

Like Magic

Ben Lewellyn-Taylor

Hanif Abdurraqib. *A Little Devil in America: Notes in Praise of Black Performance*. Random House, 320pp., \$27 cloth.

A BOOK ARRIVES TO READERS ALREADY finished. If we allow ourselves to be mystified as we age, we might wonder at the object in our hands. Like a magic trick, this text arrived fully formed. How did these words form those sentences, and how did those paragraphs come together to make those chapters? The author did not merely pull the book out of a hat like a hidden rabbit, but rather spent years painstakingly perfecting their craft so that we might find our eyes widening in wonder while we turn each page.

This was the awe I experienced while reading Hanif Abdurraqib's latest essay collection, *A Little Devil in America: Notes in Praise of Black Performance*. Abdurraqib himself takes interest in the workings of magic, placing himself in conversation with Christopher Nolan's 2006 film *The Prestige*, which also appeared in his previous poetry collection, *A Fortune for Your Disaster*. In Nolan's film, an ordinary object does something extraordinary before the audience's eyes, then returns to its original

state, but slightly altered. Here, Abdurraqib uses the notion of this trick to consider the intricacies of Black identity on personal and public scales.

As in *The Prestige*, where a magician took his own life each night and replaced himself with a copy, Abdurraqib considers the weight of performing identity with a double consciousness. He turns to Dave Chappelle, who left the U.S. at the height of the *Chappelle's Show* because, as Abdurraqib observes, he "found out that in his particular line of work, the laughter of white people was both currency and conflict. A long and echoing purgatory with no exit." Throughout *A Little Devil in America*, Abdurraqib praises a wide array of Black performances, including examples from film, television, dance, music recordings, concerts, and beyond, while counterbalancing their appearance of magic with the dynamics of the audience looking on. He explores how Black performance can mean one thing to Black audiences, and how it can mean an entirely other, more insidious, thing to white audiences.

Chappelle told *Time* in 2005 that he knew it was time to go when he saw a white man laughing louder and longer than everyone else in the audience. Both Chappelle and Abdurraqib understand how Black love can be mutated in the wrong hands: "I say I love my people and I mean there is a language that is only ours, and within that language there is shelter. But when I speak that language into the world, I know how eager the world might be to bend it to its own desires." Abdurraqib pivots to *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, the 2017 film written and directed by Martin McDonagh, and which features a prolonged scene where three white characters—two of whom won Oscars for their performances—volley the n-word back and forth in what is meant to be a humorous exchange.

Movies that proclaim to interrogate race but actually serve to promote white comfort appear throughout the essays. Too often, white audiences, including the audiences who go on to make our own art in turn, see Black performance and translate it into permission for our own ends. While Abdurraqib praises Black performance in *A Little Devil in America*, he is careful to note that praise is not without conflict.

Elsewhere, Abdurraqib takes a kaleidoscopic view of blackface, bending white laughter back on itself: “It would be humorous or fascinating if it wasn’t so suffocating. I would laugh if I was not being smothered by the violence of imagination.” Each time blackface reappears in the news cycle because another white person or group has resurrected it—or proven its ever-presentness—Abdurraqib wonders if the history of its violence has really been addressed: “I wonder about the benefits and failures of this: how far the country has gotten laying down the framework for societal dos and don’ts while not confronting history. If it is possible to ground a true behavioral shift without attacking the root of blackface.”

Considering Ben Vereen’s performance of minstrelsy at President Ronald Reagan’s 1981 inauguration, which Vereen intended as a confrontation with the white audience before the broadcast was cut short, Abdurraqib understands Vereen’s intent: “A demand, once again, to ask a white audience what the fuck is so funny. What, exactly, do they understand themselves to be applauding.” Abdurraqib celebrates the magic of Black performance while weighing the cost of carrying it forth into a nation built on the subjection of Black people.

In this way, Abdurraqib’s collection articulates an ethic around audience reception on several layers. “The thing I find myself explaining most vigorously to people these days,” he writes, “is that

consumption and love are not equal parts of the same machine. To consume is not to love, and ideally love is not rooted solely in consumption.” Differentiating between consumption and love, that is, between white consumption and Black love, Abdurraqib examines Black performance as a staging ground for larger conversations on race and racism that have yet to result in a transformation of the country or its violent progenitors.

Abdurraqib turns to his own white audience—to white readers, myself included—and considers us: “This one goes out to the answers I do not have for you, or for myself, and this one goes out to the sins I cannot crawl myself out of in order to forgive the ones you might be buried under.” With *A Little Devil in America*, white readers do not get to revel in Black performance without considering the implications of our prying eyes. “I have no real magic to promise any of you,” Abdurraqib warns. Instead, he invites complexity in place of false resolution, heavy meditation in place of easy enjoyment.

* *

Although *A Little Devil in America* features well-known Black performances, from Beyoncé’s 2016 Super Bowl halftime appearance to Billy Dee Williams’ role as Lando Calrissian in *Star Wars*, Abdurraqib displays his skill as an archivist to dig out lesser-known, yet still compelling examples. Some of these may not seem like performances until Abdurraqib goes long on a subject. He considers Josephine Baker’s time as a spy, or his own experiences playing spades with his friends and in different regions, as reshaping the terms of performance itself.

