



# Ears Embiggened: Rhiannon Giddens – Great Black Music, Redux

*(The third in a series of preview posts as we count down to the [2019 Big Ears Festival](#) in Knoxville, TN. [Part 1 here](#) on the 50 year legacy of ECM Records. [Part 2 here](#) on 50 years of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, *Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future.*)*

The eruption of way too many old photos of white politicians in blackface was a real chef's kiss for Black History Month. There quickly followed predictable hand wringing, assertions of surprise that such a thing was actually *still a thing*, and heartfelt intonations that such evidence “does not reflect who I am within my heart,” a heart that surely resides in a body that contains not a single “racial bone.”

Blackface has a long history, back at least as far as Shakespeare's *Otello*. More pertinent to the American experience is its introduction in the mid-1700s as a device to shorthand stereotypes about happy-go-lucky slaves and indolent and shiftless darkies. It was in the 1830s when Thomas Rice

introduced the character of Jim Crow and the practice of whites capering in blackface – minstrelsy – became one of the most popular entertainment tropes in America and, often, in Europe.

Many of the songs were stolen wholesale from slaves and free Blacks and their wide popularity was tied to a significant act of erasure: White performers replaced Blacks as they purported to accurately represent the hijacked culture. See also, Dixieland, rock'n'roll, British blues, &c. These acts of cultural theft are well known.

The reality was different. While the overt acts of theft<fn>e.g., Elvis as the King, or the claim inherent in the name of the Original Dixieland Jass Band, an all-White ensemble that achieved notable popularity c. 1917-1935)</fn> are well-documented, the organic syncretism on the ground was the result of a more fluid commingling of whites and blacks, especially in rural and mountain communities.

A little less well-known is the centrality of African-American influence on musics that are widely regarded as “white” music: bluegrass and country. Much of this is an outgrowth of the sorting imposed by the recording industry in its early years and the separation of *race music* and old timey/country, which was allegedly the province of white folks. Jazz and blues were deemed to have slave and African roots, while country and mountain music was declared an offshoot of the Scots-Irish tradition, distinctly white. The markets for these now-sorted musics was presumed to be distinct, as well, though the reality of how music lovers seek out and collect music made these false distinctions somewhat irrelevant as American music developed. Categories are for sheep. Maybe that should be the Big Ears motto.

One of the most successful erasures in American music history lies in the revisionism that eventually decreed the banjo as the whitest instrument of them all, despite the fact that the *banjer*, or *banza*, came to America from Africa via slave ship, an unintended import, perhaps, carried in memory by the more intentional human cargo. The banjo, an instrument imported from Africa and subsequently employed to confer authenticity on the performers pretending to be black, was ultimately stripped of its African identity.

For at least the past 15 or 20 years, there has been a concerted effort at re-framing the banjo and its associated musics in a more explicitly African-American context. One of the most successful of the musical archaeologist/apostles is Rhiannon Giddens, formerly of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, MacArthur “genius” recipient, trained operatic singer, and banjo wizard.

Aside from the sheer pleasure of her singing and playing, Giddens’ work is a concerted campaign to undo multiple acts of erasure that have decentered African-Americans from a central component of their cultural legacy. Everything about her career asks us to reconsider the “facts” we all know are true. Things like “banjos and opera are for white folks. Among her many projects, Giddens hosts a podcast series called *Aria Code* that examines one great operatic aria per episode, with a variety of surprising guests. Her interests are broad.

[In my last piece](#), I related how the Art Ensemble of Chicago rejected the jazz label and christened their genre Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future. It was a strategy that gave them access to the universe of musics that derive from the Black experience, which in practicality means just about any sound or style they found interesting. Unlike some acts of

illegitimate appropriation (minstrelsy, Led Zeppelin, etc.), their claims represent a re-appropriation of something rightfully their own.

A survey of Rhiannon Giddens' career reveals a similar strategy. She may never have thought of herself as part of the Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future orbit, but to listen to the breadth of musics she has (re)claimed, it is hard for me not to put her under that banner. Just take a listen to her latest release on Smithsonian Records, *Songs of Our Native Daughters*. Her and her three partners in this project (all WoC who play the banjo, by damn) mine their various traditions – both direct and inferred – to create a journey that is a model of intersectional storytelling.

Give a listen to “Barbados.” The wordless melody is every bit as harrowing as Blind Willie Johnson’s “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground.” But bracketing the lament is a polite recitation that slyly suggests: “So relax, my friend – we’re not all complicit.”

Buy this album. You will not be sorry.

In its own way, her embrace of the banjo and her ongoing musical archaeology are acts of cultural radicalism that have rippled out in ways she likely never imagined when she first hooked up with her eventual Chocolate Drop partners. It is a body of work that rejects and resists the acts of erasure and othering that underlie the greatest rifts in our culture.

And one of her most substantial acts of creative radicalism will be on display at the 2019 Big Ears Festival.



This machine kills fascists

In 2012, poet Caroline Randall Williams traveled to England to pursue a hot tip about Shakespeare's sonnets, specifically numbers 127 to 154.

*These sonnets have been called the "Dark Lady" sonnets for quite a while now, because of their focus (in contrast to the preceding 126, which are addressed to "a fair youth" and a "rival poet") on a woman who consistently figures as "dark" or "black," in his descriptions of her.*

*p. 8, Lucy Negro Redux: The Bard, A Book, and ! Ballet, Caroline Randall Williams, Third Man Books, 2019*

Inspired by this research, Williams spun out a book of poems, *Lucy Negro, Redux*, informed by her experience as a Black woman and her identification with a woman who (may have) been like

her, an unexpected identification with a central character in a canon of work that she loved deeply. The idea of William Shakespeare devoting a substantial portion of his work to Black Luce – a well-documented brothel owner in Shakespeare’s London – generated both disquiet (Luce likely being a madam and/or prostitute, sparking parallels with the exploited Black bodies of slave women) and elation (the possibility of placing a Black body at the center of the *ne plus ultra* of the White European literary tradition). As the NY Times review of the ballet premiere points out:

*Caroline Randall Williams also descends from white men who raped her black ancestors. She carries in her very DNA the conflict at the heart of “Lucy Negro, Redux”: What does it mean for a woman to be both desired and reviled for the color of her skin?”*

It is one hell of a volume. The poems are gorgeous, angry, sexual, repellent, yearning. They are explicit and blunt and irresistibly musical. Her use of space on the page enhances this notion of rhythm and musicality. And their intensity made it difficult for me to read more than a couple at a time. Some are stark revenge fantasy; others are demands to be seen or a fight against the ever-looming threat of erasure. Others are pained cries of yearning, of a wish to be loved for and as herself. Shakespeare as a deep blues. Or maybe the other way round.

The Nashville Ballet’s artistic director, Paul Vesterling, read it and knew he wanted to stage the work. He had just the dancer in mind for the role of Lucy: Kayla Rowser, a Nashville Ballet company member who had been named one of *Dance Magazine’s* Top 25 to watch.

Naturally, a ballet needs music. And that's where Rhiannon Giddens comes back in. Vesterling asked Giddens to create the soundscape. She collaborated with Francesco Turrisi to compose a score that they perform live for the ballet. (They will also appear in concert at Big Ears, separate from the *Lucy Negro, Redux* presentation, as they explore commonalities between American, Celtic, and Islamic musical traditions. World music, y'all.)

*Lucy Negro, Redux*, a ballet, is an assertive act of resistance against multivalent forces of erasure and false sorting. Imagine the stage. Giddens as a visual and sonic focus. Williams herself appearing as narrator and centering presence, her words and body claiming her place alongside ole Billy Bard. Kayla Rowser establishing the presence of Black Luce, her story retold through the imagination of Williams, the movements of Rowser, and the music of Giddens. It makes me shiver.

The programming at Big Ears encourages broader connection-drawing, grand schemes that dig for the meaning of life, the universe, and everything. Aside from the convergence of the 50th anniversaries of ECM and the Art Ensemble of Chicago – an obvious bit of harmonic convergence – there are the broader questions of how the programming might encourage us to ponder broader implications of how the music (and film and dance &c.) we enjoy might direct us to finer considerations of the ways we all – all of us – might connect one to the other in the broader scheme of things.

Is Rhiannon Giddens really an expositor of Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future? Honestly, chances are good she would laugh in my face at the idea. But it seems to fit, in the same way that her work and the work of the AEC fit hand in glove

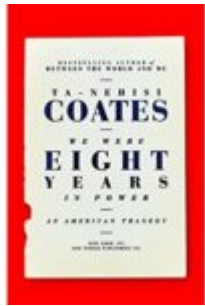
with the admonitions of James Baldwin to open our eyes and ears and hearts, to make them bigger and more able to see and hear and feel a deep and rich history that has been largely hidden from us, one that could have disappeared entirely without the efforts of the artists and scholars who insist on keeping it alive. It is work that asks us to enlarge our vision to embrace the vast and wondrous possibilities that await, if only we could overcome the limitations imposed upon us by a social and economic system that profits by our ignorance and separation.

