



THE STUDENT AS NIGGER

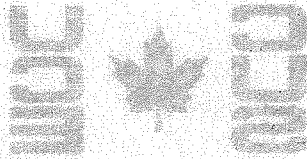
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THE STUDENT AS MEMBER

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THE STUDENT AS NIGGER

Jerry Farber

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Students are niggers. When you get that straight, our schools begin to make sense. It's more important, though, to understand why they're niggers. If we follow that question seriously, it will lead us past the zone of academic bullshit, where dedicated teachers pass their knowledge on to a new generation, and into the nitty-gritty of human needs and hangups. From there we can go on to consider whether it might ever be possible for students to come up from slavery.

First, look at the role students play in what we like to call education. At Cal State where I teach, the students have separate and unequal dining facilities. If I bring a student into the faculty dining room, my colleagues get uncomfortable, as though there were a bad smell. If I eat in the student cafeteria, I become known as the educational equivalent of a "nigger-lover". In at least one building there are even rest rooms which students may not use. Also there is an unwritten law barring student-faculty lovemaking. Fortunately, this anti-miscegenation law, like its Southern counterpart, is not 100 per cent effective.

Choose Homecoming Queen

Students at Cal State are politically disenfranchised. They are in an academic Lowndes County. Most of them can vote in national elections -- their average age is about 26 -- but they have no voice in the decisions which affect their academic lives. The students are, it is true, allowed to have a toy government of their own. It is a government run, for the most part, by Uncle Toms, concerned principally with trivia. The faculty and administrators decide what courses will be offered; the students get to choose their own Homecoming Queen. Occasionally, when student leaders get uppity and rebellious, they're either ignored, put off with trivial concessions, or manoeuvred expertly out of position.

A student at Cal State is expected to know his place. He calls a faculty member "Sir" or "Doctor" or "Professor" and he smiles and shuffles some as he stands outside the professor's office waiting for permission to enter. The faculty tell him what courses to take (in my department, English, even electives have to be approved by a faculty member); they tell him what to read, what to write, and frequently, where to set the margins on his typewriter. They tell him what's true and what isn't. Some teachers insist that they encourage dissent but they're almost always living and every student knows it. Tell The Man what he wants to hear or he'll fail you.

When a teacher says "jump" students jump. I know of one professor who refused to take up class time for exams and required students to show up for tests at 6:30 in the morning. And they did, by God! Another, at exam time, provides answer cards to be filled out -- each one enclosed in a paper bag with a hole cut in the top to see through. Students stick their writing hands in the bags while taking the test. The teacher isn't a provo; I wish he were. He does it to prevent cheating. Another colleague once caught a student reading during one of his lectures and threw her book against the wall. Still another lectures his students into a stupor and then screams at them in rage when they fall asleep.

Class is Not Dismissed!

During the first meeting of a class, one girl got up to leave about about ten minutes had gone by. The teacher rushed over, grabbed her by the arm, saying "This class is not dismissed!" and led her back to her seat. On the same day another teacher began by informing his class that he does not like beards, mustaches, long hair on boys, or capri pants on girls, and will not tolerate any of that in his class. The class, incidentally consisted mostly of high school teachers.

Even more discouraging than this Auschwitz approach to education is the fact that the students take it. They haven't gone through twelve years of public school for nothing. They've learned one thing and perhaps only one thing during those twelve years. They've forgotten their algebra. They're hopelessly vague about chemistry and physics. They've grown to fear and resent literature. They write like they've been lobotomized. But Jesus, can they follow orders! Freshmen come up to me with an essay and ask if I want it folded and whether the name should be in the upper right hand corner. And I want to cry and kiss them and caress their poor, tortured heads.

Students don't ask that orders make sense. They give up expecting things to make sense long before they leave elementary school. Things are true because the teacher says they're true. At a very early age we all learn to accept "two truths", as did certain medieval churchmen. Outside of class, things are true to your tongue, your finger, your stomach, your heart. Inside class, things are true by reason of authority. And that's just fine because you don't care anyway. Miss Wiedemeyer tells you a noun is a person, place or thing. So let it be. You don't give a rat's ass; she doesn't give a rat's ass.

