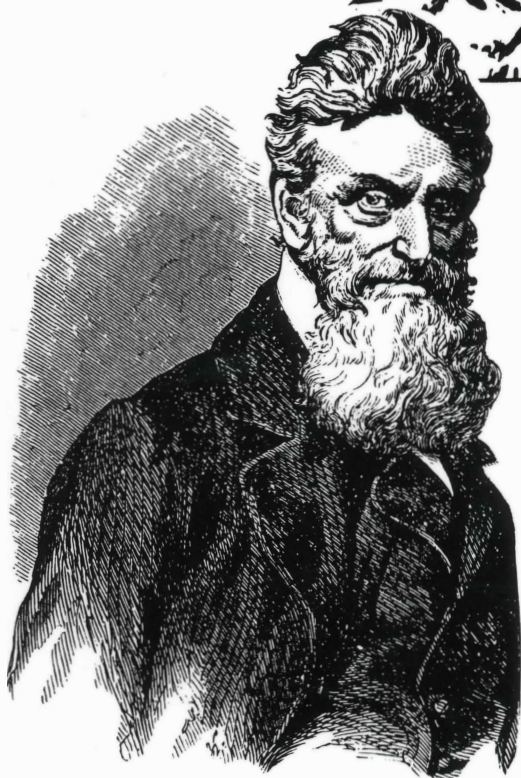


# RACE

# TRAITOR

**John Brown  
Nat Turner  
2000**



Spring 2000 number 11 \$5



Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity

# Race Traitor

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number eleven/spring 2000

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# TEACHERS AS SAVIORS, TEACHERS WHO CARE

BY ROBERT LOWE

**D***angerous Minds* was a major box office attraction that failed to win over film critics. They viewed it as a predictable, trite, saccharine, credulity-defying retread of movies that showcase a teacher confronting the educational problems of urban children.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, *High School II*, Frederick Wiseman's film of East Harlem's Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS), won plaudits for the director, the school itself, and for Deborah Meier, the school's founder and perhaps the most renowned educational reformer in the United States today.<sup>2</sup> These contrasting reviews are hardly remarkable, given the different genres the films represent. One is a Hollywood confection successfully designed to reach a large audience. The other, a PBS-aired documentary by a distinguished film maker, is stripped of viewer-friendly conventions. Without narrator, music, or a focus on the dramatic, it sets down nearly four hours of footage that captures the interactions between teachers and students. Yet there are similarities between the two films that go beyond matters of educating urban children. Each, for instance, is closely tied to a book. *Dangerous Minds* is based on *My Posse Don't Do Homework*, LouAnne Johnson's narrative of her teaching experience, and Deborah Meier's *The Power of Their Ideas* explicates the work of CPESS.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, both films depict white educators who are dedicated to working with children of color. If this were standard practice for white people, there would be little interest in films that portray such a dynamic. Instead, white educators too often question the intellectual capacities of such children and write them off.

On the face of it, then, these films appear to offer white teachers models to emulate that might advance the project of racial justice. Yet how the work of these educators is framed can either support a vision of racial

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equality or justify white supremacy. This essay views the latter as the dominant message. It will contend that *Dangerous Minds* is a blatantly racist film that counterpoises LouAnne Johnson's commitment to educating her students to African-American adults' indifference or even hostility to this effort, and, more controversially, it will argue that the text of *High School II* captures a subtle racism within CPESS that appears to stem from a failure to question the power relationship between the schools' white leaders on one hand and students and parents of color on the other. In both films the construction of white teacher-heroes depends on distorting or silencing the voices of African Americans and Latinos. Ironically, the essay will maintain, the sometimes repugnant *Dangerous Minds* partly subverts the dominant framework by evoking a strong ethos of caring that appears to be largely absent from the sophisticated but sterile practice *High School II* documents.

### Trials of a White Hero

The opening footage of *Dangerous Minds* captures in black and white a scene of early-morning urban desolation and desperation. Students board buses in this hopeless-looking environment, and when they arrive at LouAnne Johnson's school in the sunny suburbs, the film turns to color. The point of debarkation bears no resemblance to the real East Palo Alto, California, where many of Johnson's African-American and Latino students lived. Though economically stressed, it is physically beautiful and maintains the semirural feel of the utopian farming community it once was. Dramatically speaking, however, the racially suggestive play of dark and light over urban wasteland and lush suburb prepares the viewer to identify with LouAnne Johnson and the teaching challenge she will face.

In perfect keeping with such imagery, this refined white woman, a novice teacher played by Michelle Pfeiffer, meets an out-of-control class of color that has driven away her predecessors. A candidate for the same fate, Johnson succumbs to taunts on her first day, fleeing the room minutes after the class begins. That night she strategizes, considering and then rejecting as absurd the assertive discipline technique of writing down students' names who misbehave. Instead she chooses to pose tough, telling the students she was a marine and offering to teach them karate moves. This captures the students' attention, and, with the exception of the Black males in the class who consistently are portrayed as clowns or borderline thugs, the students quickly become attractive individuals whom

Johnson encourages to perform by offering them extrinsic rewards like candy, a trip to an amusement park, and dinner at an elegant restaurant. Many fine teachers offer similar bribes, but Johnson does not have a very sophisticated sense of pedagogy to counterbalance the crudeness of this sort of incentive to achieve. What she does academically is sketchy, however. There is some conjugation of verbs, some Bob Dylan poetry, and later some Dylan Thomas, but there is little evidence of probing discussion, serious writing, or literature that ties into the cultures of her students.

Yet what Johnson does is a far cry from the transmission of inert information. She teaches her own passions, which happen to include Dylan's lyrics, and though these are distant from cultural expressions of her students, it is perfectly plausible that her emotional connection with the words and cadences of Dylan's songs will be infectious and a legitimate way of evoking an understanding of metaphorical language. She also at times connects her preferred literature to themes that resonate to the experience of her students. Furthermore, as the movie progresses, Johnson relies less on extrinsic rewards, more on the intrinsic value of learning. At one point when a student asks what the prize will be for making sense of a poem, she responds, "Knowing how to read something and understand is the prize. Knowing how to think is the prize." She continues in this vein, identifying ideas with power in much the same way that Deborah Meier talks about the power of ideas at the end of *High School II*.

Whatever its limitations, it is not the curriculum that makes the film offensive educationally, but adult interactions that conspire to portray LouAnne Johnson as the only caring educator in the school. The ones who do not care include the pinched-looking assistant principal who tosses an under-prepared Johnson to the students who have devoured their previous teachers, and they include Hal, her closest (and apparently only) colleague, whose cynicism suggests an idealistic teacher gone sour. Although both these characters are white, an absence of caring is not identified as a characteristic of white people in general, but it is identified with African Americans. The two Black adults in the film are portrayed as the greatest obstacles to Johnson's efforts to teach her students effectively. One is a parent. When Johnson visits her house, concerned about the week-long absences of her two sons, this woman refuses to shake Johnson's hand and says, "You're that white-bread bitch messing with my babies' minds. My

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boys don't go to your school no more and that's going to be it . . . I saw what they were bringing home, poetry and shit, a waste of time." To Johnson's suggestion that graduating from high school would be an advantage for the young men, she replies, "That's not in their future. I ain't raising no doctors and lawyers here." This bizarre inversion of African Americans' perennial struggles for educational access and equity casts the sole "militant" Black person in the movie as someone who appears to be more militantly against education itself than hostile to the educational orientation of a white teacher.<sup>4</sup>

An equally unfortunate portrayal is that of the African-American principal, Mr. Grandey. He fits the too familiar stereotype of Black male as cardboard martinet. When Johnson wants to jettison *My Darling My Hamburger* as too infantile a novel for the students, Grandey objects, telling her she must teach the approved curriculum. Grandey's commitment to rules rather than students comes through most forcefully in the way he treats Emilio, the class rebel whose intellectual gifts Johnson has helped tease out. In mortal danger, Emilio musters the courage to enter Grandey's office to ask for help, but the principal summarily dismisses him for failing to knock before entering. Emilio's murder ineluctably follows, and Grandey's callousness is responsible.

These blatantly racist representations are not present in *My Posse Don't Do Homework*. The African-American mother simply does not exist, and Mr. Grandey (Mr. Grady in the book) is more humane. He appears to be somewhat stiff and rule-bound, but allows Johnson to bend the rules when doing so could help a student. Thus he permits her to keep a student who officially faces mandatory expulsion. In addition, the conflict between Johnson and him over requiring *My Darling My Hamburger* does not occur. In fact, it was Johnson who introduced the book to a class that considered it too juvenile, and consequently her students chose a work by Shakespeare instead. Furthermore, the episode in the movie when Grandey refuses entry to Emilio does not take place in the book, and Emilio does not die.

Unlike the book, the film version of Johnson's experience panders to the stereotype of Black men in authority by portraying Mr. Grandey as an unfeeling disciplinarian. For good measure, it plays to the stereotype of uncaring Black parents by inventing an African-American mother who has no regard for the education of her children. The viewer is invited to feel contempt for characters who represent Black leaders and Black parents. These obdurate figures serve as foils for Johnson who quite alone and

through heroic effort must save her class, comprised of mostly African-American and Latino students.<sup>5</sup> *Dangerous Minds*, then, conveys the message that only heroes are capable of educating children of color, that these heroes are properly white, and that they must battle against reactionary African-American parents and educators to rescue their students. In the world the film creates, educational change cannot take place beyond the good things that can happen in the isolated classroom of a white teacher.

## An Innovative School

In a number of respects *High School II* presents a more optimistic vision of educational possibilities for those who have been poorly served by schooling in the United States. While the opening frames of *Dangerous Minds* stress the neediness of the students' home environment in order to help set up LouAnne Johnson as their hero, *High School II* begins by presenting a vista of East Harlem on a sunlit morning that banishes thoughts of dire living conditions. CPESS appears to be housed in a structure as plain as the buildings that surround it, save for the brightly painted student work on the entrance that hints at transforming educational practices within. The film proceeds to capture scenes from CPESS, a highly praised model of educational reform, that show a staff that is unified behind a commitment to the intellectual development of students. Before graduating, students are expected to be accomplished in exercising five habits of mind, which co-director Paul Schwarz lists early in the film. They include understanding the perspective through which a subject is being presented, examining the evidence that undergirds a position, recognizing the interconnectedness of knowledge, speculating on how things might have been different, and contemplating why an inquiry matters.<sup>6</sup> These generic elements of intellectual engagement are far too infrequently called upon in college-level work, let alone in most high schools.

What takes place in scenes from classrooms predictably often falls short of these goals. In a seminar on *King Lear* that turns to a discussion of different types of love, it is obvious that most of the students have read the play, but the teacher cannot elicit much thinking of any sort on the part of students. Often the nature of teachers' questions appears to shape the extent to which students' thinking is released. Thus, on the one hand,

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perhaps the best work is being done by a science teacher whose questioning guides a student in accurately projecting what percentage of fruit flies will have vestigial wings under different circumstances. It is clear that he is really learning something about genetics. On the other hand, a student is completely stumped by the requirement that she produce a thesis statement for an essay. The teacher patiently explains what a thesis statement is, but the real problem, I think, is that the student understandably has no convictions about and no access to ways of thinking about the question that was to prompt her thesis: "How and why do law and morality effect changes in each other?" Elsewhere opinions are offered and teachers probe for evidence, but the disciplined inquiry proposed by the habits of mind is rarely evident. Whatever the gap between intellectual vision and practice, however, the lecturing and rote learning that typify instruction in most high schools are absent, and the school is organized to promote engagement. In fact, the configurations of staff members and students look downright unfamiliar, unschool-like.

By using space in ways that suggest elements of both kindergarten and graduate school, CPESS defies our sense of a "real" high school, an institution that has been notably resistant to the waves of progressive educational reform that have sought to make schooling more student-centered.<sup>7</sup> Rather than the large body of students LouAnne Johnson and most other high school teachers face and must often treat as an undifferentiated mass, students stand out individually at CPESS. In much of the film, for instance, there is no evidence of traditional classes taking place. Students either work independently or interact with teachers individually or in small groups. In counseling sessions students typically are outnumbered by the staff members present. The work of the school also reflects this focus on the individual. Instead of completing paper and pencil tests for passing grades required to graduate, each student is expected to complete a number of exhibitions that demonstrate in-depth knowledge and presumably showcase their acquisition of the habits of mind. At the beginning of the film a student engages in one such exhibition, acquitting himself fairly well in an attempt to argue from a socialist perspective that class is a far more meaningful social category than race. In this exercise, three adults are present to probe the understanding of a single student.

Meier explains in *The Power of Their Ideas* how the school is able to maximize contact with students. Part of this explanation is purely logistical. The school is small, and most teachers are expected to teach



two subjects to the same group of students, allowing interdisciplinary classes that effectively halve the number of students they otherwise would teach. In harmony with the perspective of the Coalition of Effective Schools, of which CPESS is a vital part, course offerings are limited, as depth rather than breadth is emphasized, and blocks of time for the courses exceed those of conventional schools. In addition, all staff members work with students in counseling/tutorial sessions, bringing the teacher-student ratio down to 1 to 15 for such activities. Organizing the work of the school differently from conventional public schools is not the whole story, however. Teachers are committed to the mission of the schools, choose their own colleagues (a privilege typically denied by union contracts), and clearly are willing to work unusually hard.<sup>8</sup>

Setting up the school to maximize contact between faculty and students can facilitate positive relations between the two. Meier, for instance, writes eloquently of caring and compassion (63), and by refusing to let students slip through the cracks and demanding that they perform, the teachers at CPESS demonstrate that they care more than teachers who forgive poor performance because of children's unfortunate life circumstances. The opportunity to know students well also pays off in a remarkable scene from the film in which an English instructor is helping students with essays. She is addressing one student whose face is almost completely hidden in the crook of his arm. Somehow the teacher resists the impulse to scold him—hardly easy under normal circumstances, but particularly tough given the presence of a camera that records this apparent lack of respect for her and her lack of control over his behavior. It ultimately becomes obvious, however, that the student is paying close, if unconventional, attention, and that a reprimand from the teacher would likely have broken their connection. Here an understanding of a student's idiosyncratic behavior and an ethos of caring enable the teacher to avoid a disruption of teaching and learning that would result from mistaking form for substance. Unfortunately, this moment in the film is exceptional. Though the vessels for positive interactions are in place, the exchanges that fill them at times suggest that the anonymity of conventional high schools has its solaces. This is particularly the case in counseling sessions led by either of the co-directors.

Meier writes that "new students often find so many caring adults a nuisance—'in my face,' as they say" (32). But the "in-your-faceness" of the staff often seems less about caring and more about control or

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surveillance of students who implicitly are viewed as a danger to the smooth running of the institution. Meier, who, like co-director Paul Schwarz, can properly be seen as a lead teacher in the original sense of “principal,” first appears some thirty minutes into the film. Indistinguishable in attire from the other teachers, occupying no authority-conferring space, and referred to on the same first-name basis as the other adults, she is part of a group of four white staff members meeting with a Latina student who recently had a baby. The student is accompanied by her brother, who also goes to CPESS, and her mother. Meier seems remarkably different from the author who writes so persuasively of caring and of knowing the students well. Her voice lacks warmth; her introductory chitchat appears forced; and she seems to know little about the new mother and her brother. She wrongly guesses the gender of the baby, for example, and, after being corrected, she repeats the error. Her questioning suggests that she is not so much interested in how to support the sister and brother but how to avoid disruption. She is quite concerned that the brother might get into a physical confrontation, most likely with Frankie, the child’s father, who is a student at CPESS as well. The brother quite convincingly maintains that Frankie is not completely to blame, and if trouble did begin, he would try to avoid it. Nonetheless, Meier continues to press the brother for assurances. It does not occur to Meier and the other staff members to ask him how they might help him cope with the situation. An absence of support, however, is more glaring in the case of the teenage mother (whose name nobody mentions). Although she makes it clear that she wants to continue at CPESS, Meier not only offers her no real encouragement to do so, but suggests she might be better off transferring to a school where students can bring their children. The student’s mother responds by saying that she will take care of the baby during the day, but Meier again raises the possibility of a transfer.

### Whose Power? Whose Ideas?

**T**here was no overt racism in the way Meier treated the Latino family, but there was a distinct absence of caring and compassion, and there was a concern with security that may have been heightened by racial assumptions about the students’ volatility. In this and other situations, the existence of a pervasive, if subtle, racism may account for the somewhat claustrophobic, faintly punitive, and totally humorless feel of the school. The case for racism starts from the assumption that this is a tendency among white people in a society where

persistent racial inequality is a defining feature. Confronting racism, then, becomes a necessary counterweight to such a tendency. This especially is the case in a staff-controlled school like CPESS whose co-directors and majority of faculty are white, and whose governance structure yields no authority to parents who mostly are not white. Yet like the student exhibition mentioned above that trivializes race in understanding how society is organized, matters of race simply are not taken seriously in the practices of the school the film recorded. One sign of this is that much of the curriculum, like that of LouAnne Johnson's, appears to be at significant remove from the voices, experiences, and struggles of the majority of students. Only one work by a person of color is discussed—Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. And the part of that discussion the film captures considers the American dream without any reference to race. Another sign that race is inadequately addressed is Meier's reluctance to support a student demonstration in the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict because she questions its educational value. Here her habits of mind—assuming that is what she means by educational—have no more vitality than worksheets, and they discredit a passionate response to racial injustice by shrinking the King case into an academic exercise. Ironically, in the entire film the most eloquent, thoughtful discourse by students takes place when two of them debate how best to protest the acquittals of the cops who had beaten King.

What appears to be a conviction that race does not matter is communicated on a more personal level when co-director Paul Schwarz, accompanied by another colleague, conducts what is more an interrogation session than a counseling meeting with an African-American student and his mother. Schwarz begins the session by stating that "It's a high school that works best for those people who really want to be here." Then he quickly becomes accusatory when he asks the student, "Do you see this as a white school, as a school run by white people? Would it be different for you if more teachers were Black or Latino?" Cowed a bit by the proceedings, the student rather meekly agrees and says he thinks he would be more likely to respect Black teachers. This could be an opportunity for the two white staff members to uncover through careful questioning why the student feels the way he does, and this line of inquiry might enable them to help the student cope better, or it might even lead to changes in the school. But Schwarz clearly is not interested in what the student has to say or why he says it. Rather than giving him the opportunity to express

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himself fully, Schwarz retorts, "I disagree." Since Schwarz cannot be disagreeing that the school is run by white people, he must be saying that this fact makes no difference. The student has been effectively silenced. His mother, like all the parents who are present in the film, supports the position of the staff. Perhaps she is speaking from the heart, but the power relations evident here would have made dissent difficult. Meier asserts in her book that "kids and parents show up at family conferences to complain about things to our faces and risk the necessary confrontations" (58). This does not take place, however, in any of the conferences captured by the film. Rather, the dynamics of these conferences suggest that it would take exceptional courage to risk those confrontations since staff members are unwilling to listen to the students.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the white staff dominate all these sessions but one. The insistent message that the school belongs to the white educators who unequivocally know what is best for students is hardly likely to encourage overt disagreement from students and their parents.

Meier most likely would reject this characterization of the school's social relations. She takes pride in the democratic deliberation among faculty members that students have the opportunity to witness and model. She writes, "The deep immersion in a value system that places mutual respect first and encourages a climate of diversity and disagreement becomes enormously powerful over time, and not just for the staff. The kids know we're serious" (58–59). Even if rich democratic discourse does take place among the faculty, however, the film conveys a sense that "the power of their ideas" should properly refer to ideas of a predominantly white staff who unself-consciously exercise power over students and parents, mostly of color.<sup>10</sup>

Certainly the selection of scenes Wiseman included in the film might distort the way CPESS deals with matters of race, and these scenes are open to interpretations quite different from my own. Yet Meier's comments on race in *The Power of Their Ideas* tend to confirm a failure to come to terms with the matter. For instance, she states:

We know that the school's pedagogy doesn't always rest easily with parents, some of whom wonder if we're not creating difficulties for children already handicapped by racism or poverty. We're not always going to be convincing but we need to provide evidence that where we disagree we do so respectfully, that we're not out to frustrate the aspirations parents have for their kids, or to blame them for what goes wrong. . . . At their

best, family and school are allies, however cautiously, but the kid is the performer (52).

Meier, it appears, is referring to the concern of many parents that a progressive approach to education might not require students to master necessary content and skills.<sup>11</sup> She is suggesting, however, that there is no problem with the school's pedagogy, but merely with parents' understanding of it. Teachers should try to convince the parents that they are right, but whether or not they succeed, parents have no standing to challenge the teachers' approach to education. Here is a notion of a good school based on the faculty's pedagogy. It is a notion quite different from the good school that derives its reputation from community support. Vanessa Siddle Walker, for instance, writes about the good segregated school in the pre-*Brown* era. She emphasizes the seamless relationship between the Caswell County Training School and the surrounding community, maintaining that the school incarnated the aspirations of Black parents.<sup>12</sup> Meier, in contrast, assumes an opposition between school and community where families at best are allies and where the school merely tries not to frustrate the aspirations of parents. This perspective has colonial implications since the school derives its legitimacy not from the values of parents of color, but from the pedagogy of white educators.<sup>13</sup> Meier, however, does not appear to see the disenfranchisement of parents as evidence that racial inequality is woven inextricably into the skein of the school.

