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Close-Up: Hip-Hop Cinema

U, (New) Black(?) Maybe: Nostalgia and Amnesia in *Dope*

I. Augustus Durham

Abstract

In March 2014, for an article in GQ *magazine, Pharrell Williams invoked the term "the new black"; he further elaborated on the phrase's definition in an interview with Oprah Winfrey for her show* Oprah Prime. *A little over a year later, in the summer of 2015, Rick Famuyiwa's film* Dope, *executively produced by Williams, was released to rave reviews. Although these two events appear disparate, this article asserts that the film is a cinematic interpretation of Williams's ideation. By highlighting the movie's aesthetic nods to hip-hop—clothing, paraphernalia, music, and casting—as forms of nostalgia, and reading the protagonist's preoccupation with attending Harvard as a form of cultural amnesia reminiscent of rhetoric from bygone cultural movements, the piece questions, what is the "new" that constitutes blackness? In like manner, does the arrival of such a category suggest that "the old black" no longer exists, or does it maintain a paradigmatic influence which stands to impart a lesson on culture and history to the "new"?*

Can't come around
They gon' wanna bring you down
No one knows just what's inside
Doing dope and doing time
Why they messing with your mind?
Black maybe
—Common, "U, Black Maybe"

Tell Us Why U Mad

Optically, the name of track 8 on Common's 2007 album *Finding Forever* addresses itself to "U," the subject, named "Black Maybe."[1] However, to my

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mind, the song performs something wholly different when the title is spoken. Aurally, one might conjure it as an interrogative, i.e., is "u" black; the response: maybe. Another way to hear this is to imagine an invisible question mark between "black" and "maybe"—"U, Black(?) Maybe."

The provocation of this record is apposite for reasons as numerous as its titular interpretations. But one paramount motivation is the concluding lines of the chorus—"No one knows just what's inside / Doing dope and doing time / Why they messing with your mind?" It might be serendipity that these lyrics correlate with the premise of Rick Famuyiwa's 2015 film *Dope*, and prophesy my forthcoming argument. That being, with singer-songwriter–music producer Pharrell Williams as the film's executive producer,[2] it premiered in wide release roughly a year after he invoked an ideation called the "new black" in *GQ*:

> So which is it? Is President Obama black or not? Since you're so mad: Is he black or not? Come on, man! We ain't got time for that. We are black people. This is the new black. Oprah Winfrey: That's the new black. She's a black billionaire. President Obama: He is a black American president. Regardless of what you think about him, this is his second term. That's the new black. LeBron James: the first black man ever shot on a *Vogue* cover, a black man. Me: a guy that's written a song at 40! Nominated for an Oscar, four Grammy awards—at 40! That's the new black! . . .
>
> Black ain't a color: Black is a spirit, and it is ubiquitous. In fact, there's more black out in space than there is stars. We have nothing to be insecure about.[3]

One wonders, to whom does Williams unleash this paroxysm—who is this "so mad" you? The obvious answer is Zach Baron, the interviewer. But I propose he is talking to "u," the black, maybe; or "u," the black-maybe, indirectly experiencing public chastisement.

Through roundabout circumstances, these comments compel a rescreening of *Dope* because the film trades in iterations of blackness that are applicable to the nostalgist and amnesiac alike. Rife with signifiers emblematic of hip-hop culture, it stages an old blackness foregone to "you," and propagates a new blackness for "U." Pluralized or singular, "U" is an essence that, according to Williams's record "Lost Queen," "gotta go inward / To experience the outer space that was built for" itself.[4] The contention then is that *Dope* is a representation of "new black"-ness, what some call post-blackness,[5] the "old" being "out" in order to "ring in" the "new." It exhibits a new cultural eschatology of blackness remixed as the already-now, creating an insular world that is indiscernible to persons on its periphery insofar as "no one knows just what's inside." But does such a move also chronicle the arrival of

a "new black" "culture," on par with divinity, or divination, imaginatively? Is this racial non-race the convening of the "new creature" where "old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new"?[6]

If this film trafficking initiates a crime—doing (read: watching) *Dope* and "doing time"—you/U and I must collect evidence of the old and new as scene investigators. In the end, we might solve the movie mystery: what constitutes this "new" racial category inasmuch as the screen-projected hallucinogen is "messing with your mind"? Engaging in cultural forensics, we can only hope to find the object called "the black," old and/or new, as well as forever.

This Old Thing

Subsequent to the *GQ* article, Williams expounds upon what "the new black" is in an interview with Oprah Winfrey for her series *Oprah Prime*: "The new black doesn't blame other races for our issues. The new black dreams and realizes that it's not a pigmentation; it's a mentality. And it's either gonna work for you or it's gonna work against you, and you gotta pick which side you're gonna be on.… There is more blackness out there [in the cosmos] than there is anything else—75% dark matter."[7] Because Winfrey embodies the "new black," she considers Williams's rhetoric "soulful." Meanwhile, one surmises how racial effacement, through phenotype, becomes the catalyst for one's capacity to dream. But this thinking meets perplexity.

