RACE TRAITOR

SUMMER 1993 $5

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Number 2 Winter 1993

cover: Frontispiece of the first American Edition of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1855

published at PO Box 603, Cambridge, Mass. 02140. Single copy: individuals $5. Subscription, four issues: individuals, $20; institutions, $40. 20% discount on orders of five or more.

THREE DAYS THAT SHOOK THE NEW WORLD ORDER: THE LOS ANGELES REBELLION OF 1992

BY THE CHICAGO SURREALIST GROUP

Things ain't what they used to be.

"Wherever you find injustice, the proper form of politeness is attack." T-Bone Slim

"We were not able to choose the mess we have to live in—this collapse of a whole society—but we can choose our way out." C.L.R. James

"Don't be afraid. Just go ahead and play." Charlie Parker

With flames hundreds of feet high and spread out over dozens of square miles, the Los Angeles Rebellion of April/May 1992 lit up the horrible domestic reality of the "New World Order." Thanks to what is usually the most invisible sector of the U.S. population—the despised "underclass"—the fundamental injustice of American society suddenly became visible to the whole world. In a year of preposterously insipid electioneering and "opinion polls," as Pogo pointed out that it was not the choices but the lack of choices that made U.S. elections a sham, the vanguard of the non-voting majority stated their fiercely anti-Establishment opinions loud and clear. In a time of massive political demoralization and incoherence, the most down-and-out people in the country changed the complexion and direction of American politics and pointed the way forward for all seekers of real freedom and justice for all.

The ruling-class delusions of grandeur that followed the collapse of the state-capitalist bureaucracies in eastern Europe and the USSR—delusions already interrupted by a steadily worsening recession as well as mounting revulsion against U.S. government corruption and malevolence at home and abroad—burst like a bubble as the unemployed, the homeless and the hiphoppers of L.A. started reinventing the revolutionary traditions of May Day a couple of days early.

The L.A. rebels showed that a few Black and Latino mayors and police chiefs, a few minority TV shows and token faces of Black and Latino celebrities on billboards are not solving and cannot solve the problems of those who are forced to live in America's Black ghettoes, barrios and other "bad" neighborhoods. Sons and daughters of the Watts rebels of '65, grandsons and granddaughters of the zootsuiters and beboppers of the '40s, the L.A. rebels rapped to one and all that nothing less than a complete transformation of social relations can create a life worth living.

For three full days many tens of thousands of people said "no!" to the slave system known as daily life in America. In the highly educational enthusiasm of mass action, long-established habits and routines of resignation were discarded in favor of improvisation, experiment, discovery. However briefly, throngs who had been condemned to a living death discovered new reasons for living, new possibilities of life.

Now, almost a year later, the walls of oppression are still shaking.

Their messages and ours

"By what standard of morality can the violence used by a slave to break his chains be considered the same as the violence of a slave-master?. . . Violence aimed at the recovery of human dignity and at equality cannot be judged by the same yardstick as violence aimed at maintenance of discrimination and oppression." Walter Rodney, The Groundings With My Brothers (1969)

"The police are the absolute enemy." Charles Baudelaire

The bold initiative of L.A.'s daring young rebels has now enabled countless millions to see, hear and feel—as never before—

the thoroughgoing crisis of this deadly civilization. In a social order in which the "doors of perception" are systematically blocked, boarded up and covered with barbed wire, the liberation of the senses is an indispensable prerequisite for all other liberation.

"Sending messages" to the people is one of the main functions of business and government. It is an official monopoly of those in power—the rest of us are regarded as mere receivers. When the President of the United States says he is going to send a message, as during the Persian Gulf Massacre and the L.A. rebellion, "message" generally means troops. The L.A. rebels, however, sent strong messages of their own—messages of resistance, revolt and freedom—and these messages were heard by millions, loud and clear.

Revolution is, indeed, first and foremost a question of human expression. Those of us who continue to dream of Revolution—who have not despaired of creating a truly free society—proclaim not only our solidarity with the L.A. rebels and our determination to defend them, but also our conviction that their action has done more to bring fundamental questions to the fore than anything that has happened in years.

Unequivocally we are on the side of the L.A. rebels. Their enemies are ours, as is their scorn for a social order based on inequality and force-propped authority. Ours, too, are their desperation, their rage, their yearning for real life, and their sharp awareness that direct action is the only effective means of social betterment today.

First of all it is important to clear the air of the toxic ideological dust that the government and its news-machines have been scattering everywhere on the L. A. Rebellion and its aftermath. Rejecting the demeaning term "riot," we recognize the rebellion as a truly revolutionary uprising that has challenged the exploitative foundations of U.S. plutocracy, exposed the fiction of U.S. democracy, and recharged all emancipatory forces in this country and the world. Indeed, far from being an isolated "riot," the Los Angeles events sparked a wave of rebellion which so surpassed merely local importance that we may ultimately refer to them by date rather than place. Just as there was a May '68, there was an April-May '92.

In its direct attack on this society's repressive institutions we recognize a practical critique that is near-total and, as such, a practical refutation of all the ideologists of the Left, Right and Middle whose partial critiques and reformist programs are little more than

brand-names of stalemate, defeat and reaction.

Thus we also reject the ruling-class defamation—as set forth by countless politicians and journalists, including Mike Royko in the *Chicago Tribune* and Stanley "Hanging Judge" Crouch in the *New York Times*—that the L.A. rebels are merely "gangbangers, thugs, thieves," "rioting street criminals," "just another manifestation of barbaric opportunism," and guilty of "criminal anarchy." Such abuse reveals the smug hypocrisy of those who salute "pro-Democracy fighters" approved by the State Department, but abhor those who live and fight in the U.S. itself.

People who find themselves in a cop-free environment for the first time, conscious that they are freer than they have ever been in their lives, cannot be expected to be exemplars of free human beings in a free society, for into their first tentative experience of freedom they bring with them a lifetime's accumulation of unfreedom. It would be absurd to believe that those who have been bound their whole lives will, at the moment their fetters are suddenly and unexpectedly shaken off, immediately move with a dancer's grace. No, they will not always do the right thing, and some will inevitably commit terrible wrongs. That excesses are a part of every rising of the oppressed is a truism—the American Revolution of 1776 was full of excesses—and only lickspittles of the status quo could denounce such uprisings because of the excesses of a few.

What is important is not merely to condemn brutality by those who rose up but also, as Sister Souljah observed at the time, to place such excesses in the context of the larger brutalizations which are everyday occurrences in U.S. cities. This alone can help us all to try to avoid them in the future. In any case, let us not lose a sense of proportion. The excesses committed by L.A. rebels were hardly the most remarkable developments in the rebellion there. Hysterical denunciations of violence by those who rule ring especially hollow. America's CIA President and the news-commentators who followed his orders tried to convince us that four Black men accused of beating a white truck-driver in the first hours of the L.A. uprising are among the most fiendish ogres of all time. To put this in perspective, one has only to consider how many lost their lives in any given hour of "collateral damage" in the 1991 U.S. massacre of the people of Iraq.

False, too, and no less a part and parcel of the oppressors' apologia, is the "consumerist" view of the rebellion, according to

which the "rioters" vied with each other in the accumulation of commodities. The rebels' principal action, however, was attacking and destroying police stations, government buildings and businesses regarded as symbols of the dominant order. The so-called looting was decidedly a secondary phenomenon. For the "underclass," moreover, mass-media advertising is a cruel hoax: What you see is what you can't afford and what you will never get.

We also reject the liberal theory—as advanced by James Ridgeway and others—that Police Chief Gates somehow engineered or managed the Rebellion: that he knew it was coming, refused (for personal as well as political reasons) to mobilize the L.A. police to stop it, and, in the long run, drew the most benefit from it. To thus elevate any of history's least significant actors—police chiefs, politicians and other parasites—to positions of power they could never attain, is to reduce the masses to the status of history's mere objects, inevitable victims of omnipotent authority.

The people in the streets of L.A. suffered many casualties, and for the time being have retreated. But surely it was they, not Gates or any other "prominent personality," who made history during the last two days of April and the first of May 1992.

Finally, it is impossible to agree with those who pretend to see in the L.A. rebellion only a "tragedy." That it had tragic qualities no one would deny, but it cannot be written off so simply. Had no rebellion occurred after the L. A. police verdict was announced—had the outrageous decision in the Rodney King case been passively accepted: That would have been a tragedy!

Spring is here

"In reality, phenomena don't always develop in practice according to the established schemes." Amilcar Cabral (1968)

"Up to now, misfortune has been described in order to inspire terror and pity. I will describe happiness, to inspire the opposite." Isidore Ducasse (1870)

Why Los Angeles? Poet Larry Neal wrote that "America is the world's greatest jailer, and we are all in jail." It is characteristic of the New World Order that America's most prisonlike city, a veritable hothouse of institutionalized racism and an incubator of some of his-

tory's most insidious innovations in Capital's war on Labor, also happens to be what Mike Davis calls the "fastest growing metropolis in the advanced industrial world."[1] Nothing is less surprising than the fact that a major rebellion should break out in the city in which postindustrial misery has reached its highest tension. But the April-May '92 events cannot be reduced to the status of a "regional" phenomenon. Indeed, the rebellion revealed, in rough outline, contours and patterns that will go a long way in defining the struggle for human emancipation on this continent for years to come.

Los Angeles is the most militarized city in the United States, and its cops have long been notorious as the most fascistic in the land. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) numbers 8000 officers, and the L.A. Sheriff's Police adds 8000 more. On the first day of the uprising California Governor Wilson sent in 4000 National Guard troops. President Bush sent in 4500 U.S. Army troops and Marines as well as 1200 Federal law officers from the Border Patrol, Bureau of Prisons, the U.S. Marshal's Service, U.S Park Police, Customs Service Helicopter Units, F.B.I. SWAT teams, and special teams from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. 1200 officers of the California Highway Patrol were also mobilized. In addition to these 26,900 armed defenders of Capital and the State, several thousand more were "on standby." Moreover, L.A. has 3500 "private security" firms, all heavily armed.

That it took seventy-two hours for this huge military force to occupy the rebel neighborhoods shows that the uprising expressed the discontent and desire of a large community. Significantly, far more than in the Sixties ghetto uprisings, the L.A. rebellion quickly spread beyond the extensive liberated zones of the ghetto itelf, igniting revolts among the oppressed in Hollywood, Long Beach, Pasadena and elsewhere. In all, some 10,000 businesses were destroyed. Damage was estimated at a billion dollars. Some 17,000 "rioters" were arrested. Close to 2000 were deported.

Within an hour or two of the first reports of "trouble" in L.A., police departments all over the United States were put in a state of "readiness." Reserves were called in, street-patrols increased. And all over the country local police were invited to add their own lies

1 Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage, 1992). This book provides essential background for understanding the L. A. rebellion.

and threats to the non-stop propaganda barrage provided by the obedient media.

Despite this nationwide display of police and military strength, despite an utter disregard for civil liberties by the forces of occupation which reached the proportions of a state of siege in Los Angeles, Las Vegas and elsewhere, and despite the endless half-truths and untruths droned on TV, radio, in the press and from the pulpits, the L.A. rebellion inspired a positive and active response from coast to coast. No matter how slickly the "official" State Department or media commentators—who can tell the difference?—tried to suppress the real news from L.A., or to whitewash it with racist images and innuendo, young recalcitrants throughout the country saw through the smokescreen and took action. Direct-action protests that in some cases turned into full-scale rebellions, sparked by news of the uprising in L.A. and in solidarity with it, occurred in at least forty-four cities in twenty states.[2]

As is true of the L.A. rebellion itself, few if any of these solidarity rebellions were led, or indeed, in any way affected, by the organized Left. Wholly unprepared for such an uprising, which some "leading theorists" had in fact proved to be impossible in what they like to call this "postmodern" epoch, the Left—with very few exceptions[3]—contributed neither to the events themselves nor to their subsequent theoretical clarification. In what passes for a Left press in the U.S., coverage of the L.A. rebellion characteristically oscillated between handwringing genuflections on the "tragedy" and

2 Birmingham, Alabama; Arcata, Berkeley, Davis, El Cerrito, Irvine, Marin County, Oakland, Palo Alto, Pinole, Riverside, San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose, San Mateo and Santa Cruz, California; Boulder and Denver, Colorado; Bridgeport, Connecticut; Miami and Tampa, Florida; Atlanta, Georgia; Peoria, Illinois; Minneapolis, Minnesota; St. Louis and Warrensburg, Missouri; Jersey City, New Jersey; Lincoln and Omaha, Nebraska; Las Vegas, Nevada; New Rochelle and New York, New York; Toledo, Ohio; Eugene, Oregon; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Charleston, South Carolina; Austin and Dallas, Texas; Olympia and Seattle, Washington; Beloit, Madison and Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Washington, D.C. Solidarity demonstrations also took place in Halifax, Toronto and Vancouver, Canada, as well as in Athens, Berlin, Paris and Rome.

3 In addition to the writings by Mike Davis and Robin D. G. Kelley cited elsewhere in these notes, important material on the L.A. rebellion also appeared in *News & Letters* (59 East Van Buren, Chicago, Illinois 60605) and *Against the Current* (Center for Changes, 7012 Michigan Avenue, Detroit, Michigan 48210).

cynical self-congratulation derived from the pretense that the uprising, like all events everywhere at all times, once again "vindicated" this or that archaic program. At their best the Left sects lent some support to the post-rebellion demonstrations, on which, however, they too often tried to impose a reformist slant by tying demands for more meaningless jobs to the fortunes of the Democratic Party, whose disgusting presidential campaign addressed the L.A. rebellion by playing the "Sister Souljah card" to reemphasize the obvious fact that Bill "More Cops on the Street" Clinton is just another white conservative politician behind that saxophone.

Far more interesting and consequential than the flip-flops of the would-be radical intelligentsia was the bold action of the homeless, who went from being on the streets to in the streets with lightning speed, and the revolutionary lucidity and daring of the hip-hop community, and insurgent working class young people generally, who were of course the heart and soul of the rebellion.

Contrary to those who profess to see nothing but illiteracy and ignorance in the "younger generation," we argue that America's poorest teen-agers, most of them high-school dropouts, are in many and fundamental ways far wiser than those who want them kept in school to prepare for (non-existent) jobs. If the best way to learn is by doing, the first thing is to decide what is to be done. There is every reason to believe that in some seventy-two hours of popular, creative destruction, L.A.'s insurgent population learned more than they did in all the years they spent confined in classrooms. Almost in passing, therefore, they proposed the only workable solution to the much-discussed crisis of American education.

That the hip-hoppers and dropouts have much to learn is obvious, but they also have much to teach. It would be wrong to minimize the inevitable confusion and, in some cases, outright misogyny and anti-Korean hysteria, that afflict the hip-hop community and the rappers who are its best-known public expression. It is nonetheless crucial to recognize in this community, and its music, the emergence of a rebellious pride, a conscious rejection of dominant values and the institutions that uphold them, and, above all, a new radical self-awareness rooted in the growing mass consciousness that revolutionary change is possible. The self-organization of these kids in X-caps has helped set the stage for nothing less than the creation of a free society.

In hilarious contrast to the grim puritanism and "realistic"

rhetoric of the Left, L.A.'s new urban guerrillas insisted on having a good time. Queried by reporters as to why they were looting, many replied: "Because it's fun!" A front-page May first *Chicago Tribune* photo is captioned: "Looters laugh while they carry away all they can." Ironically, the banner headline above it reads: "A nightmare of violence in L.A." One class's nightmare is another's pleasant dream.

Coco Fusco has pointed out that "laughing at imposed identity, imposed rules, imposed laws" has long been an element in the struggle against imperialist violence. In April-May '92, humor was a major weapon. Those who took what they wanted from unguarded stores could hardly help making jokes about the "free market." Less than a day after the rebellion began, stickers reading "Support Your Local Police: Beat Yourself Up" turned up on walls, windows and lamp-posts all across the land. Few things are more consciousness-expanding than a good joke at the expense of cops, bosses and bureaucrats. Moreover, as in the movement for women's reproductive rights and against the Gulf Massacre, humorists—cartoonists, street-pranksters, billboard-revisers and grafitti-comedians—grasped the essential in the L.A. rebellion faster and more consequently than anyone else. Social theory separated from humor can no longer serve the cause of freedom.

The L.A. rebels' emphasis on humor, and on the pleasure of looting and other forms of rebelling, indicates that their very starting-point was well beyond all reality-principle politics. In one of the most insightful articles on the rebellion, Robin D. G. Kelley called attention to "the joy and sense of empowerment" expressed on the faces of the young Black and Latino poor, "seizing property and destroying what many regarded as symbols of domination."[4] In this joy and sense of empowerment lies the only future worth dreaming about.

The three-day L.A. insurrection of '92 was as spontaneous as the workers' uprising in Hungary in 1956, the Paris rebellion of May '68, and the General Strike in Trinidad in 1970, and always will retain its honored place in the company of these and other great leaps toward freedom. Today, when all that's left of the traditional Left are a few dried-up rinds of long-dead movements, those who have nothing to lose continue to offer us fresh fruit from the Tree of Life.

4 Robin D. G. Kelley, "Straight from Underground," *The Nation* (June 8, 1992), 793-796.

Lying in living color

"The dream is the truth." Zora Neale Hurston (1937)

"You can't have capitalism without racism." Malcolm X (1964)

"You know, this riot has been our media." L.A. youth to reporters (1992)

During the L.A. rebellion it became clear that even the seemingly simplest bits of news were saturated with falsehood. Again and again we were told, for example, that "the violence began shortly after the announcement of the verdict"—as if the racist verdict itself was not an act of violence, and as if the entire King case did not show how thoroughly violence pervaded the LAPD's daily routine and the American Way of Life. Another dishonest refrain vented the media's consternation that the L.A. rebels were "burning down their own neighborhood." Their own? Does anyone actually believe that people forced to live in these depressed and terrorized communities own or control them?

Indeed, a central lesson of the rebellion was the extent to which the establishment media, and what passes as common sense among racists, encourages white Americans to deny what they see. Thus a juror maintained that King was "directing the action" and "in complete control" as he lay helpless with police raining blow after blow on him. A *Chicago Tribune* headline, in a rare burst of lucidity, summarized the jury's (il)logic: "What we thought we saw in the videotape didn't happen."

The acquitters of the cops who assaulted Rodney King showed a terrifying ability to construct a white "Simiotext(e)" which enabled them to deny the brutality of those in power, no matter how many times they watched it. Undoubtedly even now a small army of academics is feverishly trying to make the fashions of "deconstruction" fit the realities of Los Angeles. To the extent that such intellectuals fail to see that oppression and freedom (and not just infinitely manipulable images) are at issue, they will not manage to break from the sorry apologetics characteristic of the deManic capitulation to fascism by deconstruction's founder and the craven decision of the Simi Valley jurors.

It was not just the jury's behavior, but the entire performance

of the press and TV commentators which showed how it is possible to be literally blinded by racism. Given the arrest records, and the pictures of the rebellion, there can be no doubt that community reaction to the King verdict was, to use a term that universities have not yet fully emptied of meaning, a multicultural one.

Latino youth poured into the streets alongside African-Americans and suffered more arrests and deportations than any other group. Many of the rebels had recently come from Central American nations whose recent histories of resistance ensured that the presence of U.S. tanks was not absolutely overawing. Korean-Americans came to Justice for King rallies in great numbers and suffered hundreds of arrests. Whites formed a significant part of rebellious crowds and figured prominently in many of the most striking photographs of the uprising. Police arrested over a thousand whites.

Typically, however, when the *New York Times* revisited the scenes of the rebellion in November 1992, its writers managed to make this white participation vanish altogether. "The city's white population," according to the Times, "while largely untouched by the riot, was shaken by the uprising it witnessed."

From the moment when a young African-American woman challenged Mayor Bradley at a pre-rebellion protest meeting—"We can't rely on these people (Bradley et al.) to act. You (the crowd) know what to do"—women played leading roles in the streets. A *New York Times* photo taken shortly thereafter, but miles away, showed five people shouting, according to the caption, "insults and threats at the police": four were women. Three of four laughing looters pictured on the front page of May Day's *Chicago Tribune* were women. Some young Latina mothers brought babies with them as they looted. A British reporter noticed a Black woman methodically pitching rocks through the windows of the *L.A. Times* building. In Hollywood, a "mob of little white girls"—as a radio announcer put it—helped themselves to the entire stock of a large lingerie store. An exciting follow-up to the largest women's demonstration in U.S. history—the march for reproductive rights in Washington D.C. a few weeks earlier—the L. A. rebellion gave real substance to that overworked phrase: "The Year of the Woman."

Despite all this, far and away the media's dominant image of the uprising was the beating of the white truck-driver, Reginald Denny, by young Black men. Armed with a small bit of videotape, the press and TV imposed its New World Order on the varied, cre-

ative, living activity of the rebellion through an insistent focus on Denny.

