

The Other Made Black

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Well, it does beat all, that I never thought about a dog not eating watermelon. It shows how a body can see and don't see at the same time.

Huck, in *Huckleberry Finn*, Ch. XXXIV

Other people's chickens don't come to roost on your doorstep, and yours don't go to roost on theirs. The chickens that this country is responsible for sending out, whether the country likes it or not (and if you're mature, you look at it "like it is"), someday, and someday soon, have got to come back home to roost.

Malcom X
(1964)

Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word.

Ralph Ellison (1953/2003, p. 81)

Introduction

In this volume's companion (Hayes & Hartlep, 2013) I wrote about personal experiences shaping my outlook as educator facing matters of race in the classroom. In this piece I look further back, examining how the categories imposed on me as educator took shape and rooted decades before I set foot in front of the classroom, which persist still. Keeping with Wynton Marsalis's exhortation about race in America – "The more we run from it, the more we run into it. It's an age old story" (Marsalis, 2000) – I intend with this piece to glimpse critical moments when American culture was the product of running from itself and how that avoidance shapes us today.

Of Categories and Fiction

With an archaeologist's painstaking attention to detail and variation, Dvora Yanow (2003) carefully excavates the pertinence for public policy and administration (the fields I teach) of race and ethnicity category-making and derivative processes of "classification". Categories serve purposes that cleave at least two ways simultaneously, according to Yanow: acts of sorting also entail judgment; labeling also entails exclusion (this *not* that);

privileging or making salient this or that ethnic feature simultaneously also obscures similarities and other pertinent differences; to categorize at any given moment (i.e., for purposes of U.S. decennial census) inevitably means also to make irrelevant otherwise very pertinent historic patterns and flows among and between people and their cultural affiliations. Categorization can, as such, become itself the agent of perception at least as much as it is a tool useful for purposes of sorting and sifting pertinent information. As pertains to race classifications, Yanow elucidates:

When a single category is treated (poultry, “White”), the similarities of its elements (chicken, turkey, duck, Guinea hen; Italia, Irish, Polish, German) appear more salient than their differences from elements of other categories. When a set of categories is examined (meat, poultry, cheese; White, Black, Native American), it is the differences [within category set] that become more central. Classifying—assigning an element to one category or another within a set—entails an interpretive choice—a judgment—based on the relative importance of certain features over others. (Yanow, 2003, p. 11).

The sifting and re-sifting of race classifications made for U.S. census purposes—a profound parable on category-making capriciousness across U.S. history that Yanow gives account—makes vivid how factors other than the “naturalness” or presumptive “neutrality” of categories continuously determine race classification schemes. Nineteenth century European immigration to the United States destabilized what had previously been settled “race” signifiers and typologies, making (again) turbulent what had been, according to Yanow (2003, p. 36) the “accepted, prevailing, commonsense self-understanding of what it meant to be an American,” especially in the case of the vast numbers of nominally “white” Irish Catholic immigrants whose cultural affiliation with Protestant England and America was (made) profoundly antagonistic (Yanow, 2003, p. 36).

By the turn of 20th century, the influx of Southern and Eastern European immigration brought vastly more Catholic people and, then for the first time, massive Jewish immigration also. As Yanow (2003) summarizes: “‘American’ still meant ‘White,’ but Irish, Poles, and others were seen as—and called—‘Black’” (p. 36).

But not forever. The passage in 1952 of the McCarran-Walter Immigration and Nationality Act, and removal of 1924 ban on Asian and African immigration, set in motion the alchemy of race classification which, near the end of the 20th century, would group Catholics and Jews, almost entirely, as “Whites” (Yanow, 2003, p. 37). This alchemy indicates that “White” and “Black” are only nominally “categorical”. More significant for purposes of understanding race alchemy in the United States is the signification of *whiteness* and *blackness*.