*“And if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. For this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become.”*

*“The Fire Next Time,” James Baldwin*

Maybe the whole idea of “art” somehow being a reasonably accurate and/or useful reflection of our shared human condition – and by extension, the possibility that “art” might somehow manifest something like a healing action or force upon our beleaguered condition – is somehow valid, somehow pertinent to our hourly/daily/weekly efforts to figure out the answer to what David Foster Wallace called our essential existential question: What does it mean to be fucking human?





## America's Virgil

At this point, just about everyone has at least heard of Ta-Nehisi Coates. His second book, *Between the World and Me*, won the 2015 National Book Award. Written as a letter to his teen-aged son, *BTWAM* has sold 1.5 million copies in 19 languages. He won a MacArthur “genius” award. His writing drew comparison to James Baldwin from no less a voice on high than Toni Morrison. He was anointed with dreadful millstone descriptions like “voice of a generation” or, even worse, “the conscience of his race”.

Now comes the follow-up, and it's shaping up to be quite the media event. The reviews have been almost embarrassingly laudatory and hagiographic profiles of Coates are popping up everywhere. The man himself has been making the rounds of all the high-profile venues. Just last night he sat down with Colbert.

So the burning question. Is *We Were Eight Years in Power* worthy of the fuss?

Yeah, you better believe it is.

It would have been easy to just package a bunch of his *Atlantic* essays, slap an introduction up front, and call it a day. It likely would have been every bit as commercially successful as the more considered volume that hits the store shelves today will be. *We Were Eight Years in Power* collects

those essays – one from each of the past 8 years – but instead of one big retrospective introduction, Coates has written an introduction to each essay, a sort of mini-essay on where he stood professionally and philosophically at the time. Running in parallel to the uber-phenomenon of the first black presidency is the micro-story of a college dropout from Baltimore coming to grips with his voice, his thinking, his place in the world, and eventually, his blazing rocket ascension into his role “as one of the most influential black intellectuals of his generation”, as the NY Times recently put it. And then, to cap it all off, Coates offers a new meditation on the rise of the inexcusable Trump, “The First White President”, that kicks the hornet’s nest anew.

Here’s how I’d put it: Coates is shaping up to be America’s Virgil, the man of letters who will serve as our guide through the circles of hell built on the foundation of white supremacy, theft, murder, rape, and lying.

Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’intrate. So let’s take a walk, shall we?

The essays alone, arranged chronologically and ranging from his look at the stern moralizing of a pre-disgrace Bill Cosby to the nightmare rise of a dim-witted game show host to the Oval Office, give the reader a tour through a young man’s mind as he comes to better know himself, his craft, and the world around. But even better: the new essays give us a matured writer in conversation with his younger self, chastising the flaws and failures and giving us a glimpse of struggles that should resonate with any writer.

One of the great pleasures in this volume lies in witnessing Coates’ gradual, and then sudden, development. 2015 alone saw the publication of BTWAM and his Polk award winning essay “The Black Family in the Age of Incarceration”, included here. Talk about mic-dropping. It’s as though he gains confidence both in his voice and his thinking in tandem. I

wish he had included some examples of his early-years blogging at *The Atlantic* to paint an even fuller picture of how far he traveled in a ten year span. The blog is where I first stumbled to Coates, and I followed him regularly. He writes about that period, describing it as something of a finishing school, a place where he was able to try out ideas and voices, a place where the give and take of argumentation and citations of previously-unknown writers led him into modes of thought and investigation that were fresh and generative. It was clear that this was a guy with chops, and I remember wondering why he didn't have a two-a-week gig on the NYT op-ed. Even raw, he was that good.

Coates backs up his provocative positions with solid evidence, but nobody turns to Coates for a recitation of statistics. He is one of the finest prose stylists alive. Every page brings at least one passage – a phrase, a sentence, an entire paragraph – that demands multiple re-readings.

At one point early in his ascent, he describes attending a dinner party where someone mentioned the Continental Divide, something he had never heard of at the time.

*I did not know what the Continental Divide was, and I did not ask. Later I felt bad about this. I knew, even then, that whenever I nodded along in ignorance, I lost an opportunity, betrayed the wonder in me by privileging the appearance of knowing over the work of finding out.*

Raise your hand if you ever pretended to know when you didn't.<fn>You there, in back, with your hand down. You're pretending. That's it. Raise that hand.</fn>

Coates writes at length about the influences that made him the writer he has become. He speaks frequently of his love of graphic novels<fn>Post-BTWAM, Coates became the writer for the Black Panther comic series, telling the NYT that it "satisfies the kid in me" and is "the place where I can go to do

something that sort of feels private again.” and how he spent hours playing and replaying certain hip-hop tracks so he could decipher the lyrics, certain that there was a structure and rhythm that he might be able to unlock.

*That was how I wanted to write – with weight and clarity, without sanctimony and homily. I could not even articulate why. I guess if forced I would have mumbled something about “truth.”*

It’s easy to forget that just ten years ago, Coates was struggling to get his words out, struggling (and often failing) to provide for himself and his family. Struggling to find a voice. And grappling with the question of what, exactly, he needed to be writing about, when along comes a skinny guy mixed-race guy with a beautiful family and a very black name to upend the apple cart of assumptions about race. Coates was in the right place at the right time. And he had prepared for the moment, even if it would take a few years of hindsight to realize how fortune had smiled.

It’s not fair to say that Coates would not have “made it” absent the phenomenon of Obama. He is simply too talented and curious not to have arrived in some fashion. But just as the fact of Obama created the ground that enabled the ascendancy of Trump, so too did it provide a framework for Coates to both blossom and achieve success beyond his wildest imaginings. In “Notes from the Second Year”, which introduces his 2009 profile of Michelle Obama, he acknowledges this turn of fate.

*Their very existence opened a market. It is important to say this, to say it in this ugly, inelegant way. It is important to remember the inconsequence of one’s talent and hard work and the incredible and unmatched sway of luck and fate.*

Revisiting Coates’ work over the *Eight Years* in this volume reminds me of how much his work influences my own approach,

and how surprisingly<fn>Though it shouldn't be a surprise.</fn> similar we are to one another. Bookish nerds with a fierce love of music, backed by a certainty that these arts could change the world. Civil War geeks. Devoted family guys who, often, are tormented by a seeming inability to measure up to standards of toxic masculinity as regards our success as providers. And the tie that binds all of us who lash ourselves to pen and paper: the curiosity and fear and drive and futility of trying to transform thoughts into words that sing and dance off the page.

But even with the pleasures provided by Coates' writing, this collection is unlikely to make you feel especially chipper. Beginning with the audacious hope that the Obama era confers, the story closes with Coates pondering the specter of America's "first white president", a man who has achieved the highest office in the land based solely on his appeal to whiteness. In electing Trump, he suggests, "the white tribe united in demonstration to say, "If a black man can be president, then any white man – no matter how fallen – can be president."

*The American tragedy now being wrought is larger than most imagine and will not end with Trump. In recent times, whiteness as an overt political tactic has been restrained by a kind of cordiality that held that its overt invocation would scare off "moderate" whites. This has proved to be only half-true at best. Trump's legacy will be exposing the patina of decency for what it is and revealing just how much a demagogue can get away with. It does not take much to imagine another politician, wise in the ways of Washington, schooled in the methodology of governance, now liberated from the pretense of anti-racist civility, doing a much more effective job than Trump.*

In recent interviews, Coates has taken something of an absolutist stance: the myth of race and the horrific reality

of racism is the one key factor, “the only thing” that explains everything, as he said to Chris Hayes. I swing between believing this to be a rhetorical gambit – a means of framing the debate on his terms, almost like a negotiating stance – and believing him to be quite sincere in this belief.

I’m not much for grand theories of everything, but he has a point. He poses compelling arguments that the United States, and everything about its financial strength and global power, is predicated on the violent appropriation of black peoples’ labor, under slavery and under both the original and new Jim Crow. He is at his most forceful when he challenges America to face its original sin, to acknowledge the “bloody heirloom”. And he is at his most resigned when he avers that a snowball stands a better chance in hell.

It’s not that Coates does not offer or hold out hope for our future. In essence, the hope lies in his demand that we acknowledge our true history, unadorned by myths of exceptionalism and bootstrappy pluck and all the other fairy tales the nation has told itself over the years.

Like Baldwin (and so many others before and since), he despairs that he will ever see such a turn of fate. Yet he manages a quiet note of hope. He quotes Baldwin:

*White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this – which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never – the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.*

The “race problem” lies in America’s enthusiastic embrace of the falsity and myths of exceptionalism and of “authentic” (read: White) American working men and women raising themselves through dint of their own merit and pluck. That this formulation rests on a false notion of Whiteness that can only exist in juxtaposition to a fabricated myth of Blackness

is the unspoken dirty secret that keeps us all on blindly flailing on side-by-side treadmills, hurtling toward an illusory destination while making scant progress and never noticing that the rats in the cage next to us are really more like us than we have been led to believe.

