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“You Think We Fixta Git up off Dis Block for Real?”

Blackness, Precariousness, and Resistance in Antoinette Nwandu’s “*Pass Over*”

Abstract

The process of othering of black people in the US can be traced back to the Atlantic Slave Trade, and the identity produced by such legacy is constantly haunted by a past—that of slavery and segregation—and by a present—that of systemic racism—that cage it in the slave ship, in the plantation, in the ghetto. Read in this light, Black condition is an ongoing process of mourning and awakening in which identity formation entails a peculiar form of agency, a “wake work”—in Christina Sharpe’s words—capable of rupturing and subverting and, therefore, of imagining new ways to deal with the afterlife of slavery.

*My paper analyzes how the persistence of systemic antiblackness urges black people to engage the paradox of living within a transgenerational grief while rupturing it. To do so, I will examine the play *Pass Over* by Antoinette Nwandu, in its filmed version by Spike Lee (2018), which combines Beckettian and Biblical themes to depict Black condition as a combination of irreconcilable opposites and shows how, to borrow from the opening paragraph of Fred Moten’s *In the Break*, “the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.” In the play, Moses and Kitch are stuck in a block of Chicago, determined to pass over and “rise up to their full potential,” like Jewish people in the *Exodus*. Despite their efforts, their dreams of the promised land collide with US reality and the objectified identity that has been forced on them.*

Keywords: *Pass Over, Blackness, Antoinette Nwandu, Spike Lee, Black studies*

This is America
Don’t catch you slippin’ now
Don’t catch you slippin’ now
Look what I’m whippin’ now
(Childish Gambino, “This is America”)

1. Introduction: a street corner in the afterlife of slavery

Blackness is a concept that resists rigid categorizations, and yet it has undergone many, so that the black condition today lies on the edge between two antithetical yet complimentary consciousness. On one side, the proliferation of transnational and postcolonial identities is informing a new depiction of blackness, multifaceted and potentially fluid; on the other, the oppressive identity imposed and reinforced by the white Western world still takes its toll on non-white people. In the US, as the quintessential subjugated Other, African Americans have suffered what W.E.B. Du Bois famously defined as “double consciousness” (2015, 3-6). This peculiar survival condition required to suppress one’s identity in order to comply with the identity imposed by racist white society, resulting in “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (2015, 5). Ultimately, such condition implied the impossibility to achieve a true self-consciousness in a white-dominated society, which, as Frantz Fanon remarked, meant that “not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. [...] The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man” (1986, 82-83).

Although it may have taken different shapes depending on the historical and social context, the inner strife generated by these conflicting subjectivities is a burden that has never ceased to weigh on Black people, as Christina Sharpe highlights when she considers that “the means and modes of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain” (2016, 12). Enslaved, segregated, criminalized: not only have black bodies been physically exploited, but they have also served a macabre purpose, becoming—in the eyes of the white world—what Frank B. Wilderson III calls, “the foil of Humanity.” Speaking from the point of view of a black man, Wilderson argues that “Humanity looked to me when it was unsure of itself. I let Humanity say, with a sigh of existential relief ‘At least we’re not him’” (2020, 13). Borrowing from Orlando Patterson’s seminal study on the nature of slavery (*Slavery and Social Death* 1982, 38-51), Afropessimism sees black people as forced into a condition of “social death” (Wilderson 2010, 55) that, from the Atlantic Slave Trade, can be stretched to encompass contemporary society, too.¹ Slave societies legitimized their existence through the objectification

