

Black Children Learn Derivatives

by J.R. Hughes

Morning rush hour on the Queens-bound G train looks like every other subway rush hour — riders nodding back to sleep, bums being escorted off the train at the hands of belligerent cops, faces blocked by the front pages of A.M. New York or the Times or, even, a book that will surely impress anonymous straphangers.

Standing near the middle doors of the subway car are three black children — two girls and a boy, on their way to middle school. This is their conversation:

“Know what? I can't stand movies anymore. I'm over it,” one of the girls says. She is wearing black, plastic, wayfarer frames without lenses.

“Why you say that?” pokes the boy, whose backpack and down coat overwhelm his short frame.

“Yo, have you seen these movies? They all the same. Same actors, same things happen. I'm ready for something else, you know? I'm bored of it.”

“What you wanna see then?” asks the other girl. Her hair is plaited into dangling braids, fastened with colorful barrettes, that whip back and forth as the train starts and halts.

“I don't know. I'm just sick of seeing the same actors, talk about the same mess, singing for most of the movie, doing purr-ah, purr-ah...you know what I mean. That dance where you spin around.” She raises her hands above her head, balances on the ball of one her feet and spins. The train jerks, she stumbles into the train door.

They rupture into exhausting laughter.

“You stupid. Nah, but seriously, you might be right,” adds the boy.

“A pirouette. That's it,” continues the girl with the glasses.

“Them Madea movies is good. Mad funny,” says the girl with the barrettes.

“But why a man gotta play Madea?”

“That’s what makes it funny, dummy,” says the boy, tapping her shoulder playfully.

“Whatever. You don’t get it,” says the girl with her face stenciled by frames.

“She means Tyler Perry couldn’t find a lady to play Madea. I see what you mean but I think it’s funny,” says braided girl.

“Madea talks sense but she so ugly. You seen her clothes? Her hair be wild! She stay drunk or something, yo. Why she gotta be so ugly? I laugh sometimes but other times...I want to laugh and can’t. My moms says it’s because I’m learning. I dunno what,” explains the girl with glasses.

“You learning you ugly,” laughs the boy.

“Shut up, Damien! You got some nerve. You so black we can barely see yo ass,” interrupts the girl with the barrettes.

“At least my hair ain’t nappy,” he grabs one of her braids. “Feels like cement.”

“We all black. We all ugly,” girl with glasses says abruptly.

“Why it gotta be like that? I don’t know about you but I stay looking cute. Damien just mad he can’t have this,” she says as she runs both of her hands at the sides of her body, imitating a coke bottle shape.

“You wish,” adds Damien.

“What? You want them Spanish girls? A white girl?” says one of the girls.

“All I know, I want this soda.” He swings his backpack to the front of his body and pulls out a half full liter bottle of Pepsi. His childish pudgy fingers unscrew the top, offering a cushion for the prickly side of the cap, and he brings the bottle to his face.

“Yo! Lemme have some of that,” says girl with the glasses.

“That’s the first smart thing you said since we got on the train,” says Damien.

“If that’s the Pepsi from yesterday, I bought it,” she continues.

She slaps his hand as he brings the bottle to his waiting mouth.

“What you doing? Stop it, yo!”

They play fight and fall into a white woman standing next to them.
“Watch it,” she says sharply, her eyes narrowing.

Damien and the girl with the glasses missing lenses stare at her blankly and move into the alcove by the doors near the end of the train car.

“Whatever, who the hell drinks Pepsi first thing in the morning?”
lens-less girl says near screaming.

The white faces of the train look up in an attempt to satisfy presumption, smoothing out any interest into glassy eyed gestures toward looking but lacking the very important quality of sight. One straphanger says to another, “Damn kids. They’ve been so loud this entire ride. Why can’t they shut up? And that poor woman they fell in to. I would have definitely said something more.” This statement generates quiet, nodding approval of the riders sitting closest.

“I do,” says Damien. He takes another swig.

“An-y-way, what were we talmbout? Oh yeah, how cute I am. And how much you hate everything.”

“I don’t *hate* everything.”

“But you hatin’. You stay hatin’,” says Damien.

“I’m just trying to tell y’all how I feel.”

“Stop it with that feelings nonsense. It’s always about fee-lings with you. Can’t you just live? Stop thinking so much. That’s your problem: you spend all of your time worrying ‘bout things you can’t change.”

“I can change how I feel.”

They pause.

“I don’t have to feel bad when I look at magazines or watch movies. I don’t have to be bored. I don’t have to be just one thing,” says the girl with the glasses.

“What’s that,” Damien says.

“A black girl that stays wanting something more.”

“Like what?”

“More than me.”

“You asking for a lot,” says the girl with the braids.

“Y’all don’t wanna be more?”

“Never thought about it,” the girl with the braids and Damien say in unison. All three look at each other, then the floor of the train.

“Finally, some quiet,” says a fellow rider.