For Coates, white supremacy is so foundational to the entire American enterprise that he sees little chance of White America writ large rejecting the premise. It's hard to argue with him, even as it leaves one in despair. In his sit-down with Colbert, he was asked to offer hope for a better tomorrow. Coates was having none of it.

*COLBERT: I'm not asking you to make shit up. I'm asking if you personally see any evidence for change in America.*

*COATES: But I would have to make shit up to actually answer that question in a satisfying way.*

So don't look to *We Were Eight Years in Power* for a pleasing bedtime tale. Coates offers analysis, not bromides. Or as he puts it in what is perhaps the most Baldwin-esque passage in the book:

*Art was not an after-school special. Art was not motivational speaking. Art was not sentimental. It had no responsibility to be hopeful or optimistic or make anyone feel better about the world. It must reflect the world in all its brutality and beauty, not in hopes of changing it but in the mean and selfish desire to not be enrolled in its lies, to not be coopted by the television dreams, to not ignore the great crimes all around us.*

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## Days of Miracle and Wonder

One of the activities that keeps me off the street and out of trouble is serving as a mentor to up and coming entrepreneurs at the [Domi Station](#) incubator in Tallahassee. This is purely volunteer work where I listen to people pitch their ideas and then tell them a million ways they could do it better. Most people appreciate it; some, not so much. Either way, this was their chance to throw rocks my way.

The [1 Million Cups](#) series is a Kauffman Foundation initiative based on the notion that entrepreneurs discover solutions and create networks over a million cups of coffee. Every Wednesday, in dozens of cities, one person stands up and throws a pitch to a crowd of caffeine-fueled colleagues, peers, and the occasional VIP. Today was my turn on the mound.

Your Narrator delivered a scintillating, finely woven tale, peppered with witty asides and penetrating insights. Jaws dropped. Grown men wept. In the distance, a coyote howled. It was amazing. No, really.

But you readers have to make do with the short version. Basically, I was asking for financial support to chase down an amazing story. Essentially, to chase a miracle.

There are several strands at play, like Southern agricultural economics and the role of the peanut in the politics of social justice, largely centered around this man's story.





George Washington Carver

It's a story about how African-American farmers, instructed by an African-American researcher, upended the cotton-based economics of the agrarian South by embracing the humble peanut at the beginning of the last century. It's about how that switch regenerated the soil depleted by cotton (an extremely extractive crop that turns soil to dust) and offered a pathway to self-reliance to people who were still toiling under a de facto continuation of slavery. It's about the discovery of the superb nutritional qualities of the ground nut, the lowly goober pea, which eventually found its way onto everyone's pantry shelf in the form of peanut butter and other products, not to mention taking a central place in African-American foodways traditions.

It's also about a small town, Fitzgerald Georgia, population 9053, a long-time peanut center, which has a new factory for peanut processing that employs around 80-90 people. And how most of the employees are convicted felons searching for a

pathway back into mainstream life.

But more than anything, it's about this little guy.



This child is in the final stages of Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM), the leading cause of death of children in the world. One every 8 seconds, around 5 million deaths per year. The kids who survive are typically developmentally challenged – saddled with poor motor, cognitive, immune functions – for the rest of their lives. Entire generations of future problem solvers, leaders, entrepreneurs, doctors, &c., are left hollowed out. There are many reasons that sub-Saharan Africa is plagued by social and political crisis. This is one of the chief contributing factors.

The worst thing about it...this suffering is easily preventable. Absolutely curable and reversible.

This is the miracle part. And we're back to the peanut.



## Miracle and wonder

The boy on the right is the boy on the left after five weeks of treatment with Ready to Use Therapeutic Food (RUTF), a high-protein, vitamin-fortified peanut paste. At a cost of a little more than a dollar a day, RUTF will reverse the symptoms of SAM and place a young child on a path to normal physical and mental development. The treatment efficacy is in the 95% range. Miracle and wonder.

There are a handful of companies in the world that make this stuff according to a formula prescribed by the UN. One of them is in Fitzgerald, GA, population 9053.



## Miracle Nutrition

[Mana](#) is a non-profit that is committed to eliminating SAM. It also takes seriously an opportunity to provide stimulus to an economically suffering part of rural South Georgia, and to provide job opportunities for ex-cons looking for reintegration.

It's a big job, and like most important missions, it is underfunded. Mana reaches around one-third of the kids in need. Upping that figure takes money. (One of the stories that I dread, and that is inevitable, is how just a few miles from where we distribute Mana is another camp that will not be served.)

So they had a bright idea: create a for-profit company that leverages the existing peanut processing facility to manufacture a high-quality consumer product that can fund the famine relief mission.



## Funding the Miracle

So Good Spread was born, an effort to harness a chunk of the \$2Billion/year peanut butter industry in service to a larger good. We hear an awful lot about Social Entrepreneurship these days, and when it's touted by the oil companies and such, it's [easy to get cynical](#). But these folks are the real deal.

Next month, October, Mana/Good Spread is loading up a plane for delivery to Uganda, which recently received around 750,000 refugees from the civil strife in South Sudan. This is on top

of a multi-year drought and crop failure cycle that has already stressed the Ugandan food infrastructure to the breaking point. Not to mention an earlier influx of refugees. The situation is dire.

And Your Narrator has been offered a seat on the plane and in the back of the truck. This will mean 8-10 days on the ground in Uganda, sitting in on meetings with governmental and NGO actors, and visiting the camps and relief agencies. What I've related so far is the tip of the iceberg on this story. I want to dig deeper and bring this story home. There is already interest from a few publications, and my pitch this morning has led to potential contacts at some other notable vehicles. My gut instinct is that this story has potential for full book length treatment. It is that big.

But this project will take money, way more than I have. I'll need travel expenses to Africa, as well as resources to pursue story lines in Fitzgerald, Tuskegee, and other significant locations.

So I'm asking straight out: please donate to this project. We are not going the Kickstarter/GoFundMe route, or directly to granting orgs and foundations, because the trip is coming up so quickly. Direct action, and pleading, is necessary. We are setting up a donation channel through the Domi Education Fund, which will make your contribute tax-deductible. I'm putting up a PayPal link at the top of this page. Please use it. Tell your friends. If you know any philanthropists, tell them.

**IMPORTANT: (UPDATED)**

**The PayPal link leads to a donation form where you can place a tax-deductible donation to Domi Education, which is administering the funds.**

**If you prefer to donate via check, please remit to:**

**Domi Education  
914 Railroad Ave  
Tallahassee, FL 32310.**

I need to raise about \$4000 to put me on that plane (and the one that comes back!), and around \$5000-6000 beyond that to cover research expenses and development. If I get anywhere close to \$4k, I'm on the plane and I'll worry about the rest later. Any donations beyond those amounts will go to Mana.

And if you want to skip my project and just give directly to Mana, angels will smile and blow trumpets. I'm good with that. Do whatever feels right.

But since I really want to bring this story home, I'm turning to my network of faithful readers and pals to do the one thing I do worst: ask for help.

Whaddya say?



# The Greatest Thing That Ever Lived

By the time I could pay attention, The Greatest had already rejected his slave name, embraced the Nation of Islam, and refused to serve the armed forces of the United States.<fn>He was not a draft *dodger*. He just said fuck no, put me in prison if you have to, but fuck. No. That ain't no dodge.</fn>

By the time I could pay attention, I remember adults in my orbit still calling him Cassius Clay, declaring they would never call him by that n\*\*\*\*r name, that he had gotten way above his station, that he was a traitor, that he refused to appreciate everything "his" country had done for him, just another shiftless ingrate who didn't know his place.

I can't say I was carefully taught. But I was taught. I was taught that James Brown was barely more evolved than an ape or a gorilla, that MLK was one "one of the good ones, mostly" and that those *animals* were burning down "their own" neighborhoods.

But by the time I could pay attention, none of this stuff squared with what I was seeing with my own lying eyes.

By the time I could pay attention, MLK went from alive to dead, a victim of the racism that my people all wanted to believe was not as bad as "the bad ones" would suggest. You know, the bad ones. Like these guys.





Tommie Smith and John Carlos – American Patriots

By the time I could pay attention, James Brown was the guy who made some of my favorite music, a thrilling force of nature.

By the time I could pay attention, the futility and inherently racist cruelty of the Vietnam War was all too clear, even to this ten-year old. A 4th grade friend and I got in big trouble for refusing to stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance, reasoning that there was no way in hell that we would ever fight in Vietnam, so pledging allegiance would be nothing but a lie.

We stood with Muhammad Ali. Even if we didn't know it.

