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Afrofuturist Responses to State Violence

Caren Holmes

The African diasporic subject encounters the territories of occupied North America within a ‘post abduction existence’.¹ Contemporary manifestations of state violence and dehumanization are reproductions of generational legacies of mass incarceration, apartheid and slavery imposed upon those racialized by categories developed to alienate the original class of abductees. In 1988, the American hip hop group Public Enemy proclaimed in a song, ‘Armageddon been-in-effect’ for the African diaspora:² that is to say that ‘the conditions that continue to restrict black freedom and foreclose black futures mark the aftershocks of a man-made apocalypse’, also known as the transatlantic slave trade.³

In this essay, I explore two short stories written by Black authors in the United States. Each imagines Black resistance to the American settler colonial condition and to futurist mutations of state violence imposed upon Black and Brown communities. Both stories conceive of creative strategies through which their characters confront forms of structural and material violence which imprisons Black life in and outside of prisons and situates it closer to death.

Several scholars have understood and represented the experience of Black people in settler colonial North America as that of the alien or post-human subject. In her article ‘Reading Black Resistance Through Afrofuturism’, Black feminist writer and activist Robyn Maynard explains that to live as a Black person in a North American country fundamentally ‘structured by antiblackness’ is to live as an alien or cyborg.⁴ She expands, ‘what else... but the figure of the cyborg describes the experience of those who have survived, and who continue to insist on life and futurity, in a world structured around black death’?⁵ The project of modernity she explains, situates blackness and Black people outside of the demarcations of ‘humanity’⁶ through a violent exclusion and elimination from white society. Black existence in the American diaspora remains tethered to limited access, ‘skewed life chance’, mass incarceration and ‘premature death’.⁷ She explains that only science fiction can account for the experience of Black people, whose utter rejection from humanity has led them to resist ‘subhumanity’ and instead live in creative struggles and explorations of the ‘*beyond human*’.⁸

Afrofuturist literature imagines *beyond human* responses to state violence. It creates space for authors and readers to imagine worlds in which the ‘institutionalised proximity to death’⁹ and violence against Black and Brown communities is reversed, disrupted, confronted, disappeared or amplified. Afrofuturist writing reflects a history of resistance and refusal ‘against incorporation into the violent structures of the New World, working instead towards new ways of Black becoming’.¹⁰

¹ Tobias van Veen, ‘The Armageddon Effect: Afrofuturism and the Chronopolitics of Alien Nation’, in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astroblackness*, ed. by Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones (Lanham, Ma.: Lexington Books, 2015), 62–90 (p. 63).

² Robyn Maynard, ‘Reading Black Resistance Through Afrofuturism: Notes on Post-Apocalyptic Blackness and Black Rebel Cyborgs in Canada’, *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 39 (2018), 29–47 (p. 29) <<https://doi.org/10.3138/topia.39.04>>.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Screamers by Tochi Onyebuchi

Onyebuchi's short story *Screamers*¹¹ explores Black political struggle and rage in relation to experiences of policing and police brutality in the United States. In the text, the policing of the 'just-blacks' is outsourced to an African migrant work force. Tensions run high between the African officers and the 'just-blacks' who are subjected to violence, repression and intimidation not dissimilar to the brutality of contemporary American policing. The story is narrated by the child of a Nigerian police officer whose unit complains that 'African-Americans [make] it so difficult for the Africans who had been brought in to police them'. Throughout the story, the police force is confronted with a series of mysterious cases linked by similarly horrific 'crime scenes' littered with body parts as if 'a bomb had gone off'. Struggling to determine the culprit of the violence, officers interrogate an elderly woman who reveals that the crime scenes are in fact suicides. The officers are shocked by this revelation when suddenly, the woman under interrogation '[closes] her eyes, almost like she was praying, and ... opened her mouth'. She screams. Her body, and the officers around her are blown into debris.

