Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics

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In 1896, Paul Laurence Dunbar published a poem titled “We Wear the Mask”.

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties,
Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.
We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

Dunbar writes of black men and women at the turn of the twentieth century forced to “wear the mask” because of racism.

I’ve worn a mask, but not that one.

I’m writing this draft a day after I received word that my house has been “saved”, with “saved” placed in quotes because I am still in the middle of Bank of America hell. I had gone almost three years without paying—the last check I remember cutting to the bank was in December of 2010 or January 2011. I remember the moment I decided to stop like it was yesterday,
just like I remember the moment two men came to my home
to repossess my car.
   Let me back up a moment.

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October 2006

It was 1:30 AM on a late Saturday night and I was in my office, working. There are probably three aspects of being a professor most people outside of the Academy routinely misunderstand. The first aspect they misunderstand is the role writing and research play in our jobs and in our lives. I wasn’t up at 1:30 AM because I was thinking about a lecture, or preparing for class. I was up “club late” because I was writing. Trying to scratch out one more paragraph, one more sentence, one more word. And failing miserably. Relatedly, the second thing they misunderstand is how hard writing can be, even for someone like me—I’ve been writing in one way or another since I was 3 years old. One of the reasons I decided to pursue a job in the Academy in the first place is because I knew that if I played my cards right I’d be able to write and collect a check doing it. But that doesn’t mean it’s easy. Particularly under stress.

Which brings me to the third aspect. The Academy is like a multi-tiered economy, with four types of intellectual laborers. At the top are tenured professors, people who have the equivalent of lifetime jobs. Under them are tenure-track professors, people who do not have lifetime jobs but have the potential to get them if they work hard. And under them are adjunct faculty, who are not tenured and do not even have the potential to be tenured, and live incredibly precarious lives even though in many cases they have PhDs. And then, alongside of them

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1 The individual story of Margaret Mary Vojtko who passed away Sept. 1, 2013 is particularly important here. She’d spent over 25 years as an adjunct at Duquesne University, teaching French. According to union organizer Daniel Kovalik (2013), Ms. Vojtko was a cancer patient, and after Duquesne cut her salary to $10,000 was no longer able to afford her medical bills and her home. Forced effectively to live out of her office, Duquesne fired her. She died months after.
to a certain extent, are graduate students, people who want to become tenure-track professors so they can become tenured professors, but given the paucity of tenure-track jobs will have to fight hard not to become adjuncts.

I was on the tenure track, and knew I was hanging by a thread.

So I worked. In this case about 45 minutes too long.

Barely two minutes after I left campus a white Jeep Cherokee smashed into my minivan.

I was ok, but the car wasn’t.

The minivan was the only car we had. And it was just about to be paid off. My wife and I didn’t have savings for a down payment for another car. We didn’t even have enough money to get reimbursed for a car rental. And we had five children to shuttle back and forth.

For a week local friends shuttled us back and forth. I bought a bus pass, and took the bus to work. Because we homeschooled our kids we were part of a large black homeschool network. The parents in this network brought groceries, prepared meals, and helped shuttle our kids around. We were ok for a couple of weeks.

Then my children were involved in another accident.

Every Saturday my family made the trek up to the YMCA. T-ball, soccer, basketball, dance—you name it, our kids did it. Without the minivan we didn’t know how this would continue, but one of the homeschool parents came to our aid. She would drive to our house, pick up the kids in her minivan and would take them to the Y.

Not two weeks after my accident, our friend picks up our kids to take them to the Y. Twenty minutes after she leaves we get a phone call.

She was in a car crash. The car flipped over.

Everyone was ok. Given the nature of the accident it was a miracle.

Being hit with these accidents within two weeks of each other was incredibly draining. We needed to get back on sound footing. The first step was finding a vehicle.

One of my fraternity brothers worked at a car dealership. I’d told my brothers what had happened. One of them emailed
me and told me that he had a car for me. At first I thought he meant that he had a car for me to *buy*—something I couldn’t do because I didn’t have the money.

