

THE TRICKY BUSINESS OF RACISM:
COMMENTS UPON READING GRANDCHILDREN
OF THE BUFFALO SOLDIER

The tensions existing within the African-American world as regards color differences, hair characteristics, and cultural preferences are well known to many persons. The damage inflicted to African-American self-esteem by conquest, captivity, segregation, Jim Crow discrimination, and internal colonialism have been written about and shown before camera at great length.

Less well known are the comparable inner-group tensions existing within Native American communities, tensions exacerbated by a century to two centuries of totalitarian manipulation on reservations by white bureaucrats, a process which often sought to co-opt tribal members into a status hierarchy of "progressives" (often of mixed ancestry) versus "full-bloods" (also sometimes mixed, but usually still speaking the Indigenous language). Add to this the impact of Christian denominations, each seeking to destroy traditional values and recruit converts to their particular way of thinking and one has a "witches' brew" of forces seeking to divide and destroy Indigenous communities.

One must imagine that First Americans, such as the Assiniboine, were like most human groups with their full range of family rivalries, jealousy, gossip, and internal factionalism. But in the traditional way, Indigenous societies usually had ceremonial and other remedies for such tendencies, ones which, after all, could be dangerous to survival if allowed to get out of hand.

The European invasion, with all of its disruption of traditional life, left many tribal communities both materially and culturally impoverished. The Europeans attempted to introduce a new hierarchy in many spheres; class, education, color, language, wealth, religion.

Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldier provides us with a penetrating glimpse into many facets of the impacts of racism and colonialism, glimpses which are deeply personal and at the same time universal, I think, and are found throughout "Indian Country" in varying forms.

The fact that an ancestor of the Robe family was an African-American soldier in the U.S. Army (a "Buffalo soldier") provides the central theme for the action. That his descendants suffer from gossip, humiliation, and personal attacks because of being part-African may be seen as being directly related to the profound insights into the status of "breeds" of all kinds as seen in this drama. The fact that there are "breeds," persons of mixed ancestry, is of course not new in Ancient American life. We can be sure that

Original Americans were marrying across tribal and language lines for thousands of years. We can also imagine that many jokes might be told that would reflect on the "strange" language or customs or appearances of the neighboring tribes (friendly or hostile). But colonialism and the pressure cooker of reservation life changed all of that natural tendency at humor and local ethnocentrism.

Africans and Americans ("Indians") began to intermarry in the 1520's-1540's in North America when a group of Africans successfully rebelled against the Spaniards in Chicora (South Carolina) and joined the regional Indian communities. (This happened even earlier in Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean). The process of intermixture was greatly accelerated by the DeSoto expedition, the founding of St. Augustine (1565), and by the later importation of large numbers of captives by the French, English, and Spaniards for the next three hundred years.

Many of the captives (I try not to use the term "slave" which is derived from "Slav," the name of an ethnic group) came to North America from the Caribbean and were already mixed with Native American ancestry. Others came from Africa directly, especially those headed for South Carolina. There they met large numbers of Native American captives stolen from the tribes of Florida and the lower Mississippi Valley (Timucua, Calusa, Apalache, Choctaw, Caddo et cetera).

Along the east coast of what became the United States most of the surviving tribes from South Carolina through Massachusetts became part-African. At the same time African-American population became part-"Indian." To complicate matters, several of the southern nations (Creeks, Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws) became involved in the captive trade and eventually they allowed their mixed-blood elites to become a captive-owning class becoming wealthy from un-free labor. For this reason Oklahoma today is the home of large numbers of "Freedmen" people, ex-citizens of the "Five Tribes" who have African ancestry but are largely avoided by the Native and white mixed-blood persons who remain on the U.S. federal tribal rolls.

The "Buffalo Soldier" who married a Native woman on the northern plains and who became an ancestor of the Robe family could well have been part-Native himself. He is by no means unique. The discrimination which his descendants experience is part of the sickness of racism and ignorance perpetuated by the dominant society and magnified by the hot-house atmosphere of destabilized tribal communities.

The widespread opposition, on the East Coast, to the success of the Pequots and other part-African gaming tribes as well as the opposition to federal recognition for the Lumbees of North Carolina, stem from the very same source.

The Robe family has been doubly ill-served by racism and inter-family jealousy. In actuality, their heritage is an especially rich one, mirroring as it does the history of countless American nations from the Mapuche of Chile north to the Wampanoags of Massachusetts, the Crow of Montana, and the urban "Indians" of Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay. The fact that the Robe family has its own dance, a "jig" learned from their old Cree allies, and the unique family stories, could be, in a different place, a source of strength and joy.

The Robe story is really the American story, from Patagonia to Alaska. It is also our story, all of us who claim today to be "Americans."

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