(That week, in an odd turn, Jose Feliciano performed the National Anthem at the World Series. His performance was an outrage, a provocation, yet another example of one of Those People™ showing ingratitude at how much “their” country had done for them. His crime? Singing a British drinking song with a Latin feel. So the next day, the entire 4th grade was summoned to the classroom of one Miss Loretta Karp, a stooped skeleton from hell in high heels, with impossibly bright red hair, a woman who would have been six foot three if she was



not in a constant hunch. She was mean as a wet cat whose bright red lipsticked smile existed only to signal impending cruelty. She began by noting that there had been some “unpleasantness” in school lately with “certain people” showing “poor patriotism by refusing to honor Our Flag”. She then went on to note that the World Series had been forever blemished by the desecration of the national anthem by a “foreigner. But by God,” we were going to fix that by having the entire 4th grade “stand together and sing the Star Spangled Banner as God meant it to be sung”. My pal and I got the giggles and could not stop. We got in trouble again. Such wabble wousers!)

Sure, we were risking nothing more than a stern talking to from our parents and disapproving looks from teachers and staff. Our courage was nothing, a flea fart in a hurricane. But still. We stood with Ali, two dopy white boys in the Connecticut suburbs who basically knew shit from shinola. But we knew that everything we were being taught about the war, about the way our nation was structured, did not square with things we saw on the electric radio picture box every night at dinner, pass the biscuits please. By the way, why are they burning down that village?

Too many things we were taught were just transparently wrong. This is not to cast full blame on our parents and teachers. They were themselves taught untruth, a set of lies that became matters of gospel faith. This was “their” country, and everyone else who was here needed to know their place.

So it’s easy to understand how *my people*, taught from birth that this was “their” country, would look at Cassius Clay’s declaration of “I’m the greatest thing that ever lived!” as not just braggadocio, but as a direct threat to their security and world view. For a *colored* man, such a thing was just not done.

And for him to embrace Black Nationalism the very next day, to

clearly state uncomfortable truths about “their” nation, could only mean one of two things: one of them was lying. And it had to be, just had to be, that loud-mouthed *boy*.

And then, he rejected “their” war, “their” draft, “their” nation in terms that offered no comfort, no conciliation:

*“I got nothing against no Viet Cong. No Vietnamese ever called me a nigger. They never lynched me or raped my grandmother. Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go 10,000 miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on Brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights? No I’m not going 10,000 miles from home to help murder and burn another poor nation simply to continue the domination of white slave masters of the darker people the world over. This is the day when such evils must come to an end. I have been warned that to take such a stand would cost me millions of dollars. But I have said it once and I will say it again. The real enemy of my people is here. I will not disgrace my religion, my people or myself by becoming a tool to enslave those who are fighting for their own justice, freedom and equality.... If I thought the war was going to bring freedom and equality to 22 million of my people they wouldn’t have to draft me, I’d join tomorrow. I have nothing to lose by standing up for my beliefs. So I’ll go to jail, so what? We’ve been in jail for 400 years.”*

He gave up everything for this stand. His titles, his income. He was not allowed to practice his craft. He was, in fact, one of White America’s most hated symbols, even as he became a hero to Black America and to people around the world. When he was finally allowed to fight again, the battle lines were pretty clear. Joe Frazier was “one of the good ones”, the guy who would shut Ali up for good. The rest is, as they say, history. You can look it up. Or you can turn on the electric picture radio machine for round the clock Ali

hagiography.</fn>

As with MLK III, the posthumous softening of the Ali image is underway. Just as King was transformed from a warrior badass into a cuddly teddy bear of non-violent accommodation, Ali is being morphed into an anodyne citizen of the world, a guy who was great with kids, who met with everyone from princes to paupers. A twinkly-eyed elder statesman who, robbed of speech, became a blank slate upon which we could all shine our imagining of who and what this guy was in life.<fn>Even Trump blathered on about how they were such “good friends”, ffs.</fn>

But Ali, like King, was way more than a teddy bear.

Last night we began watching the remake of *Roots*. It's a grueling affair. Central to the first episode is the importance of a person claiming and owning his *real* name. Kunta Kinte endured a savage beating before he whispered “Toby” in acceptance of his fate. Ali flipped that, renouncing the name his more recent ancestors had been forced to assume. And he took a beating for it. The nation wanted a nice Joe Louis Negro, a quiescent and accommodating character who would make white folks feel like they are not racists, because they just love them one of the good ones. Someone who transcended race.

Writer Stereo Williams dropped this tweet today:

*“Transcended race” typically means “Helped me forget to be racist.”*

Ali never let me forget to be racist. Such a thing is impossible for this product of White Southern upbringing. If anything, I want to remember that I am a racist, constantly. I don't need to be let off the hook for my part in this legacy.

By the time I could pay attention, Ali helped me understand

that the Vietnam War was an immoral, indefensible violation of human decency. That was early on in my lifetime of paying (variable) attention to our world, and it was no small thing to realize that one of Those People™ was correcting a lie handed me by “my people”.

What else did I have wrong? The list is seemingly endless.

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ow we mourn artists we've nev  
:new them, we cry because th

2016

♥ 15,230

## All the Critics Love U in New York

If there's any celebrity you can be sure you *did not know* in any significantly real way, it was Prince. Shape shifter, name shifter/eraser, master of every style you can name. Intensely private and essentially flamboyant. Exhibitionist. Hermit. You don't know him except in the ways you think you do, and that has as much to do with what you wanted him to be as it does with which little pieces of mythologizing he wanted you to see at any given time. Like the classic Trickster of legend, he could present multiple faces at the same time, and the face you got to glimpse, briefly, depended on which side of the road you were standing on. If Prince had been around then,

Kurosawa could have made this pint-sized product of Minni-freaking-sota the centerpiece of *Rashomon*. That would have been cool.

What do I know of Prince? We're roughly the same age. He's probably the most under-appreciated guitar player in like ever. Over the years that I have been heralding him as easily the best thing since Hendrix and sliced bread I've received more than a few puzzled looks and dismissive chuckles about me just being a contrarian. This week, many people were surprised when [Billy Gibbons described his playing as "sensational"](#).

But even that is only a piece of it. From his textbook knowledge and respect for those who came before him – JB, Sly, Jimi, Miles, George Clinton, &c. – to his savage dance chops and ultra-sharp fashion sense, to his early adoption and mastery of technologies like the Linn Drum; the guy put a package together that was both historically intelligent and, somehow, way out in front of the coming surge of hip-hop and Michael Jackson/Madonna style pop that followed him by a few years. The man had his gifts. Add in an almost incomprehensible work ethic, and you have Prince.

How Prince helped me know myself comes down to this simple question:

*How could anyone possibly fail to recognize such evident talent?*

Probably the way that I did.

Because instead of listening, I reacted to the packaging cues that came with the Prince product. And because he hit the scene in the late 70s with a funky beat, puffy shirts, lots of synthesizers, and a (deceptively) silly reliance on lyrics about fucking, I saw him clearly for what he was: just another callow Disco Boy, a Travolta, a Bee Gee.

It's hard to remember (or, if you are a little younger,

comprehend) the degree to which DiscoSux fever encompassed the world of funky music. Earth, Wind & Fire, James Brown, P-Funk: all these and more took their share of unfriendly fire from people who were essentially painting the entirety of black popular music as beneath-contempt shit.

DiscoSux fever was a symptom of reaction against gay and minority encroachment into the historically masculine world of rock and pop. This music was aimed at gender-fluid communities and urban black folk. For a generation of mostly white, hetero-norm critics and fans for whom rock'n'roll equaled priapic guitar stroking and golden-maned Dionysi sporting socks stuffed into spandex trousers, this was music that threatened the natural order. <fn>The pulse belonged on the 1 and 3, dammit, none of this 2 and 4 backbeat shit. Whaddya, Disco Duck?</fn> It was outsider art storming the academy. And I was a privileged, by-birth member of the patriarchal academy, though I didn't even know that such a thing existed; such is the blindness of by-birth membership.

Prince said fk all that noise, and it was pretty clear that he was throwing down on, well, people like me.

*Look out all you hippies, you ain't as sharp as me  
It ain't about the trippin', but the sexuality  
– All the Critics Love U in New York*

Hey. I resemble(d) that remark.

So I could "listen" to *When Doves Cry* or *1999* and quickly sort this alleged genius off into the "just another over-hyped fraud" bin.

In that same song, this upstart had the nerve to sing:

*It's time for a new direction  
It's time for jazz to die*

As a burgeoning jazz-bo, I took what I took and it was more than I could take. I didn't need to hear the music behind this pixie poppinjay. These crude insults told me all I needed to know! Pistols at dawn!

Later, when Miles compared him to Duke Ellington and Chopin, it was easy to dismiss the comments as Miles trying to glom onto the popularity of the younger phenom. Because come on: he's really just another Disco Boy, and everybody knows that DiscoSux, so pass the bong and cue up some Coltrane or some real rock'n'roll. Dude.

