Refiguring in Black
For
Thabang
Refiguring in Black

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Lindiwe, *ndino tenda maningi. Mwari aku busise!*
Aperture

There must be many and different ways of redefining the current conjuncture by way of refiguring.

With the emphasis on specificity, refiguring in black can be defined as doing things differently and deliberately so from the black point of view. Precisely at this specificity, there lies the critical mode of thinking about black figures and studying them differently. In this meditation, Frederick Douglass, Toni Morrison, Hortense Spillers, and Charles Mingus are figures who are not only located in black thought but they are thematized outside the conventions of their critical reception and commendation, which means they cannot be studied otherwise. By being refigured from the black point of view, this is the insistence that they must be located outside the limitations that are imposed on them as stagnant figures. In short, *Refiguring in Black* has a different tenor and disposition of these figures, hence their refiguring from the black point of view. What is presented here is a meditation by way of refiguring. It is a critical practice, a discourse, whose critical disposition, operation, is (on) the edge. By refiguring, it means that this suite gives new meaning to the thought of Douglass, Morrison, Spillers, and Mingus as in a form of reformulation – rupture. In other words, they are refigured in ways that part company with familiar interpretive practices,
discourses, styles, sensibilities, and tropes. Things become radically different.

This, in essence, means seeing things differently, seeing them for what they are, seeing them like never before—say, anew. It is not only seeing just 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. It is to see differently and, according to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1987), it is to see clearly. What does it mean to see clearly? To see clearly is not only to look. It is to have a point of view. It is to see dissimulation and to unmask its falsities, malice, and pretenses. To see clearly is to see differently. It is to see what is not seen. To see clearly is refiguring. It is, according to wa Thiong’o, the institution of a different reality, which comes into being by means of having seen things differently because they are seen from the perspective of the black. For wa Thiong’o, there should be a look at what deformed the black, and that means having to come into confrontation with what deforms and liberates the self from this deformation. It is to begin anew. To see clearly, ways of seeing differently, mean coming into contact with what has always been hidden from sight. Not that what is seen is kept off sight. For it is something that is there on sight to see but the black is blinded not to see. Thus, it is as if things are invisible, while they are not. They are there; it is just a way not only of seeing differently, but of seeing clearly after the black has removed the blindfold.

At the moment of this opening, a foundation is laid, and the claim is made that refiguring in black is a distinctive point of view, which, in itself, as radical, presents an opportunity to do things differently, to see them in distinctive ways, to feel them otherwise and, more precisely, to be free to inhabit the realm of the unknown. This is what the work of Douglass, Morrison, Spillers, and Mingus is all about. More so, refiguring their work, and that being done from the black point of view, illuminates the darkened spaces that have decentered these figures and the concerns they bring.

To see in darkness is not to see clearly without any light, or if what is seen is clearly visible. The way of seeing is the call to end blindness. The black must see clearly, and this means
seeing what W. E. B. Du Bois (2015 [1903]) calls the “color-line,” which is the fundamental problem, and which even went beyond what was marked as the scene of the twentieth century. The clear mark of the world is what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) calls the “abyssal line.” Linked to this also is seeing, at the level of alterity politics, which perpetuates coloniality through the paradigm of difference, and which V. Y. Mudimbe (2003) calls the “fault-line.” All these aforementioned lines are drawn not on sand, but are engraved on the crust of the earth. At the somatic level, they are drawn all over the racialized body of the black, even more visibly, in the psyche that is fabricated and abstracted by dehumanization. These aforementioned lines, after being seen for what they are, metamorphize, and embody what Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) refers to as “lines of damnation.” These are the lines that demarcate those who embody life and those who are denied this life.

In this refiguring, Douglass, Morrison, Spillers, and Mingus are engaged in themes that do not account for the totality of their work, but themes that will illuminate different ways of thinking about them. That is why this refiguring is contrapuntal in nature. If there is a grain, this radical instantiation thinks, reads, scripts, and discourses against this grain. The whole idea of this refiguring is, as a practice and disposition, to engage in the open field that black life is – rupture.

