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Black to the Future?: A Review of Maurice Carlos Ruffin's We Cast a Shadow

One optimistic strain of Afrofuturism envisions a speculative world devoid of prejudice. The darker dystopian possibility is a future that is so oppressive and hopeless that no black person would want to live in it. In his satirical debut novel "We Cast a Shadow," Maurice Carlos Ruffin serves up plenty of the latter.

The novel is set in an America of the near future where, as the unnamed lawyer narrator tells us, "every black person is a de facto enemy of the state." (137) The totalitarian leanings of the nation began several decades earlier with a "whitelash" (220) against ADZE, a Black Panther-styled organization, resulting in a nation where African Americans are required in some states to have tracking devices implanted in their necks; where black people can be deported to the African nation of Zamundia; where housing projects are concentration camps; and where under the "Dreadlock Ordinance, the cops could give any arrestee a haircut if they deemed the person unsanitary." (177) The narrator goes on to say, "They used to call bringing every able-bodied black male to jail for questioning racial profiling. Now it's called excellent police work. Did I mention that blacks in most major cities live in fenced-in ghettos?" (137) The economic prospects of black people have also devolved. Black women "make thirty cents for ever dollar a white man does, and 90 percent of black moms are single mothers. Unemployment among black males is the norm" (137).

In such social and political horrors Ruffin wants the reader to recognize an America that is but an exaggerated version of the present. That said, Ruffin has bigger fish to fry. He seeks to dismantle the idealism at the heart of Ralph Ellison's celebrated novel "Invisible Man," the notion that black people's "invisibility" affords us opportunities to slip the yoke of racism and grow and thrive. The opening scene of Ruffin's novel recalls the battle royale in "Invisible Man." The narrator attends a company party, but unlike his white co-workers he has been required to come in costume. Echoing Ellison's anonymous narrator, the lawyer tells us, "My name doesn't matter. All you need to know is that I'm a phantom, a figment, a man who was mistaken for waitstaff twice that night." (3)

America has become a place where black people have become all too visible and are expected to live in accordance with long-existing stereotypes. No wonder then that July 6th is National Fried Chicken Day. (74) Rather than play scripted roles, many African Americans seek ways to pass for white, so much so that plastic surgery has become common. Indeed, Ruffin's plot involves a clever reworking of the familiar passing trope. The narrator longs for enough money to pay for his 10-year-old-son, Nigel, to undergo "demelanization," a medical procedure that would not only turn him white but would result in a form of genocide: the "process was also preventive and would keep him, or his once and future children, from ever being black like me." (225)

Still, there are those who resist, who fight for change, namely two organizations, a new configuration of ADZE that commits acts of terrorism, and BEG, a group of integrationists who abide by the "New Truth," the fact that race is a social construction.

In making fun of the naïve optimism of BEG, Ruffin would have us remember those

who, during the Obama era, received wealth and fame for touting the idea of a post-racial society – an assumption that was even then bone-headed and absurd. BEG, much like Ellison's Brotherhood (the American Communist Party), believes that racial unity can change minds and dismantle racist ideology. Even so, BEG's idea of progress amounts to training young black people for careers in the food service industry.

Satire at its best offends. Through BEG, Ruffin mocks a revered institution, the Black Lives Matter movement, an organization that in part entreats white Americans to recognize the humanity of their fellow black citizens. It's a political strategy that, for better or worse, has long been established in the struggle for civil rights. BEG follows the advice the narrator's grandfather passed on to him: "Guilt them into respecting you...Make them feel like they owe you something. Shame 'em to death." (141) How far we are here from the grandfather in "Invisible Man," who saw himself as a "spy in the enemy's country."

Perhaps the joke is on us since Ruffin underscores a hard truth, that neither nationalist nor integrationist movements have proven effective in achieving freedom for black people in America. Despite the pessimism, many readers will take pleasure in the clever ways that Ruffin riffs on current tropes—police shootings, black men in prison, white men in blackface, Trayvon Martin hoodies, black pop music icons who use plastic surgery to become white—to recast many of the most memorable scenes in "Invisible Man." When Ellison wrote his novel he never imagined the emergence of a civil rights movement that would confront segregation head on. Ruffin gives us a daring postpolitical novel that forecasts no possibility for change in the racial landscape.