

# RACE

# TRAITOR

*Russell Banks, Derrick Bell,  
John Bracey, Martín Espada,  
Herbert Hill, Robin D.G. Kelley,  
Barbara Kingsolver,  
Toni Morrison,  
Theresa Perry, Ishmael Reed,  
David Roediger, Sapphire,  
Pete Seeger, Dorothy Sterling,  
Cornel West, Howard Zinn,  
& the editors of this magazine  
invite you to join us  
in commemorating  
the anniversary of  
John Brown's birth  
—see inside for details—*



winter 1999 number 10 \$5

Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity

# Race Traitor

*Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity*

NUMBER 10 / WINTER 1999

## contents

### features

Renew the Legacy of John Brown	1
NOEL IGNATIEV: Abolitionism and the White Studies Racket	3
ANN FILEMYR: Resisting Arrest	8
REBECCA CLARK: Hunting Whiteness	24
MARTIN ESPADA: Postcard from the Empire of Queen Ixolih	34
LOREN GOLDNER: Race and the Enlightenment (Part II)	47
JAMES TRACY: Jaime the Chameleon	66
Brown Family Letters	68
BETH HENSON: Plowshares into Swords: John Brown & the Poet of Rage	77
LAUREN ONKEY: Constructing Whiteness at the Gates of Hell: Black 47's "Five Points"	85

### poetry

VICTORIA MARINELLI: The Hook	95
MICHAEL GREGORY: Dry Spells	97

### reviews

98

### letters

102

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# RENEW THE LEGACY OF JOHN BROWN

If the task of the nineteenth century was to overthrow slavery, and the task of the twentieth century was to end legal segregation, the key to solving this country's problems in the twenty-first century is to abolish the white race as a social category—in other words, eradicate white supremacy entirely.

John Brown represents the abolitionist cause. Nominally white, he made war against slavery, working closely with black people. Those who think it saner to collaborate with evil than to resist it have labeled him a madman, but it was not for his madness that he was hanged; no, it was for obeying the biblical injunction to remember them that are in bonds as bound with them. For those who suffer directly from white supremacy, John Brown is a high point in a centuries-long history of resistance; for so-called whites he is the hope that they can step outside of their color and take part in building a new human community.

John Brown's body lies a-mould'rin' in the grave, but his soul calls out to the living. He is buried alongside family members and comrades-at-arms near North Elba, New York, in the beautiful Adirondack Mountains, which he often said had been

placed there to serve the emancipation of the American slave. For many years African Americans and others celebrated May 9th, the anniversary of his birth, by gathering at his gravesite. We call upon those who share the vision of a country without racial walls to join hands there in 1999—his one hundred and ninety-ninth year—to honor his memory and the memory of the others, black and white, who fought alongside him, and to rededicate ourselves to the fulfillment of the tasks for which they laid down their lives.

John Brown Day '99 will be a day of ritual, reflection, remembrance, and renewal.

*Russell Banks, Derrick Bell, John Bracey,  
Martín Espada, Herbert Hill, Robin D.G. Kelley,  
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# Abolitionism and the White Studies Racket

BY NOEL IGNATIEV

Over the past few years, “white studies” has become an academic industry. Scarcely a week goes by that does not see a new book on “the construction of whiteness.” There are at least five college Readers on the subject. At least three universities have sponsored conferences on whiteness, and more are planned. The dissertation mill is operating around the clock, and “white studies” may soon boast its own junior faculty. The mainstream press has caught on to the excitement, reporting (often with a snicker) the latest discovery by the academy, that white people have race too. “White studies” may not survive the first frost; nevertheless, among those studying whiteness there have appeared differing tendencies. From a political standpoint, the two camps are the preservationists and the abolitionists.

At the present time, those whom I have chosen to call preservationists seek to identify and preserve a white identity apart from white supremacy and racial oppression. The Center for the Study of White American Culture, based in New Jersey, conducts an internet discussion group and has sponsored three conferences on whiteness. Its founder and moving spirit, Jeff Hitchcock, says, “We need people who are conscious of being white, and we need to give them room to be white.”<sup>1</sup>

Among the preservationists are Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, editors of the book *White Trash*, who declare “it is time we use our imaginations to invent alternative forms of white identity which... understand the disasters which constitute all forms of racial domination.” Seeking “an acceptable, multicultural form of white racial identity,” they naturally turn their attention toward elements of popular culture that might plausibly be described as “white.”<sup>2</sup> Among the elements they look at are the Elvis cult, ice hockey, and gun shows.

*Noel Ignatiev is one of the editors of RACE TRAITOR. This article is taken from a talk he gave at a conference on whiteness at the University of California-Riverside.*

#### 4 RACE TRAITOR

There are obvious problems with all of these. From the standpoint of culture, it is ridiculous to describe Elvis as “white.” As for ice hockey, I remember before they let black players into the National Basketball Association, when people said that basketball was a white sport. And gun shows—surely no one would claim that love of guns is a white monopoly. If those in attendance at gun shows are overwhelmingly white, it is because those shows are organized strongholds of the KKK and other white-power types. Like everything else about whiteness, it has nothing to do with culture. It has to do with exclusion.

Recently at an academic conference, I denied the existence of a valid white culture. What, I asked, did it consist of? What would anyone put in a White Museum? One of the other panelists answered, “Well, people are doing research on that.” Her answer was an admission of defeat. If I had asked for examples of German culture, or French, or Italian, no one would have had to say that people were conducting research to discover them.

Nor will it help to call what they are looking for “Euro-American” rather than “white,” as some people in the academy, as well as some in the white power movement, are doing. American culture is, as Albert Murray said, incontestably mulatto, and its mulatto character can be heard, seen, and felt in the music, dance, dress, language, rhythms of speech, varieties of religious expression, and other things that together make up American culture. And by the way, the culture of Europe was not solely a European product.

Newitz accuses the abolitionists of “hopelessness, brutality, and nihilism,” of “demonizing” white people, and even of promoting “prejudicial destruction.”<sup>3</sup> We may be guilty of many sins, but we do not patronize white working-class people, or treat them as *specimens*, the way some of our accusers make careers out of doing. On the faculty at a Chicago art school is a person who sports a cowboy hat, tattoos, and tank top, bills herself as “White Trash Girl,” and employs academic jargon to celebrate vulgarity: “I’m adhering to this white trash aesthetic now... It’s part of my identity.... I think it’s also a socioeconomic situation... I am busty, and I am loud, and I love bad taste. I *am* bad taste.”<sup>4</sup> The interview with her was published in the book edited by Wray and Newitz.

In their eagerness to preserve a white identity, the preservationists sometimes slip back into biological rationales for it.

In their eagerness to preserve a white identity, the preservationists sometimes slip back into biological rationales for it. Newitz says whiteness is “an identity which can be negotiated on an individual level. It is also a diversity of cultures, histories, and finally, an inescapable physical marker.”<sup>5</sup> Contrary to her claim, whiteness is about neither nature nor culture, but status. Without the privileges attached to the white skin, the white race would not exist, and skin color would have no more significance than foot size or ear shape.

To promote whiteness as a legitimate identity is to play a dangerous game. A few years back, a prominent American fascist said that what gave him the greatest encouragement was the development of a white ethnicity and white pride. He was right. But if whiteness is a valid culture, as both he and many in the white studies industry claim, then what is wrong with “white pride”? I predict that before long the white-power camp will latch onto “white studies” and use it to advance their own goals. If I now appear alarmist, wait and see: in fact, last year at a conference in Boston sponsored by the Center for the Study of White American culture, the organizers were confronted with a white-power advocate who demanded he be allowed to attend, insisting that he was motivated only by the desire to foster white pride. The organizers debated it amongst themselves for weeks, because although they did not want him there, they had no principled basis on which to exclude him. We abolitionists have no such problem, since we are proudly anti-white. A corollary of the defense of white identity is that it leads its practitioners to pander to the *white* side of the poor whites. Newitz carries this tendency to the extreme, declaring that conscientious support for affirmative action is “self-shaming rituals,” and complaining that “images of violent police culture... grow out of already-existing stereotypes of a brutal, ignorant white working class...”<sup>6</sup> Oh, the poor cops, victims of unjust stereotyping.

A second danger of white studies is that it encourages “racial sensitivity” workshops and “diversity training” instead of political struggle. A recent newspaper piece cited a white woman who had gone through “anti-racism” training and as a result learned that she was a “racist” and that it was her job to go out and educate other whites that they were “racists.” No, that is not her job. That is not what the struggle for justice is about. A young white man wrote me

## 6 RACE TRAITOR

complaining that the abolitionists were too confrontational. He preferred gatherings from which people came away feeling good about themselves—as if the purpose of the struggle against white supremacy was to make white people feel good about themselves. It has been said that people must feel good about who they are, because if they do not, they cannot be “organized.” There is a grain of truth in that, but it is not an argument for white identity. For myself, on those occasions when I am silent in the face of white supremacy or otherwise complicit with it, I feel bad, and on those occasions when I resist it, I feel good.

We abolitionists favor personal growth and transformation, but we believe they take place best in a context of struggle against oppressive institutions, and when self-examination is put forward as a substitute for institutional struggle, then it is a barrier to progress. One example of the sort of thing I am railing against is the film “The Color of Fear.” In it a few men, white, black, Asian, and Latino, get together and talk about their feelings. Among them is one white guy who insists that he has no race problem. The dynamic of the situation then requires that the others present spend their time arguing with him, which rules out their talking about other things. Finally, it gets to him that the rest consider him the problem. He has an epiphany and starts to weep. Then of course they all have to gather around and reassure him and welcome the reformed sinner into their fraternity—except that there is no indication that anything will be different. He will still go back to his white neighborhood, etc. And this film is grossing big money. It is being sold for hundreds of dollars a pop. The “diversity” industry does not depend on small groups of well-intentioned people meeting in church basements, but on lucrative contracts with corporations to conduct seminars for executives on how to manage their labor force. Some of the people in the “diversity” industry remind me of doctors who secretly love the disease they are supposed to be fighting. It is fortunate that in the nineteenth century they had abolitionists instead of diversity consultants; if not, slavery would still exist, and representatives of slaves and slaveholders would be meeting together—to promote mutual understanding and good feeling.

The knowledge that whiteness is socially constructed leads some to conclude that it is too deeply implanted in the society to be overturned. Howard Winant writes, “Like any other complex of



beliefs and practices, ‘whiteness’ is imbedded in a highly articulated social structure and system of significations; rather than trying to repudiate it, we shall have to rearticulate it. That sounds like a daunting task, and of course it is, but it is not nearly as impossible as erasing whiteness altogether, as the new abolitionist project seeks to do.”<sup>7</sup>

The best we can say of this tendency is that it represents a failure of political nerve. To its proponents we reply: you may, if you wish, try to “rearticulate” rape or child abuse, but do not ask us to rearticulate whiteness. We agree with the words of James Baldwin, “So long as you think you are white, there is no hope for you.”

Whiteness is one pole of an unequal relationship, which can no more exist without oppression than slavery could exist without slaves. The abolitionists study whiteness in order to abolish it—not to “reframe,” or “redeem,” or “deconstruct” it, but to abolish it.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> *Boston Globe*, Dec. 21, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, eds., *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (NY: Routledge, 1997), 5, 6.

<sup>3</sup> *White Trash*, 150, 149.

<sup>4</sup> *White Trash*, 125.

<sup>5</sup> *White Trash*, 148.

<sup>6</sup> *White Trash*, 139, 137.

<sup>7</sup> “Behind Blue Eyes: Whiteness and Contemporary U.S. Racial Politics,” in Michelle Fine, Lois Weiss, Linda C. Powell, L. Mun Wong, *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society* (NY: Routledge, 1997), 48.

# Resisting Arrest

BY ANN FILEMYR

This essay is divided into six sections. The first five relate a series of disturbing encounters in a mid-sized midwestern city where two private citizens found themselves repeatedly mistreated by law enforcement officers. Though these moments occurred in a specific place at a specific time, I do not believe their specificity makes them unique or remarkable. Instead I began to discover how widespread, socially acceptable, even mundane and predictable these encounters were to many, many people in communities across the country. That they are common daily occurrences for so many makes them particularly horrifying. Their ordinariness makes them no less terrifying to those who are the targets.

Through examining each of the experiences I am about to share, I began to understand in a visceral way concepts which had been previously important but merely abstract ideas: concepts such as white privilege, power, and the construction of race. And what is perhaps most important to me was the discovery of how my own silence contributed to police brutality. My social training included a certain middle-class posturing, an assumption of superiority combined with deadening guilt which kept me from expressing my anger and outrage. After all, I had certain privileges besides my socio-economic class—my white skin.

I learned slowly over the course of these events that thinking or believing or hoping or praying or wanting was not enough. I needed to act if I wanted to live in a world where my lover and I and our son would be safe from police harassment. I had to break out of the ice of my own guilt and fear, to move beyond its limits, to refuse to be arrested in my own growth and development. It is not enough to ask the questions. Nor enough to demand the answers. I had to learn to take action.

If my actions succeed, they will help create a world where a white woman and a Black woman can live together as lovers, raise a family, make a home, contribute to their communities, and not fear for their lives. Writing this essay is part of that action.

*Ann Filemyr teaches ecology, feminism, and race at Antioch College.*

## Breaking Ice

The first incident occurred in the summer of 1982. We had just returned from the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, an open air arts and music festival celebrating women's contributions to the arts. The notorious Michigan weather had been perfect. We had danced late and stayed up talking with friends from across the country who come each year to celebrate this annual event. Essie was a festie-virgin, attending for her first time, and I was an old festie-goer. For us, new in our relationship, it was idyllic and romantic, the closest thing to a lesbian honeymoon.

I tell you this to explain the indulgent peacefulness we were experiencing that Sunday afternoon in late August after our return. It was a lazy, bright afternoon and we were giggling and giddy from lovemaking, happy for uninterrupted time together, content in the lilac afterglow of our passion when a fist pounding on the front door disrupted our reverie.

Essie rushed into clothes, shushing me, as the pounding shook the old wooden door in its frame. A male voice blasted out, "Police! Open up!"

Busted for lesbian love—sex criminals! flashed through my mind, but anger froze the lines on Essie's gentle face. "Stay here," she ordered me and with a final tug to her sweatshirt she moved to the front of the house carefully closing the bedroom door behind her.

I was completely unprepared for any encounter with law enforcement.

Chiding myself I jumped out of bed to pull on clothes. Then despite Essie's command to stay put, I tiptoed to the front door full of curiosity and questions. Could we be arrested for making love? Did sodomy apply to lesbians? Did they have any proof? A hidden camera? Was the house bugged? Did they know we had gone to the festival? Didn't we have any right to privacy?

By the time I arrived to peer through the screen door, Essie had maneuvered the policeman so that he stood with his back to the house. If there had been someone inside, someone who wanted to escape the law, the officer would never have known it. The outlaw would have easily slipped out the back door and disappeared down the alley. The Outlaw? Lesbians live outside the law, with no state-sanctioned recognition of their lives, no opportunity for lawful

## 10 RACE TRAITOR

marriage, no legal protection from discrimination in housing or employment, no Civil Rights. Suddenly I felt like the rebel dyke, the lavender menace, the lesbian threat. Should I run out the back door?

His full attention was on her as she leaned away from him. He wagged a finger in her face repeating, “Your name or I’m gonna haul you downtown.” He clutched a pair of handcuffs in his other hand.

She stood defiantly, legs spread apart, refusing to cooperate. She held her hands behind her back so he couldn’t cuff them. She was resolute, “I don’t have to give you my name.”

“Your name! Give me your name!” he hollered at her as if she were deaf. His face was red, his voice trembled with hostility, “You’re going down.”

Our neighbors had gathered on the porch directly across the street and stood watching. Our landlord, a thirty-something white man in a tee shirt and jeans, came over offering to help, but the officer barked at him, “Are you the husband? No? Get back across the street.” And meekly, despite the fact that this was happening on his property, our landlord turned and left, leaving Essie alone again on the front porch with an angry man in a blue uniform.

I’ve got to do something. But what? I can’t call the police. These are the police! And if he drags her into his squad car, he could do anything to her—*anything*. My white girl paralysis, the ice that keeps good middle-class girls frozen, cracked under the pressure of a dawning realization. He was a white police officer, and she was a Black lesbian mother. He could do anything to her and probably get away with it; she could do nothing and lose her life. She was being threatened by the very people I had been raised to believe provided my protection. What should I do?

As the officer sputtered, spitting into her face, she remained rigid, refusing to flinch, her eyes fixed on his, unwavering. I swallowed, fear pumping through me, and tentatively pushed open the door. I said in my best dumb-blonde voice, “Excuse me, officer, is there a problem?”

He whirled toward me as I spotted another officer, a Black man half-hidden in the bushes beside the house with his rifle trained on Essie. I moved to stand directly in front of her meeting eyes with the officer on the ground before turning to the one on the porch.

“Who are you? Do you live here?” the white officer shouted at me.

I followed Essie's lead and did not answer his question, repeating my own instead, "What seems to be the problem here?"

I tried to use what privilege my white skin offered by being a body barricade between the bullet on the one side and the handcuffs on the other. I had no idea what was really going on, what crime committed, what had we done, had she done, to provoke this attack. Random violence I accepted as part of urban life but random police violence? The thought had never occurred to me before.

I could barely comprehend the bizarre drama. Without thinking, I had entered it by playing the role of a stereotypically passive white female. How many times had I witnessed friends, aunts, cousins, sisters, playing exactly this role to avert men's anger from erupting into violence aimed at them and their children. It wasn't the anger of white men that I was a stranger to, it was the official sanction of the state which supports racist policing that I had never experienced.

It was strange to be simultaneously in and completely removed from my body. I was terrified, trembling, but outwardly sweet, steady, calm. I kept my voice low, even smiled. I didn't know who I was or perhaps the masquerade of appearing to be completely non-threatening, docile, even stupid, was a white woman's survival tool—a Marilyn Monroe technique to disarm the enemy. But it also sickened me. Especially against the rock of resistance which my shy, sensitive lover had become. I didn't know her like this, had never seen a soft beach of sand burned to sheer glass by a single lightning strike. She was so smooth, so completely sealed up and self-protected, he couldn't even gain a toehold. She was in complete control, and he was losing it. I could feel his desperate anger clawing at her.

We were locked in position: a Black officer with his finger on a trigger aimed at a Black lesbian barefoot on her front porch; a white officer clutching handcuffs pressing against a white lesbian shielding the body of her lover with her life. No one moved for a moment. Then the crackle of his walkie-talkie shattered the still air. He grabbed it, muttered a few words, then called to his partner, "Wrong address! The murderer's ten blocks over!" The officers broke their poses and jumped into the squad car without apology or explanation.

"Nice meeting you," the white one sneered at us as they left.

## 12 RACE TRAITOR

We stood stripped of safety, of home, of tranquillity, as they sped off down the sun-beaten street.

The children on the block were the first to respond. They rushed out from their hiding places. "Bang! Bang!" they shot at each other with pointed fingers, screeching and rolling in the grass on our front lawn. The adults were slower in their approach. Did they think we were criminals? Or victims? Or in the twisted logic of power, both criminal and victim? Were we to be treated as criminals for being a biracial lesbian couple? What exactly caused our victimization and isolation on that narrow wooden porch in the horizontal forest called the city?

**I**n the long conversations that followed this incident, Essie and I analyzed every aspect of what had happened in order to understand why our responses were so different. This was the beginning of my education.

She told me about the curfew enforced in her neighborhood following the late 1960s urban rebellions labeled riots by the media. She described being a little girl and watching from the living room window as her fourteen-year-old brother was shot at by a white police officer for coming home fifteen minutes after the 6 p.m. curfew. She described the constant harassment her older brother suffered as one of the few Black boys growing up in the increasingly segregated city under the scrutiny of a white police officer who told him when he was only eight years old, "I'm gonna get you, boy."

She talked about the summer trips to Mississippi to visit family. How her grandfather kept a rifle under the front seat of the van. How he took off the license plates that revealed they were from the north. How he never drove over the speed limit. How he behaved whenever a policeman was present. She had never seen a Black police officer until she was an adult. For her parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, as well as her brothers and sisters, policemen were white, wicked, capable of killing, beating, maiming, raping, without recourse. They were free to do whatever they wanted to a Black person. They were the violent club of white society. They existed to protect white people's property from Black people. They existed as an armed force, a landed military, to patrol them. They were deeply hated, feared, and never, ever trusted. To live under the presence of

this constant surveillance requires stealth, imagination, tremendous courage and resilience.

Clearly I was completely unprepared. Like ice, I had crystallized certain concepts which prevented me from seeing what was really going on around me. I had imagined our sexual orientation to be under attack, but though this also marginalized us, the source of the fury I was to encounter over the next eight years in that city living with her was not based on our identity as lesbians or our gender as women but on the simple fact of race-based policing.

The solid blocks of ice I had used to build my world view became slippery with tears as they melted away. Her social conditioning taught her to fear police and to resist them. The politics and practice of white supremacy, she knew, were exemplified in the policing of her family, community, neighborhood. And as a newcomer, I didn't know this. I didn't know how to behave. My shock at witnessing racist policing left me unprepared to respond—frozen and ineffective.

When I came out on the porch, I thought I was doing the right thing. Essie disagreed. She thought I put us in more jeopardy by revealing to the police that a white woman and a Black woman lived together in that first floor flat. She thought I was wrong to put myself in the middle of a situation which she felt she was handling competently. She was protecting us. She had prevented the officer from entering our home which he had demanded when she came to the door. Instead she had asked to see a search warrant. He didn't have one, so she refused to let him in. She went out onto the porch to turn his back to the house so he wouldn't be able to see inside our home; so he wouldn't be able to glimpse her paintings of women or the symbols of feminist liberation and lesbian solidarity on our walls. She was protecting me, she was protecting us, and she knew exactly what she was doing.

The idea that I was using my privilege to protect her she interpreted as ludicrous and condescending. By inserting myself into the middle of the altercation, I was pretending to be some kind of hero. I fancied my privilege as an advantage to her. Isn't this the basic fantasy of those with privilege? Why do we believe so-called *underprivileged* persons want or need us? Doesn't this attitude keep power in place? Either out of guilt or a sincere desire to 'do-good'

we think it is our duty to help those who face discrimination when really we know nothing about it.

Essie pointed this out to me. She asked me to seriously reflect on the reasons why I put myself in the middle of the situation when she had specifically requested that I not make myself visible. She felt I had put our lives in much greater danger by making my presence known. She said, “You know, that’s one of the things that bothers me about white people. They always think they are right, that they know what to do and what is best, even when they have no idea what is actually going on. They have a really hard time believing brown-skinned people have any knowledge—practical, philosophical, or otherwise.”

We had been living together for about six months at the time this happened, and she knew despite my good intentions, I was still basically ignorant when it came to racism.

## Jamaican Mama

This happened when I was out of town for the weekend to do a poetry reading at a small liberal arts college in the midwest. It was a Sunday night, about 8:30 p.m., and her son, who was nine years old, had already fallen asleep. Essie had to work first shift at the hospital which meant she had to leave home at 5 a.m. but the car was about out of gas. Nothing would be open that early so she decided to make a quick run to the corner gas station before settling in for the night.

As she was pulling out of the gas station, she saw her sister-in-law walking alone on the sidewalk. She pulled over to let her in. She could smell that her sister-in-law had been smoking pot. Apparently the police saw her pull over and let a woman into her car. They started trailing them. Essie drove carefully. She wanted to make it home without being stopped.

She was only half a block away when they pulled her over. They accused her of smoking marijuana in the car. She denied it. They searched the car and found nothing. They ran her license number and then told her she had seven unpaid parking tickets, which was the minimum number of tickets required for the police to lock you up. She knew she didn’t have any tickets, but they called in a paddy wagon to haul her downtown. They let her sister-in-law go. Essie



asked her to go and stay with her son until she could get home. She knew now she was unfree until they let her go.

The paddy wagon arrived with four more white officers in it. Two in the front and two in the back. Now there were six white policemen surrounding her. One of the two officers who had stopped her pushed her into the back of the paddy wagon and climbed in next to her. Two others joined him. One officer locked the back and then left in the squad car.

Essie turned to steel. She told me, “The one in the front turned around and said to the one in the back, *Hey Joe, where you going for vacation?* And he said, *Gonna get me some Jamaican Mamas. Yeah, get me some.* The others laughed and started talking crazy. *I wanna get me some Jamaican mamas, yeah, get me some, too.*

“I was seething but I stayed cool. I wouldn’t look at them. The one next to me tried to get into my face. Two were directly across from me. I kept my mind focused. I never said a word to any of them. I wouldn’t meet their eyes, but I saw all of them—the one with glasses, the one with the blonde curly hair, the short, dark-haired one who was flat-footed. I would know them now if I saw them.

