There is nothing surprising in the ambiguities attendant upon that most familiar of multifaceted words, face. It can be an action-, as when we face facts,- face up to a looming threat, or, in a sublime irony for music lovers, when we are forced finally to face the music. More often, it falls into another tense. We have a face off, we have a face down, we demand face time, we have, indeed, a face-to-face. We put on a brave face. We worry about losing face. We save face. We make up our face to face the day. Every blessed morning we make our minds up to face up to the challenges of the day.

On the facing pages of Ed Roberson’s “Blues: In the Face of,” the type face streams before us from the bold face of the Roman numerals marking this poem’s place in the sequence of the poet’s book Atmosphere Conditions, to the dangling preposition that marks our turning from title to first stanza, the punctuating first puzzle of the poem. That initial stanza looks like nothing so much as William Carlos Williams’s late period variable feet stepping in neat triads across the white face of the page. But that stanza ends in the face of closing quotes, marks that have no precedent on the page. The Spanish language has the virtue of letting readers know in advance, via the inverted interrogative mark or exclamation mark, how the line is to be inflected. English has no such niceties, but it does generally adhere to the practice of placing opening quotation marks so that a reader knows the words have their origin elsewhere; they stream from some other face, some other outcrop. But not in this poem. The first line commences in
ellipses, so we know something has been elided, but it remains impossible in this printing to know if it is the opening quote marks themselves that have abdicated, or if the title is itself a part of the quotation. So our opening reading is:

Blues: In the face of

. . . condescending

notions of immediatist nonreflective blackness.”

(78)

In my own reproduction of these lines here, meaning here on my page, I follow, of course, the format of the Modern Language Association, reproducing this title and the poem’s first stanza adhering as closely as possible to the way they appear on Roberson’s precedent page. So I have added no quotation marks of my own, which means that my first copy-editor, should there ever be one, will probably pause over that first set of closing quotation marks wondering whether, despite my own opening, I may not have made some mistake in transcription. Were I only quoting two lines of the poem, I would be expected by MLA to open with quotation marks of my own, alter Roberson’s double to single quotes, and then close with double quote marks of my own, by which time we may all have forgotten the other opening puzzle here, the colon in the poem’s title. Scholars are accustomed to colons. We generously offer them up in the titles of nearly every conference paper, journal article and book. Those of us who scruple about such
things as MLA format know that a colon is often used to separate our own introductory words from the matter of a quotation. Absent opening quote marks in this instance, it is impossible to tell if the word “Blues,” which I now ensconce in quotation marks, is Roberson’s own word, for which the following words are some mode of expansion, or if “Blues,” the word that is, not the Blues themselves, is part of the quoted matter of Roberson’s work.

So who is being quoted? What and how does it matter who the author is? Is Roberson, having placed the words into his poem, the author of them as well? How responsible are we for the things we choose to quote? What becomes of appeals to authorial intention when we face a case such as this, in which we cannot really tell, absent a friendly note from the poet, to whom we should assign the words? And if we return to the hallowed New Critical tradition of assigning all to the poem itself, what color is this poem? The title poem of Roberson’s book, one of only two unnumbered lyrics in the sequence, offers us: “a lens of crotchety things that bring the lines’ / logos closer for us to read . . .” (7). The opening of “Blues: In the Face Of” is just such a crotchety lens. This is how things are when they are played upon the blue guitar.

More crotchety questions: Who is condescending to whom in these opening lines? And what colors are the responsible parties? Black, the color that is, is termed nonreflective precisely because it is so remarkably absorptive. Black, Gwendolyn Brooks reminds us, no longer speaking only of the color per se, has geographic powers, draws all into itself. The dictionary, though, has a surprise, as it always does, for those of us who thought that no matter what else, we knew what the color black was. First thing to notice is that “black,” like so many of our shortest and oldest words, -as Louis
Zukofsky liked to point out, has one of the longer entries in our lexicons. It turns out that from the very beginning, this most absorptive of colors, this uncolor as it were, admitted of degrees, for “black,” as it turns out, can mean simply “very dark in color,” it can be characterized by the absence of light, which makes a certain sense, but at the same time it can mean simply that there is “little” light. The closest we come to simple denotation in the unfolding of the mysteries of this word is in the second definition under the noun form: “the achromatic object color of least lightness characteristically perceived to belong to objects that neither reflect nor transmit light.” Linger over the thought of achromatic color and you begin to see that in art as in race, black is and black ain’t.