Soon, the police begin receiving letters filled with screams so volatile that they detonate like bombs, killing the officers who open them. When they are opened, they emit a cry 'pained and laced with injustice' representing 'entire souls encased in folded paper'. The police develop a special unit and a training course to prepare their officers to deflect the screams through 'controlled exercises in disassociation'. The narrator, the son of the Nigerian officer, now older and a police officer himself, explains that the screams evolved to penetrate police psyche. Police tactics were forced to advance in an arms race to '[metabolize] the psychological trauma' of the screams. But the narrator becomes obsessed and is absorbed by the pain in each letter. As he prepares to open a letter which will be his last, he grows excited wondering to himself 'how many generations of racialized trauma will this Scream sound like? How many forced prison sterilisations would fuel this Scream? What specific brand of injustice, coloured by equal measures loss and never-having-had would tint the timbre of what awaited me in this envelope?' While initially brought to the United States to police the 'just blacks', the second-generation Nigerian immigrant is ultimately destroyed when he metabolizes their beyond human articulations of generational trauma.

Necropolitics

The theory of Necropolitics is a valuable model through which to understand the political condition of the 'just-blacks' in this story. Necropolitics, coined by the philosopher Achille Mbembe, is the social and political power to determine how some live and die.¹² For Mbembe, the phenomenon explains how the state dictates conditions of living and dying, ordering populations by an 'institutionalized proximity to death'.¹³ The function of racism is thus to regulate and determine the necropolitical order and distribution of death 'to make possible the murderous functions of the state'.¹⁴ The 'just-blacks' are subjected not only to brutal treatment by an imported African police force, but also to a social order of racial apartheid in which the housing, educational and health needs of the community are wholly neglected, resulting in a desperate existence. Under such conditions suicidal rage becomes a possible escape.

¹¹ Tochi Onyebuchi, 'Screamers – Tochi Onyebuchi', *Omenana*, 9 November 2016, <<https://omenana.com/2016/11/09/screamers-tochi-onyebuchi/>> [accessed 26 January 2020]. All the quotes in this section are from this source.

¹² Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', trans. by Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture*, 15.1 (2003), 11–40 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>>.

¹³ Maynard, p. 32.

¹⁴ Mbembe, p. 17.

The Western world has manufactured a multiplicity of dehumanizing and industrializing methods of producing death through military intervention, economic scarcity, domestic police violence and prisons.¹⁵ Black communities and protesters in America have often compared police presence in their communities to military occupations.¹⁶ The author Onyebuchi is explicit about the militarized occupational police force in his story, a police force imported from Africa.

In the end, the community reclaims control and agency over their own death. ‘Under conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred’.¹⁷ The ‘just-blacks’ ultimately reverse and weaponize the necropolitical power of the state, by turning their explosive rage against police powers. The African officers, who embody a complex and uniquely distinct relationship to the ‘post abduction’ existence of the ‘just blacks’, are ultimately destroyed by the same screams.

Racial Trauma and Rage

Psychiatric scholars have coined the term ‘racial trauma’¹⁸ to describe experiences of trauma unique to people of colour which result from the harm and discrimination imposed on their communities by the state and a white supremacist society. Psychiatrists explain that those who harness calculated and creative responses to their harm are best equipped to cope with experiences of racial trauma.¹⁹ The screams emitted from the envelopes are an outpouring of trauma and pain and represent a ‘rechannelling [of] rage’, identified as a strategy for managing the consequences of experiencing racial trauma on both an individual and collective level.²⁰ As one psychiatrist puts it, ‘rechannelled rage can be a powerful energy source’ as ‘it is the build-up and culmination of emotions that have blocked expression’.²¹ The aim of treating individual or collective rage is not to silence or subdue it but ‘instead to help [one] be aware of it, gain control of it and ultimately to redirect it’.²² Rage is certainly a powerful and complex emotion ‘that can appear as anger, *explosiveness*, sadness, and depression’.²³

The ‘just-blacks’ in this story experience racial trauma not only through their experiences and encounters with economic, social and political forces hostile to their existence, but also through the generational trauma of the Black experience in America. It is evident that the author understands trauma as inherited when he writes, ‘how many generations of racialized trauma will this Scream sound like?’²⁴ The African immigrant police officers do not share the generational racialized trauma of black Americans whose suffering begins with the middle passage.²⁵ Yet, as this generational rage is delivered to officers in the form of lethal letters, they are destroyed, propelled into pieces.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁶ German Lopez, ‘What Happened in Ferguson, Missouri, Following the Shooting and Grand Jury Decision?’, *Vox*, 27 January 2016 <<https://www.vox.com/2015/5/31/17937880/ferguson-missouri-2014-protests-riots-police>> [accessed 26 January 2020].

