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Coming of Age in Black Skin: An Analysis of the Parallels Between Nnedi Okorafor’s “Binti” and Victor LaValle’s “The Ballad of Black Tom”

Morgan Kirby

Considering the coming-of-age journey, one may think of a comforting movie or novel in which the main character starts naïve, faces a trial or two, and emerges mature, having learned life lessons. While the character may face some disadvantages, they are able to grow thanks to their determination and support of others and are ultimately overwhelmingly positive works. However, what if the trials prove too much? What determines how two similar people, similarly challenged, withstand to the end, or break under the pressure? Even though they are a part of different societies spanning space and time, Nnedi Okorafor’s protagonist Binti (2018) and Victor LaValle’s Black Tom’s (2022) coming of age journeys have many similar trials which are ultimately interpreted uniquely by each character, molding them into the chosen savior or slayer of their worlds.

Binti and Black Tom are both young adults who embark upon their journeys to better themselves against the advice of parental figures who embrace tradition. Binti begins the novella as a sixteen-year-old member of the Himba ethnic group on Earth. Gifted with the ability of complex math, the audience meets her as she is running away to attend Oozma University to develop her abilities. This is against the advice of her whole family. Her nine siblings and parents are the sixth generation to live in their house and potentially the thousandth to live on their ancestral land. As Binti reminds the audience, “We Himba don’t travel. We stay put. Our ancestral land is life; move away from it and you diminish” (13). Binti is met with less than stellar responses when she informs her family about her acceptance and scholarship. Her siblings warned her against “chasing fame,” and “laughed and dismissed the idea” (29). Her parents “said nothing, not even congratulations. Their silence was enough” when she wept with joy (29). This leaves Binti at a crossroads: either continue the family tradition and become a

master harmonizer or follow her passion and blaze a new trail into the unknown.

Binti ultimately decides to run away, organizing her acceptance forms and mode of transportation. She had never left their hometown, much less her home planet. To face the threat of no marriage, being shunned and humiliated and pursuing her passion anyway requires drive, maturity, and bravery. Black Tom, or Tommy Tester, also begins his journey for betterment against the will of a traditionally focused parental figure. Tommy, at twenty years old, had witnessed the backbreaking work put in by his parents, the measly compensation they received, and how they were eventually discarded like trash when their bodies gave away. He wanted better and chose to work with the few options he had to build himself and his dad a better life, even if the end result was not strictly legal: “There were others who would have called him a scammer, a swindler, a con, but he never thought of himself that way. No good charlatan ever did” (11). When presented the opportunity to steal the book, or play music for Suydam, a rich elderly man who dabbles in the occult, he took it. Even when the job is questionable or dangerous, Tommy takes the opportunity to build a better himself and his dad. However, his father Otis does not support this: “If he had to play the role of quasi-gangster to get paid, then so be it. He played the roles needed to enrich his bank account. But this would all sound criminal to Otis...The man had an outsized depiction of dignity” (32). Otis has a traditional view of what it means to be an honorable man, and put in honest work. He worked in manual labor for years, and even when it broke his body, he is still proud to have followed the reputable path. Even though Otis eventually bends and provides Tommy with a means of protection for a particularly dangerous gig, he is by no means pleased that his son has taken up this occupation. Otis wishes his son would follow in his footsteps, but instead Tommy takes on increasingly risky jobs displaying his independence, cunning, and willingness to work for goals. Both Binti and Tommy chose to pursue their ambitions of knowledge or monetary gain, even when lacking the full support of their family. At this stage, they are both young yet skilled in their specific niche, passionate enough to defy their parents’ wishes, and good people who have just begun their journey.