Meier does allow that "The gap between the racial, ethnic, and class histories of the school staff is often substantial. . . . It's a gap we cannot bridge by good intentions alone" (51–52). But shortly after she states: "We can't do away with the likelihood that some of our students' families see white teachers as inherently suspect, but white teachers can reconsider our own reactions, offer alternative possibilities, and challenge some implicit assumptions" (52). Again the staff bear no responsibility for the race and class gap, but rather the gap appears to be created by the inappropriately suspicious attitudes of families. The burden on the staff, then, is not to address its own classism and racism in order to better serve students and their families, but to try to convince the families that their suspicions are ill-informed.

Several pages later, Meier appears to be moving toward real self-examination around race matters. She states:

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Unresolved also is our effort to deal with racism. . . . We must deal with the issue over and over if we are to help kids who desperately need to be able to talk with adults about such difficult matters, and must do so before we have ‘solved’ them. We need to take chances even though making mistakes can be dangerous. We’ve called in outside experts on racism as well as experts on group relations to work with us on both a regular basis and in times of crisis, when these issues seemed likely to split us apart (57–58).

But then she pulls back: “A bitter charge by some parents that a white teacher was not only a racist but out to injure children of color, and the overtones of anti-Semitism that went with it, didn’t produce the same instinctive response in all of us. We didn’t reach a consensus, except on how to get through it safely” (58). Although Meier tries to take racism seriously, she never really acknowledges that it exists within the school, and she essentially dismisses the parents’ conviction that a teacher is racist by merely calling their charge “bitter” and by saying it carried “overtones of anti-Semitism.” Whatever the merits of the parents’ charge, it is the predominantly white staff who get to define racism, and it is they who get through the matter safely. How safe the parents felt is left unrecorded.

Meier’s thinking about race seems to have evolved little since she taught in Harlem in the late 1960s. She then wrote about attending a meeting with a hundred African-American and Latino parents who were angry about the teachers and the schools: “Vengefulness and suspicious fury had dulled their ability to distinguish targets. Anything said against schools was guaranteed to produce enthusiastic anger. Speaker after speaker expanded on how the teachers destroyed children, and the audience cheered, stomped, and shouted ‘You tell ‘em!’”<sup>14</sup> Though she never specified who or what she thought was the appropriate target, she apparently believed that these parents—and the whole community control effort—were irrational if not hysterical in their criticism of innocent teachers. Furthermore, in talking about her support for the strike of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) the previous spring, she made it clear that parents of color had no idea what was best for their children: “While I wholeheartedly supported the UFT and felt proud of the teachers for going out on nonwage demands, their position seemed impossible to communicate to the people who most needed just what the UFT was demanding.”<sup>15</sup>

As troubling as Meier's writing about race is, she certainly does not subscribe to either the notion that African-American and Latino children cannot benefit from an academic curriculum or that it would be unfair to place strenuous demands on children because their lives already are difficult. At CPESS students are expected to learn, and teachers rightly do not countenance excuses from children for not applying themselves. Yet a school where the predominantly white staff rules and somehow views itself as unmarked by societal racism denies itself the opportunity to be educated by children and their families in ways that could close the class, race, and ethnic gaps that Meier acknowledges, and this denial is likely to inhibit the forging of the genuine community that Meier values. Certainly data that document the impressive graduation rates and low dropout rates of CPESS students have been disseminated widely. Although I do not question these numbers, my analysis invites questions about how self-selection may influence the successes of the school, what part of themselves students may have to give up in order to participate in the community at CPESS, and how many students survive but do not thrive because they are unwilling to assimilate to the institution.

## Who Cares?

The imaginative ways CPESS augments contact between staff and students at times appear in *High School II* to maximize control rather than closeness, to suggest more Jeremy Bentham's panopticon than a caring community. In contrast, *Dangerous Minds* depicts the development of a very warm connection between LouAnne Johnson and her students. Pedagogically unsophisticated and ignorant of her students' cultures—though her Spanish is deployed to good effect—she nonetheless cares about her students in a way that superior teachers do in real schools. Johnson appears to operate from the heart, and this may serve her better than pedagogical knowledge. The infectious warmth Johnson exudes in part manifests itself in physical contact with students, something that occurs only once in all of *High School II*. In *My Posse Don't Do Homework*, Johnson notes that such behavior violates proper decorum for high school teachers: "‘Never touch a student’ was one of the first rules I'd learned as a high school teacher. It's a good rule and a sensible one, too, because it presents legal complications, personal confrontations, and inappropriate familiarity between students and staff.

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But it was a rule I couldn't follow, and breaking it was one of the best things I ever did as a teacher" (141). Johnson's warmth contrasts with the mere pleasantness of most teachers at CPESS and the coolness of their leaders.

Johnson also expresses regard for students by addressing problems in strikingly different ways from the staff of CPESS. As noted above, Paul Schwarz dismissed a student's concerns with the racial makeup of the staff and made it clear that it was up to the student to adjust to the school. In contrast to this oppositional approach to students, LouAnne Johnson, in both the film and her book, found ways of expressing her solidarity with students and their parents, even when students' behavior had been disruptive. When Raul had been suspended for fighting, for instance, Johnson visited his home, but she did not offer the litany of wrongdoings expected by both Raul and his parents. Instead she said to his parents, "I just wanted to tell you personally what a pleasure it's been having Raul in my class this semester. You must be very proud. He's very bright, funny, articulate. The truth is he's one of my favorites." This simple but surprising act solidified bonds between student and teacher, parents and child, and family and school in a way that was far more likely to spur Raul's academic achievement than admonishments.<sup>16</sup>

Another example of Johnson's support for students involved a situation more directly analogous to what took place at CPESS. With less subtlety than Meier's suggestion that the teenage parent transfer out of CPESS, the administration at Johnson's Parkmont High School pressured Callie, perhaps Johnson's brightest student, to transfer out when she became pregnant.<sup>17</sup> Recognizing that a transfer could limit Callie's chances for academic success, Johnson intervened in her behalf. In contrast to the leader of CPESS and the administration at Parkmont, Johnson put the interests of the student before the convenience of the school.

Unlike Meier, who had a formidable influence on the curriculum of CPESS, LouAnne Johnson acknowledged in her book that she followed an unimaginative, mandated curriculum:

When the students truly believed that I liked them just as they were, it was no longer Teacher versus Students. It became Teacher and Students versus Curriculum. Together, we hated vocabulary exercises, grammar exams, reading proficiency tests, and spelling quizzes, but we had to do them. Teaching was the best thing I had ever done in my life. Before I knew it June raced



around the corner and crashed into the classroom, spinning all my students out into the summer sun (68).

Viewing the curriculum as an enemy that must be fought rather than transformed is not likely to inspire the highest level of intellectual engagement. Yet what perhaps mattered much more than the content of the curriculum was the solidarity between teacher and student, the conviction that kids could succeed academically, and the understanding, articulated by Meier as well, that caring meant not letting students off lightly. In *My Posse Don't Do Homework*, Johnson considers shortening an assignment and decides against it: "I loved them too much to make it easy on them" (258). Even Meier considered the proposition that the success of students at CPESS was not so much grounded in pedagogy but in the creation of a caring environment for kids: "Maybe our success is not related to our highly praised curriculum or pedagogy but to creating an intensely personal and stable place that's always there for kids" (177). Yet that personal dimension often comes across as carping rather than caring in *High School II*, a film that tells us much more about pedagogy and school organization than matters of the heart.

As important as caring is to good teaching, unilateral caring is unsustainable. *Dangerous Minds* conveys a sense that Johnson has genuine feelings for her students by showing that they reciprocate. She is not merely sacrificing the possibility of a personal life for the sake of the kids. The kids care back and keep her from resigning at the end of the year. When her friend Hal asks why she decided to return, Johnson, who had previously given her students sweets and helped them discover the Dylan Thomas passage, "You've got to rage against the dying of the light," replied, "They gave me candy and called me the light."<sup>18</sup> Of course, it is easy to inspire warm, reciprocal feelings in fiction and more difficult to capture them in real school time. Consequently, a documentary of Johnson's class may have had more the feel of the CPESS documentary than *Dangerous Minds*. Nonetheless, the affective message *Dangerous Minds* sends can inspire teachers to re-envision the way they relate to students and partially heal the fissures born of race and class inequality.

By reminding us of the gift we make of ourselves and the gift we accept from our students when we engage in authentic teaching and learning, the cinematically undistinguished Hollywood film has something of educational value to impart. Paraphrasing Richard Rorty's perspective in *Truth and Progress*, Carlin Romano writes that "Stories, not principles

or definitions, lead to moral progress. . . . Instead of theories, we need 'sentimental education' of the sort that movies, journalism, and novels provide, which will expand the set of 'people like us.'"<sup>19</sup> *Dangerous Minds* offers a sort of "sentimental education" that guides educators to expand what historian David Hollinger calls "the circle of the 'we.'"<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, this message is compromised by the racist stereotypes that afflict most of the African-American characters and by the depiction of Johnson as the only one who cares. The message is further attenuated by the absence of a historical context to account for how racially coded unequal power relations made plausible the casting of communities of color as passive clients and a white educator as the savior of their children. This lack of context also affects the representation of Meier and her colleagues in *High School II*.

## The White Image in the White Mind

LouAnne Johnson taught students enrolled in a special program for underachieving students and subsequently directed the program. Many of the students came from East Palo Alto, once a predominantly African American community where there had been major battles over education in the 1960s and 1970s. Ravenswood High School was built there in 1958 with gerrymandered boundaries designed to enroll all the Black students in a very large, affluent high school district. Subsequent to the failure of sustained Black community efforts to achieve desegregation, a movement for community control in the late 1960s succeeded at Ravenswood in removing unsympathetic teachers, strengthening the academic program, and producing dramatic increases in attendance, grade averages, and college admissions. These gains were compromised, however, in 1971 when the school board turned Ravenswood into a magnet school designed to attract countercultural white students. Five years later Ravenswood was closed. Black students were bussed to the remaining schools in this far-flung district, becoming a small minority in each. This completely ruptured the connection between schooling and community aspirations, and academic failure for African Americans became the norm.<sup>21</sup>

If white district officials did not have the power to terminate the experiment in community control, there might have been no need for Johnson's special program, and her students would not have had to rely on what appeared to be a single advocate. Similarly, had the community control effort in New York City survived, it is unlikely that Deborah Meier

would have emerged as the rescuer of city children and of urban public schools. Meier, however, helped make herself indispensable by supporting the teachers' union that undermined community control. The silence of the films on these matters of history makes it appear natural that white educators are the heroes. Such a perverse sense of the normal is fed by public amnesia. Whites typically bring to the films no memory of African-American and Latino struggles for just schools or white resistance to these efforts. Given this vacuum, the films merely confirm whites' self-image as the benefactors of other people's children.

In the end, no matter how great the energy expended and personal sacrifices made by Meier and Johnson, their stature as saviors of kids of color depends on massive failure stemming from the educational disenfranchisement of the students' communities. For the foreseeable future, of course, white teachers will predominate in most urban schools. Paradoxically, perhaps apolitical teachers, like LouAnne Johnson, who care for their students and respect their parents, are more likely to see the need for fundamentally redistributing educational power than politically progressive educational reformers who are ideologically committed to the right of whites to run schools for African-American and Latino students.

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#### NOTES:

1. See, for instance, Michael Wilmington, "Mindless 'Dangerous' Glosses Over The Urban Grit," *Chicago Tribune*, August 11, 1995 and Janet Maslin, "If Teacher Is Pfeiffer, Can Youths Be All Bad?" *New York Times*, August 11, 1995.
2. For Meier's reputation, see, for example, Jay Matthews, "The Teacher Who Threw Away the Book," *The Washington Post*, September 12, 1994. For reviews of *High School II*, see David Bromwich, "Unsentimental Education," *The New Republic*, September 19 and 26, 1994 and Caryn James, "25 Years Later, Wiseman Goes Back to School," *The New York Times*, July 6, 1994.
3. *My Posse Don't Do Homework* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
4. For African-American struggles for educational opportunity, see James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) and Robert Lowe and Harvey Kantor, "Creating Educational Opportunity for African Americans Without Upsetting the Status Quo," in Erwin Flaxman and A. Harry Passow, eds., *Changing Populations, Changing Schools, Ninety-Fourth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 186-208.
5. *My Posse Don't Do Homework* also tends to portray Johnson as the lone fighter for students, but the ugly racial dynamics of the film are absent. The one really offensive teacher is a white man whom Johnson accuses of racism.

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6. For precise phrasing of these habits, see Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas*, p. 50.
7. Meier, in fact, writes that "A good school for anyone is a little like kindergarten and a little like a good post-graduate program. . ." Ibid. p. 48.
8. Also, given CPES's high-powered leadership and visibility, it would not be surprising if the school has attracted external funding that exceeds the possibilities of most urban schools.
9. This is also true of the one conference that includes a white student.
10. The one faculty meeting that takes place without Meier being present does indicate that all felt free to speak and air their disagreements. Two Black faculty members argued quite eloquently for a rigorous approach to literature that would prepare students adequately for college work and make it possible for them to succeed on the Advanced Placement test. None of the white teachers spoke in support of this position, but seemed to be more interested in thinking about English in an interdisciplinary way. The discourse was certainly democratic, but given that the majority of teachers were white, one wonders whether the freedom of a minority to register its opinions mattered when it came to making policy.
11. See, for example, Lisa D. Delpit, "Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator," *Harvard Educational Review* 56(November 1986): 379-385.
12. Emilie V. Siddle Walker, "Caswell County Training School, 1933-1969: Relationships between Community and School," *Harvard Educational Review* 63(Summer 1993): 161-182.
13. One could also argue, of course, that legitimacy derives from the choice of parents to send their children to Central Park East. The option to choose from a number of different schools, however, does not mean that there is an opportunity to choose a good school. Central Park East at least has the reputation of being a good school.
14. Deborah Meier, "From a Harlem School," *Dissent* 15(March-April 1968): 131.
15. Ibid., p. 134.
16. In the book, the student Johnson visits is Gusmaro Guevarra, whose infraction was a refusal to do homework. Johnson speaks to the parents in Spanish with somewhat different words of praise than in the film (167). In an analogous situation in the book, Callie West misbehaves and Johnson communicates through a note to Callie's parents that she knows Callie will read. Johnson said, "I wrote a note telling Mr. and Mrs. West how much I enjoyed having Callie in class, that she was a bright and charming student with a delightful sense of humor" (63-64). The results were so positive that Johnson wrote to all the parents, finding positive things to say about even the most difficult students.
17. In the book the student is Shamica Stanton. Also, the real name of the school is Carlmont.
18. The students do not do this in the book, but Johnson makes clear that students' appreciation of her through their letters and, in one case, a ceramic teddy bear accompanying a note of gratitude, are the reason for her return.
19. Carlin Romano, "Rortyism for Beginners," *The Nation*, July 27/August 3, 1998, p. 28.
20. David Hollinger, *PostEthnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), p. 68.
21. Robert Lowe, "Benign Intentions: The Magnet School at Ravenswood High," presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 1992.

# JOHN BROWN AND BLACK REVOLT

## A TWO-HUNDREDTH BIRTHDAY TRIBUTE

BY DAVID ROEDIGER

**A**midst the empty rhetoric and commercialized hype over the millennium, we risk missing an anniversary of tremendous significance. The year 2000 marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Brown's birth. In his magnificent 1909 biography of Brown, W.E.B. Du Bois perfectly set the context of Brown's birth and of Brown's greatness:

Just at the close of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, first in Philadelphia and then in New York, small groups of [free Blacks] withdrew from white churches and established churches of their own, which still have millions of adherents. In the year of John Brown's birth, 1800, Gabriel planned his formidable uprising in Virginia.

In *Black Thunder*, Arne Bontemps' remarkable novel on Gabriel's Rebellion, 1800 became the year which would "positively let no Virginian sleep." Herbert Aptheker, following Du Bois, has pronounced 1800 as probably "the most fateful year in the history of American Negro slave revolts . . .," emphasizing that it saw the birth of Nat Turner as well as Brown and that Denmark Vesey, a third great strategist of revolt, bought his freedom at that time with lottery winnings. Indeed as Douglas Egerton's recent study of Vesey reminds us, it was precisely the first moment of 1800 when Vesey drew his first free breath. Twenty-two years later, Du Bois wrote, Vesey would go "grimly to the scaffold, after one of the shrewdest Negro plots ever to frighten the South into hysterics."

There is a temptation with Brown, as with other martyrs, to date his life from an heroic act and death. Thus the recent *New Abolitionist* headline: "JOHN BROWN: 1859-1999." However, it is worth resisting such a temptation, for reasons which quite transcend a desire to have something to celebrate next year. In celebrating Brown's long life, and not only his raid on Harpers Ferry and his hanging, vital matters are at stake.

Connecting Brown with 1800 rather than 1859 first links his magnificence with that of Turner, Gabriel, Vesey and post-Haiti Black revolt, and resistance generally. Du Bois insists on this point,

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acknowledging that in his early life Brown's consciousness was but slightly touched by revolts, but adding that "in later years he learned of Gabriel and Vesey and Turner, and told of their exploits and studied their plans." Speaking more generally of Brown's contacts with African-Americans, Du Bois wrote, "He sought them in home and church and out on the street, and he hired them in his business. He came to them on a plane of perfect equality—they sat at his table and he at theirs." What James Redpath called Brown's "higher notion of the capacity of the Negro race"—his faith in "their fitness to take care of themselves"—was for Du Bois the key to Brown's genius.

The modern work which comes closest to approximating Du Bois' sense of how militancy and racial egalitarianism were one for Brown is Russell Banks' wise and dramatic historical novel *Cloudsplitter*. The book roots pivotal and revealing chapters in the Brown family's direct actions of resistance to slavery and to the capture of runaway slaves. The Underground Railroad adventures of the Browns, Banks stresses, consistently expressed John Brown's preference for working with African-Americans rather than with white abolitionists. "In this work, it's their lives who are on the line," Brown reasoned. "When it comes to a showdown, white people can always go home and read their Bibles if they want . . . Who would you rather have at your side, a well-meaning white fellow who can cut and run if he wants, or a Negro man whose freedom is on the line?"

By virtue of his continued work with Black freedom fighters, Brown occupied a privileged position from which to see the possibilities of resistance. As Du Bois had it:

Nowhere did the imminence of a great struggle show itself more clearly than among the Negroes themselves. Organized insurrection ceased in the South not because of the increased rigors of the slave system, but because the great safety-valve of escape northward was opened wider and wider . . . The slaves and freedmen started the work and to the end bore the brunt of danger and hardship, but gradually they more and more secured the cooperation of men like John Brown.

The narrator of *Cloudsplitter*, Brown's son Owen, adds that knowledge of patterns of flight to freedom and of defense of such flight which already existed gave Brown's plans for insurrection their shape and grounding.

As Du Bois shows, Brown's commitment to struggling alongside Black people did not—indeed, given realities of day-to-day contact under tremendous pressure, could not—partake of a sentimentalism which would make him “blind to their imperfections.” *Cloudsplitter* properly places Brown in awe of the Underground Railroad heroine Harriet Tubman but he did not romanticize African-Americans collectively or individually. Brown hated slavery and race prejudice because they exacted terrible human costs, especially in the realm of education. According to Du Bois, Brown found African-Americans complete with human weaknesses, but sustained “perfect faith in their ability to rise above these faults.”

The most direct expression of both Brown's critical edge and of his faith in the ability of African-Americans to liberate themselves was his remarkable 1848 essay “Sambo's Mistakes.” In it, Brown wrote in the voice of an African-American (though not in dialect), reflecting on lessons he had painfully learned. Partly a self-help manual and partly a revolutionary tract in blackface, “Sambo's Mistakes” encourages readers to study more, talk less, save, invest, disdain mainstream politicians, abstain from tobacco, and, above all, unite and resist. Du Bois found the essay “quaint” and certainly modern readers will see it as that, if not presumptuous and preachy. But Du Bois added that he also thought it “excellent,” “delicately worded,” and well worth rereading sixty years after its appearance. Such an assessment registers how thoroughly Brown managed to become a comrade-in-arms, rather than a cheerleader or dictator where Black resistance was concerned. To see him as a singular genius who rose and fell (and perhaps rose again) in 1859, slights the connections with ongoing Black militancy which enabled him to dream of and lead a rebel force and to demand that, when “publically murdered,” his “only religious attendants be poor little, dirty, ragged bare-headed slave boys and girls, led by some gray-headed slave mother.”

Du Bois also strikingly argued against the view that Brown's martyrdom furthered emancipation only or mainly insofar as it inspired intellectuals and polarized political parties. Frederick Douglass' tribute, “If John Brown did not end the war that ended slavery, he did, at least, begin the war that ended slavery,” led Du Bois into a deep inquiry regarding cause and effect. “The paths by which John Brown's raid precipitated the civil war,” he concluded, surely included arousal of Northern conscience and the lending of

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political ammunition to Southern secessionist political leaders. But Du Bois was clear as to Brown's central contribution: "In the first place he aroused the Negroes in Virginia" and thus helped to set into motion what Du Bois would later call the "general strike" of slaves who fled to, and fought for, freedom. "Although John Brown's plan failed at the time," Du Bois wrote a century after his death, "it was actually arms and tools in the hands of a half-million Negroes that won the Civil War." Indeed Du Bois even suggested that the revolutionary anthem "John Brown's Body" may have been based on African-American music.

