

*Happy Mondays: The hour of bad Blacks*<sup>1</sup>  
Olivier Marboeuf

This is for all those for whom the fatal hour has never ceased to be on the verge of arriving, like a messenger made of chocolate slowly sinking into the sands of a burning desert, astride his/her melting steed, approaching and diminishing all at the same time and in the end no more than a smoking puddle by the time they could actually be heard by anyone. Racialized individuals have long exhausted themselves in the preparation of their words, swallowing back anger, silently clearing their throats, flexing and stretching their muscles, having been all decked out with that old stain of French respectability. Don't make the masters angry, keep thanking them for inviting you to the table, the way John Merrick in *The Elephant Man* endlessly exclaims, "Everyone has been so kind to me", to the medical experts who cannot believe such a battered mass could be a thinking head. He howls the same phrase from his toothless mouth, walking circles at night in his tiny room, from which the *real men* are now absent.

Speaking has always occurred too soon. And then he spoke, and then she spoke. And it's no longer a single unique poem, a solitary logorrhea—there's a world out there and it is populated. The racialized individual has taken up this critical mass, this depth that lets everything resonate. But soon he senses the risk, she notices the annoyed look and raised eyebrows. A silent and asymmetrical war begins. Like the child who is made to believe the worst to keep her quiet, even to the point of the theft of her Christmas gifts by a terrible Chechen, a knife clamped in his teeth.<sup>2</sup> Paternalistic kindness is over, all the subjects swept away by a distracted hand. The master's annoyed index finger taps on the table and the project manager is sent out to assault all ears with the news that the National Front is on our doorsteps. All the clowning about that frightens the French must stop. Silence or barbarism.

So is that what you've learned in our schools, you ingrates? How horrid! What an American spiel! Nothing like that here, how dare you joke! We treated you well, nothing was lacking for you to become like us except, perhaps, your filthy urchin habits, running grime-faced toward an accidental death. A tongue was put in your mouth and you turned it into a gob of spit. What a waste! What a shame! But know this: the Republic will gird itself with all its swords to fight the indigenous sabres. The master was good, the mistress loving, and you find us terribly sad now to hear you squawk. We manufactured exhibitions to amuse, distract and pacify you. We spoiled you and now we reap bitter fruits. Others would have known how to thank us, shown us white teeth, sweat-beaded foreheads and pandering hands. Others would have knelt. And if we can't find such Others, we'll smear with black the faces and appendages of vagrant beggars, those who occupy traffic circles. You were our best subjects, our darling creatures, our brothers, sisters, lovers, our screens and our mirrors . . . but now you've returned to the practices of uproar and discord.

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<sup>1</sup> We translate the word "nègre" in this article by "Black", even though in the original text the author tries to render with this violent word a sense of the ghostly persistence of the imagery of the plantation in the current power relations between the state and racialized individuals.

<sup>2</sup> In 1995, when interviewed on a French television programme about the Russian war in Chechnya, Present Jacques Chirac's only response was to tell the story he was told as a child about a Chechen as terrible as he was obscure.

I tell you again: *Quit but the woods, advised by me: / For all your fellows here, I see, / Are shabby wretches, lean and gaunt, / Belike to die of haggard want.*<sup>3</sup>

We love you, we love each other, we are the most accomplished of republics.

Don't ruin everything. Come back to our home.

***Happy Mondays* is a sporadically appearing feature written in the mood of the beginning of the week.**

Translate from French by Liz Young and Shela Sheikh.

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<sup>3</sup> From "The Wolf and the Dog", a fable by Jean de la Fontaine, Book I, 5 (1668).