Binti and Black Tom are also both aware of the harshness shown to people who look like them. Binti faced discrimination

throughout the whole novella due to the color of her skin and her cultural practices. Even before Binti left home, she received “hate messages, threats to [her] life, laughter and ridicule that came from the Khoush in my city made me want to hide” when she was accepted to Oozma University, the first Himba to be so (29). In the terminal, she was called a filthy “dirt-bather,” and her cultural practice of applying otjize to her hair compared to shit. Even amongst the academics on the ship, she is questioned over the necessity of her sacred cultural practices. This leaves Binti feeling on-edge and isolated. However, she still takes the opportunity to educate others when possible. When asked to remove her ankle bracelets when arriving upon the ship by an elder Khoush, she first attempts to enlighten the man on their importance. When he still does not fully grasp the idea behind the jewelry, she compromises with him and removes some but keeps just enough “to jingle with each step” (21). Instead of lashing out, she is aware of the Khoush’s derogatory views, but chooses to rise above and avoid confrontation. She is still able to express herself and Himba heritage, even in limited capacity. Binti faces microaggressions and ignorance throughout the story, but still strives to remain true to herself and her people.

Tommy is also discriminated against due to his status as a Black man in 1920’s New York City. This is especially apparent in areas where the majority of individuals are white: “The father Tommy Tester rode into Queens the more conspicuous he became...The conductor...stopped to make conversation with Tommy. Once to ask if he was a musician, knocking the guitar case as if it were his own, and the second time to ask if Tommy had missed his stop. The other passengers feigned disinterest” (12). In this situation, Tommy is not directly attacked or harassed, yet he is still made to feel less-than compared to the white passengers on the train. The white conductor has little value for Tommy’s personal space, touching his property as if it were his own. He also asks Tommy if he has missed his stop, with everyone in the car hyperaware of the unusual nature of a Black man heading to a white neighborhood. Before he could make his way back home, he “got gripped, hard, on the back of the neck...He knew this was a cop or had been once. Up in Harlem they called this grip John’s Handshake...The wide one reached into Tommy’s coat and removed the ten-dollar bills” (22). The cops also have no respect for Tommy or his belongings. He is robbed by figures that are in a position of

power and supposed to protect him. When pushed on the topic of why he stole the book, Tommy reads the situation and decides his best course of action is to play into “The Clueless Negro” role (25). In Tommy’s world, there is no compromising with white passersby and cops. He feels completely restricted by the systems in place. He is able to make his way out of it due to his street smarts, but loses his proud, Harlem attitude to do so. Where Binti was able to maintain some of her heritage and culture, Tommy’s is completely repressed. They are both treated poorly due to their race, but New York City is more brazen of their disrespect and disgust towards black individuals like Tommy. This constant pressure wears away at him faster than Binti’s society on her, but they are both still passionate about their goals and making progress on their journey.

Binti and Black Tom, through their unique position, experience with death, and integration of the “other”, serve as a bridge between two worlds. Binti quickly forms friendships with people her age who share her passion for math on the ship to Oozma University. She describes spending hours with them, commonalities shining brighter than their initial differences. They ate, performed treeing exercises, and enjoyed each other’s company. Finally, she had found companionship with those who truly understood her. The ship is then attacked by the Meduse, a destructive alien race. Everyone is brutally murdered. As the only survivor, thanks to her edan and harmonizing abilities, Binti develops communications with the Meduse. Once she hears of their plan to go on a murderous rampage through Oozma University to recover the chief’s stolen stinger, Binti convinces them to let her represent them as an ambassador in a conversation with Oozma University. In order to do this, she must let go of her edan, her only way to communicate and defend herself. She takes the leap of faith, and in turn is made an honorary member of the Meduse. However, this results in the loss of her braids, created with code written to tell the story of her home. They are replaced with Meduse okuoku, “soft transparent blue with darker blue dots at their tips. They grew...as if they’d been doing that all my life” (87). Her unique Himba heritage saved her life and becoming part Meduse allows her to save many more. She bridges the world of academics of Oozma University and the alien race of the Meduse, and succeeds in getting the stinger back with no lives lost. Okwu is even accepted as a student to display the strengthened allegiance between humans and Meduse. It takes Binti

time to process the change to her appearance and the loss of some elements of her Himba culture, but the integration of the Meduse benefited all involved. She rose to the occasion, and used skills she picked up along the way, such as communication with the Meduse, to settle an intergalactic political issue that had existed before she was born. Binti obtained this incredible achievement thanks to her intelligence, grit, and culture, and in the end made the world slightly better for people like her.

