

Jesters, tricksters, taggers and haints: Hipping the church to the Afro-hop, pop-'n-lock mock-up currently rocking apocalyptic Detroit

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The following essay investigates the animating force of jester-humour and trickster-critique as necessary components of prophetic consciousness and social movement. Climate change devastation coupled with racialised socio-economic predation today faces social movement with a stark demand. The root-work necessary enjoins challenge of human presumption about the meaning of life at the most basic level. The locus from which such a depth-exploration will be elaborated here is postindustrial Detroit, on the part of a poet-activist-educator who will insist that 'jesterism' as 'prophetic animation' cannot merely be 'talked about', but begs performance and embodiment – even in the process of writing and theorising. Indigenous wisdom and folk spirituality will supply historical perspective in asserting laughter as both antidote to trauma and tactic of critique – whether looking at traditional African practices of tricksterism reincarnate in everyday street life in Detroit, medieval Christian celebrations of the Feast of Fools subverting official Church orthodoxies in feudal Europe, or the postmodern insurgence of hip-hop beats and tags in challenging corporate gentrification and church capitulation at the emblematic heart of de-industrialisation.

Setting the stage

The immediate provocation for the thinking offered here was an invitation from the 2016 Biennial Consultation on Urban Ministry in Pretoria to keynote the conference on the subject of jesterism as a key component of political resistance. But I can no longer (speak and) write merely theoretically. My deepest learning from more than 30 years of living and working in Detroit in particular (as from ongoing engagements with indigenous cultures in more recent decades) is that style *is* theology. The politics of spirit is never merely written about, but profoundly embodies its commitments in the very poetics of its articulation – and never more so than when that 'poetics' insists on dry academics as its default. This essay will not accede to that default, but carry out its argument in its very figurement.

As a white middle class transplant to inner city Detroit beginning in my early twenties, the perspective I bring is one profoundly shaped by black cultural confrontation and transfiguration, compounded by indigenous challenge. The analysis offered – rooted in that most intimate personal upheaval – seeks to lay bare the stakes on the broadest horizon possible. The sheer size and seriousness of the ecological and political crises we face today demand a commensurate scale and depth of analysis. In what follows, I will trace the beginnings of personal transformation in the particularities of my Motown 'initiation' into resurgent Afro street-tricksterisms, set that encounter in the widest possible frame of global ecological crisis in which nature herself challenges our entire species with her own robust trickiness, mobilise theoretical depth on the stakes of that crisis by way of Bakhtinian reflection on European 'folk jesterism', return to Detroit articulations of prophetic 'send-up' and ribaldry in the key of architecture and conclude with a brief biblical riff in counterpoint. The shared thematic across those disparate times and geographies is the capacity of embodied gesture, coded in various cultural traditions of picaresque laughter, to probe deep spiritual crisis and return hubris and hierarchy to our equalising 'commons' of eating, copulating and dying.

Detroit initiation

Graffo defiance

I begin where I am. I sit on a scorching July morning in the Circuit Court of Detroit, proud member of the Defense Committee for Antonio Cosme and William Lucca, local taggers, rung up on felony

Note: The collection entitled 'Spirit rising: tracing movements of justice', forms part of the 'Faith in the City' research project, hosted by the Centre for Contextual Ministry in the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria. Some of the articles were papers presented at the Biennial Consultation on Urban Ministry, hosted by the Institute for Urban Ministry, in collaboration with other organizations, from 17-20 August 2016. The theme of this Consultation was '#We must rise: healers - dreamers – jesters'.



Source: Photo courtesy of Detroit Water Brigade

FIGURE 1: 'Free the Water' and black fist mural on a water tower in Highland Park.

charges for daring etch their graffo-pitch for greater justice on the side of a central city water tower (actually located in Highland Park, launching point for Henry Ford's first auto plant, a chocolate city of profound poverty entirely engulfed in the larger city of black poverty known as Detroit). Their 10-foot high letters scribe the sky with a tear from the eye of the poor. It cries: 'Free the water'. Release the flow. A crow call from 70 feet up that decries the water war promulgated by government against its own citizens on the ground down below (where since 2013, more than 90 000 homes have had their water shut off). And next to it, a big black fist in salute!

So taken are the artists with their own hubris and art, in the first blush of coming dawn, they stop to admire the work they have channelled before scrambling back down the iron-rungs. What do they see? Puerto Rican courage meets Afro-futurist aesthetic in a stark political statement! They are proud. But then ... oops! Too late! Blue-red strobe of lights and piercing siren wails suddenly interrupt the reverie and they are trapped on high, caught with their bodies aloft and their hands marked by aerosol smudges. So much for being titillated by a creative ardour that surprises even its own authors! Wry smiles register chagrin at their own foolery in pausing too long, once they are back down on the street, their hands cuffed, equipment confiscated and an arduous journey begun. First stop is the Highland Park jail for those caught in the act. Next day release; followed by an 18-month hiatus, waiting for the legal redress to kick into gear. But in the spring of 2016, the mess commenced.

Multiple court appearances later, the charges 'dropped' (were issued): they faced felony comeuppance – in Lucca's case, multiplied by 8, for other tags that bear his distinctive label, found at sites scattered across the Motown blight. Detroit's new mayor has long established himself as the graffiti enemy of the hour, going missionary and medieval on recalcitrant taggers, vowing to make them emblems of deterrence for anyone who would hint at putting up paint in 'his' town (Asher 2015:1; Counts 2016:1–3; McGraw & Schmitt 2013:1–3). So, the City of the Car is now head of the line in criminalising sublimely colourful street designs (even though

the charges here were finally argued down to community service and fines). And here be deep palavers and knuckle-headed slanders and all manner of Gucci-suited squabbles and shouts about property titles and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) rights, youth disenfranchisement and school abandonment, foreclosure epidemics and debacles of waste management companies using vacant lots as midnight dumping pits for their suburban 'freight' of garbage. We will get to such discussions presently, but for now, I want to lift up taggers as the silent court jesters of the age of the image, plying their messages of challenge and laughter, bubble-letter banter and darkly scrawled disaster, mirrors of the filibustering culture of trivial pursuit and the irrepressible mustering of young life made desperate and courageous by its unwanted and close encounter with death before its time.

Lucca, indeed, would likely be decried as just such a knave by the court, given his get-up: multishaded pixelated indigo wool jacket, purple-striped tie, dark grey shirt laced with white swirls and orange and yellow collar. Afro-punk hair standing out perpendicular from every follicle in an exploding bomb design, bead-dangled earrings and red-polished fingernails announcing without apology, 'I'm here, and I am not any category you want to take shelter in: Deal with it!' Yes, jester sublime; prophet without a dime; asking in syncopated rhyme without a single word spoken: 'Will the real crime please stand up?'

Black intelligence

It is in deep appreciation for, and full cooperation with, just such a jester-gesture that I offer what follows. I speak, without apology, from postapocalyptic Detroit. For me: beloved home base now for more than 30 years duration. Fresh from college graduation in 1974, I drove from birthplace Cincinnati, Ohio, to east side Motown, Michigan, with my entire life holdings packed up in my used Chevy Two, and plopped down in that decimated 'hood¹ – among the poorest and blackest in the country at the time – to join a renegade experiment in Christian community living. There some 70 Spirit-haunted seekers, stepping free from mainstream proprieties and values, were combining efforts in a common cause. We pooled income and assets on a poverty-level budget, black and white, married and single, residing as extended family units crammed into single-family houses within a six block radius of the neighbourhood Episcopal Church – itself, a barely functioning entity at the time the new community first formed, with less than 50 people on the membership rolls.

