

Man of the House

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February 19, 2007

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Shortly after being hired into a position with one of Florida's statewide government agencies, my new supervisor invited me and others to a Friday evening wine and dip party at one of Tallahassee's local pubs. After a few glasses of wine and beer we all became a bit relaxed and she looked at me and said, 'You write really well and your life crosses the line between segregation and integration. You've got to write a book!!!' She turned her attention to other whites about our table and they talked about hiring people for different positions, who might best help to get them or their children promoted, and all this as if I had vanished from the table. This kind of selective attention to blacks is itself a form of racism practiced by Northern whites during the period of this essay and has been described by Jacqueline Goldsby as voyeuristic liberalism in her article mentioned above (259-261). On occasions I had considered writing satire about just this kind of outsider-ness in American culture; but I had *not considered writing a book about myself*. I listened as they talked to each other and among themselves. This was a kind of segregation with an integrationist twist. In Mary Moore Cathcart's Thesis Abstract, she talks about just how Southern Tradition has stretched its long arms at least thirty years and a thousand miles to the North to shape her own identity (Cathcart, p. 2). After all, this was 1997. Experiences like this reminded me that we are in Florida and still deeply embedded in the Southern tradition. When I left Mississippi in June 1963, two weeks after I graduated from high school, a concrete sidewalk separated white and black communities and I had never gone back there. I left onboard a Greyhound Bus at the segregated bus depot in Shelby and got off at the semi-integrated Greyhound

Bus Depot in Chicago where blacks huddled together in one area and whites in another. In 2002 my mother passed and I attended her funeral in Chicago. Relatives came from everywhere, many of whom I had not seen for at least three decades. As we talked the memories of growing up in Mississippi flooded my ears, heart and mind like a winter's wind coming off Chicago's lake-front. Later I attended a conference at the Florida Nature and Culture Center near Ft. Lauderdale and was greeted by an East Indian lady who rushed toward me and asked, 'Are you Indian?' I said no. She looked disappointed and walked away. I suddenly remembered growing up in Mississippi and hearing many of my schoolmates ask me: 'Are you Jamaican?' Or, 'Where did you get that accent?' I never really listened to myself talk so I had not taken notice of it. My daughter and son-in-law came to visit recently and on one occasion we decided to go to an East Indian Cuisine restaurant for lunch. One of the owners came directly toward me and asked, 'Are you Indian?' I said no, and she said, 'You sure *look* Indian. What'll you have today, Honey?' The crowing jewel of all came as I was about to turn off the lights at work one day and go home. At that moment another of my supervisors came into my office and closed slammed the door. 'You *foreign* to me!!!' he yelled. 'Where you git dat accent? How come you ask so many questions 'round here?' You know dey can change de laws on de books but hit takes mo' in 20 yars tu git offen the back uv de bus!' he concluded. Just as he had come into my office, he turned and left. This supervise is Black and he was not the first black person to make me feel like an outsider.

My sense of identity as a youth was in part defined by the cultural environments in which I lived. And '*getting off of the back of the bus*' meant many things to most black males I met while growing up in Mississippi. I was born in Mound Bayou, Mississippi in 1944 and grew up primarily in and around Shelby, about 4 miles from the 'Jewel of the Delta'. I left Mississippi in June 1963. The time period of my youth is defined by these dates. And the developments of my identity took place within the context of my environments. The online Microsoft (Word) Encarta Dictionary defines identity as one's essential self, and then elaborates by stating that it is: the set of characteristics that somebody recognizes as belonging uniquely to himself or herself and constituting his or her individual personality . . . I have understood and recognized my essential identity as a student of life, one with a living curiosity without limits or borders, awakened by my kindergarden teacher and further illuminated by other intelligent people who crossed my path while growing up, and since. Seeing myself as a 'student of life without borders' gave me (and continues to do so) a definite sense of freedom from the constrictions of the identities that gives so many people excuses to 'commit crimes nowadays in the name of religious, ethnic, national or some other kind of identity, as discussed by Amin Maalouf in his book, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* (Harvard, p. 1). A definition of manhood was a different kind of animal. My childhood was notable for its lack of a verbal definition of, and any specific guidance toward manhood for black males. As kids we observed adult black males for clues about what we were to become; and listened to black females and white males for guidance about how

