimately self-undermining" (54). Sadly, the formerly and arguably still oppressed participate in the fictioning, thereby sustaining the cycle of repetition that fuels acts of oppression. In the latter case, too, the sacred space of memory, in the rare instances it is invoked, is discordant. The continent's complicated but no less complicit relation to the slave trade goes largely unacknowledged. Of most relevance here is Soyinka's point that fictioning is a political act that enables "the curse of repetition, albeit in disguised, even refined forms" to continue unbroken (66). Structural change remains elusive; and the well of attenuation and the tree of forgetfulness win the day.

Like the fictioning of Africa, the fictioning of blackness in America unfolds in stages. The first occurs with the articulation and subsequent promotion of scientific racism, even when it is endorsed and perpetuated by those considered our most influential thinkers (for example, Thomas Jefferson and *Notes on the State of Virginia*). Unable to sustain that argument for long, the fictioning enlists stereotyping to make the case of black inferiority. When black writers began to draw upon American laments for freedom from tyranny at the onset of the Revolutionary War to justify demands for equality—through refutations of black inferiority, through identification with black accomplishments, and through assertions of ancient African achievement—the response was swift. To undermine presentations of a nonfictionalized blackness, proslavery magazines, newspapers, and other publications printed highly stereotypical images of black people which often placed emphasis on their speaking dialect, presumably to suggest a connection between a lack of command of standardized English and an inability to reason and thus to debate one's own fate. Africa was further fictionalized as

barbaric. Absent the slave trade, this media suggested, enslaved Africans would have been killed in their homelands.

When the use of stereotyping began to wane for lack of effectiveness, blackface minstrelsy, as contemporary scholarship surrounding it makes clear, extended and revised the waning practices of stereotyping as a means of fictioning blackness.[3] The tradition of white men using burned cork and greasepaint to blacken their faces, supposedly to amuse audiences by exploiting the degradations of slavery and plantation life, was as much about constructing whiteness (by misappropriating blackness) as it was about slavery and entertainment. An integral part of the performance, as Thomas C. Holt argues, is its investigation into complex political, economic, and social forces:

> Studies of the content of minstrel shows, their music, and their social setting suggest that they served to assuage the cultural anxieties of both the new European immigrants uprooted from homelands and integrating into an alien society and political economy and the young rural native migrants to the city, many of whom were being incorporated into wage labor and the factory system for the first time. (15)

As white America grappled with the terms of its emerging identity, it fictionalized blackness to declare what whiteness was not. For Frederick Douglass, black people often participated in that fictioning beyond simply forming all-black minstrel troops—"they, too had recourse to the burnt cork and lamp black, the better to express their characters and to produce uniformity of complexion." Thus, fictionalized blackness not only intended to establish inferiority; it also declared all blackness as *same*. And black people were, ironically, enlisted for this work.

Intentional or not, the late nineteenth-century articulation of the "New Negro" as an identity trope contributed significantly to the early fictioning of postslavery blackness, notably, in terms of sameness. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the success of the trope "depends fundamentally upon self-negation, a turning away from the 'Old Negro' ... toward the ... 'New Negro,' an irresistible, spontaneously generated black and sufficient self." The determination to "recreate a race by renaming it" ultimately turns out to be a dubious venture indeed, particularly once Booker T. Washington, attempting to eschew stereotypical images of Negro life, published his compendium *A New Negro for a New Century*. In an effort to control images of the public Negro self, Washington and the editors crafted what they deemed to be acceptable portrayals of blackness, which promoted sameness and ushered in a politics of respectability

informed completely by an obsession with the white gaze. Such acceptable blackness was to model whiteness and erase the racialized self in whatever ways possible.

With some exceptions, black writers have learned to avoid the trappings of scientific racism, media-driven stereotyping, minstrelsy, and self-defeating fictioning. But as Bolden argues, neoconfederates (which he defines as white Southern chauvinists who have been mainstreamed), in their will to renegotiate the racial contract but unable to rely wholly on black participation in this renegotiation, have become "adept in using rhetorical techniques that not only distort social issues according to racial ideology but also incite racial hatred while providing discursive mechanisms to deny charges of racism" (175). In this instance, the fictioning strategy involves dog-whistling. So Darren Wilson, the officer who killed Michael Brown, never has to narrate Brown's blackness literally. Instead, Wilson can say that he felt like a five-year-old trying to hold Hulk Hogan or that Brown's face looked like a demon, that his face was filled with the most intense aggression Wilson had ever seen, that Brown grunted and seemed undeterred by the onslaught of bullets Wilson's gun let loose. Rather, this *superpredator* bulked up instead of demurring—he just ran through the shots.[4] Without ever mentioning race, Wilson fictions unapologetic blackness as unreasonable and nonnegotiable. It must be killed.