What is a black person? According to this same dictionary, “a person belonging to a dark-skinned race or one stemming in part from such a race.” Seems Curtis Mayfield had it about right in “We the People Who Are Darker than Blue,” and he had it right again in “If There’s A Hell Below, We’re All gonna Go,” and who ever had it more right than B.B. King when he sings “everybody wants to know why I sing the blues?”

And then there was Jackson Polloæk, who remarked that “art is coming face to face with yourself.” In the nineteenth poem of his sequence, Ed Roberson writes of having seen:

this country miss its chance       Looking at color

and not see what it looked directly at,

without embarrassment

act and not see that done
Black men of a certain age used to, still do, greet one another on the street as “blood,” recognizing something of themselves in the other, recognizing at the same time a bond of nonrecognition, those invisibility blues that can only afflict those who have been seen. In Fanon’s reflections upon the lived experience of the black, it is precisely this that forms the one essential, the having already been seen as black, the seeing in the eyes of the other that one has been so seen. Still, it is a different greeting from another other that greets readers at the opening of “Blues: In The Face Of.” “Condescending” is synonymous with “patronizing,” and yet it is an attitude that carries a usually unacknowledged price. The first meaning of “condescend,” prior to its secondary meaning of “to assume an air of superiority,” is “to descend to a less formal or dignified level” which carries with it a sense of waiving the privileges of rank, and so, while it is assuredly patronizing to assume that one has a higher rank to descend from when addressing any other, such descent requires at the same time a certain waiving of privilege, making the curiosities of Roberson’s opening quotation all the more an instigating puzzle. What we see in this vertiginous passage is that someone is assigning an “immediatist nonreflective blackness” to some other, but what this requires, seemingly by definition, is that a giving up of privilege must occur in that assignment. That is, if the someone is some white person, their very condescension is an act in which they give up degrees of the very white privilege that affords them the vantage point from which to condescend. It is, we have to admit at the outset, extremely unlikely that any white person harboring essentialist beliefs about black people, whether or not that white person
is an inveterate reader of dictionaries, would ever pause to reflect upon just this aspect of their mental acts.

Still, we should pause here a moment, lingering in the precincts of Roberson’s title and first stanza, to reflect a bit upon the question of how race is already operating in our readings of this poem. While I have not conducted a reader response survey of reactions to this poem, I’d be willing to bet that by far the majority of readers will assign whiteness to the person whose condescending notions of blackness are being referenced in these opening quoted lines, no matter to what race the reader assigns the persona doing the quoting, this despite about eight decades of ever-increasing critical sophistication about such matters as the intentional fallacy, the authorial function, and the death of the author. Ed Roberson is, of course, an African American poet, but certainly we have learned, if nothing else, not to confuse the poet with his personae, let alone to confuse the poet or the critic with those quoted in their works, albeit obliquely. So just what difference does it make that most of us make these racial assumptions going into the poem?

And what difference does it make once we know that the half-quoted words of Roberson's opening are drawn from the work of poet Nathaniel Mackey? Something has truly been elided in Roberson's quotation here, but not in the space marked out by the ellipses. In taking up Mackey's words and breaking them into lines of verse, what Roberson has replaced is, it turns out, that which is in the face of those condescending notions of nonreflective blackness. The original text, the closing sentence of a paragraph in Mackey's crucial essay “Blue in Green: Black Interiority,” posits a monumetal abstraction that “flies in the face of condescending notions of immediatist, nonreflective
blackness” (Mackey 202). In Roberson's lyric turning, it is “Blues” that appears in the face of that aggressive presupposition, a fitting turn of phrase for sure, and not only because it summons forth the Blues of Mackey's own title. There is a further turning in the system of echoic allusion Roberson has set in motion at the outset of his poem. Perhaps Oliver Nelson's most lasting contribution to recorded jazz was his album The Blues and the Abstract Truth, recorded in 1961 with a luminary cast that included Eric Dolphy, Freddie Hubbard, Roy Haynes, Paul Chambers and Bill Evans. Two of those gentlemen had been in the studio two years earlier with Miles Davis to record the landmark “All Blues,” and Miles Davis, as it turns out, is the central figure in the Mackey essay from which Roberson draws in commencing his poem. Mackey explores the expanded “ruminative space” of Miles Davis's sound, what he terms “the hard-won reflective space” Davis wrested from both his instrument and the society in which he worked, a hard-won black interiority wrested from “a social sphere and performance venues invested heavily in assumptions of black outwardness” (200). In the face of all that, what's a poet to do when he finds his right to the existence of his own interiority questioned? What to do when the social space in which he moves is designed to deny that Blues and Abstraction are his truth? He might sing, with Buddy Guy, “You give me the blues; you give me the blues.”