The other vital point preserved by dating John Brown's greatness from his birth rather than from his death concerns the remarkable internationalism of his campaigns and of the history of slave revolts generally. If Aptheker is right that 1800 was the "most fateful" year in such struggles, the pan-African resonances of the year certainly are one key to its centrality. Du Bois observed, "There was hell in Haiti in the red waning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in the days when John Brown was born." He added, "Ten thousand Frenchmen gasped and died in the fevered hills" of Haiti "while the black men in a sudden frenzy fought like devils for their freedom and won it." The Haitian revolution begins Du Bois' account of how Brown developed a "vision of the damned" not because its spirit was in the air at his birth but because it so lastingly informed and emboldened rebels in the U.S. What Du Bois called the "shudder of Haiti" was a context for Gabriel's rebellion, along (as Bontemps so well shows) with echoes of the French Revolution. Vesey, then named Telemaque, devoured written accounts of the events in Haiti, where he had lived for a time. His 1822 plot would promise that aid from Haiti could decisively help the rebels.

Likewise critical were the African dimensions of revolt. Indeed Du Bois begins *John Brown* with a section titled "Africa and America." The turn-of-the-century church-building that he saw as so pivotal in the development of a freedom movement featured churches which often took the name "African." From the Stono and New York City revolts of the 18<sup>th</sup> century on, African-born slaves and African traditions played signal roles in rebellions. No leader more brilliantly marshalled African participation than Vesey. When Brown stayed at North Elba, New York, his revolutionary activity was in concert with members of the Black farming community which



drew him there. The village had taken the name of Timbuctoo, "same as Timbuctoo in Guinea," as a character in *Cloudsplitter* puts it.

With Bontemps' *Black Thunder*, the work which most fully captures the fateful turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century is Herman Melville's great novella of seagoing slave revolt, *Benito Cereno*. Its hero, the African-born rebel leader Babo, leads a pan-African uprising in which the uniting of various African ethnicities into an African-American freedom struggle (with return to Africa as its goal) is richly imagined by Melville. The novella, published four years before Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, is based on an actual 19<sup>th</sup> century revolt. But Melville significantly switches the setting to 1799. The year and the ship's name, the *San Dominick*, resound with echoes of Haiti, but the U.S. captain Amasa Delano remains blind to the fact that the foundering ship he has boarded has been taken over by its slave cargo. After the defeat of the uprising, Babo is executed either—and here Melville is studiously vague—in the very last days of the 18<sup>th</sup> century or the very first ones of the 19<sup>th</sup>.

Much more could be said of Brown's internationalism and of his immersion in pan-African revolt. Inspired by British abolitionists, he studied not only Haiti, Gabriel, Vesey, and Turner but also the Napoleonic wars and the Spanish guerrillas under Mina in 1810, on whose methods of "cooking and discipline" Brown took notes. His ill-fated cooperation with the British journalist and self-described expert on guerrilla war, Hugh Forbes, rested on the latter's allegedly intimate knowledge of Garibaldi's revolt. Like Vesey's plot, Brown's promised the possibility of international pan-African resistance, in this case coming from Black communities in Canada.

Brown's life and death have long been of tremendous importance in informing and inspiring the actions of race traitors. Indeed the recent research of Clarence Mohr, Randolph Campbell, and Ollinger Crenshaw shows that during the year after Brown's death the slave system executed dozens of whites for alleged acts of solidarity with slave rebels. Even allowing for paranoia among the South's rulers, it is clear that Brown's raid had significant resonance among whites. It did so not only because his courage set an example but also because his willingness to struggle alongside Black rebels of the world opened new possibilities. And still does. Happy birthday, John Brown.

# MEJORANDO LA RAZA

## Latino/a Nationalisms, the Seductions of Whiteness, and the Coming Disarticulation of the Black-Brown Elite Coalition

BY EDGAR RIVERA COLON

The peculiar vocation of the Marxist left is to think and prepare for the worst while assuming that our practice will produce the best of all possible changes—democratic socialism. It is this double notion of optimism of the will and the pessimism of the intellect that allows us to engage in the science of historical materialism: to think the inherent contradictions of capitalism.<sup>1</sup> One of the central organizing principles of American capitalism is race not simply as the ideological reflection of economic hierarchy, but rather as a system in its own right of distributing material and symbolic wealth. Michael Omi and Howard Winant have defined race as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus, race both contains and manages contradictory conflicts and interests while, at the same time, producing a hierarchy of racialized bodies which runs from the more human to the less human. Of course, those with lighter skin colors accrue material benefits from the subordination of those with darker skin colors; these “benefits” run a wide gamut from the probability of a well-dressed Black man getting a taxi on a busy Manhattan street to the life expectancy differences between whites and people of color.

The utter oddity of race in America is best demonstrated by the experiences of those people who are not easily classifiable as white or people of color: a question accompanies them as they traverse the racialized social ambits of late twentieth century America—what are you? This question points to a stark reality in the contemporary version of the American racial dispensation: one is not a viable social being without a racial identity. Thus, the race card is not a game played but an admission ticket to American social intercourse. Simply

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put, without a clear racial identity, one is going on a train with no real point of origin or destination.

Moreover, to appreciate fully the dynamics of race in America, one has to calculate the impact of class, gender, and sexual hierarchies which are all part of the picture in producing what social scientists blithely call "social reality." It is easy to get lost in trying to plot the various effects of these multiple and interlocking systems of the social distribution of material and symbolic goods, but the essential point is fairly straightforward: American capitalism is organized through hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality. We can imagine private property and commodity relations as the wellsprings which feed and are fed by the "tributaries" of race, gender, and sexuality. Nonetheless, this is simply a useful metaphor and, like most metaphors, lacks the rigor of historical contextualization.

The pioneering work of historians such as David R. Roediger have documented that race, like class, has a history in America.<sup>3</sup> Simply stated, whiteness is a social process and not a state of being. Thus, ethnic/racial groups which were once quite literally beyond the pale (e.g., southern Italians and Irish immigrants of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) of whiteness and its material benefits are now the very exemplars of white privilege and status. It is precisely this process of incorporation of non-white subjects into the realm of normative white privilege that serves as a starting point for my reflections on the possible configurations American racial/ethnic politics may take in the not-too-distant future.

More specifically, I am concerned with the consequences of what at first glance may appear to be nothing more than a fact of demography: by the year 2010, Latinos/as will be the largest non-white racial/ethnic group in America. In all likelihood, this fact will precipitate a whole host of Latino/a nationalisms (some of which are already manifesting themselves in various cultural and political movements within different Latino/a communities). The task of progressive Latinos/as will be to reposition these emergent nationalisms to address the central question of American democratic renewal today: the redistribution of material and symbolic wealth. Yet this task must be informed by an analysis which comprehends the racial history and contemporary racial/ethnic landscape of American capitalism. To that end, this essay will address what I am calling the

coming disarticulation of the Brown-Black elite coalition. The present racial/ethnic political conjuncture requires such an analysis precisely to avoid the past becoming a prelude to the coming transformations which our erstwhile marker of 2010 is sure to inaugurate.

The present political wreckage that remains of the coup attempt by the right wing of the Republican Party needs to be one of our starting points for this reflection on race. For it is in this failed project that we will find the seeds of a new strategy or orientation that is sure to emerge from the ranks of the “more reasonable” elements within the Republican Party. At this point, the radical right or religious right is in complete disarray with Paul Weyrich of the far right Free Congress Foundation arguing for a retreat from the political system since an “alien ideology” is in power at the moment. Weyrich is counseling his ideological comrades to circle the wagons and let the outside world go to hell in a handbasket. Of course, this “retreatist” political line is being opposed by the likes of Gary Bauer, who still believes that the cultural right represents the majority of Americans and a cultural “life and death struggle” is the only honorable option. However, in the final analysis, this type of debate between the different currents within the radical right of the Republican camp is just so much marginal drama. The emergence of George W. Bush as frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination in the year 2000 indicates that the non-culturalist wing of the party is slowly gaining ascendancy in the decision-making circles of the Republican National Committee.

George W. Bush, with his homey Texas drawl and halting Spanish, represents the Republican version of Clintonian centrism. The key to this Republicanism with a human face is the multicultural rhetoric that Bush and his camp espouse. The strategy appears clear: forget the Black vote and try to woo the Latino/a vote by pointing toward Bush’s political support of Latinos/as in high offices in Texas, his support among the Latino/a electorate in his recent gubernatorial race, his family values rhetoric, his economic conservatism, and his commitment to crime-fighting through his advocacy of the death penalty. All of the above indicates a political current within the Republican ranks which intends to seize the center from the Clinton wing of the Democrats by espousing certain forms of a globalist multiculturalism, moderation on social issues, punitive uses of the justice system (e.g., mass incarceration of young Blacks and Latinos

who make up a large sector of what Marx called “surplus labor”), and a fiscal conservatism that masquerades as common sense by deploying the language of good stewardship and returning the people’s patrimony through a regime of tax cuts. In order to achieve this reclaiming of the “Great American Center,” the Republicans will have to make headway into the growing Latino/a electorate if they wish to assemble a viable electoral coalition that will make them the masters of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

If, as Lenin contended, a society rots like a fish from the head down, then the Republicans will look to create and/or buy out certain “leaders” from the largest Latino/a communities first and work their rot down to the masses of Latinos/as. From my perspective, given the sycophantic relationship between most elected Latino/a political officials and the Democratic party, the Republicans may have to invent a few Latino/a leaders in order to propel their divide and conquer project between Black and Brown elites.

In this regard, the use by the Giuliani administration of figures like Ninfa Segarra, a Puerto Rican woman and former Maoist turned Republican Deputy Mayor, to add color to the City’s management team may be instructive for the erstwhile renovating wing of the national Republican leadership. Segarra herself appears with the mayor during his periodic community meetings acting as his expert on education, especially with regard to bilingual education. Of course, Giuliani opposes real bilingual education or multi-lingual education in general, arguing that English language competency is the key element to upward mobility for all the Spanish-speaking children in the public school system. According to this argument, English acquisition is upward mobility—forget that the group which has produced some of the greatest English language writers remains largely outside the confines of the upper middle classes: African-Americans. Nonetheless, the Segarra “model-minority-as-government-official” tactic has its value as an object lesson. No doubt the national Republican leadership has studied the Giuliani administration as a test case of what might be possible for a politically reoriented party with national ambitions.

Nonetheless, the recent police execution of a West African immigrant and the unprecedented mass mobilization in reaction to this state killing, culminating in the largest civil disobedience campaign

against police brutality in recent memory, point to weaknesses in the Giuliani administration and, simultaneously, to fissures within the coalition that mounted the campaign itself. It is to these fissures that the Republicans must attend if they plan to take advantage of what is emerging as a fight among the petty bourgeois political leadership elements within the Black and Latino/a communities.

Specifically, the relatively low media profile of elite Latino/a leaders in the coalition which led the assault against police brutality is indicative of the balance of forces within elite sectors of the Black and Latino/a communities. Further, since the Black elite has a more solid institutional base within the Black churches as well as a longer history of struggle for social and racial justice in New York City, specific leaders can project their takes on justice issues as being exhaustive of the opinions of people of color in New York City. In one sense, the Black elites benefit from an institutional infrastructure (middle class in its vision and practice) that is disciplined, diffuse enough in class composition to produce multi-class mass mobilizations, and, most importantly, Black-controlled. Moreover, Black elites are heir to a long tradition of anti-racist activism (some of which has been explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist) informed by a trenchant nationalism inflected in left-wing or right-wing manifestations according to what the conjuncture of macro-sociological forces will allow (e.g., U.S. domestic political economic developments or the global politics of U.S.-based capital).

For example, Al Sharpton is decidedly not Martin Luther King, not just due to personal differences but because King lived at a time when American capitalism was under assault both at home and abroad. Thus, King was able to move to the left throughout his public life because the mass movements unleashed by the Civil Rights struggle constantly shifted public debate toward ever more radical alternatives. Sharpton, on the other hand, has had to build a coalition from different social material conditions: what Marxist geographer Neil Smith has aptly named the "revanchist city."<sup>4</sup> That is to say, a New York City which has succumbed to the national elite policy consensus of reducing the welfare state (through outright cuts in spending or privatization of social services), the mass incarceration of youth of color, police state tactics in dealing with the informal drug economy or political dissent of any stripe, and the reassertion of white

supremacy in the organs of culture (e.g., the defeat of the rainbow curriculum in the public school system).

This is, to use the words of French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, the actual “political conjuncture” that faces the likes of Al Sharpton as he tries to forge what I like to call the Popular Front from Above (PFFA).<sup>5</sup> This Popular Front from Above is a coming together or condensation of divergent elite or petty bourgeois sectors mostly from the Black and Latino/a communities, although by no means exclusively from these two sectors, in reaction to their systematic marginalization from the levers of municipal power that were “their inheritance” until the strategic defeat of the liberal-left Dinkins coalition by the Giuliani coalition of conservative white ethnics and “pragmatic” white liberals. The PFFA was able to surmise correctly that the killing of Amadou Diallo would reinvigorate a mass movement which would seek to redress not only the brutality of the NYPD in neighborhoods of color, but also to challenge the economic austerity and political repression of Giuliani’s revanchist state. The PFFA’s challenge has been to direct this popular discontent toward creating an unfavorable political climate for Giuliani (jeopardizing, with any luck, his prospects for higher elected office or appointment to a position within a future Republican federal administration) while at the same time containing this mass mobilization within the framework of redressing the democratic institutions of the state as opposed to constructing an alternative to challenge the state in the name of popular radical democracy.

Thus, to prevent any ideological or tactical confusion, the Black elite leadership of PFFA has made the Latino/a elite leadership fall within its ranks or risk total political inefficacy and/or media invisibility. This subordination of the Latino/a elite leadership to the Black elite leadership in the PFFA bodes badly for the future of intra-elite relations among people of color. Why? Well, the simplest answer would be that there is no greater wrath than that of a petty bourgeoisie scorned, but that would attribute a psychological explanation to what is essentially a contradiction of social class—as the electoral power of Latino/as surpasses that of African-Americans, the Latino/a elite should lead the coalition to broker a new racial dispensation with the white ruling class in New York City. Moreover, they fully expect to be players in brokering a new balance of forces in the ongoing race

war on a national level in accord with their share of the electoral-demographic pie. It is precisely their burgeoning resentment at their constricted role in the recent political tumult as well as the cold adding up of electoral numbers that will impel the Latino/a elite leaders to struggle for leadership of the PFFA on a local and national level.

The “rational” (I use rational here in its instrumental and not its normative sense since ruling classes, whether liberal or reactionary, do not recognize norms which do not coincide with their crass material interests) sectors within the Republican party are just as good at smelling a blood feud as their counterparts in the Democratic wing of the white ruling class. I use the word “blood” here quite deliberately in order to describe the kind of antagonistic political contradiction which exists between petty bourgeois Black and Latino/a political leaders on both the local and national level. The white rulers of this country have been enormously successful in both consolidating and expanding their power precisely because they have been able to supersede any dogma that leads to tactical or strategic inflexibility in their pursuit of the only dogma they truly care about: white supremacy and the free market. So, one solution which has helped them negotiate crisis after crisis has been to solve blood feuds through changing the precise definition of what it means to be of the blood or, more to the point, of the white race. Thus, they have allowed untold millions of Irish, Italians, and even Jews to assume the mantle of white skin privilege as long as this inclusion meant that the pillars of white supremacy and private property/commodity production were not challenged.

It strikes me that this is what is in the offing for sectors of the Latino/a petty bourgeoisie, not only in New York City, but in the nation as a whole: they are to be included in the blood—granted the privileges of white skin—as long as they are willing to accept the propriety of capitalist social relations and the social—if not biological or cultural—superiority of whites (after all, reasonable elites of various racial backgrounds do have their considered differences). The ethnic/racial history of Dade County, Florida during the last three decades could be read as the first post-60s example of the whitening of a Latino/a population—the Cubans—in order to discipline and



disenfranchise masses of working class Latinos/as of all stripes, African-Americans, and Haitians.

Oddly enough, it will not be through the denial of Latino/a culture that this whitening will occur, but rather through the celebration of the putative strength of Latino/a culture: the emphasis on family life, social solidarity, and tolerance of supposed racial difference among the "rainbow peoples" of the Latino/a Diaspora.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, it is through a sanitized version of a pro-Latino/a multiculturalism that this process will be achieved. Moreover, the constant framing of Latino/a issues by many Latino/a academics and cultural workers as ethnic issues rather than problems of racial justice or challenges within of white supremacist regimes will lend cultural and intellectual legitimacy to the racist Latino/a nationalism that is sure to come.

By 2010, Latinos/as will be the largest non-white racial/ethnic group in America—an incontestable demographic prediction. Demographic speculation: by 2010, George W. Bush will be one of many Spanish-speaking elected officials in the U.S. The only difference between George W. and his counterparts will be that these other Republicans will have Spanish surnames to boot. Of course, my speculation will remain just that if and only if progressive Latinos/as, among others, begin to articulate a distributive radical politics that addresses both capitalism and white supremacy. Obviously, my phrasing of this problematic betrays my own social formation as a university-trained intellectual: capitalism and white supremacy are separate phenomena only in the realm of analysis. In the confused and vivid motion of real life, they are inextricably co-penetrating phenomena which must be dismantled by a movement which will take this contradiction as a starting point and not as an addendum. Progressive Latinos/as must attend to these dynamics or suffer the fate of complicity with forms of Latino/a nationalism which white bourgeois patriarchy can easily reconstitute for its own purposes.

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#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> This follows Frederic Jameson's notion of historical materialism as a science found in "Five Theses On Actually Existing Marxism", *Monthly Review* 11, Vol. 47 (April 1996), pp. 1–10.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.55.

<sup>3</sup> See David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991) for a seminal historical study on how

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race and class are inseparable in analyzing the social formation of the American working class.

<sup>4</sup> Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> On the popular front both from below and above, see Michael Goldfield's "Black Liberation, Working-Class Unity, and the Popular Front: A Reply to Mel Rothenberg", *Against The Current* 78, Vol. XIII No. 6 (January–February 1999), pp. 45–48.

<sup>6</sup> On the "Rainbow People" controversy, see Clara Rodriguez's *Puerto Ricans: Born in the USA* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1991), Ch. 3 and Roberto Rodriguez-Morazzani's critique of the "Rainbow People" thesis as subordinating race to culture in "Beyond the Rainbow: Mapping the Discourse on Puerto Ricans and Race" found in *The Latino Studies Reader: Culture, Economy and Society* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 143–162.

# Vachel Lindsay: The Race Traitor as Utopian Visionary

BY RON SAKOLSKY

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century poet Vachel Lindsay, a race traitor? The same Lindsay who wrote “The Congo”? “Boomlay Boomlay Boomlay BOOM” and all? How can this be? Thanks to new revelations stemming from the republication in 1999 of his 1920 novel, *The Golden Book of Springfield*, which was out of print for almost 80 years, Lindsay emerges as a poet, essayist and novelist whose ultimate utopian goal was the abolition of whiteness. Set in the year 2018, *The Golden Book* is a winged book of visions which flies in the face of white supremacy. In this regard, it is the only utopian romance of its era to feature a multiracial heroine. She is not only an Ishmaelite, but an Amazon Warrior who, by her very existence, simultaneously challenged both the fixed racial and gender-based hierarchies of the day.

## Springfield Race Riot of 1908

Springfield Awake, Springfield Aflame,” chants Avel Boone, the heroine of the book. Yet the only part of Lindsay’s native city Springfield which was aflame in 1908 when he first conceived *The Golden Book* was the Badlands, the African American ghetto, flooded by mobs of angry whites after they ransacked the Levee’s redlight district in what has come to be known as the Springfield Race Riot of 1908. Lindsay saw the Riot firsthand and it was the historical catalyst which prompted him to seek a utopian visionary resolution, not just for Springfield’s racial problems, but for those of America.

In 1908 the eugenics movement was in full force. Nearby Indiana had just passed a law calling for the forced sterilization by castration of “inferior races.” As historian Hugo Leaming noted, “The proposal in other states was justly called the ‘Indiana Plan.’ Adherents of the Progressive Movement lent their support to what they considered another social reform, and the law spread to twenty-nine other states between 1907 and 1931. European eugenicists watched America

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pioneer in this field and by the early 1930s the Indiana Plan had spread to seven other nations, including Nazi Germany.” (Sakolsky-Koehnline, 1993, p. 45).

In some ways more disquieting than the violence itself was the carnival atmosphere surrounding it, as white people arriving from out of town to witness the events became cheering spectators to violence, buying souvenirs and photographic postcards to commemorate the occasion. One major attraction was the tree where a black barber, Scott Burton, had been lynched. Relic hunters tore it apart, carrying off pieces as riot momentos. Eyewitness William English Walling, a reporter for *The Independent*, interviewed many rioters as well as other Springfieldians. He called the situation a “race war” and was appalled by the city’s lack of remorse—a city which had “no shame.” (Senechal, 1990, p. 176).

Most prominent Springfield citizens refused to acknowledge that it *was* a race riot. They did little to prevent it, viewing it, in its early stages, as a “reform” measure to rid Springfield of a bad element by cleaning up the Levee district. They spoke out against it only when the threat to the law and order which protected their own class privilege was jeopardized by “mob rule.” As for the local media, their racist sambo cartoons and yellow journalism served only to fan the flames. Thier editorials blamed the troubles either on violent lower class white riffraff, troublemaking outsiders, and imaginary Jewish anarchists (in fact several Jewish merchants were themselves victims of looting), or, most tellingly, on the victims of violence themselves who were seen as looters. Racism had little to do with it as far as the media was concerned.