Sirens and a Rattle of Bullets

The important thing is to please her. Back in kindergarten, you found out that teachers only love children who stand in nice straight lines. And that's where it's been at ever since. Nothing changes except to get worse. School becomes more and more obviously a prison. Last year I spoke to a student assembly at Manual Arts High School and then couldn't get out of the goddamn school. I mean there was no way out. Locked doors. High fences. One of the inmates was trying to make it over a fence when he saw me coming and froze in panic. For a moment, I expected sirens, a rattle of bullets, and him clawing the fence.

Then there's the infamous "code of dress". In some high schools, if your skirt looks too short, you have to kneel before the principal, in a brief allegory of fellatio. If the hem doesn't reach the floor, you go home to change while he, presumably, jacks off. Boys in high school can't be too sloppy and they can't be too sharp. You'd think the school board would be delighted to see all the spades trooping to school in pointy shoes, suits, ties and stingy brims. Uh-uh. They're too visible.

What school amounts to, then, for white and black kids alike, is a 12-year course in how to be slaves. What else could explain what I see in a freshman class? They've got that slave mentality; obliging and ingratiating on the surface but hostile and resistant underneath. Like black slaves, students vary in their awareness of what's going on. Some recognize their own put-on for what it is and even let their rebellion break through to the surface now and then. Others -- including most of the "good students" -- have been more deeply brainwashed. They swallow the bullshit with greedy mouths. They honest-to-God believe in grades, in busy work, in general education requirements. They're pathetically eager to be pushed around. They're like those old grey-headed house-niggers you can still find in the South who don't see what all the fuss is about because Mr. Charlie "treats us real good."

They Cheat A Lot

College entrance requirements tend to favor the Toms and screen out the rebels. Not entirely, of course. Some students at Cal State are expert con artists who know perfectly well what's happening. They want the degree and spend their years on the old plantation alternately laughing and cursing as they play the game. If their egos are strong enough, they cheat a lot. And of course, even the Toms are angry down deep somewhere. But it comes out in passive rather than active aggression. They're unexplainably thick-witted and subject to frequent spells of laziness. They misread simple questions. They spend their nights mechanically outlining history chapters while meticulously failing to comprehend a word of what's in front of them.

The saddest cases among both black slaves and student slaves are the ones who have so thoroughly introjected their masters' values that their anger is all turned inward. At Cal State these are the kids for whom every low grade is torture, who stammer and shake when they speak to a professor. They go through an emotional crisis every time they're called upon during class. You can

recognize them easily at finals time. Their faces are festooned with fresh pimples; their bowels boil audibly across the room. If there really is a Last Judgment, then the parents and teachers who created these wrecks are going to burn in hell.

So students are niggers. It's time to find out why, and to do this, we have to take a long look at Mr. Charlie.

The teachers I know best are college professors. Outside the classroom and taken as a group, their most striking characteristic is timidity. They're short on balls. Just look at their working conditions. At a time when even migrant workers have begun to fight and win, college professors are still afraid to make more than a token effort to improve their pitiful economic status. In California state colleges the faculties are screwed regularly and vigorously by the governor and legislature and yet they still won't offer any solid resistance. They lie flat on their stomachs with their pants down mumbling catch-phrases like "professional dignity" and "meaningful dialogue."

They Copped Out

Professors were no different when I was an under-graduate at UCLA during the McCarthy era; it was like a cattle stampede as they rushed to cop out. And in more recent years, I found that my being arrested in sit-ins brought from my colleagues, not so much approval or condemnation as open-mouthed astonishment: "You could lose your job!"

Now, of course, there's the Vietnamese war. It gets some opposition from a few teachers. Some support it. But a vast number of professors, who know perfectly well what's happening, are copping out again. And in the high schools you can forget it. Stillness reigns.

