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"The Next Time You Got Questions Like That, Ask Yourself"

Revisit with me for a spell an important moment in the early pages of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. It comes near the end of the Prologue, and it opens the way for what is to come as it previews the role the vernacular tradition (most immediately, call and response) will play in the novel. Ambling about the streets, the narrator overhears a sermon about blackness. The preacher says:

> "Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness.'"
> And a congregation of voices answered: "That blackness is most black, brother, most black. . ."
> "In the beginning. . ."
> "At the very start," they cried.
> ". . . there was blackness. . ."
> "Preach it. . ."
> —
> "Now black is. . .," the preacher shouted.
> —
> "I said black is. . ."
> "Preach it, brother. . ."
> ". . . an' black ain't. . ."
> —
> "Black will git you. . ."
> "Yes it will. . ."
> "an' black won't."
> "Naw, it won't!"
> "It do. . ."
> "It do Lawd. . ."
> "an' it don't."
> —
> "Black will make you. . ."
> "Black. . ."
> "or black will un-make you."
> "Ain't it the truth, Lawd?"

Amid the sermon, the narrator hears "a voice of trombone timbre" say, "Git out of, here, you fool! Is you ready to commit treason?"

What is the potentially treasonous act? Surely, it cannot be as simple as the interrogation of blackness. As he tore himself away, the narrator heard the old singer of spirituals moaning, "Go curse your God, boy, and die." What about the interrogation rises to the level of a curse God and die moment, in the tradition of Job's wife? Is the inquiry into blackness that dangerous? And if so, why? For whom?

The singer of spirituals is an old woman who had sons by her master, whom she hated but also loved. Acknowledging her quandary, the narrator remarks: "I too have become acquainted with ambivalence. . . . That's why I'm here." The banter between the old lady and the narrator continues until she tells the him that even as she, paradoxically, loved her children's father, she "loved something else even more" than she loved the master—freedom. "Old woman, what is this freedom you love so well?" the narrator asks.

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> She looked surprised, then thoughtful, then baffled. "I done forgot, so. It's all mixed up. First I think it's one thing, then I think it's another. It gits my head to spinning. I guess now it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head."

I lift up this familiar passage on blackness and freedom and its treasonous, cursable ambiguities because it speaks so well to the challenges we have faced and continue to face as black people in establishing critical terms to better understand and articulate our present reality. What is black? Scholarly and cultural explorations of blackness as concept abound. In line with the case I intend to make here, however, is, first, Greg Carr's appraisal of blackness (in the context of its mis/use as a sign of global African identity) as "a category contrived—the perception of the cultural unity of Africans notwithstanding—by its artificially created, defined, and superiorized cognate, *whiteness*—" and, subsequently, his invocation of John Henrik Clarke's observation that "'Black, or Blackness, tells how you look without telling you who you are'" (288). The appeal of Carr, and Clarke's interlocution, for me is, first, its awareness of the ways the ambiguity about blackness (social, cultural, biological, intellectual, or otherwise) muddies matters and, second, both thinkers' commitment to reorienting our understanding of blackness away from binary epistemologies and toward a historically informed understanding of blackness. This commitment (for them and others) is an important, first-order principle of intellectual work.

That leads us inevitably to the question, *What does freedom mean in the context of blackness*? And then, how do we learn to say "what we got up in our heads"? As the Prologue intimates, understanding blackness and articulating freedom continue to be difficult tasks. The former is complicated by ambiguities and contradictions heightened by post-civil rights gains and, more recently, by assumptions about racial and group progress. Blackness, for example, is at once the beloved and the hated. On the one hand, antiblack sentiments are on display with great fervor. Along with being given state-sanctioned designations as violent "black identity extremists," from calls to police about black people being "out of control" at a cookout in Oakland, or "out of place" at Yale, or in a Starbucks in Philadelphia, or, especially with its far more deadly consequence in this case, even being in one's own apartment in Dallas, it is evident that any claims that the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States ushered in a post-racial era in America were unfounded at best and utopically absurdist at worst. Contrarily, black artistic culture is often the hottest commodity of public consumption across racial categories. To say that the Ryan Coogler film *Black Panther* was a phenomenon is an understatement, and black television shows, black music, and black leaders alike now more often command center stage in the public sphere. Are nonblack people finally, openly and equitably recognizing the genius of black culture? If so, this is good, right? But if white guilt, with the requisite lament of the impossibility of unburdening oneself from white privilege, compromises black excellence in a pitiably incongruous act of self-flagellation, then this is bad, no? Yes. No. It's all mixed up.

