

**Quo Vadis**  
**Zakiya Dalila Harris' *The Other Black Girl: A Novel***  
A Review Essay  
by  
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I was writing. I had just written a wrenching paragraph when, through the mail slot, I heard a plop! There before me was a copy of *The Other Black Girl: A Novel* (Atria Books, 2021). Being a believer, I accepted this intervention as a spiritual event. Here is what I had written:

*Success*, not *Freedom* is the new watchword whispering in the neighborhood (bad-mouthed as the ghetto). Success is money. Success is fame. Success is winning. Look at the lovely Megan. Megan Thee Stallion's bare, big, round, meaty, up-turned buttocks offering a selfie inside her vagina is earning mega-bucks, and she is a household (dormitory adored) name. Look at beautiful Will, rich as can be. His confident, entitled, siddity swagger to the stage slapping his way to hog limelight success is famous. Look at Tim Scott, the Black Republican senator. He did not vote for the first Black woman supreme court justice because he is urging the successful rise of Nazi power to crown white supremacy, and kick village folk (other than him, or so he thinks) back to Nazi owned plantations where "hope unborn had died." Now Nazi's love Black on Black crime such as Spelman College "sugar daddy-lovin'," bully, hot mommas who terrorize girls that behave like students, loving learning. For them, success is worth its weight in gold like Prada, while good character is a relic of the past. Look at the successful slaughter of nine lives at prayer in Mother Bethel. On the other hand, if the enormously successful rhymes of celebrity women and men of the hip-hop generation—those who protect Wakanda—should turn their rhymes against toxic successful destructions in the neighborhood, then maybe *Success* would become a different world. In exactly six months, the world will know whether an aspiring democracy actualizing Wakanda, will have enough defenders or whether Nazi terror will silence the freedom bell.

Of course, none of this is the subject of *The Other Black Girl*. Yet this doppelganger of a narrative, driven as much by inference as by names, is also, in motif, a *film-noire*, *commedia-dell-arte*, *who done it*, as well as it is a cautionary tale informing a cliff-hanger though tedious rite of passage story. Before we meet Nella Rogers, whose ordeal (also ours?) begins in the dog-day summer (July) of 2018, this entry-designed story (ala' *The Diary of Anne Frank*) opens with an unnamed girl running to catch a train where, upon boarding, she ducks down beneath her seat to keep from being noticed while a man in a seat opposite hers snores loudly. This nameless narrator whose identity we learn later, mumbles anxious complaints, not only about an anticipated pursuer, but about the grease she has been given to care for her hair as she violently scratches her burning scalp. The scene is as funny as it is pathetic when the conductor appears and recognizes from newspaper pictures our unnamed celebrity who denies his claim with a

dazzling smile. That smile jogs memory to recall the smile in the train scene of Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973). The connection establishes continuity in the fictional multi-verse of Black women writers, but the signification of the respective smiles pinpoints the huge (or tenuous) difference between twentieth century and millennial minority-majority-Black women's discourse. When the conductor asks for the ticket to our millennial narrator's destination, she reveals that she neither knows where she is going, nor why. She merely asks, "what's the most northern stop on this train?" (*The Other Black Girl* hereafter *OBG*, 3). Flight to the northernmost is the motion of nineteenth century emancipatory narratives told and written by Black ancestors insisting upon freedom. This twenty-first century narrative, testing the ironies of freedom and resisting less than collective liberation, is the prescient, brilliant, and brave achievement of *The Other Black Girl*. Through "connections made...where none existed before" (Alice Walker, *In Search of our Mother's Garden*, 5), the novel informs the present by speaking to the future.