All-white juries refused to convict rioters. Out of 107 indictments against nearly 80 individuals on charges of arson, riot, larceny and murder, only one conviction, for theft, was forthcoming. As Roberta Senechal, who wrote the definitive study of this event, *The Sociogenesis of a Race Riot*, noted, “The striking lack of sympathy and concern for the riot victims manifested in the press, in white pulpits, and by white businessmen further illustrated just how little the ‘better sort’ of white cared about blacks’ welfare. Influential whites—not just in Springfield, but in the nation as a whole—tended to place most of the blame for the outbreak on blacks and dismissed white rioters as mere hoodlums. Once it became clear that there would be no

further challenges to white authority in Springfield, better-off whites again spoke of the good that had come out of the violence. In effect, they ultimately gave their sanction—in word and deed—to working class whites' violent reassertion of white supremacy, in turn helping to perpetuate a climate that fostered yet more anti-black violence.” (Senechal, 1990, pp. 197-8). The Springfield media agreed that justice had been done. James Krohe, Jr., in his pamphlet *Summer of Rage*, called this legal travesty a “sordid postscript to the riots.” Such white denial was at its apogee when Vachel Lindsay observed that the riots and their aftermath were Springfield’s “weakest and lowest hour.” (Krohe, 1974, p. 17).

Six months later, at Springfield’s lavish 1909 Lincoln’s Birthday Dinner held at the very state arsenal where terrorized black Springfieldians had sought refuge the previous summer, such prominent speakers as William Jennings Bryan, Robert Lincoln (the only surviving son of Abraham Lincoln and President of the Pullman Car Company), the governor of Illinois, the French and British ambassadors, and all the local elites, held court. Yet aside from a letter from racial accommodationist Booker T. Washington which was read to the assembled dignitaries, no allusion was made to the previous year’s riots. As to Washington’s letter, it referred—and only in passing—to “recent occurrences in the city of Lincoln’s adoption,” never to a race riot. No Springfieldians of African descent were present to remind these venerable notables of the riots because the Lincoln Emancipation Conference, which sponsored the banquet event, had thoughtfully maintained a policy of racial segregation and blacks were not welcome to attend.

Consequently, a “separate banquet” was held by Springfield’s African-American community at St. Paul’s African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. And the day Springfield held its segregated Lincoln Dinner was the day the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was born, at the Lincoln Emancipation Conference in New York. This newly conceived civil rights organization was itself formally incorporated the following year as a national response to the events for which Springfield had refused to accept responsibility.

Lindsay wanted to challenge the vicious and demeaning racial stereotypes prevalent in his community, but the mainstream

Springfield media were as uninterested in his visionary thinking on race issues as they were complicit in the cover-up of the Springfield Race Riot. So he turned to self-publishing. His vehicle was the *War Bulletins*. Five *War Bulletins* were published between July and August of 1909 indicting not only racism and ethnic hatred, but the Almighty Dollar. In both his lectures and in these *War Bulletins*, Lindsay rehearsed some of the ideas that were to become key components of *The Golden Book of Springfield*. *War Bulletin Number One* even played with such literary forms as moral allegory and futuristic fiction. It came out on July 19, 1909, less than a year after the Springfield Race Riot.

## Strange Fruit

**T**he entire issue of *War Bulletin Number One* consists of the allegory of "The Golden-Faced People: A Story of the Chinese Conquest of America." In this story Lindsay, as narrator, gets knocked unconscious at a Springfield Chinese laundry by a broom handle wielded by the owner. The latter had insisted that he produce his laundry ticket. Lindsay who did not have it was forcibly reclaiming the paid-for laundry because he was in a hurry to darn it for that evening's Lincoln's Birthday Dinner. That the owner is referred to by the narrator as "old Yellow-Arms" will be significant later in the tale. While unconscious, Lindsay dreams he has awakened in "the next Millennium." The year is 2909, one thousand years later, and one hundred years after the birth of Lin Kon (a thinly veiled Lincoln analogue), the emancipator of the white man.

He enters a topsy-turvy world where white supremacy is a thing of the past, but racial supremacy has not disappeared. The domination of the white race has been replaced by a "golden-faced" Chinese tyranny. At first this scenario conjures up the virulent fears of Yellow Peril which characterized Lindsay's era. The fortunes of white people have gone down "through caste and serfdom to slavery." Yet the slaves are finally freed by the Confucius-like young sage Lin Kon, who has traveled around the world "seeking that magistrate who would allow him to set up his ideal government."

Yet white people are still oppressed and, ironically, the one-hundredth anniversary of Lin Kon's birth is being celebrated at a mass meeting which only Asians are allowed to attend. Meanwhile, the whites are having their own celebration and the keynote speaker is

the Lindsay character who says of the official commemoration, "Great pains were taken to keep white men off the platform or the Committees, though it was a public not a social occasion." Since this *Bulletin* story was written a scant six months after the segregated One Hundredth Anniversary of Lincoln's Birthday Dinner in Springfield, there can be no mistaking the analogy here. The indignant whites have had to meet separately to remember Lin Kon. Lindsay, his laundry bundle now magically becoming a manuscript, is introduced to the excluded crowd as a student of the Chinese conquest and he reads it to them.

On the face of it, what he has to say is relatively moderate. Anne Massa, one of Lindsay's biographers, in *Vachel Lindsay, Fieldworker For The American Dream*, explains this passage as evidence of Lindsay's embrace of Booker T. Washington's racial accommodationist approach. As she sees it, "Lindsay's stand was for a quiet pride in negritude, for acknowledgment of Africans as brothers in spirit and color, and of themselves as black, as Africa in America." (Massa, 1970, p 167). Yet there are pieces of the puzzle that point in a more militant direction.

The manuscript delivered by Lindsay so moves the one Chinese person attending the event (the former laundryman transformed) that he begs Lindsay to let him bring it to the official celebration later that day. Yet no sooner does that same laundryman cross the threshold of the "other banquet," than the manuscript turns back into the original bundle of laundry.

Lindsay, since he is not Asian, is left outside unhappily cooling his heels until he wanders off. Yet he is accused in the evening headlines of trying to break into the banquet hall after making an incendiary speech in favor of absolute social equality. His moderate speech has been turned into a radical proclamation in a society so dominated by racial supremacy that any questioning of its assumptions is viewed as an act of defiance. He is pursued by a bloodthirsty Chinese mob back to the Lin Kon celebration happening in the White Man's quarters. Violence erupts when a venerable white speaker who is comparing Lin Kon to Confucius is beheaded by the angry Chinese mob, causing Lindsay to ask, pointedly, "Would our people never resist?" This is hardly an accommodationist ending. While Massa cites as further proof of Lindsay's Washingtonian position the trilogy of

poems he dedicated to Washington ("King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba," "Simon Legree" and "John Brown's Body"), this is not entirely convincing either. Whatever you might say about John Brown, the "original race traitor" was no accommodationist and his religious fervor appealed to Lindsay.

Getting back to "The Golden-Faced People," it is easy to see why the journal of the NAACP, *The Crisis*, reprinted the story in 1914. The ending has Lindsay waking up back in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Now revived, he is shocked to look out the window and see a howling mob. Across the street three men have been hanged from trees, one the owner of the laundry who originally knocked him out and so was accused of killing him. He was lynched first, along with a Greek whose only crime was to be a foreigner in the wrong place at the wrong time, and an African American. As to the latter, a cop responds to Lindsay's queries about the nature of his crime, "I guess he was too free with his lip. Damn a nigger anyway. They are all alike." Knowing your place is what white supremacy is all about in Springfield as elsewhere.

Now back in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lindsay is advised by a visiting Southerner to wash the blood off his head and get cleaned up for the banquet. Lindsay arrives late, but manages to hear that same Southerner pay homage to Lincoln in a keynote speech. Moments before he advised Lindsay about the class etiquette of lynching "coons" and the Social Darwinist creed that buttressed his racism. Unlike the rest of the audience, who by this time are besotted with champagne, Lindsay is so shaken that he spills his wine (symbolic bloodstains) all over his freshly laundered shirt.

Here is the anguished Lindsay who, in his *War Bulletins* and later in *The Golden Book of Springfield*, questioned the concept of race itself as a social construction based not only upon material privilege, but also psychological feelings of inferiority/superiority. In *The Golden Book of Springfield* this is done through what Lindsay calls "double consciousness." Since it is set in the future (2018) and he is of the past (1920), he has already experienced the insights of "double consciousness," a concept he learned from Du Bois and gives a futuristic twist. As Paul Gilroy (1993) sees it, "double consciousness" is a touchstone of modernity with its roots in the African American experience. For the original formulation of the concept, he quotes Du



Bois, "One ever feels his twinness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." (Gilroy, 1993, p. 126). For Du Bois, the African American struggle for survival then involves shedding the imposed "otherness" of self-estrangement for a self-conscious awareness of one's historical and spiritual identity.

In the spirit of Du Bois, we encounter the narrator of *The Golden Book* as man from the past now living in the future who undergoes an unexpected transformation into a Malay slave. In his "triple consciousness" he is able to see Springfield from the point of view of a cultural outsider. When the "Veil of Color" is lifted not only does he realize the injustice of racism, but, as a member of a shunned minority group, he begins to see Springfield's "whey-faced" denizens in a different light and his own dark-skinned beauty emerges from what Du Bois called the "Lie." (Du Bois, 1997, pp. 155-6).

Similarly in "The Golden-Faced People," the Lindsay character encounters racism from the point of view of a white man who directly experiences Chinese tyranny. Yet it is only indirectly, by comparing himself to Eurasians, that he truly understands the way self-hatred works in white supremacist culture. His previous curse of "old Yellow-Arms" makes no sense now. In a society where yellow is luxuriantly beautiful and white is coded as chalky ugliness, he seeks Eurasian "yellowness" to make him more handsome and rejects his "whiteness" as a liability. Such psychological probing of the contours of racism is not far removed from the insights of Du Bois in relation to black folks but is unusual for a member of the dominant culture in 1909.

His character comments, "There were few truly white people in the audience. I found myself shrinking from them. There seemed a sort of nakedness about their celery-color. The heads of the men became more nobly formed in proportion as their eyebrows straightened, and their hair grew Chinese black. The proudest of the women were plainly those with facial contours sleek as carved jade, and complexions neither gold nor silver, yet both." This is no expression of racial pride, but a desperate desire to be Eurasian rather than "white" to lessen those characteristics viewed as negative in the crippling dynamics of racism. Yet in observing the beauty of

"yellowness," Lindsay forces the disoriented white reader, perhaps for the first time, to confront that beauty and even the beauty of the hybrid. Moreover, with miscegenation being America's greatest fear (a fear which was one of the catalysts of the Springfield Race Riot), maybe Lindsay was hinting that the true beauty of American culture is its mulatto nature which can be truly appreciated only when none of its components is seen as dominant.

## Speaking "American"

Lindsay was very receptive to African American poetry. Celebrated poet Langston Hughes, in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, speaks fondly of his 1925 "discovery" by Lindsay. Hughes encountered the senior poet while waiting tables at the Wardman Park Hotel in Washington D.C. Lindsay had been scheduled to give a reading of his poems that evening in the hotel's auditorium, which did not admit African Americans. By surreptitiously slipping Lindsay some of his poems at the dinner table, Hughes was able to get his "first publicity break," as he put it. Not only did Lindsay like them, but he read them at his performance that evening, and the next morning he welcomed Hughes into the "New Poetry Movement." in a letter left at the hotel desk (Hughes, 1968).

As an early member of that movement himself, Lindsay had seen his poem, "The Congo," frowned upon by his former champions at the NAACP for being racially insensitive. Yet as African American poet Sterling Brown has noted, the poem was a mixed bag. "'The Congo' was a successful experiment in jazz rhythms, although it hardly accomplished its boast of being 'A Study of the Negro Race!' But Lindsay, attempting to sing America, saw that the Negro could not be left out of the song." (Brown, 1969, p. 94). Another notable African American poet, Frank Marshall Davis of Chicago, acknowledged "the jazzlike rhythm of Vachel Lindsay" as one of the three major influences on his poetry, along with the work of Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters. "My debt to all three," Davis remarked in his autobiography, "was obvious to anybody who read my own poems." (Davis, 1992, p. 130). Such remarks by Davis and Brown in part explain why Lindsay was constantly referred to as "the jazz poet," a label he hated. Vernacular American English in general, was and is to a very significant extent a product of the sounds and rhythms of African American speech. Therefore, to utilize that vernacular

effectively required a mastery of the African American idiom. As Lindsay himself put it, "The best spouter of the United States language is a Pullman porter." (Higgins, 1999, p. 140).

While Lindsay did not emphasize the positive African spirituality present in "mumbo jumbo," "voodoo" and "hoodoo," he was not alone. Interestingly enough, the poem's repeated warning about "mumbo jumbo" elicits an uncanny echo in a 1954 open letter written by African American novelist Richard Wright to Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, who was a founder of modern Pan-Africanism. This letter forms the conclusion of Wright's book, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*. In it, he exhorts the African statesman to "free African minds from mumbo jumbo." (Gilroy, 1993, p. 192). Both Lindsay in a religious vein and Wright in a secular one attack "mumbo jumbo" as a means of liberation.

It was left to Ishmael Reed in his 1972 novel entitled *Mumbo Jumbo* to embrace "mumbo jumbo," countering the paternalism of both Lindsay and Wright with an hilarious celebration of the radical potential of the "Jes Grew" culture of Africans to subvert Western Civilization. Yet Lindsay's condemnation of the savagery of Mumbo Jumbo was not meant to be racist, as shown by his not limiting it to Africans alone. In a letter to Harriet Monroe in 1914, he noted, "I do not say so—but the Civil War was a case of Mumbo Jumbo hoodooing America. Any lynching is a yielding to the power of voodoo. Any burning alive, or hand-cutting depredations by Leopold, is a case of Mumbo Jumbo voodooing Civilization." (Chenetier, 1979, p. 90).

In a 1917 letter to Harriet Monroe, Lindsay mentions that upon hearing of a racially-motivated burning in Memphis, Tennessee, he had penned a protest letter to the editor which was printed in one of the local Springfield newspapers and then sent 50 copies of it to newspapers around the country prompting at least five editorials against such despicable acts. In a personal letter quoted by Olivia Howard Dunbar, he even went so far as to say that if such an atrocity should happen again, "I intend to climb on the pyre in his place, or with him. I made up my mind long ago to protest against burning alive for all there was in me. These things represent the margins of our savagery—and the battle must always be fought on the margin, if it is to be won for democracy." (Dunbar, 1947, p. 142).

## The Ishmaelite Factor

Apparently Lindsay wished to be done with racial classification as we know it. After all, his solution to the problem of race in *The Golden Book* in the year of 2018 is the rise of a “New Springfield Race,” the result of “marvelous intermarriages.” (Lindsay, 1920, pp 279-80). It is no accident that the heroine of the novel, Lindsay’s future Goddess of Springfield, the nineteen-year-old Avel Boone, is herself of mixed race and her life spans two centuries. We are told that her father, Blackhawk Boone, was a direct descendent of not only frontier hero Daniel Boone but of the Sauk Indian Chief, Black Hawk. The latter had waged war against the American government in an attempt to prevent the forced relocation of his people from their traditional lands in Illinois to make way for the same pioneers represented by Blackhawk’s European descent. In creating the creole character of Blackhawk Boone and giving him a central place in the Springfield of the future, Lindsay magically overcomes racial barriers that would have proved insurmountable in his own time. *The Golden Book*, more than any other utopian novel up to that time, used the freedom of fiction to create a cast of characters that embodied a non-racial future. Rather than Massa’s melting pot assessment of Lindsay’s motives here, I would argue that Lindsay’s vision went beyond assimilation. The Boone family are proud of their Native American ancestry and sport long hair flowing down their backs and crimson-dyed left hands. Avel, however, refuses to publicly wear her long hair freely or dye her hand throughout most of the novel because it seems to her to unnecessarily set the Boones apart. Yet she finally does so after a racial incident which leads to the death of her father at the hands of a lynch mob made up of four men who had just burned an African American man alive in Chicago before coming down to Springfield. Clearly the millennium, where racism will be a thing of the past, has not yet come to Springfield. Yet Avel’s response to this brutal attack is not to fearfully shrink into an assimilated identity but rather to defiantly reaffirm her Indian heritage. *The Golden Book* is not a naive ode to multiculturalism where everybody gets to live happily ever after.

Lindsay was always quick to recall that his father’s mother, Martha Ann Cave, was a Native American reportedly descended from Pochahantas. So it is not so surprising that Lindsay as a child enjoyed

“playing Indian” (even wearing an Indian suit), and as an adult he fancied his physician father in one of his poems as “Dr. Mohawk.” As Lindsay put it, “I have used Mohawk as a total symbol of all the Red Indian Tribes and all the Red Indian Gods from the beginning to the end of time.” (Camp, *Poetry*, vol. 3, 1986, Appendix p. 903). Though Lindsay was to poetically claim the lineage of his maternal ancestors who came west to Kentucky with Daniel Boone and taught Boone’s children how to read; there was a darker heritage that also intrigued him, one that could be traced through his paternal grandmother.

To claim to be descended from Pochahontas does not after all have to be taken literally. In Lindsay’s time, such a statement was a common way of claiming Indian blood. Since Pochahontas was a chief’s daughter, being her descendent countered the popular stereotype of the squaw and at the same time gave her a higher status that was more amenable to white society. However, while Pochahontas symbolizes American racial intermingling, for Lindsay intermarriage does not assume a supine Indian assimilation into the dominant culture. Lindsay’s grandmother appears in several of his poems and always in them he expresses pride in his Indian ancestry. He ends the 1925 poem, “The Indian Girl—My Grandmother” with the stanza,

*And I back my one drop of blood  
From this Indian girl  
Against all the blood of the Normans,  
Where the British flags unfurl.*

(Camp, *Poetry*, vol. 2, 1985, p. 644).

The same paternal grandmother said her people had originally come from out east. If so, who were they and from where did they come?

One fascinating theory, while impossible to prove beyond speculation, is that Lindsay’s grandmother was a clandestine member of the Ben Ishmael tribe. If so, there would be good reason to mask her identity by some vague connection to Pochahontas. The Ishmaelites of her time, and even of Lindsay’s, were a group that was so reviled by mainstream society that the aforementioned 1907 Sterilization Law of Indiana had been specifically devised to eradicate them.

This Ishmaelite heritage theory is partly postulated on geographical proximity. According to Hugo P. Leaming, “The first

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known appearance of the Ben Ishmael tribe occurred between 1785 and 1790 in the hills, or "Refuse land," of Bourbon (then Noble) County, Kentucky. Those who became Ishmaelites had gathered from Tennessee, the Carolinas, Virginia and Maryland, in a region still largely wilderness and at a time still turmoiled by the Native American wars and mass slave escapes of the American Revolution. That the Ishmaelites were fugitives is shown by their double removal, first from the Southeast to frontier Kentucky then on to the unexplored Old Northwest; and by their ethnic composition, the three sullied peoples of the South's slavery society: chattel slaves or 'free' blacks, remnants of destroyed Native American nations, and European indentured servants or their landless, despised children." (Sakolsky-Koehnline, 1993, p. 20). These wandering Ishmaelites were then a "triracial" group of 10,000 people whose history and Lindsay's family history seem somehow intertwined since his paternal grandparents were from Galletin county in Kentucky, immediately adjacent to Bourbon County.

Whether or not Lindsay's grandmother was an Ishmaelite, both she and Lindsay must have encountered or heard tales about the Ishmaelites. In Lindsay's case, they traveled in the vicinity of Springfield during his youth. That he at least was aware of the Ishmaelites' legendary stubbornness in conforming to society is evident when he reportedly said of his father, "Papa is an absolutely unconquered Ishmaelite in his determination to do everything his own way to the last ditch." (Ruggles, 1959, p. 310). In the poem "I Am Traveling Too Fast To Vote," Lindsay gives us that famous image from his boyhood of his paternal grandfather ordering Lindsay's long curly hair to be cut while his grandmother looks on with "still Indian eyes—eyes deep and black." Is he recalling only his abrupt transition into the masculine world at the tender age of four as one of his biographers, Eleanor Ruggles, describes the scene (Ruggles, 1959, p. 16) or is there something more happening here? Is he being symbolically "whitened" by a fearful grandfather who sees his wife's Indianness in his long hair and perhaps her Africanness in the curls? In *The Golden Book*, having "long curly black lovelocks to the shoulders" is the mark of the Ishmaelite Boones. (Lindsay, 1999, p.60).

Moreover, when talking about the Boone family in *The Golden Book*, the Lindsay character says, "There is a touch of the uncanny, the restless, the Ishmaelite about all these Boones, they have no business in the streets of a town. They look like dressed up woodchoppers, all but that trim Avel." (Lindsay, 1999, p. 62). Was he alluding to his recognition that his father's mother, Mary Ann Cave, was an Ishmaelite? Did he create Avel Boone just as James Whitcomb Riley had created the bound-girl, "Little Orphan Annie," as a veiled Ishmaelite, but on a much grander scale in the case of Avel? Is her descent from Chief Black Hawk to be seen in the same light as his grandmother's descent from "Princess" Pochahontas when in fact both are Ishmaelites? Is Avel's mixture of Ishmaelite and Boone meant to symbolically unite the two disparate "racial strains" present in his own family?

Like the picture Lindsay (himself a vagabond of sorts), paints of the wandering Boones, who came up to Springfield via Cairo (located in the southern part of the state near the Kentucky border), the Ishmaelites were not settled "town folk." Yet in Springfield today, there is a small Moorish Science Church on the East side of town, whose Midwestern roots can be traced back to the dispersion of the Ishmaelites as a result of the draconian Indiana law. The original Ishmaelites were a nomadic people whose migratory route was northwest from Indianapolis to the Kankakee River south of Lake Michigan, from there south through eastern Illinois to Mahomet in the vicinity of Champaign-Urbana and Decatur, and finally due east, back to Indianapolis. The local settlers called them "grasshopper gypsies," and wanted no part of their anarchic ways. The potent Ishmaelite hereditary mixture of fugitive peoples was more than the settlers could handle. To top it all off the Ishmaelites, having just escaped chattel slavery, doggedly refused the "wage slavery" of the industrial north as well.