Tommy is given the opportunity to bridge his world and the otherworldly space ruled by the Cthulhu monster, the “Outside”, by Suydam, but is ultimately driven there by the death of his father. When Tommy showed up as promised to Suydam’s mansion, he beckoned Tommy into the library where he was shown his first glimpse of the “Outside”. He is promised social upheaval and the chance to end up on top: “The return of the Sleeping King would mean the end of your people’s wretchedness...But imagine the fortunes of us who were allowed to survive?...those who helped the Sleeping King wake?” (50). Tommy is unable to truly progress in society as it was set in the 1920’s. He may be able to do well for a black man, but he will never be seen as anything more. This is his biggest opportunity yet, but with that comes the greatest risk. It would require something significant to push him over the top. The tragic murder of Otis broke Tommy in a way that permanently shifted his worldview and catapulted him on the track towards destruction. After his first glimpse of the “Outside”, Tommy was conflicted as to whether to return the next night. When he ventured home, he was met with crowds surrounding his apartment. Upon pushing through the throng of people, he is pulled forward and Malone breaks the news. “Outwardly, Tester took the news with great calm. Inwardly he felt the sun close its distance from the earth...a fire ran through his body, but he couldn’t show it” (61- 62). He is then forced to listen in painful detail as Howard described the way in which he brutally, senselessly, murdered Otis. The world Tommy had built, the potential for bettering himself and his father was callously stolen by an indifferent white cop. After this earth-shattering tragedy, Tommy has nothing left to lose. He returns that night and becomes Suydam’s sergeant of chaos. He deemed society to be unsalvageable, and fully embraced the power of the “Outside”, opening himself up to it and allowing it another vessel to enter his world. A new identity was forged: “Black Tom did something;

Malone heard something. A low tone suddenly played loudly, as if Black Tom had hummed a drone note inside Malone's skull...Black Tom had disappeared" (106). Black Tom proceeds to blast the door to the "Outside" wide open, awake the Sleeping King, and maim Malone. When meeting with Buckeye for the last time,

Black Tom is a broken, sorrowful man. He mourns the loss of his soul, not for those he has harmed, but for forgetting what he had and where he came from. He can no longer think of himself as "good" and describes how he gave "them" the world (148). He bridged his world and that of the Sleeping King, but this will never be enough to bring back his dad or bring about meaningful social change. While he is unsure of how long is left before the apocalypse occurs, when it does come, Black Tom will be guilty of the death of millions of people. Black Tom lost himself, who he cares for, and doomed any chance society had at improving by bridging his world with the "Outside".

Binti and Black Tom both permanently altered their societies through integrating part of an "other" which results in change for the better or an apocalypse looming ominously in the distance. They face similar challenges, but in the end Binti rose to the occasion while Black Tom was pushed past his breaking point. Binti chose to face her challenges head on, fighting for her survival using compassion for the Meduse and Khoush, and then was rewarded with honor for her people at the end of her journey. However, the satisfying end result was not entirely up to her. She could have done everything right, but her society could have still chosen not to change. Luckily for her, Oozma University decided to extend the olive branch towards the Meduse. Even in the beginning of the novella, the educated world of Oozma University showed it was willing to go against tradition by accepting a Binti student based on ability, regardless of precedent. She was able to complete her full coming of age journey due to her talents, but also the willingness of others to bend. Unfortunately, Black Tom's society was too unwilling to change, and the murder of his dad broke him and pushed him to do things young Tommy would be appalled of. His knowledge and skills were no match for a society that was so engrained in its racist tendencies, from the legislature at the top all the way down to pedestrians on the sidewalk. Instead of making his father proud and rising above to do the right thing, Black Tom rejects the idea of right versus wrong due to his inability to look past

his own trauma and pain. He completed his journey of self-discovery but found a side of himself he would have rather left unseen. He regrets his actions and spends his final moments on this mortal plane wishing for the capacity to feel joy again. Binti's and Black Tom's coming of age journeys began with similar qualities, but eventually diverged, producing a more traditional coming-of-age story of hope with a satisfying resolution and a more uncommon one of disillusionment with the world and tragic conclusion.

Works Cited

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