For the next 15 years – initiation, confrontation, education and reformulation at the most basic level – fears dis-spelled and atoms re-arranged!

We ran a range of ministries – a school and day care for neighbourhood kids, food pantry and clothing exchange shop for adults, hospitality initiatives (in our homes) for addicts and alcoholics, worked with apartment tenants to take over their buildings as cooperative housing units,

1. Street lingo for 'neighborhood'.

organised and controlled by them, collaborated with Detroit anarchists resisting the arms race and sent church members to recently liberated Nicaragua as human shields against US designs to invade. What began for me as a venture of mission – white boy without contrition thinking he is heaven-sent to help black folk deal with an impossible situation – after 8 years, upended into a very different vision. It took that amount of time finally to reach the endpoint of my own supremacist assumptions, and finally be able to see the ribald vitality and raw creativity of ordinary folk, using culture and wit, to make desperation and poverty yield beauty in spite of the desolation. Teenagers with boom boxes convening parties on broken down porches that made any club I had been to, look tame by comparison. Grandmothers – on summer evening stoops – spinning tales that made sitcoms seem boring by compare. Four generations of one family, living intensely inside one-half of a duplex – 28-people-strong, sleeping in shifts, pots of food on the stove 24/7, struggling with the tension, but exhibiting an incredible penchant for humour and banter and large-hearted magnanimity that put my own small-minded ‘resolve to share’ to shame.

Over time, dwelling on those streets, stereotypes and sphincter relaxed, my feet picked up new beats, and my tongue new syntax, and I gradually fell in love with the sheer force of the survival potency I saw all around me. Minimal resources and decimated architecture dulled into a harsh backdrop for maximal style and living large grandiosity and brilliance of personality remaking the world into a menagerie of character and retort, mythic in proportions. I was living inside a legend. The most ordinary person at any moment might suddenly channel the most breathtaking ferocity I had ever encountered in our species. Daily life became a schoolhouse in spiritual sagacity. If you cannot control the powers that control you – at least do jujitsu on ‘em and make their worst intent yield a send-up that is uncontainable. Inner city humour, in my country, historically has woven black skin into a clown-cloak of disguise, from under which might emerge in a microsecond thrust of rancour, a razor of deconstruction capable of eviscerating an entire culture in a mere eye-blink and word-krump,² without even leaving an identifiable wound site. But as Black Lives Matter is making apparent, like the ghost of Black Power come back from the grave, the clown-weave is ultimately just so much white eye-glitter; what is on the rise ‘ain’t jokin’. But more on that later.

Street life, for me, on the way into my present position, was like living in a possession cult of recurrent (black) epiphanies – speech deities like the Signifying Monkey ventriloquising Eshu-Elegua of Nigeria and Benin; anger-oracles like the blacksmith-god of the Yoruba or the lightning-striking, stone-fighting Shango-king of the Oyo; Oya and Yemaya devas of wind-daring and water-wrath; and countless unnamed *orishas* of bargain-basement opulence – all of them regularly climbing the spine of whatever refusing-to-be supine *savant-of-survival* I might be encountering on any given day (Barnes

2. Krumping is a raw, staccato, highly energetic form of dancing developed by teenagers in South Central, Los Angeles, in the early 2000s, to express and transform the violence of their neighbourhood experiences into communal celebrations and competitions bordering on possession cult animation.

1997a:xiii–xix; Barnes 1997b:1, 3, 19–23; Barnett 1997:92–93; Cosentino 1997:290–314; Gates 1988:xxvii, 4–6, 47–49, 54, 57, 76; Gleason 1992 [1987]:1, 18, 28–31, 46, 55–57; Marks 1974:64–66, 96–98, 104, 115; Perkinson 2001:567–568, 575–584).

These typically ‘off the chain’³ performances of black anger and humour, flamboyance of lip and gown, were all regularly interpreted by dominant white culture as evidence of backwardness or worse – but in effect, brought forward into the diaspora of peoples ripped from their home continent, a bit of ‘home’ reconstructed in ritual and behaviour. Here, the tricksterism central to so much African ritual and myth, initiation and griot-riff, gained traction at a new level of subtlety in animating insider (black-on-black) recognition right under the nose of white surveillance and control. Indeed, some of the oldest jesterism on the planet is elaborately coded in the antics of Legba of the Fon and the Akan Ananse, Ogu-Yurugu of the Dogon and the Yoruban Eshu (Pelton 1980:35, 38, 58, 79, 85, 88, 92–94, 101–102, 127, 129–131, 138–139, 164–165, 172, 176, 185, 205). Slavery and postslavery survival trickery hid these characters ‘in plain view’ under Roman Catholic saints and manners in *Vodou*, *Santeria* and *Candomblé* liturgies, and in more surreptitious antics of call/response ‘whooping’⁴ in Black Protestant Church worship. But equally in more secular ‘upwellings’ in blues, jazz, funk and mack⁵ cultures, street rituals of ‘specifying, lying and capping’ or ‘playing the dozens’,⁶ as now in getting ‘struck’ (‘possessed’) in krump battle dances and ‘freestyling’ in hip-hop diss-rhyme⁷ competition and ciphers!⁸ And there is some kinship here with the praise-song traditions of the griots of West Africa, whose function *vis a vis* kings was to provoke worthy deeds by pointed words (Niane 1965:58, 53). In griot cultures, at times various lineages might fall into a ‘banter-brotherhood’ relationship with each other – which in the case of Bala Faaseega Kuyate and Sunjata of old Mali, for instance, licensed the *jali* (griot) to insult the king with impunity (Niane 1965:9, 17, 78; Suso 1999 [1974]:16–17, line 441–475; 102, footnote on line 470). In a somewhat different example, in the Gambian version of the Sunjata epic, the teen prodigy himself, before liberating the kingship of Manding from oppression, purchases a burial plot for his mother under duress, from his host at Neema, Faring Burema Tunkara, with a cryptically searing arrangement of ‘prophetic objects’ (a broken pot, a bush fowl egg and some old thatching

3. An early hip-hop term for stellar and inimitable achievement and expression.

4. A black church term for preaching, at the moment of ‘code-switching’, when the preacher finds the groove, goes into more trance-like mode of poly-rhythmic interaction with the congregation in a ‘high-voltage’ delivery style that enjoins equally high-voltage audience response.

5. A street term for enterprising and eloquent, ‘psycho-genius’, mantic-tongued pimps.

6. Each of these are instances of what Gates calls ‘signifying’ in his book by that name, pointing to artful deployments, at a moment’s notice in everyday life, of irony, parody, indirection, metonymy, paralogy (rolling eyeballs, head wags and deadpan), and so on, in negotiating or even instigating conflict, thus sharpening skills for preserving psychic dignity linguistically in a culture of racist adversity and physical jeopardy (Gates 1988:67–69, 76–80).

7. MC duels in public settings in which each tries to ‘slay’ the other by way of rapidly spit (articulated), humorous and debilitating insults.