Though they were nomadic and carted their houses around on horse-drawn wagons, they did have certain stopping places in their triangular migratory pattern. One such place was what is now Indianapolis, where they constructed a monumental communal dance hall on the west bank of the White River. Here they made what Hugo Leaming calls "a distinctive kind of music. The tribe was well known for its large and frequent gatherings to sing. The voices could be

heard far away, singing the 'jolliest, noisiest songs'! These were not songs of the majority community; they are described as 'quaint,' with 'some jingle of words' and 'some music'!" (Sakolsky-Koeohnline, 1993, p. 29). Could this Ishmaelite musicking be the mysterious source of Vachel Lindsay's passion for "primitive singing."

If the Boones are Ishmaelites, it is their "multiracial" family tree from which Lindsay has plucked Avel Boone, the Amazon Warrior Goddess who will boldly lead Springfield into the future. Lindsay did not choose the Boones because they had successfully assimilated themselves into the dominant culture. It is clearly their vibrant amalgamation of Indianness and pioneer stock which he prizes. As he approvingly observes in *The Golden Book*, "Many of their young girls look more like young Indian maids from a government reservation school, than people of Caucasian stock." (Lindsay, 1999, p. 60). Unlike most of his fellow Springfieldians this racial mixing does not frighten him, but is rather a symbol of his hope for an end to racial animosities not only for Springfield but for America. It is Avel after all of whom the Lindsay character lovingly says, "My scalp must dangle at her belt." (Lindsay, 1999, p. 88). And if Lindsay himself, by dint of some Ishmaelite heritage of his own, has a claim to African ancestry, then we must reevaluate "The Congo" accordingly.

In 1917, Lindsay attended a ceremony in which he was officially presented with a flag of Springfield. Then Mayor Baumann's speech emphasized "harmonious cooperation" and "a just relation of all citizens, one to another." Lindsay might have been expected read his early Springfield civic poems, "Springfield Magical" and "On The Building of Springfield." Then, surprisingly, he chose to publically refuse to be classified as white by reciting "Our Mother Pocahontas," a poem he had composed that same year. In lines that clearly identify him as a stalwart "race traitor," he intoned,

*We here renounce our Saxon blood  
Tomorrow's hopes, an April flood  
Come roaring in. The newest race  
Is born of her resilient grace.*

(Camp, *Poetry*, vol. 1, 1984, p. 294).



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# WHITE TRASH IDENTITY & THE LOSS OF SLACK

BY JAMES MURRAY

*The South is said to be graceful  
White Mansions, live oak and velvet lawns  
The ladies and the gentlemen dress most tasteful  
But it just depends into whose hands you were born.*

PAUL KENNERLEY

The pre-Civil War South was a leisure society for whites. An amazing lack of work existed there. The planter class did not work because they had slaves who worked for them. Their plantations and aristocratic pretensions were bought and paid for with black slave labor. They were at the undisputed top of the Ol' South social order. While the planter class busied itself with the tasks of this social order, the poor whites busied themselves with little at all. These folks were mostly Celtic in origin, and they managed to bring to America Celtic traditional ways.

Before the Civil War, the South was still partially frontier. Little industrialization existed outside the cities. Many areas had been long inhabited but never "improved." The poor white rurals lived at a level only slightly above subsistence. They tended herds (which meant free-ranging cattle and hogs), they grew crops which needed little maintenance, and they hunted and fished. It has been calculated that families labored a total of perhaps 423 hours, or approximately eleven forty-hour weeks, per year.<sup>1</sup>

These people worked little and were remarkably unproductive. They didn't bother fencing their property (often they were squatting anyway), and they allowed their livestock to roam freely. They rarely built bridges over streams or creeks and never built barns. Their homes remained rude log cabins year after year. They were far more interested in hounds, horses, and firearms than in managing a farm for profit.

A Southerner confessed that he had no desire to work:

I returned after eight months absence to my home. (My wife) had been spinning and weaving and had the children well

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clothed, and they had not yet consumed all the corn and hogs I had provided for them before I went off...I was strong enough to work some, but the time for planting a crop had passed, and I could think of nothing to do...I felt no inclination to work. Indeed I felt more like I needed a quiet rest. Accordingly I took my rifle and retired to the canebrake and forest.<sup>2</sup>

Traditional poor white culture placed a higher value on leisure, idle time, and earthly pleasure than it did on the accumulation of capital. Cracker wealth was measured in pleasure received, in strong drink, fast horses, and the skill of arms. It was not measured in acres owned nor in bank accounts. Nelson Algren attempted a cultural study in his fiction:

Watch for a wild boy of no particular clan, ready for anything, always armed. Prefers fighting to toil, drink to fighting...They craved neither slaves nor land. If a man could out-fiddle the man who owned a thousand acres, he was a better man though he owned no more than a cabin and jug. Forever trying to keep from working with their hands, the plantations had pushed them deep into the Southern Ozarks.<sup>3</sup>

The term "redneck" had not yet come into usage. The planters called these people "white trash," and the slaves called them "po' buckra." Some of these poor whites did own slaves, but few owned many. Since the poor white economy was not based on capital, it required very little labor. This society was more tribal and primitive than any that existed among the Northern "white" populace. These poor whites had not yet been put to work, they remained uncivilized. And although they were usually pitifully ignorant they were often consciously anti-progressive. They were no more interested in "education" than they were in "improvements" on their primitive farms. Most of these folks were illiterate and showed little curiosity in reading and writing. Their religion would be ecstatic when it appeared, but it was usually a passing fancy; most often it would leave town with the circuit-riding preacher. Nor were the Crackers keen on educating their children. They feared the "Three Rs" would make their children cold, calculating, and miserly, or something less than their natural human selves. But the parents had little reason to worry. Some Northern schoolmasters considered the poor whites to be

barbarians, and their offspring to be untrainable. In many cases they were correct.

Schooling often clashed with the values and unrestrained habits of young southerners. When a female teacher scolded a boy of eight, he “drew his knife and defied her to punish him.” She managed by a ruse to disarm him, but his brother, age ten, pulled a pistol from his jacket and forced the teacher to dismiss school...A graduate of Maine’s Bowdoin College teaching in Tennessee complained that twice in one term when he tried to punish boys, “they had drawn pistols upon him.”<sup>4</sup>

By all indications the poor southern whites were unusually averse to toil and particularly fond of weapons. The typical liberal academic explanation of this is that the slave culture of the pre-Civil War south made whites lazy and violent. This is probably true of the planter class; they had human property on whom they could vent their boredom and frustration, but it cannot explain the behavior of country and mountain folk. They lived on a semi-frontier, and there were few if any slaves in their remote hamlets and isolated crossroads. Almost all poor white violence was directed toward other poor whites. These people had inherited a Celtic culture that traditionally toiled little and solved problems with interpersonal or communal violence. These traditions

. . .not only survived but grew so steadily that already long before the Civil War and long before hatred for the black man had begun to play any direct part in the pattern (of more than three-hundred persons said to have been hanged or burned by mobs between 1840 and 1860, less than ten percent were Negroes) the South had become peculiarly the home of lynching.<sup>5</sup>

Much of the Ol’ South was near-lawless. In areas where sheriffs and judges existed, these law-enforcers were well aware that the people they presided over were clannish and well-armed. Officials conducted themselves accordingly.

The poor whites continued on, year after year and generation after generation. Their condition was far from utopian, but most of them seemed to enjoy themselves. Indeed, enjoyment, leisure, and idle time (what we refer to today as *slack*) were the currency around which their primitive culture was arrayed. In fairness we must add to the mix

a dash of gunpowder and the swamp music of good hounds baying.

**D**espite what has been written by a century and a half of apologists and bad historians, the Civil War had one major cause, slavery. Any doubters of this fact need only examine the memoirs of Jefferson Davis or his vice president, Alexander Stephens. Or take a gander at southern newspapers circa 1860–1862; the truth will soon be evident. Without doubt the majority of southern men did not own slaves and had little initial interest in the issue. But in 1861, as now, wars were waged for the benefit of the elite, not the commoners. As civil war began to be contemplated (and soon to be waged), the planter-elite faced a quandary. They needed to make their class interests synonymous with the class interests of the white trash. That these two classes had synonymous interests was far from clear to the poor whites. Ignorant and illiterate they usually were, but foolish they were not. Their instinctive reaction was, “rich man’s war, poor man’s fight.” But this would soon change and the poor whites would enthusiastically embrace the war and fight with unrestrained valor. They would accept the white trash identity offered to them and die en masse to hasten their own wage slavery and the loss of their culture. This was a curious and terrible collective decision, one that furthered the imperialism and capital-domination of the U.S.

Various southern intellectuals (always small in number, always members of the planter-elite) had openly dreamed for decades of enslaving the white trash along with the blacks. It was widely assumed in these circles that the white trash were akin to the blacks, they would not labor unless coerced to do so. They also spoke in what were then called “Africanisms,” dropping the final “g” off words such as “runnin, drinkin, sleepin,” along with other errors of English shared by poor whites and black slaves. It was clear to the planter elite that with the white trash and blacks both enslaved the planter-aristocrats would be free to live out a feudal empire along the lines of the European past.

Attendance at military colleges, affectations of rank and dwelling on martial glory were all common among the planter-elite, but as the Civil War began to dawn it became apparent that the Confederate cause needed more than an officer-corps. Primarily it needed men-at-arms. At this juncture, secession and confederate nationalism began to

be cast in terms of the status quo. This would be a “constitutional revolution” and it would be conservative in every sense. These facts were widely disseminated via newspaper editorials, sermons, and popular songs. It was stressed that the planter-elite and “common folk” were fighting for the same thing: the uninterrupted status quo. The elite would keep their slaves and plantations and the white trash would keep their freedom and leisure.

Clergymen and laymen alike addressed the troubling situation. “It is upon the poorer classes of our fellow citizens,” Joseph Turner explained in the *Countryman*, “that abolition would fall in all its deadliest weight. It is better for the negro to serve the white man, than for one white man to serve another.” Chaplain J.D Renfroe delivered an emphatic proslavery oration to the men of the 10<sup>th</sup> Alabama Infantry: “I never owned a slave in my life, and yet I contend that I have more interest in the institution of slavery than the man who owns five hundred. Abolish the institution of slavery, and your children and my children must take the place of that institution.”<sup>6</sup>

Chaplain Renfroe did not realize that another option existed for himself and the 10<sup>th</sup> Alabama Infantry. In reality it would have been their only chance to save the way of life that was all they knew. They could have refused to go to war. They could have sided with the black slaves with whom they shared class interests, music, and speech patterns. They could have hung the planters, divided up the plantations, and resisted with guerrilla actions any Yankee attempts to subdue them. Then they would have been free to squabble, chase deer, and cultivate hounds and revolvers for a century. Yankee imperialism and capital growth would have been nipped in the bud.

But of course that didn’t happen. The white trash made a terrible collective decision that echoes through American history to this day. The horrific irony is that in a desperate attempt to keep themselves free, hundreds of thousands of poor white southern men would become wage slaves in the hierarchical, industrialized Confederate army. And they would die by the tens of thousands in places like Gettysburg, the Wilderness, and the field-works of Richmond. This tremendous sacrifice would not assure the independence of their sons and daughters, it would only ensure their subservience to capital. Even their eventual military defeat would not long enfranchise the black slaves, it would only transform them from property to wage

slavery.

The southern elite were too honor-bound and conservative to wage an unrestricted total war. Guerrilla warfare was ungentlemanly and arming the blacks was out of the question. So the South would lose when faced with an enemy that was prepared to do these things. Sherman in Georgia (inventing blitzkrieg seventy years before the Germans) took pen in hand to describe the opposition:

. . . men who never did work and never will. War suits them, and the rascals are brave, fine riders. . . dangerous subjects in every sense. They care not a sou for niggers, land or anything. As long as they have good horses, plenty of forage, and an open country, they are happy. This is a larger class than most men suppose, and they are the most dangerous set of men that this war has turned loose upon the world. They are splendid riders, first-rate shots, and utterly reckless. . . These men must all be killed or employed by us before we can hope for peace.<sup>7</sup>

Sherman had been one of the first bankers in San Francisco and he understood clearly what the war was about. The South had to be industrialized and “progressed.” Before the West could be tamed the southern hinterland had to be put to good use. Those who stood in the way of progress would either be “killed or employed.” Widespread *slack* would be brought to an end, and if it took freeing the slaves (and employing them) to accomplish this, it mattered little to the pragmatic total warriors of the Union.

**T**he poor southern whites made the largest mistake in American history and they and everyone on the continent are still paying the price. This mistake was not foreordained; in 1860 the South had a long tradition of poor whites joining Indian tribes or maroons, and the concept of refusing one’s whiteness was part of white trash consciousness. As the war progressed, the Confederate army suffered tremendous rates of insubordination and desertion. As General Lee complained, “Our people are opposed to work, all ridicule and resist it.”<sup>8</sup> In the deep south and Ozarks, Confederate draft officers were sometimes shot dead or hanged. But too few of the poor whites came to the realization that it was truly a rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight. Most decided that their class interests were

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the same as the planter-elite. White trash they definitely were, but simple pride in any whiteness at all was enough to convince them to willingly die in droves.

What is the appropriate response to this analysis? In an anarchist context, guilt is a useless emotion and counterrevolutionary. Past battles are studied for reference in the future, and we study them dispassionately. Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the stakes are much higher than they were in the 19<sup>th</sup>. Now it is not just a country at stake, but an entire world that is being Ordered. The lessons in this case are clear—side with the blacks, hang the rich, and then go fishin’.

*(This essay was inspired by “White Mansions” and “The Legend of Jesse James,” two albums conceived and written by Paul Kennerley.)*

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### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South*, University of Alabama Press, 1988, pg. 47.

<sup>2</sup> McWhiney, pg. 262.

<sup>3</sup> Nelson Algren, *A Walk On the Wild Side*, Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1989, pg. 4.

<sup>4</sup> McWhiney, pg. 204.

<sup>5</sup> W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, Vintage Books, 1969, pg. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South*, Louisiana State University Press, 1988, pg. 72.

<sup>7</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War*, Oxford University Press, 1966, pg. 195.

<sup>8</sup> McWhiney, pg 46.



# AN AMERICAN NIGHTMARE

A TRUE STORY, AS TOLD BY I

I was born in 1961. In the year of *their* Lord, not mine. I came into the world in a time and a place *they* said didn't exist. It was a town situated on the shore of the Great Stormy Water where the sun lived day by day, creeping above the horizon only to sink behind the hills on the other side night after night. Life passed by there without complaint or restraint. It was a place where thunder rolled in to frolic with the rocks in the sun's laughing light—a time when lightning was revered, not reviled, and death was a thing of the present, not the past. And we—we rode in and out on flotillas of clouds: wind and water crystallized by cold and suspended by sky, frozen in time, but not preserved. Still, they said *it* didn't exist. *We* didn't exist. Not here, not now. In the year of our Lord and the land of sky blue waters. God's Country. The Bay of Pigs Fiasco. The Indians, they said, had been removed. A final solution had been found.

In the wake of the Korean Conflict, I crashed headlong into the Cuban missile crisis, the tragedy of bullets ricocheting off the concrete at Dealey Plaza and the threshold of the cold war. The Kennedys lived the American Dream, but for families from coast to coast, dreams have been deferred, deployed and dismissed in an American Nightmare. Some bombs don't burst in the air—they just go down, silent and unseen. To me, these decades have not been a dream. They've been a nightmare.

Every coin has two sides and the same is true of any story. In that version of history which begins with the Greeks and ends with "God," tragedy and comedy take center stage and the tragic-comical truth of the matter is sandwiched somewhere in the middle.

Today, three dead bodies are dredged from the floor of the Atlantic and a nation hangs its heart at half staff. The newscasters report that every culture has a need to recover its dead—to bring them ashore and bury them at home in their soil. He doesn't mention the graves that have been robbed. On the night before his son is set to be buried at sea, JFK senior speaks from the grave, "We are tied to the ocean and when we go back to the sea, we are going back from whence we came," and I find myself just wishing they'd never come in the first place.

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My uncle Frenchie was a veteran of domestic wars who lost his legs fighting for his life while his comrades-in-arms marched off to faraway places defending a country that was never theirs in the first place. Seems everyone here next to God and Jesus has an ax to grind, but for me and my clan, the hatchet isn't ours to bury anymore. It doesn't matter whether the occupying forces are red, white, blue-blooded, or black: This United States is occupied territory.

I imagine that's how my uncle Frenchie felt confined to his wheelchair after gangrene set in and they had to amputate. We've got the Kennedys to thank for the Medicaid that footed the bill, but financial debt never meant much to my uncle Frenchie—as a kid growing up, I saw his bills stacked so high, I thought he was a “bill collector.”

The first thing to go was just his big toe, but it wasn't long before they took the rest and he was sitting there making cheap costume jewelry for my mother to sell to the barflies down at the Harbor Lights Tavern across from the coal yards on the shore of Lake Michigan in Sheboygan. They say Sheboygan's got more taverns per capita than any city in Amerika, and judging from the list of seven-digit numbers we had scribbled on the back of the quarter-inch-thick phone book in the busted drawer in the kitchen of the downstairs apartment the social services lady found for us on the corner of thirteenth and Pennsylvania Avenue after we moved out of the tenements when they got condemned, I'd say that was probably true.

My mother liked to call it Sin City, but none of us has ever been good with geography and that's probably how we ended up scattered from one end of the country to another. I look at it this way: we may have gotten lost along the way, but at least we weren't 5,000 miles off course thinking the best thing to do was to ask not what your country could do for you, but what you could do for your country. That's good advice, except when the country you're in isn't yours.

Ma would head out early in the day with a plastic purse full of trinkets Frenchie'd cobbled together from fifty-cent pieces clasped into cheap aluminum clamps and Lincoln pennies with hand-drilled holes strung together on chains that gave your neck a green patina if you wore them too long. Sometimes there was a silver dollar called the Eisenhower. The year after Kennedy's death, a silver fifty cent piece was issued called the Kennedy half. Later, it was made of copper clad in nickel and known as the Kennedy half-clad.

Frenchie'd seal each creation in a mini-Ziploc bag with an adhesive price tag stuck to it. Mom would pawn off the stuff for chump change to the workers who gathered at the tavern on their way home from the factories in the morning, then spend the day drinking the profit away before she came home to sleep it off. Just about the time the sun set in summer, she'd stumble out of bed, put on a pot of coffee, take a hot bath, and perch herself in front of a makeup mirror propped up against a plastic napkin holder on the kitchen table to "put on her face." Then she'd fiddle with the seams of her navy blue polyester pants sticking to the torn vinyl on one of the four matching chairs she'd picked up at the Salvation Army, smoking menthol cigarettes and waiting for the cab to take her to the third shift at the foundry. Sometimes, she'd undo the settings and use those Kennedy half-clads to pay the taxi fare. She always promised to replace them, but rarely did, so there was a small collection of empty aluminum hoops in the bottom of the junk drawer in the bathroom.

Sometimes, mostly in winter, she wouldn't come home in time, and we'd take turns calling all the bars in town to track down Mom so she wouldn't get fired from her factory job. We didn't care much for the commodity cheese and the corned beef hash we got from the AFDC, and, as much as it turned our stomachs to think of the way Mom's feet swelled after lifting foundry casts from their moulds all night and the burns on her arms from the molten metal, we could stomach even less the steady diet of commodity cheese and corned beef hash. While my mother was away—at the bar, at work, or, in better years, attending AA meetings—my sister and I used to play chicken, leaving a Kool 100 to burn between our arms placed side by side, testing to see who cracked first under the heat. It was an expression of solidarity with the family matriarch and, in this way, the foundry left us scarred and charred much in the same way it left its mark on Mom. Years later, when the social worker came to take us away and I was sent to live with some rich white family on the other side of town who were friends of the factory owners, they never understood why I couldn't "appreciate" the corned beef brisque they served at their gourmet dinner parties or any of the "finer things in life" they tried to give, but which I couldn't take.

Weekends, Mom donned a platinum blonde wig, white patent leather boots, a black velvet mini-skirt, and a snagged synthetic turtleneck. That's when she took out the "good" jewelry. Her most cherished piece hung from a 14-inch plated metal chain. It was a

clear acrylic fob set in a serrated hoop with pictures of JFK and RFK on either side. The brothers' faces spun around inside the hoop and whenever she wore it, my mother talked about moving "to Camelot"—by that she meant the new apartment complex on the edge of town with a mock mortared gate at the entrance that read "Camelot Manor." Mom's Kennedy chain was not something handmade by Frenchie, it was store-bought—*commercial* Kennedy commemorative kitsch—and that made all the difference. The thing quickly became something of a family heirloom and there was hell to pay if she misplaced it in a drunken stupor that lapsed into paranoia and she became convinced someone had stolen it. The treasure was kept in a cardboard jewelry box from Walgreens we'd bought for her 38<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1969.

So, the Kennedy legacy, with all its tragedies and triumphs, touched our lives too. We grew up grieving, just like everyone else.

My mother died in 1993, at the age of 62. Cause of death: cancer, complicated by diabetes, alcoholism, single parenthood, and poverty. But the way she actually died was by slow and steady suffocation. Economic asphyxiation was a way of life in the trenches of this New Frontier. But, really, it was a manner of death. And my mother was not the first, nor the last, to have succumbed, nor was hers an uncommon case. There have been billions more—and millions to come. We will spend lifetimes recovering our dead. We will spend lifetimes divebombing the wreck. But there will be no burial at sea to bring us home again because we are already there.

