

The Image of Black Masculinity as Portrayed through Dystopian Fiction

by Anika Krishna

How does a Black man survive in a world where he must constantly compensate for the color of his skin? Where blackness is the ultimate evil, punishable by death, and his suffering is a form of entertainment? *Friday Black*, a series of short stories written by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, explores the realities of being black through dystopian science fiction. Using satire detailed with unapologetically violent description, Adjei-Brenyah demonstrates how segregation and violence against black bodies still exist in a supposedly post-racial era, fueled by the commonly-accepted negative perception of the black masculine identity. In one of the stories in the collection, “The Finkelstein 5,” adolescent-age Emmanuel struggles to fit into a White-dominated society by altering his clothing, behavior, and speech to dial down his “Blackness” in public situations. Amidst the political turmoil occurring in the nation after a White man kills five black children, Emmanuel finds it more and more difficult to suppress his emotions and hide his identity. In another story in the collection, “Zimmer Land,” a young man named Isaiah works at a technologically-futuristic amusement park where patrons engage in simulations to mimic murdering black actors, like Isaiah, under the guise of delivering ‘justice.’ Receiving real and simulated abuse from customers during each shift, as well as contempt from protesters of the business who view him as a sellout, Isaiah copes with mental and emotional trauma. Emmanuel’s painstaking regulation of his Blackness dial and Isaiah’s workplace experiences in these stories reveal disturbing truths about the dystopian societies that they live in. Hyperbole based on truth blurs the lines between fiction and reality, and the detrimental impact of bias is exposed.

By introducing the concept of the Blackness dial on the first page of “The Finkelstein 5,” Adjei-Brenyah emphasizes that the first thing Emmanuel must think about in

every situation is how he is perceived. If he does not prioritize looking as unthreatening as possible, he risks putting himself in harm's way, whether that be through verbal remarks or physical violence. When shopping, he knows better than to eye any item for too long or to leave a store without a receipt. He dresses in well-fitting clothes and keeps the brim of his hat facing forward to keep his Blackness below 7.0 (Adjei-Brenyah 3-4). Adjei-Brenyah writes, "If he wore a tie, wing-tipped shoes, smiled constantly, used his indoor voice, and kept his hands strapped and calm at his sides, he could get his Blackness as low as 4.0" (Adjei-Brenyah 1). The similarity of phrases like "indoor voice" and "hands . . . at his sides" to commands given to a child is important to recognize, as the murderer of five Black children in the story, George Wilson Dunn—whose court case is written in parallel to Emmanuel's everyday life—describes his victims as looking and acting much older than they actually were in order to justify his use of self-defense. An article published in the *Journal of Negro Education*, titled "Creating a New Narrative: Reframing Black Masculinity for College Men," explains how the image of "Black masculinity has been detached from its African roots," which focused on "familial connectivity, community leadership, and collectivity," and instead "attached to a White dominant ideology" that chooses Black men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds with criminal records to represent the entire race (Pelzer 18). For Emmanuel, counteracting this stereotype does not simply mean embodying the aforementioned positive qualities or conforming to a White standard, but rather being in a state of hypervigilance, where every decision he makes is crucial to his survival.

One way in which Emmanuel attempts to keep his blackness dial at a lower level is through code switching. "'Nah We Straight': An Argument Against Code Switching" by Vershawn Ashanti Young describes code switching as the conversion of African American