As black writers become more skillful at avoiding the fictioning of blackness and more determined to defeat dog-whistling and its attending "playing the race card" retort, we must also avoid the seduction of neoliberalism, which has its own subjugating agenda. It is, at least in part, a failure to recognize the "cog[s] in the neoliberal order" that, Robin D. G. Kelley argues in "Black Study, Black Struggle," shapes the current crisis of political education. This same misidentification, I propose, informs critical missteps in writing black. Only heightened awareness of these injurious pitfalls can ward off the seduction of adopting the language and, correspondingly, the ideology of neoliberalism. Neoliberal logic, for instance, manages "difference but with no corresponding transformation in the conditions that, in the first place, marked certain bodies as suspicious, deviant, abject, or illegible" (Kelley). The murders of Castile and Sterling, in such instances, are cited as further proof of the need for police reform. And police reform is indeed necessary. But what is more necessary is a world where black males are not fictioned as ontologically criminal. In other words, neoliberal logic that "depoliticizes genuine struggles for justice and power" while claiming to provide redress is dangerous. Rather than demand "*complete transformation* of the social order and eradication of all forms of . . . hierarchy," neoliberalism advocates for small change driven more by

appearance than reality. A black police chief and more black officers are hired, but the supposition that black people are more prone to criminal behavior than non-black people remains. All the while, the neoliberal agenda applauds itself for bringing a select few into the fold to make society *seem* less unjust, instead of making it more just.

The tendency to anoint a select few spokespersons to promote this "progress" (and as evidence of it) is equally limiting, according to Howard W. French, whose timely insights parallel Kelley's warning about the trappings of the neoliberal project:

> For decades it has been clear that space is made in the firmament for a tiny number of black journalists at any given time, if mostly to write about race. These figures, however, brilliant, find themselves transformed into unwilling emblems of inclusivity—the journalistic and literary equivalent of a black president, a figure whose ascendancy can be cited by white people as proof that we don't have a race problem any more.

Noting how opening up space for an exemplar makes it easier to maintain exclusion amid self-applause for enlightenment and generosity, French continues:

> This process of assigning discrete bandwidth to a singular black figure for a limited, if indeterminate period of time (the whims of the majority will decide) is ultimately a mechanism for feeling good about oneself. . . . That singular figure then, becomes the start and finish of any belated attempts to demonstrate one's efforts at "diversity."

Ultimately, diversity that moves beyond pretext, as French incisively asserts, "is not about scoring points" or good feeling. Rather, as an act of transformation, diversity must be "akin to restoring vision to a creature with impaired sight, making it whole and allowing it to function at the full limits of its perceptive and analytical capacity."

So how does the contemporary black writer find or assert an informed voice that, particularly in moments of crisis, avoids sustaining elements of a racial mythology and circumvents the neoliberal fictioning of blackness? By definition, the moment of crisis makes the deep thought required to confront any real challenge improbable, perhaps implausible. The result can be a thinness in the level of discourse that inevitably corresponds with an impulse of immediacy or the urgency of now as point of departure. All writing, one may say, responds to something. And anyone who handles words for the express purpose of having black beingness intersect with imagination, I submit, is a black writer. So, writing black in the "Age of

So, writing black in the "Age of Ferguson," even in its response to crisis, is part and parcel of a natural, universal response in defense of the particularity of one's humanity without regard for the absurd reality of having to do so.

Ferguson," even in its response to crisis, is part and parcel of a natural, universal response in defense of the particularity of one's humanity without regard for the absurd reality of having to do so. In this sense, even the moment of crisis cannot be viewed as an isolated experience. That moment should be contextualized as the climax or latest iteration of an ongoing challenge. Ferguson is all too good a case in point.