I'm not sure why teachers are so chickenshit. It could be that academic training itself forces a split between thought and action. It might also be that the tenured security of a teaching job attracts timid persons who are unsure of themselves and need weapons and other external trappings of authority.

At any rate, teachers are short on balls. And, as Judy Einstein has eloquently pointed out, the classroom offers an artificial and protected environment in which they can exercise their will to power.

Your neighbours may drive a better car; gas station attendants may intimidate you, your wife may dominate you; the state legislature may shit on you; but in the classroom, by God, students do what you say-or-else. The grade is a hell of a weapon. It may not rest on your hip, potent and rigid like a cop's gun, but in the long run it's more powerful. At your personal whim -- anytime you choose -- you can keep 35 students up for nights and have the "pleasure" of seeing them walk into the classroom pasty-faced and red-eyed carrying a sheaf of typewritten pages, with a title page, MLA footnotes and margins set at 15 and 91.

Respect for Authority

The general timidity which causes teachers to make niggers of their students usually includes a more specific fear -- fear of the students themselves. After all, students are different, just like black people. You stand exposed in front of them, knowing that their interests, their values and their language are different from yours. To make matters worse, you may suspect that you yourself are not the most engaging person. What then can protect you from their ridicule and scorn? Respect for authority. That's what. It's the policeman's gun again. The white bwana's pith helmet. So you flaunt that authority. You wither whisperers with a murderous glance. You crush objectors with erudition and heavy irony. And, worst of all, you make your own attainments seem not accessible but awesomely remote. You conceal your massive ignorance -- and parade a slender learning.

Finally, there's the darkest reason of all for the master-slave approach to education. The less trained and the less socialized a person is, the more he constitutes a sexual threat and the more he will be subjugated by institutions, such as penitentiaries and schools. Many of us are aware by now of the sexual neurosis which makes white man so fearful of integrated schools and neighborhoods, and which makes castration of Negroes a deeply entrenched Southern folk-way. We should recognize a similar pattern in education. There is a kind of castration that goes on in schools. It begins, before school years, with parents' first encroachments on their children's free unashamed sexuality and continues right up to the day when they hand you your doctoral diploma with a bleeding, shriveled pair of testicles stapled to the parchment. It's not that sexuality has no place in the classroom. You'll find it there but only in certain perverted and vitiated forms.

Perversion is Intellectual

How does sex show up in school? First of all, there's the sadomasochistic relationship between teachers and students. That's plenty sexual, although the price of enjoying it is to be unaware of what's happening. In walks the student in his Ivy League equivalent of a motorcycle jacket. In walks the teacher -- a kind of intellectual rough trade -- and flogs his students with grades, tests, sarcasm and snotty superiority until their very brains are bleeding. In Swinburne's England, the whipped school boy frequently grew up to be a flagellant. With us their perversion is intellectual but it's no less perverse.

Sex also shows up in the classroom as academic subject matter -- sanitized and abstracted, thoroughly divorced from feeling. You get "sex education" now in both high school and college classes; everyone determined not to be embarrassed, to be very up-to-date. These are the classes for which sex, as Feiffer puts it, "can be a beautiful thing if properly administered." And then, of course, there's still another depressing manifestation of sex in the classroom: the "off-color" teacher, who keeps his class awake with sniggering sexual allusions, obscene titters and academic innuendo. The sexuality he purveys, it must be admitted, is at least better than one at all.

Underneath the Petti-Pants

What's missing, from kindergarten to graduate school, is honest recognition of what's happening -- turned-on awareness of what's underneath the petti-pants, the chinos and the flannels. It's not that sex needs to be pushed in school; sex is pushed enough. But we should let it be where it is and like it is. I don't insist that ladies in junior high school lovingly caress their students' cocks (someday, maybe); however, it is reasonable to ask that the ladies don't, by example and stricture, teach their students to pretend that they aren't there. As things stand now, students are psychically castrated or spayed -- and for the very same reason that black men are castrated in Georgia; because they're a threat.