8. A round robin of MCs, spitting lyrics ‘straight off the dome’ (totally improvised in the moment) in rapid succession, each picking up the flow where the previous rhymer left off.

grass) on a winnowing tray, promising coming retribution, but only made intelligible for the recipient by a resident griot named Makhang Know It All (Suso 1999 [1974]:15–16, lines 415–435). ‘Know it all’, indeed! All of this remarkable history of polyglot dexterity and linguistic prolixity and epistemological proclivity was alive and well on the streets of eastside Detroit.

But as an outsider to such an ancient and multileveled tradition of polemic – I had to learn ‘to see’ (Perkinson 2004:2–4, 12, 49, 84, 216, 222). And once the scales fell, then I had to learn to recognise that I was, at one level, merely one of the privileged stooges their ‘jesting’ was fooling with (Perkinson 2004:97–102). In mainstream US culture, the black community has regularly been cast as ‘house fool’, useful for a laugh, and for white folk to humour on their way to feeling superior, but never seriously entertained as human and peer, much less as tutor and critic (Perkinson 2004:115–117, 151–184; Roediger 1991:115–122). For much of the history, without much real choice, the black community has complied – using the projected buffoonery as ‘cover’, under which to hatch strategy, create underground zones of relative safety and act and dream otherwise (Ellison 1972:1–14; Gates 1988:xxiv, 67, 69, 75–77, 85; Lattany 1994 [1993]:165–166, 172; Spencer 1995:165, 173; Watkins 2005:66–71).

But recurrently, the joker uncloaks the jeremiad (Spencer 1991:2–5; 1995:136, 142–146, 149). In slave rebellion, in the Civil War, in the Black Power Movement, in certain expressions of hip hop, and now once again in Black Lives Matter, for instance – what the jester hides under the jest comes forward in unveiled protest and unrepentant insurgence (Boggs & Kurashige 2011:666–8, 82–86, 107; Cone 1989 [1969]:1–4, 118, 29, 151; Douglas 1968:78–83; George 1999 [1998]:ix–xiii; Hooks 1990:151–152; James 1963:85–117; Lattany 1994 [1993]:167; Perkins 1996:18–24; Raboteau 1978:295, 305). The killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson,⁹ like Trayvon Martin in Florida or Renisha McBride in Dearborn, Eric Garner on Staten Island, and Walter Scott in Charleston, Tamir Rice on a playground and Freddie Gray in a van, and the ceaseless litany of young black and brown bodies shot by terrified police and rabid vigilantes before and since, and now Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge and Philando Castile sitting in his car in St. Paul – all this old bloodletting has now gone viral in a new vigilance of citizen cell-phoning and the revolution, this time, may indeed be televised. Not surprisingly, for a country that so ruthlessly markets its weaponry worldwide, making dividends out of glocks and stock options out of bombs – some of that technology has been turned around on the blue suits and deep rage has begun to shoot back. I live in a strapped down country – where there now are more guns than people (Ingraham 2015:1). And the real question of the day, in the United States

9. This particular killing of a young black man, 18-year-old Michael Brown, by Darren Wilson, 28-year-old white Ferguson, MO police officer, launched the black-youth-led Black Lives Matter protest movement, challenging police killings of black and brown people in particular, but indeed, the entire regime of white supremacist violence and oppression constraining the country at large, ever since. The litany of such killings is hinted in the list of names offered, but continues apace – far too many to name and not entirely even knowable because of inaccurate police reporting.

of America, is whether we will fracture into a new version of civil war a la Syria, or finally face the global crisis white supremacy has unleashed on the planet over the last 500 years and figure out how not to go extinct as a species.

Ecocidal challenge

Natural comeuppance

The not-so-funny-prophecy the fool-of-the-hour foreshadows now is a level of emergency humanity has never before faced. Going bleak so quick – after beginning with a promised focus on joking – is necessary to the augury. Ferreting out the vibrancy of jestering requires attending to the tear underneath the titillation. Real ribaldry and comedy, the harlequin of Picasso fame and simpleton Dostoevsky loved, the clown and sound and fury of Middle Ages revelry of village folk and peasant blokes and all the tokes and toasts and carnival pokes at pretention and hierarchy have their real potency and cogency as responses to decay and death (as we shall see). And here, there is a truth beneath the truth of oppression, that in our hyperviolence may well be lost in all the smoke and torn flesh (Long 1986:164–165).

And I can only say, must say, up front, I speak as a white straight male, late beneficiary of this half-millennia-long system of global plunder that has never ceased its reach into not merely the pockets of the poor, and the vaginas of the enslaved, and the marrow of the native, but now even the cortex of the mouse, the gene of bean, the DNA of the corn, the very womb of the queen of the bees, indeed, into the living spleen of our Earth Mother to pull up the emulsified plankton-ancestors of the great down under of our ancient seas – all for the sake of a lifestyle of consumerist monstrosity, opening its 7-billion-strong maw on the secret beauty of an entire planet, converting all things living and dead into zombie-forms of half-life toxicity – neither living nor dead, unable to decay and be reborn, unable to be healed and rekindled in the living fire of eyes and fur and speech (Glenn 2007:1–2; Saenz 2010:1). We dig up our deep ancestry and run it, at ever faster pace, through the exhaust pipes of our SUVs and 747s and corporatised industries, stamp it into bottle shape to make profit from water and spread a particulate blanket of discarded plastic across the Pacific as vast, now, as the continental dimensions of Africa (called ‘the Eastern Garbage Patch’ – one of six covering 40% of all oceans; Jensen & McBay 2009:101).

And we now huddle, increasingly desperate, on an infrastructural platform of re-engineered biosphere that cantilevers out over the carrying capacity of the planet (Engelmann 2011:1–4). We are using things up and converting them into garbage far faster than the earth can absorb, swallow, compost, incubate and rebirth as life and viability (Haraway 2015:1, 2016:2). We dangle over the void. And in our bellies, at some level, we recognise the precarity. In the face of such, it will not do to ‘disappear’, ever more frenzied with fascination, into our socially mediated techno-denials. The planet is rapidly careening into a resolute necessity to eliminate us as a species. Among the scientists I read, all we

need to do to go extinct by century's end is keep on as we are (Hedges 2017:1–4; Levitan 2012:1; McPherson 2013:85–104; Wallace-Wells 2017:1–14). If we would live beyond the current crisis, we must change radically.

But in what direction? Not merely forward towards something utopic called 'revolution'. At this juncture, I would judge even more crucial that we learn to turn around and bow literally *to the ground* with repentance and respect for what our ancestry knew. Climate change and its accompaniments – like the warning of rising ocean and growing desert that it is the African continent and various Island peoples (such as my wife's brood in the Philippines) who are slated to suffer most immediately and catastrophically – demands a full stop. Who are we? What does it mean to live as a primate animal called 'human being'? How grasp our history and re-imagine our destiny? These are the serious questions every jester hides under the titters and foolery.

