



Cover of billy woods, *Terror Management* (2019).

Taking its title and hook from one translation of *Boko Haram*, rapper billy woods' 2019 song "Western Education is Forbidden" hinges on a twice-repeated tercet, in which the abstract pedagogy of academic work is set against the material immediacy of the labor of a welder:

*Told my children Western education is forbidden  
Might as well sell what's left of your Ritalin  
No loose ends, took an acetylene torch to the filaments*

woods' characteristically terse condemnation of "Western education" in favor of the thermal intensity of the "acetylene torch" both sets up the tool as a metaphor which represents a way of living and knowing that ties up the "loose ends" of our traditional untruths—one that prizes *consciously constructed* coherence and continuity (diasporic *décalage*), over the series of historical fractures and caesuras which both constitute and are masked by "Western education"—and invokes its more literal importance in the construction of the modern built environment of "filaments," support beams, foundations, and infrastructures. In this way, the comparison

embodies one of the central questions that I feel itching at me when I consider my role as an “energy humanist” in the present and future: do I continue to write about race and environment and technology—and distribute that writing through the channels of a Western educational system complicit in the establishment and perpetuation of the material and social regimes (energetic and otherwise) which my work tends to repeatedly describe and critique—or—a *false* or, for sure—do I pick up an acetylene torch and some filaments, learn to weld, make sure other (black) people learn to do so? How do I reconcile my educational, professional and creative choices with my dwindling sense of material “relevance” (“shorty can’t eat no book, what I told Ta-Nehisi Coates” as woods puts it in his first verse)—a dwindling that is constantly exacerbated by the ongoing twinned catastrophes of racial and environmental violence? When do I quit my post-doc and start preparing for *The Parable of the Sower*? How do I make sure this is understood as a serious question?

“Western Education” is the second song on woods’ 2019 album *Terror Management*, which (probably) takes its title from Terror Management Theory (TMT), a subfield of psychology which “asserts that the knowledge of one’s own mortality is problematic because it conflicts with a basic drive to stay alive that humans share with all other living organisms” (Schimel et. al. 2). This constant clash can be understood as the basis for a set of otherwise difficult to parse (and frequently “irrational”) behaviors, aspirations, and processes of social and cultural identity formation. The cover of *Terror Management* (above) is a subtly lit photograph of an iceberg, the moon perched above the edge of the floe. Together, the cover and title evoke the ongoing terror of climate catastrophe—how it has come to stand in for many *as* the fear of death—and our ability to persist in the daily habits of consciousness which allow us to function (whatever that

may mean). To manage the combined everyday terrors of race and environment, woods picks up an acetylene torch.

The tone, delivery, and phrasing of the final clause of the tercet—to “take” a torch to something—also invokes a certain violence, a sense that construction of new things might (or must) come with the destruction of others. And sometimes this destruction is built into the thing itself: “everything outdated the day it come out / hurtlin’ down, the ground racin’,” woods’ final verse on the song closes out. To what degree does the logic of planned obsolescence extend to the broader structures of modernity? Must utopia—or, equally ambitiously, justice—always precede (or, more accurately, accompany) apocalypse? (Benjamin’s insistence on the ubiquity of the “document of barbarism” comes to mind). How might we imagine futures in which the arrangements of energy and infrastructure that structure life on the planet are profoundly and justly reinvented such that they do not depend upon constant annihilation, present and future?

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Nnedi Okorafor’s 2021 science fiction novel *Noor* opens with a machine which materially embodies the coincidence of catastrophe and progress, as the narrator—a woman with the chosen name AO (Artificial Organism), whose body and mind has been heavily augmented by mechanical and digital technologies—gazes at a massive power plant in northern Nigeria:

*I focused my attention beyond the soldiers, out into the open desert, where a Noor (Ultimate Corp’s famous enormous wind turbines) sat like the world’s most bizarre plant. Harvesting clean energy from one of the world’s worst environmental disasters. How poetic. (Noor 2)*

Beginning with this absolute image of the exploitation of disaster, *Noor* establishes its setting as a near-future moment in which the usual illusions of distance which separate extraction and

violence—and even more powerfully, consumption and violence—have eroded, and the world has found an answer to the climate crisis in the instrumentalization of the crisis itself. Just as many green capitalists see the recent explosion of lithium and cobalt mining as the only feasible *material* answer to the impossibility of continued reliance on fossil fuels (a desire to replace petromodernity with electromodernity), *Noor*'s (corporate) world leaders have accepted the necessity of instrumentalizing the disaster they have broadly initiated.

Eventually, we learn that the anthropogenic nature of the storm is even more direct than we have come to expect in the era of climate crisis. At the end of the novel (apologies for spoiling a rather new book!), the dependence of the machine on catastrophe is revealed to be a fundamental condition of its existence, as AO discovers that the power plant produces and then repurposes—rather than simply harvests—the energy of the storm, referred to as the “Red Eye”:

*We sat down right there on the hard packed sand. A breeze blowing. We stared into each other's eyes letting the sunshine heat the facts into our spirits: The Red Eye was a disaster. However, it was not a natural one. It had been manmade. (Noor 210)*

Through the use of her particular powers of technological manipulation (themselves, we find out, the product of corporate experimentation), *Noor*'s protagonist shuts down the giant power plant in the novel's final scene, at once halting the flow of electricity from the desert to the wider world and dissipating the nearby storm. The end of the storm brings the arrival of the sun, and the subsequent “enlightenment” of the hero about the nature of the storm. Like an acetylene torch, the sun's heat bakes the truth into AO: the storm is as “human” as she is.

In the novel's final line, the traditionalism of this scene's schema of solar enlightenment (I think of petrodrama and the “explicit moral economy” of the *tableau vivant*, per Devin Griffiths, 624)

is immediately undercut by a more ambivalent, faintly celebratory image of the descent of darkness in another place: "...And in several big cities in a country far far away, the lights went out" (*Noor 211*). What can it mean for the lights to go out?

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The original wires in the electrical box had long since been stolen, so Jonathan found his own and replaced the thing in the basement of his new house...And sometimes streetlights worked, and sometimes they didn't. The wires Jonathan hooked through the top of the box could connect to the electrical pole in the alley between his house and the next. The local electrician had visited when Jonathan, chatting with some neighbors, had chirped about that missing element. It ain't a home till you can turn the lights off. And someone corrected the first person by saying "on," but that first woman stood her ground.

- Tochi Onyebuchi, *Goliath*, 71-2.

My chair's ready for me in front of the first cell. The cell door has bars enough for me to see through, but even if it didn't the lights are all the way on in the suicide ward. Neve night, it gets called, And they say they keep the lights on because then guards can better see when an inmate on suicide watch is going to try something, but keeping someone in that nightmare from being able to sleep ain't gonna help.

- Tochi Onyebuchi, *Riot Baby*, 117.

These moments illumination are drawn from two recent novels by Tochi Onyebuchi both set in near-future moments of global economic decline, environmental degradation, racial violence, and amped-up carceral capitalism. Together they say something about the right to turn lights off, or perhaps the right to control light oneself. Autonomous illumination, and its opposite. Learning to wield an acetylene torch, learning to wire a house—learning to survive (to *manage terror*) when, for one reason or another, you can't do either.

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