Reflections on Black Visual Artist Doug Redd

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Abstract: This essay was inspired by the death and devastation related to the pandemic of Covid-19 which intensified the ways that preexisting sociopolitical contradictions affected black people. Before the pandemic it was commonplace for thinkers to describe themselves as radicals. However, in the moment of crisis, their voices were often silent or they offered superficial commentaries. And the magnitude of their limitations—conflating moral protestations with political analyses, for instance—evoked memories of perceptive thinkers that I knew as a young man, such as visual artist Doug Redd whose worldview and aesthetics exemplify our need for alternative sensibilities, perspectives, and centers of thought in African American culture.

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Strangely enough, the disruption of COVID-19 evoked a flood of memories. Lately I've been thinking about the black visual artist Doug Redd. His poster for the Congo Square section of the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival in 1993 not only epitomizes his inimical style but also his African-centered cultural philosophy. The image features an African musician plucking a kora. Clad in a traditional, lavender-and-white outfit and matching turban, he holds his golden-brown instrument in his left hand, and plays it with his right. But this particular kora superimposes a turquoise guitar which naturally evokes the long list of blues-based musicians in New Orleans: Buddy Bolden, Louis Armstrong, Mahalia Jackson, Professor Longhair, Sweet Emma Barrett, Earl Palmer, Allen Toussaint, Walter Washington—to name a few.

Not surprisingly, almost anytime I think about blues, the incomparable Bessie Smith comes to mind. And Redd—or as I knew him, Doug—was the person who introduced me to her genius. I visited him at his home one day in the mid-1980s. Sculpting was one of several mediums Doug excelled in as a visual artist. He especially enjoyed wood carvings. He even gave me a wooden flute he made; and once I got pretty good at it, I used to play it during poetry readings. Doug's place looked like a carpenter's building, or what I imagined one might look like anyway. He had various shapes and sizes of wood and different types of tools everywhere. So, I always enjoyed walking around his living

room, looking at various artworks. Eventually, I noticed a wooden sculpture with a beautiful image of a black swimmer. The line emblazoned on it was unforgettable, and really caught my attention: "Like a deep sea diver with a stroke that can't go wrong."

"Hey Doug, I REALLY dig this! Like a deep sea diver with a stroke that can't go wrong—damn, that's a great line," I said.

Doug laughed, "Oh, I just finished that. That's Bessie Smith. 'Empty Bed Blues.'"

This was my introduction to Bessie Smith, and blues singers generally, as self-conscious artists who were adept at composing a distinct form of poetry. I had heard and read about Smith, and had studied black poets, playwrights, and fiction writers who had studied her. But I hadn't listened to Bessie. I had grown up listening to the blues because my mother loved B.B. King. Whenever she had her parties, which was after she and my father divorced, she would start out playing rhythm and blues: Aretha Franklin, Sam Cooke, Johnny Taylor, and so on. We also listened to Nancy Wilson. Her 1967 album *Nancy Naturally*, which pictured Wilson in a green dress on the cover, was always on the playlist. But once nightfall came and everyone had a few drinks, Mom would always play B.B. King. "I've got a sweet little angel," he'd sing, "I love the way she spreads her wings." And for the rest of that evening that's all we would hear–B.B. King singing blues.

For me, the blues was part of life. As natural as sunshine or the air you breathe. I just accepted it as old folks' music. When I rode my bike or strolled up the street in my black working-class neighborhood in Berkeley, California (which actually existed back then), I often heard blues recordings through people's windows. None of the houses had air conditioning, so everyone opened their windows to cool off, and walking to the store to do an errand could sound like a radio station sometimes. Many black southern migrants of my mother's generation listened to King, Big Momma Thornton, Bobby Blue Bland and other popular blues artists.

But even among blues singers, Smith belonged to an earlier generation than the one my mother listened to. Doug was one of several independent black artist-intellectuals in New Orleans who gave me a critical understanding of blues culture. As the youngest member of Congo Square Writers Union, founded by Tom Dent, cofounder of the Umbra Writers Workshop along with Calvin Hernton and David Henderson, I was introduced to the musicianship and showmanship of blues singer-guitarist Walter Washington who performed regularly at Dorothy's Medallion Lounge on Orleans Avenue. This immersion into blues aesthetics would become the foundation of most of my research and writing as a scholar.