The house of mirrors quality of American race classification refracts the catalog of Supreme Court rulings during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Led for decades by the race classification fervor that had nestled into Northern European and American intellectual venues (especially Ivy League institutions, cf. Witt, 2006a), the U.S. Supreme Court in 1923 finally gave up on the “expert” testimony upon which it had for so long depended in immigration cases because, by Roediger’s (2005) account, these classifications became so contradictory as to be useless. Reasoning in the *Thind* case (for

the naturalization of an Asian-Indian litigant), the Court reversed course it had established just the previous year in *Ozawa*.

Unable to demonstrate intellectually his nonwhiteness, the justices told Thind that everyone (or at least the “common” American) simply knew that he was not white. “Common speech” and “popular understanding” were to be the new tests for whiteness, at a time when the most ambitious social scientific study of “race attitudes” of the native-born middle class found almost identical percentages wishing to exclude Japanese and Serbo-Croatian “races” from citizenship. (Roediger, 2005, p. 59).

This vigorous and deliberate sifting and sorting of people according to surface characteristics imposed on late 19th and early 20th century U.S. immigrants can be explained, up to a point, according to the category-making logic that Yanow (2003) identifies: once the salient features of “sets” emerge (*Northern Europeans, Southern Europeans, Eastern Europeans*) under any given categorization orientation, the differentiation *across* sets becomes more pertinent than the differentiation within set. Policy making practices and accompanying narratives have always been (and will always be) beset with “this *not* that” schematizing and commensurate dilemmas; yet, as Yanow reasons:

Public policy narratives sometimes feature another dimension. In the face of incommensurable values or beliefs, people often create a myth—a narrative, not an argument or explicit explanation, although not necessarily one with a fictionlike plot—which serves, at least temporarily, to suspend the tension between the incommensurables *and allow action to proceed*. [...] In the process, explicit public discourse on the incommensurability is rendered *verboten*, silenced. [italics added] (Yanow, 2003, p. 8).

The incommensurables in race categorization matters have been stupefying... Initially spurned by nativist labor unions that were themselves constantly undermined by industrial agents, Eastern and Southern European immigrants (or those otherwise categorized as such) were made immediately wary of what *whiteness* and *blackness* really meant in America. Blacks were barred categorically from labor unions until the 1930s, a facet of working class race bitterness that U.S. corporations became expert at exploiting, deploying all *black* (not Polish, not Irish, not Slavic) national guard regiments for a series of strike breaks during this period on the tactical premise that white laborers would not form common cause across picket lines with blacks on any terms (Massey & Denton, 1993; Grossman, 1989; Noon, 2004).

Southern black migration during this period was a major impetus to the shifting construction of “blackness” as a major demographic category. By WWI, the European labor pool feeding U.S. industrial expansion was drastically cut back, to be filled by major influx of southern black tenant farmers and other black rural poor, themselves displaced by Mexican boll weevil outbreak that devastated cotton crops across Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama intermittently from 1906 through 1916. Disastrous floods and plummeted cotton prices turned southern planters to food crops and livestock, both

commodities requiring much fewer workers than cotton picking (Massey & Denton, 1993; Grossman, 1989). Northern and western strike breaking tactics during this period firmly fixed the animosity adopted by an increasingly pan-European “white” labor consciousness towards blacks.

The affiliation of “union-busting” with “black scabbing” by a vast, nativist-infused white working class was just one facet of the racist chrysalis from which U.S. Supreme Court rulings, public policy and administration would take shape; helping “to suspend the tension between incommensurables and allow action to proceed” (Yanow, 2003, p. 8).

The race/class dynamics of this era occurred within context of American imperial ambitions that made useful “fiction-like” race specifications in order to jockey America into colonial competition with Europe (Zinn, 2003, pp. 297-320). Not long earlier, in 1893, Teddy Roosevelt had proclaimed with impunity that American failure to annex Hawaii was “a crime against the white civilization” (Zinn, 2003, p. 300). As the black population grew in northern urban centers, race animosity and antagonism became increasingly enfranchised by newspaper depictions and reporting deploying derogatory terminology under salacious headlines, further instantiating unchallenged race fictions and impelling a process of deeply entrenched black/white narrative to proceed (Kusmer, 1976; Osofsky, 1968; Philpott, 1978).