¹ Recent scholarship in various fields of study, too, appear to refer to black condition as to a social status marked by degradation and abjection. Therefore, “social death” may apply also to what has been detected by Michelle Alexander when she notes that “slavery defined what it meant to be black (a slave), and Jim Crow defined what it meant to be black (a second-class citizen). Today mass incarceration defines the meaning of blackness in America: black people, especially black men, are criminals. That is what it means to be black” (Alexander 2010, 244), or by Sharon P. Holland in her analysis of the movie *Menace II Society* (2000, 19-28), as well as by Saidiya Hartman when introducing the concept of “the afterlife of slavery” (2007, 6). All these

and dehumanization of subjugated people, a system that, in the case of black people, had long-lasting effects. If the slave was an individual deprived of their personhood both on the level of personal relations and on the institutional level (Patterson 1982, 7–13), to Wilderson for black people this condition is permanent. Every society needs the existence of the Other, the embodiment of non-personhood, in order to function; in the US, this status is occupied by blackness, the only condition that is “coterminous with Slaveness” (Wilderson 2020, 102), a definition which draws a theoretical link between racialization and death and calls attention to how black people continue being identified as “imprintable” and “disposable” (Patterson 1982, 7) by white society. Thus, US racialized environment reiterates black death as a social, physical, and institutional spectacle that is integral to its functioning.

Among the scholars who have taken on the task of providing new interpretive tools for limning black condition in twenty-first-century America, Christina Sharpe’s work recognizes the persistence of systemic antiblackness in the metaphor of the wake/wake work which, through all its meanings,² represents all “the paradoxes of Blackness within and after the legacies of slavery’s denial of Black humanity” and thus can be used “as a means of understanding how slavery’s violence emerges within the contemporary condition of spatial, legal, psychic, material, and other dimensions of Black non/being as well as in Black modes of resistance” (2016, 14). The strategies that black people have developed, and still develop, to acknowledge and deal with such paradoxes are what Sharpe calls “wake work” (2016, 19-22).

Antoinette Chinonye Nwandu’s play *Pass Over* can be read through the lenses of Sharpe’s metaphors of “living in the wake” and “performing wake work” through which the scholar looks “to current quotidian disasters in order to ask what, if anything, survives this insistent Black

texts and studies, in fact, focus on the depersonalization of black people and on how this is usually linked to the deprivation of constitutional rights, to social isolation, to a life-threatening existence, and to a closely related condition of constant mourning.

² According to Sharpe, “to be *in* the wake is to occupy and be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding” (2016, 13-14). What Sharpe identifies in the metaphor of the wake is a condition of overwhelming vulnerability that, once properly acknowledged, can also turn into a subversive instrument to deal with the causes and consequences of such de-humanizing vulnerability. To perform wake work is an act that goes beyond mere survival to become a creative mode of reclaiming one’s (black) humanity within institutionalized racism, made possible by the fact that “[w]akes are *processes*; through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them; *they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory*. Wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual [...]. But wakes are also ‘the track left on the water’s surface by a ship; *the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved, in water*; the air currents behind a body in flight; *a region of disturbed flow*; in the line of sight of (an observed object); and (something) in the line of recoil of (a gun)’; *finally, wake means being awake and, also, consciousness*” (2016, 21, emphasis mine).

exclusion, this ontological negation” (Sharpe 2016, 14). In the play, two black men, Moses and Kitch, are stuck in a block in Chicago, determined to pass over—physically, by moving out of that place, and metaphorically, by escaping their condition—and “rise up to their full potential,” like Jewish people in the Exodus. Despite their efforts, their dreams of the promised land collide with US reality and the objectified identity that has been forced on them. The outcome of their plight is not always exactly the same, since Nwandu has created four different versions of *Pass Over* so far. The first was developed for the Cherry Lane Theater in 2016, then, in 2017, a second, more mature version, was staged at Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theater, followed in 2018 by a slightly different one running Off Broadway at the Lincoln Center. Finally, the last (so far), more hopeful rewriting was the first Broadway play to open post COVID-19 lockdown in the summer of 2021.