to survive in our relations with all females, and especially white females. This was a life or death issue for black males. When the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was announced in 1954, I was 10 years old, living and working on the Will Denton cotton plantation just outside the city limits of Shelby. This decision paper did not immediately affect our lives. It was not until early 1956 that *Look Magazine* published 'The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi' that my Mother made me fully aware of the restrictions on my life as a black male. She had told me about them many times; but now she had pictures to show me. 'A picture is worth a thousand words,' she would say. Fourteen-year old Emmett Till had been killed:

to defend Carolyn Bryant's honor (as a white female and to) . . . venerate their way of political life. (J.W.) Milam asserted, 'As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers are going to stay in their place. . . Niggers ain't going to vote where I live. If they did, they'd control the government. They ain't going to go to school with my kids. And when a nigger even gets close to mention sex with a white woman, he's tired of livin'. Me and my folks fought for this country and we've got some rights. I stood there in that shed and listened to that nigger throw that poison at me and I just made up my mind. 'Chicago boy,' I said, 'I'm tired of 'em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. Goddamn you, I'm going to make an example of you – just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand' (Goldsby, pp. 253-4).

Milam's assertion that: Me and my folks fought for this country and we've got some rights, seems to ignore that blatant fact that many blacks fought along side of whites for this country (Houck, p. 229). The accusation that Emmett Till made a comment or whistled at Carolyn Bryant was a stated insult against all Southern white females and a blatant violation of Southern political Tradition – whether it actually happened or not. Prof. Davis Houck asserts that Emmett's reported comments or whistling at Carolyn Bryant represented a perceived threat to the South's 'way of life,' its identity, a threat understood largely in the context of a looming integration crisis as foreshadowed in the May 1954 *Brown* decision . . . (making the act of killing a black male child *from Chicago*) an act of Northern aggression' (Killing Emmett, p. 228). My Mother placed magazine pictures of this murder and trail on our dresser top and forced me to look at them each morning before leaving home. She had been doing her best to convince me that my life was in danger since my earliest memories. Now she had pictures to prove it. In Jacqueline Goldsby's article, she informs us that: 'seeing [was] central to the meaning of the 1950s,' because a premium was placed on visual experience such that it conditioned the value assigned to knowledge: what was 'true' or 'real' was that which could be seen' (255). 'Seeing is believing', My Mother often said. My imagination about life on the other side of town was that active 'thing' Mother needed to kill in me, and she knew it. My Great-great-grandfather, Theodore 'The Man' Bilbo had won re-election to the U.S. Senate from Mississippi in 1946 on a stated mission that he would reverse the 1944 U.S. Supreme Court *Smith v. Allwright* decision which outlawed the all-white Democratic primary. Bilbo's

contention was that 'if you let a handful (of blacks) go to the polls in July (1946) there will be two handfuls in 1947, and from there on it will grow into a mighty surge' (Dittmer, p. 2). Meanwhile, Bilbo's Black Maid, Francis Lee, had given birth to seven children for him; and one of those children is my Great-grandfather. My Mother understood her Great-granddad and talked to me often about his attitude. She was insulted by the fact that he refused to be seen in public with his own children and slandered and encouraged other whites to kill blacks, in his campaign speeches and elsewhere. In any event, in 1957 we moved to Cascilla, 'within a stone's throw' of Money. I was now 14 years of age and knew the rules of the game and how to use them to my advantage. If, however, a White girl decided to cross the color line and play games, the issues became extremely complicated. As Dr. T.R.M. Howard, Chief Surgeon of Mound Bayou's Tamborian Hospital, has said, 'Every time they get ready to lynch a Negro in the South, it's got to be about a white woman' (Houck, p. 225).