Thus far, the incessant and necessary effort of black thought is what has stood in its own name, and no form of interdiction has claimed absolute totality in obliterating it. The way in which refiguring in black is articulating itself has been a forced grammar, a matter of struggle, a matter of necessity. The point is that black thinkers have been doing the thinking, while they are refused the very idea of thinking. They are interdicted when it comes to matters of thought and, as a contrapuntal gesture, they radically refuse and radically insist on doing the thinking from their own black point of view. This, in short, is what refiguring in black means. For, as its imperative, it does the work of grasping and grappling with matters of thought in different registers and dispositions that are fundamentally black. Definitely, this
is refiguring in its contextual definitional form, the disposition of this meditation. There is a different accent through which things are thought, and refiguring is such a form. It can also be said, in relation to the forms that dominate the current conjuncture, that refiguring is the disfiguring of forms (more especially if they orthodoxically insist on closure as opposed to rupture).

There is no refiguring in black outside black thought. Already at work is black thought as the constitutive element of black life. The questions, concerns, and matters of black life are confronted by way of refiguring in order to understand the critical conjuncture the black is in. Making sense of reality and the world as it were, refiguring in black signals the generativity through which existential concerns have erupted in different and profound ways. This meditation, at this current conjuncture, is one of the ways (among many other dispositions), by way of refiguring, that black thought is taken up. By doing this, through Douglass, Morrison, Spillers, and Mingus as figures of black thought, refiguring in black is heightened into one of the dispositions through which the black point of view is made bold and manifest in the arena in which it has been rendered mute, irrelevant, banal, and all things outside “standards.”

To say refiguring in black is to attest to what is not in the name of what is lying out there. Rather, it is a phenomenon that is lived, it is in the current conjuncture of the past and the present. It is the radical work of those who live in their current conjuncture, and who not only make a difference, but who act out of necessity as opposed to acting from luxurious choice. The conditions in which they find themselves have fundamentally to change not by chance, but by pure intentions of their making, their radical effort. They are more about pushing limits. In other words, Douglass, Morrison, Spillers, and Mingus do refiguring in black as what is vast and ever-expanding in its grammar, what is impure in its genealogies, trajectories, and horizons, which, in themselves, attest to the complexity of reality as such.

At the heart of this refiguring is Cedric Robinson (2000), whose concept of the black radical tradition is its very edge,
and is the operation of how black thought unfolds. It is that critique of Western civilization, the elementary definition whose mode of operation is fundamental as it attests to the material and the concrete, whose abstractions and poetics are not a luxurious muse, but are having to grasp and grapple with different ways of meditating about black life through the criticality of Douglass, Morrison, Spillers, and Mingus. This, to Anthony Bogues (2010), has been the question and concern of what it means to live inside empire. These four figures are those whose thought and life is in the clutches of this empire. It is in this location, however, that insurgent forms of black life are acted and re-enacted to become a radically different reality. Douglass, Morrison, Spillers, and Mingus are within the black radical tradition. In emphasizing the deliverance of the black radical tradition, Fred Moten (2013: 237) points to its “radical resources,” which should be mobilized, ones that “lie before the tradition, where ‘before’ indicated both what precedes and what awaits, animating our times with fierce urgency.” This is where generativity lies, and it is what marks the critical thought of Douglass, Morrison, and Spillers. And, as Moten signals, this is a way of tapping into the resources that lie before the tradition. These resources are not what the work of these thinkers is all about, but are matters of black life that can be thought in relation to their own thought.

One important thesis of this meditation is not the interpretation of Douglass, Morrison, Spillers, and Mingus; rather, it is thinking along with each of them by paralleling them with thematic concerns that are appellative to their thought. This is necessary in this refiguration because it opens other domains of thinking that are necessary not only to excavate the relevance of these figures but to attend to what they thought and to show how that is the very extension of black life through what Robinson (2000) calls “ontological totality” in its heterogenous forms. Since black life is not a homogenous totality, what is aimed at here is understanding the ways through which the accounting of this life is what is lived to the limit of having its humanity questioned. It is at this limit that there are those generative forms that insist on living in ways that are not submitting to
the imposed status of dehumanization. Douglass, Morrison, Spillers, and Mingus are thinking through the limit, and they are not reduced by it, nor are reduced by it. If thinking freedom is what they can be said to be doing, in the spirit of the black radical tradition, they are engaged in insurgent forms that are concerned with what is urgent.

Urgency and insurgency abound, the edge through which things are being pushed on, at, to, and through; the fact is that there is a lot at stake. This, then, equates to the amount of work to be done, for that work having been done in the past, and which is also to be done in the future – that is, doing the work, refiguring in black, which, in its essence, is not palatable to the captive logics of what is orthodox. Breaking free from the strictures and edicts of what deny humanity, Douglass, Morrison, Spillers, and Mingus think about the modes of being otherwise. To be on the edge, refiguring things, and from the black point of view is, according to Moten (2013: 239), “enforced when we emphymasically authorize ourselves to speak of the spirit of the age.” This is the refiguring in black done by Douglass, Morrison, Spillers, and Mingus, who are, as black thinkers, living, thinking, and working in the name of the spirit of the age, thus insisting on breathing from the scarcity of breath. Therefore, the spirit of the age they have been in has been forever critical; refiguring in black is their radical fold and, added to this, their formation. As a result of this, and having to point to the centrality of the edge, it is important to consider the ways in which the spirit of the age are a matter of their urgency and insurgency.

In figuring out the problematic, by way of refiguring, at its edge, it is justified for Douglass, Morrison, Spillers, and Mingus to be central to this disposition, that different outlook, altogether. That is why, for Nahum Chandler (2014), refiguring is the discourse – one that is formulated and enacted as heterogenous. The edge is where things are pushed to/toward. Things will, as a result, be a different form and formation. Walter Mignolo (2011: 321) writes: “Certainly, to move in such a direction is not easy.” The move of those whom Mignolo describes as doing “border
thinking,” and pushing the margins to the edge, is necessary and more urgent. By pushing and blurring the margins, by being on the edge and being disentangled in trappings of colonization, Mignolo makes an indictment of civilization by calling it the “civilization of death.”

Douglass, Morrison, Spillers, and Mingus insist on living. They seek to repossess that of which they have been dispossessed. All they seek, from their black point of view, by that edge called the black radical tradition, is to necessitate the possible in the clutches of impossibility. That is why, for Robinson (2000), it is key to define the black radical tradition as the critique of Western civilization. This definition points to the insurgent force that animates the critique of decadence – that is, this Western civilization that has been extracting and disposing of black life. In this definition, the black radical tradition, its insurgent force, that relentless critique, constitutes that generative force that does not come from exhaustion, failure, and defeat. In fact, from what seems to be the end, generativity begins things differently, anew. There is no repetition of the same, but the doing of the otherwise. This is the generative force whose grammar of being summons being to come, being-in-becoming, becoming being. The self-making of the black is a result of insurrection from the condition of having their humanity denied. It is the self not creating the individual subject, but the totality of black life. It is the life that is at stake, under attack, under siege, captive life whose death is seen as just and justified. The refusal of the black to concede to these criminalizing and pathologizing justifications of death has called for the ways of creating the world in the ways that the black in the existential struggle deems fit. Eruption and disruption are the operative modes through which Douglass, Morrison, Spillers, and Mingus are taken.

This diagnosis, interrogation, and investigation, in the form of an iteration, adjusts to an interest that radically insists on ways of thinking outside the captive logics of this civilization. What Douglass, Morrison, Spillers, and Mingus do is thinking, what they think, and how thinking is done. Their thought demands the effort that is always ready to