Thus the supposedly menacing African-American male, not police brutality, became the media's central issue. Denny's victimization, on this view, did not just equal King's. It explained King's, and the Simi Valley verdict. Black men, familiarly enough, were the problem. They were, as Quayle's and Bush's carefully rehearsed soundbites suggested, the pathological products of the collapse of the Black family and of incendiary hiphop profiteers. Black women came to be cast, in the television drama of South Central, not as actors in their own behalf, but as seduced spectators, as children bearing uncontrollable children and even as mindless Murphy Brown fans driven to single parenthood by the evil example of a rich, white, forty-something sitcom heroine.

Framing the "riot" as the affair of young Black males, the news could make little sense of the multiracial and multiethnic participation in it. As Mike Davis wrote, "You hear commentators going on and on about Black youth while in fact you're seeing other ethnicities on the screen."[5] What, for example, were so many white kids doing pouring into the streets, putting themselves in harm's way? Why were the arrested so largely Latino? These questions were mostly ignored.

Very occasionally, a news magazine briefly quoted an "expert" to the effect that Los Angeles was a "class riot," with the poor across color lines acting out of a common helplessness. This analysis, vastly better than anything else on offer in the popular press, suffers from the tendency of American intellectuals to suppose that if something is about class, it is therefore not about race. The L.A. rebellion's clear class content ought not obscure the fact that it came out of a clear demand for racial justice. "Middle-class" African-American youths, including students from the University of Southern California, University of California/Los Angeles and the California State campuses, participated energetically in the rebellion. White youth who joined the action were doing more than just expressing class grievances. They were taking decisive steps toward the abolition of whiteness by joining a "race riot" to attack authority

5 Mike Davis, *L.A. Was Just the Beginning: Urban Revolt in the United States.* A Thousand Points of Light (Open Pamphlet Magazine Series, P. O. Box 2726, Westfield, New Jersey 07091).

rather than to attack African-Americans. That's news, but you'd never know it from the newspapers.

When coverage did stray from the "raging Black men versus white society" framework, it usually did so only to emphasize the tensions between African-Americans and Korean storeowners and, more recently, between Blacks and Latinos. Both these areas of tension are of tremendous importance. That the media seems able to locate anti-Asian and anti-Latino (and anti-Arab and anti-Semitic) prejudices only when such attitudes can be alleged to have surfaced in the Black community, must not lead us to ignore real differences among people of color in the United States. But the lesson of the L.A. uprising is anything but the hopeless conclusion that unity is impossible. The outrage at the King verdict was multiracial and the cry "No Justice! No Peace!" went up loudly in several languages.

In the case of Black-Latino relations, there is little evidence that this initial impulse toward unity dramatically gave way to infighting as the rebellion progressed. Jack Miles' distended exercise in nativism, "Blacks vs. Browns," which disgraced the pages of the October 1992 issue of *The Atlantic*, labored mightily to make the events of April-May 1992 fit its title. They don't, even on Miles' tortured reading of them. Subheads like "A New Paradigm: Blacks vs. Latinos" are followed jarringly in Miles' essay by discussions of divisions within the Latino population, and by evidence of the common purpose of Blacks and Central Americans in the rebellion. Clearly there are Black-Latino conflicts in Los Angeles. The recent battles over construction jobs reflect as much. But as in gang rivalries, the experience of urban rebellion did not aggravate Black-Latino divisions so much as it defused them.

The case of Black-Korean conflict raises far more troubling issues. Korean-American merchants suffered disproportionate losses to looters and especially to arsonists. Korean-American ownership of liquor stores, and other eminently lootable enterprises, heightened tensions in the wake of the very light sentence of storeowner Suon Ja Du for the murder of Black teenager Latasha Harlins, and helped account for this pattern. Credit policies, which keep Asian businessmen in the ghettoes (from which white capital has largely fled) and which keep African-Americans from starting businesses, obviously play a role in exacerbating problems between Blacks and Koreans. Day-to-day encounters in stores are virtually programmed to explode with both sides feeling trapped and threat-

ened.

It would be foolish to suppose that in such situations storekeeper-customer problems remain only that, and do not bleed over into larger patterns of Black-Korean relations. It simply is not the case, for example, that anti-Korean hiphop lyrics are confined to expressing class hatred.

But facing such grim reality is not to fantasize, as the media did, that all reality is inescapably grim where relations among America's victims are concerned. The larger story of the Los Angeles response, and the national response, and the Korean-American response, to the King verdict refutes such despair-mongering by showing the tremendous pressure that young people can exert to break the chains which hold the suffering under the death-sentence of race and class oppression.

After the rain

"The world in danger is our true and only neighborhood." Guillermo Gomez-Pena

"Only poets, since they must excavate and recreate history, have ever learned anything from it." James Baldwin

"We are always searching. I think that now we are at the point of finding." John Coltrane

The long-range significance of the L. A. rebellion cannot be appreciated apart from the global ecological crisis. The fact that the largest urban upheaval in the U.S. in this century has been ignored by the environmental press is one more sign—and a definitive one—that middle-class environmentalism is indissolubly allied to the pollutocratic Establishment it pretends to oppose.

Clearly the rebellion, and the nationwide response it engendered, are seething with ecological implications. An extraordinary example of "acting locally," inevitably it will affect global thinking for a long time to come.

The rebellion provided, for example, a dramatic eye-opening prelude to the Earth-rapers' orgy known as the "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro a few weeks later. The delegates (mostly heads of state) straight-facedly resolved that capitalism—an inherently ecoci-

dal social system—is compatible with a healthy planet. But L.A.'s smouldering ruins and overflowing prisons joined the polluted air that always afflicts the city to give these bureaucrats the lie, and showed all the world that the Land of Capitalism par excellence is one of the sickest societies anywhere.

In this era of massive destruction of rainforests and other wild places, the contradiction between city and "countryside" has become central to all struggles for social change. Anyone who knows the ABCs of ecology knows that massive restoration of wilderness is today an urgent priority, second to none—indeed, the precondition for the continuation of life on this planet—and that such restoration requires, in turn, massive dismantling of industrial society's deadly cities. In this light, the festive community burning of L.A.'s shopping malls can be regarded not only as a sensible response to unliveable ghetto conditions, but also as an ecologically sound step toward doing away with America's poisonous urban wastelands. Objectively, in the U.S. government's war against wildlife and wilderness, the L.A. rebels were on the side of the wild.

Subjectively, however, the rebellion's ecological dimension stands out in even bolder relief. The fact that Black teenagers increasingly recognize themselves as an endangered species—this was in fact the theme of one of the most popular local rap recordings just before and during the rebellion—is surely one of the major revolutions in consciousness of our time. Equally suggestive, in this regard, is the fact that the planting of new trees—to bring beauty to L. A.'s minority communities—is a major demand in the program put forth by the Bloods and Crips for the reconstruction of the city.

The rebels' point of departure, moreover, was light-years beyond the phony "jobs versus environment" dichotomy that miserabilist demagogues of all persuasions use to paralyze the unwary. In demanding not jobs but life, and all the freedom and fullness thereof, the L.A. rebels—among whom registered voters were undoubtedly a rarity—revealed strong affinities with the most radical "no-compromise" wing of the environmental movement.

"Mainstream" environmentalism continues to be dominated by racist corporate-minded executives who, by definition, are unwilling to challenge the interests of white supremacy, Capital and the capitalist State. In the past twenty years, the mushroom growth of the National Wildlife Federation, the Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, etc., has coincided with the destruction of more U.S. wilderness than

was destroyed in the preceding half-century. These groups, which are run as businesses by bureaucrats who think and act like businessmen, are to the rank-and-file eco-activist what the AFL-CIO bureaucracy is to the working class: a privileged elite whose prime function is to control the fury—i.e., the revolutionary creativity—of those at the bottom.

The L.A. rebels manifested exactly what is needed to turn environmentalism into a real and effective movement: desperation, defiance, energy, a sense of the unbearable boredom and misery of American life today, a readiness to improvise, a willingness to take risks and a beautiful determination to win release from misery. With such an outsiders' perspective to inspire and guide the actions of a new movement, an ecologically healthy planet could become a reality instead of a slogan.

Those who are farthest from the administration of power, no matter how powerless they often feel, retain always the power to disrupt and therefore, potentially, the power to overturn the entire repressive order.

In the solidarity of all those who are outside existing power relations lies our only chance of vanquishing the ecocidal megamachine. Coming at a time when the infrastructures of America's cities are on the verge of collapse, the L.A. rebellion has opened exciting possibilities for the development of heretofore undreamed-of combat-alliances that could cut across and even destroy the debilitating barriers set up by short-sighted and self-serving "single-issue" groups.

Now is a time of new beginnings, and thus a time to make new connections. There is not an eco-activist anywhere who would not benefit from reading Malcolm X—the favorite author of the L.A. rebels—and radical ecologists and conservation biologists would do well not only to make their knowledge more accessible to those who need it most, but also to find ways of linking their struggles to the struggles of the oppressed people who can really change things for the better. Such links would seem to be particularly feasible—and even long overdue—in the city that gave us the word smog, and which is today a major dumpsite for toxic waste and Daryl Gates' radio commentaries.

Such new connections, however unthinkable to believers in dogmas, are the inevitable fruit of the revolutionary imagination. If the L.A. rebels drew inspiration from the poetry of rap, the rebellion

itself remains a crucial factor in renewing the practice of poetry everywhere, as a revolutionary activity. The boldest dreams of poets always have expressed humankind's deepest aspirations, and any "program" that denies them is a sure ticket to misery and more misery. Any would-be "revolution" willing to settle for less than the realization of poetry in everyday life is a revolution at dead-end before it starts.

As eco-activists, radical feminists, point-of-production rebel workers and ghetto/barrio streetfighters begin to understand each other, to find their common ground and to pool their resources in united struggle and mutual aid, we shall begin to see a movement that might just be capable of toppling the inhuman structures that are killing us all.

Steeped in humor, open to poetry, aiming at a fundamental reintegration of humankind and the planet we live on and the creatures with whom we share it, this new global revolutionary movement naturally will be the most playful and adventurous of all time. How could it be otherwise?

The struggle for wilderness is inseparable from the struggle for a free society, which is inseparable from the struggle against racism, whiteness and imperialism, which is inseparable from the struggle for the liberation of women, which is inseparable from the struggle for sexual freedom, which is inseparable from the struggle to emancipate labor and abolish work, which is inseparable from the struggle against war, which is inseparable from the struggle to live poetic lives and, more generally, to do as we please.

The enemies, today, are those who try to separate these struggles.

In April-May '92 the world witnessed one of the traumatic first flights of this revolution which must go farther than any revolution has ever gone.

Outsiders of the world, unite! Freedom Now! Earth First! These three watchwords are for us but one.

Copies of the above article are available in tabloid form. Send a self-addressed stamped envelope to Black Swan Press, P.O. Box 6424, Evanston, IL 60204.

MY PROBLEM WITH MULTI-CULTURAL EDUCATION

BY JOHN GARVEY

"Daddy, what are we?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, where are we from? Are we Italian, Irish, Jewish; you know, like that?"

"Well, we're from here; we're Americans."

"Daddy!!! What am I going to say in school?"

More than once, my now nine-year-old daughter and I have had this conversation. I think I understand my daughter's frustration. After all, for the better part of my grammar school and high school life, I knew who I was - a Catholic and Irish. But, definitely, more Catholic than Irish. My sisters and I can still joke that the reason why we went to parochial school rather than public school was that only "public" children went to public school. We had not a clue what such "public" schools might be like; but we knew they weren't Catholic.

Being Catholic meant getting up two hours early on school days and going to Mass everyday for weeks on end; it meant becoming an altar boy and dreaming of the sacred power vested in the priesthood; it meant seriously considering the priesthood until the end of grammar school. Being Catholic meant real fear when you went to confession on Saturday - even though the worst you had done was inconsequential.

Being Irish was not an everyday, living and breathing, thing. Being Irish meant watching the St. Patrick's Day Parade on television; it meant being part of an annual school play where all the children dressed in green; it meant, for my sisters, taking dancing lessons where they learned jigs and reels (but stopped dancing them soon enough). Being Irish meant going to Rockaway (a beach-front

peninsula, inside New York City limits, frequented by those of Irish origin or ancestry) for summer vacation once or twice and learning there that an old family friend had one of those school custodian jobs that allowed him to be almost rich. Apparently, the "public" schools were good for something.

Later, when I went way off to the Bronx, from Brooklyn, for college, I cringed whenever someone referred to anyone as "BIC" — variously *B*ronx or *B*rooklyn *I*rish *C*atholic. They intended it to mean someone who was sexually timid and alcoholically bold. Most of those who were so labelled resented it, but, as time went on, I heard more than a few proudly claim the label for themselves. My daughter, in spite of her dismay at us not being anything useful in school, would not know what to make of "BIC."

Once I stopped being Catholic, it was not too long before I, more or less absentmindedly, stopped feeling very Irish. Giving up the Catholic part was hard; the Irish barely an after-thought. (Giving up whiteness came much later still.)

Let me go back to the beginning of this story. My daughter really wants to know "Who was the first person?" and "Where did he come from?" Unlike her questions about the origins of the human species, her questions about her social identity seldom come from her own desires to know or to understand. They come from her school, a school which is explicitly committed to providing a multi-cultural education for a diverse student body. They are usually part of an assignment — from a teacher attempting to discover, with the children, the varied roots of the kids in the class. The places of family origin, back a generation or two, are located on maps; family trees are constructed; biographies are written. How could I object?

But object I have. Earlier this year, upon learning that my daughter would be studying immigration in fourth grade, I told her teacher, someone I've known for many years, that I didn't like the theme, that it misconstrued the essentials of America and that it placed the black children in the class in a profoundly disadvantaged place. Too many of those black children would have no tales of immigrant suffering and triumph to share with their classmates. The teacher was, I think, genuinely surprised by my objections. She reminded me that the school traditionally celebrated Black History Month by studying topics associated with the black struggle for freedom. I wasn't satisfied. I suggested that the theme of "Movement" might allow her to explore some of the same topics without as many

problems. To my pleasant surprise, the eventual class theme was revised to include forced migration along with immigration.

Since then, my daughter has indeed written an autobiography which includes information on my grandparents' origins in the Irish countryside. But she has also written a report on Frederick Douglass in which she interpreted his escape from slavery as a form of migration. By any measure, it's much better than what I was doing in fourth grade - or, for that matter, in much of my formal education through sixteen years of Catholic schools and colleges.

When I went to college, I had never read an assigned text by or about black folks in America. In my senior year in high school, I had independently read *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin and had written a review essay for the high school literary magazine. In college, I took more than twenty required courses in history, theology, philosophy, art, literature. Although we spent a good deal of time exploring the origins of civilization in the Near and Middle East, mostly we re-traced an imagined history of Europe -- a lot of emphasis on the achievements of high culture and international conflict, hardly any on social conflict. As I recall, I don't think we were so much encouraged to see Egypt, for example, as a European civilization. Instead, we were encouraged to see that Europe had wisely borrowed from the great achievements of those other civilizations. At the same time, we didn't spend a moment on the civilizations of Asia and Africa outside the Near and Middle East. I read Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles and Euripides; I read the Old and the New Testament; I read Kant, Hegel and Marx. In many ways, I was well educated. But, I didn't read *any* American literature. I didn't study *any* American history. For that matter, I didn't study any Irish history either, although I did read Yeats and Joyce.

As with others of my generation, events had their own demands to make on my academic development. In 1968, as rebellions shook the streets of America's cities and as Black Power became a household expression, some friends and I participated in an uncredited Black History seminar with a sympathetic history professor. I don't remember all that we read but it included Stanley Elkins' *Slavery* and C. Vann Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. In spite of this, I left college remarkably ignorant of much that I now hold to be essential. I knew virtually nothing of the pre-Columbian American civilizations. My only knowledge of Reconstruction consisted of grammar school phrases about carpet-

baggers and scalawags.

So why am I complaining? After all, my daughter already knows more than a little about Frederick Douglass. What's so bad about schools fostering an appreciation of the different habits and customs of people from different parts of the world? Well, nothing is wrong about that - unless some of those habits and customs are themselves objectionable or if the appreciation of some results in the obscurance of others. (Last year, I saw a movie on videotape about a Romanian war criminal who had emigrated to America and was all involved in the appreciation of things Romanian here in the United States. His college-educated daughter could not imagine what the celebration had to do with the crime and, more important, could not imagine him being the criminal.) What we need to talk about is not so much appreciation or celebration but rather critical examination. After all, how do we know if a habit or custom is objectionable or not?

Too often, the multi-cultural education being promoted across American schools relies on a superficial notion of culture. Ralph W. Nicholas put the matter well for me when he wrote that culture: "refers to all the habits, patterns, and ways of thinking that human beings acquire as an *extragenetic* inheritance." (emphasis added) Given the preoccupation with studying multiple cultures *through the prism of continental or national origin*, it seems to me that many children and older students are being encouraged to understand culture as a genetic inheritance. Immigration is, after all, one of the most common and most common-sensical of the ways in which the diversity of the American people is described and understood. It allows teachers and students to appreciate how difficult is the adjustment to new ways. But, as a way of understanding America, it is deeply flawed.

Professor Sylvia Wynter of Stanford University has written a provocative and challenging critique of the California social studies textbooks which were adopted within the past several years (*Do Not Call Us Negros: How "Multicultural" Textbooks Perpetuate the Ideology of Racism*). In one chapter, she takes the textbook treatment of New Orleans as an example of the shortcomings of a pluralistic, immigrant-oriented approach to the study of America. The textbook authors had written:

New Orleans is made up of people from many backgrounds.

> This kind of culture is called pluralism, or a pluralistic culture. In a pluralistic culture, life is exciting. People work, join together, struggle, learn and grow.

Wynter comments:

> The concept of a "pluralistic" culture then enables an *ethnic subset* of Immigrant EuroAmericans (the French Cajuns) to be mis-equated with one of the three founding races/cultures of the United States, that of Black Africa. This then enables the text to represent Dixieland Jazz —the major cultural-syncretic expression of the United States' popular (non-middle class) culture created out of the conflictual coming together of the "inherited cultural baggages" of both the European immigrants and the peoples of Africa brought here as slaves — as being simply another element like that of the string bands of the French-Canadian settlers (the Cajuns) who came to North America in the 1700s. . . .
>
> This pluralistic Ideology represents the Immigrant issues (such as the experience of ethnic prejudice or anti-immigrant nativism) as the central issues of American history, and to reduce non-Immigrant issues to being merely "ethnic" subsets of its generic class . . . .
>
> Consequently the New Orleans' section of Chapter One is complemented with a section titled "The Immigrant Experience." Not only are all the peoples of New Orleans (including those of Black New Orleans whose origin was in the Anglo-American slave trade, and therefore, in the Middle Passage) represented as Immigrants, but the students are asked in this section to "interview immigrants" to the United States so that this can "help you understand the dreams and hopes that built America;" and can understand their many stories as the stories of America itself. There is no room here for the fears, the despair that also built it. For DuBois' "sorrow songs," the Blues. The "trails of tears" of the Indigenous peoples, their non-Immigrant dreams.

I have not said it nearly so well to my daughter, nor to her teacher.

The focus on immigration as the central category of historical study of America usually results in the understanding of "making it"

as the central economic category and of small businesses as the central economic institution. In New York City, children visit neighborhood shops and restaurants and interview the shopkeepers - why did they come, how hard have they worked, what kind of food is that. They walk by walls covered with graffiti; they walk by teenagers with pants hanging down upon their ankles; they walk by schoolyards with basketballs bouncing. But they are not asked to interview the teenagers - to find out why.

Last April, I visited San Francisco for the first time. On the highway in from the airport, the first thing I noticed was the stylized writing of tags on the pillars of the overpasses. How did the kids of San Francisco learn from the kids of New York how to write their tags in the same way? Or did the kids in New York learn from the kids in San Francisco? Or did they both learn from kids in Chicago? Put simply, sauerkraut, lasagna and bagels do not a culture make. Basketball (played a certain way), clothes (worn in a certain style) and lyrics (sung in a certain rhythm) do so much more.Within the predominant multi-cultural paradigm, the cultures that children are encouraged to appreciate are, or will be, marginal, to the world they will live in as adults. That world is being made, not out of nostalgia for customs of lands far away, but of events and personalities close by. And the culture that has made America what it is and what it might be is not the accumulation of more or less equal contributions by various immigrant groups as such.

All those who have been here and all those who are here now are part of what we are and might become. But, we need to be clear about what we are and what we want to become. The characteristic practices of multi-cultural education, as evidenced both in the California textbooks and my daughter's study of immigration, suggest that we have accomplished more than we have and that there is less to do than there is. Multi-cultural education tends to discount the significance of present-day oppression or, if it does acknowledge it, tends to present it as oppression without oppressors. I may be wrong. For example, it may be that, in some multi-cultural education environments, students are encouraged to examine not only the hardships endured by European immigrants, but also their relative willingness to become white in America.

