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### Configurations of Blackness

THE DEFINITIONS of “black” and descriptions of what blackness means are so varied and loaded with slippery science and invention that it may be interesting, if not definitively clarifying, to examine the terms’ configurations and the literary uses to which they are put as well as the activity they inspire—both violent and constructive.

I have delved somewhat closely into the history of Oklahoma’s black towns. Land appropriated (under duress) from the Comanche tribes, known as Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory, was declared “free” to homesteaders.

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Among those who staked claims on this newly available land were freedmen and former slaves who founded some fifty towns. Out of that fifty, I understand, some thirteen still exist: Langston (where Langston University was built), Boley (which supported two colleges—Creek-Seminole College and Methodist Episcopal College), Tullahassee, Red Bird, Vernon, Tatums, Brooksville, Grayson, Lima, Summit, Renstiesville, Taft, and Clearview.

Not all of the inhabitants were black-skinned; a very few were Native Americans and Europeans. But they defined themselves and accepted government help as black people. What the founders of these towns meant by “black” is not always clear. After the Civil War, as ex-slaves migrated to the North and the Midwest, many, many advertisements and solicitations cautioned: “Come prepared, or not at all.” That seemed to be sage advice: bring your own tools, horses, clothing, money, and skills so you will not be a burden and can make

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your own way. Yet it was exclusionary—an elderly widow with no skills but housekeeping? a mother with small children and no husband? a physically disabled old man? Such people would have been warned away to ensure the health and growth of the town. Also, it seemed to me, mixed-race pioneers were preferable. I gathered that from looking at photographs showing the one or two dark-skinned men assigned to guard duty. Thriving black towns were apparently peopled by the light-skinned—meaning they had “white” blood in their veins.

I make a point of this color distinction for two reasons. One is that the meaning of color and its so-called characteristics have been the subject of scholarly and political discussion for at least a century. Another is the effect that the “meaning” has had on the so-called black and white population. (It should be mentioned that Africans—except for South Africans—do not call themselves “black.” They are Ghanaians, Nigerians, Kenyans, etc.)

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Huge amounts of medical and scientific scholarship have been devoted to the question (assuming it is a question) of what kind of species black people are and what characteristics they possess. The language invented by these investigators in the nineteenth century for various “disorders,” as we have seen, is astounding: “*dyaesthesia aethiopica*” (rascality in blacks free and enslaved), “*drapetomania*” (a tendency among the enslaved to flee captivity). These terms surely have contributed to racism and its spread, which even now we take for granted. (What would we be or do or become as a society if there were no ranking or theory of blackness?)

Once blackness is accepted as socially, politically, and medically defined, how does that definition affect black people?

We have noted the growth of black towns, harbors of safety and prosperity as far away as possible from white people. What must life have been like for the black inhabitants, living in a

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world surrounded by hostility and threats of death? Indeed, just how safe were they, considering what they knew of the world around them? Earlier I said that of the fifty or so black towns founded in Oklahoma between 1865 and 1920 some thirteen remain in existence. Of the thirty-seven or so that do not, their inhabitants may have witnessed firsthand the reason they escaped in the first place and wondered anew what black life was worth. Certainly if they were around in 1946.

The United States in the twentieth century had not moved away from eugenics, nor had there been a significant lull in lynchings. Photographs of dead black bodies surrounded by happy white onlookers appeared in print, and postcards of lynchings were a popular item.

The fear that black people had was not fantasy or a pathological condition.

It was in 1946 that Isaac Woodard, a black veteran still in uniform, stepped off a Greyhound bus in South Carolina. He was returning to

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North Carolina to join his family. He had spent four years in the army—in the Pacific Theater (where he was promoted to sergeant) and in the Asiatic Pacific (where he earned a Campaign medal, a World War II Victory Medal, and the Good Conduct Medal). When the bus reached a rest stop, he asked the bus driver if there was time to use the restroom. They argued, but he was allowed to use the facilities. Later, when the bus stopped in Batesburg, South Carolina, the driver called the police to remove Sergeant Woodard (apparently for going to the bathroom). The chief, Linwood Shull, took Woodard to a nearby alleyway where he and a number of other policemen beat him with their nightsticks. Then they took him to jail and arrested him for disorderly conduct. During his night in jail, the chief of police beat Woodard with a billy club and gouged out his eyes. The next morning Woodard was sent before the local judge, who found him guilty and fined him fifty dollars. Woodard asked for medical care and two days later it arrived. Meantime, not

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knowing where he was and suffering from mild amnesia, he was taken to a hospital in Aiken, South Carolina. Three weeks after he was reported missing by his family, he was located and rushed to an army hospital in Spartanburg. Both eyes remained damaged beyond repair. He lived, though blind, until 1992, when he died at age seventy-three. After thirty minutes of deliberation, Chief Shull was acquitted of all charges, to the wild applause of an all-white jury.