When I can manage my own conflicted feelings about black culture and white recognition enough to be bothered with award season, I find myself trying to make peace with the tension between disdain for white anointings and pride about black people winning. Part of me is like Issa Rae—rooting for everybody black—but another part of me is ever aware of how institutions and officious distinctions have the innate potential to compromise, to reinscribe hierarchies of culture and power, and to limit more than to liberate. Rooting for Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* for the Oscars' Best Picture category, being stumped by people's fascination, if not obsession, with the film version of *Black Panther* (where a fictional African country partners with the CIA), or being intrigued by Kendrick Lamar's Pulitzer and hype by Beyonce's *über*-black Coachella performance all left me feeling alternately like the old lady in *Invisible Man*'s Prologue and its narrator. I heard myself thinking, "*I too*

have become acquainted with ambivalence. . . . It's all mixed up. First I think it's one thing, then I think it's another. It gits my head to spinning."

Unable to conceptualize and articulate her idea of freedom, the old lady complains: "Leave me 'lone, boy; my head aches!" The narrator, too, begins to feel dizzy; and one of the lady's sons hits the narrator for making the mother cry. "But how?" the narrator asks, to which the son replies, "Asking her them questions, that's how. Git outta here and stay, and next time you got questions like that, ask yourself!" The old lady's son's missive is instructive and captures beautifully the tendency of black folk in vernacular culture to define their own reality, a reality undergird by skepticism about accepted "facts."

Interestingly, Ellison picks up this theme of self-definition and its relation to rhetoric while participating in the Haverford Discussions in 1969. He states:

> it was not until Malcolm X came along with his great rhetorical gift for disseminating barbershop ideas—and I say "barbershop" ideas because there was nothing that I ever heard him say that I hadn't heard in pool halls, barbershops and shoeshine parlors all my life; but it wasn't until Malcolm that we had a vigorous attempt to define American reality from our Negro American point of view. (Lackey 28)[1]

For Ellison, Malcolm's rhetorical flourish was both gift and curse—a gift in its ability to articulate in the vernacular his formulations about established "truths" to the masses but a curse in its influence on young people, students in particular, and their misunderstanding of the import of his rhetoric, which they too often wrongly parroted and mistook for intellectual work. The responsibility of the willful intellectual, Ellison declared, was "to make some adequate sense" of the "social reality for the Negro American" as a complex American situation (30). And this had to be done without the limitations of binaries or an overemphasis on "the rhetoric appeals to our aesthetic sense" (45). He notes:

> I doubt . . . that it is possible to build a vision of the Negro American predicament by basing a rhetoric upon the simple inversion of white racism into a black racism. Our situation cries out for new definitions—or at least for conscious intellectual restatement of those abiding attitudes and values which have been acted out, if not stated explicitly, by our people as they have repudiated theories of white superiority. It is our task to define who and what we are with as much intellectual precision as possible.

The problem with the task Ellison lays out—to establish self-definition with intellectual precision—is that it unwittingly undermined the power of folk wisdom, which operated with an unabashed hermeneutic of suspicion. Stories about black folk doubting the Apollo 11 1969 moon landing abound, for instance, so much so that while growing up I often heard disbelief expressed thusly: ***that ain't bit mo true than a man on the moon***. Black folks' self-definition and survival alike depended on maintaining an alternate epistemology.

But Ellison, an avid integrationist, argued that "we are an inseparable part of the American nation and its culture" and would not likely agree that our proverbial freedom (in ages past, present, and future) rests, in no small part, in our willingness to commit to the reconstruction of a global African world view that decenters American epistemologies, even those that consider black presence. The closest he would come to this was the declaration that we must "accept the obligation of defining it [a vision of the future] from the perspective of our own backgrounds and insist that its values by brought in line with our own group's aspirations and needs" (45).