Doug was born in New Orleans in 1947 and raised in Baton Rouge. He moved back to New Orleans to attend Dillard University, and was a contemporary of the New Orleans sculptor, John T. Scott, MacArthur Fellow and longtime Xavier University Professor of Art. Both he and Doug passed in 2007. Doug was also a close friend and collaborator with New Orleans Black Arts writer Kalamu ya Salaam. According to the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, which he cofounded along with Carol Bebelle, "Redd was accomplished in graphic arts, sculpture, wood cuts and jewelry making. He was strongly committed to community work that supported and promoted African and African American values, ethos, culture and symbols. As a result, he had an extensive history of making contributions to community-based cultural arts, and social and religious efforts in New Orleans. His work has been described as the pivotal graphic influence for much of the African, African American and Caribbean programs and events held in New Orleans."

I met Doug in Professor Henry C. Lacey's African American literature class in 1979 at Dillard University. In the official catalog, the course was titled "The Negro American Novel." At the time, Samuel Du Bois Cook was President of Dillard. Cook was the first black scholar awarded tenure at Duke University; and evidently, he and/or other members of his administration believed that capitalizing the word "black" in references to black ethnicity was too radical or controversial for public relations in the South which was the main area of his recruitment. And in the South, the terms Afro-American and African American were generally considered more radical than Black. This was my first full year at Dillard, and both the school and the city of New Orleans were still new to me. The sensations of experiencing a black university where I saw all manner of black folks everywhere I went—classrooms, dorms, library, and administrative offices—were indescribable.

This was much different from my experiences in the Bay Area. I had grown up in black environments. In fact, Arkansas was still segregated when I lived there with my grandparents. Everyone who lived on nearby farms were black folks, and everyone affiliated with Foster Elementary School, including students, teachers, and principal, were black. Foster High School, whose football team won numerous championships, was located on the same compound, and it was also entirely black. And everyone who rode the school bus from our farms into the little town of Lewisville, about five miles from Stamps where Maya Angelou lived, were black, too.

Besides, most of my experiences in the Bay Area were centered in black environments. I had lived in Oakland, which was predominantly black. My father and two of my uncles lived in Oakland, so being in a black environment was nothing new to me. But even though I grew up during the Black Power Movement, when the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense garnered popular support from black youth in Oakland where the Party was based and throughout the Bay Area (it was common back then to hear cofounder Bobby Seale come on KDIA Lucky 13 radio station challenging the police whom he called "Pigs"), my educational experiences were essentially colonialist. Except for the year I spent with my grandparents in Arkansas, my only black teacher growing up was Ms. Thelma B. Stemley, my first-grade teacher.

Ms. Stemley was a tall medium-brown-skinned woman with a pretty smile. In retrospect, I was lucky that she introduced me to formal education. I'll always be indebted to her for her talent, creativity, professionalism, and the love and warmth she gave us as a teacher. Ms. Stemley was also the person who hipped me to the fact that I'm black. This probably sounds strange today, but the world is much different than it used to be, and my elementary years came before the Black Power Movement made it chic to be black—so chic, in fact, that James Brown wrote and recorded his funk classic "Say It Loud—I'm Black And I'm Proud" in 1968. Before this period, in my neighborhood, if someone called you "black," even if it was another black person, which happened more often than not, it was almost as insulting as the n-word, as it's called euphemistically today.

In those days, many black parents tried to safeguard their children by withholding their ethnic identity because of racial politics. They reasoned understandably that once we learned our identity, we'd also learn what it meant to be black in America, and since they had experienced that pain and frustration themselves, they wanted to protect our innocence and allow us to live the first few years of our young lives as blissfully as possible. Of course, this approach creates problems. And somehow Ms. Stemley figured out we didn't know—perhaps by intuition or, more likely, the kinds of comments we made—and she decided to enlighten us. First, she instructed us to form a circle with our desks;

then she went around the circle, telling each one of us our racial or ethnic identities. When she got to the student sitting next to me, she said, "Harry, you're white, and Anthony, you're a Negro." I beamed with pride. The excited tone of her voice felt musical. I felt special—a Negro, she had said. I assumed that being "a Negro" meant something positive. It never occurred to me that there were stigmas attached to my identity. I could barely wait to get home. I almost ran the three blocks to Cedar Street, and then I saw my cousin Kenny who lived across the street. I couldn't wait to tell him.

