

## Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

Ron McFarland  
"Racist!"

In my yearbook from Florida State University for 1964, the Tally Ho, you may discover at least five snapshots of the Confederate flag, two in full color, but if there are any African American faces in it, I've never spotted them. That includes photos of the so-so Seminole football (4-5-1) and basketball (10-14) teams. In the fall of 1964, when I was in grad school, the passing combination of Steve Tensi to Fred Biletnikoff led to a 9-1-1 season and a win over Oklahoma in the Gator Bowl. Still no Black guys in the team photos. When I completed my master's degree in English at Florida State University in the turbulent spring of 1965, I landed my first full-time teaching position as an instructor at Sam Houston State College, before it became a university, in Huntsville, Texas.

Nor was I to encounter African Americans among the student body at Sam Houston State during my two years there, 1965-67. I did see a few demonstrations, though none as memorable as an event I witnessed in downtown Tallahassee, when the fire department quelled a peaceable march. There and in Huntsville, when a group that called itself "HA-YOU" (for Huntsville Action Youth) took to the streets and marched around the square where the old Walker County Courthouse stood, I was a bystander, a silent witness. If you weren't part of the solution, it was said then, you were part of the problem. I was sympathetic to the cause, whatever that might have meant, but I guess I was part of the problem. Locals blamed "outside agitators" from Houston, about 70 miles south on I-45.

Rumor had it (I was told) that the Klan had rallied around the Courthouse within the past year, maybe as recently as the spring of '65. Maybe a year or two before. It was said that a judge, who was an older colleague's brother, had taken a sledgehammer to the benches outside the Courthouse to keep Blacks from sitting there. All or part of that might well have been wrong, but we young instructors (I was 23) believed it. Although Huntsville is renowned as the home of Sam Houston and the center of the Texas state prison network ("The Walls," where executions continue to take place, dates from 1849), it was a town of about 15,000 in the mid-1960s, and as in most small towns, popular history and folklore blended easily.

One notable colleague was in her early sixties but seemed "elderly" to us brash young "professors," as our students occasionally called us. Or "doctor." My intention at the time was to segue on to UT, where I planned to acquire that ceremonial distinction. She had written some plays and a couple of novels published by Random House, one of which she signed for me. Not a bad read, after all, and I'm glad I kept it, as I did a couple of books by another older colleague, who'd written about the Yellow Rose of Texas and about Sam Houston. She liked to refer to the Black women who kept house for her as "Darkies." In all fairness to her, I suppose she employed that term affectionately. Can one be an "affectionate racist"? Probably not, but perhaps an unconscious or "sympathetic" one. She's been credited with starting the creative writing program at SHSC after she began teaching there in 1946, and she went on to become a notable writer of Texas-based biographies.

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In the middle of my first busy year in Huntsville, I married a central Florida farmgirl whose family dated back a few generations and might be described as “benign rednecks.” They were not disinclined to deploy the N-word, but she wasn’t that way, and neither was I. Of *course*, we didn’t think of ourselves as racist. I recall informing my father-in-law that Martin Luther King, Jr. was the best friend the white Southerner had. He was neither convinced nor amused.

After all, my family were Ohioans and Dad proudly traced branches of the family tree that showed Yankee soldiers who served in the Civil War. A distant uncle was killed at the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain in the summer of 1864. Nevertheless, I’ve a childhood memory of Dad putting on blackface for his role in a minstrel show in Ohio, and many years later he recalled finding his father’s KKK robe in a corner of the closet, the proverbial “skeleton” perhaps. That event dated from the 1920s.

My wife worked as a secretary in The Walls, and we took in the prison rodeo when we were there. Johnny Cash did his first prison performance at that venue around 1956. “Tough luck, cowboy. But he’s lookin’ at another twenty years to git better at ridin’ that old bronc!” The announcers had a ball, the cons maybe not so much.

We liked Huntsville in a some ways, and we made good friends there. I enjoyed fishing for crappie with minnows in a pond near town and for largemouth bass in the Sam Rayburn Reservoir and in a stream near the Trinity River, across which were located a pair of scruffy bars where you could buy legal beer. Walker County was bone dry back then. I played poker in a great interdisciplinary group that included a pair of ROTC majors who told me more about the evolving war in Nam than I wanted to know. I was reclassified from 2S student deferment to 2A occupational at the time. My two-years younger brother Tom was less fortunate, but he survived the Tet Offensive at Pleiku in ‘68.

Anyway, two years of eastern Texas, hot and humid even by central Florida standards, was enough, and I headed off to the Land of Lincoln for my doctorate. The Blacks who had been peripheral all my life, who lingered around the edges and could be sympathetically ignored, were about to become more central. As a teaching assistant at Illinois, I reverted to my draft status when I was at FSU earning my master’s degree. I suppose my application to the doctoral program was enhanced by my two years of fulltime teaching at Sam Houston State and by the recent acceptance of a freshman composition reader-rhetoric I co-edited with my colleague Paul Dempsey and that we published with Scott-Foreman in 1968. The royalties from *American Controversy* didn’t make us rich, but they arrived fortuitously in the middle of my doctoral studies.

What emboldened two such neophytes to the world of composition textbook editing I have no idea. I’m confident our efforts were based on no foundation of comp theory at all, but the book did offer an important feature demanded of the age: Relevance. With the aid of editors at Scott-Foresman who were far wiser than we, the 24 key essays of *American Controversy* were arranged both topically and rhetorically in six sections as follows: The American Dream (sentences); The American Dilemma (paragraphs), Youthful Dissent (organization); The New Morality (content); The Affluent Society (diction); What Is America? (the summing up). The book

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included a 34-page "Writer's Handbook," a usage guide of sorts, that I had the temerity to write up on my own: punctuation, diction, sentences, paragraphs.

The second section, on "The" American Dilemma, is apposite here as it concerned the ongoing struggle with racism, which seemed at the time, at least when we were putting the contents together in Huntsville, Texas, in 1966 and 1967, of more immediate concern to *us*, than the war in Vietnam. For the record, the essays began with Louis E. Lomax's "The Birth of the Revolt," from *The Negro Revolt* (1962); Martin Caplan's "The Last White Family on the Block," from a 1960 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*; Stewart Alsop's "The Loaded Pistol," from a 1966 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*; and William Faulkner's somewhat controversial apologia for the South, "A Letter to the North," published in 1956. Paragraphs of each essay were numbered, and two of the four in each of the initial five sections were spliced with rhetorical commentary set in different fonts. Each essay was accompanied by questions for discussion and suggested writing topics.

Looking back at that book after all these years, I'm inclined to say that Paul and I *almost* knew what we were doing.

In some ways Caplan's essay proved to be prescient personally, as my family was very nearly the last white family to leave the block of our project house in Cocoa. Developed for young engineers and other employees "out at the Cape" working on guided missile development and later for the space program, Broadmoor Acres offered modest, affordable housing (typically two bedrooms, one very small bath) with VA financing. By the 1980s, those rising young engineers, scientists, and technicians had departed the project housing along with a generation of the more modestly employed.

The neighborhood began gradually and then rapidly being integrated. My other brother Dan, twenty years younger and the delight and surprise of my parents' later years, was bused across town to a mostly Black middle school. Private schools of various sorts popped up all over, but our parents could not afford such niceties, and I don't think they'd have done that anyway. We support public schools, and my sister Susan, thirteen years younger, taught public middle school in Atlanta's suburbs, often with many Black students, for a good forty years. My brother Dan retired recently after teaching high school science for thirty-odd years in Plant City.

In the mid-1980s Dad retired from floor sales at Sears in one of the malls. But by the 1990s there were problems in Mom and Dad's neighborhood, and an apparently random bullet hole through one of the front windows proved the turning point. They sold the house that he had built on and that I regarded as my "boyhood home" to an African American schoolteacher who took very good care of it and from what I could tell driving by over the years, she still does. Or maybe her kids do. I haven't visited in recent years, but my brother Tom says the neighborhood hasn't fared at all well. All my three siblings stayed in or returned to Florida.

To return to 1967 and life as an Illini, I promptly found myself noticing a few Blacks around campus. One of them was Harry, a fellow doctoral

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student in English who with his wife Christie became good friends. He'd been a power forward at Illinois State and recalled having to deal with curfews for Blacks when he was a boy. We connected particularly on the intramural basketball courts, where thanks largely to Harry and a tall white guy who'd played varsity at a small Midwest college—and very little thanks to me at point guard, never having played even junior high basketball—we astonished the PE department by winning the faculty-staff trophy one year. Except for also playing a couple seasons of rugby on the UI club team, that event was surely the highpoint of my athletic achievement till then. I think of myself as “athletic,” but not truly an “athlete.”

Then came the fall of 1968 and the acronym SEOP for Special Educational Opportunities, popularly known as Project 500, although the plan to draw 500 mostly African American students to the University of Illinois started with an unanticipated 565. The prospect was exciting, and for a TA from the English Department teaching in the Rhetoric 101-102 (freshman comp) sequence, I saw it as an honor. An excellent website tells the whole story more reliably than I can put it from memory, but the event proved momentous for me personally. But first: [Project 500 - The University of Illinois in the Cold War Era 1945-1975 - LibGuides at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Special Educational Opportunities Program \(also known as Project 500\) – African American Heritage Trail](#) If you care to dip into those sites, you will uncover details that most of us teaching in SEOP over the next two years knew more by hearsay than we did by official (that is, reliable) information.

To draw on an early passage from that site, “Project 500 was designed by the University of Illinois in 1968 to ensure equality of educational access and opportunities for all students, including those from under-represented or disadvantaged communities. In 1967, fewer than 400 of the university’s approximately 30,400 students were Black.” Today it may sound rather easy although at the same time rather ambitious. In the current political climate, it sounds little short of unlawful. Diversity? Equity? Inclusion? But in the aftermath of the Watts riots of 1965 and subsequent racial turmoil in other American cities, it sounded downright revolutionary to many of us.

The action was “spurred,” to use the term employed in the UI website, by the assassination of “Martin Lucifer King” (as George Wallace once put it) in April of 1968. Obviously, given the chronology of events that would lead to 565 new mostly Black students coming to campus, recruitment would prove problematic. The Black Student Association was instrumental. As the potential teachers we understood that part of the usual recruitment staff had been away from campus when students arrived for summer orientation programs. The story, as I heard it, was that when they arrived that summer, the students were greeted by BSA and other friendly liaisons and were set up together in comfortable dorms. But when they came back in the fall to a crowded and very predominantly White campus, they found themselves broken up and distributed willy-nilly, often finding themselves in cramped quarters. The phrase “broom closets” was heard.

I had scarcely met my first two classes (I’ve still got my gradebooks) before as Milton wrote, “all Hell broke loose.” (Of course, he meant the literal Hell ass depicted in *Paradise Lost* IV, l. 918.) In bureaucratic retro-

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spect and in terms that somewhat fail to do justice to what happened, "The details of the project were poorly carried out, and miscommunication between students and the university bureaucracy led to a protest at the Illini Union on September 10, 1968, which resulted in the arrest of 240 black students." I found myself on the phone with at least a couple of angry and upset parents, explaining that their sons were going to do fine in the course (how would I have known by then?) and that they'd soon be released from jail.

One of my more memorable students was a pool-shark named Preston from Chicago's rough Southside who preferred to go by "Dante." He had a thin, wolfish face and wore a jaunty pork pie hat with a red feather, if I remember rightly. We met at a beer joint off campus that featured good pool tables, and Dante schooled me to the point that I got respectable at Rotation and 8-Ball. At least I got more proficient at shooting pool than I did at shooting hoops. Maybe he just let me think I was okay at what I knew was clearly *his* game. Thank-you Dante.

We were using a recently published Signet anthology titled *Black Voices*, my first real exposure to African American writing: James Baldwin (saw him on campus one day), Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, LeRoi Jones (before he became Amiri Baraka), Gwendolyn Brooks. It was an education. I'd been essentially ignorant of all that, knew next to nothing about "African American Literature." What could those poor students have learned from me? I still wonder.

My pal Harry, who would transform his doctoral dissertation into a Twayne Series book on Gwendolyn Brooks (she of "We Real Cool" fame), took me into the Southside of Chicago one day to have lunch at a Black Muslim restaurant, and I felt very cool, even privileged. I also felt very White. The male servers referred to Harry as "brother" or "my brother." Did they refer to me as "sir"? Probably so, but I don't much want to remember. We also taught Richard Wright's painfully intense novel, *Native Son* (1940). Harry went on to become a dean at the University of Florida.

Truth to tell, I was as clueless about being a White teacher of savvy Black students as I was about putting together a reader-rhetoric for a course in freshman composition. Perhaps my naivete protected me from being overly mindful, or of being "mindful" at all. I believe I was tolerated, perhaps simply endured. I also believe I emerged the better for those couple of years, and I've no idea how I survived teaching those classes along with a pair of sophomore introductions to poetry, played rugby (only one concussion), wrote an "acceptable" dissertation, did a fair amount of worm-fishing in the muddy waters of the Kankakee, the Wabash, the Sangamon and elsewhere, and fathered our first daughter. But I did. And before I knew it, we were packing off to Idaho in the late summer of 1970, where just about the only Blacks I'd see would be on the football, basketball, or track teams and not in my classes.

If I were to write a sequel to this sequel about my latent? inescapable? subcutaneous? racism, it would focus on the many Brown and Black guys I met on the soccer pitch in the twenty-odd years I played for the University of Idaho soccer club. I never touched a soccer ball till I was 35, and I never became adept with it any more than I have managed to master the fly rod. But how could anyone not love those guys, especially that bunch

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from Nigeria, Honduras, and the Caribbean (mostly Jamaica) any more than one might resist loving soccer and fly-fishing?

Among my prized photos is one showing our UI club with the 1998 Spokane Cup. Nine of the fifteen are either Black or Brown teammates.