In order for blackness to garner its bitter and elusive potency across the American cultural, political and legal landscape, the availability of variable skin pigmentation was as if made to order (Jacobson, 1998, pp. 203-222); for this skin tone variation permitted, authorized and fomented fictions that would worm through an otherwise clearly discernable interest *set* (a divested labor pool of *all* “races”), cleaving this common stake with bitter tensions. As the Church Committee (convened 1975) investigation uncovered, the FBI routinely deployed innuendo and supplied presidents with suspicion that civil rights activism was linked to communist party affiliations, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary (Johnson, 2004; Kotz, 2005). Such innuendo was possible because it reinforced the racist imaginary order already well in place after the vast, white/black labor breach that had first yawned at turn of 20th century, an abyss foreshadowing the spatial segmentation of whiteness and blackness that would ensue post-war

Blackscaping

During the 1970s and 1980s a word disappeared from the American vocabulary. It was not in the speeches of politicians decrying the multiple ills besetting American cities. It was not spoken by government officials responsible for administering the nation’s social programs. It was not mentioned by journalists reporting on the rising tide of homelessness, drugs, and violence in urban America. It was not discussed by foundation executives and think-tank experts proposing new programs for unemployed parents and unwed mothers. It was not articulated by civil rights leaders speaking out against the persistence of racial inequality; and it was nowhere to be found in the thousands of pages written by social scientists on the urban underclass. The word was segregation. (Massey & Denton, 1993, p. 1).

Thus opens the exhaustive study of race-based housing segregation in the United States from 1950 to 1990 by authors Douglass Massey and Nancy Denton (1993), finding that by 1990, among 30 of the largest U.S. metropolitan areas, all but one (San Francisco) major city was significantly more race stratified by neighborhood—with black Americans (as so classified by disambiguated census designations¹) geographically concentrated and isolated far more than any other race/ethnicity—than was the case any time prior to 1950. Alexander (1997), Witt (2006a, 2006b) and Witt, Kouzmin, Thorne and deHaven-Smith (2009) corroborate these claims: a canvass of leading U.S. public administration and policy journals indicates virtually nothing pertaining to race segregation from 1940 throughout the century. During the very period that American metropolitan areas became more segregated by race and more black-concentrated in American urban ghettos than had ever been the case *even before major civil rights legislation*, American public affairs journals assiduously, if not systematically, avoided examination of the root causes of the most intractable problems ever encountered in the United States because they were abetted by official policy making. The linkages between race fictions, governmental duplicity, class dominance and property, education and employment rights were thus rubbed out virtually entirely from the canvass of public administration scholarship.

Racist narratives were re-engineered beginning in the early 1980s when there rushed into conservative academic discourse new terminology, “the urban underclass,” overwriting (as if meaningless) what decades of race-classification had otherwise etched into policy and other pertinent landscape. According to the urban underclass thesis, the real scourge of urban slum areas—according to conservative authors like William Julius Wilson (1987) made prominent during the Reagan era by accommodating academic presses and think tanks—originated with the segmentation within-race-group of the “truly disadvantaged.” By this and kindred reasoning (e.g., public choice theory), those whom public policy putatively intended to help had in fact trapped into a “cycle (also “culture”) of poverty”. By narrowing how *blackness* had been and continued being constructed, the “urban underclass” thesis inverted the categorization schemata that had until that time denoted race classification in America: a process of ever-expanding in-group/out-group comparisons seeking to encompass (if narrowly define) all people.

Following the logic Yanow (2003) establishes, the tack initiated by the urban-underclass thesis seems to have been to disavow the relevance that *whiteness* has conferred upon those once considered “black” (Poles, Irish, Jews, Catholics in general, etc., who would become naturalized whites by custom if not official categorization) and emphasize instead the exclusive relevance of an increasingly narrow blackness. This exclusive, narrow focus has oriented policy attention to the less (black middle class), the little-bit-more (black working class), and the “truly disadvantaged,” the latter group coincidentally located in highly concentrated geographic areas; very unlike their *black-like* forbears (e.g., Irish, Poles, Italians, Slavic peoples), whose housing mobility had always been, by comparison, demonstrably more fluid and far less constrained by deed and covenant restrictions (McKenzie, 1995), and who themselves often lived shoulder to shoulder in areas of high ethnic diversity (excluding, particularly after WWI, black Americans). Notably, this systematic elision from public discourse about segregationist practices so happened to neatly coincide with a period of contracting urban labor demand and massively reduced federal subsidy for urban areas commensurate with a surge of

government provided private development subsidy for continuing suburban growth and expansion (Orfield, 2002; Levine, 2006; Frug, 1996).