Among the readings for a graduate seminar in black philosophy and theory that my students and I completed in a recent semester were the collected writings of philosopher and artist Adrian Piper, in which, among so many other projects, she reproduces the calling card she had printed up for use in one of her on-going projects from the 1970s. Because Piper is, as we so deftly put it in America, a light-skinned black
person, she has had the experience of being in a group of white people and hearing one of them tell a racist joke. She had cards printed up that she would present to the tellers of such jokes, cards that explained that she was in fact a black person and that she found the telling of the joke objectionable. This was not merely a personal campaign, you must understand, but was a sort of philosophical theater, for the presentation of the card was not simply a means to carry out a personal fight with racism. The reporting of the event and the circulation of the card as reproduced in Piper’s writings and exhibitions as well as in the writings of others was an extended event that brought insufficiently reflective people to a reflection upon the workings of race in consciousness. My students and I had the discussions you might expect regarding the transformations brought about in the presentation of the card, those moments in which the recipient had to make an immediate ontological and epistemological shift as a person previously seen as white became, in the moment of reading the card, perceived as black. Then I presented my students with an additional conundrum. We had been reading texts by Charles Mills and Tommy Lott in which those philosophers proposed a number of mind-boggling thought experiments regarding race. I asked my students to imagine a situation in which a white-appearing person, a person much like Piper herself, presents the teller of a racist joke with a card announcing that the presenter of the card is “really” black. Then I asked my students to consider what difference it might make in their understanding of this situation should they subsequently learn that the white-appearing person presenting the card was in fact a white person.

This is the point at which all our purportedly commonsensical assumptions fly out the window, along with baby, bath water and all. No matter how many of our citizens
pronounce how loudly that race no longer does, or at least no longer should make any
difference, no matter how post-racial our elections may tempt us to believe we have
become, our readings on their very face demonstrate again and again just how much
difference race does still make. As I have said before, American readers did read the
book *Famous All Over Town* differently once they learned that its author, one Danny
Santiago, was not a young Chicano but was actually a white man writing under a
pseudonym. American readers who had embraced the book *The Education of Little Tree*
felt a sense of betrayal when they learned that Little Tree did not exist; was wholly the
invention of an elderly white man, and an elderly white man who had once belonged to
the Ku Klux Klan at that. There are any number of well-known instances of passing in
the literary world, perhaps the most notorious recent case being that of Anatole Broyard,
who lived a white life for most of his New York years. Our literary history has its share
of white writers who have published in the name of black personae as well. Judson
Crews, who submitted poems to publications in the guise of black poet Mason Jordan
Mason, is just one instance. None-the-less, the behavioral fact on the ground is that most
white Americans will accept any white-seeming person’s announcement that they are
“really” African American at face value, no matter how white the face making the claim,
for the simple reason that, while the concept of blacks passing for white seems to them
eminently comprehensible, the reverse, the notion that a white person would want to be
taken for black, simply does not compute. No matter how much talk there is of wannabes
and zebra heads, white people for the most part still find it impossible to believe that a
truly white person would voluntarily and permanently pass for black. Band-leader
Johnny Otis lived a virtually black life for most of his career simply because white
people could not imagine that another white person would be living in an environment they took for black.