"Hey, Kenny," I shouted. "Guess what?"

"What?" he said.

"I'm a Negro!"

"Oh, everybody knows that."

I was devastated and perplexed. Kenny was two years older; and unlike Ms. Stemley's, his tone was noticeably dismissive. "Oh, everybody knows that," he'd said. Well, why didn't I know? Confusion swirled through my six-year-old mind. Ms. Stemley had sounded excited, and had intimated that there were affirmative, perhaps even uplifting, qualities about "Negro" identity; but Kenny's reaction suggested that my discovery bore little significance, which suggested that being "a Negro" bore little significance, and that I bore little significance myself. I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything. What could I say? I never even mentioned the conversation to my parents, who were still together then. But I did have questions: Why I was left out of the secret? Why were there such stark differences between the two interpretations? And what did it mean to be a Negro?

Variations of this dilemma were fairly common among black folks before the Black Power Movement. But when I arrived in New Orleans in January 1979, I found a chocolate city with a sense of vibrancy beyond my imagination. Black youth culture in the Bay Area was largely southern-derived because most of our parents had migrated from states such as Arkansas, Texas, or Louisiana as children or young adults, but the Crescent City was extra special. As the late Barbadian poet and historian Edward Kamau Brathwaite, who visited several times, observed, "New Orleans is the northernmost Caribbean city." Black people's worldviews and sensibilities were different from anything I'd ever experienced, including the year I spent on my grandparents' farm in Arkansas when I was ten years old. I saw black people everywhere I went, from all walks of life, in virtually every complexion imaginable, doing just about everything imaginable in a modern civil society. Even the mayor, Dutch Morial, was African American, though most people I knew back in the Bay would've likely assumed Morial was white because of his light-skinned complexion and straight hair. So, it was a different world for me. I was attending a black university in a predominantly black city.

Doug had knowledge that wasn't accessible in university settings, though. I had seen and known all sorts of black men—both successful and unsuccessful. I knew numerous personality types in the Army: men whom trouble followed everywhere they went and men who excelled in nearly everything they did. I was based in South Korea, and I knew brothers who negotiated with Koreans and navigated Korean cities with ease. Some even spoke Korean fluently. There were also talented singers. One guy I knew hit every note that Philip Bailey sang on the live version of the song "Reasons" which appears on Earth, Wind & Fire's classic album *Gratitude* (1975). But I also knew street dudes growing up. The best student in my first-grade class, Dickie Willis, became a pimp when he was 18. And according to street legend, he was shot between his eyes in Fresno, California, before his 19th birthday. There were also street poets. This was several years before the hip hop era, and older guys in my neighborhood

performed toasts such as "Dolemite," "Shine and the Titanic," and my favorite, "The Signifying Monkey," which I later perfected myself, much to the chagrin of my teachers who routinely kicked me out of class. Guys also rhymed during dice games: "Fo' one for the po one."

I had known laborers, too—welders, postal workers, construction workers, mechanics, coaches, and salesmen. One of my uncles, Clarence Brown, sold insurance. Born in 1915, Uncle Clarence earned his bachelor's degree from Arkansas AM&N in Pine Bluff in the 1930s. He was drafted into the segregated Army during World War II, and migrated to the San Francisco Bay Area shortly after the war. He eventually bought a house with his wife, Thelma, whom we called Aunt Dodie, in the Oakland hills. Clarence's brother, Joseph Brown, is 102 years old, and fought in Normandy. And initially, the two brothers planned to live in Arkansas where they were born and raised along with my aunts, Mary Brown, Odessa Brown, and Bernice Brown, and uncle Cleant Brown who all migrated to California.