My essay focuses on how Nwandu’s play embodies black paradoxical existence and engages with its implications in a way that acknowledges the persistence of black social death and that recognizes the possibility to resist and overcome it through a communal healing process, which is what her characters do through the different versions of the script, regardless of the final outcome. To do so, I will examine the stylistic choices that enable the playwright to craft a work on the balance between playfulness and despair, in which black death is an ever-present event that is always about to happen and has always already happened, as her characters’ lines and the temporal unfolding of the play show, in accordance with what Karla FC Holloway has named a “macabre revision of CPT (colored people’s time)” (2003, 6). In her study, Holloway appropriates the expression “colored people’s time,” historically referring to the racial stereotype according to which black people are always late, and uses it to describe the way in which “death was an untimely accompaniment to the life of black folk” (2003, 6): an event that alters the flow of time not only by the awareness of death but especially by its overwhelming intrusion into the everyday life of the community. The temporal layers of Nwandu’s play—from ancient Egypt to US slavery to now—as well as the way in which death is a constant topic in the two protagonists’ conversations, whether jokingly or seriously, and an event that looms over everything that happens to them, evidence of a condition that the US black community knows all too well.

Written between 2013 and 2014, after the killing of Trayvon Martin and as the Black Lives Matter movement was taking its first steps, *Pass Over* is affected by the social and psychological environment surrounding black deaths, to the point that it, too, represents “an attempt to keep mourning an open dynamic in our culture because black lives exist in a state of precariousness” (2013, 150-151), as Claudia Rankine writes with regards to Black Lives Matter. The many rewritings the script has undergone even before its first production in Chicago in 2017 already

testify to its author’s distinctively dynamic attitude towards black deaths and mourning, a stance that keeps characterizing the play’s evolution to this day, with three different versions available to theaters and audiences.

I will focus mainly on two versions: the 2017 show produced by Steppenwolf Theater—adapted into a movie by Spike Lee the year after—and the 2018 Off Broadway show produced by the Lincoln Center Theater, which share a similar view on blackness as a condition dominated by a constant sense of anticipated mourning and impending threat. On the other hand, while still dialoguing with the earlier ones, the 2021 version has been presented by Nwandu as “a New Testament version of the script, where divine redemption is hard-won but possible,” and through which she hopes to “offer an ending that will help heal people [...] and will help bring joy and beauty and laughter and a little bit of grace and a little bit of Afro-futurism to any audience member, regardless of their race” (McHenry 2021, 57). Following Nwandu’s invitation to theater companies to produce the version they believe to be more necessary for their community, my essay centers on the earlier versions precisely for their being relentlessly and hopelessly grounded in a reality in which black people are constantly haunted, both physically and psychologically by the afterlife of slavery.

2. “The only thing I have to do is stay black and die”

Antoinette Nwandu has explained that “each time I go back with this play I ask, ‘What’s happening in the world? Who’s actually going to be in those seats?’” (Fitzpatrick 2021), two questions that deeply affect the play’s nature. Indeed, *Pass Over*’s constantly evolving, multifaceted, and fluid identity contributes to the debate regarding black subjectivity and black subjugation today by being a text explicitly open to change.

On stage, Moses and Kitch stay within the same curbside and below the same lamppost the entire time, making plans for the future as days and nights pass without bringing any significant change in their lives. Sometimes—too often—gunshots are heard in the distance, which terrifies and keeps them in the block even more. As they stand there, they meet two white men. One is an apparently harmless passer-by, who offers them food and appears interested in discussing race issues with them, though much to their suspicion and discomfort. The other is a police officer, who seems to keep coming back just for the sadistic pleasure of harassing them and reminding them that they are useless members of the society, until the moment when he is punished and tortured by an unknown supernatural force invoked by the voice of Moses—uttering “STOP KILLING US” (Nwandu 2020, 87)—an event akin to the Plagues of Egypt, on a smaller scale. In all versions but one so far, one of these white men eventually pulls the trigger

that interrupts the two friends’ dreams forever, ending the play with a bang and a black death, an outcome that was foreshadowed since the very beginning.