English (AAE) to Standard English, a practice that is particularly common in academic and professional environments (Young 50). In the story, Emmanuel uses AAE when speaking to his childhood friend Boogie, but switches to immaculate Standard English when speaking on the phone to a company representative—who speaks to him in colloquial language—regarding his upcoming interview. Young argues that looking down on the use of AAE comes from a segregationist idea. He compares code switching to *Plessey v. Ferguson* and the era of Jim Crow, which encouraged the flawed concept of “separate but equal” (Young 53; 73). As English phrases and words vary even within regional groups of White Americans, the idea that using AAE is improper outside of the home attaches a tag of inferiority to it. Rather than training black students to maintain a “double consciousness” promoted by telling them when to speak in which manner, Young advocates for code meshing, which allows for the incorporation of AAE into Standard English (Young 51). Emmanuel’s fear of being perceived as “too Black,” even over the phone, is validated to the reader when he is denied the interview on account of the company filling their unofficial quota for Black employees. The company representative with whom Emmanuel speaks tells him the position is already filled when he becomes aware of Emmanuel’s race, as if his role was only to be a token minority for the appearance of diversity. The company representative then goes on to justify the decision by claiming that the company is not an “urban brand” (Adjei-Brenyah 13)—a harsh generalization and microaggression.

Emmanuel’s experiences of discrimination are analogous to the racial profiling of George Dunn’s victims in the other storyline in “The Finkelstein 5,” with the juxtaposition of Emmanuel’s story as a young adult male to that of the elementary-age female victim foreshadowing his own tragically-inevitable death. When Dunn is questioned by the prosecuting

attorney about how a seven-year-old girl could have possibly attacked him when her decapitated body was found yards away from the site of the initial altercation, he merely responds, “she looked at least thirteen” (Adjei-Brenyah 20). Along with the child’s age, he mentions the black clothes that the children were wearing, compares them to robbers, and refers to them as a “gang”—a term with threatening connotations (Adjei-Brenyah 16). Dunn’s failure to address his use of extreme violence and the logistical flaws of his cover story directs the conversation in a way that focuses on the appearance of the victims, portraying innate characteristics as being menacing. Victim blaming of the five kids normalizes an apathetic attitude towards brutality against Black bodies, evident in the complete lack of empathy and remorse not only of the murderer, but also of the jury, who watches “engaged and excited,” as though viewing for entertainment, before ruling in Dunn’s favor (Adjei-Brenyah 17). The hypervigilance Black characters must exhibit to avoid such a fate is in keeping with the idea of “Black disembodiment,” described by Adam Dahl as “a constant and pervasive fear that within a moment one's body can be taken without consequence and punishment” (322). Dunn’s victims may have been too young to understand this fear, but Emmanuel certainly does. Dahl’s article also discusses the case of Eric Garner, who was choked to death upon arrest by an NYPD police officer in 2014, explaining that Garner and other Black men who have suffered similar fates were never even calling for civil rights; they were simply begging for the “freedom to live” (Dahl 320). In the same way, none of Emmanuel’s efforts to control his Blackness were calls for social reform; they were necessary actions to keep him within a range on his dial in which he could stay alive.

Throughout the story, Emmanuel wants to distance himself from Black male stereotypes and the people from his past whom he associates with them, but the realization that justice and

equality are unattainable in a system founded on oppression pushes him to resort to violence in an attempt to release his frustration. The night after he is denied his job interview, Emmanuel decides to join his friend Boogie, whom he initially pities for always being higher on the Blackness scale than himself, in “Naming”—a form of retaliation that involves committing acts of violence against innocent White people, all while saying the names of the five children murdered: Tyler Kennet Mboya, J.D. Heroy, Akua Harris, Marcus Harris, and Fela St. John. If brought into custody by law enforcement, Namers would respond to questions only by continuing to repeat the names of the victims. When Emmanuel joins Boogie, he chooses the name of Fela St. John, the youngest victim, whose decapitated body he sees in a nightmare at the beginning of the story. In his moment of pure anger and desperation, Emmanuel becomes drawn to violence in a way akin to Guitar, a character in the book *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison, which follows the fictional journey of a young Black man looking for answers about his cultural and familial roots. Guitar joins a society known as the “Seven Days” which seeks revenge for hate crimes against Black people by killing White people, who are often unaffiliated with the crime, in the same manner that the Black person was killed (Morrison 268). The Seven Days’ “an eye for an eye” mentality causes Guitar to eventually lose his purpose and become paranoid, turning on his own friend (Morrison 428). Similarly, Emmanuel’s experience does not give him the satisfaction that he hopes for. Adjei-Brenyah writes, “as he thrashed and yelled and saw it all, he felt nothing leaving him” (Adjei-Brenyah 24). Finally, he ends up hitting Boogie with his baseball bat instead of the targeted White couple, suggesting his understanding that injuring innocent people will not relieve the resentment and fear that has built up inside of him, nor will it bring back the five children. This emotional burden is his to bear forever, and he is frustrated that he allowed Boogie to convince him that partaking in this activity would make a

difference.