But as young veterans, the Brown brothers experienced blatant racism when they returned to Arkansas. As Uncle Clarence told the story, he and Uncle Joe were processing out of the military in Lewisville, Arkansas. My grandfather, Joe T. Brown, was well known among prominent white citizenry as a successful farmer who was in high demand for his self-taught culinary skills, which included his to-die-for barbeque-sauce recipe for barbecue sauce. My uncles were known as "Joe Brown's boys," and everything was going smoothly until a few white soldiers entered the building. Then my uncles were told to step aside and let the white boys process *their* papers. Naturally, given the war propaganda—that America was fighting for democracy—the irony must've cut to the quick. They were well aware of racial dynamics during the war. In fact, in the Brown Family Bible there's a photo of Uncle Joe in Normandy with a group of black soldiers talking with the great activist Paul Robeson. But understanding a contradiction isn't the same as being able to address it forthrightly. Doing so could have gotten them killed or beaten severely at the very least. So Uncle Clarence told me, "As soon as we were finished, I said to Joe, 'What time are you leaving?'"

"I'm catching the next train."

"I'll be right beside you."

Both the train imagery and agency via flight typify the blues era. Neither of my uncles went back to Arkansas for 20 years after that experience, despite the fact that their parents, whom we called Mama Annie and Daddy Joe, still lived on the family farm. It wasn't until Congress passed the Voting Rights Act in 1965 that my uncles returned to Arkansas for a visit.

Another one of my uncles, Sanford Brown, owned a liquor store that sold sandwiches, sausages, potato chips, candy bars, cupcakes, pies, and, of course, various types of alcohol. He, too, had been in the Army during World War II. But Uncle Sanford refused to fight for this country. When he learned that his unit was scheduled to fight in Europe, he broke one of his hands intentionally, and got out of the Army on a medical discharge. Afterward, Uncle Sanford became a postal worker and bought a house in Berkeley. But he always dreamed of owning his own business, and eventually bought a liquor store that did business with the Nation of Islam. He also supported other small black businesses in the area.

And, finally, my father, Lester Henry Bolden, was a local boxing phenom who, in an exhibition bout, trounced professional boxer Ray Salas who'd fought the legendary Sugar Ray Robinson, generally regarded as the greatest boxer, pound-for-pound, who ever lived. Dad later became interested in the history of ancient Egypt. He immersed himself so thoroughly that he learned to read

ancient hieroglyphs fluently. But Dad never earned a degree; he worked as a typewriter repairman for many years, and even taught the trade at the Skill Center in Oakland for a few years before typewriters became obsolete.

What distinguished Doug was the fact that he was an African-centered artist supported primarily by black people. He had developed, thrived, and learned to work freely and independently in black neighborhoods and black community-based organizations. This is almost unthinkable today, and it wasn't especially common back then. But as far as I knew, Doug didn't have a conventional 9-5 gig, and he seemed indifferent to white America and her cultural standards. He didn't seek support or approval from mostly white, bohemian art galleries or, more generally, the petite bourgeois art world, which is itself mostly white. Nor did Doug seek formal affiliations with art faculty at large public and private universities. John Scott enjoyed a similar type of independence teaching Art at Xavier University; and, notably, the only time I met him, as a member of Congo Square Writers Union, Scott emphasized the importance of community-based art organizations.

Doug's artwork and attitude were unapologetically African-centered. He was totally committed to "African people" (his term), particularly those of us who lived in New Orleans and his hometown of Baton Rouge. Simply put, Doug loved black people, and black people loved them some Doug. He wore locs (i.e., dreadlocks) long before they became the chic fashion statements they are today. In fact, at that time, many black people, including most of us who considered ourselves freethinkers, had internalized the colonial belief that locs were ugly and unkempt; that they represented a lack of grooming—indeed, *anything* but a beautiful hair style. This was my belief, too, when I was a teenager. Consequently, black people who wore locs were considered "weird," and were often stigmatized because they deviated from conventional black cultural norms.

Toni Cade Bambara's use of irony in her great short story "The Lesson" clearly illustrates this colonial attitude. Bambara's narrator recollects a childhood experience about an African-centered teacher: "So this one day Miss Moore rounds us all up at the mailbox and it's puredee hot and she's knockin herself out about arithmetic.... the starch in my pinafore scratching the shit outta me and I'm really hating this nappy-head bitch and her goddamn college degree." That most people who wear locs today have little interest in, much less respect for, neither black cultural nationalism nor black artists who exemplified such principles is a notable irony indeed. Up until roughly 1985, most people who rocked dreadlocks were either cultural nationalists or people who sympathized with their views, particularly the belief that, by and large, most of us fare better emotionally and economically when our visions and values are shaped by African-centered aesthetics and ontologies, and when we operate within black institutions and predominantly black environments. But by the same token, as with most human experiences, I knew many people with dreads who were as bogus as three-dollar bills, people who fronted like they were down for "the revolution" at a moment's notice. And I often wondered whether they deluded themselves or whether they packaged their performances and projected them toward various audiences, including predominantly white ones.