I alone survived the American Nightmare that swallowed five generations of my family. I am a writer, teacher, and performing artist: published in two languages and on two continents. My mother didn't live to see my name in print and couldn't have read half of what I've written even if she had. I am in graduate school at a prestigious private university. My tuition is three times what my mother made at the foundry and twice what I earn today as a teacher in the inner city. What worries me more, though, is that it's also twice one of my clients' annual income from working 12 minimum wage hours a day to feed and clothe seven dependent minors—that's about a fifth of the cost of one single engine Piper Saratoga—bought used.

If it weren't for my habit of constantly calculating the comparative costs of living, you'd probably never know I wasn't born into privilege. Everyone knows that people who have it don't talk about

money. The same is true of poverty: people who have it don't talk about it.

In the newspapers I read that today's been declared a day of respect for the dead. For me, though, every day—not just this one—is a day of respect for the dead. Every day is a search and recover mission and a day of mourning.

I am a person of poverty, not of prosperity, and here, in the US of A, my name is legion. Culturally, I am an indigenist, and my colors are many. My dead are unburied. The losses at Wounded Knee, Pine Ridge, Black Churches burning—the bodies of these brave men, living and dead—have not been recovered or rescued, simply dismissed.

We should appreciate all the Kennedy family has done for us—the poor, the downtrodden, the unburied dead—the Black and the Red. Yellow menace? Commie threat? The red scare and dammit don't you dare... Salt in our blood, sweat in our tears? I'd rather have salt in my bread and blood in my tears. "No respect for the dead," you said?

It's respect for the living that makes me wish today my mother hadn't spent those half-clad Kennedys on cab fare. Tomorrow, they'll be worth a million. And in a million years, worth nothing again. But it's respect for the dead that makes me suspect there's more than one Kennedy turning in his grave at the spectacle being made on this day.

As I sift through the death certificates in my drawer—this memorial to my family, five generations long—I find myself wishing I'd hung on to the empty aluminum rings in the bottom of the junk drawer in the bathroom. I'd probably place them in the jewelry box my students presented me on my 38<sup>th</sup> birthday this year—a box made of cedar with a price penciled in on the back that says eleven-dollars-and-ninety-five cents.

Those girls are living in a shelter now that the landlord sold the house they were renting and they had to move out. I'm hoping the lady from the social services will find them a nicer place soon. Kids in crisis. We're moving up in the world: It could have been worse, the jewelry box could have been cardboard and the Saratoga custom-built, costing *twelve* times my tuition this year, not ten.

The truth of the tragedy is that the American dream could have cost me five states, not fifty. The nightmare is that it cost me and many others a hell of a lot more.

# THE WIGGERS YOU LOVE TO HATE

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass and Bulworth as Lessons in Eavesdropping

BY DAVID HILL

*We are the first fruits of this new nation, the harbinger of that black tomorrow which is yet destined to soften the whiteness of the Teutonic today.*

*W.E.B. DU BOIS, 1897*

Over a century ago the greatest intellectual in American history, W.E.B. Du Bois, prophesized that black folks would one day “soften the whiteness” of our society. If whiteness were taken to mean institutions of white supremacy paired with white folk’s entrenched racially chauvinistic attitudes, then his prophecy may be far from fulfilled. Whiteness still pervades and dominates our social structure, and it doesn’t seem like many of us are immune from the sickness whiteness can create. In this article, I’m going to focus on those white folks who are trying to evade whiteness through their participation in black culture. In particular, I’m going to talk about white people who participate in what we respectfully refer to as the Hip-Hop Nation. While participation in Hip-Hop is a good point of departure for learning about black culture, there are still limitations and problems, and our charge is to discover sincere and legitimate spaces for whites to operate in Hip-Hop (black) culture.

*I do records for black kids, and white kids are basically eavesdropping.*

*ICE CUBE*

As eavesdroppers, white Hip-Hop fans are in a difficult position. Motivated by curiosity, disillusionment with whiteness, or sincere appreciation of the richness of black cultural production, many white kids want to be a part of Hip-Hop. Heads like Ice Cube, however, let them know that it’s not about them, that their role will always be confined to the margins, as eavesdroppers.

Some so-called “wiggers” aren’t happy with this confinement. Upski, a white graffiti writer from Chicago and Hip-Hop critic and journalist, often talks about whites who “strive to be down.” This is

*David Hill is a writer and critic.*

different from just being a rap fan. Being down requires acceptance, at least on some level. Many strive to be down through the way they dress or talk, trying to adopt the codes and signifiers of Hip-Hop. This type of appropriation in and of itself falls short. What is required of the “wigger” is an understanding of what these codes and signifiers mean. Upski argues that this type of understanding manifests itself through a process of living with black folks, knowing blacks “first as people, not as issues.” But even after submerging himself in the Chicago Hip-Hop scene, he was still handed constant reminders that he was white, whether they were in the form of verbal harassment from his boys or beat downs from other graffiti artists he had the gall to challenge on issues of authenticity.

Another example of white folks who refuse to just eavesdrop is the white rap group 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass. In his discussion of 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass, Hip-Hop linguist Jurgen Streeck says that the group has taken a “painful position” of “[daring] to express him or herself in the idiom of the other.” 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass say in their song “Product of the Environment”:

*On the streets of Far Rockaway Queens  
Seagram Boulevard, B-17  
Redfern houses where no MC would ever go  
Is where I did my very first show  
Had the crowd had the rhymes going, I never fess  
(His reward, was almost a bullet in his chest)  
And on that stage, is where I first learned  
Stick out my chest to be a kid and get burned  
You're so foolish, but I think you knew this  
That on the the microphone punk I can do this  
And doing this, is what life meant  
Cause I'm a product, of the environment*

Describing the anxiety and discomfort of their first show at Redfern housing projects in Rockaway Queens, the “painful position” is apparent. Although Serch and Pete Nice were forced to suffer the suspicious and cynical attitudes of the black crowd, they admit that rhyming is “what life meant” to them, and one can see the pain of their position.

But what isn't rapped about in “Product of the Environment” is that 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass are enjoying commercial success as MCs. Their major label records, videos, and tours are Hip-Hop awards many black

“products” spend day and night working thanklessly for, and have slim chances of receiving. When 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass’s “painful position” is juxtaposed with the communities where they learned their trade, their position seems a little privileged.

In the following stanza, Pete Nice shares an experience of his own, that of his father:

*I wanna tell you something that gets me kind of mad  
 ... it's about my dear old dad  
 He's tired, and worn, and works a nine-to-five  
 Clockin thirty G's a year to survive  
 But I know kids who in a month or so  
 Make that money sellin ya-yo  
 Pushin a drug, I can't understand  
 Destroyin a life with a buck in the hand  
 Play rotten slum chain, local street hero  
 But if you ask Serch, you're just a bunch of zeroes  
 Too bad cause when you're older, you won't have a cent  
 Cause you're a product, of the environment*

He reminds the listener that although he is white, he grew up the child of a working class family, and he positions his situation alongside that of a young drug dealer. His words are angry, calling the pusher “rotten” and a “zero.” His position is that it isn’t fair that his father works hard for a living to barely survive, while local drug dealers can get by doing a lot less work and a lot more damage to the community. What isn’t told in Pete’s personal anecdote is that despite his father’s hardship, Pete was able to overcome poverty and graduate from prestigious Columbia University, and then go on to be a commercial rap success.

The point here is that despite all their posturing, 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass are still alien to the real lived experiences that produce the idiom that they have made a comfortable living copying. This is a contradiction that the blues community has understood for some time. In the pages of *Race Traitor*, a similar debate was held over the issue of what Phil Rubio called the “exceptional white in popular culture.” Citing crossover jazz and blues artists like Johnny Carisi and Red Rodney, Rubio argues that crossover artists are making sacrifices that are on the path to freedom. Salim Washington points out:



Even when black influences are obvious and acknowledged, the cold fact is that many cultural superstars enjoy their status not because of superior artistry, but primarily because of sufficient mastery of African American techniques and their "whiteness."<sup>1</sup>

This argument applies to our example of 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass fairly well. If it was not the case that 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass owe at least part of their success to their being white, then why is it the theme of the majority of their songs? White MCs from the Beastie Boys to House of Pain have experienced significant success in Hip-Hop as novelty. Any skills these MCs have are secondary to their being white.

As the novelty of the white MC gets played out, white MCs are defecting from the self-referential style of 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass. Eminem, a white freshman MC from Detroit, makes little or no reference to his being white in his rhymes. In fact, many listeners are surprised to find that Eminem is white. While we are spared the "exceptionalness" of 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass's rhymes, we are confronted with a new problem—what Upski describes as "encroaching in people's cultural space."<sup>2</sup> Eminem's racial ambiguity is comparable to the strategic racial ambiguity used by Mariah Carey, Madonna, or even the rock group Queen to sell records and get airplay on black radio stations. While I won't insinuate that Eminem is purposefully masking his whiteness to fool audiences into thinking he is black, the problem still remains that at least part of the legitimacy Eminem is granted by the Hip-Hop community stems from the fact that he is assumed to be black. When heads find out that Eminem is white, they are forced to completely re-evaluate their opinion of his music, because the music is suddenly put in a whole new context. Tricia Rose explains why white MCs pose such a problem to Hip-Hop:

Given the racially discriminatory context within which cultural syncretism takes place, some rappers have equated white participation with a process of dilution and subsequent theft of black culture. Although the terms dilution and theft do not capture the complexity of cultural incorporation and syncretism, this interpretation has more than a grain of truth in it.<sup>3</sup>

Although Eminem's fans are forced to evaluate his music in this context, he has so far passed the test. This is because he has serious

lyrical skills, and because he is rhyming to the underground, not the mainstream audience 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass denies they rhyme to.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, his lyrical content is a far cry from the preaching of “Pushin a drug, I can’t understand / Destroyin a life with a buck in the hand.” Eminem raps about smoking crack and killing his mother, far from positive, but understood by true heads as hyperbole, signifying. When Eminem raps, he is bragging and boasting the same way any other Detroit Hip-Hop head would. This is because Eminem sees himself as a part of the idiom, and not a savior who has come to Hip-Hop to lead it out of the darkness. He’s humorous, boastful, and talented. And he doesn’t care to teach or preach.

And why should he? While 3<sup>rd</sup> Bass’s message against drugs is certainly positive and applaudable, one would have to ask how a young head from Bushwick would perceive the message in the context of the messengers. Like Upski said, black folks are not issues, they are people, and white folks should question whether or not their opinions on the issues concerning the black community are appropriate to articulate considering their own positions and privileges. Probably the most profound piece on this subject ever written, *Black Power*, by Stokely Carmichael, argues:

Our point is that no matter how “liberal” a white person might be, he cannot ultimately escape the overpowering influence—on himself and on black people—of his whiteness in a racist society.<sup>5</sup>

In the popular film *Bulworth*, Warren Beatty plays a suicidal Senator who decides to start telling the truth and investigating his fascination and love of black culture. In many scenes, Bulworth “raps” his progressive political message (“The airwaves would be worth seventy billion to the public today / If a money-grubbin’ congress didn’t give ‘em away”) to black folks in churches, clubs, and in their homes. They all watch him with the same cocked-head, wide-eyed disbelief, wondering, “Is this cracker nuts?”

Beatty’s movie was smart in the sense that Bulworth is never revered by the heads in the street as serious. LD, the head of a neighborhood drug ring, is inspired by this “crazy white boy” to exploit Bulworth’s white privilege, his political power, to make some real change in the community. It would have been easy for Beatty to make the Bulworth character a “savior,” someone who finally shows

the black community what was wrong and how to fix it. The film accurately points out that the community has always known what was wrong and how to fix it, the problem was one of access to resources to get it done. Washington points out that this is similar in cultural production:

The problem is not simply that the official historiography of American culture is inaccurate due to its attempt to cover up the seminal role played by blacks, but that black artists suffer through diminished access to and control of the means of cultural production.<sup>6</sup>

*Bulworth* is an example of how white privilege can be used constructively. In the film we see how Senator Bulworth is merely articulating perspectives that he learned from his direct experience with black people. The transformation that takes place is one of a white man who at one time offered solutions to problems within the black community to a white man who learns solutions from black people themselves. The film challenges conventional constructions of racial dynamics in the sense that its protagonist is subordinated (at least in a pedagogical sense) to everyday common black folks. He uses his white privilege to bring a very honest message to the mainstream of America. He uses his political debates and television airtime, his access to political resources, to talk about the failure of Democrats and Republicans to care about communities of color, to talk about working class racial solidarity, and even to promote interracial sex in order to "eliminate white people." The heroes in *Bulworth* are not the white politicians, but the black folks who guide the white politicians toward truth.

*There's a time when every homey got to risk his neck and fight / For the thing that he believes in and he got to preach it right.*

WARREN BEATTY AS BULWORTH

So what are the legitimate spaces in which whites can participate in black culture? How can white folks move away from whiteness if their role in black culture is so problematic? Upski talks about the wigger's need to "develop a double consciousness."

We have to take the risks necessary to escape whiteness, but at the same time avoid placing our own struggle against whiteness and

white supremacy in the center and above struggles for black liberation and self-determination. Furthermore, we must interrogate our participation for sincerity. Says Streeck:

But acquisition (of rap) requires participation in the community, and whether such participation is granted certainly depends upon the credibility of the people seeking it. This not only involves a sincere appreciation of black culture as a culture that is not one's own, but also a displayed understanding of the experiences that black culture organizes and communicates.<sup>7</sup>

Yes, Streeck is right in that this understanding will require a displacement from the lack of culture (whiteness) into an oppositional culture (blackness), and that will require serious sacrifice and, yes, even pain. The challenge is to always remind ourselves that this pain is nowhere near the pain of the lived experiences that created the culture we appropriate to express our own oppositions. As eavesdroppers, we are students of Hip-Hop, and there are still too many lessons to learn before we start posturing ourselves as teachers and leaders of the Hip-Hop Nation. This is a self-destructive tendency that, in this writer's opinion, will do far more harm than good.

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#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Washington, Salim. "Response to Crossover Dreams," *Race Traitor*, ed. Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, Routledge, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Wimsatt, William "Upski", *Bomb the Suburbs*, Subway and Elevated, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Rose, Tricia, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> 3rd Bass argue that using the horn riffs and bass line from the popular Peter Gabriel song "Sledgehammer" was to lampoon artists who did similar things to make songs recognizable. Neither Pete nor Serch seemed upset that the song ("Pop Goes the Weasel") that used the riffs was their only song to go Top 40.

<sup>5</sup> Carmichael, Stokely, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, Vintage, 1967.

<sup>6</sup> Washington, Salim, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Streeck, Jurgen, *The Converse Conversation of Rap*, unpublished essay, 1992.

# SLOT RIGHT 24 TAKE

BY ANTONIO LOPEZ

Then there was the ankle sprain sidelining him the final two weeks of the season last year, a loss which cost his team the playoffs, but tonight is a different story, everybody, because Cleopheus Ross, Jr. is having the game of his life out here on Columbus Circle. At 5'10", 185 lbs., some have questioned his durability. Can he run the ball twenty-five, thirty times, week in, week out? Perhaps tonight's performance will finally silence the critics. A minute twenty left in the game, down by five, he's facing a third and seven and the traffic is getting heavy. Off-duty cabs roam the inside lanes, hi-beaming and honking. A fleet of bumper-to-bumper black Lincolns clogs the middle. And outside, deep in the secondary, dozens of horse-drawn carriages play a tight zone.

Cleopheus Ross, Jr. was born under a grim star. While carrying him to term, his mom never wanted her picture taken. The one time he saw his dad was on the occasion of his fourth birthday. The unfamiliar old man gave him a worn and shirtless G.I. Joe packed inside its original yet battered box. The dispirited boy threw the gift back in his father's face. To teach him a lesson about wasting food, his grandma made him gulp down a glass of spoiled milk on the surface of which floated a cluster of ants. Ross's mom worked the night shift at an onion-packing plant while his aunt and cousin beat him.

Third and seven and the hotels and office buildings lining the circle glow a hazy yellow, while up above, the sky is bright with airplane lights, all shining on behalf of Ross as he takes the handoff, makes a cut at the crosswalk, and flies into the street, what quickness, his cleats skating on the asphalt, looks like he's going down, but no, folks, he keeps his balance and is on his way! How could those million-dollar legs ever fail him?

Cleopheus Ross, Jr. feels good tonight. When he runs his shoulder pads click like grasshopper wings. His secret is to make sure the straps going under his armpits are always tighter than necessary because that's what gives him the heart to lower his shoulder to his

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opponents. Cleopheus Ross, Jr. likes how his hip pads rub against his pelvis when his skin is sweaty. If asked to, Cleopheus Ross, Jr. will comment on the pleasure of knowing that down the crack of his buttocks runs a five-inch by two-inch pad which protects that most sensitive of bones, the coccyx. According to Cleopheus Ross, Jr. the virtue of thigh pads resides in how, while he paces the pregame locker room, they allow him to notice the trembling of his powerful quadriceps that much more. Cleopheus Ross, Jr. surprises everyone by admitting he stays free of catastrophic injury because of the two Xs marked in black ink appearing on the back of his knee pads, ritual signs done in his own hand to ward off even the most evil of tacklers. In a show of grit, preferring that his teeth and gums do the accommodating, Cleopheus Ross, Jr. chomps down on his mouthpiece cold instead of dipping it into boiling water so the soft painless plastic can fashion itself to the contours of his mouth. Cleopheus Ross, Jr. knows three things must happen before consummating the act of wearing a helmet: one, the player must snap on his chin strap while standing alone on a quiet part of the practice field so he can hear the clicks echo between helmet and skull; two, the player must sprint downfield faster and faster until the wind rushing in through the earholes turns into screaming; three, the player must forget his facemask, pretend it isn't there, yet never ignore the fleshy vulnerability of cheeks, lips, and nose fluttering behind it. Cleopheus Ross, Jr. has long accepted the harsh bargain of the jockstrap, which keeps his testicles and penis in place while exposing the entire length and width of his buttocks.

Cleopheus Ross, Jr. sidesteps a pothole and turns upfield. Cab 2506 closes in and throws open a door but Ross delivers a strong stiff-arm. 3419 swerves into the lane, knocks 2506 out of position and blindsides Ross, leaving him stunned but still on his feet. Ross circles the monument. He's halfway around, regaining his composure, but here comes 3419 again. It pulls in front of him and slams on the breaks. Ross goes airborne, over the top, but lands on the run. Suddenly daylight opens up ahead. He bursts into the middle and sends a forearm smashing into the window of a Lincoln. Passengers nail him with their briefcases, but he spins away from the tackle. Ross turns to face the traffic and charges head-on at the next defender, a stretch limo. He jumps on the hood and meets the car helmet-to-

windshield. He shatters the glass and fights his way to the roof, driving his foot into the dashboard. Ross surveys the field and leaps to the ground before the limo rams into the back of a cab. In the secondary now, Ross lowers his head and pancakes a carriage. Horses rear up and kick. Ross juke-steps them, but out of nowhere comes a hoof. It hits him on the arm. The ball squirts loose and lands in a puddle. One of the Lincolns makes a run for it, annihilating the carriages in its way, but Ross dives, laying himself out, and scoops up the fumble. He gets to his feet and with his breakaway speed picks up the first down.

Cleopheus Ross, Jr., raised in Quincy, Florida, casts a quick backward glance at Columbus Circle, then does something not even the assembled experts have anticipated: he forsakes Broadway for 8<sup>th</sup> Ave.

**O** Mexican kid wearing a white apron, from whose garden hose arcs of cold water will soon cut the air and splash across the produce heaped outside the deli; O doorman in a dingy overcoat, cradling three miniature dogs that writhe and snap as you trip on their red leather leashes, crushing the rhinestones they're studded with; O shuffling old woman, swaying side to side, your thick hands gripping gallon jugs of orange juice, your cracked lips, bleary eyes, raw nose, and all! Cleopheus Ross, Jr. calls on you, and on the new moon spying behind the skyscrapers: see what amazing swiftness God has seen fit to grant him, a human! See his calves pumping furiously up and down. See his quads in their familiar trembling. Feel his hamstrings burning, bunched up hard like knots on a tree trunk. Can he overcome the cramp and make it to the endzone?

**T**here is no replay which captures what happened those final seconds. Some have therefore imagined the worst: Cleopheus Ross, Jr., flees from a cop who brandishes his nightstick for a block and a half before launching it at the streaking tailback, striking him behind the knees, sending him sprawling to the street, hurt for life, his little Xs having finally abandoned him. But there's no way that could happen. The way Ross played the game, he was always above the law, and everyone, from the lowliest trainer to the biggies in the skybox, knew it. Others close to the game have arrived at a

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different conclusion: Ross abandons the run, takes a seat on the curb, and removes his uniform in disgust, mumbling something about heart. Yet such an ending is just as unlikely. The truth remains that Ross's mom never raised quitters.

So what did happen? Word on the street has it that Ross eventually began moving in slow motion. He turned the corner at 47<sup>th</sup> and a man watching TV on the West Bank laughed at something on the nightly news. Ross made a move with his shoulders, barely a shrug, just enough to take the run inside, and a woman in Jersey bought her son an overcoat from the local thrift store. In slow-mo Ross's smooth stride and powerful drive churned up the sidewalk like never before. He crossed the goal line and the man hummed along to the tune of a popular orange juice commercial. Ross spiked the ball against a fire hydrant, sending it bouncing into the night, and the woman saw her son off to work in his new coat. Ross took a knee and caught his breath, his upturned helmet rolling gently at his side, and the man went outside for a smoke just as the reception soured.



