



Traps and Tramps in the Black Lives Matter Era

by Isaiah Matthew Wooden, PhD

Antoinette Nwandu's *Pass Over* shrewdly fuses elements from classic Biblical and theatrical narratives to call attention to the ongoing problem of the color line in the twenty-first century. In an interview with *American Theatre*, Nwandu notes that she was compelled to write the play, in part, by an impulse to explore "the different ways that we create epic." In the Book of Exodus's recounting of the heroic efforts Moses led to free the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and Samuel Beckett's absurdist rendering of two tramps anticipating an arrival that never arrives in *Waiting for Godot*, Nwandu unearthed two potent resources—one maximalist, the other minimalist—from which to craft her own epic reckoning with the violence and systemic racism that black people in the United States continue to face.

While the Book of Exodus and *Waiting for Godot* likely strike some as odd choices to remix into a stark, sometimes humorous meditation on the perils of contemporary black life, both works have featured prominently in efforts to confront and combat racial injustice and discrimination over the years. Participants in the antislavery movement frequently invoked the Exodus story to bolster their arguments that the peculiar institution was immoral and, thus, needed to be abolished. Moses likewise often circulated as a symbol of emancipation for the enslaved. Thus, when word began to spread about a young woman named Harriet Tubman who, having escaped from bondage herself, was surreptitiously guiding others northward to freedom, she was declared the "Moses" of her people by many. The Exodus story would accrue additional resonances among those fighting against antiblack policies and practices during the Jim Crow era. Literary scholar Robert J. Patterson has noted how the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s, in particular, pivoted on an "exodus politics" that anointed certain charismatic black male leaders as the "saviors" of the race.

Waiting for Godot was notably one of the earliest plays that Doris Derby, Gilbert Moses, and John O'Neal produced when they launched the Free Southern Theater, an integrated troupe that aimed to bring live performance to communities throughout the deep south, at the height of civil rights activism. The company reconceived the tragicomedy, in part, as a critique of the gradualism that many (across racial lines) insisted was necessary for achieving radical social change. The Classical Theatre of Harlem and the arts organization Creative Time would reanimate this critique in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, presenting revivals of *Godot* in New York and New Orleans to call out the government's slow, apathetic response to the devastation wrought by the catastrophic weather event. These, no doubt, are just a few examples of the many ways the Exodus story and *Godot* have been repurposed to occasion protest and dissent.

Of course, in evoking these narrative imaginings of escape in *Pass Over*, Nwandu not only calls forth the long tradition of resistance they've helped to engender but also invites reflection on the incompleteness of the project of black liberation. The play introduces us to a new kind of "Moses," one who speaks directly to the concerns vitalizing recent movements for racial justice, healing, and freedom—Black Lives Matter, among them. With every "bang bang" that Moses trades with his friend Kitch, Nwandu beckons fresh yearnings for a world wherein "gittin up off dis block" isn't a death sentence—a world wherein black teenagers like Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown can venture out to their local stores and return home without incident. Simultaneously, she dares us to envision (much like Moses and Kitch) how another kind of life, one absent of the forces and agents of antiblackness, might yet still be possible.

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