Today, it is the climate itself that roars with mockery and belly laughs. The likes of postmodern theorist Donna Haraway has already cast Nature herself as Trickster writ large – in her moods and complexity, ravenous appetites and raucous intricacies, a symbiotic and cyborgian 'monstrosity' beyond our capacity to image or fully imagine (Haraway 1992:297–299, 313, 331). What is a jungle? Or a volcano? And what the relation between? Or for that matter, a fly? Can you make one? Nature is incomprehensibly magnificent and terrifying! And at the same time, she is mistress of the miniature, launching bacteria into the mix as perhaps the prime stuff of life. I would also deem her Grand Jester-in-Drag, Great Chimera in Stealth, Graffo-Artist without Peer, painting every eastern sky at dawn and western limit at dusk with inimitable pageantry and pathos. But like Jesus before his Pharisaic inquisitors seeking his demise, She asserts today, 'When it is evening, you say, "It will be fair tomorrow, for the sky is red" ... but you do not know how to read the signs of the times' (Mt 16:3). Except now there is also this ominous wrinkle – in so many places, Detroit included, no red band of prediction haloes the horizon with omen as day slides towards night, but only a sickly orange spell of pollution obliterating connection with the immensity of the heaven and the stars that are our actual home and futurity. Not only can we not read the signs; increasingly, we cannot read the sky.

We think we are creatures of the machine called the city, and no longer the offspring of the Unfathomable Mystery called the wild. But we cannot yet eat our computers or smartphones. We remain organic and flesh, in our spirited march across the earth and upsurge through time. We are animal, born of plant, made of water and brine and flashing neuro-meme whose astonishing beauty and ingenuity is only matched by our equally astonishing pathology and demise. Mud-birthered, we return to mud at the end of our day, and become part of everything else. And that is the key the jester-coat hides. It is a truth our ancestry imbibed without flinching or delusion; it is a fact that indigenous people, who yet breathe in our own time, know like the back of their well-worn hands. It is a certainty we flee.

Body openness

But it is perhaps the oldest root of humour. C.S. Lewis (1971) once said, 'The oldest joke on the planet is that human beings have bodies' (p. 101). Indeed. But it is not just the fact of bodies that titillates. It is rather the fact that these bodies do not remain themselves. They eat other bodies, drool in pleasure, blow snot in illness, ooze blood when cut or the time of the month comes, belch in satiety, fart a blimp of air when food breaks down, piss pale yellow and defecate deep brown when the digestion is done. To be a body is to be in constant exchange with other bodies. Sex is obviously the most curious of these. Just what was the heavenly court thinking when the first cells opted out of fissiparity and began copulating? Answer: they were not thinking; they were bursting with a new, heretofore unbirthed blast of divine conniption. They were laughing! And have been ever since! Sex is serious stuff – but also the most hilariously ludicrous obsession our species has ever become addicted to.

But the whole range of exchange with the ecosystem – teeth tearing animal flesh and plant cellulose, lips drinking in beer, anus squeezing out air, the entire throughput of elements that *is* our body offers a menagerie of hilarity that is only matched by the utter finality of its sign. To be a body is to be temporary. We live, by means of the massive decay within us of other bodies. And we are destined to the same fate. It is eating all the way up and down the phylum. Life and death are mere abstractions from each other. In reality, to be alive is to be also a living cemetery for other beings. The bellies of each of us produce billions of bacteria a day that work to maintain our immune system (in effect helping to 'do battle' against invading bacteria) and die off as evacuated (Wenner 2007:1–6). And if they do not, we die. In fact, we are apparently minorities in our own bodies (Specter 2012:2–5; but Sender, Fuchs & Milo 2016:1). There may be something like 10 times the number of bacteria cells in each of us compared to cells we claim as 'us'. More accurately, we are – each one – a living ecology, in which life and death are so profoundly intertwined they 'are' one another. Something is alive only to the degree something is dying into its body by way of metabolism. And the defecation of what is to be discarded rather than incorporated is quickly consumed by yet other beings.

In the wild, there is no garbage. Feces for one species is food for another. Human beings live every millisecond by 'eating' plant 'poop' through our nostrils. Oxygen could be understood as plant defecation. And I confess I am addicted! The day will come when I also am a meal – no matter how hard the coffin sides and tight-sealed the lid. I will be dissolved by bacteria and other microbes, consumed by worms that will be consumed by birds that will be consumed by tigers, or taken up by plant roots, forged into leaves, broken down by seasons into humus, carried off by waters to oceans, evaporated into sky, crashed on mountain sides as cloud, coming back down to human habitation as river to be drunk and reprocessed yet again.

And it is this cycle of robust interpenetration of everything with everything else that folk culture in medieval Europe – and indigenous culture the world over – has known and celebrated! It is only as our species settles into mono-crop agriculture and urban expansion and imperial aggression that some members of our crowd try to secede from the round of exchange and pretend they do not also have to descend into the mouth of something else (Bjornerud 2005:94–97; Diamond 1999:1–3; Manning 2004:8, 23–41; Perkinson 2013:1–23). The development of elite ruling classes, presiding over exploitative peasant economies across the planet, beginning as early as 6000 BCE in present-day Turkey, by the third millennium has gone imperial in Egypt and Mesopotamia and China, and galvanises the earliest form of human resistance movements our species has known. Pastoral nomadism emerges largely (though not exclusively) as a reaction to oppressive agricultural orders rooted in city centres (Corbett 1991:4, 8, 85, 88; 2005:108, 119–121; Scott 2009:3–9). Herders take their flocks and exit altogether to live on the land in semi-arid regions or grasslands and develop proud lifestyles of relative symbiosis with their ecosystems (Corbett 1991:4, 8, 85, 88). They craft their exodus into what political theorist James C. Scott calls ‘the art of not being governed’, going feral into places hard to surveil and control (Scott 2009:ix–xiii, 98–99, 101, 334). The biblical tradition is one such memory of this herder resistance that ends up, surprisingly, in print (Corbett 1991:4; 2005:221–222; Eisenberg 1999:69, 76–79). But that is another writing (Perkinson 2013: 25–58).

As hierarchical city-state systems develop in history, elites increasingly wall themselves off from indigenous outliers and nomadic raiders and peasant workers and other marginalised menials, develop vaunted ‘manners’ to differentiate themselves from the ‘great unwashed’, commandeer resources, control food, monopolise health care, mobilise violent forms of repression to ensure their position and otherwise seek to use the labouring hordes as a buffer against the realities of decay and death (Bourdieu 1977:164; Eisenberg 1999:83; Elias 1994:60–75; Manning 2004:32–37, 44–46, 68–73, 76–79; Scott 2009:1–3). Obviously, I summarise here with extremely broad brush. But the very idea of ‘civilisation’ is predicated on relegating everyone not conforming to elite ideals (of predatory living on everyone else) to expendable status as subhuman or worse.