Brown's killing and the subsequent failure to prosecute Wilson were part of a larger history—a history of enforced segregation that dates back to the nineteenth century, of state-sanctioned violence against black bodies, discrimination against black people in housing markets and judicial systems, and widely known and broadly accepted police misconduct. While every writer will not be fully aware of the social, political, economic, and racial realities that shape the crisis, it seems fair, to me, to hold every writer accountable for doing due diligence and making an earnest effort before claiming to contribute to the discourse that develops in response to any given crisis. The seduction of media attention, the opportunity to enhance one's social networking profile, and the expectation of sound bites must be confronted and acknowledged as the traps that they are.

A related dual difficulty is the problem of the white gaze and the question of who gets to speak and with what levels of authority. It goes without saying that this voice need not be singular.[5] We have been at our best when we have had polarities that required both extremes to see well beyond their limited perches and when the range of voices has guided us out of the wilderness. Obviously, then, the entrapment of the "singular black figure," French laments, especially one shaped by a sympathetic white gaze, must be sidestepped. The reality of social media has the potential to modify this in important ways. Outlets like Twitter or Facebook can and should be seen as equalizers. A following in those spaces with a known and target audience (and in real time no less) closes critical gaps, even as new gaps are created. Twitter, especially, encourages brevity rather than depth. Investigative reporting, which has habitually worked to expose and right wrongs but which takes time and critical engagement, has not disappeared completely from the public conversation, but, assuredly, it has taken a backseat to social media platforms. Significantly, Facebook, at its core, is a social platform, but not one committed to critical commentary. Overwhelmingly, the most shared or liked posts on Facebook in general are what analysts call "I can relate to that" posts, followed by inspirational quotes, and then "bucket list" posts. When people log on to Facebook specifically for news feeds on momentous occasions, more often than not they do so to post and read comments that circumvent the critical awareness that informs news outlets' reporting on the issue.[6]

Indeed, social media plays to a particular craving for acknowledgment that animates the precincts of those who have historically been marginalized. And this is critical, but it cannot come at the expense of elevated discourse, if only because fully informed discourse is the underbelly of activism committed to the new forms of resistance that usher in change. Herein, perhaps, lies social media's greatest potential—as a revolutionary tool loosed from the shackles of sound bites and free to build communities of knowledge-based resistance. It was through social media, for instance, as Jelani Cobb suggests in "The Matter of Black Lives," that Ferguson became "a case study of structural racism in America and a metaphor for all that ha[s] gone wrong since the end of the civil-rights movement." Cobb is accurate, too, in pointing to the ways the Black Lives Matter movement, which relies almost exclusively on social media, has begun to "shape the dialogue surrounding race and criminal justice in this country." But, significantly, "it has also sparked a debate about the limits of protest, particularly online activism." Just how far can such a movement go? Can this brand of activism lead to shifts that alleviate structural oppression? Or are even the noblest protest efforts—like its companion, protest literature—inevitably defanged, as Kelley suggests, by a tendency to limit "our ambit of suffering, resistance, and achievement" when what is required for real, sustained transformation is a rooting out of "the historical, political, social, cultural, ideological, material, [and] economic" realities that inform the oppression being protested?

Because we live in an age where we can witness, in unprecedented ways, the perpetual assaults against black people, we can no longer deny the chasm that has long persisted between the nation's propaganda and the lived reality for black people in the US, President Obama's claim that "we are not as divided as some have suggested" notwithstanding. Ferguson, in this sense, rang an irrefutable alarm, reminding the masses of the persistence of the value gap Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. outlines in *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (2016). The state's failure to find a single officer responsible for Freddie Gray's death due to injuries sustained while in police custody, and then the point-blank shootings of Sterling and Castile, a thousand miles apart but within hours of one another, also harkened back to Sterling Brown's "Old Lem," where the poet warns that oppressive assaults don't happen in isolation. "They don't come by ones. They don't come by twos. But they come by the tens."