In one essay, Calrissian’s role in *Star Wars* connects to Afrofuturism and then to Trayvon Martin. Abdurraqib considers the

widely shared photos of Martin, or “photos that were sometimes him and sometimes not,” the ones intended to create a dehumanizing portrait of Black boyhood. He turns to his favorite, that of Martin visiting Experience Aviation in Florida and wearing a replica of the blue uniform worn by Michael P. Anderson.

I had seen the photo, but did not previously know that Anderson was the ninth Black astronaut to go to space in 2003, aboard the Columbia mission that killed all of its crewmembers. Anderson died a hero, and Abdurraqib notes that, unlike Martin, “No one insisted that he deserved what he got.” Abdurraqib imagines Martin as someone who “could have been a person who watched the skies and sought to climb into them.” Or, maybe he wouldn’t have done anything spectacular, anything seen as magical. “But he would have been alive to do it all,” Abdurraqib remarks, “or not do it all.” In this way, Abdurraqib imagines an alternative to one foreclosed future and demands dignity for Martin as a person grounded on this earth, whether or not he would have flown into the stratosphere.

Throughout the collection, Abdurraqib performs frequent imaginative exercises that become poetic exercises in humanizing visions of Black identity. As with Martin, Abdurraqib envisions alternate futures for many. Thinking about Merry Clayton, who showed up the Rolling Stones with her vocal turn on their 1969 song “Gimme Shelter,” Abdurraqib wants her to be as big as the white band she sang alongside: “I want teenagers to wear her face on T-shirts, and I mean her good face with her good afro and her fur coat and her father’s eyes. I want record stores to stock the solo records of Merry Clayton in the front case and I want them to play all of the songs she sang alone, with no one else.”

On the white comfort provided by the Oscar-winning film *Green Book*, Abdurraqib

imagines other, better movies for Don Shirley to exist in, until he arrives at the simplest, most ordinary possible alternative: “I want a movie in which Don Shirley goes to the movies and watches a movie in which no one Black suffers for the imagined greater good.”

Abdurraqib’s own performance on the page becomes a means to express how magic functions, in that it provides an illusion of something that is not quite real, and the grief that often coincides with the momentary suspension of disbelief. Often, these flights of imagination result in Abdurraqib bending the shape of his prose around this other world, losing punctuation and essayistic form in pursuit of something higher than language itself. Linking Michael Jackson’s death with his own mother’s, Abdurraqib’s associations string together in concert: “I can sleep my way into hunger & on the nights I dream of my mother the woman I rest my body next to tells me that I stop breathing in my sleep & inheritance is the gift of someone to spread the news of a morning you didn’t wake up for...”

Before he arrives at Trayvon Martin by way of Star Wars, Abdurraqib gazes at the spacesuits worn by Labelle in the 1970s, and wonders about his own mother’s dreams of flying.

Before he arrives at Trayvon Martin by way of *Star Wars*, Abdurraqib gazes at the spacesuits worn by Labelle in the 1970s, and wonders about his own mother’s dreams of flying: “I guess I have tricked you into reading about my mother again, and how I do not know if she wanted to go to space but how

I still wanted that for her.” Abdurraqib’s mother reappears on the page, but I felt the gravity of mourning that this manifestation entailed each time she appeared.

There is a sense in which *A Little Devil in America* is Abdurraqib’s greatest trick yet, the collection where he shows you what it cost him to make this book that sits in my hands, and which I hope you decide to hold in yours. When he wishes better vehicles for Don Shirley, Abdurraqib notes that his favorite thing about the musician is “not that he was a genius who led a sometimes spectacular life. It is that in the moments in between, he likely led a life that was very normal. And that is spectacular too.” He wishes the same for all Black geniuses: “I want them to be absolved, but no one else. There can be no solution without acknowledgment, and so I don’t want anyone to watch this movie and consider themselves clean. Everyone else will have to earn it.”

Likewise, white readers like myself who read *A Little Devil in America* should not come to the book expecting a magic wand waved over the sins of whiteness, cleansing

us because we, too, want to celebrate Black performance. Abdurraqib suggests that there is no such magic, only the illusion, and moments that appear spectacular in Black performances are only humans tethered to the earth who sometimes seem to levitate over and above time and circumstance, pointing to a somewhere else that looks like this world, but altered, and better.

“It will appear spectacular to everyone who isn’t us,” Abdurraqib muses. If white readers want to be a part of transforming the world, part of our work is to see ourselves as unextraordinary, not shallowly comforted by white movies or falsely absolved by the bottomless consumption of Black art—as something altogether unspectacular and unflattering and unsung.

It’s no wonder we wish for magic to be real. The reality is so much harder to bear, but it’s where we live, as material as a book in our hands, as costly as what it takes to bring it forward into the world. I returned from reading *A Little Devil in America* as I was before, but something inside me had been altered. .a