As a frame for decolonizing the mind and the body, the anti-Manichaean profundity of commingling the inward and the spatial outer, the cosmic, undoes previous assessments of the colonized as "the quintessence of evil."[8] This lays bare the "new black" in a contemporary register precisely because s/he is "the dream and the hope of the slave." Put another way:

> Maybe, I can break it down to you like this:
> We dreamed you Black in your badness
> Made you up out of poems and lies and words to live by
> And we ourselves was dreamed, most likely by some slaves
> Whenever they got a little space to climb into their heads and be free
> So when they closed their eyes, what did they see?
> They saw you; they saw me[9]

The enslaved unknowingly epitomize a contingency plan that supplies the raced body with a twisted ontology: it appears on the oppressive scene as reducible only and ever to oppression based primarily on pigmentation.[10] This oneiric enterprise of racecraft[11] is as "canonical" as Shakespeare,[12]

moving in either chronological direction. But through the previous lyrical analysis of "Lost Queen" (and despite Williams's affective boycott of complexion), one recognizes that Williams takes up an ethic of survival, of foundness. This is reminiscent of his community of "affinity" deeming the secular (outer space) neither more nor less profane than the sacred (the inward). The record is melismatic of enclaves of sociality that held fast to dreams for fear that the death or the evacuation of them would produce broken-winged birds that could not fly, barren fields frozen with snow.[13] It may be this very preoccupation with dreaming that one views in *Dope* protagonist Malcolm Adekanbi (fig. 1).

From the outset, Netflix summarizes the film: "In this tough 'hood, this boy's an odd one: a '90s loving nerd. Doesn't mean he can't beat a kingpin at his own game." The use of the vernacular—and the allusion to a teenager, *sans* name, being a "boy" capable of outwitting a drug lord—runs with the politics of old-school language to talk about a New Age film. Set in present-day Inglewood, California, *Dope* opens with a confirmation of what has already been foreshadowed and provides manifold definitions:

1. *noun*: a drug taken illegally for recreational purposes
2. *noun*: a stupid person
3. *slang*: excellent. Used as a generalized term of approval

This dictionarial sequencing, in concert with the pithy synopsis, sets the viewer on a course to be privy to the movie's status as a caper.

Figure 1. Still of characters Malcolm, Diggy, and Jib on bikes, from *Dope* (dir. Rick Famuyiwa, 2015).

Malcolm aggregates '90's-era hip-hop paraphernalia. Although his allegiance is to the West Coast, he has a bedroom littered with anachronistic minutiae that he is likely too young to recall consuming with full comprehension: *Yo! MTV Raps* seasons on VHS; EPMD's "You Gots to Chill" on vinyl; a wall fixture with the transcribed lyrics of De La Soul's "Me, Myself And I;" an assortment of gold chains; Eazy-E and Dr. Dre album posters; a Nintendo gaming system; an AM-FM radio; a cassette tape of N.W.A. and the Posse. He lives with his single mother and "has only one memory of his father:" a package airmailed to him from Nigeria—his father's place of origin—with a photo of the father-son duo. On the back of the photo, his father signed, "My favorite movie! Happy Birthday Son", and included a videotape of *Superfly* (dir. Gordon Parks Jr., 1972).

Nevertheless, Malcolm and his two foils Jib and Diggy, equal lovers of hip-hop, form a motley crew and engender a variant kinship that breaks with certain actualizations of "respectability" as performed through the social constructions of race and gender. Jib, Malcolm's male acquaintance, uses *nigga* liberally (although he reads as ethnically ambiguous throughout the film); Diggy, his female counterpart, is a lesbian whose presentation of queerness as gender nonconformity allows her to publicly desire girls in tandem with her "brothers," whether marveling at Nakia, played by Zoë Kravitz, or licking the cover of the 2 Live Crew album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*. Living in "The Bottoms,"[14] this triumvirate dwells at or near the base of the social totem pole. The movie's narration, voiced by Forest Whitaker (a producer on the film), decries, "Malcolm, Jib, and Diggy don't play sports and they aren't in a gang. They're always getting ridiculed by their peers because they're into white shit like skateboards, Manga comics, Donald Glover; and from listening to white shit like *Trash Talk* and *TV on the Radio*; and for doing white shit like getting good grades and applying to college."

