



NATIONAL
IMMIGRANT

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WHEN WE GOT TO THE WATERS

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When We Got to the Waters, We Flew

Keynote Speech by Bayo Akomolafe, Ph.D.

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Thank you for having me.

My name is Báyò Akómoláfé.

There is no greater kindness than to witness the stranger mispronounce one's name. This is so because, to the Yoruba people, our names are not fixed things, static things; they are diasporic, fleeting qualities. A mispronunciation reminds us of the polyphonic multiverse. A mispronunciation offers us a way out of our own stuckness, our own paradigms of correctness, our own identities – which often become forms of containment and closure. So, when our names are mispronounced, it is like meeting God again and again for the first time. Mispronunciations are the nutrients of emergence.

Interacting with the Yoruba language, with Yoruba names, in any way is an exercise in play. A trickster's tongue. There's precision but also a subtle reminder to not take oneself so seriously. Because it is a tonal language, with stresses and nuances here and there, one word could have several meanings. For instance, *Ogùn* (Medicine); *Ògùn* (Charm); *Ogun* (War); *Ògùn* (State); *Ògún* (God of iron); *Ógun* (Stab); *Ogún* (Twenty); *Òógùn* (Sweat); *Ogún* (Property)!

When my sister Nicole asked me how she might introduce me today, I wanted to be careful. I wanted her and her fantastic team – who have been hard at work for over a year now – to feel comfortable in the beautiful ways she has exercised hospitality to me...ever since they reached out to me last year. But I also wanted to leave some room for mispronunciations – which, need I remind you, are libations, spaces for failure, where failure is the intelligence of exquisite novelty. How new things come to be.

I am very thankful to you, to the NPNA, for the opportunity to speak. Your work is incredibly vital and needed – especially in these times of weaponized walls, Baldwinian fires, loss, and raw flesh of suffering. Your hospitality to the stranger is crucial.

However, even your hospitality must answer to a lower order of things, a lower power. And today, for the first part of my talk, I want to kneel with you at this site of trouble, at the crossroads we are in.

Yes. The NPNA, the grassroots activists that make it possible, the local leaders and service providers that are part of its network of agency, are at a crossroads. The crossroads is not simply or exclusively the place of indecision. To think of it that way would be a brutally humanist way of convening the concept of the crossroads and its troubles.

For me, and the people that have birthed me, the crossroads is the mispronunciation of convenient continuity, a mispronunciation of the highway. Crossroads are multispecies assemblages where things get thicker, denser, populated with alien others. They are where our models of change, our anticipatory frameworks, and the images of service and justice we are committed to are challenged, exceeded, and haunted by...*something else*.

New questions might be discernible at the crossroads – questions that might concern how we make care with a world that is always moving and becoming different. I have articulated some of these troubling questions; see if they resonate: what do we do when justice itself no longer serves? Where do we go when the promises of change fall apart under the weight of their own reach? What do we need to stay with when we recognize that our efforts to pull strangers from the waters of immigrant tides are coterminous with the systems that attempted to drown them?

What if the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis?

At this site, where we kneel, this crossroads, I invite us to pray: not to a higher god, but to strange allies of a lower order of things.

I want to invite a call-and-response prayer: I say a sentence or two and you respond with what I offer as a suitable response in this ritual.

This prayer is a speculative prayer – one which is not about us, about getting answers, but about slowing down long enough to revisit what we feel sure about. Such is the grace of the crossroads – to cross us out so that something else can risk pairing with us to remake the world.

Let me give the context of this experimental prayer.

I'd like you to fleetingly imagine yourself in December. Well, the 21st day of December of 1848. Macon, Georgia, where two slaves, Ellen and William Craft, lovers, are about to escape their sugar and cotton plantation. To do this, Ellen, who is fair-skinned Black woman, born of master and slave, disguises herself as a man – a white man, who is merely travelling with her (his) slave, William Craft. Imagine you were privy to this daring plan, and that you among others have gathered on the eve of this act of marronage. What do you say to them? How do you pray? What would be a blessing to them as you touch their tears and trembling hands and beating hearts? What do you say?

Let me offer some words to them with you. If you do not resonate with these words, I'd like you to be silent and to consider your silence and refusal a sacred gift deeper than consensus or agreement, no less precious than acceptance. If you do resonate with these words, then I'd like

you to say “Asé” – which is the Yoruba term that marks something like entanglement, like a humble invitation for something that has been said to have its way.

“May you not be seen.”

“May you not be discovered or recognized.”

“May your names be mispronounced, your bodies miscalculated, misgendered, misinterpreted, rendered invisible.”

“May you lose your way so thoroughly that the ancestors whisper to you another.”

“May your road be rough, and may the disturbance be your sanctuary.”

I have offered this fugitive prayer to disturb our visions of safety, of justice, of identity, and of inclusion. I have mispronounced our expectations of things. Let me say a little more about what this prayer wants to do with us, and why this troubling place we are in is a gift of some sort.

Ellen and William Craft lived the American Dream.

But of course, you might say, *come now*, they didn’t live the American Dream: they were slaves – just like you said. Remember, Bayo?

To this I say: to see the world in such a reductionistic, atomic, isolated, dissociative way is to reinforce and fortify troublingly modern regimes of visibility and capture. From an animist perspective, there are no essences per se: a thing cannot be thought apart from its conditions. For instance, a pandemic is not just a virus set loose. It is the names we give to the world; the rituals we enact to keep ourselves safe; the global state order that emerged in the wake of the Second World War; the legacies of slavery; the occlusions and imperialism of the scientific method. All of these and more are entangled together in the assemblage we conveniently label a pandemic.

A thing cannot be imagined outside of its relational context.

In the same way, the Crafts knew the American Dream because they lived in what subsidized it, the nightmares that citizenship controlled for.

I also grew up in the American Dream, far away from the American continent. I knew the light of the American Dream because I lived in the shadows of its rising.

I and others around the world are the bodies the city set upon a hill has made. We are the edges, so to speak. Even in our homes, we are refugees and immigrants as the world slips beneath our feet.

There are times when those edges get saturated and then collapse upon the middle. In partial response to this insurgency of edges, of the immigrant, of the refugee, the city provides room for the hospitality of inclusion, for advocacy, for the enunciation and protection of rights, for settlement and reform.

But I want to remind us that we are at a crossroads: nothing is the same. Things are different here, and the task of the NPNA – much like the task of many of us committed to composing an ethics of care in perilous times – is to sit with these changing, fluid meanings and disruptions to our ways of thinking.

If the refugee were simply a human individual, fully formed, with a name, a story, an experience, a body, and a voice, then a politics of inclusion would be enough. It would be a firm resolution to the challenge of migration. There would be nothing more to say about that.

However, seeing that we are living in animist moments when our anthropocentric modes of thinking are being challenged, it would appear that what a politics of inclusion (needed as it is, though also materially limited) does not allow us to appreciate is that inclusion doesn't so much welcome the immigrant as it manufactures the immigrant. Yes. Long before the refugee steps on the shores of new land, she has already arrived. I mean to say that there are protocols, rituals, algorithms, intricate systems, laws, and dense networks of mattering with which the refugee is rendered intelligible to systems of settlement and citizenship.

In this way, the refugee is more-than-human. The refugee is your systems of visibility and agency. The refugee is the stories, the architecture, and the material processes that account for the event of the non-citizen.

The refugee is a re/turning intensity, the surplus of empire, the excess of settlement. The refugee is the mispronunciation of settlement.

Now, it is not particularly clear what we might do with mispronunciations. One thing to do is to reform them, to correct them. But as you might already begin to notice, this comes with risks. Inclusion is risky business because it endangers the exquisite other by remodelling them in the image of the familiar. This is not bad. Like I have said elsewhere, we need a politics of inclusion and representation. And critique. I do. However, if we stopped there, if we bent everything to the standards of visibility and precision that gives us ground, we would find ourselves – as I believe we already do – within a tautological cyclicity of Sameness, a stuckness, a way of speaking and thinking that might engender sides like the political left and the political right, but a reinforcement of the status quo.

I am saying that citizenship, the paradigm of the subject to which our practices of inclusion hope to restore the immigrant and refugee to, can become a form of incarceration. An ontology of capture. Yes, keeping people safe can quickly take on nefarious qualities. I am reminded of the

way some slave ships were often fitted with nets round about the hull of the vessel. This was a feature to keep the slaves safe, to stop them from jumping overboard. Think about this: about the way the soft welcome of hospitality might become the tight embrace of containment.

I cannot stress this enough: today's politics is stuck. There is a cannibalizing quality to both existential tribes of our political landscapes where conservative politics and the efforts to resist them with countercultural measures are looking more and more like each other. It is like screaming at a library for an offending party to be quiet.

What we need is a break of this toxic cyclicity. Something outside of the sentence and grammar of the intelligible. The refugee and the immigrant, among other outliers of modern civilization, among other sites of unanticipated spillage, are such breaks. What we need, perhaps in addition to our precious acts of service, is a fugitive third way that invites us to practices and bacchanal aesthetics of a different kind.

We need a different politics today. Not one squarely focused on telling the refugee's story, but one that touches the body of the refugee. One that recognizes that even the hospitality of inclusion can constitute a trap – can fasten a face too tightly around our heads.

What kinds of openings, processes, performances, inquiries, and experiments can the NPNA invite that goes beyond inclusion without dismissing it? That addresses the violence of settlement, of being seen, of being recognized, of being pronounced properly? What kind of pedagogical project of decolonial emancipation and posthumanist care might rise to the challenge of the transversal refugee, now reworked as the more-than-human individual, the 'one' that ignites the often unseen circuits of complicity and entanglement, the 'one' that suggests we slow down and sit in the cracks of the crossroads? How do we conceive a politics that disorients, that opens up new places of power, new dreams, beyond the enterprise that stabilizes inclusion versus exclusion?

Let me end this first part of my talk with a story.

In 1803, seventy-something Igbo slaves, stolen from present-day Nigeria, were transported to Georgia via Dunbar Creek. Along the way, at the shores of the state, the slaves mutinied and chased some of their captors away from the ship. Those dislodged slavers returned with reinforcements and, upon attempting to recapture the Igbo people, encountered resistance of a strange quality. The Igbos didn't fight back; they formed a line and marched into the waters. They refused to give themselves to the shore, to the plantation. They preferred to drown.

The first official account of this story comes to us through the writings of one Mr Roswell King, who wrote in his journal a very terse line: "They took to the swamp." They killed themselves. They committed suicide. Till today, we live in the legacies of that description. It was a way of rendering the event intelligible. A queer act of inclusion. A form of capture after the fact.

However, alongside that stoic account of things, an ecology of wandering lines, rumours, echoes, mispronunciations, nightly whispers, generous embellishments, and strange openings began to fester like an untreated wound. A beautiful, pulsating wound rich with posthumanist themes and irreverent desires. This story insisted that when the “Eboes” got to the waters, they flew. They became Black birds and sailed back to Africa.

To believe this story is true is to diminish its power. The point of it is not whether it fits into a cold notion of history, or whether it has paid its tributes to some Enlightenment notion of fact. Indeed, the point is that it doesn't. It allows the slaves to become something else. It refuses full disclosure. It permits them the right to opacity. It grants them a fugitive afterlife that falls outside the text of legibility. It mispronounces history so that other effects and orientations might be glimpsed.

May we lose our way just as those who flew away.