One night in 1993 I watched a terrific Neil Young *Unplugged* on MTV. In those days, children, the M stood for "Music". You can look it up!. The next show was Prince live in some mega-arena, and I watched it and thought, "Meh, pretty good" and then he walked offstage and into a limo that took him somewhere and he walked into a small club and took the stage and proceeded to melt my face with a yellow guitar and the most scorching Hendrix-style blues I'd heard since before Stevie Ray died. For the next hour I was slain. I've been listening to Prince ever since.

So what does the phenomenon of Prince teach me about myself? Every time I hear his music, even as I am digging it down to my toes, I am reminded that I am a fallible human being, prone to unpleasant bigotries and prejudices that cause me to stop paying attention to what is real and true. The impulses that put me on auto-piloting sort mode – this person is this, that music is that, I don't like "those" kinds of people/music/movies/food/&c. – are the things that make me miss the My Favorite Worldness of life. It's good to have a ready reminder – one that the iPod throws up randomly and often – that for all my pretense to erudition and discernment and such like, I am just as likely to react like a dope as I am to apply any kind of intentional awareness to, well, anything.

Which means, naturally, that any opinion I hold is inherently suspect and worthy of re-examination. Consider yourself duly warned.

The most delicious part of the irony is that the song I quote above, had I bothered to listen to it in 1983, would have delivered exactly the kind of face-melting guitar heroics that won me over ten years later. Check it.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJxt\\_Ey6tbo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJxt_Ey6tbo)

Who knows? I was full of myself in those days<fn>Unlike now, when I am extremely humble and enlightened.</fn>, so I might have dismissed it anyway.

Thanks, Artist Who Formerly Bestrode The World as Prince. Somehow, having you be the constant reminder of my proclivity to dopiness ain't all that bad. You sexy motherfker.



## The Atticus of My Life

*In the book of love's own dreams  
Where all the print is blood  
Where all the pages are my days  
And all my lights grow old*



– *Atticus of My Life*, by Robert Hunter

**THIS POST IS FULL OF SPOILERS:**

If you hate spoilers and plan to read *Go Set a Watchman*, skip this post for now.

But please, come back when you're done.

**A piece of free advice:**

If you have not read *To Kill a Mockingbird* recently, read it before you read

*Go Set a Watchman*. You'll be glad you did.

I'm one of those peculiar people who take literature too seriously. I've never doubted the power of a good writer to create worlds that are as real as our own and, at the same time, to conjure reflections and echoes of a reality we haven't quite earned yet.

Characters in books become as real to me as my friends and family, my banes and enemies. I grant that this is a sign of deficient mental health, but I hope I'm not the only one who, for example, bursts into tears when Gavroche Thénardier dies on the barricade or when Edgar Derby is executed for pocketing that damned teapot he found in the rubble. I guess most times for most people, characters remain on the page where they belong and don't much interfere in our day to day. Lucky them?

But some characters escape the page and grow larger than life, become icons. Some, like Atticus Finch, become moral exemplars and redeemers of collective wrongdoing. And if there's anything we can't stand, it's for someone to reveal the flawed man behind the myth.<fn>See also, Huxtable, Cliff.</fn>

So let's cut to the chase. Atticus Finch is a standard issue Southern gentleman – a man I recognize well in several of my Deep South forbears – a genteel fellow of manners and decency who also happens to hold racist views that are extreme enough to make the daughter who once idolized her Perfect Father

literally throw up when she discovers his true nature.

It's easy to see why so many long-time Harper Lee fans are outraged.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee created the Great White Father, the man of infinite patience, rectitude, and sense of fairness who could redeem our (White folks, that is) sense of guilt and discomfort over racial injustice. In *Go Set a Watchman*, she pulls the curtain back to reveal that Atticus, the Great and Powerful, is just another worn out, cranky uncle forwarding conspiracy emails and ranting about Those People. Once again, hero worship turns out to be a sucker play.

At the end of *Mockingbird*, we were given permission to tut-tut the horror of Tom Robinson's predicament and to feel joy at the progress we've made, pass the chicken please. The white trash Ewells excelled in the Judas role in this passion play, lowly creatures who took welfare and kept their kids out of school and couldn't be bothered to shift for themselves. Our own hands were never dirtied like the coarse and common Ewells. They were the evil in our midst, and if only we *better* whites could follow the shining example of Atticus Finch, the world would be our Nirvana, and hallelujah, pass the gravy, if it's not too much trouble.

*Watchman's* Chapter 17 is one of the most painful reading experiences I've ever suffered. Even knowing ahead of time that Lee was going to reveal a "dark side" of Atticus, I was unprepared for the casual, genteel, typically Southern bigotry coming out of his mouth. And Lee wrote this exchange with no wiggle room: Atticus is basically a disgusting racist. He laughs at Jean Louise's arguments, he taunts her for her naivete.

There's no turning away: the Great White Father is a son of a bitch. The revelation of Atticus's repellent attitudes hits as hard as if a sequel to the gospels revealed that Jesus

and Judas were the same character. Everything you know is wrong.

A few days before GSAW hit the stores, I re-read *Mockingbird* for the first time in years. I was surprised at the extent to which the movie depiction replaced the book itself in my memory.<fn>Like I said: re-read TKAM before you read GSAW.</fn> *Mockingbird* the movie revolves around the trial of Tom Robinson; everything else that happens travels in orbit around that event. In the book, the trial is critical, but the book as a whole explores the curve of small-town childhood in the South with fondness and wit. (White children, naturally.) As with so many movies/books/tv shows about race, actual black folks are pretty much in the margins.<fn>With the notable and long overdue exception of the movie *Selma*, though it too has its own issues of Great Father drama and hagiography.</fn> And this gets to one of the key problems with *Mockingbird* – on the one hand, it asks us to empathize with the ‘poor, poor Negro’, even while bestowing upon us a glimmering savior to make us all feel okay again. That nice (hell, impossibly perfect) Atticus washes our sins away.

While theories abound as to *Watchman*’s origin, I readily accept that this was an early shot at Lee’s Maycomb chronicle; after reading *Watchman*, Lee’s editor told her go back and tell the tale from Young Scout’s perspective. It took her two years to re-write, and the result was the structurally and stylistically superior *Mockingbird*. The *Watchman* version is clearly unfinished; it lacks the cohesion that extended editing and re-writing would have instilled.<fn>It is also unmistakably the work of Harper Lee. This is no hoax, and it sure as hell is not Capote.</fn> But I can also see how this might have become, later on, an effective sequel. In fact, it takes great effort to read this as anything other than a sequel or amplification of the original: the same characters, 15 years later on the fictional timeline, in a book published 50+ years later. It’s of a

piece, and it provides an essential corrective element that turns the saga into something other than a happy fairy tale, albeit one where that poor Tom Robinson &c., pass the black eyed peas.

*Mockingbird* gave us a feel-good fantasy. *Watchman* fills in the blanks and gives us a truth that does not encourage happy mealtime discussion.

*Mockingbird* is still a great novel. Lee's depictions of the rhythms and rhymes and smells of Southern life are as good as anybody else, Faulkner, O'Connor, Percy, you name your favorite. But Harper Lee is not a great novelist.<fn> For the same reason the John Kennedy Toole and Joseph Heller are not; the body of work is just not there to justify such a judgement.</fn> She spread a dusting of fiction over the people she knew growing up, the place she knew. She had a story worth telling, and perhaps even recognized that the time had come for white southerners to address race in a different way. But she had one good story, told it, and went silent. Wondering whether she could have become a great novelist is no better than a parlor game along the lines of could Wilt Chamberlain outplay Michael Jordan and such.

While *Watchman* is not a great novel by any stretch, it's probably not fair to judge it too harshly given that it never even made it to galleys until its rediscovery. But it is an important piece of work for two key reasons. First off, it sheds light on the author's struggle, the process of taking a work from idea to paper to woodshed to completion. This alone would make GSAW a worthy curiosity for literary scholars and a fun what-if exercise for *Mockingbird* devotees. But more important than this: *Watchman* uses the Freudian/Oedipal device of *kill the father* to allow Jean Louise to become an adult in her own right. And in so doing, Lee strips the mask from a false idol that has captivated her fans for several generations. And that shit comes with some heavy dues.

So first: The similarities between TKAM and GSAW are evident and plenty, with several paragraphs that describe Maycomb life appearing in both without so much as a comma's difference. But the divergences are where we get a glimpse at the evolution of a book that has been read by millions of people over the past half century.

Famously, Tom Robinson is convicted and then killed trying to escape prison; everybody knows that. But in *Watchman*, the "trial" is dealt with in a paragraph or two, with the throwaway reference that Tom was acquitted. And a more disturbing suggestion that Atticus fought hard for Tom only to sustain the fiction of equality under the law. More later. In the retelling, the "trial" transformed from a mere trifle to the centerpiece of one of the nation's great moral fables.

Then there's the fiance in GSAW, Henry, who Jean Louise describes as her oldest and dearest friend, a boy who lived across the street at the same time the trial and the adventures with Jem and Dill and Boo played out. This character does not exist in *Mockingbird*. Perhaps even more revealing, Boo Radley does not exist in the *Watchman* universe, and there is no mention of Bob Ewell's attack on Jem and Scout, the event that provides the bookend beginning/ending of the entire *Mockingbird* narrative.

And of course, there is Jean Louise's discovery and outrage that the Father and her fiance are, if not card carriers, at the very least fellow travellers of the White Citizens Councils who made damned well and sure that Jim Crow remained the law of the land and kept Those People from getting above their station. Not to be outdone, Jean Louise reveals herself to be a states rights fanatic of the first degree, and declared herself angry and outraged that the Supreme Court would force people to do the right thing when they would certainly get around to it in their own good time and why are they rushing things so. Between the two of them, you have the

complete package of racial oppression. And they're both so damned reasonable about it.

The heart of *Watchman*'s ultimate importance lies in that last disparity between what might be viewed as the canon of TKAM and the heresy of GSA, lies in Harper Lee's forcing us to squarely face the myth of the Great Father, to see the truth of the complexity and the ugliness and duplicity, and to, well basically, grow the fuck up. Look, she says – you worshipped this False Idol, you used him to absolve your sins, and you've been a dupe the whole time. And by the way, your stand-in Scout ain't all that either, what with her love of states rights and eventual acceptance of *the way things are*.<fn>To be sure, the ending of the book feels hurried and undeveloped, something I feel would have been addressed in re-write/editing. But Lee said publish it warts and all, so this is the text we have to unpack, to use a term that I hate but why not at this point, my god, the world is in tatters and the Great Father is dead. Cut me some slack.</fn>

Lee created *the* Perfect Father, the man who could resolve any argument, cure any scratch or scrape. And Gregory Peck made that character flesh. Go ahead, try to imagine any other actor of the past 100 years in that role. None of them will stick. One stupid internet poll after another has put Atticus near the top of the “perfect father” sweepstakes. People name their children after Atticus. He's a goddamned monument.

And this is exactly where *Watchman* delivers the blow that makes it an important contribution to this corner of the literary world: Lee shows us that our Savior is a fraud, tells us to wake up and be adults in our own right. Lee shows us the essential error of putting our faith in mythical heroes and asks us to stand on our own. Sure, it's tough when we discover that the pleasing fairy tales of our childhoods are fictions that cover up a more complex and disappointing set of truths. Step up and deal.

*Watchman* comes along at a particularly fraught moment in our 400 year struggle with the wages of America's original sin. Any pretense to having arrived at a post-racial moment withers with the first serious investigation. No matter how "good" we whites think ourselves, no matter how much we congratulate ourselves on how far we've come [Guilty as charged](#). Mea culpa. – the fact remains that we live in a segregated society, and it is primarily White America's obligation to ensure that the structural changes necessary to allow this issue to reach resolution are squarely in our own laps. (Like it or not, Blacks have no obligation to *make things better*; we shit this bed and it's ours to clean.) Unlike TKAM, *Watchman* does not offer any bromides to make that pill any less bitter. In fact, by making Atticus' noble defense of Tom Robinson an act of expedience rather than principle, Lee drives home a disturbing and cynical point: good deeds may not quite be what they appear. Even your own, so stay awake and question, question, question.

Another heartbreaker in *Watchman*: Jean Louise pays a visit to Calpurnia, the Negro woman who essentially raised her and Jem. In TKAM, Calpurnia was for all intents the only Mother Jem and Scout knew. Now long since retired and removed from the White world, Calpurnia barely acknowledges Jean Louise, and certainly display no affection. Jean Louise is deeply hurt, but also outraged: how dare she not remember me, how dare she turn her back on how good we were to her, how we treated her *as though* she were just like family, etc. Jean Louise has not found the maturity to accept her own complicity in racial oppression. It's too much for her to take. In this, she is the perfect representation of too many "enlightened" whites on the question of race, with our plaintive whines of "can't they see how much we/I have done for them already?", largely blind to the overwhelming privilege we claim as our birthright without even recognizing it even exists.

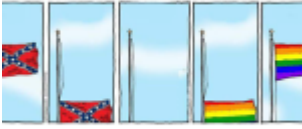
In the end, I find myself at this: despite the fact

that *Mockingbird* is likely to remain the preferred version of Lee's Maycomb tales, it is dishonest to ignore the details of *Watchman* in our overall view of what Maycomb means in its literary context. Memories are imperfect, and stories told over time shift and morph to reflect new experiences, changed attitudes, or something as simple as wish fulfillment. When Lee wrote *Watchman*, she told a story of a young woman's disillusionment about her once revered father; when she rewrote the story from the young Scout perspective, she transformed Atticus into the perfect father, the perfect man.

This is not necessarily a contradiction. But the fuller portrait that emerges from the combined tellings – even though it is a real heartbreaker – brings us closer to an understanding that is probably more useful and true in the long run: we are none of us perfect – even/especially the people you've placed on a pedestal – and you can bet there's a dark side to your own character that needs serious work, some whining cling to privilege that we mostly don't even see. And there is no Great Father who can fix everything for us; it all depends on our own imperfect efforts. It is surely impossible to bear, to go on without our Great Father; but the alternative – giving up and throwing in the towel – is even worse.

I'm not sure Harper Lee intended anything of the sort. It may be that she truly felt the story delivered in *Mockingbird* is the "way it is", and I've no doubt many will hold to that reading. But I'll hold to this one: Harper Lee knew what was in the earlier manuscript, and she allowed its publication as a favor to us all. *Watchman* delivers a harsh but necessary message: Give up the fantasy and face the world as it is. Shit's too damned serious for anything else.





## The Longest Arc

It's been a good week to be a liberal in America. The affirmation by the Supreme Court that the Affordable Care Act will be allowed to remain the law of the land, along with their upholding of Obama-era policies regarding housing discrimination, are big victories.

Even bigger: today the Supremes affirmed the right for everyone to get married. This is a huge stride forward. Obama is correct in saying that "We have made our union a little more perfect" with this decision. The *Obergefell* decision is one of *the* key social justice decisions SCOTUS has delivered, and today we saw momentous history in the making, as surely as *Brown v Board of Education* was sixty years ago.

This is all huge stuff, great stuff that helps me put aside my usual 'glass is half empty, and would it kill you to add a little ice' mindset.

Also big this week: the Stars and Bars has become de facto radioactive to almost every public official and corporation. The rapidity of this has been stunning, albeit long overdue. Sure, it's pretty evident that many of the pols speaking out against the Confederate battle flag are just playing a triangulation game, trimming their positions just in time. I'm looking at you, Nikki Haley. But in this case, having these folks play along with their "me too"

duplicity is welcome. That battle rag has loomed over the South – and the Nation – for far too long. There will be predictable pockets of holdouts, a bunch of ‘fergit, hell!’ yahoos who refuse to give up their precious. But at last, there is rapidly growing agreement that the flag is a symbol of a shameful legacy of racial hatred. I’m more than okay with that.

But this change comes with a hefty price tag that belies the *happening overnight* feeling. It took nine *more* people dying at the hands of yet another wacko with a gun to get to this moment. It’s not too much to suggest that every step in the movement to repair our national shame surrounding racial inequality has carried similar costs, that carnage has been the necessary currency in the struggle to get white people to do something as basic as to recognize our shared humanity. But unlike, say, the Newtown massacre, this horror is actually leading to a significant, if insufficient, piece of social change.<fn>Gun control remains somehow too much to even consider, and it would not surprise if the NRA crowd was somehow fueling the anti-flag fever to divert attention away from the well-armed elephant in the room.</fn> But if this overdue disgrace of the battle rag is really *just* a step in the right direction, it is a gol-durned big un, especially in the states that still whistle Dixie a little too often.

I come from the South, from a family background that is typically conservative in the way the White South has pretty much always been, and that was not always let’s say *flexible* in our view of difference. It appears that ancestors fought on both sides of the Civil War, but mostly for the Confederacy. One ancestor was a prosperous slave holder in South Georgia.<fn>None of that wealth survived the war, and that side of the family scraped along after that.</fn> On the other side of the family, my great-grandfather was, among other things, a bootlegger in Mississippi who employed black men to help work the still, and who earned frequent uninvited visits

from the local Klan who disapproved of this economic arrangement. Like most Southern families, the past is a muddle of strange happenings and inherent contradiction.

But either way, the elders of my experience were polite, white Southerners who would never dream of being overtly rude to a 'Colored'<fn>Never a colored *person*, although occasionally perhaps a *Nigra*, which was the genteel substitute for that horrible word that I was taught from an early age was only used by White Trash.</fn>, but who were quite certain in their belief that black people were something other, and absolutely *less than* in some indefinable way.<fn>But who might also, through dint of hard work and diligence, elevate themselves above the aforementioned White Trash. The granular slicing of social strata was elaborate. The point was to always have some group that was *lower* than your own.</fn>

And so it came to pass somehow that at a tender young age, when we lived in the Tennessee tri-city area, I was given a small Stars and Bars of my own.<fn>I cannot remember who gave it to me, other than that it was a relative, not my parents.</fn> It was not very large, and cheaply made, with staples holding it to a dowel that served as an ersatz flagpole. Nobody explained anything about it, other than that it was "the Southern flag". I hung it in my room and really didn't think much about it.

And then we moved to southern Connecticut, where I unpacked my stuff and hung it in my room. I still had no concept of what it meant. And it came to pass that I made friends in the neighborhood who were more overtly racist than anybody I'd known in the South. Not necessarily more racist, but they lacked the gentility to say *Nigra*, preferring that other word that gets readers of *Huck Finn* so riled up these days. And so, like anybody wanting to fit in, I started using it, too.

In the north, I attended an elementary school that was pretty much all-white, with the exception of the son of the caretaker

of our church. Willie and I became pretty good friends. You'd think this cognitive dissonance of having a chosen friend, who was Black, and a bunch of racist neighborhood friends, would provide a sharp spur of conscience in a young boy. No such luck.

One day, Willie visited my house. I'm not sure if he saw the flag or not. It really didn't occur to me that it might make a difference. But we somehow got into an argument, and I ended up getting mad and dropping the N-bomb on him. He punched me in the gut so hard I dropped to the ground. And he left to walk home, not even asking for a ride or the phone to call his mom.

And we never spoke again.

Make no mistake. I knew I was crossing a line when I said it, and I knew that it was fucked up to do so. But I felt I had it in my power to knock this really nice friend down to size, just because he made me mad about something. But he was having none of that.

I was around 10 years old at the time. The shame of what I did that day still burns. It's the most overtly racist act of my life, and that word has not passed my lips since. But I can't claim innocence of more subtle racist behaviors, like getting nervous when a group of black males gets on an empty subway car with me, or even just not considering that a great scientific advance might have been realized by a Black man or woman, or of being surprised when I met a Black man who *loves* 80s hair metal bands. Because that's not what *they* do, right?

I was not raised by bad or malevolent people. I was not taught to be racist, at least not in any obvious sense. But I did live in a world where hanging the battle rag was fine, where assuming the racial superiority was the order of things, where laughing and joining the guys in crude racial jokes was no problem. I thought I was not a bad or malevolent person. But

by every reasonable measure of the word, I was a racist. And I somehow managed to get that those two statements could not live together.

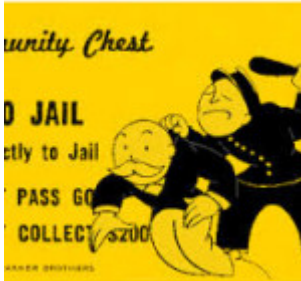
I'm not sure when I decided to change, not clear on exactly when I quietly took that toy battle flag and threw it in the trash. I'm not sure when I actually realized that I could work to be rid of the burden of lies that led me to assume my superiority based on my pale skin. I've struggled with that for over 40 years, I guess, but even though I like to congratulate myself on how far I've come, that stain is still there. Just like that stain is indelible on our Nation. If I treat every person I meet, from now until I die, with full dignity and respect – doubtful, but it's a goal – the stain will remain.

Getting rid of the battle rag is not going to change much in the overall calculus of how racial “difference” plays out day to day. But like the day I threw mine in the trash, it can represent a decision to make conscious choices about the messages we endorse and about how we wish to be, even while we are never going to be able to fully attain that goal. For most whites in my generation, the stain is pronounced. For later generations, for people who do not grow up with the message that a symbol that represents slavery and segregation and racial animus is approved by their governments and institutions, maybe that stain begins to fade.

And even though the shame of how I behaved remains, I am not ashamed of being from the South. Many of the better examples of American culture come from the South. The music I love, the food, the literature, the seemingly genetic predisposition to gothic humor...this is the bounty of Southern heritage. The Civil Rights movement started in the South and rippled out across the country to force people in other regions to grapple with the institutional racism as it manifested in those places. There's plenty to be proud of. This is the heritage – shared across race and class lines –

that we can celebrate. And we can do it just fine without that miserable battle rag.

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## Breaking: Water is Still Wet

Late last year, the NY Police were very, very cross with their new Mayor, who had the gall to mention that he had instructed his son to be very careful and respectful if he had any encounters with the police. Here's a picture of the mayor and his son.



What possible reason could da mayor have had for saying such a thing?



(Excuse my insolence. I forgot we live in the post-racial America now.)

In response, the police union announced a virtual work stoppage during which they would not issue citations or make arrests “unless absolutely necessary”. Arrests fell by 66%, parking citations by 94%, and traffic tickets by 94%, according to the [NY Post](#). My favorite stat:

*“Summonses for low-level offenses like public drinking and urination also plunged 94 percent—from 4,831 to 300.*

Of course, everyone remembers all the headlines about how NYC became a flame-engulfed hellscape in which drunken parking scofflaws urinated all over unsuspecting touristas. Snake Pliskin himself would have fled in horror, amirite?

Alas, no.

There was no surge in crime. The city went on as before. It turns out all that hyper-vigilant enforcement activity was not the only thing standing between Gotham and Somali-esque chaos. It turns out that most of the police work was not, to borrow from the union’s statement, “absolutely necessary”. Who knew?

The ‘broken windows’ policing philosophy that became (in)famous under NYPD in the 80s-90s became a tool for harrassment of minorities and other “suspicious” characters. In tandem with the lunatic war on drugs frenzy, this was really nothing more than a cudgel to keep Those People™ in

line. Stop-and-frisk statistics clearly demonstrate the disproportionate burden imposed on minorities through its practice. Even after research demonstrated that the tactic had little real effect on wider crime rates, most police forces insisted that this was the only way to keep the streets safe for our law-abiding citizens.<fn>Who, it turns out, are bad for budget solvency!</fn> But America loves it some authoritarianism, and so long as the burden is borne by Those People™, Johnny Law had no reason to change.<fn>FWIW, I have little patience with the smart-ass 'No cops? No crime!' tautology of the gLibertarian crowd. Many – maybe even most – police officers are decent people trying to do a difficult, often dangerous. Though statistically speaking, the chance of death or injury on the job is greater for about two dozen other careers, e.g. fishing, logging, or collecting trash.</fn>

Last week, our [local fishwrap reported](#) that the Leon County budget is facing a million dollar hole “because of a decline in the number of traffic tickets being written by the Tallahassee Police Department over the past 18 months.” Shortly after TPD settled an excessive force lawsuit <fn>Half a million bucks, taxpayers!</fn>, the chief of police “... went to the patrol division and instructed officers to continue writing traffic citations for serious offenses, but gave them the option and encouraged discretion in issuing warnings for stops for minor offenses.”

The article goes on to talk about TPD shifting it's emphasis to a law-enforcement model that encourages engagement over confrontation. A TPD spokesman offered this:

*“Our policing in Tallahassee has changed. In the past we may have been doing a traffic stop, and immediately the idea would be to write as many tickets as would warrant. Now the process is more of an education over enforcement at times.”*



The result? TPD wrote fewer than half the number of tickets compared to the prior year. That number had been pretty steady for years. Perhaps some of that hard-core Barney Fifeing was not “absolutely necessary”? Maybe that instinct to “write as many tickets as would warrant” led to some, oh, let’s call it overly creative police work.

The news that the city government in Ferguson, MO, viewed its citizenry as little more than a dusky-hued ATM has spread far and wide.<fn>As long as far and wide does not include that place where certain friends and relations think everything would be fine of Those People™ would just simmer down a little and know their place.</fn> Ta-Nehisi Coates provides a rundown on the situation in [The Atlantic](#), and there is really little I can add to his excellent work.<fn>Why this guy does not have a twice-weekly slot on the NYT editorial page is an ongoing mystery.</fn> Notably, the federal DOJ reported that the department held contests to see who could write the most tickets for a single offense<fn>Merely a motivational tool to ensure greater public safety, no doubt.</fn> and that the city manager actively encouraged the police to step up citations when revenue began to lag. Suffice to say that there has been an ongoing and conscious effort to balance the city budget on the backs of the (mostly) Black citizens who can least afford it.<fn>That the collection agency is the predominately white police force is certainly just an unfortunate coincidence that makes this situation appear *racial* despite the fact that we have arrived at an utterly color-blind and post-racial period of harmony and unicorns. Pardon my insolence.</fn>

(By the way, I am not accusing Tallahassee police of this same racially-structured revenue enhancement, but I am curious to see the statistics one way or the other. However that turns out, I have not noticed our little burg devolving into any sort of Mad Max-ish dystopia in the absence of hyper-vigilant policing.)

I'm no public policy expert, but it seems pretty clear that if eliminating "unnecessary" citations and fines creates a hole in the budget, that money is going to have to come from some other source. But that leads us to the word that must never be spoken: taxes. Yet another legacy of St Ronald the Dim: we can have everything we want without paying taxes. It's magic! "Enhancing" revenues through law enforcement is just another creative means of making up the shortfall that was, at one time, borne by the community as a whole. It essentially makes criminal activity a necessary component of a healthy city budget.

What would happen if, miraculously, our entire population became perfectly docile, law abiding citizens, as in Singapore, where the idea of a stray gum wrapper or jaywalking is unthinkable? If we are relying upon revenue from citations to balance the budget, we would have two choices: raise revenues some other way or *create* criminal activity where we can impose fines. (Are we headed to a day when people who do not commit infractions are labeled "takers" because they refuse to pay their fair share; at that point, the police will be viewed as "makers". I kid! Such Randroid stupidity could never happen here.) Couple this impulse with the distortion already created by militarizing the police and inculcating an occupation force mindset cf.



– alongside the budget-balancing incentive to confiscate property under drug laws run amok – and the inevitability of our descent into police statism is apparent. Has that ship sailed? Is it too late?

Back to our local budgetary shortfall and the role of (not-

enough) traffic fines in funding the local government. I happen to really like my current hometown. The services the city and county provide are generally efficient and enlightened.<fn>After enduring the incompetence of ATL's city governance for years, our local gummit is a marvel.</fn> I know this kind of service doesn't come cheap. But if we are relying upon illegal activity (or at least the citation of same) to fund our community, we are doomed.

I grant our local PD, and our new Police Chief, this: they recognize the problem and are taking some steps to move away from this kind of zero-tolerance policing.

*"Our officers are spending less and less time doing what we would call proactive policing. They are doing more of the answering calls for service."*

There's some radical thinking. Maybe a slogan to reflect this new emphasis. Hey, I got it. How about "To Protect and Serve"?

Nah, that will never catch on. Too hard to monetize.



## What the Hell is Water?

Last week, a group of frat boys in Oklahoma were caught on video chanting a completely unhinged racist fraternity song.

As any member of the privileged class would do, they lawyered up right quick and issued a *sincere apology* <fn>Written for them by a crisis manager, naturally.</fn> in which they declared themselves thoroughly embarrassed by their “mistake”, but that they want everyone to realize that they know in their hearts they are “not racist”. The University expelled the ringleaders and evicted the frat from campus. Of course, now the not-racists-in-their-hearts and the fraternity are suing the University, because they are certainly the real victims in all this.

The easy smart-ass remark begging to be thrown here is, “See, white man can’t catch a break.” This crack might be funny if the teller and audience were in on the joke that it’s a preposterous statement on its face, an obvious flip-take on the reality of race/gender privilege. Alas, there are too many whites out there who grimly nod their assent and file it away as another proof that, really, truly, it is they who are the real victims.<fn>It’s a tricky form of satire/humor, going back to the days of Archie Bunker’s transparently absurd character. Unfortunately, a majority of polled viewers did not view him as an absurd bigot; they saw him as a sympathetic victim of changing times.</fn>

A couple of weeks ago I heard one of my favorite authors, Walter Mosley, speak at a Florida A&M. This was for a literary conference looking at futurist fiction by black authors called *Black to the Future*. As expected, Mosley was very smart and funny. Unexpected: he spoke to the 98% black audience as though there were no white people there. The talk was half over before I realized that, even though he talked *about* white people in his remarks, he never talked *to* white people.

I was unsure whether this was an amazingly clever tactic, or whether he just decided to be himself. Here was a man talking to and with his tribe, his people, and I and the 4 or 5 other whites in the auditorium, while not being excluded or threatened, simply did not matter to the form and content of

his presentation. If one of us took offense, well...too damn bad. Probably the way the two black kids in my elementary school felt.

Yesterday we went to see the movie *Selma*. Once again, I had the sense that while white people were sometimes being talked *about*, the movie itself was talking specifically *to* black folks. Again, not that “we” were being demonized or anything – though we were certainly being characterized across a range of behaviors and types – it was just that our prevailing white frame of reference did not really pertain to the story the movie was telling.<fn>Skimming a few interviews, it’s clear the director of *Selma* intended this framing. She’s caught a lot of heat for it, too.</fn>

And that was fine, even a little bit invigorating. For a moment I felt I was experiencing first-hand an aspect of living as a marginalized human in an other-dominated paradigm.<fn>Oh swell job, Mister Insight. Give yourself a cookie.</fn> But then I realized that I was viewing my insight through a lens defined by my generally overarching position of privilege, and that I could shift between the stances of *ignored listener* and *presumptive center of the universe* pretty much at will. My ability to recognize the distortion of marginalization was itself filtered by my fundamental *non-marginalization*, so that my epiphany of so-called *solidarity* was in fact yet another episode in my lifelong career of cluelessness about the effects of race and racial attitudes on anyone other than white males from the Deep South.<fn>As the fish in [DFW’s Kenyon commencement](#) would say: “What the hell is water?”</fn>

Now it’s beyond easy to point out the obviously racist behavior of the frat boys; or the Univision host who “joked” that Michelle Obama resembles an ape; or the systematic judicial apartheid of a Ferguson, Missouri. It’s a little more troubling to recognize something as well-intentioned as my moment of solidarity as being, in itself, more than a little

bit racist.

Fact is, the reason I registered Mosley's rhetorical stance of speaking directly to blacks as though "we" were not there is because it stood in such stark contrast to the stance that I have grown to expect as *normal*. It was the violation of this norm that registered. Why was he talking as though I were invisible? Because to him, at that time, I was. How dare he? My view of the event was tinged by my racism.

That's one hell of a word: racism. It's a fighting word, a conversation stopper. And its weight has come to be so restrictive that it allows too many of us who carry racist attitudes to pretend it does not apply to *me*, oh no, because I am a decent, well-intentioned person, and some of my best friends, &c.

But I think we need to reclaim the word for broader application, not limited to describing the likes of Bull Connor and Sheriff Jim Clark. Everyone can agree that they were racists; they were also cruel, sadistic, ignorant men whose behavior was at least socio-if-not-also psychopathic.<fn>They would have found a different outlet for their pathology in a different society. Either one would have made a fantastic Col Kurtz or FW de Klerk.</fn>

If the word is limited to the extreme examples – racism equals monstrosity, period – then the word loses its utility. It makes it impossible for someone like me to honestly assess myself and say, well yeah, I actually am a racist, I see events and people through a filter that imposes certain expectations of behavior and status and hierarchy. I hope I am evolved enough to not act as though those expectations are entitlements. But even if I am capable of behaving decently despite living within that structural view of the world, it doesn't change the fact: I am a racist.

It's critical that we who benefit from structural privilege be

able to accept this word as descriptive of our attitudes – and of our behavior, if the shoe fits – if we ever hope to transcend racism as a societal given. Denying racism does nothing to rid ourselves of the framework that codifies behavior and expectation and that, ultimately, robs us of the opportunity to engage each other on an equal basis.<fn>Which hope may in itself be white-normative fantasy nonsense that has nothing to do with what others may want for themselves. I so do not know.</fn>

There has been a noisy debate about whether *Selma* depicted LBJ fairly. In one scene, LBJ uses the ‘n’-word to try to persuade George Wallace. Old-time LBJ partisans were outraged. I’m pretty sure that LBJ saw himself as a ‘friend to the Negro’ and did not view himself as a racist. I don’t know if he used the word or not, but given his age and his upbringing in the Deep South, I would not be surprised.<fn>Perhaps he would have been more refined, the way my family elders were: they never would have said that vulgar, common word. They would have referred to the blacks as ‘nigras’. It was considered more polite. Enlightened, even.</fn>

So sure, I like to consider myself an enlightened, fair-minded guy. But I’m drawing the line at “post-racial”. This nonsense word has been run through the wringer of privilege and entitlement and asks solely that everyone please STFU about race because it makes *Us* feel a little bit uncomfortable. Can’t we all just get along and pretend everything is okey doke? Come on, the water is just fine.

Robin DiAngelo’s 2011 essay [White Fragility](#) describes a society “in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.” This stance – coupled with the extreme definition of racism – leaves us at a great divide. The in-group is outraged that they are criticized; the out-group can’t believe the in-group refuses to recognize their role in the system’s perpetuation, and everyone embraces the role of unfairly treated victim.

It's a dead end of shouting past each other.

So no unfair victimhood here. I am a racist. I am also a sexist, and a bunch of other unpleasant isms. It's the water we've been raised in, and that sometimes seems pretty insurmountable.

But.

While the vast majority of the bleeding and dying during the Civil Rights struggle was done by black people standing up for themselves, more than a handful of whites put themselves on the line, too, and made a real difference.

And even though they grew up in less enlightened times than most of us, they managed to see the water for what it was. If they can do it...