I would suggest that multi-cultural education is a project of defeat. Those who are in the forefront of efforts to multi-culturalize the curriculum are, often enough, intellectual and personal products

of the upsurge of the 1960's. But, they have abandoned hope in the utopian desire of the 1960's and have substituted, for that desire, the social/political/ educational equivalent of managed care. More than anything else, that utopian desire was given initial expression by the black struggles of the 50's and 60's. And it struck deep into the minds and hearts of white people. There was a time when thousands of white households were being rocked by debates between children and parents over the issue of race. But, I would guess, not too much of that goes on now. The abandonment of the struggle over race has been fueled by a conviction that those considered white are not, after all, capable of joining unequivocally in the fight for black liberation and their own freedom.

It was the struggle over race that was the defining issue in the large and small episodes of the 1960's. I played a part in the battles of that era too small to include in a footnote. But, I am glad that I did. It was not always easy - arguing when no one else appeared to have the same point of view. It was not always easy when relatives would tell me of the time when "No Irish Need Apply" - as if they had the day before experienced discrimination because of their Irishness. I'm glad that I didn't have too much of an appreciation for their Irishness because, to me, it seemed then, and mostly seems still now, inseparable from their whiteness.

The multi-culturalist vision has a limited social goal - people should learn to live and let live. But what the proponents of the multi-culturalist creed often overlook is that in America living and letting live is premised on a continued complicity with the reproduction of race distinctions. So long as those distinctions are left intact, it is unlikely that multi-cultural education will do much towards changing the persistent refusal of many thousands of young blacks to participate enthusiastically in school. And it is unlikely that multi-cultural education will do much towards changing the common-sense views of whites, no matter the part of the globe they or their ancestors came from.

John Garvey is one of the editors of Race Traitor.

RUNNING THE BALL IN CROWN POINT

BY KINGSLEY CLARKE

Crown Point, Indiana, a pastoral town of 17,000, is large enough for a McDonald's, White Hen Pantry and even a Christian Science Church. On the surface it is a cute mid-western town: ginger bread houses, gift shops, courthouse. Just 16 miles south of Gary, Crown Point tries to be a world apart. It appears to have succeeded. Gary is a black proletarian city, Crown Point white middle class. Gary was a steel city (Gary Works of US Steel was until the 1980s the largest mill in North America). Now it is a depressed, abandoned place. Crown Point has always had a farm industry base. It was also a refuge, a pseudo-pristine commuter community, for white steelworkers and managers. Even now with few jobs remaining in steel, Crown Point is bustling. It is difficult to find a parking place Saturday noon on the courthouse square.

High school athletics are at the core of Crown Point's sense of community. The football stadium is just one block from the courthouse square. Merchants around the square display the Crown Point Bulldogs' basketball schedule. The school trophy room displays life-sized color photographs of recent football stars. This is Larry Bird, not Magic Johnson, country.

Last season prior to the Bulldogs' opening football game against neighboring Merrillville, Crown Point coach and math teacher Brad Smith admonished his team about Jamel Williams, the opponent's black running back: "We'll stop him by putting watermelon, fried chicken and barbecued ribs on the sideline." Whatever Coach Smith did, it did not work. Crown Point lost 28-6. Jamel Williams gained 202 yards including an 85 yard run for a touchdown.

One enraged Crown Point player, Brady Heiser, quit the team in disgust at the expression of racism. But Brady Heiser was not allowed his protest in isolation. Thirty Crown Point students, most of the football team, jammed onto the Heiser's small Main Street lawn. They serenaded the Heisers with the school song in a crude attempt to shame Brady back onto the team. When Brady came out

of the house and confronted them, they called him a nigger lover. When he stood his lonely ground facing thirty schoolmates, they threatened: "You're dead. You're not gonna see tomorrow."

Indiana has had a more intimate relationship with the Klan than any other Midwestern state. In the 1920s Indiana elected open Klan members to public office. Crown Point has long had a reputation among blacks in the area as a dangerous place: conduct courthouse business and get out of town. The Heisers received death threats, sympathy cards filled with burnt wood and ashes.

Then, when the Heisers were at their lowest point, isolated and depressed, six Mexican students showed up at their door and offered the only local support. Judith Heiser, Brady's mother: "We were in the pits and these beautiful young people came here and said 'don't worry'."

Somewhat bolstered, Judith Heiser ventured five times to the school. She sought censure of Coach Smith. She expected minimal vindication. But school officials rebuffed her, refusing to do anything. In anger and frustration she contacted a reporter and got coverage in the *Gary Post-Tribune*. The Gary and East Chicago, Indiana, NAACP presidents responded. They too met with school officials, but the principal remained steadfast: "It was an unfortunate remark but it is not reflective of who Coach Smith is. It was inappropriate, but he has apologized. [In fact he has never apologized publicly.] He is an excellent coach and math teacher and is highly regarded by his peers and students. There has never been any question about the future of his career at Crown Point High." Again, the school refused to do anything. They would not even issue the usual joint harmony and unity statement. Their stance: "sue us," knowing full well that bigoted expression is hardly illegal. The NAACP gave up.

But Brady's act reverberated among students. Confrontations ensued. A would-be Nazi student along with four comrades was suspended from school for assaulting Mexican students. He pranced, "I'm into Hitler. It's an all-white town, nobody wants Crown Point to turn out like Gary." Nazis in Middletown, U.S.A! Mexican students responded detailing white supremacist acts in the school newspaper, *Inklings*. Jaymi Colon said, "Conditions have worsened, kids drive by yelling 'spic' and 'nigger' at me and my friends." Crown Point's one black student said, "Life had become uncomfortable." Still no public or private support from local whites.

One student, Erika White, said, "I don't understand how four students can be suspended for making racial remarks, but the football coach and a group of football players go unpunished after the coach made a racist joke and a group of football players yelled threatening and racial remarks at a teammate who reported the coach." Sophomore Mike Johnson said a few incidents were being blown out of proportion: "the more publicity this gets the worse it is for us. This has blackened the town's name."

Blackened indeed! Cable television coverage brought the Heisers messages of support from around the country. But the local white response to the notoriety continued to be at best mocking sympathy: "all he accomplished was blowing his chance for getting a college football scholarship." Brady's mother wonders if he will go on to college at all. She says that in fact he is gentle, somewhat laid back, not directed toward traditional goals, that Brady should have lived in the '60s because he would have been a good flower child. She was, however, somewhat encouraged by Brady's exploration of Ball State University. He toured the campus with a Ball State student, a black woman he met at a rap concert. Nevertheless, when challenged about the necessity to move up and out of Crown Point to accomplish his political goals Brady responds: "I'll change the world from here."

Months after the end of football season Brady Heiser continues to hold firm, continues to be the only student of European descent not in the school's white club and continues to be harassed. He put a stop to physical harassment by lowering his shoulder and blocking a former teammate who stepped in front of him. (Brady is 6'2" tall and weighs 220 pounds.) He steadfastly debates the teacher who repeatedly tells him, "Brady, you see racism everywhere." (The school apparently never managed to put together a proposed joint program on "racism" with black students from a Gary high school.)

Jamel Williams went on to lead the Merrillville team to an undefeated regular season and the conference championship. One conference coach said he was the greatest player to have played in the Duneland conference. Headlines of the *Gary Post-Tribune* after the championship read simply: "JAMEL"!

Brady's friends are now the Mexican students. But the Heisers had not considered themselves to be different from their former white friends and seemingly pristine neighbors. They were puzzled, shocked, hurt by the isolation, the singularity, of Brady's act. In a

professorial attempt to explain the particular isolation to Judith Heiser, this writer characterized Crown Point to her as a refuge for privileged white steelworkers. She responded: "I'm not privileged. I just got home from working my second job at a juvenile detention center. But we are more blessed than cursed. I have five sons. I tell them character is more important than football and you know how sometimes you go along with this stuff and then you hit a point and you aren't going to go along anymore!"

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GANGSTA' RAP: LIVE ON THE STAGE OF HISTORY

BY CHRISTOPHER DAY

Gangsta' rap was the soundtrack of the Los Angeles rebellion. More than any other single form of cultural expression, gangsta' rap embodies the dilemmas confronted by youth of all colors in a white supremacist United States. In this article I want to do three things. First, I want to look at the appeal of gangsta' rap, particularly among white youth. Second, I want to examine the function of gangs in insurgency and counter-insurgency and how those functions are played out in the area of popular culture. Finally, I want to make some general observation on the relationship between cultural rebellion and political insurgency.

What is Gangsta' Rap?

In an analysis of the appeal of gangsta' rap to white youth, Michelle Shocked, a sometimes-radical white alternative/folk singer, drew an analogy to the popularity of "Zip Coon" minstrelsy a century ago. Shocked argued that the amoral pose of the gangsta' rapper appealed to the desire of whites to see Blacks as exotically violent criminals. I think there is some truth to this, but I think that Shocked is missing a more significant feature of the appeal: insurgency. Shocked should have known better. "Zip Coon" was the creation of the racist white imagination of the 19th century. Gangsta' rap, whatever the implications of its appeal to white people, is the creation of Black people defying a white power structure. That defiance may be compromised in many ways (by corporate control, by misogyny and homophobia, etc.) but rap is an authentic creation of an oppressed people finding their voice, whereas minstrelsy was created by white people, for white people, and fulfilled explicitly white supremacist cultural functions for white people. Gangsta' rap has many problems, but Shocked's analogy diverts attention away from those problems, as well as away from the radical potential its appeal to white youth expresses.

Something is happening within the Black community and

white kids know it. There has been a tremendous shift in consciousness amongst Black youth over the past 5 years expressed in the political militancy of rap, the resurgent interest in Malcolm X, and a generalized pride in things African and Black. White kids see this every day in their schools and through the media, and they want it for themselves.

The attraction of Black culture to white youth is as old as slavery. There is no shortage of explanations for this general attraction, from the psycho-sexual to the economic and political. I believe that there is truth in most of these explanations, but that what it comes down to is that Black culture speaks much more honestly about life in this society. "White" culture by definition is a culture of lies that has extracted what life it can from what it can steal from others.

This, of course, should not be surprising. "Whiteness" is not rooted so much in European cultural traditions as it is constructed to maintain a system of white supremacy, a system that depends on lies, on the repression of those things that point to universal human experiences. Black culture in turn is a culture of survival and resistance, a culture that has been a repository for certain truths in the face of daily dehumanization by white supremacy.

It takes a couple decades of parenting, schooling, and daily exposure to media lies to effectively extinguish the impulse in most children to act like human beings. In the course of this indoctrination, white youth frequently turn to Black culture as an inspiration for their own resistance to this process. I would argue that this is the main appeal of gangsta' rap to white youth.

Gangsta' rap is one of the main currents in contemporary rap. Prior to the emergence of gangsta' rap in Los Angeles, rap was dominated by artists from the east coast, New York in particular. Many New York artists were taking a more explicitly political posture. The best known of these were Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions featuring KRS-1. These acts were known for their uncompromising militancy. They quickly attracted a large white audience. But Public Enemy's invocation of the Black Panthers and stage shows employing fake Uzis wielded by the S1-Ws (Security of the First World) could not match the insurgent rage of NWA's "Fuck Tha' Police." NWA (Niggas With Attitude) were not middle-class radical speechmakers like Public Enemy, they were gangstas, street criminals from sprawling ghettos of Greater Los Angeles. They were, in the words of one song, "Straight Outta Compton."

NWA was the first gangsta' rap act to gain a mass popular following. The song "Fuck Tha Police" became a smash hit with almost no radio play. "Fuck Tha Police" was a remarkable song. It indicted the police for systematic crimes against Black people and proposed in no uncertain terms a simple solution: shooting the cops. What gave NWA an additional edge was the sense that they could do it, that they came from a sector of the Black community that was well armed and had nothing to lose. "Fuck Tha Police" expressed the insurgent political potential of the massive gang culture that had taken root in Southern California and had spread throughout much of the country. The popularity of the song across race lines was a significant portent of the multi-racial character of the Los Angeles rebellion last spring.

Gangsta' rap is the musical expression of gang culture. In addition to the predictable swaggering and boasting of sexual prowess, ruthlessness, and expensive cars, gangsta' rap also talks about the human carnage of gang life. Rise and fall tales of young black men making it big as street criminals and meeting a violent end are common features of gangsta' rap. There are also many raps that focus on lives destroyed by drugs, teen pregnancy, and other dangers. The politics of gangsta' rap do not begin from an explicitly ideological position, they grow out of a defiance in the face of particularly desperate conditions of life. This means that gangsta' rap expresses all sorts of the contradictions of gang culture. Brutal misogyny is a common element of gangsta' rap, and the insistent return to the theme of shooting cops suggests the limits of a strategic vision for social change rooted in gangs as they currently exist. But at the same time gangsta' rap has something that more politically sophisticated rap lacks: a mass base.

Listening to Public Enemy I constantly get the feeling that the militant posture is made possible by the certainty that it won't be acted on. Public Enemy is very popular and concerts of theirs have turned into brawls with the cops, but they don't speak with the same authenticity in the voice of people who really have nothing to lose.

It is dangerous to search popular music for a political program. Gangsta' rap is not the musical expression of a coherent revolutionary movement, but it is the expression of a revolutionary possibility. To be young, and white in 1992 is to have damn few outlets for any sense that things are deeply wrong. The radical potential among white youth has found little organized political expression. That

radical potential is finding its main expression in various forms of popular music. But, the Rock the Vote campaign of MTV and the dizzying array of pop musicians taking up various "issues" all has the sanitized smell of corporate manipulation. The Los Angeles rebellion was a confirmation for millions of white kids that the insurgent pose of so much rap reflected something real, something deeper. Indeed it does.

Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency

Many believe that promoting Black control of organized crime is an important step upwards for the Black community, but it's hard to imagine the government acting from that motive. It would make much more sense to assume that a large stable criminal organization would be created by the government because they saw it as an important tool for social control." — "The Lumpenproletariat & Repression: A Case Study" by Edward A. Lee in *Repression and Resistance* (Chicago: Rebeldia Publications)

In the United States today a program of domestic neo-colonialism is rapidly advancing. It was designed to counter the potentially revolutionary thrust of the recent black rebellions in major cities across the country. This program was formulated by America's corporate elite — the major owners, managers, and directors of the giant corporations, banks, and foundations which increasingly dominate the economy and society as a whole — because they believe that the urban revolts pose a serious threat to economic and social stability. Led by such organizations as the Ford Foundation, the Urban Coalition, and National Alliance of Businessmen, the corporatists are attempting with considerable success to co-opt the black power movement. Their strategy is to equate black power with black capitalism. — Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969)

The Los Angeles communities are demanding that they are policed and patrolled by individuals who live in the community and that the commanding officers be ten-year residents of the community in which they serve. Former gang members shall be given a chance to be patrol buddies in assisting in the protection of neighborhoods. — from *Give Us the Hammer and the Nails and We Will Rebuild the*

City — document of the Los Angeles Crips and Bloods in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion.

The danger of the popularity of gangsta' rap doesn't come primarily, as Michelle Shocked suggested, from a romanticism about anti-social and criminal activity, but rather from political illusions about the role of gangs in a revolutionary movement. To be sure, there is something twisted about young white men affecting the pose of a pimp, drug dealer, or gangbanger who preys on the Black community. But Shocked's criticisms don't get us very far because they treat the gangsta' rapper as an image in the white mind instead of as a reality, that some white youth are trying to figure out how to relate with, in the Black community. Shocked seeks to expose the racism of white enthusiasm for a criminalized image of Blackness, but in the process can only contextualize gangsta' rap as part of a white reality.

The criminalization of young Black men is not simply the conjurings of Time-Warner's rap division, it is a reflection of an actual criminalization that has been carried out by the state. One out of four Black men in their 20s are in some way in the hands of the criminal justice system: awaiting trial, in prison, on probation, or on parole. This is not some sort of marginal experience that the media is just hyping up to sell records to white kids. The economic war that has been waged against the Black community has made crime, in particular dealing drugs, one of the most viable survival options for many youth.

Criminalization has two meanings here: the inaccurate portrayal of a whole people as criminals, and the process of actually driving large numbers of people to crime. Both meanings tell us something about what should be properly regarded as a counter-insurgency strategy to prevent any repetition of the rise of a revolutionary Black liberation movement that took place in the 1960s and 70s. The criminalization of young Black men is a very effective counter-insurgency tactic. It drives a deep wedge into the Black community between those who are among the most likely to directly take on the white power structure and the rest of the community. Resolving this division is a crucial step in the struggle for Black self-determination.

This is the context in which white youth's enthusiasm for gangsta' rap is taking place and it has an effect on how the Black community resolves its internal divisions. Ice-T is one of the best

known rappers associated with the gangsta' style. He has always been slicker than most of the other gangsta' rappers and consequentially has demonstrated greater commercial potential. Ice-T's album "Body Count" was the subject of a national controversy as police organizations put pressure on Time-Warner to drop Ice-T because of the inclusion of the anti-cop song "Cop Killer" on the LP. "Body Count" is not a rap album. It is a heavy metal cross-over album. While Ice-T still has a substantial Black audience the success of "Body Count" is based on the largely white heavy metal market. The decision of the cops to bring pressure on Ice-T, and Ice-T's eventual capitulation to that pressure (he dropped the "Cop Killer" track from the album) say some interesting things about the implications of white enthusiasm for gangsta' rap.

"Cop Killer" is one of a countless number of songs that promote cop killing (I reject the frequent, but I believe disingenuous, claims that it is "just telling a story"). The police have been waging a war against anti-cop rap songs ever since "Fuck Tha Police" but the focus on "Cop Killer" was heavier than earlier efforts and, more importantly, it succeeded in suppressing the song. I believe that Ice-T was singled out precisely because of his massive cross-over appeal. Violent anti-cop sentiment among Black youth is nothing new, it is the natural response to the daily interactions between the cops and Black youth. What is new is millions of white youth gleefully listening to Black people talk about killing cops. For this reason Ice-T was a logical target for police pressure. The other side of the story is that Ice-T's dependence on a white market made him more vulnerable to that pressure.

The identification of white youth with the insurgency implicit in gansta' rap is largely unformed and unarticulated. Gangsta' rap is not talking about the lived realities of most of its white listeners. In this context the presence or the absence of an anti-cop track can seem less important than the vicarious identification with the dangerous pose of the gangsta' rapper. The police of course can appreciate the difference. Ice-T's capitulation may eventually hurt his standing among his white listeners, but it was a decision he could not have gotten away with if his audience was mainly Black. It would have destroyed his credibility instantaneously. Ice-T's capitulation has set the stage for a less publicized general assault on rap artists. Writing for *The Source,* the main rap magazine, Jon Shecter exposed how pressure on many rap artists to drop potentially

controversial tracks has increased dramatically since Ice-T's decision.

White interest in gangsta' rap affects the dynamics of police repression of Black dissent as in the case of Ice-T. But, perhaps more important is how white listeners give social power to one section of the Black community and how that distorts the efforts of the Black community to determine its own destiny. Historically, capitalism in the United States was built on the super-exploitation of Black labor, first as slaves and then as wage-workers. The resulting white supremacist social structure has prevented the development of any kind of autonomous capitalist class in the Black community. Consequently, the power of economically successful individuals, including many entertainers, within the Black community is greatly amplified. This relatively small section of the Black community is also very dependent on the good graces of white capital. In the past this Black middle class has tended to provide a great deal of the leadership for the civil rights movement, but it has also sought to chill out a lot of the militancy that has come out of the Black ghettoes.

The gangsta' rapper adds a new dimension to this dynamic. The commercially successful gangsta' rapper with a recording contract at a major label is simultaneously dependent on the white capitalists who distribute the music, and on an image of militancy that is crucial for selling the music. The willingness of many white listeners to uncritically accept an apolitical rapper romanticizing gang violence as readily as a political rapper advocating Black revolution gives economic power and social prestige to the apolitical rapper, and by association to the apolitical gang culture he or she publicly represents.

At the same time the more critical white listener who prefers the semi-political (anti-cop) gangsta' rap to the more outright anti-social material is also giving economic power and social prestige to a group of people who play a very complicated set of roles in the Black community. The politicized gangster is a very mixed bag.

The Los Angeles rebellion demonstrated the insurgent potential of the gangs. The truce between the long feuding Crips and Bloods, the proposal to "Rebuild L.A." and the effective resistance to police efforts to disrupt the truce show that the gangs are well organized and able to act at least semi-autonomously. I believe it is correct to draw from the these facts the conclusion that politicized

gang members can play an important role in building a revolutionary Black liberation movement. The danger I see is that these forces will be equated with the revolutionary aspirations of the Black community as a whole, and that radical white youth will uncritically support these forces. The gangs are made up of many of the brightest and most organizationally inclined young men who feel they have nowhere else to go. They are filled with natural rebels who will often be drawn to revolutionary ideas. But as organizations the primary relationship of gangs to the community is exploitive and murderous. When whole gangs enter into political activity it is important to remember that their power comes originally from their ability to rip off and terrorize the community.