Myth Making and Breaking

The driving force behind American fashioned blackness has not been the indifferent and/or bedeviled hand of bureaucratic category-making but instead the active cultivation by powerful actors intending to divest from a discernable class of people their civil liberties and thereby their capacity to generate real wealth with parity to white(ned) Americans, but which in actuality has divested the American creed of founding, stabilizing covenant and unshakable values. Per Malcolm X's prognostication opening this chapter: suspension of disbelief in these matters has produced a suspension of institutional legitimacy.

The next section examines three artistic works of narrative fiction (two novels: *Huckleberry Finn*, *Invisible Man*; one film, *The Matrix*) featuring race as either dominant motif or barely submerged in context. This examination is intended to reveal how race signification permeates American cultural consciousness, making blackness and whiteness paradoxically both highly visible and invisible; an alembic turbulence that befuddles and subverts how we might otherwise make plainly evident the manner in which policy making in America and invidious categorization schemes persist unchallenged and, more worrisomely, unchallengeable by conventional academic inquiry and on-the-ground public administration. First will be examined *Huckleberry Finn* (1885), which provides an enduring portrait of how fragile race innocence is in America. Second, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) is examined, a masterpiece of race candor written by one of the most influential American (if not also international) writers of the 20th century. This novel's closing epilogue prophesies the total psychological deracination depicted in the science fiction film epic *The Matrix* (1999-2003), which, though not outwardly a commentary on race in America, is laced with race iconography and symbolism. These three works help to substantiate Yanow's (2003) insights about the role fiction plays permitting policy action to proceed, and also to explain how perennially gullible and simultaneously culpable white America has been made to racist (un)consciousness and also suggest how white Americans can, and must re-conceptualize how racism now disenfranchises us all; for racism has always been a bait and switch tactic, now at the center of those empty pieties proclaiming a "post-racial America."

Adrift with *Huckleberry Finn*

Huck and the slave Jim are two profoundly disenfranchised characters, together escaping their circumstances drifting from Missouri down the Mississippi River. Huck is desperate to escape a brutally violent and alcoholic single parent father on the one hand, and also the oppressive conventions he attributes to life in town otherwise, beginning with his ward status under Miss Watson and the Widow Douglass. Jim seeks to escape his bondage under slavery (owned by Miss Watson) and reunite with his wife and children down river. Huck and Jim do not initially plot their escape together, but encounter one another early enroute.

Huck is among the leading archetypal incarnations of the (white) American Trickster, brimming with pluck and guile. But Huck deviates from pure Trickster amorality by, first, his abject subordination to a brutal father and also his categorical innocence as a youth; secondly, because of his emerging love for if not direct identification with Jim. These features of the story form the nexus of Twain's searing indictment and simultaneously soaring testament to American self-concept and race consciousness: only through the relatively innocent eyes and heart of youth, and then only after facing perilous challenges, can white America see past race stigmata and escape its delusional suspension of disbelief that humanity is not a singular essence. As a stereotype, Jim is drawn whole cloth from 19th century racist iconography; as with the superstition he is attached to and the depictions of childlike naïveté that he is characterized with. But it is by his characterization vis-à-vis Huck and the other characters populating the novel that Jim's authenticity and humanity is revealed.

The novel has been roundly criticized since its debut, most notably in recent decades for the racist iconography Twain utilizes for rendering Jim; criticism pointing to a dubious suspension of disbelief: Why is the (white) *boy* Huck depicted as so clever and full of pluck and guile, while the (black) *man* Jim is depicted as so gullible and dependent? In order to garner any realism for readers in the 1880s (not to mention readers decades thereafter), a relationship of desperate interdependence between a white man and a black man lacks the believability and emotional dynamism necessary to elicit suspension of disbelief. Huck's pluck and guile (far beyond his years) set against Jim's naïve innocence and profound disenfranchisement in spite of his age maturity is the narrative chrysalis and central motif of the story. This staging and characterization makes possible a central reversal: the identity crisis Huck experiences once realizing he must steal Jim back after he is stolen by two scoundrels and sold to another master.

Along their way, Huck and Jim encounter con men and desperados on the river, lunatic clans of warring faction on land, and gullible and forlorn townspeople. The novel is brimming with hilariously drawn caricature staging circumstances and actors at least, if not far more (if sometimes inadvertently) dangerous than the meandering Mississippi that Huck and Jim drift during a spring time flood, when the river's currents are most treacherous as they gather from riverbanks all manner of flotsam.

Against this backdrop, the profoundly "bare life" (cf. Agamben, 1995) the two characters endure on the river is far preferable for them to the institutionally disenfranchised circumstances they face on land; not merely because of the circumstances they have escaped up river, but because of the lunacy of life under "civilized" circumstances they cannot escape anywhere but on the shifting currents of dangerous waters: the moral order on land places demands on Huck he would rather defy and, thereby, risk damnation than betray his friendship with Jim. Only adrift on a raft amidst treacherous currents and traffic of gamblers and desperados did Huck have any chance of discovering this central basis of his humanity.

Only in the liminal space where the rules and categories ordaining right and wrong (the *superego* of civilization) are suspended could Huck (and Jim) have any chance of recovering their humanity and redeeming our own as readers; for the slave Jim stands little to no chance of freedom in a world absorbed to distraction with doing the *right* thing the (politically) *correct* way. Category making and breaking, the lure of culturally

ordained glory and privilege and other ordinance of cultural attachments are all at the center of Twain's very deceptively complex story telling.

Unmoored with *Invisible Man*

Writing in 1953 essay, Ralph Ellison limned Twain's characterization of the slave Jim: "[T]hough guilty of the sentimentality common to all humorists, [Twain] does not idealize the slave. Jim is drawn in all his ignorance and superstition, with his good traits and bad. He, like all men [sic], is ambiguous, limited by circumstance but not in possibility" (Ellison, 1953/2003, p. 88). With his first and also National Book Award winning novel, *Invisible Man* (first fully published in 1952), Ellison carves as if from Twain's mold a Promethean Jim now unbound from the circumstances of slavery, from which he rushes, Oedipus-like, headlong northward (in the reverse sequence Twain gives us Jim and Huck) towards first a bitter, then existentialist realization that there will be no innate human possibilities that cannot be defeated by the categorical circumstances that mid-20th century America presents the black man and woman.

Ellison adopts the first person narrative style, making possible the psychological depth and circumspection of the Narrator that proceeds apace with a welter of dehumanizing, numbing experiences as the Narrator encounters one after another of fiercely cruel and/or absurd farce, bewilderment, disillusionment and heart wrenching loss.

We encounter on the novel's first page the Narrator at the end of his story, a man in his late 30s, whose home is an underground cavern below the streets of Manhattan, illuminated by 1,369 lights powered by the electricity he pirates from Monopolated Light & Power. "Nothing, storm or flood, must get in the way of our need for light and ever more and brighter light. The truth is light and ever more and brighter light" (p. 7). Beneath the streets of the nominally most egalitarian of American cities at mid-20th century, *Invisible Man* domiciles himself, a circumstance that is paradoxically redundant to and profoundly confirming of the life he had once lived above ground. "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless head you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me" (Ellison, 2003, p. 3).

The Narrator's induction into invisibility begins upon entering manhood when he is invited to give his black high school graduation speech before a gathering of the town's (somewhere Southern) leading white citizens. The event he attends is actually a "smoker," a "battle royal" staged in the basement of a luxury hotel pitting a score of black youth in a brutal contest of punching and jabbing while blindfolded, barred from exit and egged on by the drunken tittering of the "leading (white) citizens" on floor tile wired with electrical current charged on and off as the boys flail at one another blindly and fall on knees and hands, convulsing from the electrical shock. Ellison's touch of ineffably light, macabre humor through this sequence and intermittently throughout the novel offsets the comparably ineffable despair the book renders.