In all its versions, the play combines a dynamic, progress-oriented optimism implied in the characters’ interpretation of the Biblical story of the Exodus—and, I would add, of the myth of the American Dream—with a static aimlessness and “placeless existentialism” (Cunningham 2021) of Beckettian inspiration, explicitly *Waiting for Godot*, made even more desperate by their ethnicity. However, as Vinson Cunningham has noted, “the ‘Godot’ adjacency goes only so far. ‘Pass Over’ doesn’t really feel timeless or placeless or, despite its many references to the Bible, distant from this-worldly matters. If not for [the] stage directions, I’d think of the play as taking place in the hyper-present, [...] a piece of heightened realism” (2021), as it is apparent from the very beginning and, possibly, even more when reading the script. If, according to Sharpe again, living in the wake of slavery and performing wake work are the instruments through which it is possible to recognize black immanent and imminent death, “that past not yet past, in the present” (2016, 13), then the play locates itself in the wake since the opening credits and author’s notes, which introduce the characters as being part of what Michelle M. Wright has named “*Epiphenomenal time*, or the ‘now,’ through which the past, present, and future are always interpreted” (2015, 4). Nwandu, in fact, begins by preparing her audience to enter a timescape in which the past is not a dedicated space somewhere behind us, but it is all around us, in *this* moment, given the fact that black subjectivities cannot be encompassed by a chronological understanding of time and history:³

Moses black, male, late teens/early twenties. a young man from the ghetto. brokenhearted.
courageous. angry. sad
but also a slave driver
but also the prophesied leader of God’s chosen people

Kitch black, male, late teens/early twenties. a young man from the ghetto and Moses’ best friend.
jovial. loyal. kind. naïve. a lovely friend to have
but also a slave
but also one of God’s chosen

Mister white, male, late twenties/early thirties. a man in a light-colored suit. out of his element.
earnest. wholesome. terrified
but also a plantation owner
but also pharaoh’s son

³ For a more detailed analysis of the meaning of epiphenomenal time see Wright 2015, 16-26; 41-45.

Ossifer white, male, late twenties/early thirties. an enforcer of the law. not from around here, but always around. pragmatic. intimidating. also terrified. The actor playing Mister should also play Ossifer

but also a patroller

but also a soldier in pharaoh's army

Time now. right now

but also 1855

but also 13th century BCE

Setting a ghetto street. a lamppost. night

but also a plantation

but also Egypt, a city built by slaves (Nwandu 2020, “Characters,” emphasis mine)

By situating her story within the *now* in which past, present, and future converge, Nwandu moves in the realm of epiphenomenal time, that is, a conception of temporality which, contrary to linear time, allows the possibility to move both outward and forward from a center, an origin and, therefore, to account for all black experience and represent black collective identity through history. The superimposition of characters, places, and times might first appear to locate the action in an extra-historical dimension but, on the contrary, the many temporalities involved do not produce an estrangement from reality. Rather, through the accumulation of black death and subjugation, they materialize the very substance of the afterlife of slavery as it is experienced in the present moment. Though not explicitly mentioned in the opening credits, these temporal layers are evident in Spike Lee’s filmed version of the play too. Here, two black men are stuck at the corner between Martin Luther King Jr.’s Drive and E 64th Street—in what is considered the most dangerous block in Chicago, the notorious “O Block”⁴ (Main 2014). The accurateness of the coordinates immediately warns the audience that they are entering a locus of death, one of the too many places of rememory (Morrison 1997, 5) that crowd the cities of America with the weight of a history of violence hiding in plain sight in every street corner. As Nwandu explained, Beckett’s play “represented the height of white western anxiety—the fact that these two men might be abandoned by God. It’s a terrible, existential feeling. But I looked up at them, and I was like, *Wait, but they still get to be old. If they were Black, these characters wouldn’t be old*” (McHenry 2021, 56, emphasis in original).

⁴ The area is part of the neighborhood of Parkway Garden Homes and is known locally as either “O Block,” after gang member Odee Perry, who was shot to death there, or, formerly, “WIIC City” (“Wild Insane Crazy City”). Between 2011 and 2014, Parkway Gardens had the highest rate of shootings than any other block in Chicago (Main 2014).

