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The Psychic Life of Blackness (Scenes of a Thinking Thing)

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If philosophy, as Gilles Deleuze might say, is asking questions and from those questions deriving concepts, what happens when the most prominent question, indeed, is your right to live? What do I think if not how I come to mean and matter in the world—a world that renders me known in my entirety at a whim, throws me into an abysmal cacophony of self-un-knowing the moment I appear, all, to be clear, because of my Blackness? A sable specter, transmuting into inimicality as the sun descends and Black shadows get long: I exist, always, and hauntingly, ahead of myself.

I'VE WORN GLASSES since I was nine. Excited as all hell, as I was the only one in my immediate family sans those “nerd goggles,” I rummaged through the subsequent days internally gloating about my newly acquired spectacles. The world was so much clearer now; all could be seen. Or could it? My mother has always castigated me for not keeping my glasses clean, snatching them from my face without appraisal, as she’s wont to do, and mist-ifying them with her breath—*haah*—before she wiped them with the cloth of her shirt. Temporarily blinded, I lamented the twelve seconds of sightlessness, knowing that in those seconds I would never see what I could have seen.

With those glasses, I’d look, watch, see, observe—the ocular practice of learning and living. Look at the dilapidation, a condition not seen in the TV shows I watched; see the cookie-cutter gangsters, ask them about, critique, their manufactured swagger—“Nigga, whatchu holdin’ ya dick for? It ain’t goin’ nowhere”; “You do realize that you can’t whoop *everybody’s* ass, right?” Ponder their minds, their shielded emotions; observe, as my mother instructed, how quickly your hand reaches for wallet, how quickly their hand reaches for gun, how quickly your voice shifts from indignation to deference, how quickly their eyes shift from “Have a nice day” to “He

looks like he's on drugs or something." These were the questions of my youth fomented by my world, ghetto-questions, those of a ferruginous Philadelphian gadfly. I'd observe, watch the world, because I had to. I'd observe, ask, inquire, *think*, because I had to. And this thinking was my refusal to be submerged by the world.

I was reared in a cauldron, bubbling with incendiary inquiries that could set the world ablaze; an enlightening darkened, and darkening, space, where brown sugar cinnamon Poptarts and orange-flavored Hi-C juiceboxes were our Communion. This was the apogee of 'hood shit.

Rene Descartes: COGITO ERGO SUM; I am thinking, therefore I exist. This was so firm and sure that not even the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics could shake it.

Claudia Rankine: Who do you think you are, saying I to me? You nothing. You nobody. You.

What might it mean if Blackness was permitted to pervade thought? What might it mean if, to put it differently, we actually started truly thinking, considering that the epistemic field is "always already touched by blackness, if not saturated by it"? Might we then heed Heidegger's words, on a different, Blacker, register: *The most thought-provoking thing in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking.* That which is most thought-provoking, alas, is to think through that which we must, but too often shy away from—or kill.

Enter into the mind, which is to say the life, of Blackness, where rebels dwell, where the world simmers and smolders under the onus of its overturning. It is where turnt gets turnt up. Hit 'em up, 'cause that's where they'll be; it is where I'll be, where the wild things be at, causing adept ruckus and thought-provoking cacophony. So keep your Shakespeare, Du Bois, I sit with Maurice Sendak, giving him dap, and he urges me to make all of you wince. We'll *gather all the rebels now, we'll rabble-rouse and sing aloud.*

Albert Camus: Since we're all going to die, it's obvious that when and how don't matter.

. . . One can only say that when they already, without question, matter.

But this thinking stuff can get you killed, leave you unprepared when the concrete buckles beneath your swagger and the rules you thought held steady actually don't for you. Your hotel on Boardwalk, right next to Luxury Tax; your Get Out of Jail Free card; your piles of turquoise and pink bills stuffed under the cardboard—all for naught. Your hotel can be rolled up on and handed over because, well, "property cannot own property"; your card was counterfeit and should not have been given to a

“being of an inferior order” with “no rights which the white man was bound to respect”; and your dough, naturally, was likely stolen. Think at your own risk.

Too, and sometimes even simultaneously, this thinking stuff could save your life.

Scene: When I was twelve my mother found out that my brother and I knew nothing about African American history. Or rather, it was not being taught to us. She made us research—Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, the usual suspects—and recon with her on the Black ballistic epistemological acquisitions we now possessed. It lasted only two weeks. I don't remember what I learned. I don't remember what my brother thought. I don't remember what my mother said. But I remember it happened. And that matters.

They pay me to be a scholar, which is to say, I think for a living. So why is it that, in my most strideful cogitative moments, I'm so often thinking about the possibility, the actuality, of death?

And why is it, too, that in my most strideful cogitative moments, I'm so often thinking about the possibility, the actuality, of joyous life?

Because that is all one can think when one thinks about Blackness.

Heidegger writes, or rather thinks, “We never come to thoughts. They come to us.” I read this and was struck. What thoughts will come to me next and, when they come, will they be my own?

I wrote in the margins next to Heidegger's quote, “You got that right, Marty. And sometimes with a murderous vengeance.”

Amid the death of so many, we should also celebrate the miracle of life.

. . . We do already. What can be more celebratory than nurturing, loving, living that which was deemed dead, non-life—PARTUS SEQUITUR VENTREM of the now (though has it not always, in each moment since its Latinate inception, been of the now?)—from the jump? It is you who cannot, and will not, see that life.

I am not who I alone wish to be, at least not entirely. Nor might such a wish be admirable, or doable. The symbiosis of identities is, after all, the very nature of identities themselves. It is the nature, we might say, of being caught between what

George Yancy has called “facticity and possibility”: the fact of my existence, the materiality inscribed with meaning that I did not choose; and the potential of what I could be, what I might be—what I am un-destined to become.

But if I am not my own, what am I to call myself? What name can I claim? And if I cannot claim a name, how will I know when someone calls me outside of it? To be called out of my name, and intend for that name to speak for me, puts me out of control. I cannot grasp or anticipate the me that I will become under this other name, a name that is outside, yet potentially within, me. Calling me a name that is not mine puts me in a place that I am unfamiliar with, uproots my me-ness. That eruptive, Derridean “order of the voice” coaxes me. I want to un-listen, but can’t, because the voice—the called name—compels my attention, sometimes against my will. The out-of-name-calling voice “draws us to it. The voice draws unto worlds that are not ours, calls out to us, giving us, as Heidegger says, ‘food for thought.’” I then lose myself—perhaps because, in part, that place can be no place at all. I must have a name, or else I am not. But that name, having shifted through time, has not always been the best of names. That name may too soon be etched onto solid slabs of concrete, marking the decomposing body seventy-two inches in the depths of the earth.

Scene: When I was twenty-three I was in the gym, benchpressing as I’m wont to do, and a seventy-year-old white man approached the bench next to me.

I am in Mississippi, 1955, and I may have been stolen that evening, found in the Tallahatchie with a gin fan around my neck, just for brushing his arm after finishing my set.

I time travel about once a day. And that takes its toll.

We have been dreaming, always dreaming, of the moment when the epidermis signaling our criminality will no longer hold its licentious cache. What happens to a dream preferred, those *somnium*-induced imaginations that choke the cogitative throat of one’s gaze, one’s livelihood, one’s template for this thing we move through called the world?

But it is from the dream that “I” begin, and not from my own, though concerning me; it is, in another sense, from the fictive—the *real* imaginary lurking just beneath the loosening film of the grit of the real, if we can still, by the end of this, call it that—that I begin and end. And in beginning, and ending, from here I walk with ambulatory thoughts of the declining state of my sanity, with hands festering with bloodless trepidation. I exist, at least in part, as a fiction crafted by those who need me to be their lifeline, and my own deathline. The dream is a treacherous place,

as it contorts me into a grotesque facsimile of myself, passing as me, and wreaking havoc in my name. If only I, too, was cast in a divine image, justified in condemning those who shalt not use my name in vain.

But, as they continue to tell us, we are “no angels.”

The unnamed protagonist in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man accidentally bumped into a blonde-haired, blued-eyed man one night, after which the man called him an insulting name. The protagonist, unnamed as he was, pounced on this man, kicking him. What name was he called? What name was his unname supplanted with, and into what world-that-would-have-been-no-world-at-all was he thrown? The eruptive “order of the voice.” But the blonde-haired man, perversicacious as he was, refused to apologize. But, “it occurred to me that the man had not seen me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare!” the protagonist realizes. When spectral “thug nigga” Caspers attack.

This is simply to say that, though I may indeed be no “spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms” but rather *one of flesh*, your belief in ghosts, in the paranormal (beyond, beside, or adjacent to the normal) concerns me too; if only in the sense that *your* ghosts, which is to say your imagination, your fictive reality, can possess me. And like the good ghost-believer you are, you will try to exorcise me. Your ghosts become mine, or further still, your ghosts become me. Now I don’t have to believe in ghosts in order to be one.

We exist, which is to say, etymologically (and existentially), that we stand out, by virtue of occupying the precarious situation of “having been given over from the start.”

But surely I am exaggerating, or overexaggerating, as they say, though that is redundant. “This man simply wants an audience to listen to him moan about his woes, his contrived slights that matter to no one this side of remotely normal,” they say. “His hyperbolic rhetoric is a trap—*double trap, triple trap; everywhere we go, we are trapped!*” But, I plead, it is merely due to curiosity and a will to know, a will to live. It is due to a desire to see what happens when I am not the only one, it seems, shadowboxing with ghosts.

Where can I reside safely if not for in my own mind? I muse as I frolic through my cerebellum, shuttling through the world at accelerated paces, seeing the world, like you and unlike you. I see, but you don't see me seeing. When my travels are invisible to you, nonexistent to you, the knowledge gleaned from those excursions appears forged, invalid, ersatz. So you inhabit me with ghosts.

Nevertheless, fair or not, I'm getting my ass kicked and being blamed for starting the fight. But who else can provide an evidentiary glimpse into what occurs if not me, the one who shows up and takes the beating from nothingness? I want to hide, clothe myself in childish innocence and jump over puddles, getting my hands dirty in mud while squeezing out the last seconds of playtime before the streetlights come on. Giggle at the mundane, see newness in things centuries-old, and rest easy in a self that is mine only. I whisper to the winds and they whisper back, echo my secrets, all ours, no one else's. And now hiding is over, whispers come only from ghosts that infiltrate your you and masquerade as you. Unevictable and unwanted, but co-signers of your life. My dreams are no longer mine, but yours. I do not believe in ghosts, and neither do you. But you do. So I must too, because your ghosts have made a nest in me. They sleep soundly and I hear them snore.

Scene: After I turned eleven my father told me that he had been shot three times. And I hoped that bullets weren't hereditary. Because too often they are.

"i sometimes wonder how i get away with living while black," Evie Shockley wrote.

Me too, Evie...