The boys groped about like blind, cautious crabs crouching to protect their mid-sections, their heads pulled in short against their shoulders, their arms stretched nervously before them, with their fists testing the smoke-filled air like the knobbed feelers of hypersensitive snails. In one corner I glimpsed [pulling upwards his blindfold] a boy violently punching the air and heard him scream in pain as he smashed his hand against a ring post.

[...]

The harder we fought the more threatening the men became. And yet, I had begun to worry about my speech again. How would it go? Would they recognize my ability? What would they give me? (pp. 23-24).

The nighttime following this event the Narrator dreams he is at a circus with his grandfather (who is fiercely dubious of whites), who refuses to laugh no matter what the clowns do. In the dream, the Narrator's grandfather later beckons him to open the brief case (given to the Narrator with scholarship inside to a black college after he delivers his speech, bloodied with face puffing by the battle royal) and read what is inside, where the Narrator finds:

an official envelope stamped with the state seal; and inside the envelope I found another and another, endlessly, and I thought I would fall of weariness. "Them's years," [grandfather] said. "Now open that one." And I did and in it I found an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold. "Read it," my grandfather said. "Out loud!"

"To whom it may concern," I intoned. "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."

I awoke with the old man's laughter ringing in my ears.

Ellison stages some of the novel's major plot points through a series of speeches (some impromptu, some rehearsed) that circumstances impel the Narrator to deliver, making progressively evident that he is a *profoundly* invisible man; for he has fallen somehow from grace, seemingly before time, by forces he cannot quite fathom. At the opening of the novel the Narrator conveys his conviction that the only place that can supply sufficient illumination given his circumstances is a literally darkened pocket below a far more profoundly darkened surface world. A few pages from the end of the novel, the narrator realizes: "Now I know men [sic] are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health. Hence again I have stayed in my hole, because up above there's an increasing passion to make men conform to a pattern" (p. 576). The pattern the Narrator identifies here can be gleaned from context: the pattern of totalizing society under thrall of increasingly rigid ideologies at mid-20th century; ideologies that had swept the Narrator into "the Brotherhood" twenty years earlier (an oblique reference in the novel to the Communist Party of America), a political sect adopting and then propelling the Narrator fatefully forward in its thrall for his oratorical skill and categorical disenfranchisement as a black man.

In a near closing scene, riot breaks out in Harlem, where the Narrator had months earlier been stationed as a tenant organizer by the Brotherhood, but from where the Brotherhood withdrew him unexpectedly and without explanation. The Narrator blames this withdrawal for the ensuing violence and desperation, and chooses to run head long

into the bedlam; a plot point depicting a return to the battle royal the Narrator could not escape so many years earlier. Personal choice and compelled responsibility now impelled the Narrator to re-encounter the same sources of violence and desperation from which he seemingly could never escape.

Closing on the last page of epilogue section to the novel, Ellison brilliantly fudges, completely, the line between the Narrator and himself-as-author (and also the relevance of time sequence to story-telling) as he introduces himself, finally (circling back to the book's opening page), to a fiercely segregated America at mid-20th century just a few years after world war fought to vanquish race supremacy:

I'm shaking off my skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless. And I suppose it's damn well time. Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play. [...] Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else [but come forward] could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me:

Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you? (p. 581).

Total deracination in *The Matrix*

The science fiction film trilogy, *The Matrix*, depicts an epic struggle for consciousness being waged by the free people who warren deep in the Earth's crust (home portentously called Zion) against the Machine City, a world governed entirely by fully autonomous (and autogamous) artificial intelligence drawing its energy source from the body heat and electrical current it siphons directly from human life organisms implanted as embryos into superconducting, high rise gothic towers, and which grow there to adulthood entirely oblivious of their actual habitat. The film's central protagonist, Thomas A. Anderson, alias "Neo," is first encountered as a diffident system software designer by day, aspiring systems hacker by night, being inducted into a very postmodernist hero's journey requiring of him to "hack" into higher and higher levels of consciousness past the deceptions posed to him by the mainframe artificial intelligence (AI) known to him and a cadre of defiant others as The Matrix.