These lovers of hip-hop have a punk band called Awreeoh. The group moniker, akin to a novel of the same name (but with the more customary spelling of the cookie brand), points to these bandmates-cum-friends "not claim[ing] to represent any singularly authentic black experience. More eccentric than Afrocentric, [the band name] calls attention to the hybridity rather than the racial or cultural purity of African Americans."[15] (fig. 2). Furthermore, Malcolm has visions of attending Harvard University; in consultation with his (black) guidance counselor, he plans to submit a personal statement entitled "November 30, 1988—A Research Thesis to Discover Ice Cube's 'Good Day.'" While the counselor understands the essay to be Malcolm not taking the application process seriously, Malcolm impresses upon him not only that he is approaching the endeavor soberly, but also that he is

Figure 2. Still of characters Malcolm, Diggy, and Jib performing as a punk rock group, from *Dope* (dir. Rick Famuyiwa, 2015).

writing on something he "loves." Thus, while the encoding of this threesome perceives their academic and extracurricular dalliances as "white shit," it is the contrapuntal occasion of *black cool*.

Reflecting on black cool as rendered through "the geek," Mat Johnson concedes:

> No, the defining element of geekdom is an overwhelming *passion* for the idiosyncratic intellectual crush. Black geeks are of the "now," in part because they never could have been before.... When the Black middle class had a lesser role within African American self-definition, traits of underclass life were misconstrued as elements of Blackness itself.... If you mistake the traits of poverty for your personal identity, you risk being locked into a position where you're unable to advance without betraying yourself. And that's a dead end. The black-geek aesthetic is a celebration of the freedom from that mind-set, and its cool is doing that in all its nerdy glory.[16]

The crew's neighborhood, nomenclaturally, symbolizes their class structure. Nonetheless, demography, even as it relates to socioeconomics, does not deter dreaming; their collective disavowal of social status obliges them to contrive of an outside to the inside, a top for escaping the Bottoms. This passion for all things hip-hop, and the freedom to express in "nerdy glory" their eccentricity and eclecticism, is idiosyncratic intellectualism: by subverting underclass life—rehearsing the "I'm from a poor, crime-filled neighborhood, raised by a single mother, don't know my dad" trope, which Malcolm considers "cliché"—the posse conceptualizes alternative ways of being as the tribe quests to succeed by deploying *low end theory*. A close reading of and

theoretical gesture toward a hip-hop record that charted before Malcolm was born gives him the chutzpah to believe that such passion will permit him entrée into the Ivy League. After all, interesting children are indeed what Harvard wants![17] This mode of uncanny imagination equally marks nostalgia through casting and stylization.

To be clear, the nod to days of yore begins by taking inventory of director Rick Famuyiwa's filmography. All of his films[18] reference the past, whether through aesthetic import or historical event. Just as pertinent, though, is how filmic citation inserts itself via the characters in *Dope*. Malcolm's mother, Lisa Hayes, played by Kimberly Elise, calls forth a hip-hop aesthetic that can be traced to *Set It Off* (dir. F. Gary Gray, 1996); Roger Guenveur Smith, the Harvard alumnus Austin Jacoby who interviews Malcolm for admission, has acting credits in Spike Lee Joints (e.g., Smiley in *Do the Right Thing* [1989]) among other projects; De'Aundre Bonds, the school security guard Stacey, has roles in such films as *Get on the Bus* (1996) and *The Wood* (1999), a Famuyiwa flick; a cameo by Rick Fox of Los Angeles Lakers fame as Councilman Blackmon—these examples forward the black cinematic historicity and more to which the film pays homage. The styling in *Dope* expresses a similar notation.

Notwithstanding Malcolm's hi-top fade and love for Air Jordans, Diggy dons Cross Colours (fig. 1). A "maker of hip-hop clothes for young men,"[19] Cross Colours was a formidable force for changing the narrative of the clothing world in the '90s as it related to the dispersion of hip-hop globally. Counteracting the clothing line's marketing to men, Diggy—especially in the club scene when the manager states, "This little nigga's a bitch!"—exemplifies masculinity as masquerade through her aesthetics,[20] confirming her non-binary performance. With the ad for Cross Colours boasting, "We want it understood that only Cross Colours is made by true brothers from the 'hood,"[21] Diggy's sartoriality ignores intracultural paradigms surrounding who can wear what. This reeled re-up of Cross Colours likely displays the "post"-ness of hip-hop as having obtained a mainstream cultural cachet.

These style choices are further insightful when charting the brand's diasporadicality:[22]

> There was a company called Cross Colours on the scene, and they were making clothes out of Kinte cloth colors that called to mind the batik patterns of certain African tribes. Plus, the texture of the fabric itself was unique, almost like a lightweight burlap, and you started to see black people walking around in orange jeans and purple jean jackets.

And:

> the then popular Cross Colours outfits were distinguished by their colors, red, green, and black—the colors of the African American liberation flag originally designed by Marcus Garvey. In the late 1980s, two African American sportswear designers began the Threads of Life Incorporation as part of the Stop the Violence campaign in Los Angeles. The slogan "Racism Hurts Everybody," printed on each piece of clothing promotes the message that knowledge, self-respect, love, and peace will overcome barriers of hate and prejudice.[23]

Under the auspices of fashionable bricolage, Cross Colours cobbles from vast parts of the style world to become a prototype of diasporic sensibility and radical politics manifested as self-determination. Amalgamating Africanity, Caribbeanness, and even Europeanness (the "u" in "colours"!), Diggy performs clothed selfhood as a walking atlas queered. Moreover, the viewer again sees the subversion of underclass life: presumably out-of-date now, Cross Colours, at the height of its merchandising, was quite expensive. How does Diggy afford these articles?