The play begins with Moses and Kitch waking up from sleeping on a curbside and already displaying an uncanny and unsettling acquaintance with death since the first words they exchange with each other:

Moses *Yo kill me now*
Kitch *bang bang*
Moses *nigga*
Kitch *what’s good*
my nigga
Moses *man you know*
Kitch *man you know*
i know
[...]
Moses *you know*
i know
you know
i know
you know
Kitch *you know*
i know
you know
i know
you know
you i –
you know –
you –
shit!
Moses *my nigga*
Kitch *shit! (Nwandu 2020, 5-6, emphasis mine)*

Pretending to kill and be killed, Moses and Kitch start the day by rehearsing their own death, something which more than a few black people from the audience may relate to, and they do so following a call-and-response pattern common in African-American poetry and music. This exchange immediately sets the tone of the play, and the “ritualized, repetitive dialogue” (Cunningham 2021) through which the two characters act out their blackness marks the sense of existentialist displacement that they endure as subjugated others who struggle to reappropriate their own identity, as their use of the racial slur par excellence, the infamous N-word, as a term of endearment shows.⁵ Their words are their sole tools and weapons, and they

⁵ But note that Moses and Kitch refer to each other as “my nigga,” which is much different from Ossifer calling them “niggers.” In this regard, scholars like Holt call for a “victim-centered approach” towards hate speech, which “would take into account the context in which remarks were said, the historic connotations of the remarks, and the effect of the remarks on the recipient” (2018, 422), observing that the fact that many black people use the N-word “not as a

use them to signify their condition, as well as to mourn it and subvert it. The author’s notes are illuminating also in this respect, clarifying that “This play is best served when the language is unadorned with sound effects or underscoring. The words are the music. Treat them as such. Line breaks and the absence of punctuation are an invitation to play. [...] (. . .) indicate an absence of dialogue, not an absence of communication” (Nwandu 2020). However, the two friends’ playful attitude about death conceals a much hopeless consciousness, that of being always on the verge of being killed, a looming feeling that keeps haunting black subjects even in their sleep, since waking up may actually mean open their eyes on a world that is going to close them again forever. Since, as Holloway considers,

The anticipation of death and dying figured into the experiences of black folk so persistently, given how much more omnipresent death was for them than for other Americans, that lamentation and mortification both found their way into public and private representations of African America to an astonishing degree. The twentieth century’s literature and film, its visual arts and music (from early era spirituals to latter-day rap), and its contemporary street-corner memorials consistently called up a passed-on narrative. (2003, 6)

The only way to cope with such constant grieving condition is to incorporate it in the everyday life not only as a memorial, or a re-memory, but also as a fictitiously harmless joke, which of course does not make its violence less effective in the reality of the street, but which can allow a glimpse of escape through creativity. As people who do not own their lives, just like their ancestors, Moses and Kitch appear to be trying to at least own their death by anticipating and exorcising it through language, as they do every day when they wake up and pretend to shoot each other, but also when they talk about the promise land as a place sweet “like milk and honey” (2020, 56)—resembling more of an afterlife rather than a bright future.

Young and somehow already dead, Moses and Kitch are part of those “communities of color [who] often describe their collective experience in the United States as dystopic rather than utopic. The paradise is often within, and ‘hell’ is a condition arising from encounters with whites” (Holland 2000, 16). To them, “‘living’ is something to be *achieved* and not *experienced*, and figurative and literal death are very much a part of the social landscape” (Holland 2000,

statement of subjugation, but as a label to overcome” (2018, 423). Historically, the N-word implies a master-slave relation that can also be intended, metaphorically, as a relation between the living and the dead. The appropriation of the N-word by the black community—and by Moses and Kitch—therefore, suggests the subversion of such power relation that qualifies as a form of signifying and, I would add, wake work. This peculiar use represents a form of ontological resistance towards the reclaiming of an identity not dictated by the dominant narrative.

15-16) they live in, in which not even the smallest distraction is allowed, because it may be fatal. Moses and Kitch carry out their existence in a succession of states of awakening and mourning, as they dream of the promised land and are called back to reality by gunshots in the background—apparently heard only by them, black people—and by sporadic yet traumatic encounters with white people.