Unlike the murderer who is able to humorously describe his attack on his victims in court, through statements such as “*Vroom*, I cut the basketball player’s head clean, *vroom*, off” (Adjei-Brenyah 18), Emmanuel does not receive the same legal and societal lenience for his behavior on the night of the Naming. Rather than being arrested or questioned when he stands over the White couple with a baseball bat, he is immediately shot (Adjei-Brenyah 26). This heartbreaking moment is reflective of how Black masculinity is perceived differently from a traditionally white image of masculinity. The article “Being a Black Man: Development of the Masculinity Inventory Scale (MIS) for Black Men” cites a 1994 study by Franklin which claims that “. . . the mainstream societal group, sends messages to Black men through avenues such as television and radio, idealizing dominant White masculinity traits such as competitiveness, aggressiveness, and dominance that are different from the messages they receive from their primary and peer groups” (cited in Mincey, et. al. 169). By contrast, research by Hunter and Davis shows that black men themselves emphasize qualities like “human community” and “spirituality” over “avoidance of femininity” and “restrictive emotionality” (cited in Mincey, et. al. 168). When traditional masculine characteristics are expressed by individuals of different races, they are not viewed equally. This is exemplified by Emmanuel’s death. At the moment when he feels what it is like to be in a position of dominance for the first time—as the perpetrator of fear rather than the victim of it—his Blackness dial uncontrollably reaches its highest level, showing that in his most aggressive state, he is seen as the most ‘Black,’ and he is killed by a police officer. Upon his death, his dial plummets to zero, proving that when he is no longer seen as a threat, which requires taking his life away, his skin color becomes unimportant (Adjei-Brenyah 26). Though Emmanuel’s

attempts to avenge the deaths of the children is not justifiable, it is impossible to ignore the stark contrast between his fate and that of the White murderer. A racially-biased view of masculinity creates this disparity and causes Emmanuel's need to be constantly aware of and in control of his Blackness.

The second story analyzed from *Friday Black*, "Zimmer Land," takes the topic of Black suffering and creates a dystopia within a dystopia, where an amusement park that boasts the attraction of being able to scream slurs at, engage in physical fights with, and simulate shooting minorities is an accepted part of society. While the park draws protesters, it is overall quite profitable, attracting several "regulars" and gaining enough money and staff for expansion. The media reports on the business around the time of its opening but quickly gets "bored" and moves on—an indication of its normalization (Adjei-Brenyah 92). As discussed in the book *Critical Race Theory*, the normalization of racism is not just common, but inherent to society. *Critical Race Theory* explains that scholars who study legal institutions through a systemic, race-based approach believe that racism is not unusual or "aberrational," but rather a "normal science" and "the usual way society does business" (Delgado and Stefancic 7). This is because the same systems which were built to benefit a White hegemony define equality through a colorblind perspective. These systems claim that equality exists because everyone—in theory—has the same legal rights within society, but the erasure of oppressive history that occurs when one doesn't "see" race is the failure to acknowledge the lasting consequences of slavery and segregation, including but not limited to the physical manifestation of biases that still exist within people's minds (Delgado and Stefancic 21-26). The Zimmer Land theme park makes it very clear that for people like Isaiah, race is not something that can be ignored, as it is the basis for the park's design.

To effectively play the role of the “Bad Black Man” in each run of the simulation, Isaiah needs nothing more than his brown skin; the label is assigned to him by the patrons. Even when maintaining a calm, unsuspecting demeanor, he is harshly interrogated and berated, as though his mere existence is a wrongful thing. The idea of the “Good Black Man” and “Bad Black Man” is elaborated upon in “Against Bipolar Black Masculinity: Intersectionality, Assimilation, Identity Performance, and Hierarchy” written by UC Davis associate professor Frank R. Cooper, who states that the “Good Black Man” must separate himself from other Black people to assimilate into White culture and norms, while the “Bad Black Man” is “animalistic, crime-prone, and sexually unrestrained” (Cooper 876). Although Isaiah may assume the role of the good Black man in real life, working to please a White authority that simultaneously demonizes him for his skin color and provides his paycheck, he does not get the option to choose how he is viewed by customers who pay to have their racial biases validated. Regardless of their actual importance in society, these consumers get the chance to live out their fantasy of being the protagonist of the story in this make-believe world.

In his section of the game, Isaiah loiters in the scene of a neighborhood until a patron approaches him, choosing either to shoot him in a heroic act of guardianship from a potential rapist or criminal, call the police for his arrest on the account of his acting suspicious, or fight him with their bare hands. Isaiah wears a mecha-suit which protects him from injury and holds fake blood packets to spew when he is shot with the BB gun, increasing the thrill of the experience while further normalizing the image of cruelty against Black bodies. Cooper explains in his article that the “animal imagery” of Black men that originated from Europe and has been so deeply ingrained in American history, culture, and law, is the most fundamental part of their threatening depiction that justifies this kind of violence. He gives

the example of the case of Rodney King, a victim of police brutality in 1991, in which defense attorneys legitimized the LAPD officers' actions by describing King as a "beast in need of control" (Cooper 878). In an environment where his only forbidding quality is his dark skin, Isaiah is seen as an animal to be hunted.

Isaiah initially hopes that the industry he works for will help decrease racially-motivated violence in real situations by providing an outlet for racist consumers, but he eventually learns that the company cares more for profit than Black lives. During Isaiah's first meeting after his promotion to the creative development team, he learns that the park has decided to begin marketing the experience to children to increase visitors. Adjei-Brenyah describes the new plan crafted by the management, writing that "it will focus on juvenile decision-making/justice implementation" (Adjei-Brenyah 96). From an early age, kids who visit Zimmer Land will be taught that cold blooded murder is not only admissible, but a form of "implementing justice," or being a good citizen. The mission's focus on "decision making" is also concerning, because in Isaiah's simulation, the only three decisions given are violent and accusatory, villainizing him in every round. Jennifer Harvey, author of *Raising White Kids: Bringing Up Children in a Racially Unjust America*, discusses the importance of "race-conscious parenting," claiming that "racial development is no different than physical, intellectual, or emotional development (Harvey 8)." She goes on to mention how starting in the first few months after birth, "babies begin to observe and absorb, and even respond to the racial dimensions of our society" (Harvey 24). By opening the park to children, Zimmer Land becomes more than an avenue for unyieldingly violent and racist people. It is now a place of racist indoctrination, as it continues to keep alive a mentality that upholds a socially-constructed racial hierarchy where Black men are dangerous and dispensable.

The societies constructed in “Zimmer Land” and “The Finkelstein 5” are funhouse mirrors of our own, reflecting the current state of our country through a lens that amplifies the flaws of its racial divide. Emmanuel’s efforts to distance himself from the negative perceptions of his intersectional identity and Isaiah’s choice (or perhaps, obligation) to embrace these perceptions are met with criticism from peers, authority, and other members of their communities, demonstrating that they can never escape from a reproving public eye that holds Black men with a degree of apprehension. While the words and actions of many of the characters in these stories are shocking to most readers, the stories simply describe the daily lives of two average young men. The discomfort that we, as readers, experience puts us in a position where it becomes impossible to ignore the culture of normalized discrimination and Black disembodiment that has existed for generations in our country. Adjei-Brenyah’s stark language challenges the way that we think, showing us that even in a futuristic society, ignorance and indifference equate to violence.

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