

On Being A Nigger *Charles Huckelbury*

In the folds of this European civilization I was born and shall die, imprisoned, conditioned, depressed, exalted, and inspired. Integrally a part of it and yet, much more significant, one of its rejected parts.

W.E.B. DuBois in *Dusk of Dawn*

Notwithstanding recent attempts to depict race as an artificial construct of governing bodies, I consider myself white. Fifty years ago, I was born into an upper middle-class family that traces its roots to northern European immigrants who entered this country not long after the Mayflower landed at Plymouth. I did not question in my formative years and do not question now the gifts endowed by nature and the abilities honed by nurture that have enabled those of European descent effectively to decide, for better or worse, the fate of the planet on which we live. I came of age in the sixties and enjoyed the privileges and perks (usually assumed as my right) that included an education at excellent universities and exposure to art and culture that extolled European civilization above all others. Before the ravages of five decades took their toll, my hair was light brown leaning to red. My eyes are blue, and my skin freckles in the sun, indicating that my particular phenotype is far more comfortable in colder climates where melanin is not required to shield the body from intense ultraviolet radiation. And yet, in society's eyes, I am a nigger.

Imagine if you will, the shock of this discovery, flying in the face of everything I had come to believe and defying the logical extension of what I saw as a European progression that had lasted relatively uninterrupted for over two millennia. During the turbulent sixties, I had managed to remain aloof, refusing to acknowledge the claims of racial and ethnic minorities of being victimized by society in general. I believed that any man or woman could do whatever his or her talents dictated. Meritocracy and the Jeffersonian ideal of an intellectual aristocracy appealed to me; ability and opportunity were the twin pillars on which my philosophy rested. If life was a metaphorical foot race, then everyone certainly deserved an equal place on the starting line, but never did I presume that everyone would or should finish in the same position.

Of course, my peers were all white, and although I recognized certain disparities in abilities, I never questioned the freedom for all of

us to expand to our personal limits. I projected this same assumption onto people of colour, refusing to listen to their cries against a racist society that denied them even the most fundamental opportunities for self-improvement. I believed that they simply lacked substance or else preferred subsistence living as social parasites. I pointed to obvious success stories like Ralph Bunche and Thurgood Marshall - it would be Colin Powell and Clarence Thomas today - to demonstrate the rewards discipline, intellect, and motivation brought, never believing that a man or woman would permit anyone to dictate what happened to him or her and their children.

I do not remember the first time I either heard or used the word "nigger" and obviously do not recall the context of either incident. Both doubtless referred to blacks in general, since during the fifties, the more reactionary elements of society used the term inclusively instead of preferentially, some even going so far as to use the n-word as an ethnic umbrella, under which "every" person of colour was gathered. I had heard blacks refer to each other as niggers, and in my naiveté, I could not understand the hostility when a white person dared use the same epithet. Never could I grasp the magnitude of the insult. Indifferent to historical precedent and the stigma slavery had stamped on the soul of every African descendant brought forcibly to this country, I blithely passed on the periphery of the black population, content with my own existence and wholly unconcerned about 10 percent of the nation that remained disenfranchised.

In 1974 all that changed when I was sentenced to life in prison. I quickly discovered that skin colour does not confer nigger status; one's position in society does and is imposed by the prevailing power structure, that is, society itself¹. As a student of history, albeit one with an incomplete education, I soon discovered the parallels between slavery and incarceration, and the environment in which I found myself clearly demonstrated that I had been relegated to the status of nigger. White, black, red, yellow, or brown, "every" convict was a nigger, with our rights circumscribed by both our confinement and the law of the land. Like *Dred Scott*, I was property, not of any individual but of the state and its monolithic prison system, and were I to escape and make my way north via some latter-day underground railroad, I could be returned at the discretion of the owners, that is, the State of Florida. Whereas the United States Constitution counted male slaves as three-fifths of a

person for demographic purposes, convicts did not rate that high; we were, and are non-persons, niggers in the most authentic sense of the word and consigned to the social oblivion historically enforced by every court in the country.

In 1896, for example, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that separate facilities for races were legal and just. I discovered the same attitudes and applications in prison, at least with respect to separation. We were segregated not by race but by our refusal to obey the law, yet unlike the aftermath of the *Plessy* decision, no effort was exerted to make our position ostensibly equal to those outside. No one cared about such rudimentary things as food, clothing, or education, and society assumed that we could survive on less than they. Indeed, many expressed outrage that we had what few comforts we did and publicly stated that we should be flogged and fed fish heads and rice twice a day. More moderate suggestions, including ones concerning education, were met with pre-*Brown v. Board of Education* rhetoric, the polemics usually taking the form: "Why educate the bastards? They're no good anyway and too stupid to learn." I began to hear Old Massa's voice loud and clear.

Our loved ones suffered along with us, required to commute to and from the prison on the weekends in a generally futile effort to keep the family together. Given the long sentences most of us had, no tactic could have preserved such a union where the husband or father would be absent for twenty to thirty years - and often permanently. As it was in the days when the men, women, and even children were sold separately, convicts watched as their wives, sons, and daughters left them forever. After all, niggers did not need families; we were not "normal" and therefore could claim no societal obligation to maintain our nuclear families. We had no civil rights, and our human rights were constantly in question. Like the Spaniards in the New World, society needed a reminder that their niggers also possessed souls, but we had no Las Casas to plead our case.

Whatever label one puts on it, incarceration "is" a form of slavery, or at the very least, indentured servitude, and manifests a blatant teleological philosophy. No concern is ever given to the propriety of the act itself; only the end result is important. And for convicts, that end result is the total, coercive humiliation of a human being, breaking him psycho-

logically and constantly reminding him that he is less than his fellows, that he is in fact a nigger.

We are transformed into second-class citizens, if in fact citizens we still are. Guards are the functional equivalent of overseers, the crackers of the plantation, and have "carte blanche" to treat us in whatever manner they choose. They beat us and kill us with impunity. We are required to shine their shoes or boots, serve their food, or fetch and carry. We must defer to their every whim and often pay for rebellion with our lives. Lord Acton's observation on the corruptive ability of absolute power found its proof in the antebellum South, and its modern affirmation stalks the corridors of today's prisons. Niggers we are and niggers we will remain in society's eyes and in the eyes of those it appoints to keep us in our places.

And yet, and yet ... the pendulum does swing. Slaves were freed by the Thirteenth Amendment, protected by the Fourteenth, and enfranchised by the Fifteenth. Society at that time, at least part of it, recognized that even its niggers had never abrogated their rights, even when they were held in physical and psychological chains, deprived of their families, kept illiterate, and reduced to the status of chattel; they had had those rights, basic human rights that Jefferson recognized, ripped from them as soon as they were placed in chains. Efforts to redress those wrongs led eventually to the giant strides made by the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties, although resistance was concerted and often brutal. Blacks ceased being niggers, at least in more enlightened discussions, not because society's opinion had changed - it had not - but largely because they were now seen as political fodder whose bloc votes could be courted and won by the most patronizing office seekers. But at least publicly they were recognized as human beings worthy of consideration.

Compare these advances with those articulated by the United States Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren. Beginning in 1961, prisoners' rights became a "cause célèbre," attracting activists of every stripe and resulting in several landmark opinions (*Miranda* and its progeny) that police and prosecutors continue to criticize. No longer could we be beaten until we confessed to whatever crime the police were having difficulty solving, and we could request and receive legal counsel as soon as custodial restraint was instituted. Moreover, conditions in many prisons were so deplorable and the lack of "due process" so egre-

gious that the federal courts had no choice but to intervene to eliminate gross Eighth Amendment violations. Like the Black community before it, the convict community began to achieve titular recognition as a group of human beings worthy of fundamental rights. Indeed, the Court eventually decreed in *Furman v. Georgia* (1972) that States could no longer kill us arbitrarily and capriciously. We had come a long way, baby.