“They knew who I was. They knew I wasn’t a throw-away. They had my driver’s license, my social security number. They knew I didn’t have seven unpaid parking tickets.

“They kept it up driving around the inner city, driving in circles. I knew they weren’t headed directly downtown. I know those streets by heart. *Yeah we’re gonna get us some Jamaican mamas. Get me some like I never had before. Get me some.* And they would laugh like it was great fun, a big party, with me as the main course, the sacrifice to their fantasies.

“No matter what they said, I stayed clear. I kept thinking, You’re going to be sorry if you hurt me. You can’t touch me you goddamn bastards. I was thinking of my brother. He was like my personal savior. I knew what he would do if these officers hurt me, and I wouldn’t stop him. I was thinking, you fuck with me and you’re dead. That’s all.

“I stayed in my corner in the back of that paddy wagon. I never lost my focus. I heard everything and saw everyone with perfect clarity. I listened to their words and stared right through them. They couldn’t touch me. To me, they didn’t have that much power. They wanted to rape me—gang rape—a police gang rape. I mean, why

frame me? Why take me down on fake charges? Why call a paddy wagon? Why lock me in the back of it with three of them? Why five white men to take down one Black woman? What else were they planning to do? Rape and kill me and dump me by the side of the road. Another casualty of gang violence.

“My mind remained focused. I sat very still. Like this. I didn’t panic. I didn’t show them fear or plead with them not to hurt me. The whole time I was communicating one single clear message: Mess with me and you die. I didn’t move. I didn’t speak. My whole being concentrated on this one message. Maybe they felt something they couldn’t name and it kept them from touching me. Maybe they felt my Ancestors surrounding me. I could tell it was torturing them because they couldn’t get me the way they’d planned.

“I have been made hostile. I have learned to kill with my mind by keeping my eyes open and not moving a muscle. I hate the police. I hate them.”

Finally they pulled into the underground parking lot of the jail, took her in and booked her with unpaid parking tickets. She was locked up in a cell with vomit in the toilet; it was filthy and stunk. She couldn’t see the other women on the cell block so she started to sing. She was locked up for five hours, and she told me she just kept singing the whole time. No one was going to forget she was there. When they finally gave her the phone, she called Daddy Son and he came down with her brother and paid for seven parking tickets in order to get her out of jail. She got home just in time to leave for work.

When she appeared in court a month later, the judge simply stated she only owed for two parking tickets and the rest should be paid back. She wasn’t allowed to speak because it would be considered contempt of court.

There is no method of measuring the impact of this daily grinding violence. The doctors working in neighborhood clinics can measure the high blood pressure of children as they watch the exacting cost of continual stress and pressure destroying the health of individual bodies. But what about the health of the community? The cumulative affect on the African American community is only made apparent during periods of great civil unrest, riots, rebellions. What is understood about collective grief and rage? How do you heal scars which remain permanently beneath the skin?

## Police Arithmetic: White + Black = Drug Deal

**A**t Daddy Son's funeral, we were all dressed in black. Black silk blouses. Black satin skirts. Black nylon stockings and black pumps. Black leather handbags and black wool coats. Black seersucker suits and straight black ties stark as exclamation points against starched white shirts.

Everyone gathered around Granny like birds at a winter feeder. Keening for the loss of an elder, the young kneeled together and then lifted their heads to sing in one voice, "Amazing Grace, how sweet it is that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was born but now I'm free."

Daddy Son was a working man. He had been a truckdriver traveling coast to coast with his Black cat in the cab. He had lived in workcamps where white employers kept Black employees behind barbed wire fences living in tents cordoned off from local inhabitants, prevented from moving into these white communities by very real barriers. He had worked in factories and lived in these temporary tent camps in Washington state, in Louisiana, in Arkansas.

At last he had joined the Union in Milwaukee, bought a home, made a life for the next three generations by pulling double shifts most of the year just so he could take a month off every summer to go fishing with his wife, grandchildren and great-grands. When he retired after thirty years, they gave him a small metal shovel mounted on pressed wood and painted it with his union number. It makes me sick deep in the pit of my stomach to think how much money white men have made from Daddy Son's long life of labor.

Daddy Son was a dark Black man. Granny would get that teasing look in her eyes and say in a sing-song way, "*The blacker the berry the sweeter the juice.*" But Daddy Son also held a startling secret. One that could only be revealed by looking into his eyes. For this reason, he kept his eyes behind dark glasses, shaded from the peering, prying questions which would never be asked aloud.

I knew him for over a year before I ever saw him without his sunglasses. He wore those dark glasses in the kitchen, in front of the t.v. or in his favorite place, the bench beside the garage where he could rest between yard work or while polishing his van or boat. The wooden picnic table bench was painted white and placed next to the

chain link fence so he could rest his back while telling stories with his men friends in the warm afternoon sun.

The day he took off his glasses in front of me was also the day after his return from the hospital. We had come over to help Granny with housework, grocery shopping, and check in on both of them. He was stretched out in bed, very unusual for this active man. He was quiet. When I poked my head in the door, I thought he might be asleep, but he waved me in and I sat gingerly on the foot of the bed because it felt awkward to stand over him and the room was small without any chairs. He started talking to me about the travels he'd taken, about the friends he'd known, about the work he'd done, about the fish he'd caught on the Great Mississippi and the Fox River and on Lake Winnebago before it got so filthy from the paper factories that you couldn't stand the smell of the water for miles around.

He'd never really spoken to me before, not like this. He was always warm to me and pleasant. He'd taken all the herbal remedies I'd made for him, and he credited me with the positive response from his doctor about his kidney. Maybe I'd become a type of lay-doctor, the kind he trusted, like the mothers and grandmothers in his life from down south who believed in plants and trusted their own hands over the technology of the sterile machines and cold white corridors. He'd asked to come home to die.

This was the first time I really looked into his eyes. While he talked, animated, inspired to answer my inquisitive nods with more details, I noticed his twinkling eyes were a solid, unblemished, bright blue. This ink-black man had bluer eyes than mine. They were astonishing and beautiful. In his face, they told the whole story of Africa in the Americas without a single word.

Essie commented to me many times how happy she was that the only father she'd ever known had taken me into his confidence that day. She had never heard him talk so long about himself before. He was generally a man of few words. His strength subsided slowly, and he grew smaller and weaker over the next days and weeks. We stood by his bed, and I held one of his hands, once strong and masculine, now fragile bones held together in a web of thin flesh, and told him quietly that it was okay. We would be okay. We would take care of Granny. He could go when he was ready. There were people waiting for him. Ancestors. We could feel them all around us.

At the funeral, brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers and nieces and nephews and children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren gathered and wept in the wet grass around the grave. As we left the cemetery, I was driving Essie and her cousin from down south and her cousin's husband back to Granny's house where the food we'd prepared for all the guests would be served. Many of them had made the long journey from Greenville, Mississippi to say their last good-byes. As we pulled out, the funeral procession disbanded, and we turned left to make a quick stop at a grocery store to pick up some more milk for all the great-grandchildren who had been so still and polite and silent and wide-eyed throughout the services.

As I drove, I realized we were being followed by the police.

"Shit," I whispered under my breath, "not again."

"What?" asked Essie, and I nodded to the rearview mirror.

Her cousin's husband sighed and stated gravely, "Same thing up here as down South. Same thing everywhere. Police arithmetic: Black + White = Drugs."

Essie and I said simultaneously, "Is that what it is?"

"That's it," her cousin responded. "They stop us everytime we get together with one of our white friends. We get pulled over and they search us and search the car. Never found anything on us but that doesn't ever stop them from trying. We just can't drive together anymore."

## Fighting Back

**O**n an unseasonably warm Sunday morning in late September near the end of harvest season, we drove to the local farmer's market for some fresh vegetables. We picked up the Sunday paper on the way. We turned off North Avenue to circle the pavilion where the farmers set up tables for the day. It was empty. Did we have the wrong day or was the season over? Disappointed we went around the block. A police car passed us in the opposite lane. As we headed home, we noticed the police car turn around to follow us with its flashing red light and squealing siren.

I pulled over to the curb. "Maybe they got a call—" my obnoxious effort at pollyannaism fell flat.

"It's us alright," Essie countered as a white officer in his late fifties tapped on the glass of my window with his ticket book. Slowly I rolled it down.

"Driver's license and registration," the officer snapped.

As I was digging through my wallet, I asked him, "Is there a reason you pulled me over?"

"Yeah, there's a reason," Essie replied wearily. Then she leaned over, "Right officer? You stopped us because she's white and I'm Black."

"Shut-up, bitch," he retorted.

Essie's hand tightened around the Sunday paper rolled up in her lap. Before I could respond, she reacted. The door of our little brown pinto flew open and the thick Sunday morning edition of the Milwaukee Journal was flung directly at the officer's head.

His fingers locked around the butt of his gun as he yanked it from his holster. *He's going to kill her.*

I threw the weight of my body against the car door as I pushed it open hoping to knock him off his feet.

As he caught himself, I jumped out of the car and into his face yelling at the top of my lungs, "What the fuck are you doing?"

Essie circled the front of the car demanding a response, "What did you call me?"

He backed up, one hand on his gun, my driver's license in his other hand. People on the sidewalk ducked into the shadow of doorways watching. A group of young black men lined up against the side of a building in the yellow morning light.

"Give me my license!" I yelled.

Essie and I walked side by side about a foot from him. He held his gun in his hand, but we didn't let up. I shouted his name aloud reading it from his badge. We backed him up to the door of his squad car, and he slid in. His white partner sat silently watching from the passenger's side. Essie and I pounded on the windshield directly in front of him, "Give me back my driver's license!" I yelled.

He grabbed his loudspeaker broadcasting to the entire block, "Girls! Girls! Get back in the car. Girls, get back in your car!"

He yelled like he thought he was our daddy, like we should obey him, like he was protected from our outrage by his blue-suited authority. We kept beating on the windows of the police car.

“Give me back my license!” I shouted again and again.

“This is my last warning,” the officer threatened us like a man to his children before he raises his hand to strike them down.

“Come on,” said Essie, “let’s report this.”

Essie drove to the precinct headquarters since I couldn’t drive without my license. They ignored us, denied us a hearing, told us that what we said happened didn’t happen. We took down a list of names and badge numbers fuming.

Monday morning I went downtown to report it to the Fire and Police Commission. At the main desk I was told I couldn’t get my license back since a report had been filed that I had falsified an accident report.

“There was no accident,” I told the officer in charge.

“That’s what you say,” he replied.

I typed up a detailed report. The African American man at the Commission was interested and investigated. It was not the first report against this officer. It was written up and put in his file. Nothing more.

It still took me six weeks to clear my record and get my driver’s license back. No apology was ever issued.

I keep worrying: What else has this coward in a blue suit done? Who else has he harassed? How many other times has he falsified reports? What other Black women has he raised his gun to shoot without just cause? Who sits in jail today to satisfy his uneasy quest to dominate and oppress? What else could I have done to get him off the street?

## Truck Camouflage

Essie was working as a carpenter when I got a new job as a visual arts exhibit coordinator. One of my new tasks involved hanging traveling shows of original art in institutions serving the elderly, disabled, and institutionalized. In order to transport the large paintings and sculpture, I needed a bigger vehicle. Essie had been looking at trucks so she could carry wood, drywall and other supplies to work.

Essie located a good deal on a pickup and we bought our first new car. We were so excited we chose to ignore the curious eyes on

us at the dealership. We chose a honey-colored Toyota pickup truck with a white cab. What a difference that truck made.

Once we started driving around town in that Toyota pickup truck we were never again stopped by the police. Why? Were we protected by the class privilege broadcast by a new vehicle? Or by the male privilege signified by driving a working man's vehicle? Or was it heterosexual privilege which now protected us as we could pass on the streets as the wives of working men? Or was it white privilege as few African Americans bought pickup trucks? As a marker of male, heterosexual, white privilege, the truck provided us protection we had never known before. We were free of police harassment. We couldn't believe it. If only we had known earlier.

We told our friends. Lesbians all over town started buying trucks—Latina, Jew, Indian, Black and White, Chrysler, Ford, Nissan, Dodge. On the streets in front of our parties, it looked like a get together of good ole boys, and the police didn't bother us. We could play our music louder and stay out later. No one stopped us. No one bothered us. That's what privilege is. The power to blend in, to move freely and not draw unwanted attention to yourself. To fit in easily and enjoy simple anonymity. To drive across town without police harassment. To be judged not by your difference but by your presence. To eat in a restaurant without worrying that the cooks or waiters will spit in your food. To love the one you love without fear of recrimination. Simple things, really. To desire these simple things, to live in peace, as a lesbian, as a partner to an African American lesbian, as a co-mother of an African American son, means I must be willing to wage war against a system of domination which denies even the simplest desire.

## Anger as Fuel for Action

I have heard the refusal to close the gap between white women and women of color rationalized by white women because women of color “are too angry” (meaning they express anger about white privilege) or “they judge me for being white” (meaning they express anger about white privilege) or “they're always upset about something” (meaning they express anger about white privilege) or “they're hostile” (meaning they express anger about white privilege). Why shouldn't women of color, particularly



African American women, express anger about white privilege? It confines and suffocates their families and communities. It dogs them. It is a constant haunting by an unwanted ghost. It cannot be escaped. Racism permeates institutions and saturates relationships repeating a deadly dogma predicated upon a myth of superiority/inferiority. And it is terribly, terrifyingly successful at keeping us separate when we have so much more to gain by being together.

White middle-class women must come to terms with anger if they hope to work in close coalition with women of color. Anger takes up space. Anger demands respect. It refuses pity. It reduces fear. It affirms self-respect and self-worth. It is uncompromising. It demands to be recognized. I have learned through my friendship and association with women of color to embrace anger, my own and others, as a tool against injustice.

When white women 'sit with' the rage expressed by women of color and grapple with it, we are transformed. Rather than avoiding the pain of this encounter, sequestering ourselves in the paralysis of guilt, or simply turning away, I urge us to listen and to learn. As we begin to see the multiple ways in which white privilege has been used to silence us and keep us in our place, we can begin to speak out and to act. Then, and not before, will we be ready to join with women and men of color and build alliances to challenge racist policing in all of its forms. Together we can begin to articulate the society in which we want our children to live, free of the triple threats of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Free of the crippling of joy.

# Hunting Whiteness

BY REBECCA CLARK

*Before you can be an effective warrior, you must become an expert huntress. Being a huntress is very complicated. There are many creatures to hunt. You can hunt and trap a spirit if you know how. Spirits are hidden from you—you think they are born in your imagination. But the imagination can turn on you and kill you if you don't look at it straight.*

(Agnes Whistling Elk<sup>1</sup>)

Although a bit unorthodox, the above quote succinctly describes my journey towards naming and dismantling whiteness. As a cultural worker, I struggle against oppression and exploitation. In the struggle, I often feel like a warrior: sometimes fierce, sometimes weary. In order to be effective, to offer counterhegemonic strategies, I must get to know exactly what I'm fighting against, just like the expert hunter learns her prey intimately in order to catch it. But, according to this metaphor, there are many creatures to hunt. In my fight against oppression I am faced with capitalism, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, etc. The most dangerous, however, as Whistling Elk suggests, is the prey we don't think we see, the one we doubt exists, the one we think lives only in our imagination. Whiteness is proving to be such prey.

What I've noticed in my own understanding of whiteness, is that when we explore the socially constructed history and contingency of whiteness, we automatically disrupt whiteness, because it maintains its hegemony through a systematic denial of its own constructed nature. When whiteness is seen, it is decentered. Once the category is highlighted and exposed, it is no longer salvageable. The process is akin to Foucault's hyperbolic prose in "Preface to Transgression." When whiteness is studied in a backdrop of whiteness, it is like the eye ripped from its socket turning to look upon itself. In return for the gift of insight into whiteness, whiteness itself is sacrificed:

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Sight, crossing the globular limit of the eye, constitutes the eye in its instantaneous being. Sight... hurls the eye outside of itself, conducts it to the limit where it bursts out in the immediately extinguished flash of its being. In the distance created by this violence and uprooting, the eye is seen absolutely, but denied the possibility of sight.<sup>2</sup>

Having seen glimpses of whiteness, I recognize that whiteness is empty, an epistemic violence that, once interrogated, precludes forever the comfort of privileged gaze. My own racial, gendered, and class identity as well as my critical reevaluation of these categories are, and have been throughout my life, uncomfortable. The eye being ripped from its socket to afford a glance of insight is violent and painful. In my early adolescence, my life irrevocably changed when I went to live with my dad in Prunedale, California (a few miles from Salinas, the agricultural capital of the central coast). My world changed there. I was shocked by all the changes in my life: the pain of my mother's abandonment, the loneliness of being left in the country with no friends or supervision, the intensification of sexual abuse I endured during those years, and the subsequent weight gain spurred by eating compulsively to survive the disjuncture of my life. I became conscious of a real class difference between the popular kids and myself. By the fifth grade, it became glaringly clear that I didn't wear the right clothes, have the right hair cut, or a "respectable" enough family.

Although I spent those years mostly alone, by junior high through high school, I found a group of rogue trouble-makers who had their own personal traumas.

I first learned about whiteness as a privilege (and hence a loss) from my ex-boyfriend Richard and his friends. We hung out in East Salinas, the barrio, which was a part of town my mother was vehemently opposed to my going to because it was too "violent." Maybe that was part of the appeal.

We congregated around the hateful rage of heavy metal music, whose practitioners were on the whole white. The attraction for my friends and me of heavy metal music was not only the rage that it expressed, but that heavy metal centers around the occult, around "black magic," which promised access to power and revenge. Power through "black magic" was our only hope to achieve power in a

world which was invested in keeping us powerless. I've come to realize that the "whiteness" of heavy metal music lies in that it emphasizes individual pain and rage of individual abuses and lives rather than locating these outrages as part of larger social structures. There is nothing essentially white about individualization, of course, but by individualizing the abuses and rage of the forgotten classes, effective collective resistance is precluded and hence white hegemony is protected.

The people I hung out with defy simple categorization as "white," "black," "Latino." Many of my friends lived on the borders of many conflicting identities. I would not know what it means to be in the center if they had not shown me what it means to live in the margins.

We all hung out at Eddie's house on Gardner Way in East Alisal (Salinas, CA). Eddie was Chicano. At one time he was more *cholo* than rocker, but he shifted during his teens, when he got into black magic. His room was painted black, decorated with skulls and graphic pictures of murdered and mutilated bodies, and satanic altars. His sister died in his arms from a heroin overdose, and his brother-in-law Chano, an old-school gangster, was lost on sniffing glue and paint. He was eventually shot and killed by Margaret, Eddie's Mom (but that's a whole other story). On the whole, Margaret was very maternal towards all of us, becoming a source of comfort for many runaway kids. She was partially supported by her boyfriend who smuggled drugs and weapons from Mexico.

Also living at the house on Gardner was Eddie's motherless seven-year-old nephew whom they nicknamed "Gecko," and Warren, a white boy who grew up rich but whose father disinherited him for refusing to bend to his militaristic regimen. Warren's whiteness was always marked, as a scourge he could never overcome, but constantly strived to. He earned respect for his "hardness" and loyalty to the Flores family.

On any given night, a crowd would arrive to hang out in Eddie's room. One of my closest friends of that crowd was Abey, half Mexican and half white, who had the audacity to come out as gay in the midst of this hyper-masculine subculture which beat people up for kicks. As a group, however, we took pride in ourselves for our intense and undying loyalty to each other. Hence, all of us, even the most homophobic, had to accept Abey's sexuality or risk

disintegrating the only thing many of my friends held onto in their lives. Abey's best friend Julie, a poor white girl whose mother was a gutter alcoholic and whose masculine appearance often led to the questioning of her gender, slept with every man in the group to divert questions about her sexuality and to cope with her own feelings of unattractiveness and unworthiness.

Abey had a set of cousins who hung around as well. Leo, the oldest, was supposed to be half Mexican. He spent most of his life believing himself to be Mexican and expressing himself through a *cholo* and gangster identity. But as he grew older, it became visually apparent that he was really white, and that Emilio was not Leo's father. Leo's mother's admission that this was true helped Leo make sense of why he was the primary object of his drunk father's almost murderous rage throughout his life. Strangely, he gradually accepted his "whiteness" and became a biker, working on Harleys, and wearing leather. His siblings were not as regular to the group, but when they were around, they added character. His younger brother Matthew was a well dressed, well groomed, attractive Chicano guy who was an amazingly talented con-artist, usually hooking up with rich women and stealing their money. His sister Sophie was a tough gangster girl who used to brag about rolling "wetbacks" for their money (illegal Mexican immigrants tend to carry all their cash with them).

Corey and his brothers, Jerry and Jake, were white supremacists, complete with tattoos of swastikas. Apparently they didn't see their Mexican brethren as non-Aryan. Rather, they hated black people. I used to complain that hating blacks was a pretty easy thing to do in a town that was only about one percent African American, since they would never be challenged by blacks, and thus the act carried no honor. But I never said that to their faces. They all carried guns. There was also Marcus, a middle class white boy, who my friends told me later had to buy his way into the group by buying all the beer for a year. Why he wanted in the group so bad, I can only speculate.

Finally, there was my boyfriend Richard, who had the most respect in the group because he had spent more time in juvenile hall and detention facilities than any of them. He was in a psychiatric boys home when I first started hanging around the group. I didn't meet him for months, but we "fell in love" instantly. Richard was half what he calls "white trash." His mother had a cowgirl twang

even though she's from Salinas and was a bartender in East Salinas. His father was Chicano, a gangster who was in Soledad prison for armed robbery (to support his heroin addiction) for most of Richard's life. Richard lived with his grandma Francis (who speaks fluent Spanish, cooks Mexican food and I thought was Mexican until I found out she was one hundred percent Italian). Richard moved in with his grandma at age ten to avoid the physical abuse of his white racist stepfather who beat Richard because he hated Mexicans. Although Richard could pass for white, he hated his white side because his mother had abandoned him, choosing her husband over him. His grandma also supported his three gangster cousins who his aunt left behind because she was in and out of jail for heroin and prostitution charges.

Now that you've met them, you may still be wondering why I detail all of these people who were in the context of my life. I want to say that I'm giving them voice, but actually I'm pulling the curtains back from a window, already tinted through the privilege and power of our viewing positions. This voyeurism into their lives is always already shaped by my political commitments and the power I wield as author of this piece. If they were given voice, these are probably not the stories they would tell about themselves . . . not to you anyway. I'm writing about them with the selfish intention of telling you about me, about my whiteness. As I mentioned earlier I have only come to understand my whiteness in backdrop to their lives.

Almost everyone in the group was marked by poverty (except for Marcus and me who actually occupied the "lower-middle class"), abuse, and an uncomfortable fit in traditional categories of identity, such as racial identity, sexual identity, etc. As evidenced by the shifts from *cholo* to rocker identities in Eddie and Leo, there was a strong pull to "be white" in a sense. But Warren would say that, on the contrary, for him there was a pull to be Mexican, to renounce his whiteness. But whiteness became something to overcome only because it had been an enemy of most of the members of the group and their families for many generations. Our group formed an awkward, painful, "diverse" coalition, and without a matrix of critical understanding to contextualize our lives within larger systems of social domination and injustice, these became primarily individual identities, individual histories of pain. We each had to

suffer alone, having only each other to help us cope with, but not change in any significant sense, the nightmares of our lives. We knew only the politics of survival.

Although individualized, most of my friends had a consciousness of how the system was “fucked up” and worked against our lives. And for my Chicano friends, there was a conscious recognition of whiteness. In this context, Richard reminded me constantly how privileged and rich I was. I was molested, but not as severely as he was. I was neglected, but not as severely as he was. He felt that society hated him. I was poor, but not even close to the poverty and homelessness he’d experienced. We argued about racism a lot. I didn’t really believe in it. He was arrested for drunk driving one night, and he told me they had no reason to pull him over, except for the way he looked. I wanted to believe him, but in my world, cops and society were still somewhat just. I figured he was just bitter that he got caught. In my whiteness, I believed in the legal system. Of course, I’d seen Marcus, the white boy, pulled over when I knew he was drunk, when he could hardly walk. When I called his house the next morning, he answered and said, “Oh, the cop let me go.” I thought he was just charmed. But his charm was, I see now, his white skin.