Real achievements and progress notwithstanding, Darren Wilson's rejection of Michael Brown's assertion of his bodily reality reminds us that whether in slavery, debt peonage, or mass incarceration, black bodies are valued by others by and large in relation to

their functions as capital. Critically, we must see the black body as a metaphor for the larger body politic. And we can do this without circumscribing sameness. But just as the body politic is perpetually under assault (and one need not subscribe to the group designation for it to be a reality with consequences thereunto), we must be in a perpetual state of awareness of ongoing structural oppression that extends well beyond assaults against the body, of staying woke. As difficult as it may be to do so, we must hold in tension the reality of this tyranny and a clear-eyed commitment to creating a more just world. The best example of how we already meet this requirement is the human orientation toward death. We need to mitigate death as the controlling narrative of our lives. As an affirmation of black life, black writing must become corporeal, and black writers must mimic Michael Brown's black body in its refusal to be confined, undeterred by assault until the very end. Perhaps "Old Lem," whom Sterling Brown describes as a "muscled up perfect" man who refuses to submit his body willingly to oppression, paradoxically, in an effort to be free, models the determination for freedom that must be asserted at every turn, no matter the cost. Our lives, if they are to matter at all really, depend on our own unreasonable resolve to "keep a-comin' on."[7]

Notes

1. I offer extensive commentary that invokes the refrain "stay woke" in a special double issue, "Hands up. Don't Shoot! Critical and Creative Responses to Violence toward Black Bodies in the 21st Century," of the *College Language Association Journal*. Bolden's remarks are also published in that issue. See *CLA Journal* 58.3–4 (Mar./June 2015).

2. I am reminded here of Mos Def and Talib Kweli's (as Black Star) invocation of the independent film *Chameleon Street* in their track "Brown Skin Lady" from the album *Mos Def & Talib Kweli are Black Star* (1998). The song opens with the sample from the film where the character defends his problematic choices as a consequence of his social conditioning as a black man in America. He concedes: "I'm a victim brother. I'm a victim of 400 years of conditioning. The man has programmed my conditioning. Even my conditioning has been conditioned!"

3. For cogent commentary on the issues driving minstrelsy, see, among other sources, Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (2003); and David Wellman, "Minstrel Shows, Affirmative Action Talk, and Angry White Men: Marking Racial Otherness in the 1990s," *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (1997), ed. Ruth Frankenberg, 311–33.

4. The full transcript of Wilson's testimony is available here: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1370518-grand-jury-volume-5.html. I quote here verbatim

what is paraphrased above, noting especially how Wilson never mentions race. He testifies: "... the only way I can describe it is I felt like a 5-year-old holding on to Hulk Hogan." Brown looks at Wilson with "the most intense aggressive face.... it looks like a demon, that's how angry he looked." Brown makes "like a grunting, like aggravated sound." And despite the barrage of bullets, Brown "was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I'm shooting at him. And the face that he had was looking straight through me, like I wasn't even there, I wasn't even anything in his way." The italics for *super-predator* are mine and speak to recent reminders about Hillary Clinton's use of the term in 1996 while stumping for President Bill Clinton's anti-crime legislation. As Kevin Drum outlines, the term originates with John Dilulio Jr. in "The Coming of the Super – Predators," *The Weekly Standard*, 27 Nov. 1995 while meeting with President Clinton, to describe youth capable of impulsive violence in large part because they have no concept of a future. Dilulio describes super-predators in physical terms ("vacant stares and smile, and the remorseless eyes"), not unlike Wilson's description of Brown. While Dilulio is clear that "the trouble will be greatest in black inner-city neighborhoods" but "will spill over into upscale central-city districts, inner-ring suburbs, and even the rural heartland," the label was consistently assigned almost exclusively to black youth.

5. I cannot help but think, here, about the outcry on social media when bell hooks commented on Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* (2016). Pro-Beyoncé Twitter users took hooks to task for suggesting that Beyoncé's "feminism" (a characterization Twitter users had given the album) was not feminism at all. It seemed to me, however, that hooks was trying to complicate representations of feminism, representations she saw as over-simplified in relation to *Lemonade*. The anti-hooks response was that there was no one "feminism," which, in my estimation at least, made hooks's point that any understanding of feminism needed to be layered. There seemed to be no room for any interpretation of the album that was not overwhelmingly favorable.

6. I use "circumvent" here intentionally since Facebook dialogue allows people to avoid, sidestep, thwart, and outwit mainstream coverage of any given issue all at once. For minority groups especially, social media can supplement misinformed, biased, or inadequate coverage of issues of interest to the group. In such instances, social media can actually enhance if not drive media coverage of an issue.

7. I allude here to Sterling Brown's poem "Strong Men" (1931).

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