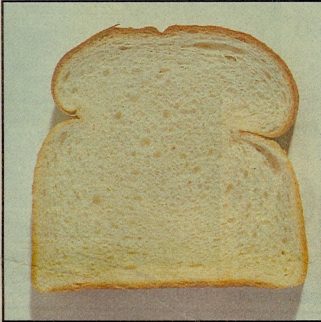


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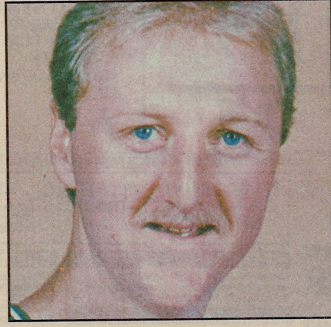
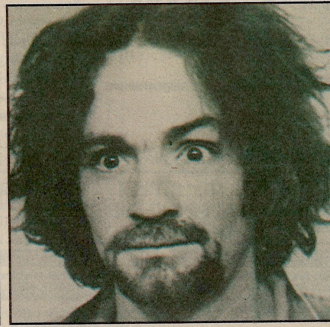
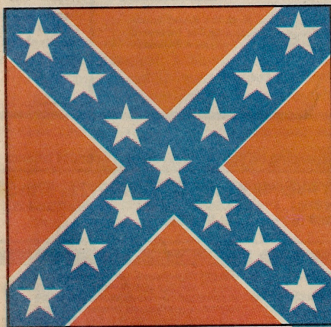
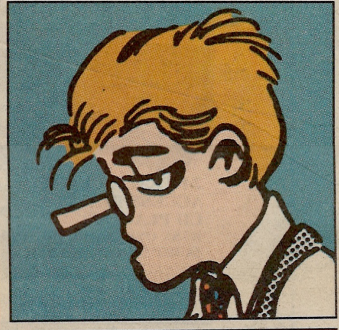
FUGAZY'S MEDAL OF DISHONOR

(Wayne Barrett, P.11)



WHITE LIKE WHO?

NOTES ON THE OTHER RACE



READING 'PALMS': ERIK DAVIS ON MUTANT TV (P.51)

WHITE THE

ISSUE

BY EDWARD BALL

"YO! EX-CUSE ME, *Mr. Poindexter!*" The black kids in the street cut loose at me. I'm wearing a tartan vest, wire-rimmed glasses, and riding a three-speed bike. A cascade of laughter comes down after the taunt, then some from me, too. We all hoot at my upright whiteness.

Whether whiteness is a thing to laugh or cry about is undecidable. For a long time it was neither. Whiteness was simply there, like the atmosphere, as unconscious as the intake of breath.

When I was a boy growing up in the Deep South, I opened a book called *Recollections of the Ball Family of South Carolina and the Comingtee Plantation*, to read about my ancestors and the people they enslaved. That was the first time I thought whiteness might be an "other" thing, as unto itself as blackness, which seemed like strangeness itself to me. I was the meek son of an Episcopal priest and a former church secretary.

The author of the memoir, a relative in my grandparents' generation, characterized the daily routine at Comingtee as "the patriarchal life." With utmost gentility, she described the warm emotions that accompanied the act of putting people in chains: "On all of the Ball plantations were certain families of negroes who seemed above the average; intelligent, faithful, trustworthy, and much attached to their masters and their families, which latter returned their devotion by the fullest confidence, respect, and consideration."

Decorous talk about "the negroes." However remote the place, however yellowed the book, the language sounds familiar. Maybe it's the way attention inexorably shifts from the fact of "the Ball plantations" to "certain families" on them. Maybe it's the singling out and celebration of "the good negro." We white folks take great pleasure in describing other people.

Then, as now, most discussion about racial identity swirls around people of color. "But wait," you say, "we're *always* hearing about white folks: their movie stars, their mass murderers, their clothes, their wars, and dreams." Yes, we know what white people do, but what is this thing that they spread around, "whiteness"?

