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Country to Call My Own

By Leonce Gaiter

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Like so many other black men of his generation, my father was raised in a small Southern town. He grew up wandering the fields of rural Louisiana and swimming in the local bayous. He talked constantly about that land. He loved it. And he tried, through his stories, to spark some love for it in me.

But, along with the tales of swimming in the muddy creeks and stealing fruit from neighbors' orchards, there were tales of burnings and beatings at the hands of local whites. While wanting me to love that land as much as he did, my father inadvertently taught me to despise it. Who could love a land that bred the horrors he described, that he'd lived through? I cursed the place he loved so dearly.

I don't remember specific lessons. No one ever sat me down and told me, "Fear what's beyond the city's boundaries. They're like dogs out there. They'll tear at you, for no reason other than that's what they are." The fear and contempt for the rural was just passed down, often unintentionally, as if part of the African American cultural ether. I learned to beware what lay beyond this line or that. White folks lived there, and they could be killers.

I remember driving with my family in the late 1960s from one Southern military posting to another, and seeing one of those "Welcome To . . . " signs that greeted you along the highway as you entered a small town. The signs were sometimes elaborate billboards plastered with the round insignia of Elks Clubs and Kiwanis and the United Brotherhoods of this and that. The billboard I most remember had a dedication on it. It said, "The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan welcome you to . . . ." I was about 9 years old at the time. This enormous state-sanctioned

billboard, blaring the town's hatred for blacks, only confirmed that rural America did not welcome people like me.

I feared and hated more than just "them," though. To me, it was also what they controlled that threatened me -- the very air they breathed and the land they walked upon. The elements must have borne the sickness within them as deeply.

I grew to feel, as many other black Americans do, that we were safe in our urban enclaves and just about nowhere else. The greatest black urban migration occurred a mere 50 years ago, but for hundreds of years we'd been concentrated and subjugated in the rural South. The land was a reminder of where we'd been, of the opportunities we'd been denied, of the bowing and scraping we'd been forced to do. To reject the land was to reject that legacy of subservience and downtroddenness.

Young blacks like me learned to belittle what the majority and our own cultural memory kept from us. Perhaps we belittled the land so we wouldn't feel that sting of denial so keenly. I scoffed at the peace and beauties that nature offers. They were fictions.

That has changed for me. I recently moved from Los Angeles to a rural Northern California town called Paradise in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas. I had spent my adult life in large cities -- Boston, Washington, Los Angeles, New York -- and, like so many people, black and white, the ills of the megalopolis had become too glaring to me, too physically and emotionally draining to be borne any longer. One of the lucky ones, I could ply my writer's trade anywhere. So I left.

According to Census statistics, black Americans have been moving back to the South in record numbers. Census officials predict that this return to the South will continue into the next century. Along with the repatriation of the South, there is a greater willingness for black Americans to live in rural settings, shedding the "urban" tag we've carried for so long, which we'd both internalized, and had hung upon us from without.

I had visited Paradise several times in the past few years. Its sharpness stunned me. Set among the tall Ponderosa pines, the air was so fresh that it almost stung when you sucked it in, and its modest homes nestled in the shade and covered

in fallen leaves looked more charming and homey than their arrangement of wood and brick could justify.

I found myself lying by a stream, hearing nothing but the wind in the leaves and the water flashing by. I felt my shoulders settle down from up around my ears where they'd been perched for the past several years, and I knew I would have to make such a place my home. Finally, I'd gained some understanding of what my father tried to tell me all those years ago.

I watched this town's white faces with care, gauging reactions to my black self. I noticed none. And for the first time in my life, I had felt that real progress had been made in this country, because even if some of these rural folk still had contempt in their blood, most had learned not to show it. And that was all I demanded of them.

All parts of this country have their racist legacies, and this town is no exception. Former residents tell tales of the sheriff from days long gone who swore he would shoot any "nigger" who dared come into town. Even before I officially moved here, my worst fears were realized: While I was walking in town one morning, a pickup truck sped by and some local stuck his head out the window to yell "nigger" at me.

I'd hoped that such a scene would never occur. I had thought that such ugliness would sour this place for me, that its natural beauty would be snatched away from me once more, just as I was learning to bask in it. That's why I dreaded hearing that word.

But I suppose I'd grown old and ornery enough not to care, not any more than I had to, not any more than the implied threat in that word insisted I care (the "prepare to fight and defend yourself" that that word calls up). It just meant that the threat to black folks lived here, too -- just as it does in the big city. But I can live with it. I'd outgrown my civil rights-era vision of a United States in which no such threat exists. Such threats have always been, and always will be, a part of being an American for me.

These white men and women were no longer the rural goblins of my father's past and my imaginings. They no longer held that status.

Throughout the 1970s, there was a great deal of talk about black "liberation," but too much seemed just talk. It wore

the bravado of those not quite convinced of what they were saying. It is a true sign of emotional liberation, at least in me and those like me, that we will no longer allow ourselves to be denied any single place in this country that we, more than just about any other group of citizens, have the right to call our own.

I was raised by a man who grew up in the bayous of Louisiana. I spent my young life in cities where my father sought and got a better life than his old country town would allow him. I spent my young adulthood loathing the land and the people that forced my father cityward. And now, approaching middle age and on my own terms, I find myself floating on back -- back to the trees and the streams and the land.

Leonce Gaiter's essays have appeared in various newspapers. His novel "Just Titty-Boom" will be published by Noble Press in the spring of 1998.

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