The first of such encounters is with a young white man, seemingly innocuous for his kindness and willingness to share his basket full of delicious food, but still disturbing because of his light-colored suit much reminiscent of Southern plantation owners and especially because of his name, Master, barely concealed in the opening credits by an ‘i’ that turns it into “Mister.” The most unsettling moment of the encounter is when he questions the two black men about the legitimacy of their constant and apparently unconcerned use of the N-word to address each other, lamenting why he cannot use it instead. “Because is not yours [...] bad or good man is not yours,” tells Moses, to which he responds thundering, “EVERYTHING IS MINE” (Nwandu 2020, 44), as if abruptly and unsettlingly revealing his true self and depriving them of any kind of agency with regards of their reclaimed identity. Appearances aside, this is clearly not a conversation among peers and, when Master leaves, Moses and Kitch cannot but go back to being stuck on the same street, wondering whether dropping the use of the N-word might help them walk out of the block without being noticed by the police, who would then see them as “*men* / like they ain’t neva seen” (Nwandu 2020, 48) and not as “niggers” (2020, 53), and let them pass over at last, by passing as men—as *white* men. When Ossifer, the policeman, enters the scene, the two men try to enact their plan to conceal their blackness and get out of the block by means of a different use of language. They try to look natural in their disguise as white people, they behave in a way that (white) society would regard as ‘proper’ and say all the ‘right’ words to hide their true selves, but the plan eventually fails when Kitch lets slip the word “nigga” (Nwandu 2020, 52), thus causing the spell to break, and prompting the officer to threaten and beat them as usual. The scene constitutes a cruel reminder of what James Baldwin wrote to his nephew that “you can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*” (1968, 16), that the weight of the N-word is something that cannot be dropped off easily and affects white social perception as well as black. The encounter with Ossifer leaves Moses and Kitch collapsed to the ground and shaken; nonetheless, a new day is coming and they are still alive, which is enough to try another plan to escape their condition.

Sticking by the role of his Biblical namesake, Moses is determined to literally “pass over,” to cross the waters by crossing the street and get out of the block, as he obsessively repeats, out of the plantation, and finally “raise up to [his] full potential” (Nwandu 2020, 8). However, his “big

ole plans” keep being postponed, implying that they may actually be unattainable precisely because he lives in the wake of slavery, where the plantation has not really disappeared but has turned into the ghetto, and there seems to be no way out of either of the two. Eventually, Moses and Kitch start questioning their status of chosen people, akin to the Jews in the Old Testament, wondering whether they might have misread God’s signs. No matter what black people do, the river apparently never parts for them; Moses considers, “dat river crash on us / drown us whole / we ain’t chosen nigga damn / we egypt” (Nwandu, 2020 76-77). Indeed, as the play goes on, the block seems to tighten around the two characters, while the River Jordan disappears from sight from where they are standing, gradually suggesting that the only way to really “pass over” their subjugated condition may be through death. This is the moment when the “yo kill me now / bang bang” of the beginning takes on a new, much bleaker meaning as the two friends try to devise a plan to kill each other with a rock—lacking even a gun to do it (Nwandu 2020, 76-77). They still believe they are going to reach the promised land together but they now seem convinced that such land is not on earth, not for them black people at least.

Liberation through death is not new in the black community and, as Holloway notes regarding DuBois’s narration of his son’s death, is an experience “fully vested in the symbolic and racialized language of this nation’s history and liberation” (2002, 5). Moses and Kitch, however, do not die by their own hands, as they have been pondering, nor by Ossifer’s. They experience an illusory glimpse of freedom and empowerment when the police officer is tormented by the plagues in front of them and is forced to yield to Moses’ demand to be considered, and treated as, *men* (Nwandu 2020, 87), an unexpected achievement which makes them believe that they have “transcended race” at last (Nwandu 2020, 89). But it is just a momentary lapse of freedom, soon interrupted by Mister’s arrival. And it is of course *the Master* who kills Moses, just as he is about to finally leave everything behind and cross the street, thus preventing the Exodus to happen and re-establishing the status quo. In the first version, right after shooting Moses, Master begins his final monologue: “Ladies and gentlemen, don’t be alarmed. It’s okay. Everything’s gonna be okay. Gosh! You could say we had a bit of turbulence. A few more ups and downs than we would have liked,” the tone wants to appear reassuring, but it has a macabre characteristic, “but all that is over now. It’s passed. It’s passed because... because we have done what we were meant to do. We stood our ground. We caught the bad guys. We took back what was ours. And now, together, we will make sure that none ever, ever, ever takes it back from us again” (Lee 2018). If possible, the monologue produces an even more disturbing effect in the movie, when Lee’s camera catches glimpses of the audience in the background, all black and suddenly all becoming victims too—or witnesses—since they share a “common understanding