One of the film story's initial plot points opens with Neo being approached online by alias Morpheus, known initially to Neo as the most notorious systems hacker and most wanted "terrorist" by federal authorities and, as such, Neo's avowed hero. From this there ensues Neo's initial induction into what will become his epic struggle against a rogue cybernetic program, Agent Smith, whose malevolence threatens not only to destroy all free human life beneath the Earth's surface, but to derail the artificial world sustained by the Matrix itself.

The Matrix world is governed entirely by the illusions propagated by a massive system relay of virtual reality programs operated (for the most part) by a super colossal mainframe system governed by AI. This propagation of illusionary fictions is necessary for keeping the countless legions of pod-enclosed human organisms sufficiently ignorant

of their real purpose and profoundly morbid existence: one that serves to supply thermodynamic energy taxed from them for the Matrix operations. Thereby is sustained the ultimate narrative pretention: a world that is entirely and profoundly self-referenced.

Except for one fleeting scene featuring two people of color at a distance in a crowd, all the inhabitants of the artificial world are white, none more so than Agent Smith himself, who, though not an organic life form, appears vividly so to the deeply unconscious human denizens tied umbilically to the Matrix. Only outside of the Matrix simulated world can there be found people of color, beginning with Morpheus himself (played in the film by actor Laurence Fishburne). It follows, at a surface level of plot analysis, that the rules governing the Matrix world do not work for a discernable class of people and, as such, that these people are most inclined, as with Morpheus himself, to opt out of the Matrix given the opportunity to do, for it is a “world” governed by a profound and suspension of disbelief with highly selective and brutal consequences. Such voluntary exit from the Matrix is no straightforward matter, as is depicted in scene when Morpheus and his pirate crew abduct/rescue Neo from the amniotic, gelatinous pod he actually inhabits when he first meets Morpheus online.

As with Ellison’s Narrator, Neo is also compelled to unmoor himself from the symbolic world otherwise subsuming his self-concept. Unlike Ellison’s Narrator, Neo is himself very white. It is therefore Neo’s invisibility *to himself* that must be overcome; the complete replacement of a (profoundly) *received* self-concept with an antithetically and diametrically opposing *derived* self-concept. For this process to be fully transacted, Neo must eventually realize that the rogue computer program, Agent Smith, which is singularly devoted to a monstrously deracinated purpose to seek out and destroy any “anomaly” to the Mainframe fiction (anyone questioning Matrix reality), is the “other face” of Neo himself.

The Matrix film story is in this sense tale of hero’s struggle to recover his humanity from absolute subordination of human to machine consciousness; the dark terror that Morpheus (Greek God of Dreams, son of Sleep) plaintively evokes at pivotal plot point where he reminds Zion it has been fighting the Machines for 100 years. This speech mimics in tone and cadence very closely the kindred sentiment evoked by Martin Luther King before the throng gathered at the Nation’s Capital in 1963, one hundred years and eight months after Lincoln’s second Emancipation Proclamation (January 1, 1863) pronouncing after the first Emancipation Proclamation (September 22, 1862) the 10 states wherefrom slaves were to be explicitly made free.

Like *Invisible Man*, *The Matrix* evokes a world profoundly antagonistic towards “the other” that is forced, like Invisible Man, literally underground. But in the Matrix, the “other” is no longer merely one defined by his/her skin tone and physiognomy, acquired cultural traits and suborned social status; the “other” in the Matrix is anyone refusing to accept a received reality ordaining brutal fictions that very literally and categorically disenfranchise mind from body. The full scale siege battle waged by the Machines against Zion – chickens home to roost – is forestalled only after Neo finally compels the Agent Smith program to accept its impermanence and subordinate itself to a world delicately balanced between human consciousness free from direct enslavement, and everyone else willing to accept the Matrix on its own terms and as real.

