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Ghetto Proclivities

SPYING A PEDAGOGICAL OPPORTUNITY, I ask my English 110 students to read Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* and tell me what they make of her animosity towards the colonizing British on the island of her birth—Antigua—and more specifically, what they make of her line, “Do you ever wonder why some people blow things up?” They are predictably affronted by the question and all of its implications, much as they seem to be regularly offended by me. She is bitter, they gripe. It's not our fault, they point out (although as I look around the room I am assured none of them are even recently British or in anyway indicted by Kincaid). She should, they argue in uniform, get over it.

We are very different from one another, my students and I, and as I teach here in Middle America at Ohio State, the gulf between us reveals itself to be more spacious than I had anticipated. Here, in the composition courses I instruct, are representatives of the White America I fantasized about and raged so much against while growing up in the neighborhoods outside of D.C. If it is not they, then it is their kin and offspring. There appears to be little difference between generations and geographies from my vantage; both, for example, have no sense of their social inelegance when they praise me—with surprised pleasure—for my “good English.”

What is my vantage? I grew up brown and poor. Not that I was a thug, or even could have been really. A female child of immigrants—the baby at that—I was sheltered from the hazards of Langley Park by sexist and protective parents who quickly shuttled me, as soon as I entered school, into the upward spiral of Model Minority thinking. I attribute my “success” primarily to a lucky arrangement of unlucky variables. Despite how it violates my colleagues' sense of the American pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps success story, I think it is an accurate, albeit reductive, assessment.

My big brother, Alfred, was less fortunate for numerous reasons, primarily because English was his second language. Placed on a demoralizing and fruitless ESOL track, he grew as uninterested in school as it was in him. The schools in our county were designed to promote the gifted—mostly Whites and Asians—and vocationally track the rest. My brother, like other neglected students, detested school. And although he would eventually acquire degrees in accounting and sociology, this disassociation from school handicapped him while it simultaneously groomed him to accept the consequences of that handicap. He thought he was dumb and his behavior reflected it.

In this way, he grew up more a product of the ghetto than I did. It was a source of pride for me that my big brother had a .45—I glimpsed it once walking by his bedroom. “What was that?” I asked, grinning, although I had already seen it, black and heavy looking. Lying on his bed, just seventeen, he pushed it beneath the pillow and shooed me away. When friends told me they saw my brother outside of McDonalds shoving a gun into his pants, I knew he was looking for the guy who lifted the speakers from his hooptie Datsun. I wasn’t fearful—even though E—Dash, a classmate of mine, had just been shot dead in the eye at the same McDonalds, less than two hundred yards from school. This was the climate we were accustomed to, the order of things we disliked but trusted.

My brother did thankfully—and *luckily*, I can’t emphasize enough—escape his teens and early twenties unscathed. Education, cultural currency, the acceptance of Islam over the British legacy of my Episcopalian parents, and good old-fashioned luck kept him out of prison and out of bullets’ reach. Many of his friends did not fare the same.

My brother’s best friend, Eric Strong, is a handsome, cornrowed man who makes a persuasive case for being one of the most intelligent people I have ever met; he was just released early from prison on account of his immaculate behavior. Eric Strong, as his name ironically indicates, is a tough guy. A real tough guy. Though I myself have never been tough, I did grow up around tough kids. I saw what they endured and what they relinquished

in order to secure that title, and at once recognized tough would never be a word that applied to me. I had too much to lose. You'll notice that how much you have to lose is one of the most significant and reliable measures of toughness; the less you have to risk, the more willing you are, by force of circumstance, to go for broke.

Eric was one of these cats. Whatever his fears or hang-ups, they were always trumped by his willingness to forget them when provoked. I remember hearing stories about Eric in his expansive Caddy-like Impala, stopping traffic on a single lane road because the driver behind him was tailgating. It wasn't sufficient for Eric to abruptly slow down. He brought his large sedan to a complete stop, put the car into park and waited. The line of cars on Riggs Road lengthened behind him and Eric sat, inexorable. The message was clear: *I got all the time in the world. Do you?*

Not that he was all machismo. Unlike many of my friends from nicer neighborhoods who had applied to the University of Maryland upon graduation, Eric was accepted, but was unable to attend because of money. College is expensive for most people, but it can be the fiscal equivalent of Mt. Everest to people like Eric and me. And Eric wasn't even your typical ghetto sob story; his parents were not divorced; his father, in fact, had always worked for himself. As a child, Eric can remember sitting underneath a vendor's table in downtown D.C., his father hawking cheap t-shirts and overpriced sodas to tourists and commuters.

Perhaps it was this entrepreneurial spirit that infected Eric, or maybe it was the same sound thinking as behind Guru's lines,

I can't work
At no burger joint
I got some talent
Do you get my point?

that decided for Eric that his intelligence, his street smarts, his good looks—his advantages—had to be put to some productive use. It wasn't that he didn't try things the straight way—he did. As a teenager, Eric never even dreamed of disappointing his parents by selling drugs. He never considered getting involved in the

hazards of his neighborhood, even after the overcast afternoon when a neighbor shot him in the thigh in front of his house. For years he worked at this or that consulting firm until low job security and low pay and low upward mobility led him, almost inevitably, to bigger and badder things. In this way he is only an illustration, one example out of many examples, of the grotesque irony of having brains in the ghetto, of having intelligence without sufficient education, ambition without opportunity. It equals trouble. Sirens.