Indigenous reciprocity with the wild – coded in indigenous myth as a mode of kinship with plants or shared ancestry with animals – is denigrated and derided as superstitious foolery. Forest-dwelling ‘native’ folks are pilloried as ‘savage’; horse warriors and nomad herders as ‘barbarian’ (Foucault 2003:193–199; Hobbes 1994:76). Peasant concurrence with the soil and recourse to the commons to hunt and gather and fish is similarly dismissed as pagan and backward (Scott 2009:101). And in Europe, in particular, as aristocratic strife in the Middle Ages gradually issues in a return to city life under monarchs and princes, manipulating ecclesial corruption and popular disaffection to ensure domination of the countryside, elite deportment and courtly etiquette begin to give rise to what sociologist Norbert Elias calls the ‘civilised body’ of

modernity (Elias 1994:ix–xv, 47–49, 52, 258, 274–275, 365–379). This is a body increasingly shut off from concurrence with other bodies or the natural world around, patterned in high class propriety, habituated in anxiety, sanctioned with severity if exhibiting open orifices of any kind. Elias will name the resultant creature ‘*homo clausus*’, the ‘shut up’ being (Elias 1998:269). Colonisation abroad and reformation at home contribute to the closure. Spanish-Portuguese pacification of native communities names the mission project one of ‘reducing’ indigenous ‘wildness’ to Christian control (Dussel 1995:68–69). Back in Europe, Protestant terror of Catholic excess and rural regress to ‘pagan’ ways wraps the body in dour clothes and sour expression and monotonous comportment (Tausig 2009:3–9).

Early modern capitalism’s ‘drive to privatise’ includes not only land, but also somatic experience. The closure of the commons has its correlate in the closure of the gesture and the harsh incarceration of ‘human identity’ as ‘individualised subjectivity’, revalued primarily as a commodity, epitomised in its most extreme form by African flesh bought and sold as human ‘tool’. And race is then broadcast as the category of greatest consequence, gathering into its literal whitewash the whole panoply of indigenous concurrence with plant and animal life, violently remaking every mode of identity it ensnares into a lesser function of its own ruling class ‘skin supremacy’ (as African American theologian William James Jennings so powerfully analyses; Jennings 2011: 113, 225–226). White skin becomes the new reference point for ‘worthy human being’, entirely evacuating the rich tapestry of native mythology and ritual embodiment of local ecology; in effect, saying: ‘from this point forward, you will be entertained to be “human” (and even then, only a lesser version thereof) only to the degree you act like me and do not resist my domination’.

It is against such a broad historical background that the colour coat of jester jokes and court foolery gains interpretive density.

Carnavalesque jubilation

Folk abundance

And here brief recourse to Russian critical theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) supplies interesting perspective. Bakhtin will say that the late consequence of this European push to fold the body into a racialised straightjacket of individualised propriety is the eruption of frenzies of violence undercutting modernity’s pursuit of revolutionary vision as exhibited in both 1790’s France and 1930’s Russia. Writing a kind of ‘people’s counterpoint’ to such terroristic extremes under Stalin in particular, Bakhtin recovers a people’s history of the body, invoking the Renaissance innovations of the late 15th century writer Rabelais, in which the latter put in print against the canons of his day, a literary commemoration of the folk traditions beginning to be repressed at that time. In his introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin will offer that folk celebration – rampaging in Carnavalesque jubilation across the entire stage of medieval struggle – insistently lives

out a collective realisation of what he will call utopic freedom and comedic abundance (p. 9). But such a practice of regular festivity did not only episodically discharge pent-up social pressure. It set aside the equivalent of 3 months per year from the calendar of labour (p. 13). It was not sheer exuberance, but also resistance.

How did it gain such irrepressible traction? Bakhtin insists that the carnival desires exhibited in pageantries of the folk – whether carnival itself, or Corpus Christi promenades of ecclesial symbols, the ‘feast of fools’ so named or the ‘feast of the ass’ openly laughed, the *risis paschalis* translating Easter triumph into bawdy titillation or the ubiquitous market fairs featuring ‘giants, dwarfs, monsters and trained animals’ – exhibit a ‘second life’ of the people, ‘outside of officialdom’ (pp. 5, 6). But they are not merely popular imagination of a utopic world, uncontained by official censure. They also attract many of those very officials. Notorious in the time were ribald parodies, written by monks in their cells, or droll ‘send-ups’ of learned theologies, in which church functionaries indulged in the people’s festivities as periods of prankish relaxation from their own pious seriousness (p. 13). Indeed, clowns and fools pirouetted through everyday life as carnival’s ‘accredited representatives’ to keep this ‘other world’ intuition alive even when the fest itself was over (p. 8).

The feast was celebrated from the 5th to the 17th centuries in Europe and carried out public mockery of top church officials who were parodied – in dramatic portrayals – as ‘Lord of Misrule’, ‘Archbishop of Dolts’, or ‘Pope of Fools’.

And all of it channelled a much older impulse of social orders not yet warped in elite hierarchies and solemn orthodoxies. This is part of its prophetic import for our thinking here. The jester tradition incubates a much older memory of an indigenous life of parity with other life forms. It does not just gesture towards some hoped-for future. It recalls a past of ‘deep equality’, in which living bodies are continuously passing into (and out of) other bodies and out of (and into) death itself. The essence of ‘the joke’ is that everything is finally compost for other things. And that compost is itself ‘sacred’ (Donaldson 2013:142, 145–147; Prechtel 2012:10, 11, 33, 47). The mystery of life is that every creature in existence is a serious articulation of majesty momentarily realised on top of a hilarious debauchery of intercourse and decay (Haraway 2016:1–2). ‘In the folklore of primitive people’, Bakhtin (1984) will say:

coupled with the cults which were serious in tone and organisation were other, comic cults which laughed and scoffed at the deity (‘ritual laughter’); coupled with serious myths were comic and abusive ones; coupled with heroes were their parodies and doublets. (p. 6)

These ‘pre-class and pre-political’ social orders kept the serious and the comic in equal esteem; both were sacred and both were ‘official’ (p. 6). And quite tellingly, this was true even of funeral ritual – in which the deceased was regaled by equal parts lamentation and derision.

Folk resistance

But with the advent of state order and class structure, this levelling function of laughter was broken, and the comedic consigned to an ‘underworld’ of non-official performance. Not surprisingly, it did judo on the very conditions of its own exile. It continually ‘cooked up’ overclass gravity and ‘heavy manners’ into irreducible parody. In the sensuousness of carnival spectacle, life bordered art. The people did not so much observe, as live the forms. Here, in these interludes off to the side of official order was embodied the return of the golden age of Saturn – a ‘Saturnalia’ not merely hoped for, but actually lived for the time of the fest. Yes, the fests were annexed to Church celebration. But *Marti gras* in France or *Fastnacht* in Germany jumped off before the official Lent, keeping palpable the genetic link to ancient pagan rite. For Bakhtin, the ancient content remained potent inside the laugh – a philosophy of the folk, conniving in spirit and ideology with ‘the highest aims of human existence’ (pp. 8–9). The people’s fest – unlike liturgical facsimiles thereof – did not try to consecrate the delusions of the present by means of the past, attempting to assure ‘eternal stability’ and ‘perennial order’. It rather mediated crisis by incarnating the break points in nature’s vital cycles. Death and revival, decomposition and renewal, birth and all of its messy liquidities were raucously championed, liberation from hierarchy and imposition given temporary purchase in public expression, change embraced, equality embodied, rank and merit defrocked. In the mix, the ‘people’, says Bakhtin, were ‘reborn for new, purely human, relations’ (p. 10). And this not so much by sheer negation as by a laugh of the collective belly, tearing down and at the same time reviving and renewing not only authority, but also the carnival-goers themselves.

And, of course, at core, much of this medieval festivity builds on much older New Year’s traditions, where, for many cultures living close to the soil, the end of the old year (whenever it was thought to occur) marked a time when all bets were off, social structure and mores went back into the ground, death bled indistinctly into birth, bodies returned to their conditions of first emergence, fluids and foods were shared without censure, touch and dance were engaged in revelry and trance, beer drunk by the cauldron-full, sausage jumping around like inebriated squirrels with elongated tails, ancestors lurking at the edge of the mist as the wall between this world and the other world thinned to mere gossamer.

The star of this folk pageantry was a collective materialisation of what Bakhtin calls the ‘grotesque body’ of interdependent exchange (p. 20). This was flesh pulled out of its abstraction as ‘elite’ and ‘vaunted’ and returned to its root in the earth (p. 19). Against a vertical privileging of head and bearing in aristocratic manners and royal etiquette, the constant impulse here is to degrade and debase with a levelling laugh – insisting that rolling bellies and salivating lips and lactating breasts and farting anuses and birthing wombs and copulating genitals and wrinkling hands and death-gurgling

mouths are the real condition and grandiosity of being alive (p. 19). The fests championed a continuous recourse of the folk to the collective ancestral body in repudiation of bourgeois notions of completed, atomised being (p. 19). Not the ready-made, completed and closed, but rather the monstrous, ugly and altering were conjured and let loose (p. 25). This was a body incomplete, not walled off from the world, blended rather than bounded, birthing out of plants and animals, dying into soil and mud, ever unfinished, ever creating (pp. 26–27). Taken up in writing such as Rabelais, the sources are ancient legend and ribald myth – concoctions of ‘Indian Wonders’ and ‘Western miracles of the Celtic Sea’, says Bakhtin (p. 27), animal epics and bestiaries of the misty past, *fabliaux* of giants and diablieries of Narts, immemorial oaths, antique curses and celebrated abuses.

And obviously, my copulating verbiage could go on and on, but I have to abstain given constraints of space. Enough to note that Bakhtin traces the gradual closure and narrowing of this wide-open body of living flesh, as modernity elevates its identity out of all such composting vitalities, separates ‘clear and distinct’ ideas from embodied hilarities and fecundities, delineates abstract taxonomies against monstrous hybridities and severs being from its basis in earth and dust. But when we jest, it is this past of our species’ wisdom that we invoke and strut or belly laugh back into momentary epiphany.

It is no mistake that the jester tradition is a sleight-of-hand conniption on the part of nobles and royals to try to have it both ways – like the suburb of today in my home country, maintaining its white-face predation on populations of colour at home and abroad, while consuming hip-hop vibe, adopting the sag and gesture, pretending home-boy postures as if it is *not* tight-sphinctered and empty and feeding its own face with the rabidly plundered flesh of ancestors and kin. Jesterism, historically, is the attempt of pontificating power to renourish its own desiccating grasp with the Eros and Compost that will alone give it rebirth (like Herod fascinated at once with the Wild Man Baptist that he will behead and the dancing nubile waif who will demand that death). It pays for the imposture to grant the laugh while withholding the truth. But underneath, the reality of the earth as consuming maw for all of us, making meat of our bodies for the nourishment of others, is never more than a worm’s width below the joke. In the wombs of our birth mother and our death mother, we *are* equal. The rest is sheer contrivance.

Architectural syncopation¹⁰

Hip-hop defiance

I spiral back to the future by revisiting the earthly flair of the folk I hang with in the Big-D. That Motown today is a great labyrinth of compost is hardly news. One-hundred and thirty-

10. In the musical sense of ‘off-beat phrasing’, a deliberate deformation of rhythmic coherence by ‘sounding’ slightly before or after the beat, in such a way that pleasure is increased even as the percussive structure is reinforced by way of an alternative pattern of echoes and anticipations – noted by art theorist Thompson as one of the definitive marks of African and Afro-diasporic sensibility and artistry (Thompson 1984 (1983):xiii) – here creating visual versions of such sonic punctuations.

nine square miles that is 30% vacant. Some 78 506 buildings empty according to a 2014 study. It registers in prime time eyes and their corporate sponsors as ‘blight’. Among grassroots groups, locked into neighbourhood fights to keep turf hospitable to homes and out of the hands of foreclosing banks and development wonks, the land is ripe for crop. A serious community gardening initiative has been launched that simultaneously boasts black innovation and laments white creative class cooptation that is gentrifying land ownership, municipal political process and philanthropic support. Activist, 30-something, hip-hop heads are leveraging the five elements (DJing, MCing, Tagging, Break Dancing and Knowledge) to educate teens about climate change, cancer-producing shale oil processing in an already polluted west-side neighbourhood,¹¹ neoliberal rages for credit default swaps swamping city budgets in interest payments,¹² rabid foreclosure,¹³ school privatisation,¹⁴ water shut off and commodification¹⁵ and Black Lives Matter action to contest police killing. In some ways, hip-hop culture is the successor movement to Black Power rancour and organisation in the hood, embodying, in its aesthetic, a live-wire ethic popularly memorialised by the likes of Tupac, whose 1996 murder in no way diminished the power of his influence. While still alive, the Makaveli griot was savvy in occupying contradiction as his habitation of choice – embracing his Mama’s Panther palaver while insisting on getting paid in late capital’s pirating of oppositional culture for gain.

I suggest Tupac as the face of jester gestures of our time, at least in my corner of global pain (and not least because his apparent last words according to the cop who was interrogating him at the scene were ‘F ... you’). His analysis of the situation bordered on alchemic brilliance; his public protestations, a *konesans* clairvoyant and raw as Shango-esque lightning. But the humour was non-stop in its send-up! It is the combination of the guffaw and the word stiletto that I find requisite. Michael Eric Dyson’s treatment of Tupac in *Holler If You Hear Me* lifts up the popular potency with inimitable acuity, scoring the Shakurian *persona* as a veritable ‘street

11. Marathon Petroleum Co. has a 250-acre plant near downtown Detroit, processing 80 000 barrels of heavy, sour crude oils per day – much of it coming by truck from the Canadian shale oil extraction fields in Alberta, Canada – whose refining products (gasolines, distillates, asphalt, fuel-grade coke, chemical-grade propylene, propane, slurry and sulfur) make the surrounding neighbourhoods some of the most heavily polluted in the country.

12. Many of these swaps – in which banks agreed to hold the bond debt of the city at market rates in exchange for fixed rates charged the city to enable a smooth budgeting cycle – were fraudulently negotiated just prior to the 2008 collapse, plunging the city into a fiscal crisis resulting in state-imposed ‘emergency management’, evacuating all democratic decision-making, exercising virtual dictatorial control over city contracts and assets – all in service of bank priorities.

13. Since 2003, one-third of all residences in the city foreclosed (either for mortgage default or tax default – often enough with water bills attached as a lien, pushing residents otherwise able to keep up, over the edge) – a kind of ‘ethnic cleansing’ by policy in the interests of reclaiming the city for largely white political class or corporate interests.

14. Closing more than half of the city’s public schools and herding students into classrooms as large as 60, without teachers, as those classrooms were being used by a software corporation to ‘test drive’ its latest programme, work the bugs out and then market the upgraded product for profit around the country, while students learned very little, seated before computers all day, with no accountability.

15. Since 2013, as many as 90 000 residences (depending upon whose figures one believes) in a city of 380 000 homes, have had their water shut off, for as little as \$150 in back bills, putting families in a situation where the state was then mandated to remove the children into state-run foster homes, breaking up neighbourhoods, resulting in increases for paying customers and leading towards possible privatisation of the system (with bills increasing as much as 300% and service deteriorating even more).

grammar' in its posthumous appearances (p. 233). Tupac is the first black artist to have come back from the grave in public recognisance – a virtual James Dean or Elvis apparition of the country at large. Tupac as 'haint',¹⁶ for Dyson, is the first-time emergence of a form of ghetto sainthood (pp. 247–268), a haunt of the culture at large, pirouetting on the high wire of his own predilection for trouble like some Eshu Eleggua of the global crossroads. Dyson calls him at one point 'the ghetto everyman' (pp. 129, 107), icon of the impossible struggle to eat absurdity and spit art that the country has never *not* asked of black sagacity ever since the first slave ship landed and the two-step shuffle¹⁷ was on. It is just that exact syntactical paradox that Tupac has become in inner city recreations of his posthumous energy that I see everywhere on the Car City streets. Whether Piper Carter 'ripping the mike' or Bryce Detroit doing the mix, the Raiz Up crew spitting in Clark Park or the water tower taggers mentioned at the start of this writing – the genius is not individual. It is a communalised jester ability to absorb white supremacist monstrosity and smelt, from its hard density, quicksilver flow and uproarious hilarity that cuts off heads without leaving a corpse. And I want to sum up with the signs of two blight-birthing shrines of that jester faculty that anchor Motown's repudiation of its late capitalist fate in the form of architectural send-ups transforming blight into medicine.

Tupac made his destined-to-early-death-body a sign of an insurgent community. Among other tats,¹⁸ he tailored onto his skin, a torso-tag read '50 NI**AZ' (the infamous 'N-word' of racist history transvalued by hip-hop culture in replacing the final 'er' with a vocalised 'az' or 'as'). (This is a bit similar to Jesus embracing being called a 'Samaritan' in his situation; John 8:48–49.) Asked its import, Pac asserted: 'When you come up against me, it's like coming up against 50 ni**as, because I've got the souls of all my brothers in me' (Dyson 2001:243). This was skin made a blazon of braggadocio claiming a proliferation of life out of threatened death. Amidst a wealth of typically hip-hop tags across the Motown cityscape – in the Big-D as everywhere else, raising issue with private ownership and youth disenfranchisement – Detroit boasts two sites where physical structure itself has been uniquely redesigned in a folk aesthetic, similarly shouting epithets and silent credits to a community life refusing banishment into the realm of ghosts. Heidelberg Project on the eastside and MBAD African Bead Museum on the west side are each examples of a jesterly ethic gone prolific.

Blight insurgence

Each is long-standing in its brick and mortar bombast, dating, respectively, to 1980s battles against city policy and natural entropy. The eastside brainchild of Heidelberg Street resident Tyree Guyton, the project going by that name (and recounted

16. A restless spirit of the dead that haunts the community of the living because it has refused to move on to the next world due to mistreatment when alive or lack of mourning and remembrance when dead.

17. A manner of walking – virtually demanded of African Americans in slavery or the years of Jim Crow oppression in the South by the dominant white culture – that (seemingly) conveyed an attitude of submission.

18. Street slang for tattoos.

in the DVD, 'Come Unto Me: The Faces of Tyree Guyton') was a simultaneous rebuff of City Council and Mayoral abandonment and a repurposing of suburban waste-management dumping of unwanted garbage on ghetto streets in the wee hours when no one was looking. Guyton had grown up poor and art-loving on the street, championed only by a Grandpa who joined him in his love of bright paint. Kicked out of a local art school as too renegade, Tyree finally responded to the bombed-out aspect of his 'hood, by gathering all the discarded trash as so much canvas-in-the-waiting, slapped it with sharp colour and nailed it on the abandoned structure next to his own'. Quickly, the house became a shrine, added to by the day, beckoning children and homeless alike as a sanctuary for vulnerability, where discarded humanity and marooned materiality both could find honour and celebration. Tyree himself could be found most days, collecting new refuse, sweeping up street dust, draping house and front tree with bicycle rims and dolls, pirated pavement signs and stuffed animal toys, up-side-down supermarket carts and empty TV frames – all of it marked with epigram and proverb, political one liners and mimed rhymes from recent advertisements, promising the 'good life' if only one drunk the beer or wore the label.

A side lot was populated with discarded vacuum cleaners, lined up like sentinels, silently promising a 'sweeping out' of city politics. Meanwhile, area junk yards gave up rumpled car hoods on which Guyton splashed bold facial designs, claiming the facsimiles were 'faces of God' – whom the artist assured 'had many faces – yours, mine and everyone, of every colour' – and propped up the result like a grinning ensemble of ghosts on the sidewalk across the street.

By 1991, the installation had grown as big as an entire block, attracted art-aficionado interest from the suburbs and drew down the ire of neighbours, angered at living in a fish-bowl-spectacle, ogled by largely white visitors, 'consuming' the effort in an hour of urban 'slumming', but ignorant and arrogant in their bulged-eyed fascination. The city responded one November morning with an overhead helicopter and



Source: Photo courtesy of James W. Perkinson

FIGURE 2: Dotty Wotty House, Heidelberg Project, Detroit.



Source: Photo courtesy of James W. Perkinson

FIGURE 3: 'Faces of God' car hoods, Heidelberg Project.

six bulldozers, bludgeoning the house shrine into oblivion in a mere 15 min. Guyton' grandfather died soon after in heartbreak and was danced out in a polka-dotted coffin, commemorating his love of jelly beans. The celebration broke on Tyree's imagination like an epiphany. Assured in a dream by two titanic angel-like apparitions that 'everything would be alright', he launched phase 2 of the project, tattooing another structure on the block with big bright dots of primal light, provoking one neighbourhood wag to remark that when you turned the corner onto this street in that sea of urban blight, it was like someone suddenly 'turned the sun on'. Guyton similarly stippled the pavement with the shouting swirls and recruited a band of guerrilla polka-dotters to begin tagging dilapidated structures throughout the city under cover of night. By the late 1990s, another barrage of bulldozers took down another 30% of the project, but Guyton was gaining international credibility and local backing that thwarted complete annihilation. Multiple court appearances defending the installation, regular participation in neighbourhood school systems initiating art projects for free after budget constraints had torpedoed official support, and 200 000 visitors per year, contributing an estimated \$5 million dollars to the city economy, finally brought recognition and acceptance.

In spite of a recent rash of anonymous arsons, burning nine of the neighbourhood houses crafted into jester messages over the last decade, the project continually rises Phoenix-like from the ashes, and sprouts new images attracting new entourages joining in the now communalised effort. And Guyton continues to preside over the project on any given day as its zen-like street-guru, spouting one-line queries at visitors like *koans* of the hour. Author in print now of its uniquely articulated mission, Tyree has refigured 'art under a brush' as a thrust of bottom-up commissioning, using found objects as canvas, poor residents as curators and the wider community as visionary collaborators, in remaking the ghetto a sign of mulatto inspiration.

Meanwhile, on the near west side, the jester-inspiration goes Afro-centric with a vengeance. Slowly incubated creation of



Source: Photo courtesy of James W. Perkinson

FIGURE 4: Dotty Wotty House, with burnt remains of OJ House in foreground, Heidelberg Project, Detroit.



Source: Photo courtesy of Nathasja T

FIGURE 5: MBad's African Bead Museum, Detroit.

former Charles H. Wright African American Museum-curator Olayame Dabls, the row house he revamped is now hosting, inside, trade beads as old as 400 years from across the Mother Continent. And the house is itself a wondrous 'bead' of flashing colour on the outside. Festooned with pieces of mirror and tile, blazoned with percussive shades of vivid tincture, the sidewalk in front sporting letters of multiple African scripts – MBAD Museum is bad indeed! And the project spreads. The lot alongside has grown multiple tableaux of compelling inquisition as well as a floridly embroidered stage for neighbourhood production and performances.

Most famous among the 18 mini-installations is one with metal chairs, with seats occupied by upright rocks, arranged classroom-like around a central constellation of iron sculpture



Source: Photo courtesy of Dabyl's MBad African Bead Museum

FIGURE 6: Sculpture Garden, 'Iron Teaching Rocks How to Rust'.



Source: Photo courtesy of Paul Cannon

FIGURE 7: ('Nkisi House') Detroit Africa Town – Africa Bead Museum #2.

in abstract and weather-crusted design. The logo is pointed postcolonial burlesque: it signs, 'Iron teaching rocks how to rust'. For those in the know, the irony is a send-up; here is white arrogance face-to-face with African spontaneous-ness. The scene is a meme for Euro-white people thinking they can teach Afro-black people how to become 'civilised'. Dabyls conducts neighbourhood classes as well as visitor tours around the subject. Iron work in history has been a long-time African technology; Europe is late to the scene and bellicose in its theft. The modern world is indeed the age of the enslaved mineral, but really!? Rock is the mother of metal and all its vaunted 'twistings' into shackles and ships and weapons. Who should teach who?

Further back behind the flagship creation in this otherwise devastated neighbourhood, there are two more large buildings entirely decked out in colourful offerings. One is more than appears at first glance. On its alley side, disclosing its secret only to those who bother to circle around its shimmering front, empty paint cans have been stuck into the sides, high up and all across. Dabyls explains: the structure is Motown *n'kisi*, the cans are the nails to scale with the building, 'pounded in' at each promise of city government to do justice in one or another policy enactment – a tracking of modern

corruption in the code of indigenous calculation, mobilising ancient curse on perverse manipulation of the present.

Dabyls daily presides in the museum that sports an amazing array of not just beads, but artefacts and ivory, silver and sculpture, paintings and books – from local hands in Detroit as well as from way back in Afrique – a living testament to a history often eclipsed in the unrelenting 'density' of the struggle merely to survive a harsh destiny, on this bend of the river, colonised by Jesuits and remade epicentre of the industrial version of white supremacist hegemony over the globe. The buildings anchor a counterpoint to the devastation – here too, a pastiche of colour and pattern, unmistakably African in ethos and detail, punctuating the environment with vision from elsewhere – a living realisation of what scholar Robert Farris Thompson calls the KiKongo regime of 'material puns' (p. 118), putting spiritual summons and social consequence into the very substance of matter. This is Black Lives Matter in the key of architecture and element – a wood, rock, iron and mirror evocation of ancestry and hope.

Prophetic signification

Biblical insurgence

In concluding comparison with all such dynamic jesterism – the biblical tradition is relatively serious in its counsels of resistance and community. But there is this:

- Abram was called to leave Ur and Haran of the Chaldees and wander as a nomad south to settle under the teaching trees of Mamre and open his tents and his table for hospitality – and is promised as a 100-year-old man that he will 'get it up' and have a son, and his 90-year-old wife laughs at the prospect of bedtime frivolity at such an age: the jest of a God who will 2000 years later, in the words of Paul, lift up this late-life vitality as the primal iconicity of resurrection faith! (Gn 11:31–12:4; 18:9–15; 21:1–7; Rm 4:16–25).
- Moses forsakes his courtly training and his BMW-lifestyle in Pharaoh's house, halts a beating of a slave, becomes OG (original gangster) for killing an Egyptian, hooks up with an African clan, learns the Sinai sands as a herder, sees a bush burning with Spirit, hears a Voice of Merit, claims a stutter to try to avoid the terror of heading back into Egypt as a renegade from the outback to lead the slaves out and teach them how to eat aphid defecation that Arab Bedouin today collect and consume in that part of the world, calling it 'man' (a cognate term for Hebrew 'manna') (Ex 2:11–3:14; 4:10–17; 16:1–36; Eisenberg 1999:15–16; Felder 1999:1).
- Elijah is summoned to the rugged canyons east of the Jordan to learn from ravens, adopt weather as weapon, ride the winds from place to place as wild-man-shaman of the bush (I Kg 17:1–7; 18:1, 12, 38–46, 19:4, 9–12).
- Amos trimmed sycamore trees and interrupted rituals with bowls of fruit (Amos 7:14–8:6).
- Isaiah strode around in public buck naked to try to render 'naked' the system of plunder. His jester coat was his own skin (Is 20:1–6).

- Hosea pilloried the foolery of the country by marrying a hooker to snooker the delusion. But underneath the 'send-up' was a down-to-earth love of real flesh (Hs 1:2–2:15).
- Jeremiah embraced the foolishness of celibacy as a sign of coming catastrophe and ended up doing time in a cistern (Jr 38:6–13).
- Ezekiel cooked his dinner over his own excrement, composting dung into flame for food as sign of a rude awakening (Ezk 4:9–15).
- John the Baptist went Bedouin and native in the deserts of Aram, wearing camel, eating insects and ranting potently about the divine vitality of water (Mt 3:1–17).
- Jesus went into the water under the hand of that Great Dipper and then out onto the land to be schooled by stones (Mt 3:9; 4:1–11); returned to the city zones to gain a street-rep as party-animal, loving wine and meat (Mt 11:19); took over the national shrine – the Temple – which was also the national bank, where all the records of indebtedness and foreclosure were maintained, and unleashed in that sacred confine the cries of the lame and the blind and the dances of poor street urchins (Mt 21:12–17); was crowned with thorns, mocked as king, strung up as fool, buried as dead (Mt 27:27–61). But the joke was on the Powers! The jest came back from the grave.

End-time scatology

In many places today, the joke is all we have left to pry open the prison gate – a jest and a belly laugh rooted in the deep past and the abandoned margins. But its truth remains absolute, despite corporate pretention otherwise. We all finally will come apart at the seams and decay into streams of composting liquid and molecules – even US drones and bankers' computer screens, blinking with algorithms. The only question is when and for what.

In recognition of such an eventuality of equality, may we choose well where to expend our breath and exercise our push back and dreaming otherwise. May we become soldiers of the unrepentant joke, militant laughers learning our hope from the least. May we keep our jest visceral and its spear-point like a razor, ready for whatever crack of freedom the Mystery of Wild Hilarity that created this planet may open. May we do so, even if that possibility is ephemeral and uphill as a spray-painted fist and a stenciled demand on a tower and the political struggle to 'free the flow' that follows! Indeed, may we finally be strong like water and as insurgent as a flower growing from concrete!

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