One could make the claim that wearing the brand is in some way aspirational; Diggy saves her coin in order to live into intersectional haute couture. But what if another one were to conceive that she obtains such clothing through "vintage shopping" in order to give anachronistic clothing realness on a starving student-artist's budget? This double-cross-weaving of "retail therapy" is no different, per se, than my own rag-ged maturation: affluent boarding school classmates wore hemp in Wallingford; peers bought designer tags at consignment shops in Princeton; and even I purchased that oversized Triple Five Soul hoodie during a McNair conference in Berkeley, California, because I, like Nola Darling, had to *have it*.

This is the "old black."

Something (K)New; or, Ain't Nothing New under the Sun

So as to not ruin *Dope*, a brief plot summary here will offer a window into this section's subject. In the aforementioned club scene, Malcolm and his friends, noticeably unaware, are inculcated into the dope trade: they have to deliver contraband placed in Malcolm's backpack by local dealer Dom[24] during a gang shoot-out. Unbeknown to the trio, the "kingpin" is Austin Jacoby, Malcolm's Harvard alumni interviewer; the package must be delivered at Jacoby's behest. While various and sundry events ensue, the "new black" intervention is near the end of the film at the resumption of Malcolm's collegiate dreams after the dope-dealing detour.

As the film concludes, Malcolm returns to writing his Harvard personal statement. He begins the new document by staging a hypothetical situation in which there are two students. One grows up in the suburbs, is academically stellar, skateboards and bike-rides, plays in a punk band, and loves *Game of Thrones* and the band the Thermals; the other attends an underfunded school, is a product of a single-parent home, does not know his father, and has sold dope. Malcolm asks the viewer to close her eyes and envision, without judgment, each student. When he prompts the viewer, "Open your eyes!" he appears after the blackout and inquires:

> So am I student A or student B? Am I a geek or a menace? For most of my life, I've been caught in between who I really am and how I'm perceived, in between categories and definition—I don't fit in. And I used to think that was a curse but now I'm slowly starting to see, maybe it's a blessing. See, when you don't fit in, you're forced to see the world from many different angles and points of view; you gain knowledge, life lessons from disparate people and places. And those lessons, for better or worse, have shaped me. So who am I? Allow me to reintroduce myself: my name is Malcolm Adekanbi. I'm a straight A student with nearly perfect SAT scores; I taught myself how to play guitar and read music. I have stellar recommendations and diverse extracurricular activities. I'm a Google Science Fair participant and in three weeks, I helped make over a $100,000 for an online business. So why do I wanna attend Harvard? If I was white, would you even have to ask me that question?

Malcolm submits his college application, rewriting the same words voiced in this broken fourth-wall conversation in his personal statement. Soon after, he visits a barbershop and has his hi-top fade trimmed low for his prom. After seeing Nakia post-prom, he arrives home to an admissions envelope on his bed. He opens it, reads the contents, looks at the camera, and smirks. The film ends with "DOPE" in red letters against a black backdrop.

The last six minutes of *Dope* engender a binary reading, which may be indicative of the "old" and the "new." One could essentialize and say he knows exactly what Malcolm intuits, while another might say that she is admittedly confused. Seeing both sides, the latter viewpoint gifts us with an opportunity to find work, even if it means making the "new" "old."

If the "new black" transcends pigmentation, no longer blames "others" for its vicissitudes, it is surprising to see those politics deployed at the end, and at the beginning really, of the film: student A and student B are meant to be phenotypically viable across racial lines. The body that accounts for student A could presumably never be that of B and vice versa. But because

Dope has a predominantly black cast, blackness becomes a straw man for whiteness:

> At the root of all this talk is the clear indication that Blackness and racism are historically and inextricably twinned and that, by extension, if the goal is to eradicate racism, the most effective, most desirable means to do so is to eradicate Blackness. This way of thinking holds that Blackness—unlike whiteness—*is* race; whiteness—unlike Blackness—is the human model, the norm, in effect, the *goal* against which Blackness must always be seen to fall short. The fact of the matter is that this logic, sadly skewed as it is, is nothing new. Reactionary Black folk have historically addressed Blackness as a "condition" to be at best transcended, at another extreme repudiated, at the very least (somehow) remedied. It is a set of stereotypes to confront, deny, disprove, continually engage. Blackness, this way of thinking goes, is *in itself* a set of limitations to overcome, a clear boundary to cross in order to achieve full humanity, the best examples of which are perceived always to be white.[25]

It is this mode of transcendence in the movie that stands to be problematized.