When I went to the jailhouse to find out about Richard’s well-being, I was shocked at how rude the police officers and clerks were to me. They wouldn’t even come to the window although I could see they were playing basketball with crumpled balls of paper and the trash can in the back. My shock and indignation was part of my white privilege. My friends rolled their eyes at my angry rantings. “Of course it’s like that,” they said, “how did you think they were going to treat you?” “With respect and dignity, like a human being, a citizen, a taxpayer . . .” They all started laughing.

My whiteness.

There’s more to this story. As a woman, I experienced the marking of whiteness differently. I experienced the pain of my friends’ existence vicariously through my own suffering and abuse. Richard raped and physically and psychologically abused me over our four-year relationship, as he constantly reminded me how privileged I was. Part of my disillusion with the system played into my continued abuse. My world crumbled when I started to realize that the world I believed in was a lie, constructed for white people’s

own use and benefit. I came to see “THEM”—the state, the system—as the bad guys. My lifestyle, friendship, and our undying loyalty to each other was really all that I had once the lie of all my bourgeois ideals was exposed.

I was 17 when all this started. I felt I owed it to Richard to give back some of what I had, to relieve myself of my guilt. Instead I gave him my soul and died inside. I finally left Richard after a four-day nightmare in which he held me hostage, threatened to kill me, and then tried to kill himself. I was partly afraid to tell anyone, to call the police. We were growing marijuana in our bedroom. I feared minimum sentencing laws. Richard assured me before they came that if I went to prison for marijuana because I turned him in, he would have me “taken care of” from the inside, and that if I survived at all, my life as a privileged white girl in prison would be unbearable. (Of course, my whiteness always had me thinking, in the back of my mind, that they wouldn’t REALLY send me to prison. I wasn’t the type who went to prison.) But I was also committed to the counterculture I was in, resigned not to invite intervention into our enclave of resistance. I did finally call the police, and as a validation of my suspicion, they had no help to offer me, only terror.

I’ve struggled over telling this story in this way. It sounds like I’m re-entrenching the already held image that people of color and poor people are violent and scary and in need of managing, that I was this poor white girl abused by a scary man of color. I still want to tell this story, not only because it was my story, but so I can contextualize my private experience in the larger socio-political surrounding. In hindsight, my despair and isolation, his despair and impotence, were constructed through his rejection by society, by this soul-crushing white supremacist capitalist system. While I felt somewhat safe going to counselors, he always feared that when he told his story, they would try to lock him up, that they would institutionalize him. And indeed they have. It was a result of my whiteness that I thought institutionalization might be a good thing for him—that the state, doctors, and officials were really here to help us. Richard’s extreme fear (to the point of paranoia) that they were going to get him, try to control his mind and break his spirit was the result of his racialized experience and his childhood that he had spent in and out of “detention facilities.” I’ve come to realize



that just because he was paranoid didn't mean they weren't really out to get him.

Richard's own child abuse born of and coupled with this racist world closed him in upon himself. The only way he knew how to survive the pain, fear, and deep sense of being alone was through drug abuse and controlling me. His abuse of me was probably fueled by his need to control whiteness in some way. Controlling me was his one grasp at power, his assertion of his masculinity in a world that had emasculated and crushed him. Like anger directed at the misogyny of gangsta rap from a position of white middle-class comfort, condemning Richard for abusing me fails to take responsibility for the fact that spousal abuse was the only **SOCIALLY-SANCTIONED** and, I emphasize, **ALREADY AVAILABLE** outlet and expression of power allowed. While stealing and property damage brings legal retribution, violence against women has long been a tolerated and "ignored" outlet for male frustration in our culture.

My story continues, but the space is limited. I want to briefly share how I traveled from Richard to academia.

After leaving Richard, I moved in with Cack, a guy I met at my warehouse job where I worked full-time (while going to school full-time to support both Richard and me). We moved to Sacramento, where I started managing his band "Phibes Infernal Machine" and came into my own as a hard drug addict and alcoholic. Phibes was yet another site of mixed racial identities. The singer, Ken, was black. Cack, the drummer, was Navajo, Mexican, and Spanish, which he often collapsed into a Chicano identity or a white one depending on which was called for. The guitarist, Scott, was a white trash rocker boy, and Dominic, the bassist, celebrated a full-on Chicano identity, with the Aztec calendar tattooed on his back. Within this group, I was working hard to dissolve the remaining vestiges of what I considered my privilege, which had rifted Richard and me so deeply. These privileges included school (I went to UC Davis at this time) and the loans I could secure by going to school. Hence, I spent all my money and nearly dropped out so I could blend in and be a part of this group of people. I did enough speed (methamphetamines) to garner respect. Cack told me one New Years Eve, after a wild three-day weekend in San Francisco, that he was absolutely amazed that I had kept up with him in terms of drug use.

He was 30 and had been using most of his life. He was astounded that I was so hardcore at such a young age. I took it as a compliment. Like Warren, I also tried to renounce my whiteness through my “hardness” and loyalty to the group, this time to the music scene I was involved in.

But my whiteness, my privilege, did rear its head here. We were all drug addicts, but my bottom hit hard and fast. I wasn’t going to have a life-long drug career because I felt like I was messing up my future. Cack never felt he had much of a future to mess up. The difference between us was perceived potential. I always believed in the back of my head that I could be anything I wanted to be. I cleaned up astonishingly fast. Because I am white, I was offered immediate re-entry into white mainstream life. What does my whiteness have to do with my ability to quit using drugs? Since beginning this narrative project, I have struggled to explore this.

What I do know is that drug use is one of but a few available ways to cope with a racist capitalist hierarchy that continues to inflict violence on the underclass. For Richard, to give up drugs would require separating from both family and our close-knit group of friends. The state tried many times to separate Richard from us, so he could “clean up.” To take away his only support system and site where he locates his agency, and offer only a “white-but-not-quite” entry into the capitalist system would have required Richard to lobotomize his soul, formed by a lifetime of marginalization and resistance. As Richard found out, this was neither possible nor desirable. Having seen the corruption and white supremacist logics that rule the center, staying loyal to the hardcore margins was his only way to resist. My ability to clean up and move away from these networks shows not a superior personal strength on my part. Rather, it reveals the hidden privilege and the ease with which I can move about in a white world. Because of my whiteness it’s possible for me to move between the margins and the center. My friends cannot do that without significant violence to their souls.

I’m not trying to valorize drug use as resistance. I’ve seen drugs rip apart families and lives. Richard went to jail for stealing thousands of dollars from his grandma to pay for his crack habit. Richard’s aunt resorted to prostitution to feed her heroin habit and contracted HIV. Chano’s glue-sniffing caused repeated seizures and melted his brain. Every one of them had an uncle who died young

from cirrhosis of the liver. Deep in my heart, I long to help my friends get off drugs. But drug use is not the problem. It is a symptom of a larger social disease: white institutional racism and global capitalism. Until we start to dismantle these evils, individual battles with drug use have little effect on the whole.

My white skin allowed me to get past the gatekeepers of the academic institution, who assumed that I would be an ally in maintaining white supremacy and entitlement. And because of that, although I worked so hard to relinquish my white privilege, I am now grateful that my whiteness has got me through the doors so I can try to disrupt the system from within.

The debt I owe in return for this privilege is to bring with me my commitment to Richard, Leo, Cack, and Abey, whom society has forgotten and despises, who will never be where I am now, into every class I teach and paper I write. We must work towards abolishing whiteness now. Let's dismantle the solidarity of the white race in favor of a solidarity in struggle against oppression. My journey has shown me that we must become hunters of whiteness in order to become warriors of justice.

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NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Andrews, Lynn. *Walk in Balance: Meditations with Lynn Andrews*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, Michel. "A Preface to Transgression." *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. trans. Donald F. Bouchard. New York: Cornell U. Press, 1997.

# Postcard from the Empire of Queen Ixolib

BY MARTIN ESPADA

**R**ecently, I made a pilgrimage to a parking lot at the corner of Main Street and Howard Avenue in Biloxi, Mississippi, across from the Masonic Temple.

Almost fifty years ago, a few days before Christmas, a Trailways bus stopped at around midnight in this town on the Gulf of Mexico. A young man, nineteen years old, born in Puerto Rico, slept in the seat immediately behind the driver, the only passenger on the bus, en route to visit his family in New York City. He was wearing a Class A khaki uniform from the Air Force, having finished four months of basic training at Lackland Air Force base in San Antonio. His dark skin was darker still after his time in the omnipotent Texas heat. He must have been tired, which may explain why he did not stir in Biloxi until he was shaken awake.

A new bus driver was poking him. The driver said: "You have to get to the back of the bus." The airman muttered, "Fuck you," and waved the driver away, then tilted his cap over his eyes. A few minutes later, he awoke to a flashlight bleaching his face, exploring the geography of his skin. A huge police officer said: "It's time for you to go." He was arrested and taken in a police car to the local jail; it was the first time he had ever been arrested. He was not fingerprinted, photographed, or allowed a phone call. He noticed that everyone in jail was Black.

The following day, the airman stood before a justice of the peace. He had no lawyer. The judge was white-haired, with the jowls of a bloodhound, oozing eyes that stared down over bifocals, and a dangling string tie. The judge lectured on respect for the law and the local custom of segregation, then asked: "Boy, how many days you have on that furlough?" This was a ten-day furlough, before the next

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assignment at an Air Force base in Illinois. The judge calculated the distance by bus between Mississippi and Illinois, then pronounced sentence: "You can stay with us for seven days." The hearing lasted less than ten minutes.

The airman spent a week in jail, every day in his dress uniform, since his duffle bag was confiscated. His jailers were polite, most likely because of the uniform. After asking repeatedly for several days, he found a jailer who would let him use a telephone. His family did not have a phone in their apartment on West 98<sup>th</sup> Street, so he called the janitor and left a message that he was not coming home, without revealing the circumstances. He saw a number of Black men brought to jail that week: some drunk, one badly beaten. He heard blues harmonizing and hollers, the *wooo* of a distant train spiraling from a human mouth. At six feet four inches, he splayed across his bunk, ambushed by the chill of Mississippi nights in December, becoming more furious every night. When he left Biloxi, headed for Illinois, he sat in the front of the bus again, this time without incident.

He says that the week of Christmas 1949 in Biloxi, Mississippi, was "wonderful." He says that he decided what to do with his life.

A man without religion, he experienced a different kind of epiphany. He did not glimpse an angel in the gleam of that flashlight. But, after this and other incidents, he was now intimate with the breath of racist encounters; at nineteen, he committed himself to resisting that bigotry. He was, to use his word, "primed" to join the civil rights movement. From that point forward, all his work, from community organizing to documentary photography, was anchored in opposition to racism.

**F**rank Espada, my father, never told me about Biloxi during my upbringing. When I was fifteen years old, I discovered a discarded page from his resume which summarized the experience in a few terse sentences. Later, I would hear him tell the story to others; I had learned to be an expert eavesdropper around my father. The first time he ever told me the entire story directly was when I informed him that I was going to visit Biloxi, Mississippi, myself. I was forty years old.

A few years before this, I had written a poem called "Sleeping on the Bus." The third stanza refers to the Biloxi incident. My father is not named; rather, he is an anonymous "brown man" who "sneered at the custom of the back seat," meant to represent all the nameless people who sacrificed themselves to protest the laws of American apartheid. Even as I honor the act of resistance, I acknowledge in the poem that I do not fully appreciate that act: "and still I forget." The stanza is partly fictionalized: the judge "proclaimed a week in jail / and went back to bed with a shot of whiskey." The drama is deliberately intensified, for the sake of representing all such incidents through this single incident: "how the brownskin soldier could not sleep / as he listened for the prowling of his jailers, / the muttering and cardplaying of the hangmen / they might become."

At times a poet resembles a bird, patching together the nest from string, the cellophane of cigarette packs, and other human artifacts. I borrowed the emotional state in these last few lines from *another* racial incident involving my father: his confrontation at a certain segregated lunch counter in San Antonio, a tale more familiar to me. He recalls leaving the scene after that incident and listening tensely for the footsteps of possible pursuers crunching the gravel in the parking lot.

I visited Biloxi in January 1998. Glimpsing the highway sign that read "Welcome to Mississippi" triggered a pulsation of dread. Even before I knew of my father's experience there, the Mississippi of my young imagination was an inferno. Here Emmett Till was murdered for insulting a white woman; NAACP leader Medgar Evers was assassinated; three civil rights workers were found buried in a dam, killed by the Klan with the collaboration of the local police. Phil Ochs sang of the cops in Mississippi: "Behind their broken badges / they are murderers and more." My father played that record over and over during my childhood years, and I never understood why.

Nearly fifty years later, Biloxi is now a casino town. Countless casinos line Highway 90 along the Gulf Coast: President Casino, Isle of Capri Casino, Imperial Palace Hotel and Casino, Casino Magic Biloxi, Grand Casino Biloxi. A gargantuan sign on Highway 90 features a cackling pirate and his

parrot advertising the Treasure Bay Casino. The casino boasts “a 400-foot authentic replica of an 18<sup>th</sup> century pirate ship, which hosts Scalawag’s Show Bar, Laffitte’s Gourmet Buffet, the loosest slots on the coast, friendliest table in the South, full service poker rooms” and “dockside gaming 24 hours a day.” The gamblers at Treasure Bay somehow see themselves as the robbers, and not the robbed.

The coastline glitters at night, pirate ship included. This is not the Mississippi of Robert Johnson, his “blues falling down like hail” on a 1937 recording that crackles like bacon frying. There are clues, however, that another Mississippi is not only present, but cherished.

In the midst of the casinos on the highway sits a white-pillared mansion called Beauvoir, the “Historic Last Home of Jefferson Davis.” The President of the Confederacy is memorialized there by the “Jefferson Davis Shrine,” presumably to facilitate the worship of Jefferson Davis. In the center of town, a dignified restaurant called Mary Mahoney’s bills itself as “Old French House and Slave Quarters.” The plaque on the wall of the eighteenth-century building refers to a “romantic past”; indeed, I was told that, until recently, the restaurant preferred to employ elderly Black men as waiters. This recalls a joke by an African-American comic whose name I have forgotten. He reports having had a cheery vacation at “Colonial Williamsburg,” the reconstructed historical village in Virginia—until he was sold.

Upon entering the town, I encountered a bus station on Main Street, which, I had heard secondhand, was constructed in 1947. I paced between the diagonal yellow lines where the buses stop and wondered if Frank Espada had stepped across those same yellow lines.

When I entered the bus station, I was struck again by that pulsing dread. I drifted through the tiny depot, scanning the checkered floor, a stranger with no business there but the tracking of ghostly footprints. A clerk in a starched white shirt watched me from the ticket counter with seeming suspicion. I had always wondered what would happen to me if airport metal detectors could screen the gray baggage of my mind; now I wondered if the clerk could do the same.

I knew my reaction was irrational. The days of Jim Crow are over, and I am lightskinned anyway. This thought stumbled into

another: my father is a different color. How could I possibly comprehend the experience of dark skin in Jim Crow Mississippi? How could I put my hand on that coarse texture? My father would describe the glower of white people in the South as “the Look.” I remember, from adolescence, watching my father pay the tab at a seafood joint in rural Virginia while one of the poolplaying locals fixed him with the Look. But the Look was not for me.

Searching for any justification to remain in the bus station, I slipped a few quarters into a soda machine and bought an orange soda that I did not drink. I then dropped more change into a pay phone, and dialed a local number. I got the number wrong. When I walked outside the station and scratched in my notebook, the clerk strolled out with me. Maybe he thought I was the federal bus station inspector.

I had been attempting to call Deanna Newers, a Professor at Gulf Coast Community College and community historian who also worked at the Mardi Gras Museum in the Magnolia Hotel, which, the brochure said, “still possesses the aura of the Old South.” I finally located Professor Newers at the Museum. While waiting for her, I drifted through the exhibits of mannequins in masks and capes, a collection of mutely strutting gargoyles. The mannequins were all white, as were all the faces in the vintage photographs on the wall. The brochure said that “The black community had their own parade.” (No museum, though.) After reading a melodramatic tribute to the “Southern Gentleman” on the wall, I noted that the Mardi Gras King and Queen for 1949 were Howard McDonnell and Mary Rose Venus, respectively. The queen of the festival was officially dubbed “Queen Ixolib,” which is Biloxi spelled backwards, like reading the word in a mirror. The Native Americans who involuntarily lent their name to this town might consider the inversion a telling commentary.

Professor Newers graciously guided me on a walking tour of the town. As we walked, she was able to point out the buildings that stood in 1949, and recall their demolished siblings. “Your father would have seen the Woolworth’s over there,” she said, or “your father would have seen the Masonic Temple here.” I wanted to remind Deanna Newers that he was not in Biloxi on vacation in 1949, that there was no tour for him, that the Woolworth’s would not have served him at the white lunch counter and the denizens of



the Masonic Temple would not have ushered him into their secret society. I wanted to tell her to stop referring to my father as if he, too, were demolished brick, to tell her that he was a human being of almost seventy years with a diseased heart. But I wanted to match her graciousness, so I said nothing.

Finally, we arrived at the corner of Main Street and Howard Avenue. She informed me that the jail and municipal courthouse once stood here. We found ourselves in a parking lot. I was confronted with the startling fact that my place of pilgrimage was gone. While I was still working to assimilate that information, Professor Newers gestured across the street. We had circled back to the bus station where, she said, my father must have been arrested.

But that had to be wrong. My father clearly recalled being driven some distance in a police car from the bus station to the jail. If he had been arrested here, the police simply would have walked him across the street. Now nothing was certain. That procession of spectres, Frank Espada among them, was marching silently back into 1949 without a glance at me, as if that year were the foggy gulf and they were wading into its waters.

Then, at the Biloxi library, we encountered another community historian named Ray Bellande. Born in 1943, he recalled from childhood a Trailways station by the seawall, and offered to walk with me to the place where the station once stood. On the way, Ray Bellande endeavored to explain why my father was jailed in Biloxi. He squinted at me and said, slowly: "People had fewer personal freedoms back then." I yearned for a Distinguished Professor of Euphemism to translate the words "people" and "freedoms."

Rather predictably, a casino was being constructed on the spot where the Trailways station had been. This was Beau Rivage, or "Beautiful Shore," a huge, yellow, concrete and steel shell where cranes dangled like the fishing poles of a god lazily creating yet another world. Beau Rivage was owned by Golden Nugget Casinos of Las Vegas, and would open to the gamblers by the end of the year.

Wearily confusing my timelines, I visualized my father dealing blackjack at the Beau Rivage. Then I searched for him in the newspapers: the *Daily Herald* for December 1949, on microfilm at the library. Ray Bellande watched over my shoulder, reading me

## 40 RACE TRAITOR

reading the microfilm, and repeating: "I don't think they would have reported this sort of thing."

They reported everything else. In the *Daily Herald* for December 24<sup>th</sup>, we read that judge J.D. Stennis fined John Michael Buren and Robert Harold Carter \$10 apiece for disorderly conduct; fined Willie Parker, George Carlson, and Broker Huddleston \$5 apiece for drunkenness; and fined Percy Case the sum of \$1 for a parking violation.

Some of these men were probably my father's company in jail that week. Moreover, J.D. Stennis, whose name surfaces repeatedly in the *Daily Herald*, was certainly the judge who sent my father to jail. There was a Senator John Stennis who championed segregation in Congress for many years. It is not unreasonable to speculate that a Mississippi judge may have been kin to the Senator.

There was more news of crime in the *Daily Herald* from the week before Christmas 1949. Spec's Service Station was robbed, ten dollars in nickels taken from the cash register. A movie camera and binoculars were stolen from a car at the Hotel Biloxi. Police arrested an "armed negro" named Willie Richardson, who allegedly attempted to shoot "another negro," one Ernest Frank. Was Richardson the man my father saw in jail, badly beaten?

The newspaper reported other happenings in the "negro" community: the "Colored 4-H Banquet," the "Colored Toy Doll Fund Distribution," and "Colored Death." That was the headline for an obituary, as in, "Colored Death: Christopher Columbus Monroe, colored, a native of Alabama and a resident of Saucier for many years."

By bizarre coincidence, this was also the week that Joseph Stalin turned seventy, and every day the newspaper featured stories and columns such as, "Is Atheistic Communism Making a Deity of Stalin?" DeWitt MacKenzie opined that the answer was affirmative, and reasoned: "virtually all peoples, including primitive savages, believe in some kind of god." Apparently, the worship of Jefferson Davis was not considered primitive. There were also announcements of numerous Christmas parties and advertisements from local businesses proclaiming their belief in the Christian deity.

**B**ut Ray Bellande was right. The name of Frank Espada was nowhere mentioned in these pages. There was one more place to search for him: a law library back home, where I could research the legal history of segregation in public transportation. I am, after all, a lawyer, a fact I sometimes forget myself in this English-professor phase of my existence. At the law library, I made one final discovery: Frank Espada never broke the law at all.

In June 1946, three and a half years before the incident in Biloxi, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia* (66 S.Ct. 1050) that state laws of segregation could not be applied to interstate bus travelers. Bus companies engaged in interstate travel could not segregate their passengers by color, and the driver could not compel a passenger to change seats because of color.

Irene Morgan, a Black woman traveling from Gloucester County, Virginia, to Baltimore, was arrested when she refused to sit in the back of the bus, and convicted of violating Section 4097d of the Virginia Code. She appealed, eventually to the Supreme Court. The argument ingeniously constructed by her attorneys, Thurgood Marshall and William Hastie, attacked the Virginia law as an “invalid burden on interstate commerce.” They could not address the inherent injustice of de jure segregation in 1946 and win the case. The Court agreed with their argument, invoking the Commerce Clause of the U.S. Constitution.

Marshall and Hastie demonstrated that the application of local segregation laws to interstate buses in ten different Southern states was impractical, disruptive. Moreover, as the Court pointed out, the buses had “seats convenient for rest. On such interstate journeys the enforcement of the requirements for reseating would be disturbing.” In other words, the driver might have to awaken a sleeping passenger; the Court envisioned the exact scenario in which my father found himself. This would be an “invalid burden on interstate commerce.” The ironic fact that the Court decided the case on these narrow technical grounds, never directly challenging the system of racial segregation nor recognizing the deeper injury to Irene Morgan as a human being, illustrates why the Supreme Court is rarely a source of great literature or profound moral guidance.

According to Taylor Branch in *Parting the Waters*, his landmark study of the civil rights movement, the decision was not “widely enforced in the South.” The Congress of Racial Equality sponsored a bus ride through the South in 1947, called the Journey of Reconciliation, to test enforcement of the new ruling. Branch relates that “white opponents met the challenge with beatings,” and civil rights leader Bayard Rustin “was among those convicted under local segregation laws.” In the midst of appeals, NAACP lawyers lost critical evidence: the interstate bus tickets. Rustin and his friends found themselves on a Southern chain gang. In 1963, my father would meet Bayard Rustin at the March on Washington; the following year, they worked closely together on a New York City public school boycott.

Throughout the South, state and local officials, governors, mayors, judges, and police, defied the Supreme Court and continued to implement segregation for another generation. An attorney at Greater Boston Legal Services, Jacqueline Bowman, once told me of a town in Tennessee where Blacks were still required to sit at the back of the bus in the 1970s, years after all segregation on public transportation had been outlawed. For every George Wallace, blocking the doorway to Black students and television cameras at the University of Alabama, there must have been legions of lesser officials throughout the hierarchy quietly, even surreptitiously, enforcing the same racial code.

**I**n all probability, at least some of the actors in the Biloxi drama knew that Jim Crow could no longer reach into the door of that bus. It had been three and a half years since a police officer in Mississippi could legally arrest anyone refusing to sit at the back of a Trailways bus coming from or headed to another state; three and a half years since a judge in Mississippi could by law incarcerate an interstate bus traveler who refused to change seats because of color.

Perhaps the bus driver was unaware of changes in the law, and was simply acting to preserve the order of his tiny racial universe, at midnight, on an empty bus, as if shuffling the black and white pieces on a chessboard. On the other hand, Trailways drivers should have been informed by the company that they could no longer segregate their passengers on interstate trips; that may explain why the driver in San Antonio allowed my father to sit directly behind him.

What the arresting officers or jailers knew can never be proven. Yet, my father was not fingerprinted, photographed, or allowed a phone call when he was brought to the Biloxi jail, a shadowy scenario closer to an abduction than a legal arrest. The farther this case moved up the ladder of authority, the more likely it was that someone acted consciously to enforce a law that was no longer law. The Biloxi judge was part of a judiciary in the South that was acutely sensitive to the edicts of the Supreme Court on segregation, and resisted those edicts. His concern that my father not be reported AWOL may well have been born of a desire to avoid an Air Force inquiry into the airman's disappearance. From the bench, he scolded my father about his lack of respect for the law, in a backwater fiefdom where the Supreme Court had no jurisdiction.