But we know this. We are all aware of the causal relationships between poverty, low-quality education, and crime. But there is a difference between being aware of these sociological truths in an academic sense (i.e., reading about them) and having them make up the fabric of your personal reality. Aware of the precariousness of your survival and cautious of the threat in (as opposed to security of) legality, you must experience some level of terror. How else would you describe knowing, but being unable to prove beyond anecdotal evidence, that you and the people around you are forced to live lives of either crime or poverty, or more likely, both? Without the benefit of sociological studies, qualitative research, and quantitative data, observations of the real world of the ghetto can make you feel paranoid. This paranoia should not be underestimated. The size of that paranoia, and the ability to ignore it, can be the difference between a short jail sentence and two degrees. Good kid versus good kid under duress.

Perhaps you wonder how, if Eric was such a good kid, could he so easily slip into a seedy situation? Perhaps it is because motivation alters the aroma of crime; in Langley Park, in Southeast, in Chillum no one is selling leather jackets out the trunk of his Honda to get rich. These aren't the white kids I went to high school with, kids who sold weed out of their parents' split-levels as a way to acquire some toughness, as a way to impress each other. These are those individuals motivated out of privation, who have usually exhausted—at least intellectually—all other opportunities (or their lack).

It's not that our value system is inverted, but rather that the conditions through which values are formed are topsy-turvy. For

example, there is the issue of the police—the threat of legality as opposed to the security of it that I referred to earlier. Of the 122 people in Prince George’s County—a county once touted as a Mecca for middle-class blacks in suburban Maryland—who were shot by the police in a decade, over half were unarmed and many, many had committed no crime. And although this figure made it amply clear that PG cops shot and killed more often than any other police force in the US—including the LAPD and NYPD—top officials concluded that all of the shootings were legally, if not ethically, justified. This includes an unarmed construction worker who was shot in the back. A homeless man whose radio was mistaken for a gun. An unarmed man who had pulled to the roadside to relieve himself. A man who was accused of trying to run over police—in a truck that had no key its ignition. A college student whose attack knife turned out to be a butter knife that police later admitted was on a table across the room. The teenager who was shot thirteen times in the back while lying facedown unconscious. The unarmed James E. Minter who was shot while on his porch, seated—as he always was since his paralysis—in a wheelchair.

Was Eric profiled? I think that is less important than the numerous constructions that led him to ask himself, despite the risk and his abilities, if not slinging drugs, then what? In the ghetto crime is, if not the best choice, still a viable option, an alternative like all the rest. In a climate where murder is justified not under the veil of police cover up, but in the broad daylight of open corruption, it is impossible and unreasonable to view crime in the same way as the rest of suburban America.

It’s not just crime either. You don’t need to be able to conduct statistical research to understand what value system is at work in your community when you can purchase a fifth of Southern Comfort more easily than a gallon of milk. Whether you can unpack the implications or not, you understand. You don’t have much to lose.

I’ve met talented and gifted people on my way up the academic food chain, and Eric is still one of the smartest cats I know. He is the person I think of most when I teach my students at

Ohio State—fresh-faced nineteen-year-olds who have never known anyone like Eric or anyone like me or what kids like them might represent for people like us.



At the end of the first day in a freshmen English class, one of my students stopped to chat with me while her peers filed out. I had opened class in my normal fashion—quirky around the room introductions, a self-deprecating anecdote or two, anything to ease them on board. I was pleased to see that this student felt comfortable already.

“I just wanted to say,” she began, “that I was kind of upset when you walked in.”

I smiled. I anticipated my students being surprised by my appearance. I was younger than most college instructors, and at Ohio State I was part of a minority of non-white teachers.

“It wasn’t my perfume, was it?” I asked.

“Well, no.” She laughed. “It’s just that when you first walked in I went, ‘Oh, great, an English teacher who doesn’t even speak English.’”

I looked up from the papers I was shuffling.

“I’m just so glad that you do,” she said with sincere relief and bounced right out the door.

My students, to use their vernacular, blow the shit outta me. I don’t claim to be unique. There is certainly no shortage of teachers who complain about their students. At universities in particular there is no end to the catalogue of flaws instructors feel their students exhibit. They watch too many SUV commercials, select their classes as if they were shopping at Abercrombie, and never read anything other than sports page—if that. They settle for B’s when they could earn A’s, they expect A’s when they haven’t done the reading. These criticisms are stale by now; students are intellectually indolent (check) and socially indifferent (check check). This censure is usually rooted in hilarious allegorical evidence—compounded by its uniformity—but is also generally qualified with equally disdainful attacks on the rampant consumerism and global apathy that constitutes 21st

century suburban America. Yes, my colleagues assert, students are shallow, lazy and ignorant, but their problems are not organic; rather they are symptomatic—indicators that society as a whole has succumbed to the same failings.