My Mother was eight months pregnant when we moved to Cascilla and I began work plowing the cotton fields with a mule to earn money to buy food and keep my siblings in school. I earned \$1.50 each day plowing cotton rows from sun-up till sun-down. Shortly after her delivery, Mother began working as a maid in the 'Big House'. On one occasion she asked me to go with her. We entered the back door as required. The Husband and Wife had three daughters. All were gone except their 12-to-14 year old daughter. In this isolated area of Mississippi's hills, there was nothing for children to do with their time and energy. As we walked in through the kitchen door the little girl ran to greet us. She caught me by

the hand, and said, 'Come on! Let's play!!!' My Mother froze stiff and turned a different color but she could do nothing to stop the little girl. As a White person, she was 'the boss' and I followed her to the bedroom where she immediately began jumping up and falling down on the bed, as if it was a trampoline. She faced me with a bright smile and each time she came down and bounced on the bed with her legs open, I noticed that she was not wearing panties. Joy and the possibility of death faced me! My Mother grabbed my shirt collar and said, 'Go outside and cut some wood!' She knew that it was already too late. Many nights and days followed with my Mother sweating, imagining the worst, and telling me horror stories about what she believed might happen to me at any moment. 'They might castrate you!' she repeatedly told me throughout the coming days and weeks. During and after listening to her stories my fears of castration and death challenged my imagination of the infinite possibilities of transient joy and tranquility.

I continued my usual habit of going across in front of the Big House to get the mule, hook him up with a bridle and plowing gear, and then going out to the cotton field to work. Silence followed. One day after another and there was only silence coming from the Big House. Mother voiced her worries and insisted that I look at those pictures in the magazines. Time passed without incident and soon my imagination regained its original strength, nourished by the mental images of the girl's desires to play and the beauty of her sex. My imagination crossed the color line just as Dante's imagination crossed the financial divide between himself and Beatrice. Milam's statements seem to suggest that white males had

a different sense of their identity and responsibilities within this culture. What he does not say is that white males could also sexually use black females at will and without fear of exposure – married or not. As in the case of my Great-great-granddad. If adult white males were expected to grow to manhood, protect their wives, other white female relatives and friends, provide homes and security for their wives and children; adult black males were referred to by the dominant white males of the areas as ‘boys’ at best; and actual black boys seeing and listening to this kind of communication and behavior knew instinctively that they would never be respected as men. Adult black males in our neighborhoods did not challenge white males who called them boys. Instead, they looked on the ground, frequently scratched their heads and often shuffled their feet while white males or females talked down to them. Adult black females were equally submissive although in different ways. Black parents with sons often feared the possibility of seeing them castrated, beaten and dead. One need only recall the circumstances surrounding the murder of 14-year old Emmitt Till to grasp a sense of it all. And as Milam has said, no nigger would go to school with his children. In other words, damn the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. In this story you will also note that Emmitt’s Uncle, Moses Wright, only pleaded with the white males invading his home and insulting his wife. He did not order them away from his home and protect his family. During the trial, however, Rev. Wright was asked to take the witness stand and identify the White person who stalked into his home, insulted his wife and took his Nephew away. He stood up, pointed his finger at the individual and said, ‘Thar

he!' Those two words echoed around much of the world in many newspapers and pierced a hole into Southern political Tradition. Rev. Wright knew that his time in Mississippi had ended and he needed another place to live. Black females may be raped or in the case of Fannie Lou Hamer, beaten by black males on orders from white males; but black males endured in this life as males without the dignity and respect of manhood and as human beings; and if a white female said that a black male looked at her, he may be castrated, clubbed or shot to death and burned hanging from a tree. In this atmosphere most adult black males would not have testified against any whites. The political culture which decided that only whites were allowed to testify in courts of law had given way to an unthinkable precedent. Thar he! Yet it would be many years before all Southern black males internalized and adjusted to this new way of living in which they, too, could speak and know in their hearts that their words were respected by all. It was this kind of '*getting off the back of the bus*' that my ex-supervisor talked about. Untill then Richard Wright's *Black Boy* seems to best describe the hearts and minds of most black adult males I knew during my youth:

The penalty of death awaited me if I made a false move and I wondered if it was worth-while to make a move at all. The things that influenced my conduct as a Negro did not have to happen to me directly; I needed but to hear of them to feel their full effects in the deepest layers of my consciousness. Indeed, the white brutality that I had not seen was a more effective control of my behavior than that which I knew. The actual experience would have let me see the realistic outlines of what was really

happening, but as long as it remained something terrible and yet remote, something whose horror and blood might descend upon me at any moment, I was compelled to give my entire imagination over to it, an act which blocked the springs of thought and feeling in me, creating a sense of distance between me and the world in which I lived (172).

This racially charged political environment was intensely violent, and separated by skin color; it was occasioned by passionate, compassionate interactions between people of whatever ethnic or gender group; and yet Mississippi was destined to suffer the consequences of its own negative actions as well as that of others, such as the over-reactions of the NAACP and the inactions of Thurgood Marshall. It is important to note, too, that whites did not have a monopoly on violence as suggested by Richard Wright in his statement ‘as long as it (white violence) remained something terrible and yet remote, something whose horror and blood might descend upon me at any moment, I was compelled to give my entire imagination over to it, an act which blocked the springs of thought and feeling in me, creating a sense of distance between me and the world in which I lived’. Inside my childhood homes and schools in Mississippi the beatings I got from my teachers, Grandmother, my mother and one of her male friends took the form of religiously sanctioned child abuse. Mother often told me that ‘the Bible said bend the sap while it is young so it grows straight’. In our shanty houses both Mother and her Preacher friend viewed me as a kid who had gotten “too manish;” one who thought he was the ‘man of the house’, read books and asked too many questions. My mother had

taught me to believe that I was ‘the man of the house’ from my earliest memories, and since there were no men living in our home any longer than it took to make her pregnant, it seemed to make sense to me. And though there were no known examples of ‘manhood’ for me to emulate, I fashioned one for myself and it fit me just fine. I would look into the eyes of adults, for example, until ordered to do otherwise. I asked questions until told to ‘shut up’. And my imagination wondered across all borders and beyond.

Asking questions would appear to be a separate issue; but coming from a child, it could only mean to my mother and her Preacher-brute that I had forgotten my place in *their* social order. My search for answers to questions in the home, school or elsewhere often sent me into uncharted territories where my presence in white communities may have been perceived as a threat to the quintessential images of Southern beauty – white females. On numerous occasions teachers mentioned books that were not in my school’s library and I made a ‘B-line’ to the ‘White school’ library to get them. One of the librarians became my ‘backdoor friend’ and she would usher me into a closed room while searching for the book I wanted, checking it out, and then sneak me out the back door with a little hug and a kiss on my cheek. Experiences such as this differs sharply from that reflected in *Black Boy*; and it is for this reason that I have decided to write this mixed autoethnographical/heuristic story and address some of the questions about my experiences under segregation and integration. In as much as it is important to portray the many ways in which my own identity was shaped and refined, it is also important to state unequivocally that it is most

inappropriate for anyone to refer to 'men' as being 'all the same' or to suggest that Southern black American men are somehow part of America's 'male-dominated society'. To be truthful about gender issues is another aspect of 'the politics of evidence' as we know it in America.

In an effort to situate myself into Mississippi's cultural and political context between 1944 and 1963 and address the issues mentioned above, I will attempt to answer the following questions in the order given:

- a. Did my mother inherit the teachings of a segregationist oppressive system in Mississippi and knowingly or unknowingly help to perpetuate it by teaching her children to believe in, and accept their place in it? If so, what did she gain by doing so?

- g. Was intellectual inquisitiveness in African American males squashed due to a fear of being beaten, castrated and/or killed?

- f. What can we extrapolate from this research about white males and females who succeeded in academics under superior conditions during this time period?

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