¹⁷ Mbembe, p. 40.

¹⁸ Erlanger A. Turner, ‘Racial Trauma Is Real: The Impact of Police Shootings on African Americans’, *Psychology Benefits Society*, 14 July 2016 <<https://psychologybenefits.org/2016/07/14/racial-trauma-police-shootings-on-african-americans/>> [accessed 20 April 2019].

¹⁹ Walter Howard Smith, *The Impact of Racial Trauma on African Americans* (African American Men and Boys Advisory Board, 2010) p. 2 <<http://www.heinz.org/userfiles/impactofracialtraumaonafricanamericans.pdf>> [accessed 5 March 2020].

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Kenneth Hardy, ‘Healing the Hidden Wounds of Racial Trauma’, *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 22.1 (2013), 24–28 (p. 27).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Onyebuchi, ‘Screamers’.

²⁵ van Veen, p. 84.

Kafka's Last Laugh by Vagabond

Kafka's Last Laugh is a short story featured in the Afrofuturist anthology *Octavia's Brood*; its author uses the pseudonym Vagabond.²⁶ The story follows a young Afro-Caribbean woman, Resister Fernandez, protesting against capitalism and wealth inequality in a demonstration on Wall Street. The protest is brutally disrupted by police who beat her unconscious. She wakes up in a medical facility to a notice from a prosecutor which indicates that she has been charged with 680 counts of terrorism, assault of police officers and 'seditious conspiracy to overthrow legitimate business interests'.²⁷ She is served with court documents in her hospital bed as she heals from head injuries caused by brutality of the police. Flipping through the pile of court documents intended to impose bureaucratic exhaustion, she erupts into a violent and incessant laughter.

Resister is sentenced to three years in Corrective Retail Operation Confinement (CROC), a program funded by large companies designed to rehabilitate inmates' relationship to capitalism, developing a healthy respect for the free market. In spite of proponents of the free market's claims to be a natural, self-correcting process, it nevertheless requires the state to build prisons and 'correctional' facilities as a means to counteract and reverse identification of capitalism's structural violence. Ultimately, the young woman's response to imprisonment, capitalism and her experience of police brutality is madness; laughing uncontrollably as 'the system itself was a joke'.²⁸ Her laughter is contagious and erupts through the prison halls in what is described as a 'riot of laughter'. This laughter is a defiant act and a refusal to take seriously an alien, unnatural and authoritarian state order.

Self-Care and Refusal

Laughter is also an act of self-preservation, defending the protagonist's mental state in the face of a violent system mechanized for her torment. Preserving and healing one's mental state of being is a necessary means of resisting state violence. As Angela Davis, herself imprisoned by a violent, racist and colonial state, explains, 'survival... is a prerequisite for all higher levels of struggle'.²⁹ The activist and author Audre Lorde asserts, 'caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare'.³⁰ A riot of laughter, in this sense, is a creative and powerful mobilisation against state repression.

Kafka's Last Laugh builds upon existing efforts by Black and Brown organizers in the US to develop and share 'self-care' resources, meant to support, defend and preserve communities struggling against the devastating mental health repercussions of intergenerational state violence. 'To protect and preserve our physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual health as Black women, we must ask: How can we repurpose our strength to lead and support demonstrations against social injustices without continually sacrificing our wellbeing?'³¹ This author trials such strategies in her Afrofuturist dystopian reality.