# SOCIAL CLIMBING, 1977

BY STEPHEN E. MANTIN

After five years of driving a cab, the only day Bob still looks forward to is Sunday. The traffic is light and the fares are out there if you know where to look. Even now, forcing himself out of bed in the pre-dawn darkness, ever so careful not to wake Nettie or the kids, kissing them all so lightly they stir without waking. He's out of the apartment ten minutes later. Sunday morning is the time, like the song says, "the good people are going to church and the bad people are going home."

Of course, if he took the teaching job out on Long Island, Sunday morning he'd be curled up in bed with Nettie. He'd own a car instead of just driving one and the kids would have a backyard. But the Long Island of his memory is a hostile ocean of White people: unpredictable, arbitrary, thoughtlessly capable of becoming an unruly sea, buffeting his bronze-brown children about without cause or reason, casting them back from the horizon onto dry land, offering them sand for sustenance.

A smile creases his lips as his interior dialogue continues, extravagant and dramatic, not so much thought as feeling—the feeling of thought. Then, again, driving a cab is one of those jobs that can easily kill you and no one dies teaching high school English. As he walks to the subway, Delancey Street almost deserted, he hears the faint rumble of waves on a white beach.

Waiting for the train, Bob misses the car he doesn't have and wonders if he'll get to the garage before 6:30. Most Sundays an elderly Episcopal priest and a dark skin boy around eleven years old appear at the corner of Ridge and Houston Street between 6:45 and 6:50 am. Up the Drive to 135th Street the meter humming, furiously flipping numbers, the final destination an Episcopal Church on Convent Avenue with, Bob assumed, a West Indian congregation. 6:16. Sometimes another cab, an owner-driver, was already waiting for the priest and his young charge and sometimes Bob got a late start and missed them. He hadn't seen them or the owner-driver for three weeks. It had been a month since Bob, after discharging his fares, left the cab and walked to the front of the church.

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The entrance was almost blocked by an enormous basket of tropical fruit. This fruit bouquet was as bright as flowers and so numerous as to be beyond words. Bob remembers Nettie and her Jamaican family and friends discussing mangoes and arguing for their favorites: be it a "Blackie," an "East Indian," or a "Number 11." Bob continued to stare, momentarily silenced by how many tastes and textures remain unknown to him. Smiling, he remembers his mother-in-law mourning the fruit trees she left behind.

The priest and the boy, both in gowns, emerged from the back of the church. The priest smiled tentatively. Bob nodded briefly in reply and returned to the cab. He was overwhelmed in the face of bewildering abundance: in nature, in people's natures, and in the nature of different people. He should have stayed long enough to see the congregation: the hats, the fans, the flowery dresses.

The only other person waiting in the subway is a disheveled man, muttering to himself and, Bob thinks, waiting for more than the next train. When the train arrives, the disheveled man stops muttering. He stands up straight, faces the train, his head thrust forward, his eyes no longer dull but open wide in wonder and appreciation. Bob sits by the window and stares at the solitary man on the platform who's staring at the train rushing past.

The dispatcher, this being Sunday, is almost friendly. The priest and his charge are not on the corner. Either he's missed them or they didn't show. Maybe Long Island is a smart move. The thought lulls his mind as he corrals six fares. Having booked a fast twenty dollars, he opens the window, elbows out, feeling the wind and the sun on his left arm, wondering where he can find a decent basketball game. A couple, with baggage, flag him down. Kennedy Airport.

Bob hates Kennedy Airport. The Port Authority cops have it in for cabdrivers and most of the dispatchers take payoffs. The rules are as irrational as the traffic signs. He's afraid of making a wrong turn or wasting half the day waiting in line. Bob gives them a perfect ride and they tip him a lousy \$1.15. He rushes back to the city.

Bob would bet the teachers get the gym to themselves on Sunday. Isn't that the American Way, a better future in a bigger house?

Bob has been up and across Houston Street several times now and each and every fare has been picked up just before he reaches them. The taxi gods are mocking him.

Heading west toward the Village, Bob sees a derelict at Bowery and Houston lying on the ground a bottle tilted high. Bob stops at the light. The derelict lowers the bottle, wipes his mouth with his sleeve, and with his free hand hails Bob. Bob ignores him. He comes over to the driver's side. Bob doesn't roll up the window.

"Are you free?"

Bob considers the question. Looks his potential fare square in the eye surprised that the bum doesn't smell half as bad as he looks.

"Got any money?"

Reaching in his pocket the man extracts three crumpled dollar bills and stuffs them in Bob's hand and enters the cab. For the rest of the ride he is silent except for the most perfunctory directions.

The cab travels Houston to Broadway, south on Broadway. The meter relentlessly tallies up the fare and, crossing Canal, registers \$2.45. Bob begins to get anxious. At Wall Street the fare has reached \$2.85 and the passenger motions to Bob to pull over and, seemingly in the same motion, indicates that Bob can keep the change.

It is a quiet Sunday afternoon, no traffic except for a few cars and several solitary bike riders. The streets are without pedestrians. Despite the human scale of Trinity Church, the huge buildings, built to and for the gods of commerce and finance, dwarf the narrow thoroughfare which Broadway becomes at its southernmost roots.

The bum gets out, lies down on the sidewalk, takes the bottle out of his coat and continues drinking. Bob leans out the window.

"Why did you want me to drive you here?"

The bum looks at Bob as if Bob were crazy. He lowers the bottle, wipes his mouth with his sleeve.

"Are you kidding? This is a much better neighborhood."

A few fares later Bob flashes on the OFF DUTY light and returns the cab to the garage.

It's the kind of early spring day when the entire Lower East Side seems to move outside: tables are set up for dominoes, old friends meet on familiar corners with a winter's worth of tales to tell. Bob walks home from the subway hoping enough players are left in the park for a full court run. He says hello to eighteen people: six Blacks, six Hispanics, three Whites, two Asians, and a Native American. A sea everyone can swim in.

# HISTORY 014

BY JAY CASPIAN KANG

On the last day of eighth grade during third period in Ms. Phillips' science class, Paul Carp's voice cracked. It was right in the middle of a well-researched, well-rehearsed class presentation about the benefits of natural over artificial light in the growth of bean plants. He had just finished explaining how he gathered his artificial light data by placing a bean plant in a closet and allowing it to receive only light from a fluorescent lamp when his voice suddenly jumped into ridiculous registers. The word was "however," and during his entire career as a professor of English at Amherst he would always wonder if the disdain and nausea he felt whenever he encountered that overused clarifier in one of his student's papers could be traced back to that humiliating incident. Professor Carp's students were in for a much worse fate than a cracking voice: Carp gave all papers including the word "however" an automatic D and demanded a rewrite.

Of course, if you told an average thirteen-year-old boy that getting a D on a final paper is worse than being humiliated in front of his entire science class, he would look at you like you had just told him that you were the lost member of Led Zeppelin. And while Paul Carp excelled at many things, including oral class presentations, he was average enough to feel humiliated when he lost control of his voice and it turned on him like a teased cat. The class, bored to tears with his bean plants, started laughing hysterically. Everyone took their best crack at imitating his blunder, and for the next ten seconds or so the air of Ms. Phillips' science class was filled with countless "howevers" spoken in cracking voices. Paul Carp blushed and tried to regain his dignity by continuing where he left off. "However," he heard himself say again, and once more the classroom erupted into laughter and imitations of poor Paul Carp's cracking voice.

Ms. Phillips, a woman whose good intentions were hidden by her stupidity, decided the best way to help Paul Carp was to get out an old book titled *Your Changing Body* that she used in teaching sex ed to the eighth graders. Of course when the eighth graders, not mature

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enough for sex ed, saw the large colorful pictures of male genitalia in *Your Changing Body*, they began to shriek and fall out of their chairs in fits of laughter. “Look! Paul’s got such hairy BALLS!” screamed out one of the day schoolers. A boarding student chimed in, “Yeah, and look at how his pecker just HANGS there!” That one got a good laugh because everyone in the class was self-conscious about how their peckers weren’t developed enough yet to hang at all. All the time Ms. Phillips was lecturing the students on why poor Paul Carp’s voice had cracked, he was standing meekly behind her, clutching his white notecards in his sweaty hands. The only time that he looked up was to quickly glance at the clock on the wall. There were still thirty minutes left in class. Then three more periods and then the bus back home for the summer.

Vivid images involving Ms. Phillips being hit by a large bus with menacing spikes sticking out of its grill started running through his mind until Ms. Phillips finally finished explaining to the class of fifteen boys why Paul’s voice had just cracked in the most humiliating way possible. The daft woman then had the gall to turn to Paul and give a sympathetic smile, pat him on the shoulder and say, “I know it’s hard; I hope that helped some. The others will go through the same thing soon.” Once again, the class erupted into laughter and daft, old Ms. Phillips flashed Paul Carp another mindless smile, oblivious to the destruction she had just wreaked.

At this second smile, his voice, which had been stripped away since his second botched “however,” flooded back in the form of a large loogie that he spat onto Ms. Phillips forehead. The splat from the impact of his phlegm with her forehead would echo in his head as long as his distaste for the word *however*, because his telling her what he thought of her and *Your Changing Body* resulted in his expulsion from St. Andrew’s School for Young Men and barred him from ever gaining admission to his father’s alma mater, Exeter. Instead, the following school year, he enrolled in public school.

**F**irst day of school, Honors Freshman Biology, taught by a sixty-six-year-old woman named Mrs. Brooks, who often used a life-sized plastic skeleton named Mr. Bones as her teaching assistant. For the past ten years, the administration of Sagapunack had been trying to convince Mrs. Brooks and Mr. Bones to retire, but

the tenured old lady was resolute in her conviction that "I'll teach until I drop dead with Mr. Bones by my side."

This was her favorite time of year, when she met the bright minds in her honors classes. Later she would deal with the more troublesome kids in her "regular" biology class, but now it was time to embrace her finest students. In only two years, these faces would be illuminated by lit candles during the National Honor Society induction ceremony. Mrs. Brooks introduced herself as she did every year: "Hi, class. I'm Pat Brooks and this is Honors Biology. You all are here because you are bright children and we will be moving quickly in this class, so I hope you're all up to it." Here she paused dramatically before introducing Mr. Bones. "This is Mr. Bones, he will be assistant teaching during our anatomy unit." Then she would talk about how much fun the Honors Biology Class had and about the trip to the zoo if they all did well on the state exams. For the past ten years, her announcement of the zoo trip had been met with a great deal of apathy. Paul Carp didn't think much of it either. He had been to the zoo several times over the summer and never found it that exciting. This year the wave of indifference that usually met her announcement of the zoo trip was interrupted by Lauren Potzner, who raised her hand in the air. Mrs. Brooks smiled and said, "I'm sorry, dear. I don't know your name, but please feel free to ask your question."

"How come only the honors class gets to go to the zoo?" asked Lauren Potzner. "Most of my friends are in normal biology and I wouldn't want to go to the zoo without them, too."

Mrs. Brooks shifted in her large, black shoes. She was not prepared for this type of question. "Well," she began, "five years ago we brought the other biology class and there was an incident where one of the black students stole from the zoo gift shop." She then gave Lauren Potzner another smile.

Lauren Potzner hesitated somewhat before raising her hand again, "Well, I don't think the entire class should be held accountable for what one kid did."

Mrs. Brooks flashed another one of her phony smiles and said, "The trip is at the end of the year; we will discuss it then. But now, we should get to the order of introducing ourselves."

This time, Lauren Potzner's hand shot in the air without any hint of shyness. "I don't think it's fair at all to not let the other kids go,"

she said before Mrs. Brooks had a chance to acknowledge her raised hand.

"What's your name again, dear?" asked Mrs. Brooks in the frailest voice she could force.

"Lauren Potzner."

"Well, Laura. Perhaps, you would like to talk with the principal, then?" continued Mrs. Brooks, "He and I both agreed to let only the honors children go on the trip, and if you have a problem with that, you should talk to him about it."

At this point in her life, Lauren Potzner's biggest fault was her impatience. She was not the most tactful of girls, even if she was the brightest. Her well-directed energy was often wasted on situations like this one. Later on she would learn patience from a boyfriend who was addicted to her understanding shoulder and heroin. She would marry him the day after graduating from Princeton and go on to write vivid novels that were cited as sparking a series of riots which wrecked much of the city of Charleston, South Carolina—or at least most of the *white* parts of Charleston, South Carolina. However, the patience that allowed her to sit up nights writing novels after taking care of her emotionally wrecked husband was not with her in ninth grade. Instead of raising her hand this time, she stood up.

"I don't think, Mrs. Brooks," she said in a wavering voice, "that I would want to go on a trip that wasn't open to all students."

"Please sit down, Lauren," said Mrs. Brooks in a sterner tone, "and please see me after class to discuss this."

Paul Carp had been listening intently and found himself getting annoyed at Mrs. Brooks. Ever since his embarrassment at the hands of Ms. Phillips, he had carried a healthy dislike for teachers, especially female ones. Why was Mrs. Brooks putting off this girl's questions instead of answering them in front of the class?

He was captivated by the hatred he saw in her face and spent the rest of the class staring at her. When the bell finally rang, he tore his eyes away from her and walked out of the classroom. The kids who had Mrs. Brooks the following period were lined up next to the door. They were mostly black, he noted. Only then did he realize that his honors class had been all white.

## Letter to Myself: KUSF Radio Station Winter Solstice: December 21, 1998

BY RONNIE BURK

the smell of tar burning perfume  
an Andrei Codrescu look-alike  
swallowed in an oversize cloth coat  
walks by. Everything reminds me of NY  
the cold, the sallow faces, the kitchy  
X-mas music. You are there.  
I am here shivering beneath the shell of  
another year. No one is happy. No one seems  
pleased. I smoke a joint &  
the lights in the window start to sparkle  
the bombing has stopped  
& it is this simple moment of peace  
I claim. I own. Is mine.

*Ronnie Burk is a poet who lives in San Francisco.*



# High Voltage

BY KEVIN A. EATON

Last night we drove through desert  
so vast and flat that we were able  
to watch a factory recede from view  
four miles behind. As we whipped  
past sage brush and beavertail blooming,  
a sign reads, "Caution: High Voltage,"  
and for a moment, I thought  
I felt my hair rise up.

Today we walked through ancient homes  
abandoned when corn production slowed,  
and in the arroyos we drank Pleistocene  
waters that still ran between the layers  
of rock, the same water they drank nearly  
one millennium ago. And I was afraid of it,  
not because of some ancient omen  
or curse, but of uranium dust and spills;  
and I pictured the Navajo men  
with our machinery, steel shovels and drills.

## reviews

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*Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, edited by Michael Richardson. Verso, 1996. 287 pages, paper, \$20.

BY FRANKLIN ROSEMONT

In spring 1973 the journal *Arsenal/Surrealist Subversion*, which I edited, published for the first time a translation of the 1932 manifesto of the *Légitime Défense* (Self-Defense) group—a statement in which Etienne Léro and seven other Martiniquan students in Paris affirmed their unreserved adherence to surrealism and communist revolution. Immediately banned by the colonial authorities, copies passed from hand to hand and the journal became a legend. The manifesto is a vibrant, imaginative text and we were sure our translation would provoke wide discussion and debate. Alas for illusions! It was wholly ignored, and with rare exceptions has been ignored ever since.

I was by no means the only one urging a closer look at the work of Black surrealists. For years African American surrealist poet Ted Joans had been championing the work of Léro, Aimé Césaire, Wifredo Lam and others. One of the few pleasant memories I have of the otherwise boring conference organized by the philosophical journal *Telos* in Buffalo in 1971 was discussing Caribbean surrealism with Ernest Allen, Eric Perkins, John Higginson and others in and around the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. James G. Spady of the Black History Museum in Philadelphia was also deeply interested in the Black surrealists, and Paul Garon cited Léro, Césaire, René Ménil and others in his *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (first published in 1975). All our efforts, however, remained “underground.” Not even the 1974 appearance of a U.S. translation of the Camerounian scholar Lilyan Kesteloot’s pioneering 1963 dissertation, *Les Ecrivains noirs de langue française* (Black Writers in French) sufficed to turn the tide. Only in the past year, following Robin D. G. Kelley’s and Amiri Baraka’s insistence on the urgency of Black surrealism in their talks at the Black Radical Congress in Chicago, has surrealism at last begun to receive wider attention as an

*Franklin Rosemont is the author, editor and publisher of numerous works of and about surrealism. He edited RACE TRAITOR number 9, a special issue entitled SURREALISM: REVOLUTION AGAINST WHITENESS.*

important current of international Black cultural/political radicalism.

*Refusal of the Shadow* is the first anthology in English focused on Black surrealists. All contributions are welcome to this field that has been so thoroughly ignored for so long. This new volume edited by Michael Richardson, a British critic with a background in anthropology, is important because, unlike so many commentators, he refuses to dismiss—and indeed highlights—the specifically surrealist dimension in these writings. As in his earlier excellent compilation of Georges Bataille's writings on surrealism, he values these Caribbean texts not only as historic documents, but because they "continue to raise important questions with multifarious implications for current debates."

The book collects forty articles, three-fourths by Black Caribbean participants in surrealism, and the rest by Europeans; less than a third are otherwise available in English. Despite the book's peculiarly narrow focus—the French-speaking Caribbean in the years 1932–1946—the texts themselves are wide-ranging: critiques of Western civilization, colonialism, and the politics of race; explorations of Caribbean culture; discussions of poetry, dreams, humor, the Marvelous, and surrealism itself. Richardson's introduction sketches the historical setting in which the anthologized texts appeared, and touches on some of the cultural/political affinities that made the surrealism/Caribbean connection so explosive. Although I disagree with much of what he has to say in his introduction, I did appreciate his perceptive critique of Sartre's abusive attempt to appropriate Negritude for his own ideological purposes. His brief discussion of the similarities between the old French colonial policy of "assimilation" and the current U.S.-dominated policy of "globalization" is also very much to the point, as is his observation that "multiculturalism" and "postmodernism" are watchwords of the "new imperialism."

Nearly all of the book's problems are the result of its single oddest aspect: Richardson's elevation of one writer, René Ménil, above all the others. Anthologies inevitably involve choices, and it is usually pointless to quibble about them. Richardson's obsession with Ménil, however, is so weirdly lopsided that it actually distorts the panoramic presentation of "Surrealism and the Caribbean" promised in his subtitle. Ménil was a hearty supporter of Léro's in the *Légitime Défense* days, and Aimé and Suzanne Césaire's right-hand man in *Tropiques*, but Richardson regards him as far and away the towering

figure in both groups. This unwarranted emphasis and its consequent omissions are not merely matters of taste and preference; involved here are crucial questions of historical accuracy, as well as critical theory, practical politics, and—by no means least—the revolutionary integrity of the surrealist project.

Out of forty articles by fourteen authors, *eleven* (or more than half the pages devoted to the Martiniquans) are by Ménil—who, by the way, is not a prolific writer. The imbalance is further aggravated by Richardson's positioning of Ménil's texts in such a way as to give him the first and last word. The *Légitime Défense* section opens with Ménil's 1978 overview (written as a preface to the Jean-Michel Place reprint of the journal), and the much longer *Tropiques* section begins *and ends* with texts by Ménil, dated 1959 and 1978, many years after his departure from surrealism. Make no mistake: I am glad to have a selection of Ménil's writings in English, for he was an important surrealist theorist, and has long been neglected by critics. It is misleading, however, to present him as the overriding figure of surrealism in the Caribbean. The book should have been titled *Writings of René Ménil, with Selections by a Few of His Former Friends*.

In his rather stilted and less than sympathetic backward glances at what he evidently has come to regard as a questionable youthful fling, Ménil curiously does not explain why he rejected the views he once held so fervently. Even more curiously, Richardson passes over this hardly insignificant lacuna in silence. Clearly he has appointed himself Ménil's zealous and uncritical advocate, without ever troubling to tell us how he came to single him out for such exalted devotion. In itself, that's not so bad—intellectual hero-worship may be hard to defend, but it's far from the worst of the evils afflicting humankind today. What *is* bad is that his ardor for Ménil has led him to slight other Caribbean surrealists, and even to regard them with condescension. Léro, for example, the editor and by all accounts major theorist of *Légitime Défense*, gets less than five full pages in the book. Worse yet, an astonishing amount of space in the introduction is taken up with a ludicrous attempt to belittle Aimé Césaire.

"Great poet that he is," Richardson declares, "Césaire is not an original thinker, and his critical writings reveal that he did not fully grasp the philosophical underpinnings of surrealism." This is a serious charge indeed to be aimed at one of the two individuals

(Wifredo Lam was the other) credited by André Breton with introducing "the greatest impulses toward new paths for surrealism" in the 1940s. Richardson's accusation, it so happens, reveals that his own grasp of surrealism's philosophical underpinnings is not too strong, for surrealists have always insisted that *poetry* is, in the words of Benjamin Péret, "the source and crown of all thought"—that is, thought at its highest, deepest, most radically critical, and most original.

Richardson pursues his strange polemic against Aimé Césaire in an unconvincing defense of former-surrealist-grown-conservative Roger Caillois, whose Eurocentrism Césaire had denounced in his 1955 *Discourse on Colonialism*. In Richardson's opinion, the very essay of Caillois's that Césaire attacks is written "from a surrealist point of view." Unfortunately for Richardson, the *Discourse* was praised *unreservedly* by Breton, who called it "a definitive work in which the argumentation is . . . rich and solid." Moreover, in his 1943 essay on Césaire, Breton describes Caillois (whose renunciation of surrealism was vehement) as "a perfect philistine." Richardson's criticisms thus put him in the dubious position of claiming to understand surrealism better than Breton did.