Well, duh. Of course, eighteen-year-olds are products of their upbringing and environment. I was prepared for that. Unlike many of the aforementioned Complaining Educators, I am proximate—at least age wise—to my college experience. We, too, were slackers; some of us were just more efficient than others. We lambasted boring professors for not entertaining us; we drank too much; we were occasionally or regularly bad students. Whatever my and a few colleagues' political proclivities were, I did not attend college with similarly sensible students. I was prepared for that.

What I was not prepared for was rural Ohioans like Clayton. He wore fatigues that were patched with conservative slogans and wrote papers that delineated the fundamental differences between responsible white supremacy and irresponsible white supremacy. Although his papers—not to mention his definition of responsibility—made me cringe, I enjoyed having him in class. He was bright, conscientious and friendly.

When he came to speak with me during office hours—at my urging—we talked candidly. Although I teach writing classes, the readings I use are usually about race or class—we read a lot of Kincaid. We spoke about his reaction to the literature I assigned and then about other subjects, such as the fact that his brother belonged to the local chapter of the KKK and that if asked to label me racially, his initial impulse would have been to call me white.

My skin is the color of a wet Graham cracker.

I laughed. "Why?"

"I don't know," he said with embarrassment. "You're not Black, so I figured you might be mixed. I didn't want to insult you."

It speaks volumes, doesn't it? Clay's world was black and white and as simplistic as that was, it was exceeded in its awfulness only by the unfussiness of his bigotry—it would have been an insult to call anyone Black who wasn't.

I hope that Clay enjoyed my class—I think he did. I certainly learned a great deal from him about the ways in which racism can be revised and passed on. He told me about how he refrained from using the N-word around his baby niece and wished his brother would do the same. She was too young, he said, to hear that kind of talk—as if racism was like drinking alcohol, acceptable only after one had the maturity to handle its consequences. Whatever else it may be, perhaps it is an inch in the right direction for Clay.

But how do I push Clayton and his peers in the right direction? What do I teach students who are so ill prepared for the violently diverse world that awaits them outside of Columbus? More than how to write 3-5 page papers with proper citations, of course. We read Barbara Ehrenreich to learn about class, we read John Hockenbury to learn about disability, we read about the CIA's School of the Americas in Georgia to learn about America's role in disseminating terrorism, we read about the successes of an ethnically homogenous Norway—a country that has no discernible poor.

Yet, despite many of my students' surprising willingness to discover new things, I feel that I fail at my most serious objective: to transcend a superficial awareness and replace it with true empathetic understanding. The disparity is demonstrated by the way that we Americans must necessarily view those who suffer abroad—Rwandans, Palestinians, Bosnians—as Martians, people living lives so traumatic that they are alien to ours. How else can we explain the lack of grave attention we permit our leaders to give to their causes? How else can we account for America's support of Israeli tanks and missiles, over Palestinian teenagers with rocks and homemade bombs, if it is not partially that one paranoiac grief is more recognizable, more familiar than the other? How else can we explain the distaste we felt towards the rioters in LA? We recoiled, not because of the social conditions and injustice that produced them, but because the rioters succumbed to what James Baldwin describes as the ultimate urge of the ghetto—"to blast something."

I have seen this impulse in Eric, too. Once while speeding around Haine's Point on Ninjas, Eric and my brother were cut

off by two white boys. Eric patiently caught up to their car at a light. Leaving the bike running, he set it upright with its kickstand, walked over to the car, opened the driver's side door and punched the driver in his glasses. The passenger sat stunned as Eric politely shut the door, climbed back on his bike and waited for the light to turn green. Some people laugh when I tell that story, others wince with disgust. I think it depends on your sensibilities. I see what little power Eric has over his life when compared to say, my students, and I understand his neurotic appetite for respect.

Perhaps this is the true source of my failure. Empathy does not come from intellectual work. I *want* to remember that my students, like Eric, are products of their environment—blue to white collar, working to middle to upper class. In this intensely global world, they too, are at a disadvantage. I want to be forgiving of their racism, their homophobia, their apathy for anything unfamiliar because of course I know these failings are due to their upbringing, their inability to relate. Yet despite all of my cerebral readiness, I cannot mitigate my hostility towards them when they say *to me*, as one of my students did during a class discussion, “I have a lot of hatred towards other races.” I have all the tools that my students are missing—education, an open mind, a culturally heterogeneous life—yet, my reaction is visceral. I feel a reciprocal inkling of hate, too.

As an instructor this is what most disappoints me: knowledge and tolerance go a long way, yes, but they are not enough. If I—despite all my rigorous training and reading—cannot relate to my students, how will they ever understand my conviction that under another twist of fate it could be me car-jacking their Volvos, me hating on them from afar, me—like Kincaid—understanding why it is that some people blow things up.