Conclusion

In an essay entitled “Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Face of Humanity,” Ralph Ellison (1953) compares the work of Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn* with the iconic works of Ernest Hemingway (and also William Faulkner). Ellison’s purpose in this essay is to examine how by the early 1920s America had entirely forsaken the “black face of humanity” that Ellison sees limned by Twain’s depiction of Huck and Jim; an irony, given that Hemingway had famously avowed that all American literature started from, if it did not directly mimic *Huckleberry Finn*. For Ellison, Hemingway represented the iconic embodiment of tragic retreat from the moral odyssey authors like Twain (also Melville, Poe and Hawthorne) viewed as foundational to American fiction: reconciling America’s avowed doctrine of human freedom with its (near) mortally, self-inflicted disgrace of black slavery. Ellison pinpoints in Hemingway a profound blindness to this dilemma, citing Hemingway’s remarks that all readers should “stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys. That is the real end. The rest is just cheating” (cited in Ellison, 2003, p. 90). Hemingway’s lean writing style owed clear debt to Twain—flexible colloquial idiom, the vivid and sharp naturalism of yeoman characters, the “thematic potentiality” of adolescent realization and discovery—is achieved, according to Ellison, with the sacrifice of Twain’s encompassing moral vision. “And just as the trend toward technique for the sake of technique and production for the sake of the market lead to the neglect of the human need out of which they spring, so do they lead in literature to a marvelous technical virtuosity won at the expense of a gross insensitivity to fraternal values” (Ellison, 2003, p. 91).

Speaking of Hemingway’s preoccupation with physical violence and disfiguration, Ellison (1953) writes:

Here is the literary form by which the personal guilt of the pulverized individual of our rugged era is expatiated: not through his identification with the guilty acts of an Oedipus, a Macbeth or a Medea, by suffering their agony and loading his sins upon their “strong and passionate shoulders,” but by being gored with a bull, hooked with a fish, impaled with a grasshopper on a fishhook; not by identifying himself with human heroes, but with those who are indeed defeated. (p. 95).

Ellison (1953) continues:

And when I read the early Hemingway I seem to be in the presence of a *Huckleberry Finn* who, instead of identifying himself with humanity and attempting to steal Jim free, chose to write the letter [to Miss Watson] which sent him back into slavery. So that now he is a Huck full of regret and nostalgia, suffering a sense of guilt that fills even his noondays with nightmares, and against which, like a terrified child avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk, he seeks protection through the compulsive minor rituals of his prose. (pp. 95-96).

Here we arrive full circle to (re-encounter) the subtext of race classification schemes in America that Yanow (2003) examines: compulsive, minor prose rituals intended to obscure from view a history of governmental venality, subversion of authentically free

housing and labor markets, willful contravention of civil liberties and other dubious and duplicitous actions that have been underwritten if not conceived by powerful governmental agents, agencies and auxiliary actors, including (directly and indirectly) scores upon scores of academics. Of course race schemata can be claimed to have legitimate purposes. But these purposes are not the origin of these schemata; these schemata are half-baked policy responses and make-up calls beckoning equally half-baked reaction, as with the synthetic “culture of poverty” thesis of the 1980s or the “post-racial America” piety parroted constantly on Fox News since 2008 and picked up like clockwork by larger media networks: all actions proceeding from a willful suspension of disbelief.

We have in this sense, as the hired guns at Fox New exhorted of us constantly in lead up to the 2008 presidential election, become a “post-racial America.” Race as salient social schemata *has* become in some very bitter and paradoxical ways profoundly irrelevant now that, failing to confront the spin doctors across decades of the vicious illusion and fiction of race, America has become overrun by an institutional matrix more and more uncoupled from this nation’s founding tragic awareness: the price of freedom/democracy is eternal vigilance directed, first and foremost, inward against compulsive minor rituals and outwards towards those who propagate them. This is where literature transects our individual biographies and could/would/should embolden us to defy the fictions and illusions that popular categories subject us to.

Notes

1. For review of the literature on the measurement of segregation by race see Taeuber and Taeuber (1985), Massey and Denton (1988), White (1986).

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