Finally, the absence of a journalistic record is striking. In a small-town newspaper in which everything was reported, from one-dollar parking violations to the theft of nickels at the gas station, there was no report of this incident. An understanding between the authorities and the newspaper in Biloxi would hardly be unique.

Frank Espada did not know that the law had changed. He was aware that he might be subjected to the rules of segregation. Those rules usually required only "any appreciable Negro blood" to be invoked, and, as he put it, "I'd been called 'nigger' by the cops before." In his mind, he was engaged in an act of civil disobedience against an unjust law. When I told him about the *Morgan* case, that he had never violated the law, he said: "Then I was kidnapped."

Sitting in the law library, I became aware that I was moving in the rhythms of a strangely familiar ceremony. I was acting like a lawyer preparing the defense of a client. I was ready to argue Frank Espada's case before that judge in Mississippi half a century ago. I wanted to brandish my copy of *Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia* before the judge and demand the acquittal of the defendant.

The fact is that he probably would have been sent to jail anyway. I have argued before too many judges who were cleverly venomous, arrogant as petty aristocracy, or merely doltish. From my days representing indigent tenants in court, I remember one white-haired judge who would immediately award victory to the landlord if it

were revealed that the tenant was receiving welfare, which the judge regarded as shameful. Another judge would hold hearings that consisted of one question: Does the tenant owe rent? The laws of rent withholding aside, this judge would instantly render judgment for the landlord, with the breezy advice to the tenant that he or she could appeal. Most vividly, I recall representing a prison inmate at a disciplinary hearing. The “judges” were two guards and a social worker. Moments before the hearing, as I reviewed my opening argument that the supposed offense was a physical impossibility, my dreadlocked client leaned across the table and whispered to me: “Now don’t forget the appeal!” His instincts proved to be reliable.

So I cannot unscrew the jailhouse door from its hinges, nor make justice appear in my hands like a magician’s dove.

What I found in Biloxi was the splintering of history. I unearthed a fragment, jagged and inscrutable as a shard of pottery or bone. But this fragment—my father’s story—is evidence of how actual human beings behaved in the face of an enormous crime: the orchestration of a racial caste system with its roots in slavery. The crime is so vast that the scattered fragments of its history are buried everywhere, and everywhere the graves are unmarked.

Now Biloxi’s history fossilizes beneath a proliferation of casinos. A casino is under construction at the place where my father was arrested; the parking lot where the jail and courthouse stood belongs to a corporation called Casino America. The casinos sprout along the coastline for economic reasons, not for the calculated interment of the past. But in their pseudo-elegance, their air of ersatz adventure, the casinos simultaneously evoke the shiny, prosperous image of the New South and the misty, romantic image of the Old South. Both myths demand that collective memory must plow the bodies of segregation and slavery deep into the ground. Certain histories have always been obliterated for the sake of commerce. And what better metaphor for the impulse to forget than the act of gambling, the vertigo of the roulette wheel? Everybody can play pirate.

**T**he community historians want to preserve old Biloxi, conserve the old buildings in a historic district. Some of that knowledge is useful, and I am grateful for their cooperation, which would have been impossible in my father’s Mississippi. But,

for all their good will and good manners, they cannot seem to transcend the notion that history consists of minutiae in neutral colors, the what-was-where-when. This also constitutes a splintering of history. I think of wandering in the Mardi Gras Museum, in the palace of Queen Ixolib and her mannequin handmaidens, an empire where words are mirrored backwards and all the revelers are white. It is here that the front of the bus becomes the back of the bus.

The splintering of my father's history began at the instant of his arrest. By not taking his fingerprints, the police in effect wiped away their own. This is characteristic of splintered history: the fragments are scattered immediately in the sand, over time becoming driftwood, beach glass. Thus the perpetrators, the collaborators, the bystanders, the ambivalent, and the ignorant can all claim innocence for themselves and future generations: everyone is good.

On occasion, in a euphoria of alcohol and bloodlust, a lynching party and the witnesses to that killing would pose for the camera, smirking and pointing at the corpse in the trees. But soon after, the corpse was ash, the smirking mouths pursed in secrecy. Of course, my father was not lynched; but segregating the buses, or jailing someone for refusing segregation, falls somewhere along the same spectrum of terror and humiliation. Quotidian segregation could only be enforced by the constant threat of violence, and was itself a form of violence. In my poem, "Imagine the Angels of Bread," I envision a time when "darkskinned men / lynched a century ago / return to sip coffee quietly / with the apologizing descendants / of their executioners." During my time in Biloxi, no one I met expressed the slightest compassion or regret for what happened there to my father.

Yet, I have that fragment, an heirloom more prized than the family pocketwatch I lost twenty years ago. I can no longer rub the brick of jailhouse or bus station, but I still have words, my father's and mine. I write this account, and so build my father a museum of words, where a glass case displays the seat on the bus where he said "no."

I may build that museum more for myself than for him. I still want to read the walls, like a high school student on a field trip, and educate myself on the complex subject of my father. We were estranged once, not speaking for three years. At forty, I realize that

## 46 RACE TRAITOR

we must speak while we still have the power of speech, that there will be millennia enough for silence.

**A**t the end of my visit to Biloxi, I returned without my local guides to the parking lot at the corner of Main Street and Howard Avenue. Here, I said to myself, and carved my heel into the concrete and dirt. There was an epiphany on the bottom of my shoe.

I keep returning to one moment in Frank Espada's narrative. When my father left Biloxi for Illinois, after a week in jail, *he sat in the front of the bus*. He says today that he probably would have moved to the back if told to do so, that he was concerned about going AWOL. If that were the case, however, he could have sat in the back to begin with and eliminated the possibility of another arrest. What he did was dangerous: a second act of defiance could have provoked a far more hostile reaction than the vicious pettiness of that first confrontation. His uniform might not have shielded him from lethal consequences. Taylor Branch reports that Southern mobs "assassinated no fewer than six Negro war veterans in a single three week period" during the summer of 1946.

The second act of defiance was even more significant. This moment points like a storm-pounded weathervane in the direction of my father's political and ethical choices for the next fifty years. As a poet, I aspire to the grace and metaphor of that gesture; as a teacher, I aspire to the clarity and conviction of that gesture.

I always will. I am sending my father a postcard that reads "Greetings From Biloxi"—unless he holds it up to a mirror.



# Race and the Enlightenment

## Part 2: The Anglo-French Enlightenment and Beyond

BY LOREN GOLDNER

*“The animal is immediately one with its life activity, not distinct from it. The animal is its life activity. Man makes his life activity itself into an object of will and consciousness. It is not a determination with which he immediately identifies. [The animal]...produces in a one-sided way while man produces universally...The animal only produces itself while man reproduces the whole of nature.”*

Karl Marx, 1844

*“They enslaved the Negro, they said, because he was not a man, and when he behaved like a man they called him a monster.”*

C.L.R. James  
THE BLACK JACOBINS (1938)

*“The only race is the rat race.”*

Wall graffiti,  
London rioters, 1981

The Western<sup>1</sup> invention of the idea of race in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, at the beginning of the Enlightenment, was not merely a degradation of the peoples of color to whom it was applied.<sup>2</sup> Such a degradation had to be preceded, and accompanied, by a comparable degradation of the view of man within Western culture itself. A society that sees the racial “Other” in terms of animality must first experience that animality within itself. “If you’re going to keep someone in the gutter,” as a black activist of the 60s put it, “you’re going to be down there with them.”

Part One, it will be recalled, showed how rationalist Biblical criticism in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century tore away the last of the myths, drawn from Greco-Roman classicism and Judeo-Christian

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messianism, which purported to explain the origins of the New World Indians in terms of traditions then known to Europeans. This critique unintentionally left in its wake a new, purely biological vision of “natural man” which, in some instances (such as the North American colonies), fused with the new white supremacist color-code justifying the Atlantic slave trade, and the previously unknown idea of race, the identification of cultural attributes with physical features such as skin color, was born.

It is now necessary to situate the Enlightenment between what preceded it and what followed it, in order to see how it got caught up in this definition of human beings as animals, which underlies any association of cultural attributes with skin color or physical features. As stated in Part One, the Enlightenment as such is neither inherently racist nor valid only for “white European males.” But the Enlightenment today cannot be defended merely in terms of the Enlightenment alone. Its limited rationality can only be adequately understood and seen in true proportion by those who see a higher rationality. The best of the Enlightenment, taken by itself, is disarmed against the worst of the Enlightenment.

An ideology is best understood when seen against the background from which it began, and against the future in which it will end.

The view of human beings as animals is inseparable from the birth of bourgeois and capitalist society, which simultaneously gave rise to two interrelated questions which that society has never solved, and will never solve: the question of the proletariat, and the question of the underdeveloped world. (By “animality” in this article I mean what Marx meant in the above quote: someone [i.e. a wage laborer] compelled by society to identify themselves with their life activity. From this fundamental degradation flow others, namely compulsory identification by any presumably “fixed” “natural” quality, such as skin color, gender, or sexual orientation.)

The philosophically-disinclined reader is asked to bear with the following, for in a critique of the Enlightenment, it is necessary to first set up the question philosophically. Ideas by themselves of course do not make history. To go beyond the idea of race—the connection between biology and cultural attributes which, for one strand of the Enlightenment, succeeded medieval religious identities—the mere idea of the human race would be sufficient. But

before locating these questions in the balance of real social forces where they are actually decided, it is necessary to know what the questions are. Once they are posed, it will be clear why the immediate attitudes on race and slavery of this or that Enlightenment thinker are not the real issue; the issue is rather the view of man of even the best of the Enlightenment which is ultimately disarmed for a critique of its bastard offspring.

The new society which arose out of the collapse of feudalism in early modern, pre-Enlightenment Europe, between 1450 and 1650, was revolutionary relative to any pre-existing or then-contemporary society. Why? It was revolutionary because it connected the idea of humanity to the new idea of an "actual infinity."<sup>3</sup>

What does this mean? In social terms, "infinity" in class societies prior to capitalism is the world of creativity, e.g. art, philosophy, science, usually monopolized by an elite, as well as improvements in the society's relationship to nature, first in agriculture and then elsewhere, usually made by skilled craftsmen. "Infinity" here means innovations that allow a society to reproduce itself at a higher level, by creating more "free surplus" for its members, or cultural innovation that anticipates or expresses those improvements in human freedom. (The word "infinite" is appropriate because the elasticity of these innovations is infinite.) These improvements in a society's relationship to nature are universal and world-historical, beginning with stone and bronze tools, and societies that fail to make them run up against "natural barriers" (known today as "ecology crises") to their existence and either stagnate or are destroyed, often by other societies. This freedom in their relationship to nature through such improvements is what distinguishes human beings from animals, which mainly do not "use tools" but which "are" tools (e.g. beavers, termites) in a fixed relationship to their environment.

Such improvements, once again, have occurred many times and in many places throughout human history. But history is also filled with examples of brilliant civilizations (such as Tang or particularly Sung China) where many such innovations were lost in blocked stagnation or terrible social retrogression. What was revolutionary about the bourgeois-capitalist society which first appeared in Europe, initially in northern Italy and in Flanders ca. 1100, was that these innovations were institutionalized at the center of social life,<sup>4</sup>

as necessity. For the first time in history, a practical bridge was potentially established between the creative freedom, previously restricted to small elites, and society's improvements in its relationship to nature.

It was this institutionalization which made possible the appearance of "actual infinity." In the ancient (Greco-Roman) and medieval worlds, "infinity" was expressed in a limited way. The Greco-Roman elite had aristocratic values, and considered any relationship to material production<sup>5</sup> to be utterly beneath itself, an attitude which meshed well with a "horror of the infinite" often expressed in their ideology. Medieval philosophy, largely shaped by Aristotle in Christian, Moslem and Jewish thought, generally considered an "actual infinity" to be an abomination, often associated with blasphemy. It was exactly this "blasphemy" which was developed in the early modern period of capitalism by Nicholas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno, Spinoza, and Leibniz.

While these figures developed the concept of actual infinity in theological or philosophical terms prior to the Enlightenment, its implications for the appearance of the concept of race can best be understood by looking ahead to its further development, in social terms, after the Enlightenment, from Kant via Hegel and Feuerbach to Marx. Hegel called Enlightenment (Newtonian) infinity "bad infinity." The practical realization of pre-Enlightenment actual infinity by Marx retrospectively clarifies the impasse (and social relevance) of Enlightenment bad infinity, without an even longer philosophical detour.

Many people know Marx's quip that communist man "will fish in the morning, hunt in the afternoon, and write criticism in the evening, without for all that being a fisherman, hunter or critic." But the underlying theoretical meaning of that quip is not often grasped; it is usually understood merely to mean the overcoming of the division of labor, but it is rather more than that. It is the practical expression of what is meant here by "actual infinity." It is the concrete expression of the overcoming of the state of animality, a reduction of human beings to their fixed life activity in the capitalist division of labor. Marx expressed the same idea more elaborately in the *Grundrisse*:

“Capital’s ceaseless striving towards the general form of wealth drives labour beyond the limits of its natural paltriness, and thus creates the material elements for the development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption, and whose labor therefore no longer appears as labor, but *as the full development of activity itself*, in which natural necessity in its direct form has disappeared, because a historically created need has taken the place of the natural one.”<sup>6</sup>  
[emphasis added]

The “full development of activity itself” is the “practical” realization of actual infinity. It means that every *specific* activity is always the “external” expression of a more fundamental *general* activity, having an expanded version of itself as its own goal. In such a social condition, the immediate productive activity of freely-associated individuals would always be in reality self-(re)production aimed at the multiplication of human powers, including the innovation of new powers. Every activity relates back to the actor. “Actual infinity” in this sense is the practical presence of the general in every specific activity in the here and now. For the Enlightenment, an object was merely a thing; for Hegel and above all for Marx, an object is a *relationship*, mediated by a thing.

The link between the mechanist revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the attribution of animality to human beings is Newton’s theory of infinity. This—what Hegel called “bad infinity”—is the nub of the question. The infinity, or infinitesimal, of Newton’s calculus, which solved the problems of mathematically describing the motions of bodies in space and time, was an “asymptotic” procedure (with roots in Zeno’s paradox in Greek philosophy) involving the infinite division of space or time approaching a limit that was never reached. With Newton, infinity for the West became infinite REPETITION toward a goal that was never reached. (It was an appropriate conception for an era in which Man was an ideal to be approached but never attained.) This infinity, as shall be seen, expressed the social reality of the new capitalist division of labor, as theorized by Adam Smith, who praised the social efficiency achieved by the relegation of the individual worker to the endless, lifelong repetition of one gesture. With the emergence of this new social phenomenon of the relegation of the atomized individual to a single gesture, early

capitalism transformed the human being into the wage worker who (as Marx put it in the quote used at the outset) was precisely identified with his/her life activity, that is into an animal. This was the degradation of the human, simultaneously with the subjugation of non-European peoples, into which the new concept of race could move, in the last decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, following the lead of Sir William Petty's *Scale of Creatures* (1676).<sup>7</sup> The Enlightenment could say that some (e.g. dark-skinned) people were animals and beasts of burden because the disappearance, under the blows of the new mechanistic science, of the earlier, Greco-Roman or Judeo-Christian views of the human made it potentially possible, in the right circumstances, to see *anyone* as sub-human, starting with the laboring classes of Europe itself. (This potential would require 250 years to work itself out, from Malthus to the the fascist paroxysm of Social Darwinist "living space" [Lebensraum] for the "master race.")

But it is necessary to be careful; not all Enlightenment theorists of the new idea of "race" were racists; some used the term in a descriptive anthropological sense without value judgement. What laid the foundation for the virulent 19<sup>th</sup> century theories of race was the taxonomic-classificatory "fixity of species" with which the Enlightenment replaced the older Christian view of the unity of man: "It is the assertion of biologically fixed, unchanging 'races' with different mental and moral value judgements ("higher", "lower") which became the decisive criterion for modern racism and a key argument for its propagation. Bernier, Buffon, Linnaeus, Kant and Blumenbach develop their systems for the classification and hierarchy of humanity with extremely varied positions on slavery and on the humanity of "races" both outside Europe as well as among the "whites" who were increasingly dominant in world affairs."<sup>8</sup>

The following is a chart of the major Enlightenment theories of race, with author, work and year of publication:

1666	Georgius Hornius (ca. 1620-1670) <i>Arca Noae</i>	Japhetites (white), Semites (yellow), Hamites (black)
1684	Francois Bernier (1620- 1688) <i>Nouvelle division de la terre</i>	Europeans, Africans, Chinese and Japanese, Lapps
1735	Linnaeus (1707-1778) <i>Systema naturae</i>	Europaeus albus (white), Americanus rubescens (red), Asiaticus luridus (yellow), Afer niger (black)
1749	Buffon (1707-1788) <i>Histoire naturelle</i>	Lapp Polar, Tartar, South Asian, European, Ethiopian, American
1774	Edward Long (1734-1813) <i>History of Jamaica</i>	genus homo: Europeans and related peoples; blacks; orangutans
1775	Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752) <i>De generis humanis varietate nativa</i>	Caucasians; Mongolians; Ethiopians; Americans; Malays
1775	Immanuel Kant <i>Von den verschiedenen Rassen der Menschen</i>	Whites, Negroes, the Mongolian or Calmuckic race, the Hindu race
1785	Christian Meiners (1747- 1810) <i>Grundriss zur Geschichte der Menschheit</i>	“light, beautiful” race, “dark, ugly” race

(The above chart, with small additions, is translated from I. Geiss, *Geschichte des Rassismus*, Frankfurt 1988, pp. 142-143.)

The Enlightenment was, as such, neither racist nor an ideology of relevance only to “white European males.” Nevertheless, it presents the following conundrum. On one hand, the Western Enlightenment in its broad mainstream was indisputably universalist and egalitarian, and therefore created powerful weapons for the

attack on any doctrine of racial supremacy; on the other hand, the Enlightenment, as the preceding chart shows, just as indisputably gave birth to the very concept of race, and some of its illustrious representatives believed that whites were superior to all others. This problem cannot be solved by lining up Enlightenment figures according to their views on slavery and white supremacy. Adam Smith, better known as the theoretician of the free market and apologist for the capitalist division of labor, attacked both, whereas Hobbes and Locke justified slavery, and such eminences as Thomas Jefferson, who favored abolition (however tepidly) and defended the French Revolution even in its Jacobin phase, firmly believed that blacks were biologically inferior to whites.

This kind of polling of Enlightenment figures for their views on slavery and race is, further, an extremely limited first approach to the question, easily susceptible to the worst kind of anachronism. What was remarkable about the Enlightenment, seen in a world context, was not that some of its distinguished figures supported slavery and white supremacy but that significant numbers of them opposed both. As Part One showed, slavery as an institution flourished in the color-blind 16<sup>th</sup> century Mediterranean slave pool, and no participating society, Christian or Moslem, European, Turkish, Arab or African, questioned it. Well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Western attacks on New World slavery only attempted to curb its excesses. Radical Protestant sects in North America (the Mennonites, then the Quakers) were well ahead of secular Enlightenment figures in calling for outright abolition, between 1688 and 1740, and a political movement for abolition,<sup>9</sup> again with religious groups more preponderant than secular Enlightenment figures, only emerged in the Anglo-American world in the final quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as the Enlightenment was culminating in the American and French Revolutions. There is no intrinsic relationship between Hume's philosophical skepticism or Kant's critique of it, and their common belief that whites were innately superior.<sup>10</sup>

Any critique of the limits of the Enlightenment, where the question of race is concerned, has to begin by acknowledging the radicalism of the best of the Enlightenment, for that side of the Enlightenment, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, was radical in relation to the Western societies in which it appeared,<sup>11</sup> and also radical



relative to many non-Western societies it influenced. Readers of C.L.R. James' account of the Haitian Revolution will recall his description of the abolition of slavery in all colonies by the French National Assembly in February 1794, when the Jacobins and the even more radical Mountain were at the height of their power, under the pressure of the Parisian masses in the streets. Abolition in Haiti had been won by the black slaves led by Toussaint l'Ouverture in August 1793, but, threatened by British and Spanish military intervention to seize the colony and restore slavery, the Haitian revolutionaries wished to remain allied to France, and wanted abolition confirmed by the Assembly. Neither Robespierre nor the Mountain wanted it, but the radicalization of the situation under mass pressure, in the most extreme year of the revolution, forced it on them:

“...The workers and peasants of France could not have been expected to take any interest in the colonial question in normal times, any more than one can expect similar interest from British or French workers today (James was writing in 1938-LG). But now they were roused. They were striking at royalty, tyranny, reaction and oppression of all types, and with these they included slavery. The prejudice of race is superficially the most irrational of all prejudices, and by a perfectly comprehensible reaction the Paris workers, from indifference in 1789, had come by this time to detest no section of the aristocracy so much as those whom they called “the aristocracy of the skin”...Paris between March 1793 and July 1794 was one of the supreme epochs of political history. Never until 1917 were masses ever to have such powerful influence—for it was no more than influence—on any government. In these few months of their nearest approach to power they did not forget the blacks. They felt toward them as brothers, and the old slave-owners, whom they knew to be supporters of the counter-revolution, they hated as if Frenchmen themselves had suffered under the whip.”<sup>12</sup>

Bellay, a former slave and deputy to the Convention from San Domingo (as Haiti was then called) presented his credentials and on the following day introduced a motion for the abolition of slavery. It was passed without debate and by acclamation, and was the radical high water mark of the revolution. As James said, it was “one of the

most important legislative acts ever passed by any political assembly.”

It is certainly true that the proto-proletarian action of the Parisian masses in 1793-94, and their link-up with the overthrow of slavery in San Domingo, went beyond any political ideas of the Enlightenment of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> They were still too weak, and capitalist society too undeveloped, for them to be anything but brilliant precursors of later revolutions in which, for brief moments, revolts in the “center” fuse with revolts in the “periphery” and mark a turn in world history.<sup>14</sup> It was not in France but in Germany, over the next two decades, that philosophers, above all G.F.W. Hegel, would theorize the actions of the Parisian masses into a theory of politics that went beyond the Enlightenment and laid the foundations for the theory of the communist movement later articulated by Marx.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, nowhere did the radical Enlightenment program of “Liberty—Equality—Fraternity” acquire such concreteness as a program for mass action as in Santo Domingo after 1791 and in Paris in 1793-1794; Toussaint l’Ouverture had himself studied French Enlightenment thought. Thus the “best of the Enlightenment” is revealed precisely by the actions of people who, influenced by it, were already in the process of going beyond it, with practice (as always) well in advance of theory. This realization of the Enlightenment, as the revolution ebbed, was also the end of the Enlightenment, for reasons too complex to be treated here.<sup>16</sup> The Enlightenment had foreseen neither the Jacobin Terror nor Napoleon, and could only be salvaged by figures such as Hegel and Marx, who subsumed the Enlightenment into a new historical rationality of the kind defended here.

One strand of the worst of the Enlightenment was realized in the work of Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), laying the basis for an ideology which is still rampant today, and completely entwined, in the U.S. and many other countries, with racism.

Malthus’s basic idea, as many people know, was that human population increases geometrically while agricultural production increases only arithmetically, making periodic famine inevitable. Malthus therefore proposed measures for “grinding the faces of the poor” (as the saying goes), opposing a minimum wage and welfare because they encouraged profligate reproduction of the working

classes, and welcoming periodic epidemic, famine and war as useful checks on excess population.<sup>17</sup> (In contrast to today's Malthusians, such as the World Bank and the IMF, who preach zero population growth to Third World countries, Malthus also opposed contraception for the poor because the "reserve army of the unemployed" kept wages down.) Even in Malthus' own time, innovations in agriculture had doubled production in England, but Malthus was above all concerned with developing a "scientific" facade for policies aimed at maximizing accumulation and controlling the vast armies of poor people unleashed by the early, brutal phase of the Industrial Revolution.

It would be a travesty to call Parson Malthus an "Enlightenment thinker"; he was already denounced by liberals and radicals of his own time. But his linear view of agricultural production was a direct extrapolation, in political economy, of the linearity and "bad infinity" of Newtonian physics and the Enlightenment ontology. Malthusian man was Hobbesian man: an animal, performing a fixed function in the division of labor in a society with fixed resources. Malthus was not so opaque as to deny invention, but his linear view, which he shared with all political economy (as shall be shown momentarily) concealed the reality, demonstrated many times in history, that innovations in productivity (and not merely in agriculture) periodically move society forward in non-linear leaps, from apples to oranges, so to speak. (In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, for example, end-of-the-world cults proliferated over the coming depletion of the forests in Europe's wood-based economy; a century later, inventions in the use of iron had made coal, not wood, Europe's major fuel, obviating the earlier hysteria.) Resources, like human capabilities, are not "fixed", but are periodically redefined by innovation, and major innovation ripples through a whole society, creating the non-linear "apples to oranges" effect.