During the debate that accompanied the Columbus quincentenary, we *thought* we heard all about whiteness. Time and again, the story of New World colonization was shown to support Walter Benjamin's observation, "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."

But in the end, talk about white people seemed to blend gracefully into talk about *otherness*. Whites—first in the spirit of the plantation, now in the spirit of political correctness—contort themselves to get a hold on "the other." Meanwhile, at the "center," if that's where whiteness is, there remains a pale blur. Whites shun identification with "white culture," fearing the existential loss that comes with being marked.

So intense is the pressure to focus the lens elsewhere that there is even a field of research called "ethnoastronomy," which studies not the stars, but the ways colored people look at them.

To talk about being white amid an international discourse on race and ethnicity is not a guileless expression of *me-tooism*. Nor does it have to be some guilty pilgrimage, a journey of amends through the world whites have made. Me-tooism is a backlash against multiculturalism. And guilt is an extension of "the patriarchal life."

There are few things so dyspeptic as white liberals performing guilt, painting their role as having to live out some punishment of Minos, who was damned forever to have a serpent slung around his waist, chewing on his penis.

There are two kingdoms within the white world: white *people* and whiteness. Most of us cling to the belief that the former can be tabulated. How comforting is the notion, backed by the U.S. Census Bureau, that complexion is a scientific reality, a sum of integers. In the recent census, the increasingly skittish line of questioning around "race" yielded 189 million respondents (76 per cent) who identified themselves as "White-non-Hispanic."

The little qualifier *non* contains multitudes. It demonstrates how white people only appear after subtraction. The cultural markings of everyone else are spun out, separated, and identified in the statistical centrifuge, leaving only . . . pure whites.

White people, in other words, don't exist. Until they come up against difference. "Yo! Mr. Poindexter!"

When did whites come into the world? The question is not so archaeological, or white supremacist, as it sounds. When was the first time that Europeans, faced with otherness, looked at each other and said, "We're white"?

To imagine such an event would be to create a myth, but myths are at the heart of racial identity. I like to think of an actual moment of selfhood, such as (why not?) the year 1096. It was then that Pope Urban II called the faithful of Christendom to the First Crusade, and a ragtag army of penitents just above starvation marched out of the bowels of Europe and into Jerusalem, where it confronted and slaughtered the occupying Infidel—in this case, dark-skinned Muslims. I am Christian! Christendom is white!

White folks quickly disappear into a fog of signs, detached from skin color, *whiteness*. More than just pale folks on the ground, whiteness swirls around every complexion, including those of color. A "poindexter" is a white person touched by an absurd aura of whiteness.

There are two kinds of whiteness. The "ethnic" or cultural kind appears when you trace a heritage, however contrived, to one of the national tribes of Europe. WASPs are "ethnic" as much as Italian Americans, Greeks, or, for that matter, Vietnamese. To use the phrase "ethnic white" is not only to be redundant; it is to practice a quiet racism that divides white people into first-rate

whites and also-rans.

Europeans immigrating to the United States, such as the 12 million who passed through Ellis Island, learned to suppress their cultural whiteness and adopt the second kind, a generic white identity. Assimilation meant the acceptance of "universal whiteness," along with tacit acknowledgment of one's prepared role in the choreography of American race relations.

Universal whiteness transcends nation, gender, and class, and extends to the meaning of the phrase "the First World," which is not just high piles of consumer goods, or even capitalism. The First World is a system of government, popular culture, kinship rules, an attitude toward nature, and whiteness at its highest abstraction. When the industrialized nations consult each other in matters of economics or war, universal whiteness is at work, with Japan lately offered a seat at the table as "honorary" white.

It's a weekend evening around midnight, and I am walking with my partner along an empty Chelsea street. The air crackles with



the expectations of a million libidos cruising the downtown night. I look up and see four black teens sitting on the stoop of a townhouse. My white antennae go out, instruments created in the squalid laboratory of U.S. racial engineering. The black kids eye us, a white couple. The street becomes a stage. Whatever happens will come out of the script of color called America.