of that vulnerability, whether one was directly affected by this violence or just afraid of it, that forged a cultural association between color and death” (Holloway 2003, 59). As Mister talks, the menace which his words imply for that audience becomes more tangible, just like the fact that the plural “we” does not include them but, on the contrary, excludes and threatens them. Mister is apparently alone, the only white person in the room, and yet he gets away with the lynching he has committed because, as the use of the plural infers, he embodies and acts on behalf of an entire racist society. This seems to grant him impunity, as well as the arrogance to pretend that his is innocence instead, almost naivety, and forget everything that happened just a few moments before with his very last words: “Will you look at that? The sun has come up” (Lee 2018).

The second published version of *Pass Over* includes an equally tragic but quite different ending, through which Nwandu has converted her play “from a sledgehammer to a shiv,” always with the aim of “pok[ing] people in their ribs” (Nwandu 2021, 57), especially white people, unveiling their flaws and shortcomings. Here, Master speaks as the caricature of a liberal white man:

golly gee
 did you guys hear
 a fella was killed today
 black fella
 another black fella was killed
 i should say
 well
 because
 well gosh
 it just keeps –

He makes a gesture for ‘happening.’

which is sad
 you know
 so sad
 but also
 gosh
 so darn perplexing
 how does something like this keep –

Again, he makes the ‘happening’ gesture. (Nwandu 2020, 91-92, emphasis in original)

Through his hypocritical words and silent movements, black death becomes something that just “happens”—a minor accident or mistake like many others—and black life something that can

be erased with a simple gesture—a shot, a movement of the hand—barely touching the consciousness of a society that pretends being helpless while cherishing its impunity:

gosh
 and yes
 there are times
 i must admit
 there are times
 that i
 i don't know
 resist
 or find myself resisting
 having to listen to
 to look at
 or acknowledge
 there are times I just don't wanna know
 you know
 because it just keeps –

Again, he makes the 'happening' gesture. (Nwandu 2020, 92, emphasis in original)

There is hardly a glimmer of sadness, too little to foster the slightest change, and soon replaced by the reassuring realization that another black body lying on the street does not mean anything in terms of affecting any kind of radical change. Ultimately, no one is going to be held responsible for the reiteration of black death but black people themselves:

and each time
 it makes me feel so sad
 but also helpless to
 to change
 or intervene
 or i don't know –
 but then
 you know
 there are those few [black people]
 who manage to make good
 or decent –
 i don't know
 so that's
 that's really ... [heartening]
 yes
 but yes
 there are those times when i don't wanna –

A moment.

*Then a big performative sigh; self-conscious
without being ironic.
A moment.
Then his demeanor brightens.*

anyway ...

Blackout.
End of Play (Nwandu 2020, 93, emphasis in original)

This second ending raises questions regarding the struggle for subjectivity within black community, shaped by the looming knowledge of one’s own death, as well as regarding how white culture measures its own value by distancing itself from the socially dead. “What if some subjects *never* achieve, in the eyes of others, the status of the ‘living?’” ponders Holland, “What if these subjects merely haunt the periphery of the encountering person’s vision, remaining, like the past and the ancestors who inhabit it, at one with the dead [...]?” (2000, 15), and the stilted compassion displayed by Mister’s monologue to conceal his direct involvement in Moses’ killing describes the same scenario and attitude. In such context, black subjects are nonentities, whose impending death serve whites’ need not to confront with (past) history and (current) reality. The “shiv” Nwandu talks about comes from the fact that Mister’s lamentation does not appear to be feigned but sincere. He truly sees himself as a decent, liberal, but unfortunately helpless white man, and if he refuses to acknowledge his blatant responsibility in the assassination of Moses, this is because the black man, to his eyes, has never been his fellow among the living.