In the late 1960s, in the wake of massive Black urban rebellions, the U.S. government and corporate elite employed two tactics of counter-insurgency that bear on this discussion. One was building up a layer of Black capitalists and professionals who would function as a buffer between the impoverished majority of the Black community and the white power structure. The second was the use of gangs to disrupt the activities of revolutionary organizations in the Black community. Gangs are subject to this manipulation because they have a direct economic interest in the stability of the capitalist ghetto economy that they are an important part of. They are fearful of the power of the polIce-To shut them down, they are fearful of the power of a revolutionary movement to run them out.

The gangsta' rapper needs to be seen in the context of this historical experience. Gangsta' rap has played an important role in building up the identification of white youth with some of the most rebellious sections of the Black community. At the same time the gangsta' rapper is an unreliable spokesperson for the revolutionary aspirations of the Black community. The gangsta' rapper is subject to pressure from corporate record labels. The solution to this complex dilemma is not to caricature gangsta' rap as Michelle Shocked did, nor to encourage white youth to only listen to "Politically Correct" rap and thereby disconnect themselves from the rich, and contradictory, realities of Black culture. White youth listening to gangsta' rap have taken a step towards solidarity with the movement for Black liberation. What is crucial at this point is to create ways for them to take the next step from cultural identification to active political support. Rap artists can encourage this step in various ways, but ultimately it has to involve a rupture with the spectacular-

ized politics of controversial celebrities, and an embrace of action in the real world. The thousands of young white people who participated in the Los Angeles rebellion and the related uprisings across the country represent fresh signs of the possibility of that rupture.

Cultural Rebellion and Political Insurgency

Gangsta' rap was the cultural product of a particular period. That period is passing, and so is gangsta' rap. The popularity of Arrested Development and the movie CB4 are two indications of this passing. Arrested Development consciously rejects the macho pose of the gangsta' rapper without abandoning the revolutionary political commitments of the more politicized gangsta' rap. But unlike the almost exclusively political work of Public Enemy, Arrested Development roots its politics in an affirmation of the Black community as a whole, complete with ambiguities and complexities. The popular hit, "Tennessee," powerfully reconnects the largely northern urban rap culture to the Southern past, and by extension to a broader, more historically rooted, and more nurturing notion of community than the desiccated bitterness of the young urban gangster. Where Arrested Development poses an alternative to the culture of the gangsta' rapper, CB4 is a parody of the gangsta' rapper as a poser looking for a quick buck. The movie follows the efforts of a group of middle class Black rappers as they try to hit it big, finally succeeding when they embrace the gangsta' formula.

Arrested Development and CB4 each in their own way indicates a turn towards a richer, more nuanced, and more critical expression of the current ferment in the Black community. The Los Angeles rebellion announced the resurgent power of Black rebellion, but it also exposed the political, and organizational weaknesses that now must be confronted if that power is to become a force for actual liberation. Both Arrested Development and CB4 also give white rap listeners something more to think about than another call to off the pigs. But CDs and movies should not be confused with a political program.

There is a tendency among white radicals to approach all questions of culture in a one-dimensionally political manner. This approach not only makes for stultifying cultural criticism, it also robs one's politics of the appreciation of how most people live their lives that, to my mind, seems crucial to effective radical political

action. In discussing the politics of gangsta' rap with other white radical activists this problem often arises. It can take two forms: a moralizing about the political deficiencies of particular artists, or an uncritical awe before a militant pose. These are really two sides of the same coin, the refusal to attempt to understand gangsta' rap as it is experienced by most of the people who listen to it.

The error of most radicals in cultural criticism is simultaneously taking cultural expressions too seriously and not seriously enough. In talking and thinking about gangsta' rap most radicals take the specific lyrical political content too seriously as either an expression of political failings or of political possibilities. At the same time most radicals fail to appreciate the ways that general developments within culture reflect changes in the way people are thinking about themselves and by extension in their capacities for action. Far more important than whether a particular rapper uses the word "bitch" or advocates killing cops, is the degree to which currents within rap reflect a developing awareness among a people of their subjectivity, their ability to act for themselves. Gangsta' rap was the expression of the emergence of a new political subject that announced itself with the Los Angeles rebellion — and that fact is far more important than either the predictable homophobia or the overblown invocations of the Panthers. The popularity of gangsta' rap among white youth reflects a recognition of that subjectivity and a desire to share in it — and that fact is more important than any tendency to romanticize the gangsta' image.

Black youth are in the process of finding a fuller cultural expression of their newly rediscovered political subjectivity. It is likely that white youth will remain attracted to that process as well, but to the degree that they develop their own subjectivity it will find some of its own cultural expressions. To the degree that the renewed political subjectivity of Black youth has prompted this development, gangsta' rap deserves some credit for making possible an authentically multi-cultural alliance that can challenge the death grip of white supremacy and capitalism. The gangsta' rapper is already leaving the stage, but the new political subjects he or she represented have only begun to act.

Christopher Day works with the Love and Rage Network. We expect to publish one or more replies to this article in the next issue.

HUCKLEBERRY FINN: RACE TRAITOR

Editors' note. "All modern American literature," wrote Hemingway, "comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." Yes, but what does *Huckleberry Finn* come from? The answer is—the slave narrative.

In the decades before the Civil War, a number of former slaves wrote and published their life stories, often with the help of the abolitionist movement. Many were widely read and did a great deal to arouse northern opinion against slavery. The most famous of the slave narratives at the time (and still the best known) was by Frederick Douglass.

Aside from mobilizing opposition to slavery, the narratives also constituted a new literary form. Indeed, one contemporary commentator, Theodore Parker, described the slave narrative as America's unique and original contribution to world literature.[1]

The slave narrative followed a more or less standard form: it began with the horrors of life under slavery, described how the idea of freedom germinated and took shape in the writer's mind, recounted the escape from slavery, and concluded with a statement of the writer's hopes for a new life.

Huckleberry Finn follows the form, although its main protagonist is not a slave. Huck has run away from Widow Douglas, Miss Watson, his father, and the entire community of St. Petersburg (based on Hannibal, Missouri, where Twain grew up). He meets Jim, a slave of Miss Watson, who has also run off. The two set off together on a raft down the Mississippi, intending to turn north at Cairo, up the Ohio River to freedom.

The climax of the book—and perhaps the most intense moment in all of American literature—takes place in the chapter, "You Can't Pray a Lie," when Huck learns that Jim has been betrayed by two confidence men and is being held as a runaway. Huck's slight exposure to school and church has taught him that the

1 See Houston Baker, ed., *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglasss, A Fugitive Slave* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 12-13.

proper course would be to write to Miss Watson, informing her of Jim's whereabouts. He starts to do so, but his mind turns to their trip down the river: "Somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind."

> . . . and then I happened to look around and see that paper.
>
> It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:
>
> "All right, then, I'll go to hell"—and tore it up.
>
> It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog.

In a certain sense, the entire project of *Race Traitor* is to examine, from every possible angle, the moment when Huck Finn (and all the modern Huck Finns) decide to break with what Huck calls "sivilization" and take the steps that will lead to Jim's (and their own) freedom.

Last year a literary scholar, analyzing speech patterns, concluded that Twain modeled Huck Finn's speech on that of a 10-year-old black boy he had met at a hotel in New York. *(New York Times*, July 7, 1992.) We cannot judge the validity of her claim; Twain insisted, in the Explanatory Note, that he was personally familiar with the various dialects used in the book and that he was careful to distinguish among them. When a great writer tells what he is trying to do, it is a good idea to pay attention. But even if it turns out that the scholar is right, in a larger sense the specific model for Huck's speech is beside the point; for who could believe that the language and world view of anybody, black or white, growing up in "St. Petersburg" could fail to be influenced by the presence of slavery and the slave?

Just as America's most beloved literary work has roots in the classic story of the slave's quest for freedom, so will the future of

this country depend on the willingness of Americans to identify their quest for self-realization with the destruction of the evil system of white race supremacy, the modern counterpart of slavery.

The following essays were written by students in a class at Harvard. They show that, more than one hundred years after the book was written, the story of Huck and Jim speaks directly to the heart of the modern reader. We refuse to despair for a country that can still cherish such characters.

THE LAW ACCORDING TO HUCK

BY JOANNA WEISS

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a story about breaking the law, but not about breaking all laws. By faking his own death, leaving his hometown, and rafting down the Mississippi River with a runaway slave named Jim, Mark Twain's title character proves he isn't afraid to reject a rule or two. Throughout the book, Huck openly defies the authority of church, state, and his elders—and suffers few pangs of guilt about his disobedience. But over the course of his journey, despite his misbehavior, Huck holds fast to one set of guidelines. The rules Huck refuses to break are not voiced by his parents or guardians, not written in the record books or the Bible. They are the laws of the natural world, dictated by superstitions and obeyed through mystic rituals.

Life in a small riverside town is full of rules—government rules that force Huck Finn to go to school and church, cultural rules that force him to sleep in a bed and wear clean clothes, Biblical rules that command him to love his neighbor. The guidelines set by these different institutions often overlap, and always send clear messages. In the Bible readings his guardian frequently prescribes, Huck must hear "Thou shalt not steal" *ad nauseum*. And nineteenth-century Missouri law books contain ample restrictions against theft and robbery. Huck knows that the penalties for transgression range from a

night in jail to an eternity in hell. But neither clear-cut prohibitions nor the threat of punishment deters him from taking things that aren't his.

Huck uses his father's wisdom as justification for his robberies of farm fields and markets, for his theft of boats and other large items: "Pap always said, take a chicken when you get a chance, because if you don't want him yourself you can easily find somebody that does, and a good deed ain't never forgot" or "Pap always said it warn't no harm to borrow things, if you was meaning to pay them back, sometime." Huck recognizes the flimsiness of Pap's character. He remembers the counter-arguments his Christian guardian offers to Pap's assertions. He nonetheless prefers to follow his father's advice, when it suits him.

"Thou shalt not lie" is another rule Huck frequently ignores. A master of deception, Huck invents believable stories at the drop of a hat, and uses clever tricks to cover his frequent slip-ups. When he forgets the fake name he assumed as a guest of the Grangerfords, Huck issues a challenge to young Buck Grangerford: "I bet you can't spell my name." Buck's reply, "G-o-r-g-e J-a-x-o-n," furnishes him with the information he needs.

Huck needs the food he pilfers; he swipes boats only when his life is in danger. Necessity provides a rationale for most of his lies, as well. Even his most self-indulgent stories wind up serving a valuable purpose. From his trip to St. Petersburg disguised as a girl, he returns to Jackson's Island with information that ultimately saves Jim's life.

Huck rarely shows remorse for making up stories, but he feels terrible after he plays a trick on Jim. Huck pretends that a terrible storm, which had separated the two travelers, never took place, and insists that Jim must have dreamed the entire episode. When Jim discovers the truth and expresses disappointment in his young friend, Huck swallows his pride and apologizes:

> It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger—but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way.

By assisting in Jim's escape, Huck violates strict fugitive slave

laws, laws that can result in harsh penalties for whites. By treating Jim as a friend and an equal, Huck shows that he rejects the common interpretation of the Bible, that blacks are inferior to whites. Huck doesn't come to this conclusion easily. It is difficult for anyone to reject ideas that seem universally held, to abandon notions that are rarely questioned.

Children learn the basic laws of human behavior not through books, but through consistent contact with other people. Huckleberry Finn's education began with his birth in St. Petersburg, Missouri. St. Petersburg, so far as we know, operates quietly and peacefully under a slaveholding system. But the burden of this system must fall somewhere, and here it falls on identity. Skin color instantly determines the identity of every resident. Before any other judgements can be made, each individual is classified as "white" or "black." And that simple label determines his or her place in the town's social structure.

Because Jim is black, his identity is defined chiefly by slavery. Huck first refers to Jim as "Miss Watson's big nigger." Miss Watson is Huck's guardian's sister; Jim is her property. Throughout his journey, Huck has trouble dismissing that concept. On the raft the two companions share an equal standing. Nonetheless, Huck often reverts to the belief that Jim belongs to somebody. When he wrestles with moral qualms about helping Jim escape, Huck describes his conscience's haunting message:

> What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word? What did that poor woman do to you, that you could treat her so mean? Why, she tried to learn you your book, she tried to learn you your manners, she tried to be good to you every way she knowed how. *That's* what she done.

Huck's conscience is correct; Miss Watson has taught him much of what he knows. While she inculcated some of her lessons through lectures, her behavior sent a far more influential message. Huck learned about the relationship between blacks and whites every day of his life, through the interactions he saw and experienced. He witnessed poor treatment of blacks at the hands of many of the people he was taught to admire. At night, he recalls, Miss Watson "fetched the niggers in." His language reveals the thirteen-year-old's view of

the master-slave relationship; to Miss Watson, Huck observed, blacks were animals or objects. Even Pap, an unsavory character but the only parent Huck ever knew, railed extensively on the freedoms that blacks had obtained up north:

> "There was a free nigger there, from Ohio. . .they said he was a p'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain't the wust. They said he could *vote*, when he was at home. . . . I says I'll never vote again."

Every encounter he witnessed between Jim and Miss Watson, every tirade on "niggers" he heard from Pap, reinforced Huck's notion that Jim was his inferior. Huck certainly saw other sides of Jim—he watched the black man's interactions with his fellow slaves, and recognized his skill with the spiritual realm. But in the world Huck knew best, the world of St. Petersburg, nearly everyone behaved according to traditional guidelines. And for Huck, these rules, far more than the Biblical quotes and the fugitive slave law he knew about in the abstract, helped to codify the "law" that blacks were slaves.

It is much easier for Huck to break this law once he leaves the society that taught and enforced it. On a raft in the river, as Huck distances himself more and more from St. Petersburg, he begins to separate himself from all of the rules that governed the first thirteen years of his life. But the separation is not easy, and he finds himself torn between allegiance to his new friend and allegiance to the rules he recently escaped.

Jim, with an unflagging idealism and an astute sense of logic, dismisses the laws Huck can't easily forget. Jim rejects the notion that superficial differences should cause men to act differently. Trying to explain why the French don't speak like Americans, Huck insists that because cats and cows don't speak English, there is no reason a Frenchman should. But Jim immediately recognizes the fallacy in Huck's argument.

> "Is a cat a man, Huck?"
> "No."
> "Well, den, dey ain't no sense in a cat talkin' like a man. Is a cow a man?—er is a cow a cat?"

"No, she ain't neither of them."
"Well, den, she ain' got no business to talk like either one er the yuther of 'em. Is a Frenchman a man?"
"Yes."
"*Well*, den! Dad blame it, why doan' he *talk* like a man? You answer me *dat*!"

Huck is frustrated by this exchange, but Jim's logic here is simple and perfect. He demonstrates his belief that a human is a human, and needs no artificial source of separation from others like him. French or American, Kentuckian or Missourian, black or white, all humans are part of the same species. Just as all cats share the same language regardless of their color or size, Jim insists, humans should share the same language—and by extension the same rights—regardless of nationality or race. Huck slowly grows to understand this view.

Huck breaks many rules over the course of his passage down the Mississippi. But thoughout his journey, he constantly and steadfastly adheres to one value system—a set of codes mandated neither by the Bible nor by the law books. Nature dictates to Huck an elaborate set of customs, whose intricacies he takes great pains to learn and whose advice he takes great pains to follow.

Through his travels with Jim, Huck discovers an extensive list of guidelines, ranging from the proper time to fold a tablecloth to the best way to dispose of a dead man's bee hive. Jim also introduces Huck to an inventory of signs and signals. Some dictate the day's weather. Others predict the future: Jim says he knows he will someday be wealthy because he has hairy arms and a hairy chest. Many announce impending bad luck. ("What you want to know when good luck's a comin' for? want to keep it off?" Jim asks.) Regardless of their origins, Huck associates these rules and omens with Jim's wisdom, and with nature's preeminence. He finds that nearly all of the mystic prophecies hold.

When he breaks one of these "laws," Huck notes, he faces near-immediate retribution. Jim scolds his young friend for inviting bad luck by touching a snake skin. Huck is doubtful, but regrets his actions several days later, when a rattlesnake bites Jim. The boy is certain the two events are connected.

Superstitions played an important role in nineteenth-century slave culture. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass writes about

his experience as a slave in Maryland. He recalls one encounter in the woods with another slave, Sandy Jenkins. Seeing that Douglass is distraught, Sandy tell his friend the secret of "a certain *root*, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it *always on my right side*, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me."

Although he is skeptical at first, Douglass soon grows to believe Sandy's story. He gains confidence from the root's supposed powers—so much confidence that he defies Mr. Covey, an oppressive slave driver. Like Huck and Jim, Douglass challenges the rules that govern his world. Later in his life, Douglass escaped from slavery.

Huckleberry Finn challenges rules right and left. He turns Bible lessons topsy-turvy and makes a mockery of the legal system. And after a long inner struggle, he finally rejects slavery, the fundamental precept that shapes his former society. Although he is unwilling to touch a snake and cringes at the thought of burning a spider, Huck Finn chooses to renounce much of what he has learned from "sivilization" in St. Petersburg, Missouri. By leading Huck on this course, Mark Twain suggests that the laws of the rattlesnake, the spider, and the cosmos have a power and a permanence that human laws lack.

HUCK FINN AND THE AUTHORITY OF CONSCIENCE

BY MEGAN FRITSCHEL

Whether he was an impertinent humorist, a renegade boy adventurer, or a nameless genteel voice in his numerous short stories, Samuel Clemens fought an inner struggle for identity. Clemens was a Nineteenth Century upright journalist and

man of letters who was freed of societal constraints by his pseudonym, Mark Twain. It was as if he stepped out of his body of proper manners and society dinners and obtained a license for bawdiness and vernacular humor by stepping into Twain's shoes and taking up his pen. As Justin Kaplan describes, "in February of 1863, when for the first time he signed 'Mark Twain' to a travel letter for the Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise*", [he] thereby committed himself to the identity and obligations of a humorist."[2] This urge to adopt another identity, to reject society (to a certain extent) and revert to a more natural state is acted upon by both Twain and his classic creation, Huckleberry Finn. From the start of the "mostly true book," Huck "lits out" of the Mississippi Valley after various attempts by the Widow Douglas to "sivilize" him. Huck feels more comfortable in his rags, sleeping in the woods, than crammed into the suffocating stiff shirts of society. Going naked is even better. This physical struggle between civilization and a more barbaric state is a manifestation, a continuance on a tangible level, of Huck's inner battle, that of his heart and his conscience.

Much has been made of the dichotomy of The River and The Shore, the one a grand representation of spiritual freedom and the other a symbol of bondage. Henry Nash Smith sees these two physical elements as primarily antagonistic in their relationship:

> Huck is drawn ashore repeatedly, and repeatedly returns to the raft, but this apparent movement is merely an oscillation between two modes of experience, and the episodes are restatements, with variations, of the same theme: the raft versus the town, the River versus the Shore.[3]

But is this relationship quite so antagonistic? It would seem that the Shore is indeed a representative of social tyranny and the raft a symbol of egalitarianism. Huck and Jim, as they escape from The Shore and embark upon the raft traveling down river, become good friends, equal in their respect and love for one another, equal in their desire to "light out'" and equal in social status. On The Shore, "Admission [is] 25 cents; children and servants, 10 cents." On The

2 Introduction to *Great Short Works of Mark Twain* (New York, 1967), vi.

3 Introduction to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Riverside Edition, Boston, 1958), xii.

River, water becomes a leveling force: the differences between black and white fade and become confused in the equalizing fog which settles down upon the waves. But does the raft truly put Huck and Jim upon equal ground (as it were)? The sleeping arrangements in the wigwam betray a certain hierarchy:

> My bed was a straw tick—better than Jim's, which was corn-shuck; there's always cobs around in a shuck tick, and they poke into you and hurt.

Huck never explains this curious difference, and whether it is intentional remains unknown. And just as Huck and Tom "slipped Jim's hat off of his head and hung it on a limb right over him" on The Shore, Huck tricks Jim upon the raft: ". . . I could a got down on my knees en kiss' yo' foots I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin' bout wuz how you could make a fool uv old Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is trash. . ." As in the dark of the night on the Shore, as in the blinding fog upon the River, Huck takes advantage of Jim, treating him as more of an exasperating gullible child than a friend. Although one person is just himself, two people do constitute a certain kind of society where struggles for interpersonal power will commence, and it is upon the raft that monarchy later invades, with the entrance of the King and the Duke. The child and the black man once again become slaves to an aristocracy, a fraud though it is, and the superficiality of social rank swallows both Huck and Jim: "So Jim and me set to majestying him, and doing this and that and t'other for him, and standing up till he told us we might set down."

Huck cannot seem to rid himself of the Shore; he returns to it again and again, and his trip with Jim upon the raft is not one of "freedom, security, happiness, and harmony," but one intruded upon by society—not necessarily the physical society of houses and schools but the "vulgarity and malice and fraud and greed and violence"[4] which are both the source and the product of the social consciousness. For it is also upon the raft that we first glimpse flashes of Huck's internal struggle with the question of freedom and slavery. His heart belongs to the River, is wild and rebellious and full of intense feeling, while his conscience is corrupt with the oppressive force of moral codes:

4 Ibid, xi.

> I was letting *on* to give up sin, but away inside of me I was holding on to the biggest one of all. I was trying to make my mouth *say* I would do the right thing and clean thing, and go and write to that nigger's owner and tell where he was; but deep down in me I knowed it was a lie.