Perhaps because all of my formal educational training and my familial and social circumstances have been rooted firmly in historically (and still) black spaces, I cannot remember a time when my world view was limited by the kind of American mythos Ellison seems to suggests inevitability informs black American perspectives. At every turn, I was taught to be deeply suspicious of and cautious

about American narratives. And, perhaps as a function of my apprenticeship with Eleanor W. Traylor and others at Howard University, and through interactions with a handful of colleagues there I am proud to call peers, most of my work as an academic takes foremost as its point of departure sentiments like those W. E. B. Du Bois expresses in his notion of intelligence, or what he calls *broad sympathy*: "knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life" (189). For Du Bois, indisputably one of our earliest and chief pan-Africanists, knowledge of the world did not include knowledge of Africa solely. Intimate, layered knowledge of Africa must foreground any serious claims of knowledge of the world. My understanding of our need to (re)affirm a commitment to the reconstruction of a global African world view is similarly informed by Anderson Thompson's missive in the preface of "Developing an African Historiography," where he argues that at the core of the challenge of the twenty-first century is "*the battle for the hearts and minds of the Worldwide African Community*, that is the battle to establish the *primacy of Africa* in the minds and actions of African people worldwide." Suffering from "a combined period of four thousand years of intermittent foreign invasion, pillage and plunder, as well as military domination and occupation" (9; original emphasis), African people, if freedom will appear on the horizon, must now face the challenge of creating "a vision extending beyond personal interests such that this vision becomes the embodiment of the *vital interest and moral centerhood* of the entire African World Community" (10). Obfuscating this vision of a liberated future, to evoke Larry Neal's turn of phrase, are variations of the same ambiguity and confusion the old lady expresses to the narrator in *Invisible Man*. Again, the old lady's son's response is instructive—"next time you got questions like that, ask yourself!"

Beyonce and Jay-Z's June 2018 release of the video for "Ape Shit" is a case in point. Filmed at the Louvre, the video can be seen alternately as a disruption of white space with black bodies and as a reinscription of white value systems, but in blackface. The question I posed on Twitter after seeing the euphoria about a black woman picking her man's hair with a black Afro pic in front of the Mona Lisa was a sincere one—can "claiming" a European space as black be separated from the inevitable reinscription of the claimed space as one deserving of reverence and deference, so much so that co-opting it becomes an achievement? Rereading Ellison helped me tremendously with this. Lamenting the limits of "black is beautiful rhetoric," he reminds us "that almost everything Negro Americans do in the way of self expression [*sic*] and group expression is so eloquent of an implicit pride of being that it is an affront . . . to exhort us to 'black pride'" (45). Politicizing the aesthetic dimension (whether it is race neutral or race affirming) deprives individuals of their basic human freedom, he argues, "the freedom to make art of his own features. . . . this politicizing of matters which should have been left to the realm of aesthetics has unleashed a lot of chaos, ideological as well as visual" (46). In other words, aesthetic impulses have limits. Politicizing them, I would argue, is a gratuitous distraction.

As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o suggests makes clear both in the second volume of his memoir and in *Decolonising the Mind*, one need not expect clear answers from others on the question of the ambiguities of imperialism while living as a tenant in the house of the interpreter. When you got questions like that—questions about freedom and blackness—you got to ask yourself and then figure out how to say what's up in your head. How does one reconcile (in the colonial moment in Africa or in this neocolonial, neoliberal moment in America) "the productivity and the possibilities of wealth" on previously unknown scales with the repressive racist ideologies constructed to ensure that the appropriation of that wealth remains private and in white hands (*Decolonizing* 66)? Among the greatest contradictions for Ngũgĩ was the

imperialist missionaries' "benevolent" motive to impose newly crafted writing systems onto definitively oral African languages, an act that paradoxically standardized literacy to a certain class, but sometimes also left people within the same colonial boundary unable to read commonly because of rival orthographies. The introduction of contradictory representations of sound systems of the same language, obviously, was problematic. One person might read a word and understand it to mean one thing, while another person, having learned a contradictory orthography, could understand it to mean something else. Words now needed control by context in the hopes that they would better stand still. In the case of Gikuyu, Ngũgĩ's native tongue, tonal variations, which are common in African languages, were without demarcation in the prevailing orthography. Thus the introduction of a writing system by nonnative speakers to a native language to serve imperialist intent undermined indigenous thought.[2] It was the challenge of language then, among other things, Ngũgĩ suggests, that helped him to understand the ways a self-determined language of fiction could help him create a critical bridge to cross the gulf between imperial forces and the quest for freedom. In short, he accepted the challenge of asking and answering the questions for himself, on behalf of the peasant class he refused to leave behind.

