

A Little Devil In America:
Notes in Praise of Black Performance

by: Hanif Abdurraqib

Pgs. 89-91

On the Certain and
Uncertain Movement of Limbs

NO ONE KNEW exactly what it was to *talk white* around any of the places I grew up. It was a sound that could be pinpointed, but the goalposts also moved, depending on what side of town you were on, or what school you went to. Many in my crew now might not admit it, but when we were kids—depending on where we grew up—to pin dressing white, or talking white, or acting white on someone who was not white felt like one of the most visceral of insults. Part of this is because the designation could mean any number of things, all of them likely something a Black person didn't want to be on the wrong side of.

It's not like any of my crew knew what code-switching was when we were rolling through our neighborhoods on bikes in the mid-'90s. Our parents knew it, even if they didn't know the language for it. Our parents who worked government jobs, or rang people up at the grocery stores in surrounding suburbs. My father, who would return home after work and sit in our driveway with the windows up on our old van, letting loud jazz fill the car's interior for a few moments before exiting. Like it was a bridge bringing him back to a more familiar self.

But in the small segments of world my crew and I inhabited, there was no need to code-switch or even understand the concept. Most of the neighborhood was Black. Most of our

school was Black, and the kids who weren't Black mostly grew up around Black kids. Everyone at the corner store was Black. The cops in our neighborhoods were Black and sometimes one of them knew someone's older brother and might look the other way when a Snickers bar was swiped from the candy aisle.

In the *Cosby Show* era, our elders might tell us to *talk proper*, but no one, even them, had a clear idea of what that meant. No cursing, sure. But also a suggestion that we enunciate with clarity, or maybe not clip a letter off the backside of our words. That might play around the house, with someone you love pretending not to hear you unless you pronounced a word with a tone they wanted to hear. Of course, as easy as it is to paint these actions as shameful now, and as easy as it was to be annoyed by them back then, it is just another move in a line of moves that seemed invested in safety. In retrospect, I have sympathy for this concern, when it came from elders who I knew had these beliefs because of violence they'd witnessed, or been a victim of. Things they'd been denied access to. The idea that if only they'd sounded a certain way, or dressed a certain way, things might be different. If their family could be mapped onto a Black sitcom family, that might do the trick. One way trauma can impact us is by the way it makes us consider a polite proximity to violence and oppression as comfort.

And so, in rebellion, our familiar slang flooded school hallways. We cursed with impunity on basketball courts, letting the words dangle in the air long and loud after a missed shot, or a made shot, or a foul, or a pass skipping out of bounds. Any cause for frustration or celebration, punctuated with language our grandmothers would try to slap off our tongues. And, of course, when someone was mercilessly mocked for *talking white*, even when it was done with affection and not

malice (which was often the case), we laughed, or sat silent. Foolish rebellion, but rebellion nonetheless. Our schools, tucked in the city's urban interior, might occasionally get a student who transferred in from the suburbs. Someone who had parents with luck that shifted in a different direction, forcing them to cut back on private school, or move to a smaller house. A student who, used to the confines of a uniform, would come to school tucked in, or with a tie. Someone would take the new kid under their wing, and within a week, the button-down shirts became monochromatic tees, the slacks became jeans, and the loafers became white Nikes.

I have thought often of these two contrasting acts of care, both performed in the hope that someone might conform safely and comfortably to their environment: our parents and grandparents gently nudging us toward a respectability they believed might save us in a world outside the confines of our neighborhood, and the coolest Black kids in a middle or high school putting an arm around someone new and not hip, showing them the ropes. Giving them music to listen to, or telling them what mall to hang out at on the weekends. All of this done out of (a sometimes misguided) love. A love that tells people that who they are isn't enough, but that they can at least perform in a way that will make others believe they are enough until an ecosystem fully embraces them. I think of this tension as a push and pull, between generations and histories and geographies. Between those who would try to convince us of a type of survival and those of us who would spend much of our adolescence detaching ourselves from those teachings, taking as many people as we could with us in the process.

Everyone putting on different masks for different worlds and calling it freedom.

* * *