The subject of *The Other Black Girl* is, ostensibly, the ordeal of Nella Rogers. Born in Connecticut, well-parented, UVA graduated, an emblem of millennial Buppy lifestyle, editorial assistant at Wagner books, one of the largest and best publishing houses in the country, the world of Nella (namesake of writer and freedom fighter Nella Larson and of Nell in *Sula* where themes of betrayal and a pied-piper motif take place) is ensnared in the problem of "being Black in a white workplace" (*OBG*, 12). Yet roiling beneath a light office drama ripple waves of human struggle as profound as betrayal, choice and direction. In a chronicle of events dating from July, 2018, we learn that two years of impeccable work, imminently qualifying Nella for promotion to the position of editor, her desire and ideal of success, is for naught. She is, instead, rebuked by Vera Parini, the editor whom Nella assists, claiming, "I wish you'd put half the effort you put into those extra-curricular *diversity* meetings, into working on the *core requirements*" (my emphasis, *OBG*, 13). Concealing the bite of injustice she feels, Nella smiles acceptance but resolves to appeal. Yet before she can petition Richard Wagner, the *ubermeister*, founder and CEO of Wagner books, she catches a whiff of cocoa butter. "And it wasn't just any cocoa butter. It was Brown Buttah, her favorite brand of hair grease" (*OBG*, 10). In *The Other Black Girl*, hair grease becomes *terrerio*, (black space) in a black lived-in, white controlled space (ghetto), the world of Wagner books. It is hair grease, the home-like smell of cocoa butter, that introduces *Hazel-May McCall* (my emphasis) the other Black girl of the novel's title.

The name of Hazel in Black women's fiction is seismic. Entering contemporary literature, precisely in Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla My Love*, (1970), Miz. Hazel becomes the northernmost point from the nineteenth century-influenced cult of true womanhood (see Clyde Taylor, *The Mask of Art*, 169), to the new age, actualized-ideal Black woman—a resolved spiritual, emotional, intellectual, moral, economic, and socially aware consciousness---at work in the world raising generations to think better than they've been trained, and seducing social justice. She is as sexually appealing as she is street smart and village mannered. She smashes onerous divides between "grass-roots" and the rest of us. Similarly, though resourceful and generous, by contrast, self-fashioned, empowering, excellence-oriented, goal-directed, success-seeking, self-commodified Hazel of *The Other Black Girl*, is, in millennial terms, "dope" (67). When Hazel, appearing to answer Nella's desire for diversity (systematic change), becomes Nella's office mate, the novel's action begins to model a *tableau* of Duboisian double-consciousness as pathology "two warring souls in one dark body" (*Souls of Black Folk*), and as gift of second sight---the art of making connections. With Hazel's entry, the novel itself morphs

to resemble both a *fin-de-siecle* narrative as well as an account of the present moment. From back and forth, from time to time, and through space and time, *The Other Black Girl* opens Pandora's box to juggle, through the perspectives of multiple doppelganger narrators, the hottest topics of our time: the politics of representation (stereotypical names), the 'exceptional Negro,' white supremacy, social justice, betrayal, double-consciousness, replacement theories, the personal versus the collective ("I come to the garden alone" versus "Come unto me, all ye that labor"), the politics of identity, vis a vis Zora Neal Hurston's "skin-folk" or "kin-folk" distinction, leading to the razor sharp question who is black and why.

A topic hot enough to have prompted Amiri Baraka's nineteen-sixty-nine poem "SOS," exhorting a movement in art opposing alienation between the artist and her community, Blackness in the third decade of the twenty-first century is raging. "Black Like Me?," the cover story of *The Nation* (April 18/25, 2022), a collection of essays edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Andrew S. Curran entitled *Who's Black and Why: A Hidden Chapter from the Eighteenth Century Invention of Race* (Harvard University Press, 2022), and before those, Houston Baker's *Betrayal* (Columbia University Press, 2008) are examples. In *OBG*, Blackness treated with wry humor, irony and wit, as in a light office drama, elaborates as an important history of manners, taste, and insight, in millennial America metaphorized as Wagner Publishing House. In that world where it is as crucial to understand inference as it is to know names, where making connections may be the difference between life and death, where diversity and equity (Democracy) are ever under siege, definitions emerge. Here, Blackness is not only "From us, By us: The Effect of Black Eyes on Black Ideas" (*OBG*, 47); it may broadcast as "achievers of firsts" (180) or exceptionals putting on award winning performances (233). Actually it is a choice as "between going along with the machine or sticking a foot in its gears" (58); it is a certain way of [moving] about in the world" (55) informed by the bane and blessing of double-consciousness. It is *Kindred*, a gift of love, shared between Colin and Nella.

Yet, as I read the last word of *The Other Black Girl*, my hair stood up on my head, despite its conditioning grease. Something fierce hit me, as though this book had suddenly come to life. Even so, I heard myself chanting "Wakanda Forever!"