Why that attack—in addition to the coverage it received from the NAACP and other organizations—got the attention of President Harry Truman while so many others did not can be attributed to the medals the victim had on his uniform displaying his battlefield deployments and commendations.

What might these black towns fear? Isaac Woodard was not alone.

Let me mention just a small handful of the lynchings that took place in the twentieth century:

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Ed Johnson, 1906 (lynched on the Walnut Street Bridge, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, by a mob that broke into jail after a stay of execution had been issued).

Laura and L. D. Nelson, 1911 (mother and son, accused of murder, kidnapped from their cell, hanged from a railroad bridge near Okemah, Oklahoma).

Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie, 1920 (three circus workers accused of rape without any evidence, lynched in Duluth, Minnesota; no punishment for their murderers).

Raymond Gunn, 1931 (accused of rape and murder, doused with gasoline and burned to death by a mob in Maryville, Missouri).

Cordie Cheek, 1933 (lynched and mutilated by a mob in Maury, Tennessee, following his release from jail after being falsely accused of rape).



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Booker Spicely, 1944 (shot by a bus driver in Durham, North Carolina, after refusing to move further to the back of the bus).

Maceo Snipes, 1946 (dragged from his home in Taylor County, Georgia, and shot for having voted in the Georgia Democratic Primary; a sign posted on a nearby black church read: THE FIRST NIGGER TO VOTE WILL NEVER VOTE AGAIN).

Lamar Smith, 1955 (civil rights figure, shot to death on the lawn of the Lincoln County Courthouse in Brookhaven, Mississippi).

Emmett Till, 1955 (at fourteen years of age, beaten and shot in Money, Mississippi, after reportedly flirting with a white woman who has since confessed to lying about the encounter).

These are just some—there are many, many more, all dreadful—but these are representative, I think, of the circumstances, the real danger for blacks (no longer slaves) in the twentieth century.

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So they fled to “free” land and established their own hierarchy of color, ranking the deepest black—“blue black”—skin as a definitive mark of acceptability. This is, anyway, the premise of my novel *Paradise*, concerning the remote (fictional) all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, where there is “nothing to serve a traveler: no diner, no police, no gas station, no public phone, no movie house, no hospital.”

Color coding among blacks themselves, the threat of being turned away by members of one’s own race, as well as the severe possibility of being brutalized in the same way and for the same non-reason Isaac Woodard was, were the realities that motivated the founders of many black towns. In *Paradise*, I imagined a reverse dystopia—a deepening of the definition of “black” and a search for its purity as defiance against the eugenics of “white” purity and especially the “Come Prepared or Not at All” rule which would exclude many, many poor blacks escaping with nothing on their backs.

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What might be the reason for and success of an all-black town that emphasized its own standards of purity? In *Paradise* I wanted to reconfigure blackness.

I wanted to trace the purity requirement and the response by the townspeople when black purity was threatened by the lesser or the impure.

In *Paradise*, I played with these confused and confusing concepts of blackness. I began at the very opening, which signals race, purity, and violence: “They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time.” Just as the “white girl” is never identified, none of the killers is given a name in the initial onslaught. The men committing the murders are a son or nephew or brother, uncle, friend, brother-in-law—but no proper names.

After this deliberate anonymity, each of the following chapters is headed by a woman’s name: Mavis, Grace, Seneca, Divine, Patricia, Consolata, Lone, and Save-Marie, without identifying her “race.”

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I was eager to simultaneously de-fang and theatricalize race, signaling, I hoped, how moveable and hopelessly meaningless the construct was. What more, really, do you know about these characters when you do know their race? Anything?

The threats in the world “outside” Ruby, the townsmen’s familiarity with the danger they face by being black, define their determination to build a racially pure black town they can control and defend:

Ten generations had known what lay Out There: space, once beckoning and free, became unmonitored and seething; became a void where random and organized evil erupted when and where it chose—behind any standing tree, behind the door of any house, humble or grand. Out There where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled; where congregations carried

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arms to church and ropes coiled in every saddle. Out There where every cluster of whitemen looked like a posse, being alone was being dead. But lessons had been learned and relearned in the last three generations about how to protect a town. So, like the ex-slaves who knew what came first . . . Before first light in the middle of August, fifteen families moved . . . headed not for Muskogee or California as some had, or Saint Louis, Houston, Langston or Chicago, but deeper into Oklahoma. . . .