Taken for black; seen as black; we have a text before us that we take on its face for a black poem. We learn in the turning of the poem’s lines that it is a poem about reflection, about the blues as an ethical respon sorium. Roberson’s lyric is a space in which Richard Wright’s “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” encounters its reflection in the ethics of Emanuel Levinas. Levinas writes that “language is born in responsibility” (82); language is nothing if it is not response. It is among our most social acts, even when speaking is simply speaking to oneself. To speak requires an acknowledgment of the other; is in its very nature an act of recognition. Ethical recognition, though, does not condescend. For Levinas, “the proximity of the other is the face’s meaning” (82). If language bears within it the responsibility to the other, as it commences with a taking into oneself of the language of others, then our day to day meetings with others face-to-face present our most basic of ethical situations. In Levinas’s argument, it is in the face-to-face that we encounter mortality, that the ego must lay down its sovereignty. There, precisely, lies the problem. The ego in the face-to-face must negotiate the possibilities of its own impermanence. There is, Levinas observes, a “fear of occupying someone else’s place with the Da of my Dasein, it is the inability to occupy a place” (82). In the racially striated -space of America’s social places, whiteness has come into being as a response to a prior being whose primacy it cannot allow itself to recognize. It is crucial to the existence of the white ego that it assign a nonreflective core to blackness, else whiteness would have to recognize itself as the cowering creator of race that it is. White is reflection before it is anything, but that is surely not as reassuring to white people as it
might sound, for it means, according to those same dictionaries I consulted earlier, that
the white object reflects “diffusely nearly all incident energy throughout the visible
spectrum.” “White” as a racially defining term means, we learn, “being a member of a
group or race . . . usually specifically distinguished from persons belonging to groups
marked by black, brown, yellow, or red skin coloration.” Thus, as the scholarship of
whiteness studies has insisted, whiteness is a category that regards the other as the one
marked, but which at the same time is itself defined by its marked relationship to those
darker others. Again, the dark other must already have been seen if one is to regard
oneself as white, which assigns a certain priority to those others that the white ego is
unprepared to concede, to which it thus condescends. The very first definition of “white”
is “free of color.” At a time when what social scientists refer to as aversive racism is still
very much with us, many white Americans attempt to organize their lives in such a way
as to be free of color, perhaps by denying color to the colored others in their midst, which
is exactly the mode of condescension at the root of the blues in Roberson’s poem. The
ego defined as white occupies an untenable position, unable to free itself of the colors
that define it yet unable to think with ease of itself in the place of the other. Racial
whiteness in America has been a refusal of the ethical encounter, even as the constant
encounter with the face of the other unrelentingly demands a response.

“What’s a brother to do” could well be the subtitle of Roberson’s poem. He
writes here of the blues as black behavior:

in response to

the face they see
their own

face make

on faces

they routinely see (79)

In Blanchot’s rendering of the face to face, “I never face the one who faces me. My manner of facing the one who faces me is not an equal confrontation of presences” (quoted: in Robbins, 62). Yet this asymmetry as we confront one another is the very source of the demand for ethics. If I do not truly face the one who faces me it is because I have no real access to the other’s interiority other than by way of the face itself and by way of language. Still, as I face what I perceive of the other within my own consciousness I must make welcome, greet the bright blood beating beneath the skin of the face that is, after all, before me. I cannot ethically expect space to be made for me if I refuse or condescend to the reflective interiority of another.

But do any among us think we live in an ethical world? And what face do we make up to meet that reality? For Roberson, it’s the face of the blues, and so his poem, which we take on its face for a black poem, tells us:

my interiority

think of it

as a bit of Ellington take-home (80)
Grant Jenkins, in an important series of lectures and essays in recent years, has undertaken the long overdue work of critical meditation upon ethics and innovative African American writings. Even at the peak of the so-called ethical turn in literary studies, a reading of the critical literature might well have suggested that none of the critics had ever read any black writers. Further, by far the majority of the work done in that mold proceeded as though no person of African descent, with the possible exception of Saint Augustine, had ever had anything to say about ethics. In speaking here of Levinas and Roberson in the same breath, I follow in the path that Jenkins has been working so productively. In speaking of Levinas and of Wright’s “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” on the same page, I am attempting to take the discussion into one additional turn, root consideration of ethics and race. In that context, Caribbean poet and novelist Éduard Glissant, in his Poetics of Relation, offers perhaps the most cogent framework for these considerations. Glissant argues the absolute right of opacity. For Glissant, the opaque is not the obscure, rather it is “that which cannot be reduced” (191). With Roberson, Glissant would reject the condescending mode of reduction referenced at the outset of “Blues: In the Face Of.” Not irreducible complexity, but an absolute reduction to nonreflective blackness is the presupposition giving Roberson the blues. Glissant writes that: “As far as my identity is concerned, I will take care of it myself. That is, I shall not allow it to become cornered in any essence,” quickly adding, “it does not disturb me to accept that there are places where my identity is obscure to me, and the fact that it amazes me does not mean I relinquish it” (192). Roberson’s blues, a mode of the poetics of amazement after Glissant’s, -sings in the face of those who refuse to permit him his own opacity. It is not an ethical turn to permit Roberson admission to a pre-existing
hierarchy of transparence. An all too ready admission of “difference” can easily reproduce exactly the effects that have produced Roberson’s poem. *Whatever the self-perceived race of the reader*, the poem demands neither “acceptance” nor “identification”; it demands to be taken up, to be taken in, to be read. “It is not necessary,” turning again to Glissant’s meditations, “to try to become the other (to become other) nor to ‘make’ him in my image. These projects of transmutation—without metempsychosis—have resulted from the worst pretensions and the greatest magnanimities on the part of the West” (193).