²⁶ Vagabond, 'Kafka's Last Laugh', in *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. by Adrienne Maree Brown and Walidah Imarisha (Chico, Calif.: AK Press/Institute for Anarchist Studies, 2015), 177–187.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

²⁹ Angela Davis cited in Karla Scott, 'Black Feminist Reflections on Activism: Repurposing Strength for Self-Care, Sustainability, and Survival', *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, 5.3 (2016), 126–132 (p. 129) <<https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2016.5.3.126>>.

³⁰ Audre Lorde, cited in Scott, p. 130.

³¹ Scott, p. 126.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is often a consequence of traumatic experiences at the hands of law enforcement.³² It is often the response of Western psychology to pathologize victims of such trauma, rather than identifying the harms of settler colonialism and white supremacy incubating in American social, economic and political institutions. It is the victim of violence who cannot cope with the alien colonial order, rather than the colonial order itself, who is subject to treatment and correction.

Pathologisation

In his seminal text *Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon theorizes about the psychoanalytic experience of the colonized subject. He refuses colonial pathologizing of colonized populations and theorizes instead that behaviours identified as mental illness by colonizing forces are actually methods of subversion and resistance.³³ He thus demands that we re-examine symptoms of mental illness through the lens of colonial domination and state violence. The pathology ascribed to oppressed people (often laziness, unproductivity or disobedience) is, for Fanon, a logical and rational means of sabotaging the state and being unproductive to the colonial project.

Fanon understands the medical system and its pathologization and criminalisation of the colonized subject as integral to colonial domination. The state builds institutions to realign subjects with the aims of the colonial administration, which aim to produce subordinate and productive subjects. The resistance to colonial projects, and the pathologizing of such subordination, is ultimately used to legitimise the colonial project itself.

The protagonist in *Kafka's Last Laugh* is criminalized and deemed mentally ill for her subordination and rejection of the capitalist free market. Her behaviour is pathologized as insanity and she is sent into an institutional correction program where the state hopes to 'rehabilitate' her into a productive colonial subject. But she is not sick, nor criminal: she is the descendent of abductees, alien to a society which rejects her humanity, and she can only laugh.

Conclusion

Gayatri Spivak suggests, 'it is not possible to become cultured in this culture, if you are naturally alien to it'.³⁴ 'Despite civilizational strategies', the settler colonial nation state has never absorbed Native, Black or Brown people into its definition of humanity.³⁵ Rather, the United States has institutionalized its processes of racist dehumanization and built structures of state control to preserve the settler colonial order.

The stories selected for this essay do not see beyond this contemporary dystopian reality. The authors recognize perhaps that 'the carceral continuity of concerted anti-Black state violence and neglect across four centuries demonstrates that Black subjection has in many ways only changed forms'.³⁶ Their Afrofuturism anticipates the mutation of state violence strategies rather than its abolition.

Referring to the realities of slavery, activist Robyn Maynard explains, 'if life had become a nightmare so horrific it could be described today only as a dystopian science fiction, then the black

³² Turner, 'Racial Trauma Is Real'.

³³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, NY: Grove, 1963; repr. 2002).

³⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 2.

³⁵ Andrea Smith, 'Not-Seeing: State Surveillance, Settler Colonialism and Gender Violence', in *Feminist Surveillance Studies*, ed. by Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Shoshana Amielle Magnet, (London: Duke University Press, 2015), 21–38 (p. 35).

³⁶ Maynard, p. 43.

imagination that stages a refusal to submit demonstrates a near-cosmic drive to futurity'.³⁷ The texts I have explored reflect and imagine resistance to state violence, enacted in reiterations of the black radical tradition. They are part of the same tradition which revolted against slavery,³⁸ which held strong against police terror in Ferguson, which produced screams so traumatically violent they became weapons, and which initiated warfare in a riot of laughter. It is through the practice of Afrofuturist writing and imagining, that both readers and writers reinvent and trial creative responses to state violence which in the United States, has always situated Black and Brown life, those racialized by historical abduction, in proximity to death and madness.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

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