So you can add sexual repression to the list of causes, along with vanity fear and will to power, that turn the teacher into Mr. Charlie. You might also want to keep in mind that he was a nigger once himself and has never really gotten over it. And htere are more causes, some of which are better described in sociological than in psychological terms. Work them out; it's not hard. But in the meantime what we've got on our hands is a whole lot of niggers. And what makes this particularly grim is that the student has less chance than the black man of getting out of his bag. Because the student doesn't even know he's in it. That, more or less, is what's happening in higher education. And the results are staggering.

For one thing damn little education takes place in the schools. How could it? You can't educate slaves; you can only train them. Or, to use an uglier and more timely word, you can only program them.

Hands in Some Clay

I like to folk dance. Like other novices, I've gone to the Intersection or to the Museum and laid out good money in order to learn how to dance. No grades, no prerequisites, no separate dining rooms; they just turn you on to dancing. That's education. Now look at what happens in college. A friend of mine, Milt, recently finished a folk dance class. For his final he had to learn things like this: "The Irish are known for their wit and imagination, qualities reflected in their dances, which include the jig, the reel and the hornpipe." And then the teacher graded him A, B, C, D, or F, while he danced in front of her. That's not education. That's not even training. That's an abomination on the face of the earth. It's especially ironic because Milt took that dance class trying to get out of the academic rut. He took crafts for the same reason. Great, right? Get your hands in some clay? Make something? Then the teacher announced that a 20-page term paper would be required -- with footnotes.

At my school we even grade people on how they read poetry. That's like grading people on how they fuck. But we do it. In fact, God help me, I do it. I'm the Simon Legree of the poetry plantation. "Tote that iamb! Lift that spondee!" Even to discuss a good poem in that environment is potentially

dangerous because the very classroom is contaminated. As hard as I may try to turn students on to poetry, I know that the desks, the tests, the IBM cards, their own attitudes toward school, and my own residue of UCLA method are turning them off.

Make Them Willing Slaves

Another result of student slavery is just as dangerous -- students don't get emancipated when they graduate. As a matter of fact, we don't let them graduate. As a matter of fact, we don't let them graduate until they've demonstrated their willingness -- over 16 years -- to remain slaves. And for important jobs, like teaching, we make them go through more years just to make sure.

What I'm getting at is that we're all more or less niggers and slaves, teachers and students alike. This is the fact you have to start with in trying to understand wider social phenomena, say, politics, in our country and in other countries.

Educational oppression is trickier to fight than racial oppression. If you're a black rebel they can't exile you; they either have to intimidate you or kill you. But in high school or college, they can just bounce you out of the fold. And they do.

Rebel students and renegade faculty members get smothered or shot down with devastating accuracy. In high school, it's usually the student who gets it; in college, it's more often the teacher. Others get tired of fighting and voluntarily leave the system. But dropping out of college, for a rebel, is a little like going North, for a Negro. You can't really get away from it so you might as well stay and raise hell.

Organize for Freedom Now

How do you raise hell? That's another article. But for a start, why not stay with the analogy? What have black people done? They have, first of all, faced the fact of their slavery. They've stopped kidding themselves about an eventual reward in the Great Watermelon Patch in the sky. They've organized. They've decided to get freedom now, and they've started taking it.

Students, like black people, have immense unused power. They could, theoretically, insist on participating in their own education. They could make academic freedom bilateral. They could teach their teachers to thrive on love and admiration rather than on fear and respect, and to lay down their weapons. Students could discover community. And they could learn to dance by dancing on the IBM cards. They could make coloring books out of the catalogs and they could put the grading system in a museum.

They could raze one set of walls and let life come blowing into the classroom. They could turn the classroom into a "field of action" as Peter Marin describes it. And they could study for the best of all possible reasons -- their own resources.

They could. They have the power. But only in a very few places, like Berkeley, have they even begun to think about using it. For students as for black people, the hardest battle isn't with Mr. Charlie. It's with what Mr. Charlie has done to your mind.