In the past, writers, artists and printers had to contend with “blue line proofs.” For generations, African American neighborhoods were subjected to “red-lining” by banks, realtors and insurance companies. Proofs, too, are subject to redlining, the color rendering edited passages of the text more readily visible to the editorial eye. Teachers render corrections in red. Roberson, poet, teacher and state employee, finds himself confronting the weary blues of color coding in the next poem of his sequence, “I am in Blue (or The Changes).” Any musician knows you have to know the changes. Blues master Willie Dixon sang, “I Am the Blues.” The Supremes sang, “Come See about Me.” Each song was an imprecation, a gospel of opacity playing the color-coded changes of American life. Muddy Waters, too, used to sing of “That Same Thing.” “Who’s to blame,” he asked; “the whole world’s fighting about that same thing,” and despite the clear sexual center of the song, as was so often the case with the blues, there was something opaque at the song’s core, some meaning deferred. That dream deferred of Langston Hughes’s most often read montage reappears in Roberson’s “Same in Blues,” a poem that alternates folksy, bluesy quatrains with italicized commentary,
commentary that moves through the changes of a dream deferred. “There’s a certain amount of traveling,” Hughes says of the constantly receding horizon line of the dream: a certain amount of nothing, a certain amount of impotence, and finally a certain amount of confusion.

As Ed Roberson sits at desk, at job, at poem, he works changes on Hughes’s lines even as he works his way through the forms that lie before him. The “state’s form code” in the corner box of the forms Roberson is filling out directs him to a spectrum of color-coded changes. Changes are to be in blue pen, deletions in red, questions in pencil. The poet writes in the form of his poem:

This is in pencil. I will change

It into print If it’s not lost

somewhere in all this (81)

Should the poem survive the multitude of deferrals to which it is inevitably subject it shall move from pencil to print, from query to lyric challenge. Later in the poem, Roberson speaks of the “nullification in the same / -ness of the unrelieved” that is the sameness Hughes speaks of in “Same in Blues,” that certain amount, that whole lot of nothing in a dream deferred, that (to avert to another lyric, this time by Billy Preston) nothing that is the remainder when nothing is subtracted from nothing. When we’re asked what we’ve been doing, we reply that it’s been that “same ol’ same ol’” (Roberson 82), and it’s just that same thing that is the too much of nothing in the blues:
so life and the blues both
amount to just about nothing and the changes
having to be in blue
pen in these justification rosters
countin everybody like theys niggahs

is some heavy hues I’m doin’

In writing his changes in blue, marking his red deletions, Roberson replicates the heaviest
dude, Hughes. All of this is a lot to pack into a poem about the unrelieved nothingness of
the daily grind, but there’s an eruption of invention out of the sheer opacity of the work,
out of that “nonexistent” blue that isn’t even the color black (82). There’s also one last
joke on the page in tribute to the Hughes hues. Roberson replicates the bop from
Hughes’s “Montage” with a telling difference. “Hey / rebop de bebop” he types,
explaining that this is “bam type shit.” But it turns out not to be the sort of thing you
would hear at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). This is something “you won’t
hear at bam      in brooklyn jim.” Where Hughes had Swing Mikados to marvel at in his
day, Roberson has lived to see his blues taken and gone to the avant garde. Nothing
wrong in that, really, but it’s not the blues he sits typing. At the end of everything for
Roberson, it’s always bam, “back to work.” He’s “Done this so often,” the poem begins
and ends, thus proving the point. It’s a signal difference in the daily; it’s a way of
typcasting the changing same. By the time we round the last corner of his poem,
catching at the joke along the way, we can feel the gravity of the poem’s title tugging at
our memory. “I Am In Blue (or The Changes).” It answers to the rhetorical question of popular song, “Am I Blue?” It recalls Willie Dixon’s “I Am The Blues.” It posits irreducible change, opacity that demands an ethical respect. Roberson’s poem says, “I exist in blue,” that metaphorical color that isn’t even black. But, as we read in the poem itself, changes are signaled in blue pen. “I am in blue” requires, as the state requires, that we read the blue as a signal to make a change. It’s not just that “I is an other,” it’s that “I” is a change. As Glissant will refuse to be cornered in the essential, will take care of his identity himself, Roberson begins by feeling the opacity of his own interiority as a stark refutation of condescending notions of nonreflective blackness, and ends in the blackest place of all, those heavy hues, the changes.

WORKS CITED


Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary.