

THE NEW HUCKLEBERRY

Earlier tonight I watched the first installment of the eleven hour PBS special titled "The Civil War." For two hours I sat transfixed to the television. I viewed the majority of the program but I missed a lot of it too. From time to time there were scenes or portions of the narration or the score which first elicited various emotions from me and these, in turn, caused my mind to wander to realms I know not where. It was as though I was hypnotized. Following each episode of lost time, even without a mirror, I knew my pupils were dilated and my breathing was as even as the horizon looking out over the quiet Pacific. If my doctor could've taken my blood pressure, which is ordinarily as high as an orbiting satellite, during any of those moments he would have declared it either a triumph of modern medicine or a miracle. Such serenity I had. Simultaneously, my chest was soaked with the tears I had shed while in the trance and my jaws ached from having clinched my teeth so tightly.

As I examined my state of being during those moments, I had ambivalent feelings. I was at once at peace, filled with self-righteousness, aloof, manifesting an ever-growing enhancement of my own self esteem and seething with anger. There was a terribleness about the joy which sent shudders through my body. I felt sorry for those whose history was devoid of such overpowering content and the depth of my sorrow was greater, even, for those whose history was the same but is unknown to them. I pity the person who knows not his history. I pity those who only have a glimpse of their history and who, when called upon to talk about it, can only speak of it in general, emotional terms and without continuity. But, more than either of those, I pity those who, due to an absence of such knowledge, has nothing to call upon during those times when such knowledge would stand them in good stead.

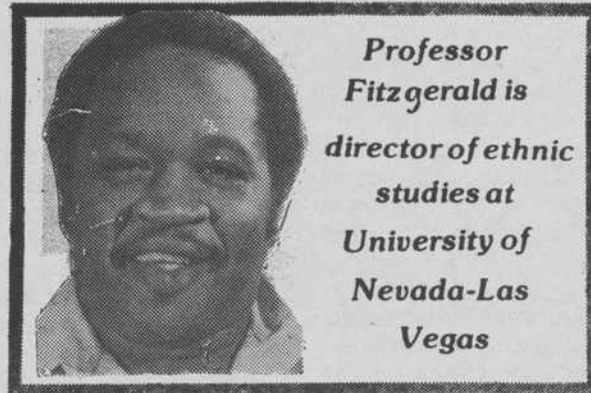
Imagine, a mere 130 years ago my family members were slaves on the Stowers plantation in Churchill, Mississippi. Think about it--approximately 75 years before I was born, everyone in this country who was directly related to me was a slave on that place. Bought

and sold, beaten and raped and worked to death and without a nickel to show for it. They owned nothing, controlled nothing--not their destiny nor their children's, and each day made to feel their own valuelessness. I've seen that plantation and the slave quarters where my people lived and where my grandparents, one of whom I knew, were born.

The structures were of brick -- brick that the slaves made. They built the cabins themselves. Most of them had dirt floors and tree bark shingled roofs. My grandfather showed me the cabin he had been born in (my grandfather, the ex-slave, lived until 1954). He took a stick and scratched at the dirt floor of the cabin and revealed slender sections, four to five inch diameters, of pine timbers which he said his father had placed there, two deep, and covered with a veneer of dirt to conceal their presence from the overseer. Those sections of timbers in the floor were intended to keep out some of the dampness which otherwise permeated those humble lodgings.

He showed me where the traps for small game and birds were set, where the fishing was done, how certain roots were dug out and how to discern and pick wild greens. He showed me where the family's little garden plot had been and he showed me the area, in the bottoms, near a briar patch, where my great grandparents and others were buried. Just the thought of that causes me to reflect on the fact that generally when we think of slavery we only think of the sunrise to sunset days of hard labor, the sunset to sunrise nights of slave women being raped by overseers and plantation owners. We oftentimes fail to contemplate on the fact that there was also sickness and death and the dead had to be buried somewhere and that somewhere was always somewhere which was not useful for any other purposes.

As my level of consciousness became more heightened, I was reminded of my own conclusion as to why so little of the black experience in America has found its way into the history books. Certainly, two-thirds of that history has been and sometimes, even today, is like a festering sore in what



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might almost otherwise be, if we disregard other minority groups and women, who've been the recipients of oppressive government sanctioned acts, a glorious history of which we all might be proud but, as it stands, some are embarrassed by it, others humiliated by it and the great majority are ignorant of it.

The irony of it all is that that which has proven to be America's great embarrassment, its underbelly, its blackeye has, in fact been a testament of the strength of black people. When we consider that that period of our nation's history is remarkable in its brutality toward black people, slave and free, and yet when we gaze upon the old photographs depicting slaves with scars inches thick covering their entire backs, with few or no teeth, in rags and without shoes, dirty, emaciated and with their futures unpropitious, their presents horrendous and their past, that part lived in America, pock-marked by the depravity of those with undeserved arrogance, we cannot help but also notice that in spite of all that, they stood straight, shoulders squared and clearly--even in those old photographs, the spirit and fire in them blazed in their eyes. These were people who would not and could not be defeated.

The presence of such strength in my ancestors speaks very clearly to me. How can I have despair? Perhaps those of my generation and the generations before and that immediately thereafter were privy to something which might not be accessible today. We had family who assumed responsibility for us and who taught us about ourselves. When I speak of family I include not only immediate family, but also

relatives and others in the community. We had not scattered all over the place as we are now. Both my mother and stepfather worked and my older sister was in charge. When my older sister had to be away, my older brother was in charge and it came right on down the line. When no one was available I was in charge of myself and I could go next door to any one of several neighbors or my aunts or uncles or even to the houseman at the poolhall. We took care of each other. I miss those days. How can I

bemoan today's conditions? They are not nearly as bad as they were during slavery. Reconstruction, the "Gilded Age" and all the other subsequent periods. I was not raised to contemplate defeat because the collective sum of whatever terrible things I might have experienced in a lifetime do not amount to a day, an hour, a moment of that experienced by those who came before. They didn't bend, break, disappear or start killing each other.

Arsenio says it: "Let's get busy." Let's get busy learn-

ning our history and no one or nothing can make us feel so badly that we turn on ourselves. I never thought I'd see the day when I would begin to fear black people more than I fear the Klan. Who has killed more of us this year, the Klan or us? We're putting the Klan out of business alright but I do question our method. The Klan, in the meantime, well, they're probably laughing at us. It's the Huckleberry Finn story all over again, only this time, rather than tricking some one into doing the painting, someone has been tricked into doing the killing.

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