Now, however, we are suffering the effects of a uniform retrenchment at all levels. Gone is the acceptance that we are also human beings, unquestionably flawed but humans nonetheless. And like Blacks before us, we have become a political football, only this time the politicians make no effort to hid the animosity in their public faces; without the franchise, we do not count except as beasts of burden to bear the victors' spoils.

In every election, one issue leaps to the forefront and becomes the linchpin of the campaign. In the late sixties and early seventies, it was the war in Vietnam and civil unrest at home. In the mid-seventies, Nixon gave the Democrats the ammunition they needed to regain the White House, but Jimmy Carter fell victim to an orchestrated economic attack by OPEC that raised gasoline prices and produced the infamous - and erroneous - malaise he is accused of describing in those affected chats. In the eighties, along came Ronald Reagan and his confrontational tactics with the "evil empire." But accompanying these obvious issues was a more subtle effort to shift public opinion regarding crime and punishment, until in the last two decades of the twentieth century, when the country is at peace (except for intermittent excursions to validate the Monroe Doctrine, kidnap heads of state, or protect oil-rich proxies), when a strong economy and low unemployment guarantee prosperity for most, and when no other external or internal threat looms, crime and criminals became the hot button in successive campaigns for local, regional, and national races.

Yes, we are it; society's niggers are always good for a vote on one end of the political spectrum or the other. No one wants to be perceived as soft on crime, and with monsters like Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy, and others constantly making headlines, support for more repressive laws and confinement is easy to find, especially when public servants convince the body politic that niggers neither deserve nor require a millisecond's consideration. If, as Emerson observed, a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds, then the attitude cultivated

and maintained by society toward its prisoners clearly demonstrates the limited imaginations of a people responsible for increasing the prison population to over one million men and women, executing mental defectives and minors, and raising paramilitary police tactics to an art form.

This is not to say that, like the black community and their enslaved forebears, we are blameless. Most assuredly we are not, and I make no attempt either to argue with detainment for criminal behaviour for society's protection or to claim kinship with a people whose only offense was to be chained and transported by force to this country. Unlike expatriate Africans, we are active participants in our own confinement. But culpability is not the issue; society's insistence on creating a permanent underclass and the philosophical posture that denies our fundamental humanity are, and the members of that underclass - niggers - have no chance to rise above the station society has selected for us. Indeed, it is society's intent to keep us there, just as slaves were kept in their place by brute force and repressive legislation. Like the plantation owners in the antebellum South, the majority of Americans today do not discriminate, if you will pardon the irony. Slaves were seen as all of a piece; unworthy of inclusion on equal terms into the family of man. Today's convicts are likewise deprived of any preferential assessment: all of us are scum, all are irremediable, all are equally despicable.

One factor, however, escapes most analyses when treatment of, or attitudes toward convicts is discussed. Whereas for 350 years, slaves had no logical reason to expect manumission, our eventual freedom is guaranteed in over 90 percent of cases. Treating humans like niggers is always morally reprehensible, but from a utilitarian position, it hardly matters as long as that status remains invariant. If a society never intends to free those it holds in captivity, then treatment is irrelevant, and one's keepers can exercise their will without restraint.

The obvious concomitant to perpetual captivity is the ability of the captors to break their prisoners' spirit and convince them that they are in fact niggers deserving of their fate. This has historically proven difficult. Alabama's chain gangs and the new supermax prisons to the contrary, it is futile to attempt to break the human spirit by force alone. We are simply too resilient and in some cases, far too stubborn. Surprises, of course, do occur, as in Nat Turner's short-lived rebellion, John Brown's futile raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, and

the insurrection at Attica, to cite but a few of the more notorious examples.

But, and the but is monumentally significant; if one's keepers have no choice but to release their charges after a specified time, then it does not take a giant leap of logic to understand that their attitudes should reflect that awareness. Perhaps a society can impose nigger status on those it loathes, and in some instances, make that label stick. What happens, however, when that nigger gains his freedom and during the course of internalizing his status, comes to understand that a perpetual state of war exists between him and society who sees him as a nigger? What happens when he begins to act like the nigger society tells him he is?