Huck must force himself to verbalize his motivations only when conversing with others. He can barely choke out the words authority would like to hear, while his silent debates with himself involve feelings and knowledge, not mere words, and take on a kind of eloquence in their presentation. In their content, to our Twentieth Century ears, these conversations Huck has with his "deep down inside" have an air of irony. Or rather, a strong, wild gust of it. Huck's problem is that he has not been thoroughly "sivilized." He has learned, from school, from church, from the Widow Douglas, that slavery is a "right thing and a clean thing." Within the realm of his conscience, Jim his friend becomes "that nigger." But Huck's rebellious heart stops short and cocks an eyebrow, suspicious of his "learning": ". . . what's the use you learning to do right, when it's troublesome to do right and ain't no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same? I was stuck." He is indeed stuck. His situation is that of the raft tied to the dock yet pulled by the current; he is in between worlds and in between urges. When Tom Sawyer agrees to help Jim out of slavery, Huck is confused at this decision, one that he has already made himself:

> . . . yet here he was, without any more pride, or rightness, or feeling, than to stoop to this business, and make himself a shame, and his family a shame, before everybody. I *couldn't* understand it, no way at all.

Even as this dilemma of feeling and action and moral rightness is externalized for Huck to observe, he still does not comprehend the nature of the struggle. His corrupt conscience, the result of moral and religious education, comes to represent the society he cannot fully escape.

Huck recognizes the fallacy of his religious education, not in an ideological analysis, but in a rational assessment: "there ain't nothing in it" because "if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork?" Although

he does fly to the woods and reason this problem out of his mind, he finds no answers, and so returns to society and accepts Miss Watson's authority:

> I went out in the wood and turned it over in my mind a long time, but I couldn't see no adventure about it . . . So at last I reckoned I wouldn't worry about it any more, but just let it go.

Even as Huck makes his big decision to help Jim to freedom, his resolute "All right then, I'll go to hell" still rings of religious retribution in the after life; he has decided for his heart, but this seeming triumph holds a steadfast belief in his decision's moral degeneracy. It is in this reverence for authority that Huck creates an internal enemy and blocks for himself the path of his heart. Tom Sawyer is another embodiment of this authority, and Huck's willing subservience, his relief at getting the responsibility for his actions off of his own hands, almost gets them both killed and Jim sent back into slavery:

> . . . I knowed mighty well that whenever he got *his* plan ready, it wouldn't have none of them objections to it.
>
> And it didn't. He told me what it was, and I see in a minute it was worth fifteen of mine, for style, and would make Jim just as free a man as mine would, and maybe get us all killed besides.

Huck rejects his own autonomy at this point, yielding to the power of authoritative society rather than his own rationality, and this urge proves the most dangerous one of all. Huck's true autonomy results in his loneliness, a feeling that is intensely disagreeable to him, and although he has a stroke of luck in finding Jim on the island, he hastily creates his own society upon the raft. He embraces religion and societal authority because they externalize his actions and his guilty responses, and relieve him of the responsibility of being alone.

Twain's German contemporary, Friedrich Nietzsche, defined conscience as "the proud awareness of the extraordinary privilege of

5 Second Essay, Section Two of *Genealogy of Morals* (New York, 1989), 60.

responsibility, the consciousness of this rare freedom, this power over oneself and over fate. . . [which has] penetrated to the profoundest depths and become instinct, the dominating instinct."[5] Huck has given up this responsibility to those he recognizes as authority figures: religion, Southern attitudes, and Tom Sawyer's imagination. His power over himself has ceased to become instinct, and it is because of this adoration for societal clout that his corrupt conscience battles so unceasingly with his deepest instinct of true moral good. It is doubtful that Huck could have ever truly escaped "sivilization," and it is more doubtful that he would have even wanted to.

It seems to us, thumbing through the well-worn pages of a paperback *Huckleberry Finn,* that Huck's dilemma is ironic and almost humorous. But even in the post-Civil War era of the 1880s, when Mark Twain scratched out his "story for boys", Southern society was teaching its children to revere the right to property and to read the Bible. Slavery, though made illegal in the aftermath of the Civil War, was still an institution in the Southern mind, and its peculiarity could only be seen and wondered at. Huck Finn's physical surroundings symbolize the great, unvoiced struggle within him; he wavers in between The River of supposed spiritual freedom and The Shore of repressive civilization, and compromises by tugging the land up onto the raft. These two worlds are no longer antagonistic "modes of experience," but are mingled together within Huck's sensibilities, fuzzed at the edges. His good heart strives to save Jim while his reverence for all he has been taught almost destroys his only true friend. In subverting the societal concept of morality, Huck finds happiness but also the overarching guilt stemming from that moral sense that has become, within him, spiritually transcendent. He becomes a slave, subservient to the corrupt conscience of the Nineteenth Century American South. As he grapples with internal and external influences, we are never really sure of his true identity—Huck Finn, Sarah Williams, George Peters, Tom Sawyer—and we have the sneaking suspicion that that is just the way Mark Twain—Samuel Clemens—would have wanted it.

SLAVES, ENGLAND, AND THE AMERICAN WORD

BY CHRISTIAN D'ANDREA

Jim moves down the Mississippi at the same speed as Huckleberry Finn. Of all the social movements current while Twain wrote *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in the 1880s, from the Pendleton Act's civil service reform to the problems of Indians and Expansion in the Dakota and Oklahoma territories, Twain's novel only calls by name and involves characters from a single American social institution—Southern slavery. Many of the book's characters are avatars of moral positions who, although they help define the South, do not accompany Huck for the book's duration in the way Jim, the de facto ex-slave, does. Why does Twain add the institution of slavery to his celebration of anecdotes from scattered Mississippi communities? What keeps Jim at Huck's side? They come together by chance on Jackson's Island. They stay together because of a promise Huck makes to the runaway slave. Huck "ain't agoing to tell"—a promise which is both preserved because Huck is a trustworthy friend and severely put to the test because Huck is a Southern child programmed to despise the "low down Abolitionist." Jim is safe because his secret is safe with Huck, "de on'y white genlman dat ever kep' his promise to ole Jim." The paradox is that he gives his word to not say a word. But he actually says a great deal. His zestful and improper English, spotted with "ain't" and "warn't," makes up an ample fraction of the book's dialogue and all of its prose. Huck is the narrator of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* In a rich dialect, the book creates a folk tale in rural America and also manages to condemn slavery. While Huck's friendship with Jim constitutes Twain's statement on slavery, *Huckleberry Finn* is not an anti-slavery polemic. It is pure fiction making its points through dramatic episodes. If Twain's comment on slavery, the one institution called by its name, is implicit, his other social comments must be positively hidden. Whether the message is writ large or small, Twain's agent of revelation is the paradoxical Huckleberry, rich but penniless, officially dead but really alive — a boy who fibs feverishly with poor grammar while keeping

the most important promise on the Mississippi.

Huck's enduring promise to Jim is a testament to the power of the spoken word. But the role played by language and words in *Huckleberry Finn* exceeds Huck's oath and the exposition of regional dialect. Twain's characters stealthily set up all the angles from which Twain can view the one designated political institution, slavery, as well as the movements he associates with language. For example, slavery exists in this novel which has no government—no official authority figures—only would-be fugitive slave hunters. The horror of plantation life would suffice to prove the misery of the slaves. But what about a novel in which the one slave is permanently separated from his masters, the slave holders? Is this a true portrait of slavery? This is the quandary that exists in *Huckleberry Finn*. Jim's question, "dey ain' no kings here, is dey, Huck?" is a legitimate question for a slave, and Huck answers with a firm "No." Jim has no master in the novel. Twain's innovation on the slavery issue is to prove its inhumanity not with whips and chains, but by asserting the Negro's humanity in an unusual environment where freedom from whites depends on friendship with a white. Instead of a master's subject, Jim is Huck's equal - one man in a partnership where forty dollars, given to them as a sympathetic contribution by two deceived boaters, is freely split "twenty dollars apiece."

"Dey ain' no kings" on Huck's Mississippi. Jim's tentative assertion, reinforced by Huck, is a loaded declaration. More than just a metaphor for the absence of Jim's masters or even Huck's father, it raises the larger issue of authority in America. And Mark Twain knows the sources from which authority flows in his country, his version of America. Twain sets *Huckleberry Finn* in a real place, the Mississippi River. Twain's authority on that subject cannot be called into question. Twain grew up and worked as a pilot on the river. In the book's "Explanatory," he also invokes his authority in the field of dialects. The use of dialects and their location along the Mississippi River are the two topics in which Twain insists on accuracy. The blend of Jim's Negro dialect and Huck's South-Western backwoods dialect is the book's seminal dialogue. It is a dialogue that can quickly run the gamut from thoughts of the lowly imposter King who "do smell so like de nation" to the strained morality of young Huck, whose loyalty to slave-society's lessons jars with the even greater loyalty to Jim, and whose confusion is reflected in the phrase "I do believe he cared just as much for his

people as white folks does for their'n." The unchanging language of their two Mississippi dialects is powerful enough to voice both the exultation and the despair of the slavery debate. The feelings and thoughts of a fictional slave and a parochial youth are those of Twain's America. His deputies, Huck and Jim, have no need for the models and heroes of other nations. These humble practitioners of a humble language detail a world free of slave kings, tell a story that mocks the imposter king, the Dauphin, and become a tool in the hands of Twain for assaulting real kings and that land of monarchs, England. "Kings" are more than a metaphor in *Huckleberry Finn.* With the stability of South-Western dialects along the Mississippi behind him, Twain attempts to hammer out a clearer vision of American cultural independence.

Twain's association of the Mississippi and its language with the independence of Huck and Jim makes the world of *Huckleberry Finn* a hostile place for European thoughts, myths, and citizens. This position is imprinted on the thoughts of Huck and Jim, who are loyal to each other above all else and pay no allegiance to local men or events, let alone foreign men or events. In the Grangerford home, a place of rare decoration and style, Huck comes across a beautiful table with "some books. . .piled up perfectly exact, on each corner of the table." The selected volumes were deliberately chosen by Twain, and Huck's candid treatment of them is tantamount to a judgment of the cultures they represent. "One was a big family Bible, full of pictures." These Scriptures get short shrift. *Pilgrim's Progress* was "interesting, but tough." Huck has neither the time nor the interest to decode the message of Bunyan. *Friendship's Offering* was "full of beautiful stuff and poetry," but he "didn't read the poetry." Huck—a practical boy who only wishes *Pilgrim's Progress* would "say why" the man left his family—pays more attention to *Dr Gunn's Family Medicine* than to *Henry Clay's Speeches.* Huck's dismissal of the Clay certifies this mini-library scene as a significant judgment on the relative value of printed words. Of all the books, only the Henry Clay selection received no comment from Huck. Huck is no more likely to value the written words of a United States Senator, even a fellow Southerner from Kentucky, than he is the written words of anybody else. The most he will have acquired from this sampling of The Canon is an appreciation for a coffee-table well decorated.

Huck's lack of interest in texts is only one way in which

Huckleberry Finn slights the power of foreign or distant words. Encouraged to think about kings by the books salvaged from the *Walter Scott,* Huck and Jim pervert the royal tradition with a discourse on Solomon and his "million wives." Henry Clay excepted, the pilloried authors and abused oral traditions are non-American. The seeming harmlessness of young minds playing with obscure legends cannot explain the story's consistent xenophobia. Because he professes the greatest love for it, Tom Sawyer's mutilation of the heraldry tradition is meant to be a stinging insult sent Europe's way. He claims to know "all the best authorities" on "getting a prisoner loose." Yet the rich traditions and lessons of "Benvenuto Chelleeny," "Casanova," and "Henri IV" suffer as much in the hands of Tom the imprecise historian as the spellings of their names suffer in Huck's phonetic spelling of Tom's dialect. Tom explains how, in the same day, Henry "heaves all the tea in Boston Harbor overboard, and whacks out a declaration of independence." These milestones of American history and the history of the Englishman, Henry IV, suffer equally under the tyranny of Tom's inaccuracy. Whereas Huck's encounter was with books elegantly arranged in the Grangerford home, Tom's sampling of history is haphazard and his interpretation is misguided. The conclusion he draws from the history of adventurers is a skewed one: "You got to invent all the difficulties." For all the talk, Tom's planned "Evasion" is a failure. Taking stock in the past does not pay off.

In comparison, Huck succeeds in protecting Jim on numerous occasions, without ever referring to European or American regulations to guide him. Huck's contribution to *Huckleberry Finn*'s theme of independence is to single out the opposition and reveal the real nature of Twain's attack. The abuse of foreign tradition is unmistakable, unlike Tom Sawyer's false application of principles. In cataloguing the "relicts" of Silas Phelps' ancestors, Huck refers to their arrival here "from England with William the Conqueror in the Mayflower." The subtle effect of this gross mistake is to ally the great invader of England with the American historical tradition. The alternative treatment of English history is Tom Sawyer's. He gives the English king, Henry IV, credit for the Declaration of Independence. Although his mistake is similar in form to Huck's, Tom effectively attributes the authorship of one of our greatest documents to an English king. Twain's judgment on the two approaches amounts to his judgement on their two proponents, and the decision

is unmistakable. Huck is the story's hero, and Tom's great scheme to free Jim is the book's great fiasco. It becomes clear that Twain's emphasis on the Mississippi region is the product of a deep loyalty, a loyalty fueled both by a love for a part of America he fully understands and a dislike for England. Corroborating this theory, the plot of *Huckleberry Finn* mounts a sustained assault on England, targeting more than just historical figures. The only living Englishmen to be found in *Huckleberry Finn,* the real Harvey and William Wilks, are given a rough welcome and are deprived of their identities. Even the English accent suffers mutilation in *Huckleberry Finn.* Doctor Robinson calls the king's attempted impersonation of Harvey Wilks the "worse imitation I ever heard." The novel's abuse of these English standards is one of Twain's hidden motives, and in his efforts he goes for the jugular of English pride. Shakespeare himself is hammered by the king's irreverent interpretation of Hamlet's soliloquy: "To be or not to be; that is the bare bodkin." As Huck narrates these snubs of English traditions from the past and present, his distinct usage of words and their loose union—his vernacular—are growing paragraph upon paragraph into the book's secret identity: a barrage of rustic American dialect hurled at Britain and its version of English.

Twain's celebration of Missouri, South-Western, and Pike County dialects in *Huckleberry Finn* suggests his enrollment in the effort for an independent American language, a movement spearheaded by men such as Ben Franklin and Noah Webster. But Mark Twain does more than just subscribe in spirit to these same ideals. He adopts in words the mysterious symbol used by Webster in his movement. In recalling the procession of the Philological Society in New York on the occasion of the ratification of the Constitution in 1788, Noah Webster described an esoteric coat of arms which was supposed to "emphasize the strong desire of many Americans to break with British English."[6] Tom Sawyer's proposed coat of arms for the imprisoned Jim corresponds with Webster's description of his Society's emblem in a number of essential details. Webster's "Argent three tongues," "gules," and "Chevron. . . indicating firmness and support" match Tom Sawyer's "three invected lines on a field azure," "gules," and "chevron vert in a chief engrailed."

6 Robert McCrum, William Cran, and Robert MacNeil, *The Story of English* (New York, 1986), 240.

Surprisingly, the problem that the coat of arms presents is not a result of Sawyer's confusing the terminology of Heraldry. He uses the words properly, but that he uses them at all is the problem. Twain is initiating himself into the movement for a pure American speech, and, in an attempt to reproduce its badge, he uses terms which are completely alien to the American dialect championed by Tom and Huck. Twain's subtle gesture one hundred years later is a sign of solidarity with Webster, but its use of the most foreign terminology seems to be a breach in Twain's own dogma of pure American dialect. Although Twain discredits the deeds of Tom, the character, whose history and plans are a colossal failure, Twain's citation of Webster's coat of arms is a genuine attempt at resurrecting a tradition. Twain ironically compromises the purity of his philosophy that the Mississippi language is the footsoldier of American cultural independence.

Mark Twain's facility with the Mississippi dialects is largely a result of "personal familiarity." It seems two kinds of familiarity are possible: one from having spoken the dialect and another from having heard the dialect. Tom's proposed coat of arms hinted at the discrepancy between living an experience and witnessing one. Along with a "dog, couchant," Tom adds "a runaway nigger, sable" to the original shield described by Webster. Twain adds a runaway slave to Webster's symbol of free American language. *Huckleberry Finn* unites linguistic liberty and racial liberty. While Webster aims for a "uniformity. . . of pronunciation" in works such as *A Grammatical Institute*, Twain celebrates the diversity of regional dialects, with a slave dialect prominent among them. Yet one thing is certain. The white Mark Twain never spoke the "Missouri Negro dialect." Twain's comment on slavery is a white man's comment. Confident in his skill with the Missouri Negro dialect, Twain creates Jim, a black man with a good heart and an almost fatherly love for Huck. But no amount of sympathy and familiarity with blacks or accuracy in describing their superstitions will give him the experience of the slave, the feel of a lash on the back. Mark Twain has every right to condemn slavery from the viewpoint of the white man, but *Huckleberry Finn* is meant to be an exemplar of a new kind of book, one in which the dialects are used only under strict authorization. Twain's sorties against slavery and England depend on the professed invincibility of dialect. Are these movements jeopardized? A consideration of the impact made by Webster and language on another

black slave will help determine whether Twain succeeded in realistically portraying a slave.

Unlike the fabricated character, Jim, Frederick Douglass portrayed the life of the slave from the perspective of having been one. The question of greater realism between Twain's Jim and Douglass is moot. But, while the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is grounded in the author's experience of the historical fact and Jim's story is only really accurate in its dialect, the relative power and effect of the two works is not decided. Both Twain and Douglass revere language in various forms. Frederick Douglass attributes his freedom to the written word while *Huckleberry Finn* emphasizes the spoken word. This difference between the two narratives is highlighted in the corresponding use of companions and accomplices in emancipation. Jim had Huck, and Douglass had the "little white boys whom I met in the street" and used as "teachers." But Huck is a permanent friend whose contribution was that strange silence of withholding a word—the keeping of a promise not to tell on Jim. Douglass, on the other hand, sought forbidden lessons from the mouths of the boys. Because he had believed his master's warning, "If you teach that nigger how to read. . .it would forever unfit him to be a slave," reading became the secret to freedom. And writing soon followed. While Twain culled from Webster that cultish coat of arms of the early declaration of American cultural independence, Douglass "cop[ied] the italics in Webster's Spelling Book, until [he] could make them all without looking." Webster's attempt to standardize grammar succeeded. Douglass's studies resulted in the measured prose of his classic American slave narrative—the product of a master rhetorician.

The purity of Douglass's proper English contrasts sharply with Jim's dialect. Frederick Douglass thinks about slave songs and makes the striking point, with striking syntax, "To these songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery." Writing in perfect standard English prose, Douglass asserts that "slaves sing most when they are most unhappy." Mark Twain's Jim never sings. Maybe he is always happy, or maybe Twain did not truly understand the behavior of slaves. He "moans" and "mourns" to himself, but he never sings. His humble vernacular, riddled with the "de's," "dese's," "dis's," "mo's," and "agwyne's" of stereotypical slave speech, is enough to communicate his faith to Huck. Friendship, not diction, is Jim's ticket to freedom.

Although Douglass's escape from the "horrible jargon" into a mode of learned speech seems to conflict with Jim's roots in his dialect, Twain knew the power of elevating the quality of diction. Mary Jane Wilks speaks of Huck early on with the slightly flawed grammar of the Pike County dialect: "the thing is for to treat him kind, and not be saying things to make him remember he ain't in his own country." But with the increase of her woe after having watched the separation of her slaves' family at auction, she achieves a ready fluency with Standard English and has harsh words for the king: "The Brute! Come - don't waste a minute - not a second -we'll have them tarred and feathered, and flung into the river." Twain also temporarily imbues Doctor Robinson with a flawless English when he is called upon to be the sole proponent of the truth in the Wilks fraud and exhort the people to "turn your backs on that scoundrel." The speech of Jim and Huck is immune to such fluctuation because they are always skirting the border between mundane events and high moral virtue.

Douglass masterfully adopted a language. So did Mark Twain. Twain's progress is from a writer of the clear prose of journalism to the master of dialects. He tried to evince the beauty of Huck and Jim's friendship by sealing it in flawed and humble English. Douglass, a slave, both related the horrors of slavery and chronicled the miraculous growth of his own language into the flawless English that Webster prized. Twain's bond with Webster is not the shared urge to standardize a single form of English. He signed on with the Webster who fought against Britain's cultural domination, a force Twain still felt he needed to assault in the 1880s. Their use of Webster articulates the difference between the writers. Twain thrived as a word smith and wandered freely among the differences of North, South, and Black dialects. His fear was the intrusion of Britain's English with all of its historical associations and figures. So he let loose with a broadside of American language in *Huckleberry Finn*, using dialects that he knew and one, the slave dialect, that he adopted. Twain is not the authority on Southern slavery and he does not presume to make it *Huckleberry Finn*'s primary concern. While he is not an African-American, his authority to assert the eminence of the Mississippi, rebuke Britain, and do the American slave justice is uncontested.

This essay won the 1992 Sophomore Prize in the Program in History and Literature at Harvard.

IMMIGRANTS AND WHITES

BY NOEL IGNATIEV

At the turn of the century, an investigator into conditions in the steel industry, seeking employment on a blast furnace, was informed that "only Hunkies work on those jobs, they're too damn dirty and too damn hot for a 'white' man." Around the same time, a West Coast construction boss was asked, "You don't call an Italian a white man?" No, sir," came the reply, "an Italian is a dago." Odd though this usage may seem today, it was at one time fairly common. According to one historian, "in all sections native-born and northern European laborers called themselves 'white men' to distinguish themselves from the southern Europeans they worked beside."[1] I have even heard of a time when it was said in the Pacific Northwest logging industry that no whites worked in these woods, *just a bunch of Swedes*.

Eventually, as we know, Europeans of all national origins were accepted as "whites"; only rarely and in certain parts of the country is it any longer possible to hear the Jew or the Italian referred to as not white. The outcome is usually hailed as a mighty accomplishment of democratic assimilation. In this essay, I shall argue two points: first, that the racial status of the immigrants, far from being the natural outcome of a spontaneous process, grew out of choices made by the immigrants themselves and those receiving them; second, that it was in fact deeply tragic, because to the extent the immigrants became "white" they abandoned the possibility of becoming fully American. Finally, I shall speculate a bit on the future.

The general practice in the social sciences is to view race as a natural category. A representative example of this approach is the book by Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York, 1973). The authors declare the subject of their study to be the "white working class." As well-trained sociologists, they are careful to specify what they mean by "working class," but they do not find it necessary to define "white." *Of course everybody*

1 David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Non-Union Era* (New York, 1969), 120; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925* (New York, 1963), 66, 173.

knows what is "white." However, for some, including this writer, the inquiry becomes most necessary just at the point Sennett and Cobb take for granted.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to review the work showing the origins in the seventeenth century of "white" as a social category. The term came into common usage only in the latter part of the century, that is, after people from Africa and people from Europe had been living together for seven decades on the North American mainland.[2]

In an April 1984 essay in *Essence*, "On Being 'White'. . . And Other Lies," James Baldwin wrote that "No one was white before he/she came to America." Once here, Europeans became white "by deciding they were white. . . . White men—from Norway, for example, where they were *Norwegians*—became white: by slaughtering the cattle, poisoning the wells, torching the houses, massacring Native Americans, raping Black women."

Now it is some time since settlers from Norway have slaughtered any cattle, poisoned any wells, or massacred any Indians, and few Americans of any ethnic background take a direct hand in the denial of equality to people of color; yet the white race still exists as a social category. If it is not an inherited curse, whiteness must be reproduced in each generation. Although Sennett and Cobb treat it as a natural classification, they recount a story that reveals some of how it is re-created. One of the characters in their book is a man they call Ricca Kartides, who came to America from Greece, worked as a building janitor and, after a few years, "bought property *in a nearby suburb of Boston*" (emphasis added).

What social forces, what history framed the fearful symmetry of Mr. Kartides's choice of location? Was that the turning point in

2 Various scholars have explained the emergence of whiteness as a response to a problem of labor control in the seventeenth-century Chesapeake region. See especially Theodore Allen, "'. . . They Would Have Destroyed Me': Slavery and the Origins of Racism," *Radical America* IX (May-June 1975), 40-63, reissued as *Class Struggle and the Origins of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race* (Hoboken, N.J., 1975). Lerone Bennett, Jr. *The Shaping of Black America* (Chicago, 1975) is a popular account. Alden T. Vaughan, "Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 9:3 (July 1989) 311-54 provides an introduction to the literature and debates on the relation between the appearance of slavery and the ideology of race. See also Richard Williams, *Hierarchical Structures and Social Value: The Creation of Black and Irish Identities in the United States* (New York, 1990).

his metamorphosis from a Greek immigrant into a white man? What alternative paths were open to him? How would his life, and his children's lives, have been different had he pursued them? There is a great deal of history subsumed (and lost) in the casual use of the term "white." Even in the narrowest terms, "white" is not a self-evident category. Barbara J. Fields recounts the apocryphal story of an American journalist who once asked Papa Doc Duvalier what portion of the Haitian people was white. Duvalier answered unhesitatingly, "Ninety-eight percent." The puzzled reporter asked Duvalier how he defined white. "How do you define black in your country?" asked Duvalier in turn. When the answer came back that in the U.S. anyone with any discernible African ancestry was considered black, Duvalier replied, "Well, that's the way we define white in my country."[3] Along the same lines, every character in Mark Twain's novel, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, black and white, is of predominantly European descent.

If whiteness is a historical product, then it must be transmitted. Like all knowledge, white consciousness does not come easily. In one case in a small town in Louisiana at the beginning of the century, five Sicilian storekeepers were lynched for violating the white man's code: they had dealt mainly with black people and associated with them on equal terms.[4] In her short story, "The Displaced Person," Flannery O'Connor describes how the immigrant is taught to be white. The story takes place shortly after World War II. A Polish immigrant comes to labor on a small southern farm. Among the other laborers are two black men. After he has been on the farm for a while, the Pole arranges to pay a fee to one of the black men to marry his cousin, who is in a DP camp in Europe, in order for her to gain residence in the U.S. When the farm owner, a traditional southern white lady, learns of the deal. she is horrified and undertakes to explain to the Pole the facts of life in America.

> "Mr. Guizac," she said, beginning slowly and then speaking faster until she ended breathless in the middle of a word, "that nigger cannot have a white wife from Europe. You can't talk to a nigger that way. You'll excite him and besides it can't be

3 "Ideology and Race in American History," in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, *Region, Race and Reconstruction* (New York, 1982).

4 Higham, op cit 169.

done. Maybe it can be done in Poland but it can't be done here. . ."

"She no care black," he said. "She in camp three year."

Mrs. McIntyre felt a peculiar weakness behind her knees. "Mr. Guizac," she said, "I don't want to have to speak to you about this again. If I do, you'll have to find another place yourself. Do you understand?"

The story ends tragically as a consequence of the Pole's failure to learn what is expected of him in America.

In what relation, then, does whiteness stand to Americanism? If adoption by the immigrant of prevailing racial attitudes is the key to adjusting successfully to the new country, does it then follow that to become white is to become American? The opposite is closer to the truth: for immigrants from Europe (and elsewhere, to the extent they have a choice), the adoption of a white identity is the most serious barrier to becoming fully American.[5]

Like Cuba, like Brazil, like other places in the New World in which slavery was important historically, the United States is an Afro-American country. In the first place, persons of African descent constituted a large portion of the population throughout the formative period (how large no one can say, but probably around one-fifth for most of the first two centuries). Second, people from Africa have been here longer than most of the immigrant groups—longer in fact than all groups except for the Indians, the "Spanish" of the Southwest (themselves a mixture of Spaniards, Africans, and Indians), and the descendants of early English settlers (who by now also include an African strain). Above all, the experience of people from Africa in the New World represents the distillation of the American experience, and this concentration of history finds its expression in the psychology, culture, and national character of the American people.

What is the distinctive element of the American experience? It is the shock of being torn from a familiar place and hurled into a new environment, compelled to develop a way of life and culture from the materials at hand. And who more embodies that experi-

5 From a *political* standpoint, the degree of cultural assimilation is largely irrelevant. The two least culturally assimilated groups in the country are the Amish of Lancaster County—the so-called Pennsylvania Dutch—and the Hasidic Jews; yet both enjoy all the rights of whites.

ence, is more the essential product of that experience, than the descendants of the people from Africa who visited these shores together with the first European explorers (and perhaps earlier, as recent researches have suggested), and whose first settlers were landed here a year before the Mayflower?

In *The Omni-Americans* (New York, 1970) Albert Murray discusses the American national character. He draws upon Constance Rourke, who saw the American as a composite, part Yankee, part backwoodsman (himself an adaptation of the Indian), and part Negro. "Something in the nature of each," wrote Rourke,

> induced an irresistible response. Each had been a wanderer over the lands, the Negro a forced and unwilling wanderer. Each in a fashion of his own had broken bonds, the Yankee in the initial revolt against the parent civilization, the backwoodsman in revolt against all civilization, the Negro in a revolt which was cryptic and submerged but which nonetheless made a perceptible outline.[6]

"It is all too true," writes Murray, "that Negroes unlike the Yankee and the backwoodsman were slaves. . . But it is also true—and as things have turned out even more significant—that they were slaves *who were living in the presence of more human freedom and individual opportunity than they or anybody else had ever seen before.*" Later he writes:

> The slaves who absconded to fight for the British during the Revolutionary War were no less inspired by *American* ideas than those who fought for the colonies: the liberation that the white people wanted from the British the black people wanted from white people. As for the tactics of the fugitive slaves, the Underground Railroad was not only an innovation, it was also an *extension* of the American quest for democracy brought to its highest level of epic heroism.

American culture, he argues, is *"incontestably mulatto."*

6 American Humor: A Study of National Character (New York, 1931), 98-99.

> After all, such is the process by which Americans are made that immigrants, for instance, need trace their roots no further back in either time or space than Ellis Island. *By the very act of arrival*, they emerge from the bottomless depths and enter the same stream of American tradition as those who landed at Plymouth. In the very act of making their way through customs, they begin the process of becoming, as Constance Rourke would put it, part Yankee, part backwoodsman and Indian—and part Negro!

It is very generous of Murray, as a descendant of old American stock, to welcome the newcomers so unreservedly. But what if their discovery, as he puts it, of the "social, political, and economic value in white skin" leads them to "become color-poisoned bigots?"

Their development into Americans is arrested. Like certain insects which, under unfavorable conditions, do not complete their metamorphosis and remain indefinitely at the larval stage, they halt their growth at whiteness.

John Langston Gwaltney wrote, in *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* (New York, 1980), "The notion that black culture is some kind of backwater or tributary of an American 'mainstream' is well established in much popular as well as standard social science literature. To the prudent black American masses, however, core black culture *is* the mainstream." At issue is not, as many would have it, the degree to which black people have or have not been assimilated into the mainstream of American culture. Black people have never shown any reluctance to borrow from others when they thought it to their advantage. They adopted the English language—and transformed it. They adopted the Christian religion—and transformed it. They adopted the twelve-tone musical scale—and did things with it that Bach never dreamed of. In recent years they have adopted the game of basketball—and placed their own distinctive stamp on the style of play. And they have adopted spaghetti, okra, refried beans, noodle pudding, liver dumplings, and corned beef, and modified them and made them a part of ordinary "drylongso" cuisine.

It is not black people who have been prevented from drawing upon the full variety of experience which has gone into making up America. Rather, it is those who, in maddened pursuit of the white whale, have cut themselves off from human society, on sea and on

land, and locked themselves in a "masoned walled-town of exclusiveness."

All this is not to deny that whites in America have borrowed from black people. But they have done so shamefacedly, unwilling to acknowledge the sources of their appropriations, and the result has generally been inferior. The outstanding example of this process was Elvis Presley, who was anticipated by Sam Phillips's remark, "If I can find a white man who sings like a Negro, I'll make a million dollars." Other examples are Colonel Sanders's chicken and Bo Derek's curls. There are exceptions: Peggy Lee comes immediately to mind.

Can the stone be rolled back? If race, like class, is "something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships,"—to borrow the words of E.P. Thompson—then can it be made to unhappen? Can the white race be dissolved? Can "white" people cease to be?

I cite here two details which point to the possibility of the sort of mass shifts in popular consciousness that would be necessary to dissolve the white race. The first is the sudden and near-unanimous shift by Afro-Americans in the 1960s from the self-designation "Negro" to "black" or "Black." (Among prominent holdouts are Ralph Ellison and the Negro Ensemble Company.) The shift involved more than a preference for one term over another; although its precise implications were and still are unclear, and although much of its substance has disappeared or been reduced to mere symbol, there seems little doubt that the initial impulse for the change was a new view among black people of their relation to official society. "Black" stood in opposition to "white."

The second detail I cite was an apparently trivial incident I happened to witness. At Inland Steel Company's Indiana Harbor Works in East Chicago, there used to be a shuttle-bus system that operated at shift-change time, picking up workers at the main gate and delivering them to the various mills within the plant, which may be as much as a mile away. One morning, as the bus began to pull away from the gate, I saw, from my passenger's seat, a man running to catch it. He was in his early twenties, apparently white, and was dressed in the regulation steelworker's garb—steel-toed shoes, fire-resistant green jacket and pants, hard hat—underneath which could be seen shoulder-length hair, in the fashion of the time, the early 1970s. The driver pulled away and, as he did so, said over his shoul-

der, "I would have stopped for him if he'd had short hair."

That small incident brought home to me with great force some of the meaning of the revolution in style that swept so-called white youth in those years. At the time, many young people were breaking with the values that had guided their parents. In areas as seemingly unrelated as clothing and hair styles, musical tastes, attitudes toward a war, norms of sexual conduct, use of drugs, and feelings about racial prejudice, young people were creating a special community, which became known as the counterculture. In particular, long hair for males became the visible token of their identification with it. It was a badge of membership in a brotherhood cast out from official society—*exactly the function of color for Afro-Americans*. As that incident with the bus driver reveals, and as anyone who lived through those years can testify, it was perceived that way by participants and onlookers alike.

Granted that only a minority of eligible youth ever identified fully with the counterculture, that the commitment of most participants to it was not very deep, that few in it were aware of all its implications, that the whole movement did not last very long, and that its symbols were quickly taken up and marketed by official society—nevertheless, it contained the elements of a mass break with the conformity that preserves the white race.

Normally the discussion of immigrant assimilation is framed by efforts to estimate how much of the immigrants' traditional culture they lose in becoming American. Far more significant, however, than the choices between the old and the new is the choice between two identities which are both new to them: white and American.

This article, written in the spring of 1987, appeared in Konch, *Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter 1990) in a slightly different version, under the title "'Whiteness' and American Character." Noel Ignatiev is one of the editors of* Race Traitor.

CROSSOVER DREAMS: THE "EXCEPTIONAL WHITE" IN POPULAR CULTURE

BY PHIL RUBIO

> *"At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching. . . in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night. . .I was only myself, Sal Paradise, sad, strolling in this violet dark, this unbearably sweet night, wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America. . . ."* — *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac.

> *"I've been exploited all my life."* — Dan Aykroyd as Elwood Blues.

Can a white boy (or girl) play the blues? And why have so many wanted to for so long? Recently a white rap artist, Vanilla Ice, covered the song that was a hit on the black R&B radio stations in the early 70's: "Play That Funky Music White Boy" by the white R&B group Wild Cherry. The song was a description of the band's earning a black nightclub audience's approval, with the crowd shouting the song's title as the chorus: "Play that funky music, white boy. Play that funky music right! Play that funky music, white boy. Lay down the boogie and play that funky music 'til you die!"

In his introduction to *The Encyclopedia of Jazz* (New York, 1960), jazz critic Leonard Feather recounts having once given a blindfold test to African-American jazz trumpeter Roy Eldridge, who had claimed he could tell just from listening whether a musician was black or white. When Eldridge failed, Feather felt that he had proven his point—that jazz knows no color.

But Miles Davis, who often included whites in his bands, pointed out the *style* difference, in Quincy Jones's recent documen-

tary on his life: "I could tell a black band from a white band. I don't know why—how I could tell it, but I could just tell. 'Cos it [the white band] wouldn't go in my body."[1]

In the mid-70's, band leader George Clinton would cause self-doubt among white would-be funksters with this observation from his Parliament/Funkadelic hit "P-funk (Wants To Get Funked Up)": "Would you want a 'Doobie' [referring to the Doobie Brothers—a popular mostly white R&B band] in your funk?" In Frank Zappa's 1981 release "You Are What You Is" he mocked white male singers who imitated blacks because it "made them sound more manly."

Just a few years before, we saw white artists like Elvis Presley and Pat Boone routinely stealing and "whitening" black popular music for mass consumption. But the early 60's white R&B duo of Bill Medley and Bobby Hatfield (known as the Righteous Brothers) were among the first to "cross back over." Groups like them provided a vicarious feeling for many white teenagers, of having gained the approval of black people. Many readers will recall the legend of how the Righteous Brothers, whose hits "Unchained Melody" and "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'" have been recently revived, got their name. A black Los Angeles DJ, after playing their record, commented, "That's righteous, brother!" The rest was entertainment history.[2]

"That's very white of you" and "free, white and 21" were expressions I grew up with in the 60's. Today, "white" means "boring," and white kids deride other whites as dancing "too white." To be accused of playing "too white" can be an artistic death sentence. During the big blues revival in the mid-60's (that ran parallel to the Motown and Soul Music explosions), the blues band I played with in all-white DeKalb, Illinois looked up to harmonica player/singer Paul Butterfield, who'd already been playing for years in nearby Chicago

1 A white jazz piano teacher of mine even more graphically illustrated this point to me, as part of my instruction. He told me how a black sax player had cured him of playing solos with many notes but little feeling by exclaiming, "Man, do you fuck like that?!"

2 Part of the appeal of that anecdote to many whites was imagining that blacks were finally fooled by white imitators. Not only was there no evidence to indicate that, but skin color has never made any difference to black radio. If it grooves, it'll play. R&B Top 40 has seen frequent crossovers over the years, from the Rolling Stones to Suzanne Vega. I think there's even a sense of triumph among many blacks to see crossover white groups and fans as "defectors."

black blues clubs with Muddy Waters and mostly-black blues bands. He was our crossover hope. Young white jazz and blues musicians today seek approval and validation from blacks.

How did this happen? How can a racist society also make it the supreme compliment for a white musician to be told by an African-American audience that he or she "sounds black?" Is this the beginning of a dramatic shift in cultural attitudes among European-Americans, or just newer minstrelsy, through which whites can steal from, put down, and envy black culture all at the same time? Where did this crossover urge come from, and is it any different today from what it was 50 years ago, when Malcolm X noticed black-acting white zoot-suiters coming up to Harlem? Where is the line between rip-off and respect? Finally, if what we are witnessing is white assimilation, how will it go from from cultural to political, or is it in fact already there?

"Hey white boy, whatcha doin' uptown?"—from "I'm Waitin' For My Man" by The Velvet Underground, 1967.

The phenomenon of so-called whites crossing over into African-American culture started to become noticeable in the 1920's and 30's, mainly among jazz musicians and fans. Locating whites within an oppressed culture was nothing new: the solitary white man was Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim, someone who chose to live "closer to nature" with people of color, but as lord and master nevertheless. In real life we had the English "adventurer" T.E. Lawrence. But something different started happening in the 1930's. We began to see stories reflecting both a fascination and guilt with the oppressive position of whites, found in the "exceptional white" who prefers the culture of the oppressed to his or her own.

A story in himself is jazz clarinetist Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow, co-author (with Bernard Wolfe) of *Really The Blues* (New York, 1946). Known as a purist disciple of early New Orleans-style jazz, he's been ridiculed by some as a drug-dealing mediocre musician. (Louis Armstrong might disagree if he were alive to tell it.) The book is the remarkable story of Mezzrow's lifelong quest not only to spread the gospel of black music, language, and culture, but actually *to become black.* Sent to prison in 1940 following a conviction for marijuana possession, he insisted on being classified as "colored" and assigned to the "colored" cell-block. From then on he began

referring to himself as a "colored musician" and "voluntary Negro."

To the "white-boy blues" debate, Mezzrow offers this advice: "Knocking around with Rapp and the Rhythm Kings put the finishing touches on me and straightened me out. To be with those guys made me know that any white man, if he thought straight and studied hard, could sing and dance and play with the Negro. You didn't have to take the finest and most original and honest music in America and mess it up because you were a white man; you could dig the colored man's real message and get in there with him, like Rapp."

Clint Eastwood's 1988 movie "Bird," about the life of jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker, shows him touring in the late 1940's with young Red Rodney, a red-haired Jewish trumpet player who they decided to pass off as an albino black blues singer in the South half a century ago. Johnny Carisi and other white jazz musicians earned a coveted place in the jazz world by playing in orchestras like those of Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie, as opposed to recruiting blacks for white bands, or expropriating their music. The difference was not lost, either on other musicians or the public, in the same way today as Michael Bolton is only the latest "rip-off artist," contrasted with those who pay homage to the source, like Bonnie Raitt, Harry Connick, Jr., or "Dr. John" (Mac Rebennack).[3]

Two interviews with white jazz people from Dizzy Gillespie's 1978 autobiography, *To Be or Not To Bop,* show some of the early white movement towards black culture:

> *Johnny Carisi (trumpet)*: About me being the only white guy at Minton's [after hours black jazz club in post WW II Harlem], I think I lucked up on getting in there at the beginning of it because later on a lotta cats came, mostly because I told them. . . . The only 'thing' I ran into was really a back handed kind of compliment, in a way. There was a lotta getting loaded there. I remember one time we took a walk outside, and Joe Guy was pretty stoned. . . half-hostile, and half-familiar, family kind of style, grabbed me and says, 'You ofays come up here, and you

3 It should come as no surprise that so many white crossover musicians like Connick and Rebennack come from New Orleans, a city that preserved so much African heritage and was the birthplace of jazz. Dizzy Gillespie and others have noted how in Brazil and Cuba, with samba, salsa, and santeria, the descendants of slaves and slaveowners share Africanized cultures.]

> pick up on our stuff,' and the other cats were saying, 'What are you doing, Joe?'. . . But it was kind of a compliment, because he was really saying, 'Man, you're doing what we're doing.
>
> *Teddy Reig (recording executive)*: I was scuffling, dreaming, trying to be a Jewish boy who didn't want to be Jewish, who didn't wanna be involved with a Jewish background. . . I would have done anything to get to Harlem. My mother and father, they would walk in the house, and one would look at the other and say, "Where is he?" "With the niggers, where do you think?"

In *The Omni-Americans* (New York, 1970) Albert Murray says of this phenomenon:

> Perhaps the white negrologists could learn something about intellectual and artistic sincerity as well as American culture from the more serious white jazz musicians. These jazzmen sound as if being closely interrelated with Negroes were the most natural thing in the world. Unlike the white negrologist. . . white jazz musicians eagerly embrace certain Negroes not only as kindred spirits but also as ancestral figures indispensable to their sense of purpose and to their sense of romance, sophistication, and elegance as well. Negroes like Duke Ellington. . . inspire white Americans like Woody Herman. . . to their own richest sense of self-hood. . .

The loose, democratic, group-centered structure of jazz, where other musicians feed ideas to the soloist, caught the ear of early white crossovers, as it still does today.

The artists and writers of the so-called Beat Generation were also drawn to black culture. "Beat" poet/novelist Jack Kerouac's biographers differ over whether he was stereotyping black culture or genuinely showing how much it filled a void in his consciousness. His jazz poetry (recorded with 50's black bebop players) exists in contradiction to some images he used in his later works.

Eldridge Cleaver, in *Soul on Ice,* and Abbie Hoffman, in *Soon To Be A Major Motion Picture*, noted that long hair, strange clothes, language, political protest, music and drug use, exposed young white hippies to treatment previously reserved for blacks, and were also

their "tools of rebellion." This rebellion, wrote Cleaver, was "America's attempt to unite its Mind with its Body, to save its soul. . . ." But it wasn't until well after the sixties that the "crossover" impulse first began to be seen in movies.

Carl Reiner's 1979 comedy film "The Jerk" (Steve Martin's first film hit) was based on an old routine of Martin's, where he satirized the insincere white celebrity's "I was inspired by black music" story by saying, "It wasn't always easy for me: I was born a poor black child. But at the age of eleven I was given my first Mantovani [originator of "elevator music"] record. It changed my life." In the film he's raised by a black rural Southern family. As the fool, or "jerk," he's too stupid to notice that he's "white." By a fluke he becomes rich, but when his business is forced into bankruptcy he returns home—to his black family who take him back after he is rejected by white society and left homeless on the street. At the end he even shows that he's finally learned how to "keep time."

***"The vision is a very definite part of Negro religion. It almost always accompanies conversion. It almost always accompanies the call to preach."*—Zora Neale Hurston, The Sanctified Church.**

The 1980 film "The Blues Brothers" was credited by Aretha Franklin with reviving her career. It also didn't hurt the other icons of black music in the film, including James Brown, John Lee Hooker, Ray Charles and Cab Calloway, who are portrayed as teachers to the brothers. But Dan Aykroyd (who co-authored the screenplay) and John Belushi accomplished more than that. With their black suits, sunglasses and black fedora hats, as well as a way of dancing and singing that suggested the opposite of imitation or mocking, they portrayed a new category—something definitely "not white."

While not religious leaders in any formal sense, the Blues Brothers nonetheless tell everyone that their attempts to raise the needed property tax money to save their inner-city parish church is a "mission from God." On the other side, we have upholders of white culture—the Nazi Party, the police, and the "Good Ole Boys" country band, all of whom pursue them for one reason or another. (And the feeling is mutual, as we see when Jake reacts to the Nazis' infamous march through Skokie with, "I hate Illinois Nazis!" just before

Elwood guns their salvaged police car through the march.)

Near the beginning, when Cab Calloway tells the brothers that they need to "go to church" (which also means in black music "get back to the basics"), they attend a black Baptist service. As "Pastor" James Brown conducts the congregation in song, Jake becomes "illuminated" (through special effects), crying "I see the light," realizing that they can raise the money by reorganizing their R&B band (which includes such white crossover legends as guitarist Steve Cropper). The real "mission from God" is the brothers' proselytizing for black music. The scene in the streets of Chicago where children and adults spontaneously dance to Aretha Franklin show a few white faces; these are the "exceptional whites" who aren't afraid of being in a "bad" black neighborhood boogie-ing to "the real thing."[4]

There was also the savage satire of "white culture" contained in Martin Mull's 1985-86 pseudo-documentaries "The History of White People in America Parts I and II": actress Teri Garr, as "one of the few white people in America who can dance" introduces these films. Steve Martin, introduced only as a "white actor," bemoans having lost the lead role in a film about the life of basketball star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to a "less-qualified black actor!" Viewers also witness scenes from a suburban backyard barbecue where family members each have to have their own jar of mayonnaise, and participate in support groups dealing with white problems like "avoiding confrontation."

"The Commitments," a film made by British director Alan Parker for the American market, is about a contemporary young Irish band that adopts 60's soul music. "I want you on a strict diet of soul," insists their manager Jimmy Rabbit. Was the point, as some "sensitive" critics argued, that "this is a rip-off," that blacks do it better, so buy the original? The film, with almost no blacks appearing on screen, is about exploited Irish working-class teenagers

4 The "Blues Brothers" themselves seem like a continuation of the Marx Brothers' 1937 "A Day at the Races." When the brothers put on blackface to elude the sheriff's posse, joining the stablehands' families in a musical revue that features Harpo blowing a trumpet to the tune of "Who Dat Man? It's Gabriel!" is it just the old familiar minstrel show? Or is it a festival of the oppressed? In the last scene, after the brothers disrupt a horse race, the black families who danced with them at night now surge onto the racetrack in a jubilee. As in their other movies, the Marx brothers manage to save innocent people from the rich, mean, and powerful, but themselves continue to hustle and live on the edge.

inspired by African-American culture, who take it upon themselves to adopt it and cross over. The key figure in this film is middle-aged Joey Fagan, who impresses the neophytes with his credentials, claiming to have played with "all the greats," as he says, listing B.B. King, Sam Cooke, Screaming Jay Hawkins, and more. He becomes their musical director by convincing them, "I was sent by the Lord, and the Lord blows my trumpet."

There *is* a serious message in all this comedy. Spiritual expressions of musical inspiration are not new or uniquely African. What's unique here is the use of African-American culture by whites to find the spirit, and hence the humanity, they feel they've lost. Besides just having a good time, these characters, like earlier generations of abolitionists and civil rights workers, see themselves on a "mission from God," to free so-called white people from a culture of guilt and shame. White supremacist culture has created the conditions for its opposite to arise and destroy it.

John Brown or "Lawrence of South Dakota?"

The most appealing thing about Kevin Costner's 1991 movie "Dances With Wolves" is the ending: Costner's character, a white lieutenant sent out West to "manage" the Indians and protect white settlers, returns from the Indian village speaking Lakota and wearing native dress. The film's appeal hearkens back to popular writing during the sixties that proclaimed our generation "different" because, among other things, "we" rooted for the Indians in the TV westerns we grew up on. (Blacks, Latinos, and Native-Americans maintained they always did.) "Dances With Wolves" finally put that crossover dream on screen.

Another recent example of the crossover genre, "Sommersby," was a 1992 American remake, set in the Reconstruction South, of the French film "The Return of Martin Guerre." It had the hero John Sommersby (Richard Gere) submit to execution for a murder he didn't commit. To admit he was an imposter, he tells his wife (Jody Foster), would invalidate the contracts he signed that promised land ownership for the first time to black farmers, working with whites on the old Sommersby plantation.

"The Long Walk Home" (1990) contains one of the strongest depictions I've seen in a Hollywood drama of a white person forced to make a decision on breaking with "the club." When Miriam

Thompson (Sissy Spacek) for her own convenience drives her maid Odessa Cotter (Whoopi Goldberg) to work during the 1955 Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott, she not only fractures her marriage by defying the authority of her husband (Dwight Schultz), she also rejects his appeal to racial solidarity. When she cheefully dismisses Odessa's warnings that joining the carpool means police harassment and tickets, Odessa replies, "It ain't just the tickets. Once you step over there [to the carpool parking lot] I don't know that you can ever step back. . . This boycott's gonna survive without you drivin'. . . And what about when it ain't just the bus?"

Miriam has to think about this—so what her husband and the women at the bridge club said was true! She decides to join the carpool and winds up confronting a white mob that includes her husband. She is slapped to the ground. "Get your daughter and walk with the niggers!" commands one man. Taking her daughter's hand, she crosses the line that Odessa prophesied, joining hands with hymn-singing black women in refusing to leave the parking lot. Her life has been changed by their struggle. Tomorrow she may still be a rich housewife, but more than likely she'll be a single mother looking for work (in a car with broken windows) and doing her own dishes. I suspect that this film got less enthusiastic reviews than the popular, paternalistic "Mississippi Burning" (1988) because instead of "good" and "bad" whites fighting over passive, grateful black people, it depicted different shadings of whites, capable of racist violence, acquiescence to racism, or the Hegelian leap to freedom.

The guilt is there, but the treason is safely ensconced in the past, in familiar settings: Western frontier and Jim Crow South. But even to admit that this is what should have been (and in fact was) done poses an alternative.

"Dances With Wolves" has been dubbed "Lawrence of South Dakota" by American Indian Movement leaders Russell Means and Ward Churchill. The charge of paternalism could also be directed at the new "crossover stars," Madonna, Marky Mark, and Vanilla Ice, whose bands are all-black or nearly so, and who cultivate the appearance of being assimilated and respectful of black culture. (Madonna once told an interviewer that as a child she wished she'd been black.) But being still "in charge" and still the "white leader," they are still "Lord Jims." Madonna's tour movie "Truth or Dare" shows her patronizing attitude toward her gay black male dancers. (See bell hooks' essay "Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul

Sister?" in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation* [Boston, 1992].)

Black observers have traditionally been sensitive to the line between respect and rip-off. Singer Betty Carter last year told an NPR reporter about how, in the old days at Minton's, when black musicians would see a white bandleader in the audience furtively scribbling the melodies and chord changes of the blacks' hip-sounding be-bop "charts" (sheet music) on cocktail napkins, they'd deliberately play the tunes wrong as an anti-theft device! The self-described "black classical" singer Nina Simone, who once went into exile from the United States to protest racism, described Bob Dylan as the closest thing black people had to a saint among whites, for his songs against racism and willingness to acknowledge his blues mentors, like Big Joe Williams. On the other hand, she refuses to record or perform Paul Simon's "Bridge Over Troubled Waters," contending that he stole it from the gospel tune "Don't Trouble The Waters."[5]

The image of the British rock star Sting (formerly of The Police) in the mid-80's forming a new band of well-known African-American jazz players like Branford Marsalis and Kenny Kirkland really brought to mind Lord Jim in Sting's documentary movie about his first tour with his new band. In it, we see Sting lecturing them about how he'll be making top pay as the "star." In later magazine interviews, Sting and Marsalis traded barbs over Sting's contention that he'd had to "teach" the band reggae music and rock solos!

***"Why do we always have to crossover to them? Why can't they crossover to us for a change?"*—black singer in Robert Townsend's movie "The Five Heartbeats"**

5 "Nina Simone" by Walta Borawski, *Z* magazine, May/June 1992. Paul Simon is known for performing with Ladysmith Black Mambazo, the black South African acapella group, a combination that sparked a debate a decade ago: was he just using them to get a funky beat behind his usual smarmy solipsistic lyrics, or was he doing both them and the world a favor by exposing their music to a large audience, not to mention paying U.S. union scale? In contrast to Simon we have in South Africa the white singer, songwriter, and guitarist Johnny Clegg of the mostly black group "Savuka." His story resembles that of many American legends, like Jerry Lee Lewis. Clegg recounts how he would sneak out as a boy to townships to learn Zulu dances and music which he incorporated into his music, earning a university degree in ethnic studies, while being arrested along the way for performing in mixed bands.

Spike Lee's 1989 film "Do The Right Thing" is at least one black-directed film to explore this possibility. Spike's character "Mooky," the pizza delivery man, encourages the Italian-American pizza parlor owner's younger son Vito (Richard Edson), to stand up to his older brother's bullying, and also takes him for a walk in the neighborhood as a sign of acceptance. For this act of "treason" he is beaten up by his older brother Pino (John Turturro). The 1984 movie "Beat Street" (produced by Harry Belafonte) was the first movie about hip-hop culture (which includes dance, rap music, graffiti art, clothing, and language). It included a homeless young Italian-American recently discharged from the military who shows up at the abandoned building where the African-American teenagers are holding their house parties, and is taken in by them to be their bouncer.

The tenacious defense of "whiteness" exists alongside a culture that has incorporated elements of African-American speech, music, sports, dance, clothing and more. There has been since the thirties a growing white attraction to black culture, including some who immersed themselves in it, even married into it. But this is the first generation to be dissatisfied with white imitators, instead demanding the "real thing."

The African-American "hip-hop cult" is now mainstream. "Crossover" is crossing back. In early 1992, according to *Billboard*, half of the top ten popular single recordings (mostly purchased by teenagers) were by black R&B groups. As I began writing this in January, 1993, I noticed that they all were. Today, it's not just black but also white audiences who are saying, "If you're going to copy, you'd better be good."

That fact literally came home to me one recent night while I was watching the amateur spot on the weekly Saturday night Apollo Theater TV show with my daughter. The Apollo has always been known as a "tough crowd"—mediocre acts are booed off the stage. That night a white female singer from Toronto had the audience about evenly divided between those cheering and those booing. As the young woman fought to hold her own, my daughter, herself a singer who fills our house with Whitney Houston songs, exclaimed, "Go girl!" That could have been her up there.

Meanwhile, it is estimated that three-quarters of Public Enemy's audience is white, and over half of "rap" records in general are purchased by whites. Rapper Ice-T, whose popular "Cop Killer"

single was met with hysteria by police and white community groups last year, has responded to this audience with an album called "Home Invasion." The title track features lyrics like "I'm taking your kids brains and you ain't gettin' them back. . . Start changing the way they walk, they talk, they act. Now whose mother fuckin' fault is that?" In the liner notes he writes, "The injection of black rage into the American white youth is the last stage of preparation for the revolution." Other hip-hop artists (like Run-D.M.C.) have taken white "heavy metal" rock bands on tour with them, playing to mixed houses. As with jazz, the "metal" sounds have been incorporated into hip-hop, not met halfway. In a 1992 syndicated column, African-American journalist Chuck Stone proclaimed the end of crossover, saying that black and white youth were combining cultures.

Sports, Sex, and Rock 'n Roll

When Duke University's star center Christian Laettner appeared on the Arsenio Hall TV show just after their 1992 NCAA championship victory over Michigan, viewers heard a white middle-class upstate New Yorker talking like a black Southerner, with a "white boy fade" haircut to boot! Black teammate Antonio Lang would later deadpan to the Duke Chronicle that "Laettner would rather hang out with the black guys." In a new twist to the old "miscegenation" hysteria, rumors began here in Durham, N.C. and made their way to the front page of *USA Today* that Laettner and his black teammate and roommate Brian Davis were gay (which both denied). So much for the new "great white hope."

Recently retired NBA star Larry Bird was described throughout his professional career as "blue-collar," suggesting (as Isaiah Thomas pointed out) that while blacks had natural talent, Bird's accomplishments came through hard work. Yet in a February 1992 *Esquire* magazine article by Charles Pierce, Bird said, "Basketball is a black man's game. I just try to fit in." Refusing to let himself be known as the "greatest white player to play the game," he played what Atlanta Hawks star Dominique Wilkins called, "a white game with a black head."

Meanwhile, finishing his college career at Duke was another white "blue-collar" player, Bobby Hurley, who better fits the sportswriters' cliche because of his New Jersey "mean streets" back-

ground, (compared to the more patrician-looking and acting Laettner). With his fast-paced style and no-look passes he demonstrates a thorough assimilation of what Nelson George calls "the black basketball aesthetic."[6]

The 1992 movie "White Men Can't Jump," contrary to studio hype, reflected the white crossover in sports. By the end of that movie, Billy (Woody Harrelson) has switched from hustling black basketball players, to assimilating their game and their culture. But not incidental is Sidney (Wesley Snipes) imploring him to stop imitating "the dozens," and to really start "listening" to Jimi Hendrix (Billy's hero). The movie is allegorical, with Sidney acting as a kind of "black Yoda" to a culturally repressed Billy.

If the phenomenon of the "exceptional white" didn't exist, why does it keep popping up in popular culture?

At this moment, both the tendency to reject "whiteness" and the tendency to hold on to it are played out mainly in the cultural arena, with all of its contradictions. The examples given here of artists and films are not models (certainly note Ice-T's misogynist lyrics and album cover) so much as examples — reflections of the growing white fascination with black culture and the idea of being "exceptional." The "exceptional white" has historically been regarded with a mixture of envy and loathing by the larger white society, serving as a projection of that part of the consciousness of most whites that knows what is morally right and which path represents freedom. White cultural assimilation is not the same thing as political defection from the white race, but it is already a form of political awareness. Today's abolitionists have the opportunity to take the historically marginalized "exceptional white"—the race traitor—from cult to mainstream. In the world the whites made, the fear of the black neighborhood (maintained by the spurious admonition that "we're not wanted over there, just as they're not wanted here") waits to be dissolved by those not only unafraid but eager to cross over, physically and psychologically. But when and how will the "exceptional white" become the rule?

Besides his day job, Phil Rubio also plays jazz piano and writes in Durham, North Carolina.

6. *In Elevating The Game: Black Men and Basketball* (New York, 1992), George wrote: "[I]n basketball improvisation is the ability to be creative on the move, and, while not limited to Blacks (see Bob Cousy, Pete Maravich, Larry Bird), there's no question that certain African Americans execute their court magic with a funky attitude akin to that of the race's greatest musicians."

CORRESPONDENCE

SKINHEADS

Editors' note. *The following letter was sent to Race Traitor as well as a number of other publications.*

Dear Anti-Racist Skinhead or Skinhead Supporter,

The situation for anti-racist skinheads looks really bad in North Amerikkka. From what we can grasp, things are only moderately bad in terms of nazi bonehead numbers here in the Northeast U.S. Other areas (the South, South West and West Coast in particular) seem to be all but lost, and if the recent events in Germany, Italy, France, etc. are any gauge of the bonehead situation, we're in for a coming shockwave that doesn't look pretty. We figure right about now the nazis have more newspaper-clipping wallpaper than they can put up, and it's only a matter of time before they start getting braver and begin firebombings again here.

Unfortunately, thanks to the mainstream media, the nazis' brutality and a lack of direction within our own scene, anti-racist skinheads seem smaller in numbers and more divided than ever before. Mention the word "skinhead" to almost any member of the mainstream public and they automatically think "violent racist." Our subculture has been all but stolen from us, and if we want to win it back from the boneheads and put a different, positive image in the public's head, it's going to take a fight.

But what unity do anti-racist skinheads have? Sure, many of us look the same, listen to the same music, etc., and we all claim to be anti-racist, but there's been an awful lot of anti-racist skins who beat up queers, fuck with leftists & those exercising their right to burn the flag, supported the Gulf War, voted for Bush, etc. We, for one, want no unity with these idiots.

See, we figure the reason so many skins are becoming nazis, and the reason that our numbers are getting smaller is because the nazis are revolutionary and they're angry. What do most anti-racist skins offer some young, working-class kid who's getting fucked up by his/her parents, kicked around at school by teachers, beaten up on by cops and being forced onto welfare because he/she can't find a

job? We offer flying old glory, and going on about how Amerikkka is the greatest country in the world? That's no alternative! As one former NYC SHARP said on July 4th, 1989 after 75 skinheads trashed the "Anarchist Switchboard" (a local @ community space), attacked a homeless tent-city in Tompkins Sq. Park and put several flagburners in the hospital - "We're a more violent version of the Boy Scouts". Fuck that!

The nazis blame Blacks, Jews, Queers, Immigrants, etc. for our current recession. They have scapegoats. But any skinhead with half a brain and a bit of tradition knows the real enemy: the Rich, the Corporations, the bosses and the politicians. It's time that we rethought our strategy for beating the Nazis and reclaiming what skinhead means.

Our Proposal

We want all the radical left skinheads to unite and get together. We want to create a network of Red & Anarchist Skin Heads that can offer something to the young kids in the scene. A network that can not only out-fight the nazis, but continue fighting the State for something real. We want to create better lives for ourselves, and spread the ideas of a united, international working class.

We've got a lot of suggestions on how to do this. Here's some we'll be doing in NYC in the next few months:

RASH DECISIONS zine—A quarterly skinzine for Red & Anarchist Skins focusing on music, culture, AND politics (First issue should be out in early spring '93)

STAY TRUE—A monthly free traditional skinhead news sheet for the NYC area focusing on ska, non-bonehead Oi!, upcoming shows, reviews, etc. (We're trying to make this more accessible than the zine, so it probably won't talk much politics except for anti-racism.)

STAY TRUE distribution—A non-profit distribution service for anti-racist skinhead zines, records/tapes, pins, shirts, videos, etc. We'll be doing mailorder, as well as selling through RECONSTRUCTION records (a local, cooperative record shop run by punk rockers). We will also be screening patches, shirts, etc., and selling

them at low cost (to undermine scumbags like BLEEKER and BOB'S records, etc.).

SOCIAL EVENTS—Together with TRADS UNITED (A local, apolitical social club for mods, skins and rudies), we're putting together monthly, low cost "SKA UNITY DANCEHALLS" at ABC-NO-RIO (a local community center), and we plan on holding picnics, TRADS nights at local bars, etc.

OTHER STUFF—We'd eventually like to do a record label, book tours for cool bands, organize and participate together in protests, and much, much more...

What We Want From You

So we're just trying to feel out what other people think about forming a left-skin network to trade ideas, music, scene info, to have a good time and to win the war against the boneheads and the State. If you're a skinhead crew/zine/band or even an individual and would like to participate, write us with your address, and in the first issues of the zine we'll list you as a contact. So far, we only have people in Minneapolis, Chicago, and New York, but if we're right this should catch on pretty quickly.

If you're not a skinhead but you support our efforts, please publicize them. Send us any info. you think would be of interest to us (we're attempting to build up an info-base on the nazis). Send us clippings on skins in the newspapers, copies of anything you put out, and spread the word on what we're doing.

So that's all for now, but we hope to hear more from you soon. Even if you hate what we're saying, and think we should all be put up against a wall and shot because we're "anarcho-commie fags," we'd like to hear from you. Communication is the key.

In the Spirit of '69 but Kicking Ass in '92,

MAYDAY Skinhead Crew/R.A.S.H. NYC
PO Box 365
Canal Street Station
New York, NY 10013-0365
Feb. 1, 1993

WHAT ABOUT OTHER RACES?

To the Editor:

I have just finished reading the first issue and there were many things I found fascinating and educational, and many things I found confusing or with which I disagreed. Since you state that such reactions are among your editorial goals, I would say you are a success, at least with me.

The historical articles were a grand supplement to my rather shallow understanding of abolitionism, and to my knowledge of the Boston school integration issues, which was previously confined to a few newspaper articles and *Common Ground.* The Civil War reenactments piece was interesting, although not really a surprise to me based on my own experiences with the baggage actors tend to carry in historical re-creations. Having just begun my education about Malcolm X, I appreciated the article and would like to see more.

I agree with your general editorial philosophy that the white race as a concept must be abolished; it has certainly caused enough suffering, social displacement, and political and ecological damage. My question is whether all other races, too, ought to be abolished. I feel there is nothing inherently evil about the "white" race; the evil is the concept of race at all and in the culture that has grown up around it and the weapons of cultural, economic, and political imperialism it now wields. My personal conclusion is that the problem lies in using "race" to describe groups of human beings. I would rather view the world as a collection of peoples with varying characteristics like language, skin color, etc., with no qualitative difference in what I consider the basic human attributes of rationality, competence, concern for others, love, and so forth. To a certain extent, this seems to be your philosophy as well. I believe that I understand your comment about not accepting articles professing racial harmony because such a perspective accepts the paradigm of separate races in need of harmonizing.

My dialogue with *Race Traitor* begins with my perception that you are not interested in the abolition of all races (starting with perhaps the most destructive). It appears to me that you believe that other races must develop a self-conscious culture and wield the tools of empowerment themselves. If one or more of these newly empowered races came to fit the dominance paradigm now asserted by the

white race, they too would become "white" and need to be abolished. Do you feel that race-consciousness among "non-white" races is merely a means to abolish the white race which will then itself be dissolved, or do you believe that other races are inherently different and would remain so in a world without a white race? I do not think I could agree with the latter idealism, for it seems but one short generation between Jews in concentration camps and Jews breaking the arms of Palestinians on the West Bank.

Steven Snyder
Cambridge, Mass.
December 10, 1992

Editors' reply. Race has no existence apart from social distinctions; without them, the only race is the human. While people of fair skin etc. are human beings like any other, the white race (which, by the way, includes people who, if they search hard enough, can trace their ancestry to every part of the globe) *is* inherently evil and must be abolished, by doing away with the social distinctions that describe it. (Just as it is not Italians, Irish, Poles, etc. who form white supremacist mobs, but *whites*, it is not Jews as an ethnic or religious group who are committing atrocities in the Middle East but a population which has been accorded a special status—and hence defined as a "race"—by the authorities of the Zionist state.) In *Look Out Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!* Julius Lester wrote, "It is absolutely necessary for blacks to identify as blacks to win liberation. It is not necessary for whites. White radicals must learn to nonidentify as whites. White is not in the color of the skin. It is a condition of the mind: a condition that will be destroyed." The extent to which black people must identify as black in order to achieve liberation is a question they must resolve; we are not advocating an ahistorical symmetry. With the rest of Lester's advice we could not agree more strongly, adding only that whiteness is not solely a mental condition.

JUST ANOTHER LIMP, TIRED ORGAN

To the Editor:

Thank you for founding *Race Traitor*. It is enormously heartening to read a *white-edited publication* dedicated to the proposition

that the issue of race-based oppression is central to all efforts at justice and creative social change in the U.S. I applaud your forthright attack on the questions involved, and feel especially cheered at the fact that you mount this attack from an independent position outside the academy (where much of the most acute current thinking about such matters unfortunately vanishes into a miasma of post-structuralist jargon from which it will never emerge to confront everyday life). You are concerned with things that concern me, and your effort makes me feel less alone.

I enjoyed and learned a good deal from most of the pieces you printed in your first issue, especially those richest in historical detail, such as "Lydia Maria Child," "Two Who Said No," and "Bridges and Boundaries." Nevertheless, I have two substantial criticisms of your basic approach as revealed both in your editorial and in what you chose to print in this important introductory number. My first criticism must, in fact, be registered as a cry of alarm and outrage; the second can be expressed as a more measured disagreement with your analysis.

I am thoroughly dismayed by the narrowness with which you frame the problem of the historical and social construction of race and its manifestations in the present. You include strikingly little material by and about women of any color. Your editorial cites "movies" and "sports," as well as "young people" and "unions" among a list of topics you want to run articles on, but omits mention of the feminist and the lesbian and gay movements, although these have been extremely important sites of struggle, consciousness raising, and activism around racism and racial identity on the part of both people of color and whites. You seem implicitly committed to the bipolar, intensely ideologoical model of racial difference that has for much of this country's history skewed the perceptions and analytic abilities of *both* whites and African-Americans, for with the exception of one essay on racism in Europe, all of your articles focus on the U.S. and *all* (!) of these are concerned exclusively with a black/white model of "race," as though that model either represented the only important manifestation of racism in this country or constituted a paradigm from which all other significant racisms could be abstractly derived.

I certainly believe that we need to be able to foreground "race" as a category of oppression, just as we need to be able to talk about the specific—and central—experience of African-Americans as the

group in relation to whom U.S. whites construct an identity and relations of material privilege. But this discussion must happen in a context, one that takes into account gender, class, queer identities (currently the subject of furious ideological struggle) and a spectrum of racial constructions. Not coincidentally, I believe, the importance of dumping the bipolar, black/white model of "race" has been extremely well-articulated by feminists of color who have sought increased solidarity among women who are Native American, Latina, Afro-Caribbean, Asian-American, and African-American. (For classic statements of this position, see *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing By Radical Women Of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, published by Kitchen Table Press, 1981.)

How could you neglect the perspectives of white feminists and lesbians who, largely inspired and informed by "Third World" feminism, have undertaken just the sort of critique of white identity and race-privileged behavior that you advocate? Consider, for instance, the existence of the largely white New York group Dykes Against Racism Everywhere, in the late 70's and early 80's. Adrienne Rich's famous essay "Disloyal to Civilization" (which in effect maintains, in terms I find theoretically problematic, that white women's experience within patriarchy renders them natural "race traitors") was published in the early 1980's. Among white lesbians doing very important work around race, I think especially of Elly Bulkin and her work on Jewish identity and racism (in *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Essays on Anti-Semitism and Racism*). which could serve as a useful companion to your "Bridges and Boundaries" piece; Rebecca Gordon (whose *Letters from Nicaragua* is one of the most useful reflections on the racial, class, and cultural implications of "solidarity" work that I've seen); Minnie Bruce Pratt (who has written about her identity as a would-be anti-racist lesbian from a white supremacist Southern background); and Mab Sagrest (also a Southern white lesbian involved in anti-Klan organizing). To a lesser extent, some white gay men have followed this lead, especially in the latter half of the 80's. One of the most important functions your publication could serve would be to publicize the contributions of feminist, lesbian, and gay male "race traitors"—but doing so means challenging several other problematic social and historical constructions besides "race."

Of course you could not include every perspective in your first or any other issue, but you could and should have set a tone that

made it clear that yours was not going to be just another limp, tired organ of the white, straight, soo-to-be-dead male left. (Let me be very clear here: I don't for a moment mean that straight white men have nothing to contribute, only that they render themselves impotent, irrelevant, when they neglect a strenuous effort to recognize and include other perspectives.) What would you make of a white-edited "progressive" magazine whose first issue contained minimal material by and about people of color, and no mention of racism? Would you conclude that the omissions were simply accidental, or would you surmise that the editors had failed to grasp a primary dimension of their putative subject? I hope you will take swift steps to insure that your publication doesn't require an unwanted subtitle: Race Traitor, Gender Patriot.

Now I move on to my second critical point, my difficulty with your "race traitor" model of assault upon the foundations of social control. You devote considerable space in your short editorial to discussing John Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry as a metaphor for the kind of rebellion you are advocating. Important as this 19th-century episode may be as both history and metaphor, it does not seem to me to offer a very useful guide to thinking about most of the situations in which white would-be anti-racists (a term I still consider useful) must now decide how to act. The way I see it, "race" as a clearcut category is currently dissolving *itself* faster than its critics of any color can hope to deconstruct it. To see both the reality and danger of this fact, we need look no further than a recent *New York Times* article describing how the Broderbond, the powerful secret society made up of the Afrikaner ruling elite in South Africa, is contemplating lifting its ban on nonwhites (though it would in any case continue to insist that members be Protestant and male!). If the white "club" in the land of apartheid is capable of this degree of flexibility in the interests of survival, we can be sure that "the nerves of the white executive board" in the good old U.S.A. will not exactly be shattered by a few whites acting in solidarity with people of color. The system no longer depends on the sort of absolute racial categorization that was crucial to a slave society, or to the South under Jim Crow. Instead we are rapidly getting a far more sophisticated race-class system, tricked out with a degree of token integration, in which symbolic transgression becomes a far more complicated matter.

"The white executive board" is no longer concerned with keeping James Meredith out of Ole Miss, but with getting Clarence

Thomas onto the Supreme Court. In an essay on African-American responses to the Thomas confirmation hearings, Manning Marable points out that

> During the period of Jim Crow, the oppressive external constraints of legal discrimination imposed norms of racial conformity and solidarity. . . .But in the post-civil-rights period, in the absence of legal structures of formal discrimination, the bonds of cultural kinship, social familiarity, and human responsibility that had once linked the most affluent and upwardly mobile African Americans with their economically marginalized sisters and brothers were severely weakened. It is now possible for a member of the present-day Negro elite to live in the white suburbs, work in a white professional office, attend religious services in an all-white church or synagogue, belong to a white country club, and never come into intimate contact with the most oppressed segments of the black community." ("Clarence Thomas and the Crisis of Black Political Culture," in Toni Morrison, ed., *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*, p. 75)

Of course significant remnants of the old-style, absolutist construction of racial categories flourish. Perhaps among those inhabitants of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, who sympathized with the murderers of Yusef Hawkins in a case involving white racist panic over "interracial dating," Virginia Lamp Thomas, white wife of Clarence, might even be regarded as a "race traitor." The fact remains that her marriage, insofar as it serves as a highly visible example of the blurring of racial lines, actually helps symbolically to justify existing/evolving power relations in which *most* African-Americans will remain on the bottom.

Manning Marable's point that it is no longer possible for Black Americans to use skin color as even a rough litmus test for figuring out who will represent their interests is another way of saying that "race" as a category is virtually deconstructing itself; the corollary is that whites can less and less often rely on rejection of "whiteness" per se as their guarantee of a progressive stance. A progressive stance in the Clarence Thomas affair necessitated not only figuring out that Thomas, despite his skin color and despite the support he received from an alarmingly large percentage of African-Americans,

actually represented ruling-class interests; it also required figuring out how to support Anita Hill *without* (a) obliterating her race by assimilating her testimony to a white feminist model of narrowly focused protest against (colorless) gender oppression; (b) ignoring the real fears and hopes to which Black supporters of Thomas responded; (c) participating in the prurient stereotype of the oversexed Black man which the hearings undoubtedly did evoke; or (d) forgetting that Hill herself is an ideological conservative. Once one had done all that, what one ended up with was an analysis that evoked no nervousness whatsoever in the hearts of the "white executive board" who backed Thomas—because, for one thing, it was just far too complicated to be communicated to a public saturated in a sound-bite mentality.

The slogan "abolish the white race" has a certain shock value, and expresses a real and valid anger and indignation—emotions I share. As a guide to action, it is worthless insofar as it implies that such "abolition" can somehow happen on a symbolic or mental level, apart from thoroughgoing social transformation. Indeed, such is your direct claim: "The key to solving the social problems of our age is to abolish the white race. Until that task is accomplished, there can be no universal reform. . ." Of course you are quite right that "whiteness" is an ideological product, but as such it represents not only distorted mental constructs but the distorted structural relations out of which these constructs arise and which they continually reinvigorate. *It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness.* (Marx, The German Ideology) I am far from being a mechanical Marxist, but I confess it seems to me infinitely more likely that we will succeed in abolishing the white race by working for justice than that we will obtain justice by abolishing the white race. Of course, this only removes the tough questions to another level, requiring us to determine what action, what justice, how, when, with whom.

To aid readers in thinking about some of these problems, I would suggest the following as useful articles:

—The rainbow curriculum fight in New York: race and class *versus* a "queer positive" position?

—Lesbian feminist resources for thinking about white identity, anti-racist action, coalition building, and the theoretical contributions of women of color;

—From "affirmative action" to "managing diversity": "multiculturalism" as co-optation in corporate and educational settings;

—Men of All Colors Together: A pioneering gay male movement;

—Considerations of Race in the Central America Solidarity movement;

—The legacy of Audre Lord for white progressives.

Again, thanks for being there. I know something about what it takes to put out a little magazine, and I am grateful for your gumption and all your work.

As they say, yours in struggle,

Jan Clausen
Brooklyn, N.Y.
January 18, 1993

Editors' reply. We shall be happy to publish articles showing how gender shapes the making and unmaking of whiteness, as well as articles examining the relation of lesbian and gay male communities and the struggle against anti-gay discrimination to the white race. We thank you for your recommendations of things to look at, and invite our readers to write something for us on these topics. We have no objection to calling into question "other problematic social and historical constructions besides 'race'," *if it come fairly in the way of our business, Captain Ahab—hunting the white whale.*

On your second point: in our view the U.S. displays not a "spectrum of racial constructions" but a "bipolar, black/white model." Much of the controversy over the status of the "new immigrants" from Asia and what is called Latin America consists of efforts to determine who will be "white" in the twenty-first century.

The last presidential election, which Clinton won by refusing to acknowledge black people as a distinct constituency, showed that race is hardening as a basis of popular consensus. Admittedly, there is a tension between on the one hand the removal of some barriers to the development of an integrated black professional class, and the appointment or

election of some Afro-Americans to visible positions in the state, which took place in response to the mass movements of the 50s and 60s, and on the other the perception (accurate, in part) of many whites that these changes came about at the expense of their sense of what is right, to which they are strongly attached and which they are determined to defend. There is no reason to assume that the process of desegregation among the elite is irreversible. David Duke got the majority of white votes in Louisiana. Do you think his supporters, mainly working-class and all angry, can be kept out of power forever by a coalition of black voters and white middle-class liberals? And what would be the effect of their triumph on the integrated black professional stratum?

Your exposition of the complexities of the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill affair convinces us that race is more central than ever in American life, and makes us glad that we are merely a humble journal and not a political party, and hence are not required to take a "position" on every issue that the other side inflicts on us.

Finally, we do not like to see *Race Traitor* described as "white edited."

VALUABLE EFFORT

To the Editor:

Race Traitor is a really valuable effort to get at what is essential. It is all the more important given the postmodern fashion of vacating power relations and obscuring race by celebrating all group differences as equivalent.

I especially liked the editorial and the brief piece by Roediger. The Fraser article, though usefully suggesting an antidote to *Common Ground,* certainly doesn't live up to its title. [Ed. note: The title of the article was "Two Who Said 'No' to Whiteness"] That *all* whites didn't support the demagogues in Boston is hardly remarkable and doesn't indicate a renunciation of whiteness. I wish Jim had further explored the comment by Mary Ellen Smith that those whites who went about their business were heroes. I'd like to hear from some of them about why they went about their business and,

whether, in fact, they suffered any reprisals for doing so.

Bob Lowe
Milwaukee, Wis.
January 13, 1993

OUR NAME

To the Editor:

Good start, but consider adopting a less cranky name.

Nell Painter
Princeton, N.J.
January 18, 1993

To the Editor:

Stirring up trouble again as usual. Race Traitor, I love it.

John Bracey
Amherst Mass.
November 5, 1992

To the Editor:

Great title! Will David Duke get the irony?

Berndt Ostendorf
Munich, Germany
May 28, 1992

To the Editor:

A number of people here are put off by the title. What is the response over there?

Louis Kushnick
Manchester, England
February 11, 1993

To the Editors:

Nell may be right about the title; perhaps a subtitle is in order.

Peter Coclanis
Singapore
April 6, 1993

Editors' reply. We have added to our back cover the words: Journal of the New Abolitionism.

EDITORS' REPORT

Sales of our first issue and contributions brought in enough money—barely—to permit us to publish a second. Other circulation news: *Race Traitor* can now be found in a few bookstores; Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company (1740 W. Greenleaf Ave., Chicago, IL, 60626), publishers of anti-establishment literature since 1886, have agreed to add it to their list; and we now have professional distribution in Britain. Readers' responses have encouraged us to ask for subscriptions, something we were unwilling to do until we knew the journal would be coming out again. Those who wish to subscribe, thereby making sure they receive future issues and at the same time helping us develop a financial base, can do so by sending us $20 for four issues. We have done almost no advertising and still depend for circulation mainly on direct contact. We ask you to consider ordering extra copies to pass on to friends or to show to bookstores. (Teachers may find this issue, with the symposium on *Huckleberry Finn,* particularly useful for classes.) We will give a discount of 20% on orders of five or more. (Bookstores please inquire.) You can also help by asking libraries to subscribe, at the institutional rate ($40 for four issues).

Copies of the last issue are still available. The contents of that issue include: Abolish the White Race By any Means Necessary; Two Who Said 'No' to Whiteness: Boston Public Schools, 1962-1975; Lydia Maria Child and the Example of John Brown; The American Intifada; Bridges and Boundaries: Black-Jewish Relations; Reading, 'Riting, and Race; Civil War Reenactments and Other Myths; The White Question; Malcolm X Beyond Labels; and Letter from Europe.

This issue was prepared with the aid of equipment and expertise made available to us by readers who answered the call for technical assistance in our last issue. Typesetting and layout was provided by the Aspect Foundation. To repeat what we said then, send us comments, suggestions, offers of assistance, money, material for publication, ideas for circulation, or anything else you think we ought to have. We want *Race Traitor* to be the voice of a community of readers.

WHAT WE BELIEVE

The white race is a historically constructed social formation. It consists of 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 the system that degrades them.

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

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 determinant of behavior will set off tremors that 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 which 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 primary intended audience for Race Traitor will be those people commonly called whites who, in one way or another, understand whiteness to be a problem that perpetuates injustice and prevents even the most well-disposed among them from joining unequivocally in the struggle for human freedom. By engaging these dissidents in a voyage of discovery into whiteness and its discontents, we hope to take part, together with others, in the process of defining a new human community.

A longer version of this statement appeared in the first issue.

a journal of the new abolitionism