No.

He loaned us a brand new SUV. I didn’t have to pay a *dime*. All I had to do was bring it back like I found it.

He wasn’t the only one. My father-in-law had a working van that he no longer drove, and he promised it to us. Further, another homeschool parent gave us an older car to drive. Within a few weeks we had three cars to replace the one we’d lost.

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Every now and then I conduct research experiments. Let’s conduct one now. Change three details about the story I just told you. Make me a low level Walmart employee with no college degree. Finally, change my parents’ financial circumstance.\(^2\)

What happens after that first car crash? I noted that I took the bus to work (the MTA 22 to be exact—the same bus I use to this day). As a professor I only have to be on campus on the days I teach.

The only clock I had was the tenure clock. In other words, I have a relative degree of flexibility.

But what if I worked at Walmart?

If I worked at Walmart, my single twenty-minute bus ride becomes 40 minutes longer, with another bus and a metro trip thrown in for good measure. Which on the surface doesn’t appear to be too bad. However, neither the two buses nor the Metro runs exactly on time, so even if I’m at the bus/metro stop on time…the bus/metro might not be.\(^3\) And if even one of the buses or the metro is just a bit off schedule everything else is

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\(^2\) Of course this thought experiment is a bit tricky, because if I worked at Walmart…or didn’t have a PhD…or didn’t have parents with resources, I wouldn’t have been at Hopkins to get in the car accident in the first place, right? But bear with me.

\(^3\) On more than one occasion I beat the bus home because, rather than wait for it, I decided to walk.
thrown out of whack. The first bus might be on time, and the last bus might be on time, but if the metro isn’t on time . . . then I’m out of luck.

Further, working at Walmart isn’t the same as working as a tenure-track university professor at a high-tier university. If I’m scheduled to work at Walmart from 9 to 5, I’ve got to be there at 9. If I come in late, I’d lose pay . . . and likely my job if it happened more than once, even if it wasn’t my fault. If I had to rely on public transportation it would likely have cost me my job. And would have put my family at severe risk. I can hear the manager now. “You should have taken the earlier bus.”

Being a professor has its own grind but it provides me with flexibility—I work far more than forty hours per week but I work the majority of those hours when and where I want. It also provides me with benefits. Health insurance covered most of the costs associated with the accident. Even if I were somehow able to keep my Walmart job with no car, Walmart’s idea of “job benefits” is to have workers covered by Medicaid rather than provide them with health care. How would my story differ if we took away my college education? If I didn’t attend college, I wouldn’t have access to any of the networks I relied on. I wouldn’t be able to rely on my fraternity brothers because I wouldn’t be in the fraternity. The vast majority of the parents in the black homeschool network I was a part of were also college educated. So it’s unlikely I’d have people in my life with the ability to just give me a car.

I thought about all of this as I was in the middle of it, as I was thinking about how I was going to get to work, as I was thinking about how I was going to get another car, as I was thinking about how I was going to pay whatever bills left over from the accident. I realized how blessed I was to be able to emerge from the accident relatively unscathed, how blessed I was to be connected with people who would look out for me. And I realized that if I were different, if my life had gone just a bit differently, I’d be in a very very different place.

Now many would probably say in response that I worked hard to get to where I am, that my parents and my in-laws worked hard to put my family in the position where getting into a car accident isn’t a life-changing event. In black (and other) churches around the country, prosperity gospel pastors
routinely use the phrase *favor isn’t fair* to argue that God’s blessings tend to go to God’s people. My story, then, can be read as the story of someone who, because of his favor (that is, because of the type of job he had and the networks he had as a result of his education and his upbringing), was able to take a couple of minor setbacks and overcome them. My race and gender here makes the story even better—black man faces setback, emerges triumphant!

But this narrative, told in black communities across the country, ignores a couple of important things. The first thing it ignores is that our ability to bounce back from life’s challenges aren’t *and should not be* simply dictated by favor . . . by whether we went to the right schools, or by whether or how we believe in God (or the “right” God), or by whether we have the right networks.

We are fooling ourselves if we believe there is something inherent about what we do as people who purport to be middle or upper class that causes us to deserve the benefits we do receive, that “working hard” or “being faithful” or doing one’s duty as a brother should automatically confer certain benefits. If favor isn’t fair, it *should* be. Everyone should have access to the resources and networks I had access to in that moment, regardless of their employment, regardless of their religious background, regardless of their personal connections. But we routinely make comparisons between the deserving and undeserving. The idea that “favor isn’t fair” produces and reproduces crises that do significant damage to black communities.

But the second thing we miss is the unique stresses and strains the contemporary condition causes even for the supposedly favored among for us.

Which brings me back to that mask.

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*October 2008*

Although I emerged from the accident without a physical scratch I did not emerge from the accident unharmed. It
was a while before the insurance claim came through, so we were forced to reply on makeshift transportation options for months. When the claim did come through we had enough money to pay off the old car, but not enough to buy a new car outright—we didn’t have savings. Every dollar, every *penny* I brought in, immediately went out. Our car was only several months away from being paid off, and we literally banked on that extra money to provide us with a cushion.

But now, we had to postpone that vision. Instead of having only eight months of car payments we had to now add another 64 months to that. And as our kids were growing older the bills we accumulated grew. We spent more on food. We spent more on clothing. We spent more on utilities.

The next year went by in a blur. Every month we were just a little bit short—one month on rent, another month on heat, another month on the car. Every month it seemed as if we were relying on our network a little bit more for money.

I mentioned the fact that we homeschooled our children. While we rented in one of the best black neighborhoods in Baltimore, the elementary school was horrible. I remember the day I looked over my oldest daughter’s math homework. They were working on decimal points, and on her worksheet she was assigned to state whether various mathematical statements were “true” or “false”. For example the mathematical statement $2.4 > 2.0$ is “true” while the mathematical statement $2.1 < 1.9$ is “false”. She marked the mathematical statement $1.0 > 1$ “false”. The teacher marked the statement wrong, which meant that $1.0$ and $1$ had different numerical values. So I tell my daughter the teacher is wrong—that $1.0$ and $1$ have the same value even though the two are written differently. Her response? “But daddy, she’s my *teacher*."

After this I look at her homework more closely, noticing a number of words her teacher misspelled on homework assignments. And after our oldest son’s second grade teacher told us she wouldn’t send her own child to the school we figured the problem wasn’t our children but rather the school.

Private school wasn’t an option for us because we didn’t have the money. So homeschool was the only option we had left. My wife found a black homeschool group in the city, and
was able to provide our children with a better education than they would have received if they’d have stayed in that elementary school. But bills continued to pile up.

When our landlord asked us to pay a portion of our energy bill because of skyrocketing energy prices, we realized we needed another income . . . which meant we needed to move to find a better public school system. Which meant we needed to buy a house.

We scraped up the money through a combination of family and my retirement account, and got enough for a mortgage down payment. Our kids could go to school right around the block. And my wife could begin to look for work.

But this made our circumstances even tighter, because now I had to pay every bill I’d paid before, plus utilities and the loan I’d taken for the down payment on the house.

(Even writing this down makes me want to take a deep breath.)

During all of this I was still expected to work. To be a good teacher. To publish in scholarly journals. To write a book good enough to be published by the best academic presses. To collaborate with colleagues. I mentioned above that being a tenure-track university professor has its own grind.

I went into overdrive.

I would wake up at 4:30 AM, then write for hours. Then go to work. Then try to write some more. Then come home at around 6:30 PM. Eat, talk to my wife and kids for about an hour, then go to bed.

When I woke up I would repeat the process. Write. Work. Come home for a bit. Eat. Sleep. Wake up. Write. Work. Come home. Eat. Sleep. Write. Work. Always feeling as if I were behind, as if there were more work to do, as if I didn’t have enough hours in the day, in the week, in the month.

After more than a year, it all caught up with me.

One weekend, the weight of everything that had happened to us up to that point, the car crash, the bills, the decision to move, the homeschooling, the robbing Peter to pay Paul, the lack of savings, the missed mortgage payments, all the (in my mind, bad) choices we’d made, all of it came crashing down.
And I collapsed. And I didn’t get out of bed for three days straight.

I hadn’t considered medication before. I got a prescription for an anti-depressant. It didn’t take our bills away, it didn’t miraculously write my book for me. But they enabled me to be a bit more capable of doing what I had to do to survive.

By 2010, two years after America elected the first self-identified black president, the car we bought as a result of the accident had been repossessed, and I was facing foreclosure.

The mask.

Throughout the entire ordeal, I donned the mask, to the extent I could. I didn’t miss a class. I didn’t miss a writing day. I told very few colleagues. I fulfilled all of my obligations as if I didn’t have a care in the world.

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In June 2011 the University of Minnesota Press published *Stare in the Darkness: The Limits of Hip-hop and Black Politics*, the book I was working on before, during, and after the accident. It represented an attempt to subject the various claims scholars, activists, and others have made about hip-hop to critical scrutiny. But it also represented an attempt to understand how black communities reproduce inequality, sometimes through black popular culture.

Even in this supposed post-racial era, a range of writers, activists, and policy-makers examine inter-racial inequality. In fact a growing number of scholars have become interested in *intra-racial* politics, the politics that occurs within racial groups. I’ve spent most of my life in and around three majority black cities, Detroit, St. Louis, and Baltimore — cities with large black populations. Even as racism still shapes the lives of blacks in these cities lead, racism cannot explain why some blacks in these areas have a lot of resources and some have a few. Racism cannot explain why there are some black populations we as black men and women are all too willing to fight for, while there are other black populations we are willing to let die. And racism cannot fully explain how black people choose
to fight, nor can it fully explain the solutions black people generate for the problems they face.

What can?

The neoliberal turn, the gradual embrace of the general idea that society (and every institution within it) works best when it works according to the principles of the market, can go part of the way. We now routinely refer to public officials as people we hired rather than elected, as CEOs rather than political representatives. We place business executives with more managerial expertise than educational expertise in charge of public school systems. We use the Bible (and increasingly the Koran) as entrepreneurial self-help guides rather than as spiritual texts. We increasingly believe an array of public goods and services (from education to utility provision to social security) are better off distributed by private profit-making actors. Finally, we no longer respect the dignity of labor, and increasingly propose hustling to make ends meet. The neoliberal turn helps explain the rise of inequality, the increasing anxiety and insecurity we all feel (regardless of how much money we make or what type of job we have), how a number of institutions (including but not limited to black churches) we’ve relied on have been transformed, how narrow our political imaginations have become.

The story I began this with is not a life or death story. But it is a story about a certain type of suffering, a masked suffering, that even when healed is done so problematically, “problematically” because the various ways we (and here I not only refer to African Americans but to Americans in general) tend to heal this suffering are woefully inadequate, in part because we haven’t properly identified what causes our suffering in the first place. The crises my family faced are the natural end-products of a society that increasingly shirks its responsibilities to those perceived to be losers in an increasingly stark competition over material, social, and psychic resources.

Over the several chapters to follow I seek to make plain the suffering that black populations, black institutions, and black cities undergo in this contemporary moment. For a variety of reasons we’ve been forced to hustle and grind our way out of the post-civil rights era, and it is this hustle and grind in all of its institutional manifestations that’s resulted in our current
condition. While interest in neoliberalism is growing, writings that examine how neoliberalism shapes black life are few and far between. I rectify this gap with an eye towards contributing to the scholarly literature, but more importantly with an eye towards contributing to the broader conversation about solutions.