But Doug was for real. He lived on St. Claude Avenue at the edge of the 9th Ward, and his neighbors respected him so much, they protected him when he wasn't home. This is significant. In addition to his long, thick dreadlocks, Doug wore traditional African clothes. So he was very noticeable, but neighbors didn't interpret his difference negatively. It was impossible to enter his yard without someone letting you know. Didn't matter what time of day it was either. If you knocked on

Doug's door and he wasn't there, somebody would say something to you.

"You lookin fa Doug? Doug ain't home. He had to go handle some business. He'll be back in about two hours, hear? Come back a little later."

I can't remember a single occasion when some variation of this ritual didn't occur after I entered Doug's yard when he wasn't home. In point of fact, Doug was given a traditional New Orleans jazz procession after his death, a ceremony reserved only for individuals the black community holds in highest esteem.

In retrospect, though, especially in the age of Trump and COVID-19, the thing that fascinates me most about Doug is his political wisdom. Many black intellectuals today are self-described radicals. And to my knowledge, Doug never described himself this way, but he certainly understood what writer Langston Hughes called the ways of white folks far better than most people who identify as radicals. His brief comment on billionaire Ross Perot is a perfect example. When Perot ran for President as an Independent, in 1992, I was probably more bemused by his candidacy than I was disturbed by his Stone-Age worldviews and beliefs. The fact that he would knowingly split the Grand Old Party's[1] vote defied everything I knew about colonial mentalities, which is essentially how I've interpreted Republican ideology throughout my adult life. No matter what differences they might have between each other, no matter how intense or longstanding their disagreements might be, they always have one unifying mechanism: to caucus and coalesce against black folks and *anything* related to black folks, especially the Democratic Party. To put it differently, anti-blackness establishes a bulwark that enables the GOP to unify against anyone and anything, whether liberal, moderate, or conservative, that conservative media outlets portray as sympathetic to black people. This is a truism. Therefore, from my vantage point, Perot's reasoning seemed at variance with conservative logic. And though I sensed that there was something else going on, and that there was much more to the situation, I couldn't put my finger on it. So, when I visited Doug on that spring day in 1992, I asked him what he thought about Perot's candidacy.

"Well, I think this might be the beginning of a shift among the elite. See, up until now capitalists preferred politicians handling things. They looked at politicians the way rich people looked at chauffeurs. It was their car, but it was better to let someone else drive it and figure out all the navigations. But now, they're like fuck it. Y'all ain't takin me where I need to go as far as this money is concerned. I'm driving the car now. That's how I see it."

And Doug was right. Fast forward to 2016. Donald Trump was the walking embodiment of Doug's prediction. It's doubtful that Ross Perot himself ever imagined a more dramatic manifestation of his political idea. More than any political figure in modern history, Trump symbolizes mega-capitalists' and neo-confederates' desire to create a corporate state. Of course, Doug couldn't have predicted Trump's presidency some 25 years later; and obviously, Doug was only one individual, but his analysis of Perot's candidacy and what it represented exemplifies the political wisdom that developed and circulated through a largely independent black base of information.

Doug's reading of American politics wasn't dissimilar from the great novelist Octavia Butler's. Her 1998 novel, *Parable of the Talents*, includes Texas Senator Andrew Steele Jarret whose presidential campaign slogan is "Help us to make America great again." It's as though Butler peered into the stark twilight zone of our present. Of course, people seldom correlate Butler with black artists who had Doug's worldview. For many people today, it's quite appropriate that black cultural

nationalists are little more than lampooning targets. For the record, black cultural nationalism and white nationalism are not equivalent; the former was one of many historical responses to the latter. And sure, many proponents of cultural nationalism and the philosophy itself advanced glaring contradictions. But we contemporary thinkers we have a few doozies of our own. That so many of us underestimated Trump and didn't respond to the danger he presented with much more urgency exemplified our shortsightedness. For reasons that remain unclear, we generally throw nuance out of the window when cultural nationalists are concerned. Yet Doug and other black New Orleans artist-intellectuals, including Kalamu ya Salaam and Tom Dent, offer valuable insight. They witnessed Jim Crow first-hand, participated in resistive black organizations and collectives, and observed resistance movements in the African Diaspora. This is why they urged us to build black frameworks and institutions, elaborating on Billie Holiday's premise in her 1941 classic recording "God Bless The Child": "God bless the child that's got its own."