Léro and Césaire, however, are not Richardson's only victims. Except for the briefest mention in the introduction and/or notes, he ignores Pierre Yoyotte (author of a compelling psychoanalytic critique of fascism) and the great Guyanese poet Léon Damas—whose links to surrealism date back to the 1930s—as well as the inspired critic Aristide Maugée and others from the *Tropiques* group in the following decade. The brilliant surrealist theorist Suzanne Césaire is represented by four articles, but neither Simone Yoyotte of the *Légitime Défense* group (the first Black woman surrealist) nor Lucie Thésée, an important figure in *Tropiques* and regarded by Damas as one of its finest poets, are even mentioned. Woefully under-represented (by one very short article) is Jules Monnerot, a far-reaching thinker who took part not only in surrealism but also in Bataille's short-lived "College of Sociology"; his 1945 book, *La Poésie moderne et le sacré*, is a pivotal sociological study of surrealism. Clément Magloire-Saint-Aude, of Haiti—one of surrealism's outstanding poets—is reduced to two token pages. Altogether missing are the vitally important surrealist voices from Cuba: painter Wifredo Lam and sculptor Agustín Cárdenas, both featured in Breton's *Surrealism and Painting* (1965), and poets Juan

Brea and Mary Low, who among other things fought in the workers' militia during the 1936 Revolution in Spain, and co-authored the excellent *Red Spanish Notebook*, prefaced by C. L. R. James. Also unacknowledged is the surrealist presence in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Are the Cubans and other Spanish-speaking Caribbean surrealists excluded because of Richardson's French focus? If so, how are we to explain the inclusion of the Dutch writer, Hendrik Cramer?

Although Richardson has culled these texts from different countries, somehow he has missed the global perspective of Black cultural/political radicalism. His introduction fosters the impression that nothing much happened in the islands from the time of Toussaint L'Ouverture until André Breton showed up in 1941. The book makes no attempt to relate the Martiniquan surrealists (or the Haitians, discussed in a much shorter section) to the various currents of Caribbean radical thought. The Black surrealists' interaction with Marxism and psychoanalysis is barely hinted at, and the relation of their ideas and activities to those of other international Black radicals—such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, Paul Robeson, Hubert Harrison, George Padmore, Langston Hughes, C. L. R. James, and Garan Kouyaté—is left unmentioned. The Martiniquan surrealists' deep interest in African American poetry, and in jazz, is similarly overlooked.

Stranger still, the book contains not a word on the impact of *Tropiques* or other manifestations of Francophone Black surrealism in Portuguese-speaking Africa or Brazil, in the Spanish- and English-speaking world, in Egypt and North Africa. Although this influence was immense, diverse, and persists to this day, Richardson skims over it, apparently because it has drawn more on Negritude than on surrealism itself. Not surprisingly, Richardson fully shares the aversion to Negritude that Ménélik developed in his later years.

As evidenced by the work of William Wells Brown, Martin R. Delaney and Frances E. W. Harper in the U.S., the St. Thomas-born Liberian Edward Wilmot Blyden, J. J. Thomas of Trinidad, the Puerto Rican Luis Palés Matos, the Jamaican Marcus Garvey, and "Les Griots" of Haiti, the spirit of Negritude long preceded the word, and has recurred again and again in different forms, times and places. Indeed, it can be stated as an axiom: As long as white supremacy exists, Negritude will continue to re-emerge, in one form or another, as a means of self-defense. However, as a self-conscious movement

with a name and a program, Negritude began with Aimé Césaire and his friends, and to a large extent it was a direct offshoot of the early Caribbean/surrealism encounter.

Negritude as a concept has always been fluid and volatile, and has ranged from celebrations of the African heritage and assertions of "Black Pride" to the biological mystique of melanin and outright political demagoguery (it was in the name of Negritude that Senegalese dictator Senghor brutally suppressed the May '68 student/worker uprising in Dakar). For the Césaires and *Tropiques*, Negritude was never reified into an absolute; it was a concretely and historically situated dynamic of poetry, freedom, humor, and revolt, and as such marked a milestone in the intellectual development of such revolutionists as Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral and Agostinho Neto. Richardson, however, resists seeing Negritude as anything more than an example of "reductive essentialism," and wants no part of it. Invoking an abstract humanist "universalism" and other pleasant-sounding but vague generalizations ("What is essential . . . is to keep open the paths of communication"), he skirts the tough political questions. He praises Ménélik, for example, as one of the more "trenchant critics" of Negritude, but not once does he mention Ménélik's long identification with Stalinism, which lasted well into the 1960s and probably beyond.

Richardson's hostility to Negritude smacks of the one-dimensional, and warps his view of the whole complex issue of "Black identity." He never explicitly says so, but his arguments here are couched in terms suggesting that he is no less opposed to all forms of Black Nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and Black Power (and feminism as well). In other words, he is all for the independence and self-determination of "the Other"—to use a term Richardson likes—but he just happens to disapprove of the particular expressions of independence and self-determination that the Other has chosen. Like so many European and Euro-American radicals who believe they have freed themselves of all racial mythology but who still suffer from the delusion that they are "white," Richardson seems to think that good will and color-blindness are enough to erase the color line. The fact that he is perfectly sincere in this complacent "anti-racism" perhaps explains his occasional naive lapses in good judgment, seemingly forgetting the very audience he is addressing. How else are we to understand the appalling passage in which he tells us that the Black Martiniquan students in 1930s Paris looked on André

Breton and other European surrealists as “white masters with new voices”? His addition of the phrase “voices that renounced their mastery” is hardly enough to justify this grotesquely inappropriate and insensitive remark.

Merely to point out that race is not a biological reality but rather a social construction doesn’t go very far in ending racial oppression. The fact that Richardson avoids the critique of “whiteness” and its implications, and is therefore utterly silent on “race treason,” suggests that he—unlike Breton and the surrealists—considers “anti-racism” adequate to the task, and is hesitant about *going too far*. He is right to say that surrealism “refuses any abstract formulation of racial identity,” but I would stress the practical revolutionary consequence inherent in that refusal: surrealism always has been unequivocally on the side of the Blacks against the whites. What distinguishes André Breton and his comrades from most Marxists, Anarchists, and intellectuals such as Sartre, Camus, *Tel Quel*, and their present-day counterparts, is the fact that the surrealists always have *refused to be white*.

*Refusal of the Shadow* contains many good things, but as a portrayal of surrealism in the Caribbean it is scarcely more than a sketch. Poetically and politically its editor’s perspectives are much too limited. The book simply does not do justice to the surrealist challenge.

***Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties*, by Mike Marqusee. Verso, 1999. 310 pages, hardcover.**

BY BETH HENSON

On the last day of the twentieth century, Mohammad Ali rang the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange. In 1996, shaky from Parkinson’s disease, he lit the torch at the Olympic Games in Atlanta, and accepted a gold medal to replace the one he had tossed into the Ohio River thirty-six years before. The man once villified and threatened with jail, stripped of his title and sent into exile, has become, with Malcolm and Che, a symbol of celebrity itself.

Marqusee’s book restores to Ali his political teeth and explains why he cast away that first gold medal. He reaches back to describe the first black boxers and the load they were made to carry as representatives of the race. He describes the Nation of Islam in its early, pre-Promise Keeper days, when it was hated and feared by



both whites and integrationist blacks for calling on blacks to give up trying to change America and build for themselves an independent refuge. He explains how Ali, then Cassius Clay, a poor boy from Kentucky who only wanted to box, was drawn to their discipline and their offer of a coherent way of life. He recounts the eighteen months when Ali and Malcolm X were friends, before Malcolm broke with the Nation and Ali broke with him.

On February 25, 1964, Ali beat Sonny Liston for the heavy-weight championship of the world. The next day he announced, with Malcolm at his side, that he was a member of the Nation of Islam. "I don't have to be what you want me to be," he said. Reaction was immediate and brutal: he was villified in the press, lucrative endorsements were withdrawn, and the World Boxing Association initiated action to strip him of the title. Floyd Patterson announced his intention to fight Ali in order to reclaim the championship for America. The NAACP joined the chorus of condemnation. The Selective Service reopened his draft status and eventually ruled him 1-A, a penalty which it visited on a number of civil rights activists.

Ali was drawn into the thick of political engagement against his will and rose to the occasion. He defied the draft, refusing to fight in an unjust war. "Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong," he said. His battle with the Selective Service went on for years. Following his conviction for draft evasion, he was stripped of his championship and went into exile. For three and a half years, he did not enter the ring. Instead he became, however reluctantly, an international symbol of Black Power and global solidarity.

Marqusee has written a thoughtful and engaging book, one which captures the audacity of the sixties and the transformative power of the experience of shared defiance. Read it and then see the film *When We Were Kings*, which documents Ali's 1974 match with George Foreman in Kinshasha, Zaire.

***No Aloha: The Friendly Happy Music of the Past*, by Deran Ludd. Semiotext(e)/Smart Art Press, Native Agents Series, 1999. 197 pages, paper.**

BY BETH HENSON

*No Aloha* is the story of the future as barbarism. The friendly happy music of the past appears as chapter headings; their unheard melodies evoke a time of blind self-indulgence. The United States

has broken apart; the midwest has become a giant factory hog farm; the political fragmentation of the east has been exacerbated by a devastating earthquake; and the west has seceded. Ronald Reagan is in his seventh presidential term; Nancy and the Drug Enforcement Agency are running the country. Colorado, the site of our story, has elected Televangelist Kingston "tyrant of the state on his promise of full employment through the mass murder and/or vivisection of sinners."

The Surgical Jesus Mind Project, administered by Team Jesus, has subjected 178,000 sinners to experimental brain surgery, implanting bioplastic Jesus-loving bits in place of evil-inducing parts. None of the experiments were successful.

Finally the United Nations' North American Arbitration reluctantly intervenes, led by ex-South African President Nelson Mandela, and sends the tyrannical pastor into gilded exile. Their ineffective troops are now preparing to pull out, leaving the field to Kingston's former lieutenants, Team Jesus paramilitaries, armed with iron club crucifixes; Golden West Guards, a private army; and the Tribbers, members of the Secret Rapture Movement, who wear sashes inscribed with the names of sinners they have dispatched to the Last Four Things.

In the ruined city of Denver, four teenagers armed with daggers scrounge and steal, squatting in abandoned buildings. They scramble through broken windows to board the few surviving metrotrains (whose conductors shoot at the mass of would-be passengers), where they rob anyone with anything left to take, ripping the clothes from other children, stomping on the weak and infirm. They share cigarette butts and roaches, and quarrel over food. They argue about which smells worse, burnt plastic or dead flesh.

They are slowly making their way on foot across the ruined city to a suburb where they hope to find refuge and food. Gus has a bad stomach; he has trouble keeping down the UNNAA rations. He amuses the others with tales of his sexual experiences with the owner of the suburban house, a middle-aged accountant who wants to be called "daddy" at the moment of orgasm. Maude lost two fingers of her right hand when a landmine exploded. Gladys is the youngest; she carries a treasured Ultra Playdeck 8220, which requires precious batteries to play with. Walter, the oddest of the lot, insists on wearing girls' clothing and may be something of a messiah.

The bourgeoisie has solved the race question: everyone is

multiracial. The political meaning of race has been erased.

5-by-10-kilometer LCD screens functioning as stratospheric billboards patrol the skies. The children tramp through the dying city, with nowhere to go and no future. Socialism or barbarism.

## CRITICAL WRITING

This is some of the most critical writing of our time. It is absolutely necessary. Few people are willing to recognize and renounce their whiteness with its concomitant privileges. To be white, and to therefore be considered part of the white club, while simultaneously reacting to white discriminatory remarks and actions against nonwhites as if one were not white, is demanding, and at times dangerous, work, but essential in the struggle to help create a world in which we all can truly be a part of. I, myself, have been deficient in disturbing the laws of whiteness on occasion: sometimes due to power relationships, and other times remaining quiet, partly to explore the biased minds and partly because I feel unable to effect any change in their thinking. I wonder how we, as New Abolitionists, can succeed without a real profound change of thinking on the part of many whites, i.e., before all people can be looked at as equals, or as James Baldwin says, “before white people learn to love themselves.”

David Hollander  
Verona, New Jersey

## HUNGER FOR MORE

I came across the Surrealist Issue on the New Abolitionists/*Race Traitor* Website. Having grown up in one of the most conservative right-wing areas of South Africa during apartheid and being of European descent, it took me a long time to overcome many of my prejudices, and I still have many to work on.

I have been and am very active working on prison issues in the Bay Area of California, as well as “anti-racism” causes, but in my heart I felt that this was just not enough—there was and is a hunger for more, which I realize I had found when I came across *Race Traitor*.

Lara Johnson  
Oakland, California

## IMPROVISATION

In reading *Surrealism: Revolution Against Whiteness* I was impressed by the analysis. Needless to say, my curiosity has grown regarding the Surrealist Movement, not only for its political stance,

but because many of the surrealists are either poets, writers, painters, or musicians. And I am a musician. In fact I am a jazz drummer with over 30 years experience playing with known and unknown bands and groups. Also I am (good or bad) a writer and dabble in poetry. So I find this to be something of communality.

"Notes on Surrealism as a Revolution Against Whiteness" contains some interesting points. For example: "None of the surrealists in the 1920s seem to have made a special study of race." They had "no plan," they were "improvising, making their own way on uncertain terrain." True jazz is improvisation. It is from the heart and from the soul. It is something that has no written rules of structure yet is pure and open and honest to the listener. This is what I felt when I read this passage, and this is what I am feeling as I read more and more about Surrealism.

Needless to say, I am sharing this material with other comrades here and turning them on to it. Most of the reactions I have gotten thus far are very favorable. I have even found some whites here to find it interesting and, after reading something, in deep thought. Hopefully they are re-evaluating what they have been programmed (like machines from birth) to artificially believe as true.

*In the trenches,  
Ali Khalid Abdullah #148130  
Saginaw Correctional Facility  
9625 Pierce Road  
Freeland, Michigan 48623*

**EDITORS' NOTE:** For a packet of writings by Ali Khalid Abdullah, and information on the organization he has founded (Political Prisoners of War Coalition), send \$3.00 to Cynthia Ritscher, P.O. Box 554, Lincoln, MA 01773.

### **EXHILARATING**

What an exhilarating, liberating issue of *Race Traitor*! I didn't even know there was and is such a surrealist presence in the U.S. Now I want to know more.

*Harris Sussman  
Boston, Massachusetts*

### **REPLETE WITH POTENTIAL**

The Surrealist Issue of *Race Traitor* excites me no end, leaves me tossing and turning at night, and provokes much thought, confusion and tension. It makes me feel how deplorable the ruling cultural-

economic-technological system really is, even more than I ordinarily feel its deplorableness. Interestingly, the angle of surrealism has worked long enough on me that when I read of the ills of our time from the perspective of “storm the walls and free everything” surrealist tractors, I am empowered. On the whole, the world still appears as replete with potential as it does with oppressive cultures. So I guess I still feel hopeful! Thank you, surrealists.

As to the introductory article on the 1920s Paris surrealists and other bits and pieces on early surrealist activities related to race treason: I am amazed at their “forward thinking.” I understand the surrealists of Paris, being European in upbringing, needed to look far and wide across the continents to find “humanity” or “convulsive emotion” to repair what was done wrong to them by the misfortune of their having been born and raised in 19<sup>th</sup> century France. They were marvelous in their power to heal themselves of the socially-inflicted self-hatreds of white supremacy and Eurocentrism as well as capitalism, fascism, miserabilism, etc.

The Madrid Surrealist Group’s essay, “Beyond Racism: The Role of Poetic Thought in the Eradication of White Supremacy,” came into my heart rapidly and directly. I am convinced the poetic/political agenda of the surrealists could restore western peoples.

Florence Blake

*North Conway, New Hampshire*

## ANTI-POETRY CLUB

I am writing with two purposes in mind. The first is to congratulate you on your very timely “Abolitionism and the White Studies Racket” (No. 10, Winter 1999). I share your unease with the mounting volume of “research” that reads like materials recycled from the more readable and original *Journal of Popular Culture* with the burdens of poststructuralist and postmodernist jargon added and the label “whiteness” slapped on it. You are right that much of this stuff just oozes with contempt for the poor and working class people whose cause these scholars claim to be championing.

My second purpose is to add a footnote to an overly modest segment of “Surrealists on Whiteness—from 1925 to the Present” in the splendid special issue on Surrealism (No. 9, Summer 1998). My old friend and comrade Franklin Rosemont writes that the Surrealist Group in Chicago was organized in 1966, and then recounts some of its anti-racist activities after that date. While this may be true in the formal sense, what Rosemont’s account omits is what I remember of

the actions of members of the Surrealist community dating from a few years earlier. For those of us who were students at Roosevelt University there was the formation of the unselfconsciously multiracial and multicultural Anti-Poetry Club. In addition to its interventions into the cultural and political life of the campus, it earned the honor of being banned by the president of the university as one consequence of a multiple flag-burning that was part of a presentation by Joffrey, an African American poet, anarcho-pacifist, and Roosevelt alum.

Even more significant was the support of members of the Surrealist community for the more militant wing of the civil rights movement in Chicago. On at least two notable occasions in 1963, comrades from Roosevelt put their bodies on the line when direct action was called for. The first was the demonstration led by a group of younger Black activists against the participation of Mayor Richard Daley in a meeting of the national convention of the NAACP in Grant Park in early July. Bob Green, active in the Anti-Poetry Club, and I found ourselves at the head of a crowd of hundreds of angry citizens who joined in expressing our disapproval of statements made earlier by the Mayor to the effect that "there were no ghettos in Chicago" and that the NAACP was welcome to visit the city, but was not needed. Bob Green also provided the portable hand-operated mimeo machine that enabled us to produce leaflets on the spot outlining the reasons for our protest. Later in that summer several members of the Surrealist community joined in the picketing of Reverend Wilbur Daniel, president of the Chicago chapter of the NAACP. This action, which took place outside of his church, prodded him into taking a much stronger stance against the racist policies of the city government.

It was actions such as those coupled with their genuine love of and respect for the history and culture of African Americans, and their understanding of the necessity of African Americans setting the terms of their struggle, that placed Franklin and Penelope Rosemont, Bob Green and the others whose names are lost to me in time, firmly in the camp of what you now call the New Abolitionists. The valuable issue on Surrealism tells us some of the contributions of Surrealists to the struggle against racial oppression. For those of us who know them and their work, there is much more yet to be told.

*John Bracey*  
*W.E.B. Du Bois Dept. of Afro-American Studies*  
*Amherst, Massachusetts*

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# 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 prepaid from P.O. Box 499, Dorchester MA 02122.

edited by Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey

## WHAT WE BELIEVE

The 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.

The 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.

The 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.

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

## INVENTING WHITE ROOTS

**Bogus "White Culture" Class Is Liberal Attempt to Save the White Race**

by Joel Olson, Phoenix

During the first week of the fall semester I was walking through a building on the Arizona State University campus, where I work. I passed through a gauntlet of tables with information about AIDS prevention, counseling resources, and other items of interest to new students. While browsing through the information I caught sight of a lone flier sitting on a table with no one sitting at it. The flier was an ad for a one-credit class entitled "CAM 394: Exploring Your White/Euro-American Roots." The flier said the course will "focus on the dynamics of being White/Euro-American and include an examination of identity development models, an exploration of White/Euro-American culture, privilege, and intergroup relations."

**A class for white people**

I smelled a rat. I checked the class's web site to confirm my suspicions. I then fired off a letter to the heads of the Intergroup Relations Center (IRC) and the Vice President for Student Affairs, the two offices responsible for the class. The letter read, in part, "While I'm sure the intentions of your department and the instructor in offering this class are well-meaning, what the class does is perpetuate white supremacy and the privileges of the white skin by attempting to transform whiteness, a form of unjust power, into a 'culture'... Classes such as 'Exploring Your White/Euro-American Roots,'" I wrote, "Not only camouflage white privilege, they actively perpetuate it by providing a space for whites



*White/Euro-trashed: The flier in the background was the original course flier; the revised version (minus the word "Your") is in the foreground.*

to navel-gaze without compelling them to squarely face their role in perpetuating racial oppression in this society."

I also argued that since the class is designed for white students it violates the university's anti-discrimination policy. No African American history classes offered on campus, by contrast, are designed just for

*How do you unite university liberals with right-wing talk radio: Challenge their whiteness.*

Black students. Once again, I wrote, white privilege is perpetuated on a college campus, only now under the guise of multiculturalism and "intergroup relations."

I concluded by demanding that they revise the class immediately so that the course is either a class on whiteness (i.e. a historical analysis of white supremacy in the United States) or a class on American culture, in which case African, Native, Chicano, and

*Continued on page 4*

## DECATUR: WHERE ARE THE RACE TRAITORS?

by Kingsley Clarke, Chicago

It is apparently easier to free Marines from Slobodan Milosevic than to get six Black students back in school. The November expulsion of seven Black high school students for fighting at a football game by the Decatur School Board has been thoroughly covered in the media by now. I will limit these observations to matters with which readers may not be familiar.

Decatur is a city of 83,885 at the geographic center of Illinois. It is a small Midwest city but a number of major industrial corporations maintain facilities there: Archer Daniels Midland, Caterpillar, Bridgestone/Firestone, A.E. Staley. It was the original home of the Chicago Bears (the "Decatur Staleys") and now calls itself the "soy capital." The white population is 82 percent and the Black population 17 percent according to the 1990 census. The enrollment in Decatur

*Continued on page 2*

**Race Traitor**  
**Journal of the New Abolitionism**