

Refiguring in Black, by Tendayi Sithole.

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Tendayi Sithole's *Refiguring in Black* is a difficult book to read. By difficult I mean *inzima le ncwadi*¹ (this is a difficult book). *Nzima* in isiXhosa can refer to heaviness as in weight, heaviness as an affect, and heaviness as in demanding. The book comprises three main chapters sandwiched by the "Aperture" and "Verso". The "Aperture" reads as an introduction, and much like an aperture in a camera, this is the opening that lets the light through, therefore showing the parameters of the book. The "Verso" is the afterword, and yet it offers no neat conclusions; it opens up more provocations. Sithole frames the book as "doing things differently and deliberately so from a black point of view...the critical mode of thinking about black figures and studying them differently." (1) Using the works of Frederick Douglass, Toni Morrison, Hortense Spillers and Charles Mingus Sithole offers that the thought of these figures is "refigured in ways that part company with familiar interpretative practices, discourses, style, sensibilities and tropes" (2).

Herein lies the difficulty of the book: Sithole writes that the "point is that black thinkers have been doing the thinking, while they are refused the very idea of thinking". This is a jarring and disturbing sentence I read over and over again. It is a passive sentence: who or what has refused these prolific artists and writers the idea of thinking? This

1 I have deliberately used translanguaging, the "purposive alternation of languages" (Makalela 2015, 16). Translanguaging is also "a theoretical lens that offers a different view of bilingualism and multilingualism. The theory posits that rather than possessing two or more autonomous language systems, as has been traditionally thought, bilinguals, multilingual, and all language users select and deploy particular features from a unitary linguistic repertoire to make meaning and negotiate particular communicative contexts." (Vogel & Garcia, 2017:1). In the context of this review, it is important to include a language other than English in response to a philosophical text about black life. To this end, I do not italicise the words in isiXhosa as this would mark them as other and obscure the fluidity between the languages.



seems like an obvious question to ask, but there are many such passive sentences Sithole uses throughout the book, which left me wondering: for whom is Sithole writing this book? Earlier in the “Aperture”, Sithole offers that the book is about seeing Douglass, Morrison, Spillers and Mingus anew: “It is not only seeing for its own sake. It is the seeing that has been refused, where blackness has been blinded so as not to see things for what they are” (2); again I am left wondering, who or what has blinded blackness? Who or what has been (un)seeing these thinkers? Of course, the answers to my wonderings exist, but they are rendered opaquely (and deliberately so) in Sithole’s meditation.

Refiguring in Black is the second book of a trilogy, which begins with *The Black Register* (Polity Press, 2020) and, more recently, *Black X: Liberatory Thought in Azania* (Wits Press, 2024). Like all scholars, reading Sithole in the context of his other scholarship is important. When read in isolation, *Refiguring in Black* may be accused of locating the black radical tradition as scholarship generated by African-American scholars in the global north. However, in *The Black Register*, Sithole creates a conversation amongst thinkers across space and time.

Sithole’s book is about ways of thinking about blackness—a blackness situated within questions of humanness. I asked myself many questions as I read *Refiguring in Black*: yintoni umntu? Ngubani umntu? Yintoni emakhayo umntu? (insufficient translations: what is a human? Who is human? What creates a human?). Sithole is writing in the realm of black studies, responding to Western civilisation, which has rendered blackness as non-human, ex-human and non-being. This results in another difficulty in the book. I did not read this book purely as an intellectual exercise. I read this book while in the world as a black woman, living despite the material (and careless) death and precarity of what it means to be a black woman in the world. Moreover, even as I am surrounded by death as well as devising strategies to prevent death, I am also observing how ndibangumntu when I am in a community, especially in a community with other black women. This book cannot be read in isolation from the micro-world of the reader who holds it in their hands. The embodied experience of reading this book while on the train in Cape Town or in the comfort of my home in quiet suburbia is part of the experience of thinking about this book and its place in the world and what it can do in the world.

The prefix re in refiguring is central to the book’s thesis. Re as in “once more, afresh, anew...return to a previous state...in return; mutually...in opposition...behind or after...in a withdrawn state...back and away, down...with frequentative or intensive force...with negative force...origin from Latin re-, red- ‘again, back’.” (971) The words afresh, anew, again, and back resonate with Sithole’s use of refiguring. There is an iterative process of thinking about blackness which is being proposed in the essays, particularly in the essays which consider Douglass and Morrison, whose work has been canonised in the black intellectual tradition (much like W.E.B. Du Bois, who is always cited). For Sithole, the again and again of the black intellectual tradition allows for “radical openness” (142), which allows for a new reading of authors like Morrison, with

which people are familiar through her literature, but often not her prose, which Sithole focuses on.

Sithole's book offers deeply considered provocations about the nature of blackness. I wondered how it would read alongside Hugo kaCanham's *Riotous Deathscapes*, which kaCanham writes "from the disorientating vortex of repeated catastrophe and the joyful paradox that is the black condition" (xii). Even while the book is less than 200 pages, each essay is layered with ubunzima (a heaviness) that demands slow reading. Perhaps this is the beauty of the book: it is demanding because thinking and writing about blackness in a racist world (while being a black scholar) is demanding.

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