3. Conclusion: This is America

It is no surprise that the two protagonists are not granted a happy ending in either of the first versions; the intent of the play, in the historical moment it was first written, was not to heal, but to demand recognition. Moses and Kitch embody this claim within the wake, since their being stuck in a precarious but oppressing time forces them (and the audience)⁶ to come to terms with all the implications of what Sharpe calls “living in the wake”:

Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are erased. Put another way, living in the wake means living in and with terror in that in much of what

⁶ The Author’s Notes are, again, very explicit in this regard: “this play should NOT have an intermission. If Moses and Kitch can’t leave, neither can you” (Nwandu 2020).

passes for public discourse *about* terror we, Black people, become the *carriers* of terror, terror’s embodiment, and not the primary objects of terror’s multiple enactments. (2016, 15)

In *Pass Over*, this same terror starts with gunshots in the background and builds up throughout the play to reach its climax with Moses’s death. In the middle, it hides behind the smallest things, just like when the two young men talk about “light skinned ed” being killed by the police (Nwandu 2020, 15-16). Or when they are deciding whether to eat the small pie they think they have saved from Mister’s picnic basket but they fear they may be charged with stealing it and end up in jail like another black man they heard of, wondering if he might be still “locked up” or, worse, dead (Nwandu 2020, 66). Tormented by all those deaths and many others (Nwandu 2020, 73), Moses and Kitch live in the wake of a terror that is also engraved in their bodies, which presents them as criminals—*thugs*—to that same society which haunts and annihilates them as victims. This twofold narrative encompasses the overlapping identities inhabiting blackness through history, paradoxically yet very much tangibly, as most autobiographical accounts written by black authors still testify. “They are picking us one by one,” says one of Jesmyn Ward’s friends in her memoir *Men We Reaped* (2018, 38), a sudden realization that leads her to wonder “who *they* were. [...] Were *they* us? Or was there a larger story that I was missing as all these deaths accumulated, as those I loved died? Were *they* even human? [...] Suddenly *they* seemed as immense as the darkness, as deep, as pressing” (2018, 38). That *they* includes not only the police, but all that comes with the afterlife of slavery, “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (Hartman 2007, 5). The darkness Ward refers to resembles the darkness that Moses and Kitch unsuccessfully try to overcome from their corner: an overwhelming social and political landscape which establishes, borrowing again from Baldwin, the limits of black people’s ambition (1968, 19), as well as the limits of their bodily existence. Within the national imagination, then, black bodies, their invisibility and exposed fragility, serve “to ward off a nation’s collective dread of the inevitable. Someone else bears the burden of the national id; someone else (always already) dies first” (Holland 2000, 38). Like in Ward’s memoir, Moses and Kitch carry out their life as survivors, while an eerie feeling pervades the play, especially during the various occasions on which they look happy—and they are. But it is the happiness that comes from being *spared*, as Ward too recalls when writing about her own life as a young black person (2018, 64), a feeling as precarious as their actual existence. As Holland notes, the first definition of *body* in *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, is “corpse,” with “person” being only the secondary one. “The implication is startling,” she argues, “as the body marks space equally in death and in life it becomes the bridge between the way others see us (science/pathology) and the way we see

ourselves” (175-176), a trajectory that finds a fitting representation in *Pass Over*, where Moses and Kitch constantly play the dead, challenging death’s looming presence through the play. Their black bodies, however, seem to take on a concrete form only when death ceases to be something to be exorcized and mimicked, and intervenes to end their story, as if black existence paradoxically required death in order to be recognized as human life.

Near the end, Moses tells Kitch that “after all dis shit / right here / we been thru / man / you are my brotha too” (Nwandu 2020, 90), and that is the moment when they both consciously embrace the humanity they were trying so hard to achieve. That humanity, that personhood had always been within them, but needed a wake work—“a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with [black people’s] known lived and un/imaginable lives” (Sharpe 2016, 18)—to find its way to the surface and across the river.

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