A prisoner made the observation some years ago that ex-convicts have only three options upon release: we can reintegrate into society and become productive, contributing members; we can become public wards and strain a struggling system already on the brink of collapse; or we can resume the role of predators. The first option represents the most beneficial, both from society's and the ex-convicts' perspectives, and it makes the most sense. The second evolves from hopelessness and an anomic loss of self, derived from the indoctrination that convinces the susceptible mind that he is unworthy and therefore need not try to change his status. But the third is the creation of anger and a gutwrenching, mindbending need to pay somebody - anybody - back for the years of being treated like a, yes, like a nigger.

Last year, a journalist examined the maximum-security unit at Pelican Bay (California) and interviewed some of the men inside, one of whom was frighteningly candid. He said that things had been done to him inside that no slave, no animal should have to endure. This individual was ending his sentence; no parole, no supervision of any kind, and he made the point that he could go wherever he wanted, do whatever he decided, and he was mad enough (and bad enough) to get the job done. This is the unavoidable result when society creates niggers by permanently subjugating a race or class of people, keeping its collective foot on the necks of those it tries to hold down, and never letting them up either to breathe freely or even to catch a glimpse of blue sky instead of the dirt in front of their faces.

Niggers of any colour eventually get angry, and in my twenty-two consecutive years in prison, I have seen scores of them. Most are long-term prisoners who will have two or sometimes three decades of prison

behind them when they are released, and they are mad. They are mad like you would not believe. Their families are gone; they are largely unemployable; and the vast majority are psychologically unstable. I stress here that these people are going to be released because they have done their time; you cannot stop them. They will be living in your neighbourhoods and shopping in the stores where you, your wives, your sisters, and your children shop. Think about it: mad niggers everywhere you go but without the identifying skin colour that would have previously warned you when you thought all niggers were black. The scenario scares *me*; it should terrify the average citizen.

But, you answer, we have police to protect us from such predators. That is certainly true, but the very nature of crime and random violence precludes its prevention, and like it or not, it does not take a lot of creativity to avoid the police long enough to commit a crime. The role of the police is, after all, apprehension. They catch us *after* we have committed whatever offense it is that we have chosen to perpetrate, which means that no one is safe from someone harbouring a grudge that has festered for twenty or thirty years. I repeat: no one is safe. Examine the conventional wisdom: niggers are crazy. We do not care who we hurt in the process of getting what we want. If that is the case, then why persist in legitimizing a system that creates niggers in an assembly-line process, turning them out year after year like so many new models of automobiles with built-in engineering defects: accelerators jammed at full throttle with no steering?

Some primitive societies believe that knowing a person's name confers an advantage on the one knowing, and thus names are kept secret. So it is with convicts. *I* know my name, even if society sees me as a nigger and even refers to me as such. If society agrees about the definition of a nigger, that distinction is society's alone. Most men and women do not see themselves in that role, no matter how often they hear the term applied to them. They retain their distinct, personal identities, even if they have to submerge them to survive, and society should be thankful that they preserve that degree of autonomy instead of acting according to the model urged on them.

Call me Ismael or what you will, I refuse to be anyone's nigger, because, whether society realizes it or not, its niggers are dangerous people when pushed, and I have more important things to do than ponder revenge. That is, unfortunately, not a universal sentiment behind the

walls and fences communities have erected to contain their prisoners. Those men and women whom society has discarded - its niggers - will, like Frankenstein's monster, one day turn on their creator, not behind the walls where society will be able to ignore the consequences but out there in the street. For those of you who have forgotten, Mary Shelley's novel was subtitled "A Modern Prometheus," but unlike the legend, the fire this time will consume rather than console.

ENDNOTES

1. For an excellent discussion of this phenomenon, I recommend Paulo Freire's (1989) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.