The same linearity, however, pervaded even classical political economy, with direct Enlightenment sources (most importantly in Adam Smith), from which Malthus may be seen as an early, but significant, deviation. David Ricardo (1772-1823) was praised by Marx as the most advanced political economist, the theoretician of "production for production's sake." (For Marx, by contrast, "the multiplication of human powers," not production per se, was "its own goal.") But although innovation was far more central to

Ricardo's economics, he too succumbed to the linearity of his premises. Malthus's bourgeois "end of the world" scenario was overpopulation; for the productivist Ricardo, the unleashed productivity of capitalism would be strangled by ground rent as poorer and poorer soils were used for raw materials. Like Malthus, Ricardo failed to conceive of "quantum-leap" innovations that would supercede the need for specific, limited raw materials. Thus the two major "end of the world" scenarios produced by 19<sup>th</sup> century economics grew out of Enlightenment, bad-infinity premises that saw even innovation in terms of linear *repetition*. Ricardo culminated classical political economy's theorization of *labor*, but the limitations of a bourgeois viewpoint prevented him from grasping the idea of human *labor-power*, out of which "apples to oranges" improvements in society's relation to nature periodically occur.<sup>18</sup>

Marx's concept of labor-power is the concrete realization, in social terms, of the "actual infinity" of pre-Enlightenment thought; it is the nucleus of a rationality beyond the Enlightenment, a rationality centered on the "fishing in the morning, hunting in the afternoon, and criticism in the evening" notion explained earlier, in which man goes beyond a fixed place in the division of labor, "fixed" natural resources determined by one phase of productivity, and the fixity of species in relation to their environment that characterizes animals. It thereby goes beyond the worst of the Enlightenment, the Hobbesian view of man which, in concrete historical circumstances, fuses with Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment race theory.

The preceding, then, was a "theoretical" exposition of the flaws of the Enlightenment world view (the general world view of bourgeois-capitalist society in its progressive phase), which have disarmed it against race theory and racism, the association of physical features with cultural traits, and even, in their early phase, contributed to them. It has the advantage of going "beneath" the wide array of views for and against slavery and white supremacist race theory held by individual Enlightenment figures to the foundations of a world view they shared, but it has the great disadvantage of posing "theoretically" the evolution of ideas which are in fact the product of a shifting balance of forces in real history.

Marx's realization of pre-Enlightenment actual infinity in his theory of labor power superseded both the Christian idea of humanity and the Enlightenment view of Man in a concrete-practical view of real people in history. But, as stated earlier, if race were merely an idea, it could be overcome by another idea. The connection first made by some Enlightenment figures between biology and culture became socially effective in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century not as a mere idea but as a legitimation of the Atlantic slave trade, of Western world domination, and in the U.S., the special race stratification of working people as it first emerged in 17<sup>th</sup> century Virginia; it was deflated neither by Marx's writings, still less by the real movements organized by many of Marx's followers (whose relation to the overcoming of race was often ideologically rhetorical and practically ambiguous, at best). The biological idea of race has been marginalized, but not made extinct, in official Western culture since the 19<sup>th</sup> century by anti-colonial struggles and the emergence of former colonies as industrial powers, by the culmination of Western race theory in Nazism, and by the successes of the black movement in the U.S. in the 1960s, with both national and international repercussions. It was also marginalized, within the official culture, by a critique launched in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by figures such as Franz Boas and Robert Ezra Park, which began as a distinctly minority view among educated whites and which increasingly drew momentum from these events. Nevertheless, beginning in the late 1960s, and accelerating in the climate of world economic crisis since then, the biology-culture connection and its (usually explicit) racist edge began to make a comeback in the work of Konrad Lorenz, Banfield, Jensen, Schockley, Herrnstein, E.O. Wilson, and more recently in the controversy around Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve*.<sup>19</sup> Biological theories of culture (with no racist intent) are also reappearing in the utterances of such figures of liberal credentials as Camille Paglia and Carl Degler.<sup>20</sup>

The history of the idea of race as the biological determinant of culture after the Enlightenment is far beyond the scope of this article. After the French Revolution, the backlash against the Enlightenment took many forms, but the relevant one here was the intensification of the biology-culture theory of race first developed by some Enlightenment figures, and relative oblivion for the more neutral anthropological use of the term, not linked to judgemental

color-coded race hierarchies, developed by others, even if still tainted with a “fixity of species” outlook. But the key point is that when deeply anti-Enlightenment figures such as Count Gobineau<sup>21</sup> (1816-1882) began the intensification of race theory that pointed directly to fascism, they had already found the concept of race in the Enlightenment legacy. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was common coin in both Europe and America to refer to the “Anglo-Saxon race,” the “Latin race,” the “Slavic race,” the “Oriental race,” the “Negro race” etc. with or without (and usually with) judgmental ranking,<sup>22</sup> and usually assuming a biological basis for cultural differences. (Phrenology, which claimed to determine intelligence by skull shape and size, also remained a respectable science until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.) The admixture of Social Darwinism after 1870 (for which Darwin is not to be blamed) and the massive land grab known as imperialism created an international climate in which, by 1900, it was the rare educated white European or American who questioned race theory root and branch. Forerunners of *The Bell Curve* routinely appeared in the U.S. up to the 1920s demonstrating “scientifically” the biological inferiority of the Irish, Italians, Poles, and Jews, and influenced the Immigration Act of 1924, sharply curtailing immigration and imposing quotas on such nationalities.<sup>23</sup> Eugenics accelerated in popularity in the Anglo-American world from 1850 onward, and Hitler and the Nazis claimed that they took many ideas, such as forced sterilization, from the American eugenics movement. Margaret Sanger, the famous crusader for birth control, was a white supremacist, as were a number of early American suffragettes and feminists.<sup>24</sup> Some sections of the pre-World War I Socialist Party made open appeals to white supremacy, and the SP right-wing leader Victor Berger was an unabashed racist.<sup>25</sup>

For many of these post-Enlightenment developments, the Enlightenment itself is of course not to be blamed. Many Social Darwinists, eugenicists, suffragettes, Progressives and socialists ca. 1900 undoubtedly identified with the Enlightenment and thought their ideas of “science,” including “scientific” demonstration of the innate inferiority of peoples of color, were an extension of the Enlightenment project, and the preceding discussion shows they in fact had their Enlightenment predecessors. Nevertheless, the early intellectual debunkers of this pseudo-science, such as Boas, were also heirs to the Enlightenment. When the Enlightenment is

remembered today, it is not Bernier, Buffon and Blumenbach who first come to mind, but rather Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Kant (as philosopher, not as anthropologist) and Paine, and one could do worse than to summarize their legacy as the debunking of mystification. The Enlightenment contributed to the Western theory of race, and the real separation of culture from biology was the work of post-Enlightenment figures such as Marx, and above all the real historical movement of the past century. Nevertheless, when the Enlightenment is attacked today by Christian, Jewish, Moslem and Hindu fundamentalists for separating religion and state, or by the new biologism of the New Right or the Afrocentrists for its universalism, or by the post-modernists as an ideology of and for “white European males,” it is the best of the Enlightenment, the “Liberté—Egalité—Fraternité” of the Parisian and Haitian masses in 1794, and the best post-Enlightenment heirs such as Marx, which are the real targets. Such attacks remind us that, once critique is separated from the limitations of the Enlightenment outlined here, there is plenty of mystification still to be debunked.

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NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> One reader of Part One criticized it for Eurocentrism, because it overlooked earlier color-coded racial systems in other cultures, citing in particular the case of the Indian caste system as it was imposed by the Indo-european (formerly called “Aryan”) invaders of the subcontinent ca. 1500 BC. Since my argument was that race as an idea could not appear until rationalist and scientific critique up to the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century had overthrown mythical and religious views of man to arrive at a biological view, this objection seemed highly unlikely. The theoretical foundation of the Indian caste system does correlate the four “varnas” (which means, among other things, color) with the four castes. But the hierarchy of “varnas” in India is inseparable from a similar hierarchy of “purity/impurity” which descends from the Brahmins at the top to the Sudras at the bottom, not to mention the untouchables who are not even included in the system. And “purity” for a caste is connected to action (karma), in this life as in previous ones; thus the Hindu system conceives of someone’s birth in the Brahmin caste as the consequence of “pure” action, and their ability to stay there the result of ongoing “pure” action (whereas the Sudra have committed “impure” action), something totally different from a race system, where no one acquires or loses skin color by action.

As Oliver Cox puts it: “The writers who use modern ideas of race relations for the purpose of explaining the origin of caste make an uncritical transfer of modern thought to an age which did not know it. The early Indo-Aryans could no more have thought in modern terms of race prejudice than they could have invented the airplane. The social factors necessary for thinking in modern terms of race relations were not available. It took some two thousand more years to develop these ideas in Western society, and whatever there is of them in India today has been acquired by recent diffusion.” (in *Caste, Class and Race*, New York, 1959, p. 91)

<sup>2</sup> (Part One of this article, “From Anti-Semitism to White Supremacy, 1492-1676. Pre-Enlightenment Phase: Spain, Jews and Indians” (*Race Traitor* #7) argued that the first known racist social practices were the “blood purity” laws created against Spanish Jewry in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, many Jews converted to Christianity where, as so-called “New Christians”, they entered the Franciscan, Jesuit and Dominican orders of the Catholic Church where their own messianism mixed with Christian heretical ideas in the evangelization of the peoples of the New World. One widespread view, among many theories taken from Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian sources, held that the New World peoples were descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel. These theories were debated for 150 years until the French Protestant Isaac LaPeyrere published a book *The Pre Adamites* (1655) in which he argued from internal inconsistencies in the Old Testament that there had been people before Adam. While LaPeyrere himself was still completely in the messianic tradition and still believed in the theological assertion of the unity of mankind, others used his theory to argue that Africans and New World Indians were different species. Sir William Petty, in his *Scale of Creatures* (1676), made the link between skin color and culture, thereby theorizing for the first time what had begun in practice in Spain more than two centuries earlier. It is in this way that the idea of race and the Enlightenment came into existence simultaneously.)

Part One defined “race” as the association of cultural attributes with biology, as it first appeared in early modern anti-Semitism in Spain’s historically unprecedented 15<sup>th</sup>-century “blood purity” laws. This association was then transferred to the Indian population of Spain’s New World empire, and then generalized through the North Atlantic world to legitimate the African slave trade, which greatly intensified in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century just as the Enlightenment was beginning. But this evolution did not just happen. For 150 years after 1492, Europeans sifted through all the myths and legends of their Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian past to find an explanation for previously unknown peoples in a previously unknown world. They saw in New World peoples the survivors of Plato’s Atlantis, descendants of a Phoenician voyage or King Arthur’s retreat to the Isle of Avalon, or finally as the Lost Tribes of Israel. By the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, rationalist critique of the Bible and of myth ripped away these fantastic projections, and inadvertently destroyed the idea of the common origin of humanity in the Garden of Eden. By 1676, simultaneous with the multiracial Bacon’s Rebellion in Virginia and the Puritan extermination of the Indians of New England in King Philip’s War, Sir William Petty articulated a new view, relegating peoples of color to an intermediate “savage” status between human beings and animals.

<sup>3</sup> Figures who articulated the previously heretical “actual infinity” in the 1450-1650 period, in theological and then philosophical form, were Nicholas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno, Spinoza and Leibniz.

<sup>4</sup> “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them whole relations of society.” (*Communist Manifesto*)

<sup>5</sup> Improvements, such as inventions, in the ancient world, were made haphazardly, and were often viewed as curiosities, not something to be socially applied in a systematic way, or were even shunned because of the threat they posed to existing social relations.



<sup>6</sup> K. Marx, *Grundrisse* (1973 ed.), p. 325.

<sup>7</sup> Petty's book is the first known Western source which both overthrows the Christian idea of the unity of man and also connects biological features to a color-coded race hierarchy. "Of man himself there seems to be several species, To say nothing of Gyants and Pygmies or of that sort of small men who have little speech... For of these sorts of men, I venture to say nothing, but that 'tis very possible there may be Races and generations of such".... "there be others (differences-L.G.) more considerable, that is, between the Guiny Negroes & the Middle Europeans; & of Negroes between those of Guiny and those who live about the Cape of Good Hope, which last are the Most beastlike of all the Souls (?Sorts) of Men whith whom our Travellers arre well acquainted. I say that the Europeans do not only differ from the aforementioned Africans in Collour...but also..in Naturall Manners, & in the internall Qualities of their Minds." (quoted in M. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia, 1964), 421-422.

<sup>8</sup> I. Geiss, *Geschichte des Rassismus* (Frankfurt, 1988), p. 142. Geiss sees Hume as the first Enlightenment figure (in 1753-54) who specifically theorizes a racist hierarchy of color (p. 149); he does not seem to be familiar with Petty's text. I. Hannaford's *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Johns Hopkins, 1996) surveys the same period, with somewhat different judgements (cf. Ch. 7), and sees the main break occurring with Hobbes.

<sup>9</sup> In 1780, during the revolution, Pennsylvania, with its large Quaker presence, became the first North American colony to abolish slavery.

<sup>10</sup> E. Chukwudi Eze's *Race and the Enlightenment* (New York, 1996) is a useful compendium of little-known texts by Blumenbach, Hume, Kant, Hegel and other figures, mainly expressing white supremacist disdain for Africans and African culture. In my opinion, these texts mainly demonstrate that Hume, Kant and Hegel expressed the limitations of their time, and in no way shows any race-linked implications of the philosophical works we still read today. (I would be interested in hearing from *Race Traitor* readers who think otherwise.)

<sup>11</sup> Figures such as Hobbes, Locke or Hume were all suspected of radical atheism by the conventional middle-class opinion of their time, still tied to official religion. They were in reality moderates, deeply hostile to radical popular forces, many of which still spoke a religious language. The "left to right" spectrum of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in no way, particularly in the Anglo-American world, aligns itself neatly with distinctions between the "secular" and the "religious", as the examples such as the Digger Gerard Winstanley or William Blake clearly show. The mainstream Enlightenment always opposed the "antinomian" social radicalism associated with such figures. (Cf. M. Jacobs, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution*, 1976)

<sup>12</sup> C.L.R. James. *The Black Jacobins*. New York, 1963, pp. 120, 138-139.

<sup>13</sup> The great majority of Enlightenment figures limited their political aims to a constitutional monarchy on the post-1688 English model or to a vision of benign top-down reform by Enlightened absolutist despots; the proclamation of a Republic in France

in 1791 was the result of the practical radicalization of the political situation there and throughout Europe, not a preconceived application of Enlightenment ideas.

<sup>14</sup> The radical wing of the French Revolution, the Parisian masses, was crushed in 1794 by the Jacobins, who were in turn overthrown by moderates; after Napoleon's seizure of power in 1799, France restored slavery in all its possessions and lost 50,000 soldiers in a failed attempt to subdue Santo Domingo. In 1848, when capitalism and the proletariat were more advanced, a new French revolution (part of a European-wide uprising) occurred and finally succeeded in abolishing slavery in the colonies, after England had done so in 1834.

<sup>15</sup> Hegel's fundamental idea that "the real is rational" comes directly out of his analysis of the French Revolution. In contrast to even the best of the Enlightenment, Hegel (having the example of the revolution before him, as the Enlightenment did not) was the first to understand (even if he did not use this language) the "sociological" truth that a social class (e.g. the Parisian proletariat) is not a "category" but an *act*, and that the "truth" of any social class (i.e. the "real") is not its own day-to-day humdrum self-understanding in "normal conditions" of oppression but the extremity of what it has the potential to *become* ("the rational") at crucial turning points (generally called revolutions). Hegel's own late conservatism and that of his followers turned the meaning of "the real is rational" into a simple apology for the existing status quo, cutting the radical heart out of Hegel's original meaning of "the real."

<sup>16</sup> The Enlightenment (at the great risk of oversimplification) conceived abstractly of Man as "natural man," endowed with reason, and endowed with "rights of man" by "natural law." The counterpart of this was a conception of societies as initially formed by individuals who came together in some kind of "social contract"; Enlightenment theory thus assumed individuals who initially existed independently from society and history. Society was the "sum" of such individuals. It was a completely ahistorical view, which is one reason the Enlightenment was so preoccupied with utopias in distant places, in which Man could be portrayed in harmony with (static) "nature," and with New World Indians or Tahitians, who supposedly revealed Man "in Nature," or with the "wild child" raised outside all social institutions. "All men once lived as they live in America," said John Locke, referring to the American Indian. The Enlightenment was also preoccupied with drawing up constitutions (as Locke did for the Carolina colony in North America, or Rousseau for Poland), as if social institutions were derived from, or could be derived from, "first principles," and were not, as Vico first argued, a *factum*, the product of activity. Enlightenment social thought *had an ideal to realize*, a human nature that could be distilled and identified separate from society and history. Thus Rousseau could conceive this ideal of Man as something to approach but never be achieved, the social equivalent of Newton's bad infinity.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the invaluable book of A. Chase, *The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism*, New York, 1980, particularly Ch. 4. Space does not permit a full discussion of the influence of Malthusian ideology today. I will limit myself to pointing out that John Maynard Keynes, the theoretician of the post-1945 welfare state, explicitly identified himself as a Malthusian. Keynes obviously was not opposed to a minimum wage, welfare measures or contraception; what he shared with Malthus was the idea that the buying power of unproductive classes should be increased to avoid periodic

depressions. Malthus and Keynes had in common a “consumer’s” view of the economy, assuming that if demand were maintained, production would take care of itself. But the underlying world view of both Malthus and Keynes, as theoreticians of the unproductive middle classes, had the necessary corollary of “useless eaters”, which in the austerity conditions of the post-1973 period in the U.S. have mixed with classical racism to produce a “conservative-liberal” consensus for the abolition of America’s (minimalist) welfare state. Bill Moyers’ reportage on teenage parenting among American welfare populations was classical Malthusian propaganda about the “promiscuous poor” from a “liberal” viewpoint.

<sup>18</sup> One may readily understand the distinction between labor and labor power by the recent example of the “new industrial countries” (NICs) such as South Korea. Cases such as this are not merely a question of dropping some factories into a peasant economy. South Korea emerged over 35 years from an extremely poor, predominantly rural, Third World country to one which exports high-quality technological goods and even conducts its own R&D. This was made possible by many things, but among them were the creation of an infrastructure (transportation, communications, energy systems) and above all a skilled work force capable of operating modern factories. South Korea in 1960 had an abundance of *labor*, but desperately short of *labor-power*.

<sup>19</sup> After being largely marginalized by official culture in the U.S., many of these authors were translated into French in the 1970’s where they contributed to the rise of the anti-immigrant National Front, which openly proclaims white supremacy in its public utterances.

<sup>20</sup> Paglia attacks 50s and 60s left culturalism for overlooking the “dark” biological side of sexuality; Degler announces his conversion to the “return of biology” in *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> Gobineau’s book, *The Inequality of the Races*, which became the manifesto of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Aryan supremacy, was first published in 1853.

<sup>22</sup> T. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York, 1963), Ch. XIII, tells the story of Anglo-Saxon race theory. Gossett also traces the history of the polygenecist theory of races, as discussed in Part One of this article, through the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Ch. IV.

<sup>23</sup> A dense survey of this history is in A. Chase, *The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism* (New York, 1980).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Robert Allen, *Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States*. (New York, 1975), Ch. 5.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p. 223-227.

# Jaime the Chameleon

BY JAMES TRACY

**D**uring the summer, his skin always turned brown, brown enough that people would greet him in Spanish, speaking rapidly, only to be greeting with the last two surviving words from a semester of high school Spanish. Spanish broken as only a whiteboy could, screwing up the language of poets.

Jaime had travelled to Nicaragua in July; his skin darkened and his voice became more conversational in Spanish. His Nica compatriots renamed the boy Jaime the Chameleon. A campesino named Santos teased that a local witch turned visiting whiteboys into Latinos without their knowing it.

One month later, Jaime rode a Greyhound bus going east through Arizona. He was gripped by hunger for the first time in his life. He had lost his wallet, possibly pickpocketed, in Los Angeles. The bus halted in front of a convenience store/gas shop. Jaime peered out of the window and read the lit sign. It was the last chance for phone, food or cigarettes for 200 miles or more. This would mean that for the next few hours the Greyhound would revert to barter economy as hungry riders, some broke, hustled for snacks and nicotine.

The bus operator, a large, muscular man with tatoos as souvenirs of war and women informed the passengers that the door would not be opened to the promised land of overpriced cigarettes.

“Please remain in your seats until further notice, we will resume our trip shortly.” A man next to Jaime jumped up with the expression of someone about to fall prey to a shark attack.

“Let me go,” the man demanded with a deep accent, most commonly found on the tongues of the Zapatistas of San Cristobal.

The operator looked at the man with apprehension. It was the look of the “Good German” appealing to the World Court that he had been *just doing a job*.

Raising his hand in an ambiguous manner, it was quickly retracted as yellow lights from four green vans ambushed the Greyhound.

*James Tracy is a member of the Eviction Defense Network of San Francisco.*

Six border patrol agents swaggered in, each looking like an extra in a John Wayne movie. Two were of Mexican descent. The man was ordered, “Siéntate.”

“Vendido,” seethed the prisoner.

One by one, the agents solicited the papers, taking extra time to examine the most basic documentation. People were dragged off the bus. A man separated from his family, a mother from her children, were lined up outside the bus.

The commander approached Jaime, not saying a word, expecting the boy to come up with some piece of ID which would allow his journey east to resume. With his wallet donated to the streets of Los Angeles, he couldn't. Taken outside, he trembled with fear. Did he make a stand? Demand his rights? Run? Where could they deport him to? Back to the suburbs?

Filed into Border Patrol vehicles, Jaime began to yell and scream using his best California whiteboy accent. “*LIKE, DO I TALK LIKE A MAN WITHOUT MY FUCKING PAPERS, DUDE?*”

The agent looked at Jaime, smiled, then put him back on the bus. The woman who had lost her husband to la migra looked up and said to her friend, “Sabía que era gabacho.” *I knew he was only a whiteboy.*

The Greyhound pulled east driving along the ruins of Aztlán.

# Brown Family Letters

## Introduction

BY RUSSELL BANKS

These two letters, the one by John Brown to his family in North Elba and the other by Brown's son Frederick to Frederick's sister Ruth, also in North Elba, are rare. Though Brown's life was a public life, especially after the guerilla war in Kansas, he was not a literary man or a statesman.

His letters are essentially private communiques posted home to his family or pleas sent to real or potential allies for money and support in his war against slavery. And thanks both to the Kansas War and his raid on Harpers Ferry, he was very famous at the time of his death. Beyond that, he used with utter brilliance the very occasion of his death, his execution by the state of Virginia, as a stage for all the world to view the final act of the great drama of his life. Which, as it happened, was the great drama of American life and remains so. Therefore, few letters or other papers written by Brown or members of his immediate family are not held today in one of the major institutional collections, such as the Houghton Library at Harvard, the Henry E. Huntington Library, the Kansas State Historical Society, and the Library of Congress.

As a novelist, my personal use for the letters was not scholarly or even literary, so much as totemic. They made physical what would otherwise have existed only in my imagination--the actual, literal, daily lives led by Brown and his family. They took me behind the historical icon, the myth, the larger-than-life figure of Brown, to the man himself, a passionate, deeply principled man as harried and conflicted and as fearful as any of us, who, as his and his son's letters make perfectly clear, was no more insane or fanatical (whatever that means) than any of us who try to lead moral lives in a world that seems to function without value or reason. It's one thing to intuit or imagine this about Brown; it's another to hold in your hand the sheet of paper with the handwriting that proves it.

*Russell Banks is the author of the novels, CLOUDSPLITTER, THE SWEET HEREAFTER, AFFLICTION, RULE OF THE BONE, CONTINENTAL DRIFT, and more.*

For me, these two letters contextualize Brown's life and work. They personalize what he saw as his holy mission in a way that nothing else does. Not years of study of the historical context, not all those biographies, poems, novels, plays, and films made of Brown's life that have appeared with regularity since the afternoon in December 1859, when he was hung in Virginia and Emerson, Whittier, and Thoreau sat down to write about him, followed within days by Victor Hugo and hundreds of other foreign poets and writers, until the whole world seemed to be writing and singing about John Brown's body. His dead body. His corpse, and then his ghost.

What I wanted to sing was his living body, the body of the man who got out of bed every morning for nearly sixty years and, like me, like everyone I love and trust, tried to begin his life anew and to live it in a better way than he had the day before. These two letters connected me to that John Brown, the ordinary working American man whose sense of moral outrage and personal courage, because they came from his deep sense of himself as an American, were so exemplary to his contemporaries that they collected his letters and journals and notes to himself and wrote poems and plays about him, and that are so necessary to our lives today, one hundred forty years later, that we have been similarly moved, both to collect whatever we can find that was touched by his mind and hand, and to write yet another story about him.

to John

Pittsburgh, Pa. 12<sup>th</sup> April, 1851

Dear Children

After much delay at Oneida Co, we reached Wilson day before yesterday about noon all in usual health, & found all well. I was obliged to leave for this place on the company business the next morning, & shall set out on my return this evening. John & Wealthy go back to Vernon the first of next week. Jason was fixing to move on to a place he has bought four or five miles on the way towards Richfield. Frederick appears quite well & we hope he may escape his poor turn this Spring. We went by Rail Road from Cleveland to Hudson. I some expected to be obliged to go to Springfield again before long, & it may be possible, that I may see North Elba before I return back from the East. If possible I mean to come; but can neither promise myself, nor you, now. In the mean time I shall be very glad if Henry can dispose of any more of the stuff I left to be sold, than <sup>for I am pretty short of money</sup> to remunerate himself for money he gave me, & for his trouble on our account. I did intend to write you sooner, but have been so drove ever since I left, that I could not before this. Letter was away from home. & your Uncle Frederick away in Kentucky, so I have not seen them. Edward has not returned from California. I write in great confusion & haste having traveled all last night. May God abundantly bless you both

Your Affectionate Father  
John Brown

(Let us hear from you)

Sold some & take for \$118 at Oneida Co. Got the letter, & look on safe.



Albion Ohio Feb 9<sup>th</sup> 1852

Dear Sister

It is now nearly two months since I received your kind letter & I am thinking it is high time to make some sort of a reply. We are all well here at this time, and I hope may remain so. The winter has been very cold here untill lately & there has been more slaughting here than for three years before. The weather is mild and pleasant now the snow is gone nearly and the spring birds are singing sweetly. It appears as though there would not be much more cold weather, but it may be very cold within four or five days. Your letter was a very acceptable one it made me think of old times and of the happy days of childish glee. It brought up your honest face in full shape with all the happy days we have seen together. You say that you have often thought of me and ask me to forgive you for having a little fun at my expense just as though you thought I still remembered it against you, far from it I should like to see you and then we would remember we should be among the best of friends for a little while without any ill feeling. I have never thought of you since <sup>now</sup> I was to see you

very much often have I had long letters with  
you and Henry in old Essex & hope in some  
of the most scenery on the Mountains & it is  
that same country just what they were all  
dreams I mean to see if I can do so & I  
will then see it summer when I shall be  
from here to New York will all in all be  
the are now running between the falls and  
Hudson intersecting the Cleveam & Pittsburgh  
road at Hudson. The other run from  
run from Hudson through Akron Wooster and  
several other towns in Wayne & Holmes Counties  
intersecting the Cleveam & Cincinnati  
road at Akron by figures, however, but I  
think it will be a great improvement  
to have it run to go to White Hall &  
or Henry's family can come down Lake St. Clair  
again to White Hall and make us a visit  
soon. I wish is writing about as much as  
perhaps he will write you a letter & hope  
you must not give him up to hundreds  
of heart & blessing of mind just get  
done. I have not respect you wants to know  
of Henry how did the same is & whether  
he has ever hunted any or not. Whether  
want to know how old Mrs Jones is this will  
be a talking & writing you again soon with  
write me a good long letter about matters & things

In general tell Henry that I should like to  
hear from him to want to get acquainted  
with him by his letters and I will send letters  
& papers quite as often as you will want to see  
them. ~~Go to~~ Enck's Comet may now  
be seen with a telescope & may soon be  
seen with the naked eye look out for it.  
You rich write soon don't forget the boy  
& etc excuse mistakes as I have written in  
a hurry. Good by Your affectionate Brother  
Thos. K. Brown

Pittsburgh, Pa. 12<sup>th</sup> April, 1851

Dear Children

After much delay at Oneida Co, we reached Akron day before yesterday about noon all in usual health. & found all well. I was obliged to leave for this place on the company business the next morning. & shall set out on my return this Evening. John & Wealthy, go back to Vernon the first next week. Jason was fixing to move on to a place he has bought four or five miles on the way towards Richfields. Frederick appears quite well & we hope he may escape his poor turn this spring. We went by Rail Road from Cleveland to Hudson. I some expect to be obliged to go to Springfield again before long, and it may be possible, that I may see North Elba before I return back from the East. If possible I mean to come; but can neither promise myself, nor you, now. In the meantime I shall be very glad if Henry can dispose of any more of the stuff I left to be sold as I am pretty short of money then to remunerate himself for money he gave me, and for his trouble on our account. I did intend to write you sooner, but have been so ever since I left, that I could not before this. Father was away from home, and your Uncle Frederick away in Kentucky, so I have not seen them. Edward has not returned from California. I write in great confusion & haste having traveled all last night. May God abundantly bless you both.

Your Affectionate Father

John Brown

(Let us hear from you)

Sold oxen and yoke for \$110 at Oneida Co. Got the cattle and lock on safe

Akron Ohio Feby 9<sup>th</sup> 1852

Dear Sister

It is now nearly two months since I received your kind letter & I am thinking that it is high time to make some sort of a reply. We are all well here at this time and I hope may remain so. The winter has been very cold here untill lately & there has been more sleighing here than for three years before. The weather is mild and pleasant now the snow is gone nearly and the spring birds are singing finely, it appears as though there would not be much more cold weather but it may be very cold within four or five days. Your letter was a very acceptable one, it made me think of old times and of the happy days of childish glee. It brought up your honest face in full shape with all the happy days we have seen together. You say that you have often thought of me and ask me to forgive you for having a little fun at my expense just as though you thought I still remembered it against you, far from it. I should like to see you and then we would see whether we should be any the less friendly from a little fun with out any ill feeling. I have often thought of you and have wanted to see you very much. Often have I had fine times with you and Henry in old Essex, & have enjoyed the fine scenery of the Mountains and lakes of that famed country first rate but they were all dreams. I mean to see if I cannot realize some of them next summer when the Rail Road from here to Cleveland will be in full blast the cars are now running between the falls and hudson intersecting the Cleveland & Pittsburgh road at hudson. The Akron branch road is to run from the Hudson through Akron, Wooster and several other towns in Wayne & Holmes Countys intersecting the Cleveland & Cincinatti Road near Millerburgh in Holmes County. but enough of this it will be so that we can get into the cars at Akron & go to Whitehall by Rail Road or Henry & Family can come down Lake Champlain to White Hall and make us a visit in short order. Owen is writing about as much as ever perhaps he will write you a letter shortly. you must not give him up to *hardness of heart & blindness of mind* just yet. Wat sends his best respects and wants to know of Henry how deep the snow is and whether he has crust hunted any or not. Mother wants to know how old Mrs Jones is this winter. Oliver is talking of writing you again. Now Ruth

76 RACE TRAITOR

write me a good long letter about matters and things in general. Tell Henry that I should like to hear from him to. I want to get acquainted with him by his letters and I will send him letters & papers quite as often as you will want to see them. Enck's Comet may now be seen with a Telescope & may soon be seen with the naked eye look out for it. Now Ruth write soon don't forget the boy & etc. excuse mistakes as I have written in a hurry. Good by.

Your affectionate Brother

Frederick Brown

# Plowshares into Swords: John Brown and the Poet of Rage

An Appreciation of the Work of Russell Banks

BY BETH HENSON

*Russell Banks is doing through fiction what the editors of RACE TRAITOR are attempting to do through the pages of the journal: accompany readers on a voyage through whiteness and its discontents.*

**O**f all his characters, it is the guinea-pig lady (in *Trailer Park*) who speaks most to me: she has been abused, neglected, and institutionalized, and now, finally on her own, she has retired to a trailer park in northern New Hampshire and goes looking for a pet—tropical fish—to share her days. Instead she brings home a pair of guinea pigs. In no time she has enough guinea pigs to trouble her neighbors at the Granite State Trailerpark.

“If you take good care of them, they thrive.” She alone of all Banks’ characters has managed to break the cycle of abuse, by finding herself something to care for; she spends her time constructing cages and feeding-systems for her babies. Alone in the world, a figure of ridicule, she marches singing through her daily rounds. Her neighbors react with growing consternation. Forced to a showdown, deprived of her pets, she gives up on civilization altogether and moves to a tarpaper shack in the woods.

Until John Brown, most of the men in Russell Banks’ work are a sorry lot, steeped in alcohol and violence, prone to runaway obsessions, mired in poverty and powerlessness in the long winters in small New England milltowns where first agriculture and then industry have headed out and gone and the best get away early. (“*Nothing but the dead and dying back in my little town....*”) Those

*Beth Henson is a poet and one of the editors of RACE TRAITOR.*

left behind are ashamed of staying; urban people move in and renovate, commute to the city, glide through town in their BMWs, and give the old-timers in their shabby clapboard dwellings an additional reason for resentment. These are small towns that have lost the coherence that once made them communities, where marriages go bad from deadend jobs, too little money and not enough hope, where haggard mothers share a beer at the kitchen table while the men drink at the tavern and shout the refrain, "Nobody screws over me." Here are the discontents of working people-free, white and 21 and enraged with the barrenness of their lives. The anguish of the middle class is left to other authors to tell. Banks is the poet of working-class rage.

Banks is relentless in his depiction of the miseries of everyday life; his characters get no relief. Marriage saves no one; the celebrants enter already weighed down with the violence of their early lives, the tedium and degradation of their jobs, confusion in the sexual sphere, and there they drown. Once divorced, they exchange partners and meet in shabby motel rooms, not quite friends and not in love. There is nothing so grim as an episode of adultery as described by Banks.

Bob DuBois, of *Continental Drift*, is a dreamer without imagination, a drifter (as the title indicates). He does not know what the new world he yearns for would look like. The high point of his life was when he was a hockey champion in high school. His only notion of the good life is material: a boat, a big house, a fast car. Too ineffectual for the life of crime which his brother and his best friend offer him, he knows only how to be a victim. In a fit of Christmas-induced self-pity, he leaves New Hampshire and his job as an oilburner repairman, and takes his family to Florida, the southern frontier, in pursuit of the American Dream. Flight solves nothing, bringing only a change in climate; he winds up with another deadend job, this time with the added humiliation of working for his brother, Fast Eddie, the hustler. DuBois, to his credit, is a step forward from the violent men who beat their wives at the end of the day: he practices random acts of kindness on his way to doom, loving his wife as he cheats on her and drags her to hell and back. He's the new man in embryo, ineffective but not violent, at least not with his fists.



In counterpoint to the story of Bob DuBois, the book traces the travails of Claude and Vanise Dorsinville from the Haitian backcountry as they flee north to Florida, their circumstances more desperate but also typical of their time and place. They, too, are the ordinary workers of their country.

Florida is no idyll but it does bring DuBois into contact with black people. When he first arrives, he begins to drown his uneasiness in a full-time obsession with Marguerite, a nurse whose aging father works with Bob. Despite-or in addition to-her beauty, Bob wants her as a black woman, a sexual challenge. A weak man with a strong imagination, he allows his infatuation to consume him, leaving his family to fend for themselves-his wife is pregnant, one of his daughters has begun to have trouble in school-and then, just as arbitrarily and impulsively, he rejects Marguerite, making a scene at her house. Attracted and repelled, unable to imagine a life with her, he leaves her when his son is born. Throughout the affair, she behaves with a decency and dignity that contrast strongly with his chaotic and unintentional cruelty.

Feckless and given to impulsive gestures, DuBois finally runs out of room. His life resembles the drift of tectonic plates, or the shifting migrations of exile and exodus that follow land reform and revolution and counter-revolution and price speculation and famine.

Bone, in *Rule of the Bone*, the boy made homeless by an abusive stepfather, drifts through a world of malls, petty theft, dealing, and vandalism. When his homeboy Russell, his partner in crime, announces that he is returning to Aunt Doris to go back to school and get a job in construction, Bone insists on his birthright of freedom-to get high, listen to music, hang out with his friends and be left alone. Bone believes that Americans have rights. "This is America, they can't buy and sell little kids here, we're free," he tells Froggie, another homeless child, as he rescues her from a pederast. They stumble on an unlikely Eden: an old Rastafarian, I-Man, living in a schoolbus and cultivating veggies and ganja on a vacant lot. Together they tend the crops, cook vegetarian, sit on the stoop in the evening, and share a spliff while I-Man expounds his cosmology-Bone has found himself a family. They are Huck and Jim on the raft. A young boy running away from respectability and school-and sexual abuse-and the kindly old man, what a father should be, himself a fugitive, an illegal alien subject to deportation and worse.

They go to Jamaica where Bone serves as I-Man's apprentice dealer and grower until in a serendipitous meeting, he hooks up with his birth father, an expatriate cokehead and self-appointed doctor, who lives with his Jamaican family in Kingston and with his wealthy girlfriend Evening Star in Montego Bay where she keeps her mansion ready to receive a steady supply of her white women friends, down for Jamaican studs, pool parties and cigar-sized blunts.

Bone knows he's not black, though he's been admitted to certain Rastafarian initiation rites. Stumbling on a murder scene, he is spared because he is Doc's white son. If Bone had been a real Rasta like he pretended, he'd be dead, and he knows it.

We leave Bone drifting, after he flees Jamaica crewing for an American captain offering cutrate Caribbean cruises. On the ship are two rich kids, neglected by their parents, who are cold and self-absorbed. Bone's pity for the children is exquisite; he has become a person who can love. He imagines I-Man sending him a message through the stars: "Up to you, Bone." He has become autonomous.

**"REMEMBER THEM THAT ARE IN BONDS AS BOUND WITH THEM."**

**T**he central figure in Banks' most recent novel, *Cloudsplitter*, is John Brown. When asked why he chose to write about Brown, Banks said, "Because he is the one figure whom white Americans universally regard as a madman and black Americans as a hero." Early in the novel, he concludes a discussion of Brown's sanity—the only question that matters—by saying, "For if he was sane, then terrible things about race and human nature, especially here in North America, are true."

What terrible truth is revealed by John Brown's sanity? That race and its consequences are evil and must be destroyed and that this is a mission worthy of dedicating one's life to. He alone among the abolitionists of his time believed that the barriers of race could be dissolved and he identified so completely with the slave as to take his cause as his own. For this he was judged mad.

What made Brown, among the thousands who agitated against slavery, unique? How did he, alone, come to the conclusion he came to: to engage in bloody acts of war, to be the advance force, to hurl himself into battle when no one else was willing to act?

John Brown is the common man who is able to confront the disappointment and frustration of everyday life and to distill the

essence of its wickedness, to find the pivot around which it turns and name it in order to combat it. The name he gave it was slavery. In the mid-nineteenth century, slavery was no secret, concealed within the confines of the southern plantation. Its ravages were well documented. Nothing more than the workings of ordinary human sympathy is needed to explain the horror Brown feels when, a child himself, he realizes that the child he befriends while traveling on his family's business, an intelligent and sympathetic boy his own age, is subject to beatings and ill treatment, without a mother or father to protect him—a slave. The trauma caused by that meeting stayed with him all his life.

Brown was a deeply religious man, of Puritan forebears and manners, and once he had identified the central evil of his day, he had to work to stamp it out. Slavery is sin, and he would not rest until that sin was eradicated. By his reading of the Bible, slavery held the entire nation, white as well as black, under Satanic Rule. New England's "dark, Satanic mills" fed by the cotton plantations are a devilish encroachment on the family farm and domestic manufacture that formed the backbone of Puritan virtue—the family as a self-reliant economic unit, the community as a free association of equals. Brown rightly saw the labor of the slave as the cornerstone of the accumulation of unearned wealth that fueled the spread of northern industry. All this was to be inexorably overturned. In 1839, after reading aloud through the northern winter night from a collection of contemporary accounts of the horrors of slavery, he and his family swore a blood feud with it.

He was an ordinary man who had to continually battle to return to his mission. He spent decades absorbed in land speculation, livestock trading and resulting lawsuits, finally declaring bankruptcy and losing the family homestead, which was only one of many removals to which his large and long-suffering family were subjected. His failure in business is sometimes remarked by his detractors as if it were an impetus to compensatory revolutionary zeal, but it was the other way around: he desired success only enough to free him from financial worries so he could pursue the eradication of slavery singlemindedly.

By the time of Harper's Ferry, Brown was not alone in opposing slavery; the Fugitive Slave Law, passed in 1850, created a new situation. Previously, the slaveholder and his agent had retained the

burden of proving someone a runaway slave; now the burden was on the accused. Any black person could be kidnapped, hauled off and sold-made into property-with forged papers and the word of a slaveholder's agent. Every northern public official was forced to act on behalf of the slaveholders, making the entire population of the north complicit in slavery as never before. The north was galvanized into protest and resistance.

Brown, always ahead of the anti-slavery forces, began to say, "Pro-slavers are fair game." The South, he declared, had established conditions of war. The courts of law of the state of Virginia had now displaced the courts of Massachusetts. (The abolitionist Wendell Phillips would address his New England audiences, "Fellow subjects of Virginia...")

Brown insisted on being a sovereign and autonomous force within the Underground Railway; he alone evaluated the links which fed into his stretch of the railway. Arriving in the Adirondacks, he refused to work with a man he considered unreliable, replacing one route with another of his own invention. He was suspicious of whites, abolitionists included. In organizing his first militia, the Gileadites, in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1851, he relied solely on his son and the resident Negro population. "Let the white folks make their own policy, as they always have. We must have our own." He would draw his forces from the people whose lives were on the line, the free blacks of the north. He was seeking soldiers, not pacifists, politicians or poets. By running the Railroad with blacks and not whites, he would ensure that the cost of maintaining the peculiar institution become prohibitive.

John Brown proposed to build a guerilla army in the mountain strongholds which led from south to north through the Alleghenies to the Adirondacks, conducting raids into the south and providing an escape northward for noncombatants among the freed slaves. His plan was a militarization and an extension south of the Underground Railroad which he had been working for decades.

The raid on the federal armory at Harper's Ferry was to be the opening skirmish of a popular war. The weapons captured at the armory would be used to arm a small band quartered in the nearby rugged mountains and the outcry generated by the raid would serve notice on the slaveholders that the war had begun. While slaves had been quietly stealing themselves away for years, an armed force

beating at the very gates of the South was to sweep away the social order. In fact, the mere threat implied by the failed raid did just that—in the words of Wendell Phillips, John Brown “startled the south into madness.” He made warriors of abolitionists and insurrectionists of slaves. He started the civil war.

One of Banks’ perennial themes is fathers and sons. Captivated by the legend of the noblest patriarch of all, he asks how it would be to be the son of a man who is not a cowardly and whiskey-ridden bully but a man of God, bigger than life. He creates the motherless one-armed Owen, through whose eyes the story is told. Owen is sexually repressed and full of doubts, a bulletin from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in shepherd’s gear. He is tormented by race in ways the father is not; he feels ashamed and guilty for being white and unable to eliminate race-consciousness altogether: “Pride, lust, envy—these are the certain consequences of race-consciousness, whether you are white or black, just as they are the consequences of thinking constantly of your maleness or femaleness when in the presence of the other sex....You do not view yourself or the other person simply as a person.” His confusion is of a piece with his frustrated desire to prove his manhood by rebelling against his father; he has difficulty viewing himself simply as a person, self-motivated, autonomous.

Owen, the troubled self, no longer the Puritan soul, breaches the story’s Biblical dimensions and speaks to the motivations of nonbelievers. “In some countries the only life you can properly desire is that of a destroyer,” he remarks on visiting London for the first time, being astonished by its wealth and reflecting on the origin of its riches in the factories of Manchester and the sugar plantations of the tropical colonies. In all of Banks’ work, Owen is the son who comes closest to emancipating himself from the patriarchy by becoming his father’s colleague; he does this by shedding the first blood in Kansas and becoming his father’s captain and terrible sword.

But the son’s emancipation is incomplete. When the final drama unfolds at Harper’s Ferry, Owen has been assigned to wait with a wagon on the nearby heights and gather up escaping slaves and carry them into the mountains. As the slaves fail to gather and Brown’s forces are overrun, he watches the debacle until its outcome is assured, then simply drives away, heading west for California. In the

end Owen proves to be as ineffective, alienated and conflicted as any of Banks' later protagonists.

In his old age, Owen professes to hold himself responsible for his father's turn to violence. But this is false; John Brown has moved inexorably to war through the logic of his own opposition to slavery. "Slavery is evil: kill it." No other path was open to Brown.

John Brown rejected his own race, and by his rage and permanent suspicion of whites gained the trust and admiration of blacks. In Owen's words: "This matter of difference and sameness—the ways in which we were different from the Negroes and the same as the whites, and, vice versa, the ways in which we were the same as the Negroes and different from the whites—was a vexing one. If a white person persists, as we did, soon he will find himself uncomfortable with people of both races—with the one, because of his unwanted knowledge of their deepest loyalties and prejudices, for, as a fellow white, privy to their private race conversations and an adept at decoding those closed, tribal communiqués, he understands their true motives and basic attitudes all too well; and uncomfortable with the other also, because, whenever he chooses to allow it, his pale skin will keep him safe from their predators."

Turning colorless is no escape; the escape from color is itself a privilege granted solely to the white. Only by resisting the privilege of turning colorless can the white attain partial freedom. "He has to separate himself from the luxurious unconsciousness that characterizes his own race, without claiming as his own the historical experience of the other. There is a price, though. He pays with cold loneliness, an itching inner solitude, a permanent feeling of separation from his tribe. He has to be willing to lose his own history without gaining another." Such is Banks' appreciation of the paradox of John Brown, the founder of a tribe of race traitors, neither white nor black.

The presence of the historic figure burns incandescent through the novel's rockinghorse rhythms, through the psychological dimension and the repressed love interests of the fictionalized Owen. Such is the power of the man, 150 years after his death, that the question raised by his sanity still confronts us: if race and its consequences are evil, then what do we, its purported beneficiaries, propose to do about it? What is the ordinary white to do?

Will Bone grow up to be the 21<sup>st</sup> century John Brown?

# Constructing Whiteness at the Gates of Hell: Black 47's "Five Points"

BY LAUREN ONKEY

In September of 1996, members of New York's Irish-American community sponsored a fundraising event called "Out of the Ashes: An Irish Evening to Re-Build Burned Black Churches" at the club Tramps. The evening featured speeches by Bernadette Devlin McAliskey and David Dinkins and a performance by the New York band Black 47. Promotional material for the event insisted that it was incumbent upon the Irish community to support African American civil rights struggles:

The African-American Community has always supported the Irish struggle for freedom, going all the way back to the Black Abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who spoke in Britain for Irish Freedom, not an easy thing to do...Thus we think it's important for us to show that *solidarity goes two ways*—that we're also willing to *stand up for justice* (Ashes WWW site).

This rhetorical alliance between the Irish and African Americans assumes a shared history of oppression, yet the use of italics reveals that such an alliance is contested. Its audience may need reminding about how such a black/green alliance might work. And of course it does, because Irish American history is fraught with racism, from the 1863 "draft" riots in New York to the Boston busing riots of 1975.

Black 47's music embodies this ambivalence, because they attempt to forge links between Irish nationalist struggles, the fate of the Irish immigrant in the United States, and the civil rights of African Americans. Although their music confidently asserts connections, it also reveals the limitations of these leftist minstrels. Black 47 was formed in the Bronx in 1989 by Chris Byrne, an Irish

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American cop and musician, and Larry Kirwan, a musician and playwright from Wexford, who emigrated to New York in the 1970s. Their music is an eclectic mixture of a traditional Irish ceili band with rap, reggae, and New Orleans-style brass band horns. At their best, Black 47 draws on hip hop's energy and political caché to recast the Irish American experience. They seem to enjoy the discomfort their use of black music inspires in some Irish Americans, reporting in songs and interviews that their music was not met with enthusiasm in New York's Irish bars because it violated their audience's expectations for "Irish" music. In "Rockin' the Bronx" from their first CD *Fire of Freedom* (1993), they tell the story of the band's beginnings facing hostile audiences and confused club owners: "Then a flinstone from the Phoenix gave us a call/But when he heard the beat, he was quite appalled/'D'yez not know nothin' by Christy Moore?" to which the band replies, "The next thing you'll be wantin' is 'Danny Boy'." They proudly represent themselves as hip, "black" outsiders to an establishment Irish American community: "we got a new noise /And it would please us greatly to come on uptown/And show you Paddies how we get on down." Their beat and boasting disrupt the sense of racial privilege that many Irish Americans have come to take for granted.

Of course, it's not news when an Irish band evokes musical solidarity with African Americans—U2, Van Morrison, and Roddy Doyle's fictional band *The Commitments* have all acted out the role I call the "celtic soul brother."<sup>1</sup> These musicians most often forge an unproblematic link with African Americans: the Irish have been oppressed by the British, and therefore soul and rhythm & blues are appropriate vehicles for Irish musicians to express Irish identity. Playing African American music becomes a way for a band like U2 to define themselves as authentic, part of the "folk," against corporate rock. But such identifications reinscribe African Americans as noble savages, naturally more in tune with truth and soul than whites who have "progressed" into post-modernity.

Placed in the context of the history of the Irish in the United States, these Celtic soul brothers become even more suspect. In recent years the subject of Ireland's ambiguous "whiteness" has been traced by David Roediger, Theodore Allen, and Noel Ignatiev. Their work has established that the Irish ultimately constructed themselves as white in order to survive and later prosper in America,



where they were more apt to be defined as a dark race—a definition adopted from English representations of the Irish, useful as a way to demonize a large group of new immigrants to the United States.<sup>2</sup> As David Roediger puts it, in antebellum America, “it was by no means clear that the Irish were white.” (134)

In order to gain the privilege of whiteness, the Irish in America rejected any possible alliance with blacks. To define themselves as slaves was to put themselves too low on the food chain in the United States. Roediger reports that Irish Americans were “deeply offended” when James Buchanan suggested in the 1856 campaign that the Irish were not slaves of the British. But Roediger argues that “to compare Irish and African oppression forfeited any claims of Irish-Americans to be qualified for freedom by republican criteria.” They instead “treasured their whiteness, as entitling them to both political rights and to jobs”:

Instead of seeing their struggles as bound up with those of colonized and colored people around the world, they came to see their struggles as against such people. Frederick Douglass... could only wonder ‘why a people who loved and cherished the thought of liberty at home in Ireland could become, willingly, the oppressors of another race here.’ ... he asked how a people ‘so relentlessly persecuted and oppressed on account of race and religion’ could take the lead among Americans in carrying ‘prejudice against color to a point...extreme and dangerous.’ (136-37)

Studies such as Roediger’s work as correctives to easy alliances between the Irish and African Americans or other colonized peoples.

If we follow the change in Irish America’s racial status from not quite white to white to now self-consciously black we see a consistent trope of the Irish defining their racial character via blacks. Black 47 is the latest manifestation of this trope, embracing a self-conscious “blackness” to define a more radical Irish American identity. This use of blackness to redefine Irishness evokes in many ways the history of minstrelsy. In *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott asserts that minstrelsy functioned as a way to create whiteness:

...one of minstrelsy's functions was precisely to bring various class fractions into contact with one another, to mediate their relations, and finally to aid in the construction of class identities over the bodies of black people. Emerging splits within the working class (between artisans and proletarianized workers, for instance, or between "natives" and immigrant Irish) were often made manifest in terms of these groups' differential relations to racial privilege, even as the formation of a northern working class depended on a common sense of whiteness. (67)

Lott's book shows how new immigrants, especially but not only the Irish, created a white identity through their ability to put on and take off blackness. But minstrelsy also represents the possible transgressions of racial borders: "Underwritten by envy as well as repulsion, sympathetic identification as well as fear, the minstrel show continually transgressed the color line even as it made possible the formation of a self-consciously white working class." (8)

I've come to see Black 47 as performing a kind of nationalist, leftist minstrelsy in their use of blackness. Evoking "blackness," reminding people that the Irish can "get on down," enables Black 47 to define a kind of nationalist Irish American by reconnecting the severed interests of the Irish republic, Northern Ireland, and Irish immigrants. They are the first rock band to make this link in America, the site where the Irish have historically asserted their whiteness. What does it mean, then, to be a "celtic soul brother" against the history of Irish America's chosen whiteness and racial oppression?

**M**usically, Black 47 tries to conjure the relationship between Irish Americans and African Americans by using hip-hop to tell the story of struggles of Irish immigrants and Irish nationalists. They define Irishness as an identity which naturally and historically works against racism and injustice. Black 47's nationalist songs are pretty traditional fare with a socialist strain. They include a tribute to Michael Collins, "The Big Fella," "James Connolly" and even Constance Markievicz. Their nationalism is not confined to the past; they've also recorded nationalist songs about the war in Northern Ireland like "Bobby Sands MP."

In “Time to Go” from *Home of the Brave*, they depict relations between Britain and the Irish in Northern Ireland in terms of race, using their most direct rapping style:

I support one thing, that one thing is peace  
 Peace with justice and the troubles will cease  
 British rule totally fucked up the place  
 Treats us like we’re an inferior race  
 Pat and Mike jokes on the BBC  
 Face it, you’re racist, all you’re missing are the white sheets  
 You keep on lying, I won’t stop trying  
 I won’t step off ‘til my people stop dying

.....

I know this much, this much I know  
 People are dying—it’s time to go  
 It’s time to go—get the fuck out.

They talk about race here in specifically American terms by comparing British actions in Northern Ireland to the KKK, which suggests that the most viable image to use to represent racism is American.

By asserting a link with African Americans in overtly nationalist terms, Black 47 hearken back to the Northern Irish Civil Rights Movement’s use of “We Shall Overcome” as a marching song in 1968. That alliance was effective in defining the war in Northern Ireland in colonial terms rather than the product of “unruly hooligans” or an “angry race.” It is not surprising, then, that Black 47 have worked with Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, who spoke publicly about the connections between the NICRM and civil rights for blacks in the U.S., which brought her scorn from many in the Irish American community. As she told an American reporter in 1969: “Many [Irish Americans] do not want to make room for the guy on the lower rung—in this case, the black man” (“The Maid of Bogside”).<sup>3</sup> America plays a crucial role in definitions of both Ireland’s rejection of its colonial status (i.e., the choice of whiteness) and the possibility of a more fluid, disruptive Irish identity (blackness). Black 47 reminds us that the famine is the root of both those possibilities.

The name Black 47 performs two functions: it memorializes the famine which devastated the Irish population, but it also celebrates

the possibility of an Irish-black alliance, because 1847 brought the Irish to America in large numbers. Emigration ruptures Irish history and leaves an emptiness that needs a new narrative to account for the wound. Roediger, Ignatiev, and Lott suggest that the Irish created a white identity in the face of that emptiness. So by evoking solidarity with blacks at the moment of loss rather than asserting whiteness, the name *Black 47* questions the whiteness of the Irish, and explores the creative and political possibilities of blackness. Of famine commemorations, Kirwan has said: "I think that the emphasis should be on the political as well as the memorial, because we can learn from what happened...How do we utilize what happened with Ireland, the lesson of the Famine? How can we solve problems that are ongoing?" (Roden)

It may seem strange to speak of the famine as producing possibilities for this relationship, but such is the nature of *Black 47*'s hybrid Irish nationalism. Luke Gibbons argues for a notion of post-colonial hybridity which can break out of the model of colonial center vs. colonized margin, where the colonized mimic the ways of the colonizer to gain status: "Another way of negotiating identity through an exchange with the other is to make provision, not just for 'vertical' mobility from the periphery to the centre, but for 'lateral' journeys along the margins which short-circuit the colonial divide. ...Hybridity need not always take the high road: where there are borders to be crossed, unapproved roads might prove more beneficial in the long run than those patrolled by global powers." (180)

Daniel O'Connell and Frederick Douglass saw the possibilities of what Gibbons calls "unapproved roads." Douglass toured Ireland during 1845-46 to see the results of the famine and felt connections between Irish suffering and slavery. O'Connell was aggressively anti-slavery, and encouraged Irish Americans to join the abolition cause. In 1842, 70,000 Irish signed an antislavery petition "which called on Irish-Americans to *'cling by the abolitionists'* in seeking not just the end of slavery but of racial discrimination as well. The address advised: 'Irishmen and Irishwomen! treat the colored people as your equals, as brethren.'" (Roediger 134)

The alliances Douglass and O'Connell were trying to forge had the potential to disrupt the oppressive definitions of both blacks and the Irish. *Black 47* represent the famine as tragedy, but they also

reveal emigration, and its resulting hybridity, as an asset which can explode notions of pure identity. Black 47 conjure the spirit of anti-slavery work by the Irish in Ireland and the musical mixing in New York neighborhoods like the Five Points. That positive aspect of relations between the Irish and African Americans in the U.S. needs to be recovered, and there have been very few voices on the Irish American side making such a case.

Black 47 make these connections by writing about Irish national history, current Irish immigrants and conditions in Northern Ireland using hip hop beats as a backdrop. By renewing this story over a contemporary beat, the band seeks to connect the fractured and displaced identity of the African American with the Irish. They also use the hip-hop beat to critique some Irish American immigrants. In "Danny Boy," from their second CD *Home of the Brave* (1994), they tell the story of a young gay immigrant who gets a job working construction and faces homophobic attacks from coworkers, reminding listeners of the intense anti-gay tactics of New York and Boston's Irish American community. The band's work suggests that unless traditional instruments and rhythms can accommodate both the rhythm of the Bronx and the stories of the Bronx, it will die. The immigrant must fight insularity and the drive towards whiteness.

Other than one song about Paul Robeson, however, there is little reciprocity in their work. Like their predecessors, Black 47 use African Americans as a way to redefine Irishness, without much interest in African Americans or relations between the groups. Therefore their "blackness" remains static, short-circuiting its radical possibilities.

The limitations of Black 47's approach are revealed on their latest record, *Green Suede Shoes* (1996) where the band pays tribute to the immigrants who were herded into deadly slums of New York, especially in the notorious Five Points neighborhood. For Black 47, the emigrant of the past is exempt from the prejudices exhibited by Irish Americans in the present. Their nineteenth century emigrants are always fighting for freedom and on the side of labor. The back cover of the CD, the inner booklet, and the CD itself feature a photo from Jacob Riis' classic study of New York slums, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the tenements of New York*. These

crowded but proud figures in an alley figure as the band's spiritual ancestors.

Although the album, unlike their previous efforts, consists of songs almost entirely set in the present, the ubiquitous Irish photos make "The Five Points"—the only song set in the distant past of Irish-American history—the key to the album. The Five Points was one of the worst slums in lower New York, and the center of the Irish American enclave in the mid nineteenth-century. It was also the site of much musical mixing between Irish and blacks, as Lott reports. But it is not such mixing that the song celebrates—for one thing, the song exhibits none of the musical mixing so prevalent in some of the earlier songs; it's a sped-up, Pogues-like reel.

The narrator of the song is a "draft" rioter from 1863. For five days in July 1863 armed rioters disrupted enforcement of the first federal conscription act in New York City, largely in the Five Points area. The role of the Irish in the New York City Draft Riots is one horrific example of the Irish constructing themselves as white. Although the spark was conscription, the riot brought other urban tensions to the fore, as Iver Bernstein points out: "relations between the wealthy and the poor, between blacks and whites, and between the city and the nation"(8). Democrats predicted that emancipation would bring north low-wage black freemen to compete with white laborers for employment. After a few days of rioting, the Irish made up the majority of the rioters. Increasingly, the rioters focused their attacks on blacks: they burned the Colored Orphan Asylum, the Longshoreman's Association drove blacks away from the piers, and on Roosevelt Street, tenements that housed black families were burned. Bernstein describes such attacks as grotesque "street theater."

The narrator of Black 47's song is a unironic hero, resisting conscription and railing against the conditions of the slums. There is no suggestion in the song that the riot was about anything more than immigrants rising up against their living conditions, no sense that the war against slavery might be a worthy cause:

D'ya remember back in the Five Points  
 When the Fire was in the air  
 The streets were hot as the hob of hell  
 The bodies were everywhere

“Won’t join their bloody army”  
 Sooner burn down Kerosene Row  
 So to hell with your kings and your presidents  
 Let them fight their own bloody wars

When the narrator of “The Five Points” sings, “Them soldier boys are runnin’ wild/Down by the Gates of Hell,” it cannot help but to evoke stories of the army coming into the Five Points to stop lynching. Iver Bernstein describes the event this way:

...laborer George Glass yanked crippled black coachman Abraham Franklin and his sister Henrietta from their rooms a few blocks away, roughed up the girl and dragged Franklin through the streets. A lamppost was found and Franklin was hanged. The military arrived, scattered the crowd and cut down Franklin’s body, but when the soldiers departed, the corpse was hoisted up again with cheers for Jefferson Davis. Then the crowd pulled down Franklin’s body for the final time. In a grisly denouement, sixteen-year-old Irishman Patrick Butler dragged the body through the streets by the genitals as the crowd applauded. After yet another hanging in this neighborhood, rioters cut off their black victim’s fingers and toes. The houses of these black residents were often identified, if they needed to be, by bands of small boys who ‘marked’ them by stoning the windows. The boys later returned with their male elders to pull out the black tenants and complete the bloody mission. Through such elaborate routines, these white workingmen and boys cultivated a dehumanized view of their black neighbors. (29)

Bernstein suggests that these events ritually “purified” the Irish American community of blacks and established the sexual and political power of the white figure.

In their attempt to highlight Irish resistance to conscription and frustration with their living conditions, I think Black 47 want to suggest that this was a moment when the Irish feel “black.” But it’s just not that simple. “The Five Points” cannot help but to evoke stories of Irish men attacking blacks. By celebrating the arsonist, Black 47 elides an ugly part of the emigrant’s history, but a necessary one if they want to speak from a position of shared oppression. The song ultimately reflects a “loss of memory” that limits the political possibilities of their attempted alliance. Certainly

Black 47's political sympathies and their political work suggest that they recognize the racism of contemporary Irish Americans. But if Black 47 sees themselves, as I think they do, as representing a new kind of Irish American, then a new account of the past is in order, too.

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NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of U2's film and album *Rattle and Hum* in this context, see my article "Celtic Soul Brothers," *Eire-Ireland*, Fall 1993. 28.3

<sup>2</sup> Aptly documented in L.P. Curtis' *Apes and Angels* and Dale Knobel's *Paddy and the Republic*.

<sup>3</sup> Devlin repeated this message to reporters and to audiences of Irish Americans many times during her first U.S. fundraising tour in 1969, and it did not always go over well in a conservative Irish American community.

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## The Hook

BY VICTORIA MARINELLI

*During the Nazi period... there was a women's bar, the Leibnez den... It was a lesbian bar, that was obvious... I picked up a woman there once. She wore a long, grey leather coat and said very openly that she worked for the Gestapo. There was something attractive about it for me, an evil attraction. I was with her two or three times; of course, I never told her anything about myself. It's possible that the Gestapo knew about the bar and just tolerated it. I mean, that's where I met that Gestapo woman. Maybe they just wanted to keep an eye on us, and maybe that's what the Gestapo man meant when he spoke of that list.*

Elizabeth Leithauser

DAYS OF MASQUERADE: LIFE STORIES  
OF LESBIANS DURING THE THIRD REICH

I remember once I told you  
I had a dream  
I'd go underground      infiltrate the Klan  
use my white skin for people I love

You laughed  
shook your head and sighed  
The week before you had cradled my head in your hands  
said to closed eyes      *There is a Sisterhood*  
The most insistent utterance I'd heard you make  
I'd opened my eyes but couldn't make heads or  
tails of your face and so I'd closed them again

Those explosive first days  
turned brutal upon our becoming more acquainted

*Victoria Marinelli lives in Richmond, Virginia. This poem is from a work in progress, Letters to a Terrorist.*

96 RACE TRAITOR

Admittedly I had taken you home from the Coming Out Week Dance for the 'lesbian' sex about which I'd been curious and there you had been, offering

I took  
the bait in my mouth with my eyes wide open  
Felt your hook deep inside me for months  
Your fury indecipherable  
Bisexuality the topic of battles that weren't  
about bisexuality but about my Jewish  
ex-boyfriend whose friendship I hadn't given up

Mike, the security guard from your old job fucked you  
enough but then you two had a special bond forged in  
robberies, hard alcohol and deceiving his wife

When you left your consort on occasion would follow me on the  
street  
Once I followed him back  
He disappeared into the bar called The Brotherhood and I stopped

I ripped  
your hooks out years ago and have since  
bled a lot, wondering what makes a girl use her body like  
that in the service of the white man

# Dry Spells

BY MICHAEL GREGORY

More than one old white man watching the rain  
bypass his place time and time again has thought  
the Chiricahuas must have cursed his spread if not  
the whole valley before they left, or else some woman  
every bit as justified as the Apaches  
getting back at him or one of his predecessors  
for all the lying and cheating and plain brute force  
Anglo and Mexicano alike used to get  
what they liked to think of as their property  
until she got fed up and left and the land went dry,  
the storm cells splitting just upwind and skirting by,  
year after year the trees failing to bear, the grass  
failing to grow, the animals and enterprises  
to thrive the way they might if there had been rain.

Having said so much to himself or to the wind  
he might have been thankful for the drops that did come  
now and then or, calloused by the long dry spells,  
scornful, knowing however much may come at this  
late date will never be enough to quench his thirst  
-and likely never would have been, now that he thinks  
of it: that boundless ambition, that clarity he had  
about what was his to claim and require by right of being  
free, white, American, male . . . .

Not all that much alone in the face of no rain.

Being out of a job was like that: a bitter  
rebuke to pride, hope, reason and faith. Rugged  
individualism turned mean: alien nation,  
survivalist bullshit or the barrel of a shotgun  
against the roof of the mouth. Otherwise it's take  
the handout, go on the dole, forget all that crap about being  
self-sufficient, able to stand on your own two feet,  
what you used to think it took to be a man.

Rain. A job. Someone to share the hardpan with.

*Michael Gregory is a poet and environmentalist who lives in McNeal, AZ. He is the author of HUNGER WEATHER and THE VALLEY FLOOR.*

# reviews

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*CONFEDERATES IN THE ATTIC: DISPATCHES FROM THE UNFINISHED CIVIL WAR*, by Tony Horwitz. Pantheon Books, 1998. 416 pages, HC \$27.50.

BY JAMES MURRAY

Since the United States is a purely artificial nation held together by military force from the beginning, its history is one of a series of civil wars raged throughout the centuries and across the continent. Horwitz's book concerns the continuation of the most remembered of these civil wars, the one waged between 1861 and 1865 between North and South. Since the cessation of official hostilities, this war has been continued by other means. Through Reconstruction, the birth, death and rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, to the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, the South has remained contested territory. The battlefields may nowadays contain tract housing and the battles may be waged as much over symbols as politics, but the ballot box has not (even today) entirely replaced the bullet box.

Horwitz begins by relating how he was surprised by gunfire one morning at his Virginia home. Investigating, he discovered a group of Civil War re-enactors reliving some forgotten skirmish. Horwitz was fascinated by this phenomenon. Americans being mostly uninterested in history, he wondered what bred the obsession that transformed waiters, forklift drivers, and the odd professional into "living historians" (as re-enactors prefer to be called). So he joined their ranks, spending a weekend with the Southern Guard, a group of hard-core buffs who pursue authenticity to self-mortification: eating hardtack, soaking their uniforms in grease and urine, marching for hours on blistered bare feet, rejecting sunblock and insect repellent. They had a research committee that investigated such arcana as underwear buttons and 1860s dye.

Horwitz could partly understand the appeal of what they called a "period rush," "dwelling on the past rather than the present," leaving the twentieth century for a few days. But not entirely, and he used his experiences with the Southern Guard as a departure point to

explore the various subcultures that make up what he terms “Neo-Confederate thought.” For the next two years he visited every state that seceded. He interviewed members of the United Sons (and Daughters) of the Confederacy, historians, museum workers, Confederate battleflag fanatics, Civil War buffs both professional and lay, and others who cannot be so easily categorized. The result is a very good book.

Neo-Confederate thought is wrapped around the two poles it can never escape. The “reasons why” the original Confederates fought with such valor and sacrifice, and the inherent racism that renders their valor and sacrifice shameful and horrid. “Was it possible,” Horwitz wonders, “to uphold one heritage with upholding the other?” This should be a question of great interest to new abolitionists, especially those who live in the South and related territories. The knee-jerk liberal/leftist answer is “no.” But outside the liberal/leftist looking glass, the past and present are complex. As would be expected, the Neo-Confederates insist the Civil War had little to do with slavery:

Rather, it was a culture war in which Yankees imposed their imperialist and capitalist will on the agrarian South, just as the English had done to the Irish and Scots—and as America did to the Indians and Mexicans in the name of Manifest Destiny. The North’s triumph, in turn, condemned the nation to centralized industrial society and all the ills that came with it.

This is false, but not entirely false. West of the Mississippi, even more shades of gray appear. The last Confederate general to surrender was the Cherokee, Stand Watie. Recently in Oklahoma, Cherokee descendants of rebels have sued the state government to include the Confederate battleflag among those flying at the state capitol. Their reasoning: the Stars and Stripes is a flag of repression over the indigenous, while the Stars and Bars is a flag under which Cherokee partisans fought for their freedom. Of course the Cherokees were slaveholders too, and those interested must wonder, as did Horwitz

Was there such a thing as politically correct remembrance of the Confederacy? Or was any attempt to honor the Cause inevitably tainted by what Southerners once delicately referred to as their “peculiar institution”?

Yes, no, or maybe? In Horwitz's investigation, the Neo-Confederates are not all skunks with the same stripe. They run the gamut from little old ladies having tea in honor of Robert E. Lee to out and out racists dreaming of a return to the "good ol' days" to family tree historians, themselves wrestling with why their ancestors fought and died, to others Horwitz labels "anarchistic."

And just how much of the Yankee (i.e., liberal/leftist) conception of the War is wishful thinking? Horwitz goes on another outing with the Southern Guard, this time dressed up as a Union soldier to calm his conscious. After the weekend of re-enacting he stops in a convenience store, where he encounters a black Gulf War vet who engages him in conversation. The vet asks why six hundred thousand had to die between 1861 and 1865. Horwitz answers, "At least some of the Northerners thought they were fighting to free the slaves." The black vet is incredulous:

You shittin' me right? I fought in the Gulf War. Nobody be gettin' their butt shot off for no freedom thing... It's a big lie, this slave war thing. It don't matter really, except that whites still like to think, "Damn, my ancestors dies for those niggers, they should be thankful."

Later Horwitz interviews a black highschool teacher in Alabama. She tells him "the Union army betrayed us too. So we're fighting a confederacy up north and down south."

Without doubt slavery was the hot emotional button that pushed extremists on both sides to the brink and beyond. What followed was a total war in which the slaves were freed not from humanity but from military expediency. A hundred and thirty-five years later the fissures remain, and others have been added to the list. Horwitz finally realizes about the Neo-Confederates that

In one sense they were right. The issues at stake in the Civil War—race in particular—remain raw and unresolved, as did the broad question the conflict posed: Would America remain one nation? In 1861 this was a regional dilemma, which it wasn't anymore. But socially and culturally, there were ample signs of separatism and disunion along class, race, ethnic and gender lines. The whole notion of a common people united by common principles—even a common language—seemed more open to question than at any period in my lifetime.

That is where Horwitz's book ends and that is where we are at. The heirs of Harriet Tubman and John Brown need to step forward.

*SURREALIST WOMEN: AN INTERNATIONAL ANTHOLOGY*, Penelope Rosemont, ed. University of Texas Press, 1998. Illustrated. 576 pages. PB \$24.95.

BY RACHEL BLACKWELL

Conventional wisdom has it that “very few” women were involved in surrealism. Art and Lit texts rarely mention even one, but Penelope Rosemont's research has revealed over three hundred women active in surrealism as an organized movement since 1924. This first-ever anthology of surrealist women *writers* features ninety-seven of them, from thirty countries. If some were nine-day wonders, many are obviously major figures.

Recovering lost revolutionary voices is always valuable, but what makes this anthology truly exciting and important is that these voices have so much to say to us today. Writing in *La Revolution Surrealiste* in 1927, Fanny Beznos linked historic slavery, modern capitalism, and the oppression of women (“always busy at the cradle, not entirely a slave, but... half of a free being”) and concluded with a passionate call for revolution. White supremacy, misogyny, capitalism, imperialism, ecological devastation, and the struggles against them are recurring themes of the book.

From Nancy Cunard's early enthusiasm for African sculpture to Hilary Booth's celebration of “Great Black Music” when the Art Ensemble of Chicago played Australia in 1983, the liberating influence of Black culture—and the surrealists' support for Black liberation—run all through this book. Vitally important are the many texts by Black surrealists, from the brilliant, pathbreaking theoretical essays by Suzanne Césaire to the firespitting poetry of Jayne Cortez.

*Surrealist Women* will do much to inspire, expand, and deepen the theory and practice of the new abolitionism. As Meret Oppenheim (inventor of the fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon) once said, “No one will give you freedom, you have to take it.”

# letters

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## PRISONER WRITES

I received two issues of *Race Traitor* and I like them both. They've created quite a stir here also. Overall, the guys here like *Race Traitor* a lot. They grasped the concept behind it quickly. A couple of the guys are history buffs, and appreciated the article [by Loren Goldner, *RT* 7] on the historical origins of race ideology.

The article about Lucasville [by Staughton Lynd, *RT* 8] was right on target. In 1993 Muslims and the Aryan Brotherhood united in the Easter Uprising at Lucasville. The Lucasville 5 stand united to this day. But some outside supporters wanted to support the blacks, but not support the evil "white supremacists." Still today some outside groups won't support the Lucasville 5 because two of them are A.B.s.

Alice and Staughton Lynd were among the first outside activists who realized what was going on and made an effort to preserve their unity by rendering support to all the Lucasville Five. Staughton has articulated this problem well, and shows why they have earned the respect and support they're getting.

In our efforts to build unity and break down barriers based on race we often deal with prisoners who have organized under the banner of Aryan Brotherhood or Aryan Nations. In the prison system it's a structure that whites use to organize for power. It's no worse than any other prison gang, but it does carry extremely negative connotations. It seems strange to me that outside supporters don't understand the politics of prison gangs. When I get a member of the Aryan Nations and a member of the Black Gangster Disciples to sit down and discuss racism, classism and oppression, then I've accomplished something. There are those on the outside who feel we should hate each other. It's not unusual to see a Muslim embracing a member of the Aryan Nations (not A. B.).

I have followed the ARA [Anti-Racist Action] for several years and watched their actions, and I disagree with their approach. The ARA isn't winning anyone over, they're misdirecting thousands of young people toward the lunatic fringe who have little or no power over us. They should be directing these people at the institutionalized state racism that is inherent in our society.



We have the former Ohio Grand Dragon of the Knights of the KKK and two of the Aryan Nations former officers here in this prison. These men have been racists all their lives, but they are slowly beginning to question their belief system. They're maturing, and learning about the revolution and the importance of unity among our class. We work with them every day. Basically they'll always have some racist beliefs, but we are establishing common ground to base our unity on in the struggle against oppression from the government and the ruling elite. Racism is based on fear and ignorance, and the hate and violence the ARA projects towards them only reinforces the barrier and makes it harder for us to find common ground to build unity on.

The ARA doesn't have to eat and sleep next to their enemy every day for years. We do and that's our reality, and we have to find common ground or we'll end up killing each other forever! Way down here on the bottom, in the trenches, we see things clearly without the meaningless rhetoric from the ARA.

The racial situation is less of a problem in here than it is out there. In here most of us know that the government is our enemy, our oppressor. For the most part I judge people as individuals, and I try not to get caught up in the racial issues. If a person is in the struggle, they're my Brother or Sister. Whenever there's trouble between prisoners and prison officials I strongly urge unity among prisoners. I defend all the prison gangs, whatever they choose to organize through.

The work strike and fires here last year show that we have enough unity to organize. The work strike here last year put me in isolation for 4-1/2 months. But I earned the respect of a lot of prisoners. There's been some talk here recently of trying to organize a stronger work strike in the Ohio prison system next year. But we're trying to round up outside support. Without outside support to get our side of the story out during disturbances, we're often made to look like fools with no valid issues or complaints.

I get a lot of literature and share it with other prisoners-regardless of race. We've got a large group of prisoners here who share whatever material we get. We use this material to educate ourselves to classism, racism, oppression and the struggle for justice. The material we get in here is passed around and read until it falls apart. To talk about racism or classism is one thing, but to tear down

the barriers between us and build working relationships and unity, that's something altogether different. We're doing that here, because we must build unity to overcome our oppressors. It is not an easy task, but I sleep real good because I have no enemies among the prisoner class.

*Dan Cahill  
Columbus, OH*

### QUESTIONS AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

I am a "white" student at the University of Texas in Austin. I completely agree with your call for abolition of the white race and with your analysis of how categories of race further victimization and oppression. However, I also am pro-affirmative action (which relies on the notion of distinctive races to combat the effects of past and present discrimination). How do the editors of *Race Traitor* reconcile support for affirmative action with a call to end the distinctions demarcated by "race." Or is there a way to reconcile these issues?

*J. V. Reed  
Austin  
May 1998*

**Editors reply.** We have no problem reconciling our desire to abolish race as a social category with support for affirmative action as a means of overcoming the effects of past and present discrimination. The U.S. is a big engine guaranteeing affirmative action for whites, and affirmative action for victims of race discrimination is one way of addressing that problem.

### A SLIGHT MISUNDERSTANDING

I am a white American male. My father is from the Azores and my mother is second-generation American. I work full time for the department of corrections. So not only am I white, but I also hold authority. I'm batting a thousand! I like to think that I hold myself in a very professional manner and I do not consider myself a racist. I do agree that our government degrades us and it is time for a change. All races need to unite as one race called Americans! But from reading your web page, you make it sound like we should all die. You don't even know me, what my morals are and what I am willing

to fight for. I don't hate you for what you are but obviously you hate me. Now you're the ones responsible for creating a racist not the government!

*David  
May 1998*

**Editors reply.** You misread us. We don't hate you for the color of your skin. We hate the system that favors some people for the color of their skin. Let me offer you a parallel: we are also against monarchy, against kings, thrones, crowns, and all the rest, but that doesn't mean we want to kill the king. White is a social grouping, not a natural one, and no one has to be white simply because he has fair skin. If you oppose the system of white domination, we will be happy to welcome you as a comrade.

“**David writes back.** I misunderstood. It is difficult sometimes to separate the term “white” from the color of my skin. In the prison, I get referred to as a “blue-eyed devil” or “wolf.” I apologize and I would like to learn more about your mission.

#### **MY SENTIMENTS EXACTLY**

Thank you for putting a name to my exact sentiments on “race.” I am proud to be a Race Traitor. Thank you for continuing to expose classism as the real war yet to be fought. I have had my fill of the “Why can't we all just get along?” attitude.

I am a “white” woman, married to a “black” man for 18 years now, with two (adopted) “mixed” kids, ages 8 & 10. I go about my life appearing to be “white,” but I have concerns that can only be had by “black” people. When I am treated politely by a clerk who was just rude to his/her previous “black” customer, this is a serious concern for me. I cannot ignore it, choosing to hide behind my “white” privilege; I must take the clerk's actions very personally. When my husband and I are stopped by police officers for the offense of DWB (driving while black) I am considered just as “black” as my husband; “black” by proxy. When I am at work and (with the “black” employees safely out of earshot) my “white” co-workers make racist comments, I am as deeply offended as if they were talking about me—they ARE talking about me: my children, my husband, and my whole extended family. These are but a few examples of a consciousness that develops over this many years of

“walking in both worlds.” As I think about how my experiences relate to “bonafide blacks” that look “white,” I am struck once again by how ignorant and foolish the whole falsely contrived notion of “race” really is. How can one be “really black but look white?” What does this mean? Does this phrase describe me? Could it be that this is the very way we should ALL feel, vigilant against all racist actions and implications, overt and covert? It would be a step in the right direction if we were to end this insane practice of categorizing people by such arbitrary measures. I do battle as a “black” person, and I get a bird’s-eye-view of racism that sometimes only “white-skinned” people get. Isn’t it eerie that “whites” regularly assume, by looking at my skin, that I am “one of them,” and that it is OK to espouse their racist opinions to me? I do battle as an undercover agent. I expose them, and it feels good. I find that I have an arena that “blacks” don’t always have. My husband can only wonder and suspect if the way he was treated was due to racism at times, but when I hear the comments “straight from the horse’s mouth,” they cannot deny their intent, and so I have a clearly defined battle instead of the difficult, “impossible to prove in a court of law” positions “blacks” usually face.

A question: If I am in the workplace and am confronted with bald-faced racism of white management/owners, can “white” me sue for discrimination in court? It is very difficult for “blacks” to prove discrimination on the job, subtle and covert as it is. As a Race Traitor though, I have repeatedly had access to overt, direct proof of racial discrimination against co-workers. I would not propose to sue on behalf of the co-worker, but on behalf of myself, for the fact is I could not tolerate working for an employer who would slander my children, my husband, my family, myself, and have been forced to seek other employment rather than be abused in such a way. I have long felt that racism and discrimination can only end when “whites” demand that it be so. Is there precedent for a “white” suing an employer for racial discrimination directed at “blacks”? Considering that I do not subscribe to being “white,” and that I am deeply offended by this type of discrimination, and that it translates into monetary loss for my family when I am forced to seek alternate employment in the face of it, would I not qualify as being discriminated against? How could the courts deal with the quandary they would face in this situation? The point of the suit would be to

force the hand of a racist court system, and if successful, to make REAL headway to eliminate racism in the workplace. If “white” capitalists did not know which “whites” were REALLY “white,” they would be more inclined to put a lid on the racism that all good “white” folks silently bear witness to on a regular basis. I applaud you once again for exposing the issue of “race” in America for what it is: subterfuge for the economic benefit of the few.

*Theresa Johnson  
Racine, WI  
July 1998*

### **COPWATCHING**

St. Patrick's Day, my boyfriend David and I were driving along a street near an Irish bar—Scruffy O'Shea's (what a name). The traffic slowed: the cops had set up a sobriety checkpoint. The people in the car next to us—two young Latino men and one Latina—started to freak out. Sure enough, when they approached the checkpoint, they were waved over. Dave and I didn't even merit a second glance. In fact, every damn person they had stopped on the side of the road was Latino. And just two blocks down from this checkpoint, a bunch of white middle class folks were going mad celebrating their Irish “heritage” with big pints. It was a very graphic demonstration of how the Irish got white and who took their place. All I could get up the courage to do was yell “racists” at the highway patrol as we pulled out of the checkpoint and “keep your head up” to the Latino kids we had been next to in line. It was one of those moments when you feel your whiteness...it's that voice in your head shouting “shut up.” There was that brief moment we could have done something. So we went home and reread the copwatch issue [RT 6] and formulated a better plan for what to do next time.

*Joanna Brooks  
Los Angeles  
April 1998*

The other night I got handcuffed & thrown into a squad car by some cops because I was attempting to do some copwatching while they were shaking down a few Mexican guys outside a bar. They gave me a 15-20 minute verbal working over in the car, pounding me with questions like: Where are you from? What neighborhood do you live

in? What the fuck are you doing down here (I was in Pilsen, a predominantly Mexican barrio)? Where do you work? How do you think it would look if your employer were to find out you got locked up? On and on... They were particularly jarred by the fact that a friend of mine who was with me at the time had a camera on him & he was starting to take some shots of the situation. They were seriously pissed. They told us to disperse immediately. What law was I breaking by just standing on the corner & observing this scenario? I asked. My law! barked the cop. Can I see where it's written that a citizen can't stand and take a look at what's happening on the street? That was it—the next thing I knew I was cuffed & crammed diagonally into the back of the squad car. There were a bunch of folks from the neighborhood just sitting out on their doorsteps, I should mention, casually checking out the action (this sort of shake down takes place routinely in their working class/poor community). One of the people I was with opined that what I did was stupid—and that engaging in copwatching serves no purpose other than to inflame the situation and endanger your own well being. (This is someone who, incidentally, considers himself “progressive.”) I want to hand your Cop Watch issue over to him as food for thought. And—who knows?—maybe, one day, even action.

*Danny Postel*

*Chicago*

*July 1998*

#### **PERMISSION TO REPRINT**

We are requesting permission to reprint “Abolish the white race—by any means necessary” from the racetraitor web site.

*Mark Schopmeyer*

*Jackson Community College*

*Jackson MI*

*August 1998*

**Editors' reply.** Granted. Let us know how the discussion went.

#### **SURREALIST ISSUE**

Thank you very much for sending me a copy of the Summer 1998 Surrealist edition of *Race Traitor*. I view *Race Traitor* and those

who support it as one of the more hopeful signs in today's troubled racial environment. Keep up your good work.

*Derrick Bell  
New York*

**Editors' note.** Derrick Bell's most recent book is *Afrolantica Legacies*, published by Third World Press.

The Surrealist Issue is ELECTRIC. Required Reading!

*Laura Corsiglia  
Paris, France*

The Surrealist issue is suburb! Please send twelve more!

*Ted Joans*

**Editors' note.** Ted Joans's *Collected Poems* are in the works at Coach House Press.

It is good to hear some surrealist voices in a world which is going into the trap of a new (but really old) conservatism. The overview of surrealist activities against racism in the past is as important as the manifestations of the different surrealist groups in the present.

*Richard Anders  
Berlin*

**Editors' note.** Richard Anders is one of the foremost poets in Germany today. His collection, *The Footprints of One Who Has Not Stepped Forth*, will appear soon in English translation.

Just wanted to say that I love the surrealism issue. I read it straight through, from cover to cover. It gives me a sense of context for my own artistic work, and it also gives me a clearer sense of the connection between the political and the artistic.

*Patricia Eakins  
New York City  
August 1998*

Patricia Eakins's novel *The Marvelous Adventures of Pierre Baptiste, Father and Mother, First and Last* will be published in spring 1999 by

New York University Press. She is the winner of the 1996 Aga Khan Prize for Fiction from *The Paris Review*.

I am an African American poet and playwright, and the politics of *Race Traitor* struck a chord with me the first time I encountered them—at long last a publication honest enough to speak the whole, and not merely a parcel, of the truth.

My accord with the political objectives of *Race Traitor*, and hence I gather with the contemporary surrealist movement, has sparked an interest in surrealist aesthetics. It's an odd coincidence that while I received *Race Traitor's* special Surrealist Issue I was also reading (experiencing would be the better word) for the first time the poetry of Aime Cesaire.

I have never thought of myself as a surrealist writer until recently—but you should also appreciate that until recently I was unaware that one could still be “a surrealist.” I am presently working on a book of poems entitled *Burning My Secret Notebook of Dreams*, and my method of writing these poems—this project was begun months ago, without thinking of my methods as surrealist—is to wake up each morning and start writing, choosing as my theme the first phrases sifting through from my dream (un)conscious.

Let me emphasize that reading “Three Days that Shook the New World Order” [by the Chicago Surrealist Group, *RT* 2] was inspiring and revelatory. My dream (isn't that the most important word in English, aside from love?) has been to somehow marry art and politics as wings of a butterfly, fused together. Essay after essay of *Race Traitor's* Surrealist Issue pointed me toward the surrealist method as the most natural—if not the only—way.

*Darryl Lorenzo Wellington*  
*Savannah, Georgia*

I just read “Surrealists on Whiteness” in *Race Traitor*. It is an interesting, provocative piece to me. Not because of its views on whiteness and the movement to overthrow it, since I am a longtime anti-racist and militant against white supremacy, but rather because I've never seen any of the surrealist writings from an ideological point of view.

Surrealism has been an art movement which I have admired, particularly the poetry. As soon as I started reading the Introduction



to the *Race Traitor* issue, it clicked—that in fact I had never really understood the entire surrealist conception and project. So here I am a few decades late—educated in Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, even anarchism, but ignorant of something that resonates with a broader spectrum of who I am than narrow political ideology.

As I read, a friend came to visit (I am in prison—a political prisoner). She is an artist who has been a political activist as long as I have. I told her about the Surrealist issue. Together we are both excited. Where have I been, I wonder, that I didn't know of the surrealists and their worldview.

*Marilyn Buck  
Dublin, California*

I was intrigued by the articles in the Surrealist issue of *Race Traitor*, and am hungry for more. I was never formally educated beyond high school, but more and more I am appreciating that fact, for it means basically that I have much less junk to haul out in order to let the Real Learning in.

*Larry Holman  
Atlanta, Georgia*

Congratulations on the excellent Surrealist Issue of *Race Traitor!* Both the contemporary and the historical writings are invaluable. Not much “orthodox” surrealism is available in Canada, and for many people I know, the magazine was their first engagement with contemporary surrealism as a revolutionary project.

*Mark Connery  
Toronto, Canada*

### **HELL YEAH!!!**

About four years ago, when I was the editor of the San Francisco State University School of Ethnic Studies newsletter, I was posting little sayings like: THE WHITE LIBERAL AMERICAN CREED: When riding on another man's back as I would a horse, I will do everything in my power to alleviate his suffering, EXCEPT get off his back. And I would sign it RT, for Race Traitor.

*Jim Lester  
San Francisco  
March 1998*

I live in central Illinois and work in an auto factory. I have always considered myself as a non-racist. I recently read Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and *The Outsider*. It seems as though the insights I gained through these writings have produced a roving light in my heart seeking out those nasty little shadows of racial bias that I thought I had dispelled long ago. I have found myself moving from this into a more in-depth inquiry into racism in America, from the advent of slavery to the present. I like what I read in your article on this page. I would like to know more about you and if there are others like you and how widespread is the acceptance of these views.

*John Powell*  
*April 1998*

I am a graduate student, poet (first book out in August from New Rivers Press), teacher (freshman comp, creative writing), former police (911-Dispatcher/Jailer with the Ames, Iowa, P.D., 1987-1995) with a bad attitude toward whiteness and white privilege. I renounce mine every chance I get, although this institution is full of recruiters for the white club who'd like to see me re-enlist. I use the "What We Believe" section from the web to start classroom "discussion"—my friends call it the "exploding head" method of pedagogy.

*Ken Munger*  
*May 1998*

Very interesting site. I bet you get a lot of hate mail. It doesn't matter, I hate those bastards with a passion anyway. But as a white male with a black girlfriend, I have seen the roots of racism and have seen the so-called white devil in people. People who you would have thought of as "friends" turn their back on you. I spit on those people. I'm proud for who I am and for the decisions I make in life.

*Joe Hyden*

#### **ARE YOU FOR REAL?**

I am white and agree with what you advocate. But the webpage address—postfun—makes me wonder if this is really a joke. If you are for real, I would like to hear from you.

*Don*  
*December 1997*

**Editors' reply.** We like to think we are for real. Our web page was donated to us by the good people at Postfun. Check them out.

### **WHITE OR ETHNIC?**

I think someone should write a piece on the “new white ethnicity.” I am speaking of the spate of films (“Southie,” “Good Will Hunting”) celebrating white ethnic groups in the US—in particular, lower middle class Boston Irish. It seems to me that white people—those who have not renounced whiteness—no longer have the right to celebrate ethnic identity. They traded in that right for the power of white supremacy. Of course white supremacy lets them make any kind of film they want to make; I am speaking of rights in a just world, not this one.

*Dan Tenenbaum  
Portland  
September 1998*

### **WHAT KIND OF ABOLITIONISTS ARE WE?**

I've been telling people for years that we should get rid of the institution known as the “old whitey.” They do nothing but bring the Mexican and Negro man down to their sub-human level. I haven't known it, but I've been a new abolitionist all my life. What can I do to help abolish the white race? I would love to see those white, racist sons of bitches gone before I lay down in my grave.

*Sanford  
June 1998*

**Editors' reply.** Thanks for your letter. For starters, you can subscribe to our print journal and order the anthology (info on the website), to help us keep publishing. You can join the New Abolitionist Society and talk it up and circulate it among your friends. And you can write up your experiences, so others can learn.

**Sanford writes back.** What kind of abolitionist movement are you running? I say I want to get rid of the white race, and you tell me to buy your anthology and journal? We have to take action. Forget about the journal, none of my friends can read all that well anyway. I say we've got to put down our pens and pick up our weapons. With the white bastards that control this society pumping drugs and prostitution into our black neighborhoods, writing isn't going to do a

hell of a lot. I've been writing and talking about get ridding of white control in our neighborhoods for years, but I'm sick and tired of it not working. We've got to try something different. I'm looking to send a message to the white folks in society that they can't ignore. It's too easy for them to look the other way when they see our writing, and pass it off as "racist propaganda." Peaceful protest has only got us so far-it's going to take more to reach our ultimate goal. The question is, are you willing to help? Will you put down your pen and pick up a gun to protect your rights as a black citizen of this white-dominated country? Are you willing to risk it all to turn this nation into a black-dominated society? I am, and I turn to you and the other New Abolitionists for some advice on how to stir things up. Thanks for your time, and may God bless you and our cause.

**Editors' reply.** You are absolutely right: Books alone, no matter how good they are, will not overthrow white power. Let us, therefore, say a bit more about our project. *Race Traitor* was started up about five years ago. It is published on a desktop, with no support other than sales and contributions from its readers. It pays no salaries and doesn't even have an office. Nonetheless it has reached thousands of people with the idea that race is not a natural but a social construct, and that what was socially constructed can be socially destroyed. But *Race Traitor* is, so far, only a magazine. The task is to build a movement capable of challenging and ultimately overturning all the institutions that reproduce the white race. With that aim in mind, the editors called a conference in 1997 in New York City. About 200 people attended, mostly from the northeast, and we announced the formation of the New Abolitionist Society. The Society is still barely more than a loose network connected by a newsletter, but it is beginning to develop chapters in a few places. We are hoping to develop the newsletter, and use it to report on and encourage struggles against white domination. The journal, the newsletter, and the website exist to serve a movement. The Society will do whatever its members want it to do. If you want to take part, we can put you in touch with other readers in your area. Perhaps you can develop something. Finally, although we know that there comes a time to replace the weapon of criticism with the criticism by weapons, we wouldn't scorn the *word*. Nat Turner plus William Lloyd Garrison gave rise to abolitionism. Abolitionism plus the fugitive slave created John Brown. John Brown sparked the Civil War. And the Civil War opened the way for the slaves and others to move against slavery.

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Abolish the White Race; Two Who Said 'No' to Whiteness; Lydia Maria Child and John Brown; American Canada; Black-Jewish Relations; Reading, 'Riting, and Race; Civil War Reenactments; The White Question; Malcolm X; Letter from Europe

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Special Issue—Surrealism: Revolution against Whiteness

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## WHAT WE BELIEVE

**T**he white race is a historically constructed social formation. It consists of all those who partake of the privileges of the white skin in this society. Its most wretched members share a status higher, in certain respects, than that of the most exalted persons excluded from it, in return for which they give their support to a system that degrades them.

**T**he key to solving the social problems of our age is to abolish the white race, that is, to abolish the privileges of the white skin. Until that task is accomplished, even partial reform will prove elusive, because white influence permeates every issue, domestic and foreign, in U.S. society.

**T**he existence of the white race depends on the willingness of those assigned to it to place their racial interests above class, gender, or any other interests they hold. The defection of enough of its members to make it unreliable as a predictor of behavior will lead to its collapse.

**R**ace **Traitor** aims to serve as an intellectual center for those seeking to abolish the white race. It will encourage dissent from the conformity that maintains it and popularize examples of defection from its ranks, analyze the forces that hold it together and those that promise to tear it apart. Part of its task will be to promote debate among abolitionists. When possible, it will support practical measures, guided by the principle, **Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity.**

The editors of *Race Traitor* publish what we think will help to build a community of readers. Editorial opinions are expressed in editorials and in unsigned replies to letters.

# RACE TRAITOR

*Race Traitor*, an anthology of selections from the first five issues of the journal, won a 1997 American Book Award. It is available at bookstores nationwide, or you can order it for \$15 postage paid from P.O. Box 400603, Cambridge, MA 02140.

edited by Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey

# Race Traitor journal of the new abolitionism

Pittsburgh, Pa. 12<sup>th</sup> April, 1851

Dear Children

After much delay at Oneida Co, we reached Hudson day before yesterday about noon all in usual health, & found all well. I was obliged to leave for this place on the company business the next morning, & shall set out on my return this Evening. John & Matthey go back to Vernon the first of next week. Jason was fixing to move on to a place he has bought four or five miles on the way towards Richfield. Frederick appears quite well & we hope he may escape his poor turn this Spring. We went by Rail Road from Cleveland to Hudson. I some expect to be obliged to go to Springfield again before long, & it may be possible, that I may see North Elba before I return back from the East. If possible I mean to come; but can neither promise myself, nor you, now. In the mean time I shall be very glad if Henry can dispose of any more of the stuff I left to be sold, than to remunerate himself for money he gave me, & for his trouble on our account. I did intend to write you sooner, but have been so drove ever since I left, that I could not before this. Father was away from home, & your Uncle Frederick away in Kentucky, so I have not seen them. Edward has not returned from California. I write in great confusion & haste having traveled all last night. May God abundantly bless you both  
Your Affectionate Father  
John Brown

side cover & John for \$110 of Oneida Co. Let the letter, & look on safe

(Let us hear from you)