THE WORST THING YOU CAN HAVE RIGHT NOW... IS AN IDEA?

THOUGHT BY RAJA FEATHER KELLY

Buddhists define eloquence as the telling of a truth in such a way as to ease the suffering of others. The more suffering that’s eased by your telling of a truth, the more eloquent you’ve been.
— Je Tsongkhapa

PROEM

I don’t know anything about anything. I make it all up. I watch TV or otherwise read poems, memoirs, and self-help books. I never watch the news. I listen to music: sad-core mostly, or rap, rapped by women. Theater holds a special place in my life... I watch a lot of theatre in order to adopt principles, ascribe to value systems, or otherwise discover rules to live by. I understand theater, or rather I seek to understand theater as a means for taking in the world, and I understand that I do that. I and my body love a metaphor. I especially enjoy the scripting of reality television and the producers that manipulate the stories. How can something so terrible be based on someone’s real life? How can someone’s real life be so absurd? How does the absurd go so far in its own direction that it lands back at the truth?

People sometimes say that the way things happen in the movies is unreal, but actually, it’s the way things happen to you in life that’s unreal. The movies make emotions look strong and real, whereas then things really do happen to you. It’s like you’re watching television — you don’t feel anything.
— Andy Warhol

I am married, I have a dog, I think I have six sisters. I was adopted, but not legally, my friends are the most important thing in the world to me, and I am writing in a rhythm that matches the cadence of my thinking, and I am afraid that you might not understand my train of thought.*

I escaped New York City. In the movie in my mind, COVID (which could be a musical — but not for the purposes of this moment), Black people are at risk of death, but if you’re Black and an artist you are kept valuable as long as you keep creating art. In order for me to do the best job I can, I ran away to a town that has the fewest cases of the virus. I am shackled up; writing, editing, exercising, and otherwise plotting a syllabus for the “re-opening.” I am in a single bedroom, in what appears to be a finished, open-floor attic. I thought I was going to nap. I put on a video of Black people telling stories about their dancing histories and spent three minutes listening to a choreographer who is similar to my age, who was born where I grew up, and whose family moved to where I was born. I know this man, but I don’t know him, and in only three minutes of watching and listening, I understand it’s very possible that we could have crossed paths before graduating high school. We did not.

We also could have gone to the same college. I got a full scholarship to Rutgers University — this is where he went — but I did not accept the ride. I am fascinated by this moment of looking at someone who not only looks like me — sort of, he’s much prettier — but also who shares a similar journey to mine. Journey to where? I don’t know... but it’s rather uncanny. After a quick google, I am also made aware that he joined the Trisha Brown Dance Company the year after I auditioned for the company and refused an offer. I don’t know why this is important. [My Co-Star app goes off. Your day at a glance: You want to be everywhere.]

Instead of Rutgers, NYU, DeSales, SUNY Purchase, I paid $200,000 in student loans to go to Connecticut College because it was called a baby Ivy and I thought it would be a better story. I didn’t take the job with Trisha Brown that year, or Wim Vandekeybus the year after, or Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker two years before that, because I wanted autonomy. A kind of liberation I am still looking for. Looking at him reminds me of all this. And after three minutes of listening to him, the video stops, the Internet cuts out, and I am left stewing in the wonder of how I got here.

My nose is a bit runny from sleeping with the air-conditioner on. My stomach hurts from eating sub-par BBQ from a food truck, followed by a bowl of Captain Crunch. I’m on a diet. I diet a lot. I am a serial dieter.

I’m confused.

What is the moment I refer to when I say ‘here,’ when I ask myself how I got here? Location? Point in time? Point in space? The moment of a thought? The conclusion of a thought? This weight? This room? Or to think about all this through writing. Right! I’ll write. Alright. Oh. Right. What a terrible idea.

It’s not that I think ideas are either great or all bad. And yet, it is a sad decade when conversations with your friends are mostly about all the things that you shouldn’t do or say, or write, or tweet, or photograph, or otherwise think. Some of these ideas are the bravest, most honest, most gag-worthy ideas.

There is a great fear of being seen, being called in, being called out, being cancelled, of making mistakes in an effort to learn. Or unlearn? To make a mistake is to bear a Social Scarlet Letter. And if I am correct, we wear that to the grave. Epitaph: “my bad”.

Is this such a bad thing? We are asked to think twice, speak once, or not speak at all? We are asked to consider who we could hurt, or who we could harm, or who could use the mic more than the person holding it, or who has proximity to it, or who has the means to even hold it. Before you speak, here is a metaphor: consider that you are only as powerful as the most tender in the room.

Everyday, I seem to talk myself out of writing a novel. Because mostly it feels like I’m living one. Do you know that some people do NOT have an ongoing monologue in their head? Not a theatrical monologue, but an ongoing stream of thoughts and ideas and musings about the experience of living as they are living it? You must look this up — I implore you to look it up. I am not one of those people, in fact I am just the opposite. I am a person who
has so many different dialogues and monologues going on in their head, it almost makes me anxious. If I weren’t so interested in it, I would be the most anxious person. Truly. I don’t sleep much at night, I get up as early as I can without an alarm, and I am constantly observing, evaluating, and narrating the scenes of the world in front of me back to myself in real time.

I’m sitting here, lying here really, on my stomach, not working out because I am so tired, and so worried because the world seems to be crashing in on itself, and I feel so certain that we’re all going to die, explode, or otherwise, and I realize I say ‘or otherwise’ a lot because I like to consider options. My point is that due to the fact that we cannot differentiate the truth from a fact, from a desire, from an idea – we hate ourselves to a degree of debilitation. Whether or not we can recognize this or not. We are some of the most creative living species alive, so creative. Creative in that we are able to weave lies, hundreds of years of lies. Lies that we continue to tell ourselves today. We are so creative. Creatively imagining and reimagining our existence, thinking ourselves into ideas that take up the time from morning until sleep and then we start over again. Our creativity is thriving. We are a class of creative liars. The truth is disguised in plain sight and the lies are executive producing our press releases. If anyone is making money, it is payment for being complicit in someone else’s lie. Ammiright? Believe me or think I’m crazy, think me funny or mad. But is a lie such a bad thing? I believe in nuance.

The New Negro sits on my pillow. Where my husband would be if he were here with me. He’s home, in Brooklyn with the dog, working hard. He is a light. The New Negro is a book that... well, I haven’t finished it yet, but the foreword has got me shook because I can’t seem to understand how a book that was copyrighted in 1925, with a new foreword from 1999, can so accurately describe the time we are living in right now. [Timestamp: August 6th, 2020, 7:37 PM]

I guess, I have something to write about.

I don’t know. I have to use the bathroom.

I’m back. And here’s what I got...

**Fuck You, James Baldwin.**

That’s the truth I want to tell. That’s the show I want to write. I dunno. Fuck you for being so damn smart, and so observant and so slick with your tongue. Thank you for taking up so much space, no one ain’t got no ideas any more. We’re just here unpacking your shit. Unpacking the world you left behind. I mean fuck.

How many fucking emancipations does it take to free a nigga?

Must I leave what I know in order to come free?

What would be of James Baldwin if he had stayed in America through the rise of McCarthyism.**

*How much time do you want for your progress?*

– James Baldwin

*You must accept them [white people] and accept them with love for these innocent people have no other hope.*

– Uncle Jimmy

People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.

– Mr. B

Someone’s life’s work could simply be just to use their experience of living to flush these quotes out.

Meanwhile, I am like...

I don’t think I knew I was Black until Obama was elected president. I mean, there was a significant shift in my Blackness after Obama was elected president. Like being Black somehow became a currency?

**Where I grew up** everyone was Black or poor. Those tokenized were white girls, who made an effort to get their hair and nails done to look as much like the Black girls they were hanging out with. No one had a problem with it. In fact, the more these white girls appropriated and assimilated, the more they were accepted. Anyway, all our parents were drug addicts and everyone called each other a “Nigga” and everybody hated gay people.

While I hate when other people say this, no words are truer: “That’s just the way things were.”

When I went to college, I was class president, I started many clubs, and my Blackness just wasn’t a thing I had to think about. Or I chose not to make it a thing. I knew who I was and where I came from and I had just made my grandmother drive four hours away from home in her Honda CR-V so I could become something other than what many of the men in our town became: Dead, a Drug Dealer, or Diseased. At least that is how it was laid out for me.

So in 2008, when I had returned from Study Abroad, there was a shift in me, and a shift in everyone else. When I was away, people thought I was Michael Jackson, or Michael Jordan – no kidding – and when I came back, it was difficult not to realize that I was the only Black person in every classroom at my college. Except maybe dance classes. How did I not understand that before? What had I been ignoring, or distracted by?

I was studying poetry – which no one cared about. It’s important to mention that at this time in my life I had lost my moral compass. Having grown up going to church two days a week and having to sit through endless admonitions – admonitions at war with your heart – at some point it felt better to leave morals at the door and live life. And learn from TV. Where everything changes and then ends. I had no idea what was right or wrong at that point, no understanding of God, or any gender or sexual identity that made sense. Just a penchant for suicide, poetry and dancing – which I called monster-making in my head. But now, I had to carry BLACK in a whole new light.

I became everyone’s own private Obama. The closer white people got to me and my Blackness, the closer they believed to have gotten to Obama. And I guess that was meaningful to them.

Fast forward eight years to James Baldwin’s timely *I Am Not Your Negro* on the heels of the end of Obama’s final term as president. It seems, in some ways, we’re back to where we began again, confused, identity-less, and looking. While *I Am Not Your Negro* purports to be Baldwin’s personal account of the lives and assassinations of three of his close friends – Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. – it truly is a censuring of America’s failure to redress its humiliating history of racial inequality.
Therefore, *I Am Not Your Negro* became a campaign. Blacks all around, UNITE, and plant your flags, disengage, decolonize, expel the whites from your lives, minds, histories, and bodies, for you are nobody’s Negro.

At least this is how the social campaign presented itself.

So long as I was anybody’s Negro,

I could in fact not be. It seemed. This is to say that your acceptance of me allowed me to be who I wanted to be, to be abstract, to be a thinker, to be a future poet and pop-cultural anthro-pop-nographer novelist trapped in a choreographer/director, filmmaker, lover, storyteller’s body who happens to love the young white women starlet actresses from the ‘90s candy-colored wet hot American camp-stamp, and the polished white glam queens the starlets would never become, and the glory Hollywood gay-defining grand mistress-glam-queens who the polished white glam-queens fought so hard to separate themselves from. (Think Christina Applegate < Julienne Moore < Joan Crawford.) Am I their Negro? They made me curious, funny, campy, emotional, thoughtful, scared, vulnerable, and witty. They made me want to go to college, want to have a life, and want to be smart.

But I noticed other Black people in 2008 when Obama was elected too. I met my sister and brother in college. We locked in our friendships around 2008. I think then we were allowed to be as smart as we wanted to be. Were we now allowed to want a future beyond being someone’s edgy Black friend?

Anyway, these are my musings from two out of four pages of the introduction to Alain Locke’s *The New Negro*.

Or do I give my credit to Trump, Black Lives Matter, Beyoncé, Viola Davis, *Being Mary Jane*, Michelle Obama, Kanye West, Kerry Washington, or the death of George Floyd?

I saw Act One of *Hamilton* on July 5th. I didn’t finish it on account of not being able to understand the choreography. But dance on film is hard to watch. This feels related.

It’s become dark since I came to this room, the headquarters of my mind. Housed here in the Vermont getaway away from the city, I have been able to escape. In order to survive the made-for-TV (not so, but could be a musical) movie going on in my mind. It has now begun to rain. I have got a frozen video loaded, and I have only read the introduction of a book, and I had an idea to write, and I’m debilitated trying to understand how I got here. Where am I? Who am I?

Today I got a letter in my inbox from an investigator. My company is being charged for discrimination. From a person who used to be a company member and a friend.

The details aren’t mine to go into, but sometimes I imagine that closing my eyes and perhaps never waking up might be a better option than existing in a world where our integrity and our curiosities are on trial daily. I thought theatre was a place where we could escape, where we could radically imagine the lives that we want to live and not the lives that we have to face, and then the curtain goes down.

There must be room for representation, curiosity, and mistakes. There must be room to cast the protagonist as Truth with Ideas as the supporting roles.

I see your radical imagination and I raise you moral imagination.

My nose is still running, and I’m afraid that everyone will think I have Covid-19.

No one wants to be caught Black and with an infectious disease in Vermont. Not a good look.

Can I take a moment here, one more? Are you with me?

Are you on my train of thoughts....

I’m so tired of press releases and descriptions of art projects saying, “in response to Covid-19,” as if Covid-19 isn’t an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), which has resulted in a Pandemic—an epidemic of this infectious disease spread worldwide.

Specifically in the U.S., where the race and ethnicity of 93% of the cases are known, Black Americans continue to experience the highest overall actual Covid-19 mortality rates—more than twice as high as the rates for Whites and Asians, who have the lowest actual rates.

I think about this every time I sneeze and every time someone says that their musical reading, their dance performance, their poem about woodworking, their losing their virginity, or their bread-baking adventures are in response to Covid.

That’s their truth.

I’m a nigger. That’s my truth.

Arguably.

Anyway, I’ve been going to therapy, it’s great. They are like, damn, your parents fucked you up. And I’m like yah... then I went to theatre — cause that’s what they told me to do in New Jersey when life at home wasn’t benefiting. And now I am here and we are tearing theatre down because we hate ourselves. Cause we don’t want to be anybody’s niggas.

So, if Buddhists describe eloquence as the telling of a truth in such a way that... in such a way that...

Wait.

“In such a way.” Let’s stop there. Could a lie ease someone’s suffering if we are not able to tell truth from lies? Have we asked ourselves if we know the difference between a truth and a lie that we have hoodwinked ourselves into believing?

My truth is that I truly believe that we are all dumb and scared, and grasping for air. We are our own biggest threat. We are all sitting in the mess we made, pointing the finger instead of changing our own diapers. We deny that our creativity comes from our ability to sell our own shit.

In such a way that it resembles gold.

*To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger.*

— James Baldwin

The worst thing you can have right now... is an Idea?

— Raja Feather Kelly

FIN.
*Have you ever seen Pixar’s animated movie *Inside Out*? If you know me, you know I am not a fan of animation, but what really got me hooked on this movie is perhaps finally having this understanding of my mind. Something I continue to refer to. At this moment when I was writing, I meant to refer to Pixar’s train of thought, but I didn’t. When I later returned to thinking through why a flash of that train came into my mind, it seemed to make sense.

The Train of Thought is a train that travels all over the mind. The train runs on tracks which form in front of it and disappear behind it. It goes all around the mind in an unreliable way and delivers daydreams, facts and opinions, and memories. The train only runs when you are awake.

**I wonder how James Baldwin would have fared during McCarthyism? He was already a Black man, under close watch. Thrilling that he was able to escape America, enough to look back at it and reflect it back to us. Ever-so-eloquently guiding us toward a more nuanced understanding of our most complex issues.**

Meanwhile, Warhol was fine. A white man doing as he pleases. Skipping the streets of America, taking on its stink, reflecting it back to us. Ever so eloquently guiding us toward a more nuanced understanding of our most superficial issues.

These two men represent the two sides of my creative brain.

Considering how I got here... the United States was struck by a cataclysmic event: McCarthyism (1949–1952), a political attack that forced artists to radically alter or adjust their lives and values. Some fled the country never to return, some were Blacklisted and forced to stop working, and others simply changed, recanted, disengaged, and shut up. Today, most of us are not aware of the serious consequences of that forgotten catalyst.