Much like Ngũgĩ's fiction, Daniel Black's 2015 novel *The Coming*, gives us the fruit of what happens when you take up the challenge of asking oneself the question, waiting for, and then living the answer.[3] *The Coming* assumes a communal narrative voice to tell the story of being taken from Africa and brought to the United States from the perspective of a group of men and women who have been enslaved. In terms of content, it enters the discourse of other narratives of the middle passage. But in terms of its telling, it stands alone. The typical narrative (and even the best "radical" narratives), whether we notice it or not, trends more toward setting a tone that is informed by a particular truth than toward encompassing one. *The Coming* is different in this regard. The book *is* an epistemological truth. From its determination to resist genre conformity to its decision to forego dialogue for the sake of a communal narrative, it adopts and sustains a world view that is spacious and that allows the text to speak on its own behalf. In this regard, *The Coming* is what we might call "place speaking." It speaks, uncorrupted, from its point of origin and thus from its own world view. And it does so at the risk of failing to fit into the categories we know. It foregoes the neatness of genre and characters, allowing the ancestor as drum, or baseline, if we must, to speak instead. Here, the novel does the work Ngũgĩ calls for—the creation of a new thing. It creates a third space (not "art for art's sake," not "propaganda"); and it goes beyond even Wole Soyinka's interpretation of Moliere/Denis Diderot's fourth wall to heighten the reader's awareness of herself within and beyond the text, as part of and yet very separate from the text. Without ever saying so, *The Coming*, as an *ur*-text that reveals the ways fiction can help us make sense of the literal and proverbial howling winds of our time, reminds us that there is nothing to be gained from neither the most valiant nor the most fragile attempts to graft the particularity of blackness onto whiteness. Rather, *The Coming* makes clear that the particularity and then universality of our experience will not be ours if we can't call our own names, live and die on our own terms, and tell our own stories.

Significantly, the novel ends by narrating the fate of the last man in the stall, Atiba. A trickster, Atiba was the "time bender, the reality shifter, the mind regulator." He was known for his ability to illustrate the depths and dimensions of his people; he had "recreated war battles that resulted in solutions elders could not find. His talent was becoming everyone else in order that the community might see itself" (Black 214). His ability to craft a new identity for himself in a strange land is his saving grace. He contorts himself to gain the favor of those who might purchase him,

which is more preferable to him than isolation, but he is ever true to his principal identity as manifested in hiskilling the couple who purchased him just days after the transaction.

The difference between Black's representation of Atiba as trickster and the representative trickster we see in Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey* is critical. Although Gates attempts to marry the theoretical and the vernacular in *The Signifying Monkey* and does so with some success, in the end, the strictures of structuralism, with its emphasis on knowing, flatten out critical ambiguities and suppress the unknowable. Atiba's power rests in his being culturally fortified and in his unwavering awareness of the difference between performance and simulation. At some point, perhaps in its determination to be embraced, African American critical reading practices (its criticism and theory) moved so far away from the folk wisdom that undergird it that it began to look more like the thing it was mocking than the thing itself. And while these critical approaches enhanced our ways of reading African American literature in particular and literature in general, they also inevitably contributed to the veneration of theoretical models that unwittingly devalued folk wisdom. In his response to the Robert Penn Warren line "Nigger, your breed ain't metaphysical," Sterling Brown warned of this dangerous divide, shooting back, "Cracker, your breed ain't exegetical." If Warren meant to decry black people's ability to be theoretical, Brown meant to exalt black people's ability to deconstruct reality. In times such as these, Brown seemed to know, you got to ask yourself. Then you have to find the language to say what you got in your head.

Notes

1. Of course, it was Du Bois who had begged the question about defining an American reality from a Negro American point of view nearly a decade earlier in "Whither Now and Why," an address he gave to the Association of Negro Social Science Teachers in 1960 at Johnson C. Smith University. He asked: "when we have become equal American citizens what will be our aims and ideals and what will we have to do with selecting these aims and ideals?" And Du Bois had begun this line of inquiry as early as 1897 in "The Conservation of the Races." Du Bois did not, however, have the mass appeal of Malcolm X; and this is Ellison's point, at least in part—that Malcolm X's rhetorical skill was of tremendous import to his influence and appeal to the masses.

2. I take some care here to note that Ngũgĩ is not suggesting, nor am I, that writing did not exist in African cultures prior to the colonial encounter.

3. It is important to note that Black is an African American author who accepts the challenge of making "the corpse speak" and offers us a viable African-centered response to what Ngũgĩ refers to in *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* as linguicide.

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