The hubris Doug highlighted, which conflicts with salient values in blues ontology, is part and parcel of the trend toward privatization and neo-confederates' dream of a corporate state. Both of which are related to slavery. Then as now, the ultimate objective involved implementing and solidifying a system of private fiefdoms wherein evil thrived on lies and ignorance. In 1861, slave owners chose to become confederates and to embroil the nation in a civil war rather than accepting a compromise on slavery. The historian Carole Emberton observes a similar mentality among GOP politicians and voters today: the "Southern version of Civil War history … has nourished the white nationalism currently poisoning American politics." The triad of Trump, Fox News, and the GOP obtained and maintained power chiefly through spinformation in talk radio, punditry, ads, and political commentaries. Consequently, GOP voters have prioritized identity over reality as their criterion for truth-telling. And while the road trip with Trump has begun to feel more like a rollercoaster malfunction than a joyride in a Corvette, he maintains a religious-like following among white evangelical Christians and white people without a college education.

As journalist James Poniewozik noted recently in *The New York Times*, Trump transformed the coronavirus briefings into "create-your-own-reality TV." Poniewozik continues: "There is no greater asset to a salesman or a politician than an audience that wants to believe. If you want to believe, here's what you can see: The president of the United States, at a podium, backed by a team of officials and experts, doing something — or at least saying something, at length, which in the visual language of TV reads as the same thing." Of course, this is nothing new. But what's missing in Poniewozik's critique is the racial element. In my essay, "The Rona and Politics Today," posted on my blog in March, I quote Ralph Ellison, and his prescience bears quoting again: '"These white folk have newspapers, magazines, radios, spokesmen to get their ideas across. If they want to tell the world a lie, they can tell it so well that it becomes the truth; and if I tell them that you're lying, they'll tell the world even if you prove you're telling the truth. Because it's the kind of lie they want to hear.…'"

How, then, do we explain white voters' loyalty to Trump? Granted, people do feel vulnerable. But there's more to it than economic fear. After all, it's obvious that under similar circumstances other presidents would've fallen out of favor. Indeed, the Grand Old Party's unwavering loyalty to Trump exemplifies the ontology of whiteness, particularly in the form of neo-confederacy. Both are defined by opposition. And for people who have this mentality, their identity is at stake. They're emotionally invested in Trump's narrative of racialized grievances—which is to say, the myth of

white supremacy—and they know his lies are interrelated. One lie becomes the premise for another chapter of lies. This is something most of us are taught when we're very young. I distinctly remember Mama Annie telling me when I was ten years old: "Don't chou walk around here tellin no lies. Cause if you do, you'll have to tell another one, and another one after that. So you tell me the truth, hear?" Likewise, acknowledging Trump's falsehoods would unravel the fabric of his narrative. This is the main reason why voters ignore his failures and wrongdoings. But there's another reason that establishment figures often overlook. An admission of Trump's ineptitude would amount to a confession of misjudgment, if not immorality. And for people committed to a worldview of sanctioned innocence and ignorance, any such admission would likely engender emotional pain and precipitate cognitive dissonance.