They surround us, and we freeze. "Give up the money!" One of the teens reaches into his jacket, and appears to pull something out. He crouches and holds his arms outstretched in the firing position.

Flashing up in that instant, a freeze-frame from some film shown until shredded, I saw the stiff pallor of my whiteness. I saw "the Ball negroes" of Cominglee. I saw a trans-historical dance of colored and colorless, and a million gestures and grimaces learned in the racial act.

He aims . . . his index finger. Cut! The kids laugh, falling down on the sidewalk at their own joke. They'd improvised a burlesque of the story. My partner and I tremble and gape. Dazed, we teeter down the street, laughter at our backs. We'd been had, because although we had memorized the original script, we *didn't* know the lines of the parody.

I'm beginning to feel like a walking spoof of whiteness.

Race is a masquerade; we are its players. Whiteness speaks through me like a ventriloquist, as it does through you, I think, whatever your color. We perform it, use it to win attention, refine it to its purest, sugared essence. We revile it, even as we continue to ape it. Many people of color attempt to opt out of the white mime, and the refusal itself places whiteness near the core of the imagination. For Frantz Fanon, the choice was "to turn white or disappear," to be whiter-than-you, more white, never-too-white.

In one act of the white performance is the caricature that poet Audre Lorde called "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure"—people so few in number as to be truly shadows on the wall of Plato's cave.

Moving down along the shifting rungs of class, education, and cultural extraction, there is a constant auditioning for roles. Jewishness is precarious whiteness, poised on the edge of the pale. Asians have a lock on sometime-whiteness, because of the "white values" they supposedly possess: the work ethic, punctuality, the deferment of pleasure, obedience. Eastern Europeans present a rough copy of whiteness, at a distance from its purer state in the northern and western capitals.

People are forever trying to "get it right":

noses, speech, sexual positions, clothing, hair. The genius of white folks is that they've managed to conscript the world into their ethnic theater. In Japan, people "fix" their eyes to be rounder; in Ouagadougou, women jam their feet into high heels; in Ulan Bator, men sport suits around town.

"But what about blackness," you say, "all those whites who want to escape the blank white world, and go black (or brown, or . . .)?" It's true, the reverse pull toward color is equally strong. There are legions of whites who want out of the white soup. Youth culture and music are where that crossover mostly happens. Behold: Marky Mark, Harry Connick Jr., and their fans. Marky Mark is the latest in a line of would-be homeboys, and Connick's record sales feed off the soul of the Duke, the Count, and Cab Calloway.

But to "go colored" is merely another part of the white franchise: the freedom to sample other identities, to season white identity with the spice of the other. Whites who taste blackness (or Latino-ness, or . . .) have always done it as cultural tourists. You don't get black kids dressing in khaki pants and Lacoste shirts—well, maybe a few—but the white boy rap fan is good for the bottom line at Time Warner. Once whites leave the cocoon of youth or bohemia, whiteness comes back with a vengeance. I'm still waiting to see a thirty-something white who wears a baseball cap any way but frontwise on the head.

As I was helping to prepare this section of the newspaper, I spoke to my friend Ken, an editor at Duke University Press, who said he was hoping someone would write a book about "local whiteness." What could he mean? I thought. Then it clicked. Local whiteness happens in a particular way, place, and time. Like the whiteness of plantation owners in South Carolina.

I haven't visited Comingtee, or the other plantations of the Ball clan. They had names like Limerick and Kensington, and were gradually sold off after what the family memoir quaintly refers to as "the general upsetting of all order in early 1865." With Emancipation, "the negroes" stayed on as sharecroppers, or moved to nearby Charleston to become house servants. Some of their names were Jenny Buller, Old Marcus, Dolly, and Josh Lovely.

I did once go to the old family cemetery, among the moss-heavy trees in the South Carolina countryside, next to a tiny church called Strawberry Chapel. