

Honor My Diversity

A. DONALD BOURGEOIS *

WHEN I returned to the campus last year after a spring Study Tour to Europe, I was immediately set upon by the Black student leadership. "Where were you," they wanted to know, "when the ship was going down?" Well it wasn't exactly "ship" they referred to, but that's close enough. I've got a new resolution: No more profanity, more about that later.

"Yeah, man," they said, "we were in the streets getting our heads knocked in and where were you, our leader? In Europe, that's where you were. What could you do for us in Europe?"

"Well," I said after a moment's thought, "I prayed for you."

In retrospect I guess that Allah did Black students about as much good as He's doing for Hussein right now.

Let me also explain my resolution to clean up my language and stop the name calling. Actually it was Spiro Agnew who sold me on this name calling business. As my friend, Tom Eagleton, said recently, name calling is repulsive and divisive whether you use a four-letter word or a four-dollar word. It opens up the chasm of division which plays to the passions and fears of middle America.

There was a time when the most derogatory term I had for whites was Mr. Charley. Then along came Malcolm and I abbreviated Mr. Charley to plain old Chuck. Malcolm also taught me to call whites "blue-eyed

devils." In terms of what came later, this was mild.

Whites became "whiteys," "honkies," "dirty racist dogs," "fascists," "swine," "peckerwoods," "swindlers," "crackers," and in general "vicious, bloodthirsty, violence-prone, two-faced, white slimy beasts." Whew. If that wasn't enough, we went around playing the dozens with whites, talking about their mamas, their sex habits, and their tendencies toward Oedipal behavior. All this was accompanied with clenched fists, angry scowls, and cries of "Right on, brother, right on." "Right on," of course, is just another way of saying "Amen," but we didn't want anyone to think we were going to a prayer meeting.

For a while it worked. Whitey got shook. We found out that, with the right combination of words and the correct inflection, we could make him jump. But now whites don't react to our rhetorical acrobatics. Instead of being shook, they do some shaking of their own.

Rhetoric can actually get you killed. Black Panther Fred Hampton was shot to death in his sleep. For what? Selling dope? Pimping whores? Shooting cops? No, none

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of these. Brother Fred died the violent death of a revolutionary, and you might even say that Brother Fred died a natural death. It was rhetoric that killed Fred Hampton. Fred Hampton ran breakfast programs and other community organization efforts. He had yet to commit a violent act when at the age of 21 he was shot to death in his sleep.

Whites generally don't react with violence to the black rhetoric (even though such a predisposition might exist). No, most whites just yawn. It's not even newsworthy anymore. Time was when I could make the six o'clock news with the right kinds of name calling. But no more. And I'm sure Spiro is going to discover the same thing for himself. America just doesn't respond too long to this approach. We will listen for a while. Even laugh or cry for a while. Get happy or feel sad, get angry and be mad for a while. But it's never for more than a while.

Accepting the Unwanted Truth

Someone once said that Winston Churchill's genius lay in recognizing the obvious, no matter how distasteful. You say that's not genius. Listen. The distasteful turns you off and the obvious is too plain, too easy. It was hard for me to accept the obvious and distasteful concerning Blacks on my campus. I remember when Martin Luther King was assassinated. We were in Saint Louis at the time. I worked for Al Cervantes, the mayor. My daughter, Yolande, was at Rosati-Kain, an all girls' parochial high school.

At the memorial service conducted at Saint Louis Cathedral, I was the lector. As a matter of fact, all of the participants in the Mass were Black at the special request of the archbishop. At Yo Yo's school, a special assembly featured my daughter as the speaker. Needless to say, while lectors were in regular usage at the cathedral and student speakers were in vogue at Rosati, my daughter and I were both having unique experiences.

I carried off my presentation without incident. It's hard to ad lib the scriptures. But Yo decided to tell it as she saw it. The

only Black in her class and one of only three in the entire school, she detailed in her talk the slights she had suffered during her time at the school and how no Black had theretofore participated in an assembly.

After she finished, a nun walked up to her and said, "Yolande, I never realized you were so paranoid. How could you carry all that venom around inside you, smiling at your teachers and your classmates, all the while feeling that they were doing you in?"

That night Yolande and I agreed that this business of telling whites about their ethical concessions was a minus sum game. If you don't get understood, you lose because stereotypical images block the communication process. If you do get understood, you still lose because you're paranoid. We also decided that what would pass for paranoia in the white community was really superior awareness in the Black community. *You're not really paranoid if people are out to get you.*

What Is a Man?

Recognizing the obvious was a bit much for me and my daughter. It was too distasteful. It was a bit much when I arrived at Ohio State two years ago. One incident stands out. During my first days here, a janitor called me "boy" in the course of our otherwise friendly conversation. It was before my days of rhetorical violence so he was spared.

But it led me to the question:

What is a man?

The male species of *Homo sapiens* over the age of 21?

A powerful male individual who controls others?

Someone clothed in trappings of a man?

It's much easier to say *who* is a man, isn't it?

Just saying you're a man doesn't make you a man, does it? When the garbage men in Memphis first put on the sandwich board signs that proclaimed, "I am a Man," I thought to myself that should say, "I want to be a man." When they marched after the assassination, in the face of hostility and

violence, with the same signs, I said, "Yes, you are a man."

Or just looking like a man doesn't make you a man, does it? You remember the story of Daniel and the head eunuch who tried to get Daniel to give up being a Jew. He offered Daniel a new name, but Daniel said, "No, I'll stay who I am." Now the eunuch looked powerful on the outside, but if you stripped him of his outer trappings you would find that in one essential he was deficient. He could never celebrate Father's Day.

The official policy of the U.S. government has been and is that Blackness and manhood are antithetical. In other words, you cannot be a man if you are Black.

The Moynihan report stereotyped the Black family as matriarchal and weak. The report said we needed more poppas. Rather than deal with the real social problems—housing, income, police protection—we were told to go out and round up some more poppas. I've got news for Moynihan: if we all had the best daddies in the world, the social problems would still exist. Moynihan was duped and deceived by his own stereotype. He was duped into thinking that the plastic, smiling, white suburban families were the norm. We were deceived and duped also. Didn't we rejoice when the government gave us programs based on this myth, this stereotype of Black families as weak, of Black men as inadequate?

Head Start is a good example. The rationale goes: If the Black family is weak, let's take the children at an early age and straighten them out. Head Start didn't prove to be the panacea. At this rate, when the original children in Head Start become parents, their children will be in Head Start. Because we live in such a nation, a racist nation, a nation of myths and stereotypes, we need to examine manhood in terms of Blackness.

We Didn't Dig Our Blackness

Once upon a time Black folks used to do everything possible to "hide their nigger," according to comedian-activist Dick Gregory. What he means, of course, is that we Blacks

had a penchant for trying to be white. I remember as a child using vaseline on my hair when most of the country used it for cuts, scratches, and bruises. I was literally amazed later when I discovered its medicinal use. For the first time, after having heard this revelation from a friend, I went to the medicine cabinet and read the label. Sure enough, nothing about straightening naps, only verbiage about cuts, scratches, and bruises.

When I was 14, I graduated to Murray's, a very stiff pomade with the picture of a light brown-skinned, slick-haired dude on the can. I yearned for a real "conk," which had to be applied by a barber very meticulously because of possible burns from the chemical used. The barber donned rubber gloves and, using a wooden applicator, applied the foamy, milky, latherly substance and worked on the brother's head for what seemed like hours. Finally, the customer would emerge from the chair looking cool, baby, really cool. The fear of the burns, plus the fact that repeated use of the chemical turned the user's hair a sickening, marinay color inhibited me, so I settled for temporary "conks" obtained by applying layer after layer of Murray's interspersed with hot towel applications.

Later when the "process" was invented, the "conk" was almost universally abandoned in favor of this chemical improvement. Whereas the "conk" simply laid one's hair down flat, so to speak, the "process" simulated the appearance of whites' hair, complete with appropriate waves, and then froze the hair in place.

Everyone who made biweekly trips to the barber for a "process" or the earlier "conk" owned a "do-rag" which was worn during sleep.

Later, the "do-rag" made its street appearance, and dudes congregated on corners sporting cloths tied tightly from the crown to the forehead with a flap drawn neatly across the top, the whole business tied in a snappy knot or bow just above the eyebrows. Lord help you if you called somebody a sissy just because he had on his "do-rag." You would have to fight. That was worse

than signifying, which itself was dangerous: signifying was worse than lying.

My sister, meanwhile, was getting her hair straightened on a regular basis. I thought her hair was beautiful in its natural state. It was reddish-brown, sort of auburn. Her eyes were the same color. Everyone would comment on the hair, skin, and eye color similarity. Yet every Sunday morning, there she was in the dining room, pouting and complaining as mama wielded that hot iron through her transformed tresses.

My mother, on the other hand, kept the Noxema and Nadinola people in business with her abundant usage of their "bleaching" cream. I never noticed her turn any shade lighter, but I soon learned that Black people with any sense avoided overexposure to the sun, sun lamps, or any other such foolishness that made one darker than he already was. Thus her use of the cream was completely acceptable.

My father was fair—yellow, we called him. His hair was straight and his features keen. He could easily have joined the 12 million Blacks who have crossed the color line.

Papere had a white buddy by the name of Angelletti, and together they'd tour the Loop bars after a night's work at the Chicago Post Office. I used to be fascinated by the stories my father would tell after these escapades. He was the fox, the hero who'd dared enter the inner sanctum on an equal basis, sit with the lions in his lion costume, roar when they roared, and escape unharmed.

All of this to make my point: we just didn't dig our Blackness.

We Quit Hiding Our Nigger

Aldous Huxley once observed that the reason it is so difficult to train birds is that their whole central nervous system is tied up in one function, that of flying. On the overnight steamer from Helsinki to Stockholm a dozen or so gulls followed us for hours. I sat on the deck and observed these birds in flight, understanding Huxley all the more and understanding humans all the more.

American whites have been so intent on

being white that it has hung them up on doing what is equitable or even perceiving what is equitable. Being white means protecting things, holding the line, being powerful, being a man; or, rather, should I say that being white meant thinking that there were things that needed protecting, or imagining there was a status quo line or level below which one should never fall, or hoping that one would be seen as powerful, or pretending one was a man.

Since the ostensible form exuding "power" and being "man" was the assaultive, swaggering, outrageously offensive white, Blacks began imitating this style. This imitation reinforced and supported the fantasy world of white manhood. Mr. Charley's psychological hangups kept breaking through, though. My soul sister whom he coveted and took by coercion, whether the coercion was in the form of a slaveowner, a trick, or the insurance man, was the first to peep his hole card. We began to perceive that we were the "men," that when whitey was calling us boy he was questioning his own manhood.

We became the stylists, the musical stylists, the language stylists, the stylists of social reform, the stylists of revolution, the universal stylists. Here, all the time we had been out imitating those fools when all the time they have been imitating us. What an awakening! When the dawning came, it was the morning we had sung about which was coming bye and bye. We did understand it better.

The Black introspection established our worth. We looked at ourselves and liked what we saw. One of Newton's Laws of Motion had proclaimed that bodies at rest tend to remain at rest and bodies in motion tend to remain in motion. We were the movers, we were the backbone, we were the conscience, we were the bodies in motion. While we were painted as villains, we knew now we were victims. From times when we mouthed our own inferiority, we moved to times in which we gloried in ourselves.

We quit hiding our nigger.

First thing I did was change my symbol. Instead of a slave with rhythm, I became a man with soul. Then I undirtied the word

black. The language I spoke had told me about blackmail, black days, black hearts, black everything that was dirty, while white was clean and pure as the driven snow. (I used to wonder why fields of cotton weren't clean and pure until I realized that we were usually in that picture.) Even a tornado is as black as night until it goes in that white lady's kitchen. Then it's a white tornado.

Power was the first thing I blackened. Next thing was my history, my roots. Then I went to work on myself.

Finally the job was complete.

I had become a Black, seeking power-sharing and equity. I had a new sense of my identity. I became proud of my heritage, aware of my humanity. I knew I had a certain something that nobody else had. I knew I had soul. I understood that now I had a culture of my own. I knew I was distinct. I knew I was different. I always knew this, only now I was proud of it. More than any of this, I now knew that I was a man.

This self-knowledge was hard to come by. I fought knowing myself. It was easier being on the outside trying to get in. I knew that if I knew myself and acknowledged my culture as separate and beautiful I would have something to protect, something to keep others from destroying. The old way of always trying to be white or to get to be part of the "in crowd" was easier because somehow we knew we'd never make it.

I now know that we are unassimilable. We won't melt in any pot. We are diverse.

Whites Have Dishonored My Diversity

Thelonious Monk once observed that "Trouble is, too many folks going around saying they're white." It's true, there are too many folks thinking they're something because they're white and pushing folks around because that's how white folks are supposed to behave. So it is only natural, I guess, that whites have always dishonored my diversity. They felt they were somebody, somebody special.

This led another philosopher, Franz Fanon, to the notion of dual liberation, that

is, that whites must be freed of their superiority even as Blacks are being freed of their inferiority. What good would it do if whites disdained their attitude of superiority while I still felt myself a slave? Conversely, what good is it doing in America today for me to discard my old self-debasing notions and continue to face an implacable foe who believes and feels himself my superior?

This duality, this twin liberation can be accomplished as whites begin to honor my diversity. Otherwise we as a nation can look forward to more of the same, in true Stella Dallas fashion. Remember the radio show "Stella Dallas"? When I was a kid my mother listened to it. I could miss six or nine months of it, then happen to be home one day and pick up where I left off. We've got a real Stella Dallas syndrome operating. There's always some program or movement getting up, moving on, or getting out. I don't care if it's abolitionists or reconstructionists or integrationists or separationists, it's all the same. There's a change of names but it's still Stella Dallas. Whether it's doing it for them or letting them do it alone, it's still Stella Dallas. It's still dishonoring my diversity.

Roger D. Abrahams, in his book, *Positively Black*,¹ tells us that we need to view things, institutions, and events from our point of Blackness—with our Black eyes—rather than be observed from the point of view of the thing, institution, or event.

For example, if I look at Blackness from the point of view of Christianity, I find that the white Christians are my keepers, are my benefactors and my friends. But if I look at Christianity from the point of view of Blackness, I find that the white Christians see themselves as born in the image of God and see me as the devil.

Or, as Abrahams says, if I look at Blackness from the point of view of America, I find the promise of brotherhood, fraternity, equality. I find an equilibrium model and this deludes me, gives me a sense that we are driving toward something at all times—social stability and social justice—and that we can therefore solve our own problems

¹ Roger D. Abrahams. *Positively Black*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970.

through the principle of social incorporation, that is, through making a place for everyone in society.

Abrahams also points out that if I look at America from the point of view of Blackness, I know that I need a disequilibrium model to explain and confront those realities and coercive forces which impede me. With Black eyes, my expectations are not of social persistence and stability but of change, not of change by consensus but of change by conflict and dissent.

If I look at Blackness from the point of view of education, I find a formalized, monopolistic system designed to deblack me, to crackerfy my mind and make me conform to an alien culture. But if I look at education from the point of view of Blackness, I find I need a system that understands my vitality, that recognizes me as a sensual being, more

hand than eye, and that helps me learn to deal effectively with those forces which oppress me and keep my community weak.

Honor My Diversity

Up until recently we have been powerless little darkies, sometimes begging, sometimes yelling, "Help us, y'all."

But Blacks, having quit trying to "hide their nigger," now dig their Blackness, respect their own cultural past, glory in their diversity.

We ask for one rule: Honor My Diversity.

No other rules or commands. No more civil rights laws. No more poverty programs. No more do-gooders. No more books or speeches by white experts. Just this one rule: Honor My Diversity. □

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