Here's the ugly truth: Trump's people act like they're engaged in a civil war by proxy. They regard his judgments as law: celestial decrees and criteria for people, policies, and perspectives. In Trumpworld, anyone who questions him is morally corrupt, and acolytes use this stigmatizing stain to rationalize self-righteous ignorance. How else do we explain Republicans' fervor for voter suppression? Or their aversion to scientific data about COVID-19? Or their ghoulish, stone-hearted belief that wearing masks infringes on their freedom when the death toll is 219,000 people and counting? What else besides rank and rancid ruthlessness, or perhaps a blood-thirsty craving for cruelty explains their obliviousness to Trump's evil? Why are they completely unfazed by his audio-taped admission that he's been lying about the virus for the entirety of the pandemic? Or that his refusal to wear a mask and merciless demonizing of mask-wearers contaminated the social environment of the nation so extensively that the White House itself became a super spreader of the Rona, as black folks call it, so that Trump himself, his wife Melania, his son Barron, numerous white house officials, and untold numbers of other people contracted it, too, including staunch supporters like Herman Cain, the former presidential candidate who attended Trump's rally without a mask, contracted the virus, perhaps during the rally, and died shortly afterward? Trump recently advocated herd immunity as a possible response to the pandemic, a suggestion that William Haseltine, Chair and President of ACCESS Health International, described as "mass murder," and GOP leaders remain as silent as death.

Meanwhile, as Election Day approaches, Trump and his supporters are stoking violence, mayhem, and fears of a civil war.[2] Reminiscent of Gil Scott-Heron's characterization of neo-confederates' use of projection (e.g., "up looked down" and "right looked wrong"), Trump had urged supporters back in April 2020 to "LIBERATE" Michigan and Virginia after Governors Kate Whitmer and Ralph Northam issued lockdown orders in Michigan and Virginia, respectively, in their attempts to contain the virus and to thereby minimize its economic impact. And as it happens, just a few days ago, on October 8, 2020, the FBI arrested thirteen white terrorists who were evidently trying to start a civil war. Seven of the men were Wolverine Watchmen, a group tied to the far-right Boogaloo Bois movement. Details of the plan involved storming the Michigan state capitol and charging Whitmer with treason to trigger a "societal collapse." Neither Trump nor Attorney General Bill Barr has condemned any of these actions. On the contrary, when asked if he would condemn white supremacy during the presidential debate, Trump acted like a neo-confederate commandant, invoking violence against black and brown voters at the polls on November 3, 2020.

"Proud Boys," he said. "Stand back and stand by."

At its core, neo-confederacy is a capitalist form of the monarchy—what people today call autocracy. There are several recent geographical manifestations of this phenomenon. But regardless of the terminology, they seem to share common characteristics. For instance, there's a zero-sum mentality of anti-intellectualism, greed, and deceit. These systems also thrive on xenophobia, that is, scapegoating and fomenting various sorts of conflict and divisions related to racial, ethnic, gendered, sexual, and / or religious differences. Of course, none of this is new. Countless artists, activists, and scholars warned us about wedge-tactics. Many also highlighted the inherent limitations of capitalism. But COVID-19 has put those limitations in stark relief. Since Trump refused to invoke the Defense Production Act early in the pandemic, and thus neglected to address the shortage of ventilators, masks, and other supplies, governors were forced to compete with each other for supplies. Nurses have gone on strike because they didn't have necessary equipment to protect patients, themselves, and therefore their families when they went home. This is 21st century American capitalism, the cumulative result of more than a half-century of counteracting victories of the Civil Rights Movement, otherwise known as "cutting big government."

In many ways, Trump personifies the toxic, and morbidly intoxicating, blend of hatred and ignorance that comprise the conceptual ingredients of neo-confederacy. This ideological concoction of malfeasance is the ultimate challenge for our survival in the 21st century. Reminiscent of Evel Knievel, the stunt performer who became equally famous for his death-defying motorcycle jumps and his numerous, bone-crushing crashes, Trump's approach to decision-making during this outbreak is comparable to someone driving a turbocharged performance car blindfolded, speeding down the highway at nearly 200 miles per hour, swerving like a drunkard, changing lanes at whim. And unfortunately, most of us are stuck in that car, riding without seat belts or serenity until the nightmare of Trump's presidency is over. But even if Trump is defeated, the broader problem of Trumpism will be more difficult to address. Doing so will require the foresight afforded by contrarian values and egalitarian viewpoints embodied in blues ontologies and other conceptual frameworks that black folks fashion and formulate on the outer edges of American society.

Notes

1. Republican use the phrase Grand Old Party and the acronym, GOP, interchangeably. The "grand old party" is a phrase that became associated with Republicans in the latter part of the 19th century.
2. This essay was written in April 2020 and revised in October 2020.

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