With the onset of the film suggesting that Malcolm and his friends dabble in "white shit," emblematic of student A, the facile assertion is that whiteness is banality: teenagers being teenagers doing teenage things. When the crew becomes "black," it is through criminality, the plight of student B. Because of the incalculability of students A and B as one another, when one comprehends that Malcolm is the conflation of both pupils, it confirms (and denies?) the argument of *Dope* as a "new black" film. All the more, because Brenda Marie Osbey casts this cultural epistemology as "nothing new", one ponders: why does the "new black" code the "old black" as hackneyed while simultaneously using that archetype to constitute itself, in excess of itself, as the arrival of the non-excessive human model—the goal?

Osbey's "reactionary black folk" brings to mind what Amiri Baraka, as relayed by Margo Natalie Crawford,[26] regards as spatiotemporality: "What should be obvious in these tales are the years, the time passing and eclipsed.... What is left of what has left." Essentially, as Crawford notes, what was, is.[27] The attempt at revolutionary reactionality in Williams's "new black" hearkens back to the Black Arts Movement (BAM) in that he accomplishes that "nothing new" discursively: "During the BAM, outer space, abstraction, and the eccentricity that Larry Neal simply referred to as the 'weird' were steadily invoked but they were not imagined as being post-black. The BAM pivoted on a dialectic between collective mirrors and collective collages that layered and gave blackness depth. This depth was a spatial and temporal strategy of resistance that insisted on blackness as the past, present, and future....

Post-black advocates fail to understand black abstraction, black improvisation, and even *black* post-blackness."[28] Conventions around the intergalactic, the eclectic, and the arcane situate the rehearsal of a bygone era that, as wasness, maintains a current status of is-ness, even in relation to hip-hop. When Malcolm exclaims, "Allow me to reintroduce myself," I doubt I am the only one who faintly hears, "My name is Hov / H to the O-V"[29] Hence, allow me to air a cinematic public service announcement: *Dope* demonstrates melancholy because the evocation of the "new black" presumes that black culture has reached its pinnacle—as the old folks used to say, that it has *arrived*—signaling a stunning loss,[30] aesthetic and otherwise. The above invocation of Jay-Z enlists a return to Crawford:

> At the end of Bayard Rustin's 1971 essay on the historical trajectory of names used by African Americans to name themselves, he writes, "The problems confronting Negroes are formidable, and they will not be solved by altering a name, or by dressing differently, or by wearing one's hair in a new way. We should not be fooled by names or appearances. The real problems lie beneath the surface." … His tone matches the tone of the iconic hip-hop song "99 Problems." As Jay-Z says, in this song, "I've got 99 problems," but the next Rustin-inspired line is: "But a name ain't one."[31]

Utilizing musical interpolation: *Dope* got ninety-nine problems, and naming black culture *is* one.

While Rustin holds validity, there is something to how the assignment of a name, whether culture or personage, misses the target, even as the newly named object, always and ever resistant to capture, finds itself and the bodies that constitute it in crosshairs immemorial. This is to say, the moment the culture has "arrived" is the prime time when it needs to "get lost." Hortense J. Spillers advises that "if there is no black culture, or no longer black culture (because it has 'succeeded'), then we need it now; and if that is true, then perhaps black culture—as the reclamation of the critical edge, as one of those vantages from which it might be spied, and no longer predicated on 'race'—has yet to come."[32] While the "new black" does not rid itself of the past by way of a linguistic paradigm, its very premise does invite the reading of a blackness that is *en vogue* no more or, as was once decided about hip-hop, *dead*. This is why Malcolm's inquiry at the end of his soliloquy is befuddling.

I recall college counselors telling my peers and me that Harvard is a "reach" for everyone; that is, such a concern is an equal opportunity one. At the same time, while immensely colloquial, instead of posing "Why Harvard?," "Why *not* Harvard?" is more apropos. This is because blackness

has always been affiliated with the institution such that it could be deemed, vis-à-vis its prominence and history, the Mecca of American scholasticism. In other words, Malcolm's acceptance there fulfills the dream and hope of the slaves whose names we speak—Titus, Venus, Bilhah, and Juba—and those unnamed who we claim now as an act of (k)newness[33] (fig. 2). A potential response to Malcolm's query would be you wanna go to Harvard because since *they built it,* U are supposed *to come*.