The Morgan Brothers control the town they helped found, which they name Ruby to honor their recently dead sister. Despite their local power and threats, however, deep and severe conflicts exist among the townspeople. One of the most disrupting is the question of what the engraving (missing the first letter) on their precious community Oven, built by the Old Fathers and transported to Ruby, says. Is it “Be

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The Furrow of His Brow”? Or, as the young people insist, “We Are The Furrow of His Brow”? Or even “Women Are the Furrow of His Brow”? And along with frowned-upon sexual liaisons with outsiders, there is a fundamental religious division. The sermons of Reverend Pulliam, an arrogant conservative preacher, illustrate one of the town’s divisions. His sermon at a wedding is a sample:

Let me tell you about love, that silly word you believe is about whether you like somebody or whether somebody likes you or whether you can put up with somebody in order to get something or some place you want or you believe it has to do with how your body responds to another body like robins or bison or maybe you believe love is how forces or nature or luck is benign to you in particular not maiming or killing you but if so doing it for your own good.

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Love is none of that. There is nothing in nature like it. Not in robins or bison or the banging tails of your hunting dogs and not in blossoms or suckling foal. Love is divine only and difficult always. If you think it is easy you are a fool. If you think it is natural you are blind. It is a learned application without reason or motive except that it is God.

You do not deserve love regardless of the suffering you have endured. You do not deserve love because somebody did you wrong. You do not deserve love just because you want it. You can only earn—by practice and careful contemplation—the right to express it and you have to learn how to accept it. Which is to say you have to earn God. You have to practice God. You have to think God—carefully. And if you are a good and diligent student you may secure the right to show love. Love is not a gift. It

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is a diploma. A diploma conferring certain privileges: the privilege of expressing love and the privilege of receiving it.

How do you know you have graduated? You don't. What you do know is that you are human and therefore educable, and therefore capable of learning how to learn, and therefore interesting to God, who is interested only in Himself which is to say He is interested only in love. Do you understand me? God is not interested in you. He is interested in love and the bliss it brings to those who understand and share that interest.

The counter to that view of God is articulated by Reverend Misner, the progressive preacher presiding over the wedding, for whom love is "unmotivated respect: All of which testified not to a peevish Lord who was His own love but one who enabled human love. Not for His own glory—never. God loved the way humans loved



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one another; loved the way humans loved themselves; loved the genius on the cross who managed to do both and die knowing it." In silent protest against Pulliam's "poison," he holds up a cross before the congregation, thinking,

See? The execution of this one solitary black man propped up on these two intersecting lines to which he was attached in a parody of human embrace, fastened to two big sticks that were so convenient, so recognizable, so embedded in consciousness *as consciousness*, being both ordinary and sublime. See? His woolly head alternately rising on his neck and falling toward his chest, the glow of his midnight skin dimmed by dust, streaked by gall, fouled by spit and urine, gone pewter in the hot, dry wind and, finally, as the sun dimmed in shame, as his flesh matched the odd lessening of afternoon light as though it were evening, always sudden in that climate, swallowing

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him and the other death row felons, and the silhouette of this original sign merged with a false night sky. See how this official murder out of hundreds marked the difference; moved the relationship between God and man from CEO and supplicant to one on one? The cross he held was abstract; the absent body was real, but both combined to pull humans from backstage to the spotlight, from muttering in the wings to the principal role in the story of their lives. This execution made it possible to respect—freely, not in fear—one’s self and one another.

The conflicts within Ruby grow, so much so that the men (some of them) need desperately to find an enemy to purge and destroy the evil and disruption in their community. The women in a nearby former convent, outside of Ruby, serve that purpose beautifully.

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Of course the women—a collection of misfits and fugitives—are no peaceful saints. They disagree about virtually everything except their affection for the convent's last inhabitant, an old drunken woman named Consolata who welcomes them all. Prior to the violence that the men of Ruby inflict on the women, Consolata demands an extraordinary ritual called “loud dreaming,” one that cleanses and empowers each woman in the convent. Too late. The men of Ruby descend.

Amid all of this struggle, chaos, and unbreakable conflict caused by power distribution within classifications of race and gender, I hoped to draw attention to specific individuals trying to escape harm and mitigate their failures—one narrative at a time. One to one.

The work—or my purpose in writing it—reminds me of something I experienced years ago at a Vienna Biennale. In one of the artworks on display, I was asked to enter a dark room and

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face a mirror. In a few seconds a figure appeared, slowly taking shape and moving toward me. A woman. When she (rather, her image) was close to me, same height, she placed her palm on the glass and I was instructed to do the same. We stood there face to face, unspeaking, looking into the eyes of the other. Slowly the figure faded and shrank before disappearing altogether. Another woman appeared. We repeated the gesture of touching our palms together and looking into the eyes of the other. This went on for some time. Each woman differed in age, body shape, color, dress. I must say it was extraordinary—this intimacy with a stranger. Silent, knowing. Accepting each other—one to one.