Even Du Bois understood that his attendance at Harvard was an honor *to* the institution![34]

The Sleeping Answer

Three noteworthy moments in Williams's *Oprah Prime* interview surface after viewing and in relation to *Dope*. The first two emerge when Oprah asks him if happiness is a decision; he replies that it "requires openness" and "if you're a pessimist to begin with, it's gonna be very tough for you to achieve it." He then proceeds to explain his son Rocket's name; of particular import is its referentiality to Stevie Wonder's "Rocket Love." The lingering interest reveals itself in the record's chorus:

> You took me riding in your rocket
> Gave me a star
> But at a half a mile from heaven
> You dropped me back down to this cold, cold world

Even in its coalescence of love, outer space, and abstraction ("A female Shakespeare of your time / With looks to blow Picasso's mind"), the song deals in pessimism: although the exhaust from the rocket generates extraterrestrial passion, the driver *grounds* her enamored passenger. And yet, such an affect is worthy of naming one's heir. This modality of "sampling" beckons a return to track 8 on *Finding Forever* insofar as it also borrows, in this case from Syreeta's "Black Maybe":

> Maybe you're red
> Or maybe you're green
> But your real color
> I've never seen
> Black maybe
> Or maybe you just talkin' trash
> Tell me, black maybe

Or really would you rather for me not to ask
You see the time is runnin' out
And your man's been sad for ages and ages and ages
Black maybe
It's time for you to wake up
Come around
Come around

Produced and cowritten by Wonder, this song, in tone and arrangement, is as pessimistic as "Rocket Love," if not more. So when figuring out whether U, (New) Black, it seems that in order for the category to proverbially live out the true meaning of its creed, it must acknowledge the line it toes between the optimistic and the pessimistic.

The other pivotal moment is when Williams, recounting his process for writing "Happy," utters that "the answer was sleeping in the question all along." Upon closer examination of Malcolm's admissions letter, the parcel's locative genesis, found in the upper left hand corner of the envelope, is Hartford, CT. Therefore, "So why do I wanna attend Harvard?" may be the *dopest* question yet.

Maybe.

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Notes

1. Common, "U, Black Maybe," *Finding Forever* (GOOD, 2007).

2. Philip Cosores, "Pharrell Williams Shares 'Dope' Movie Poster," *radio.com*, April 30, 2015. http://radio.com/2015/04/30/pharrell-williams-dope-movie-poster-instagram/.

3. Zach Baron, "Pharrell Williams on Advanced Style Moves and That Oscar Snub: My Song Will 'Be Here for 10 Years,'" *GQ*, March 25, 2014, http://www.gq.com/story/pharrell-williams-oscar-snub. Considering the names Pharrell Williams drops as "the new black," much has been written about President Obama and the politics of race, specifically post-blackness. See Ben Pitcher, "Obama and the Politics of Blackness: Antiracism in the 'Post-Black' Conjuncture," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 12, no. 4 (2010): 313–22; and Ishmael Reed, "Fallacies of the Post-Race Presidency,"

in *The Trouble with Post-Blackness*, ed. Houston A. Baker Jr. and K. Merinda Simmons (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 220–42.

4. Baron asks Pharrell Williams to elaborate on the concept of an "outer space that was built for you," a phrase from the album *G I R L* on a track ironically called "Lost Queen." In response, Williams states, "The aether. The ultimate connection between time and space is time and space. Without time, there is no measurement of space. Without space, there is no measurement of time. We need them both to coexist. And the theory of everything is that everything exists at the same time, is connected. So we're connected. Are we connected physically now? No. But are we physically connected in this moment? Yes. When you look back in this memory, the part of this fabric: yes! So there's a lot of allusion that just goes over people's heads, so they lose the importance of certain aspects." See Baron, "Pharrell Williams"; and Pharrell Williams, "Lost Queen," *G I R L* (Columbia Records, 2014).

5. Houston A. Baker, Jr. and K. Merinda Simmons, eds., *The Trouble with Post-Blackness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Brenda Marie Osbey states, "Alternatively, if indeed *post*-Black is the *New* Black, then the standard ten to twenty-year trend span is nearly done. One can only hope." See Osbey, "UNTITLED, or, the Post-Blackness of Post-Blackness,", *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* 15, no. 2 (2015): 113; emphasis in original.

6. II Corinthians 5:17, KJV.

7. "Oprah Winfrey interviews Pharrell Williams—Full Version," *YouTube*, June 7, 2014, , https://youtu.be/dJ7rZRFNF-o, accessed June 1, 2016. Pharrell referencing "dark matter," pigmentation, and dreaming encounters a counterpoint in the "Epilogue" of *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Desi Cryer (a black man) and Wanda Zamen (a white woman), coworkers in Waller, Texas, were testing out the Hewlett Packard MediaSmart computer. The apparatus is unable to capture "Black Desi" due to "'standard algorithms that measure the difference in intensity of contrast between the eyes and the upper cheek and nose,'" while "White Wanda" enables "the webcam's automated facial tracking feature." The irony of this is "Black Desi" purchased that very HP model for Christmas. No doubt, he never could have *dreamed* his purchase would not recognize him due to his complexion. What should one surmise when 75 percent of the universe is made up of Desi's "essence," yet on Earth, technology renders him invisible? Furthermore, should "Black Desi" assess blame? If so, to whom or where—Hewlett Packard, the multinational corporation "disambiguated" from race; "White Wanda" for publicly airing such findings on YouTube with him, even if it was done in ostensible solidarity; or the contraption itself which, no different than the cosmos, is engaging in an expression, or lack thereof, of "dark matter"? See Simone Browne, "Epilogue: When Blackness Enters the Frame," in *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 161–64.

8. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (1963; reprint, New York: Grove Press, 2004), 6–7. Fanon's theorization of the harnessing of colonial power as exercised in the terminological zoologizing of the human is intriguing when juxtaposed to Pharrell's interview with Oprah. When she asks him to clarify the term "the new black," he does so and then pivots to talk about women's inequality and how his album is "not called *R A C E*; it's called *G I R L*—it's for the *female species*." He lists all of the "race" women in his life—his mother and wife—and how people should stop allowing the delusions in their own mirrors to become issues. He continues explaining that he

is "trying to get you [women] more money as a *species*. The *female species*, there's such inequality; . . . women don't make as much as men. We need more Oprahs, we need more Sheryl Sandbergs, and you are talking to me about a skin color? And make up your mind: is your President black or is he not? Did you cry when he won or did you not? And why did you cry? Because one of his parents is white, so what's the problem?" So as to not belabor this doublespeak, Williams's judgment about the superfluity of invoking race while constantly invoking it, only to make the intersectional move toward gender, borders on rhetorical schizophrenia. Simultaneously, because it is unclear to whom these words are addressed, does the move to sentimentality—crying—at the end of the diatribe mean he desires making the "species" more money while also policing their emotions? Moreover, is this the "quintessence" of the "totalitarian nature of colonial exploitation," even in a "decolonial" gesture?

9. The generative fugitivity of "going inward" to experience "outer space" sounds like Sekou Sundiata. See Sekou Sundiata, "Urban Music," *longstoryshort* (Righteous Babe Records, 2000), https://youtu.be/nZQUjWHG-ZA. As well, see Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise," in *And Still I Rise* (New York: Random House, 1978).

10. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 69–73. For more on skin pigmentation as justification for slavery, specific to religiosity, see David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal, in four articles, together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of the United States of America* (1829; reprint, New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 12.

11. Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, "Witchcraft and Racecraft: Invisible Ontology in Its Sensible Manifestations," in *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso Books, 2012), 193–224.

12. Considering Spillers's allusion to Othello in note 10, see Karen Newman, "'And wash the Ethiop white': femininity and the monstrous in *Othello*," in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The text in history and ideology*, eds. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1987), 142–62.

13. Langston Hughes, "Dreams," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (1994; reprint, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 32.

14. While "The Bottoms" is the section of Inglewood where the film protagonists live, the name may riff on "The Bottom" as fictionalized in *Sula*. Valerie Smith opines, "In addition to emphasizing the place of irony in African American cultural life, this account of the genesis of The Bottom introduces the issue of the instability of meanings that is central to the text as a whole." Such "instability of meanings" carries over to the film as a whole and what I argue is its actual and theoretical nomenclature. See Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1974; reprint, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993); and Valerie Smith, *Toni Morrison: Writing the Moral Imagination* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2012), 32–33.

15. Harryette Mullen, "Foreword," in Fran Ross, *Oreo* (1974; reprint, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), xii–xiii. Another similarity between the novel and the film: *Oreo*'s epigraph provides an eponymous definition—"Someone who is black on the outside and white on the inside"—, no different than the opening scene of *Dope* with its multiple definitions.

16. Mat Johnson, "The Geek," in *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness*, ed. Rebecca Walker (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2012), 11, 15–16. For more on black

coolness, albeit masculinist but with particular regard to scholasticism, see "In Search of Pride and Manhood," especially the section "School Is Not Cool," in Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemma of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 37–54; and "schooling black males," in bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 33–45.

17. Deemed "[s]imple advice from the president of America's most venerable university," Harvard President Drew Gilpin Faust offered this "top tip for raising a Harvard man or woman: 'Make your children interesting!'" David A. Graham, "How to Get Into Harvard," *theatlantic.com*, June 30, 2014, http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/06/how-to-get-into-harvard/373726/.

18. Famuyiwa's films include *The Wood* (1999), *Brown Sugar* (2002), *Our Family Wedding* (2010), *Dope* (2015), and *Confirmation* (2016). *The Wood*, *Brown Sugar*, and *Dope* play upon a soul, perhaps even a post-soul (I use the term hesitantly), aesthetic because hip-hop is a character in the films. *Our Family Wedding* is a quasi-modern take on *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), and *Confirmation* is based on the Anita Hill trial and her accusations of sexual harassment against Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas. "Rick Famuyiwa," *IMDb*, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0266622/.

19. Edna Bonacich and Richard P. Appelbaum, *Behind the Label: Inequality in the Los Angeles Apparel Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 40.

20. Only because the clothing was tailored toward men does this ring true. However, it actually is womanliness as masquerade as rendered by Joan Riviere and further theorized by Judith Butler. See Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929): 303–13; and Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 2006 [1990]), 59–78.

21. Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (1998; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 163.

22. I borrow the term "diasporadicality" from "diasporadical" as used by hip-hop artist Blitz the Ambassador in his project *Diasporadical Trilogia*. See "Blitz the Ambassador & Yaba Blay: Talking Music," *YouTube*, February 17, 2016, https://youtu.be/T4P82P8yhB8.

23. Daymond John, *Display of Power: How FUBU Changed a World of Fashion, Branding and Lifestyle* (Nashville, TN: Naked Ink, 2006), 56; and Stephanie Davenport, "Lesson of Faith," in *Inside City Schools: Investigating Literacy in Multicultural Classrooms*, ed. Sarah Warshauer Freedman (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), 212. For more on Cross Colours, see Elena Romero, *Free Stylin': How Hip Hop Changed the Fashion Industry* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012); and Sacha Jenkins, *Fresh Dressed* (Mass Appeal, 2015).

24. A$AP Rocky's role as "Dom" is somewhat dichotomous: although he could qualify as a "new black" character, he is a bridge between the "new" and the "old." When he first appears, he decodes Malcolm and his friends' signifying: "I be seein' you and your little friends with y'all flattops and MC Hammer pants . . . looking like y'all came out of a DeLorean or some shit." When Malcolm explains that "the '90s was like the golden age of hip-hop," and mentions Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions* and Jay-Z's *The Blueprint*, Dom responds, "*It Takes a Nation* came out in '88. *Blueprint* came out in 2001. What the fuck are you talkin' 'bout right now?" Alluding to *Back to the Future* (1985), and giving the years of album releases, proves that Dom perhaps has more internal cultural knowledge than those externally projecting

it. This becomes more counterintuitive, yet affirming of this article's premise, based on A$AP's emergence in hip-hop: his debut mixtape, "Live Love ASAP," was considered "placeless and universal, an album that sounds as if it has ingested the last 20 years of hip-hop's travels and would be comfortable anywhere.... Almost everywhere but New York, it seems. The *old* New York, that is. On 'Live Love ASAP,' New York has a *new* role. Once the universal donor, it's now the universal recipient." In some ways, A$AP's role may be contradistinctive to that of De'Aundre Bonds because the "new" is plotted over and against the "old," even if the "new" "knows" his "history." See Jon Caramanica, "Thinking Globally, Rapping Locally," *New York Times*, October 21, 2011 (emphasis mine), http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/13/arts/music/asap-rocky-new-york-rapper-with-a-hint-of-elsewhere.html.

25. Osbey, "UNTITLED, or, the Post-Blackness of Post-Blackness,"109; emphasis in original.

26. Natalie Margo Crawford, "What Was Is: The Time and Space of Entanglement Erased by Post-Blackness," in *The Trouble with Post-Blackness*, ed. Houston A. Baker Jr. and K. Merinda Simmons (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 23.

27. Ibid., 21–22.

28. Ibid., 22.

29. Jay-Z, "Public Service Announcement (Interlude)," *The Black Album* (Roc-A-Fella Records, 2003).

30. "Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on. In some people the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning." Black culture is "some abstraction," "an ideal." See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology* and *Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 243.

31. Crawford, "What Was Is," 24–25.

32. Hortense J. Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 3 (winter 2006): 26.

33. Christina Pazzanese, "To Titus, Venus, Bilhah, and Juba," *Harvard Gazette*, April 6, 2016, http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2016/04/to-titus-venus-bilhah-and-juba/. In the article's embedded video, President Faust, speaking about the plaque marker, states, "The plaque is intended to remember them and honor them, and to remind us that slavery was not an abstraction but a cruelty inflicted on particular humans. The past never dies or disappears; it continues to shape us in ways we should not try to erase or ignore—we must never forget." Though this action occurs post-*Dope*, it is a necessary addendum to my argument. Likewise, it is important to acknowledge a similar historicizing occurring at Georgetown University. See Rachel L. Swarns, "272 Slaves Were Sold to Save Georgetown: What Does It Owe Their Descendants?," *New York Times*, April 16, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/us/georgetown-university-search-for-slave-descendants.html?_r=0.

34. In line with historicizing blackness at Harvard, "upon being congratulated for being the first African American to earn a PhD from Harvard, W. E. B. Du Bois replied, "The honor, I assure you, was Harvard's.'" See Heben Nigatu, "18 Incredible Moments

Throughout Bloop History," *Buzzfeed*, April 3, 2016. https://www.buzzfeed.com/hnigatu/incredible-moments-throughout-bloop-history?utm_term=.lq7woRkP9#.xlQ1nmryE. In line with channeling Du Bois, my alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania, posthumously appointed him an Honorary Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Africana Studies. See Tukufu Zuberi, "About," *Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois Honorary Emeritus Professor Conference*, https://duboisprofessorship.wordpress.com/about/.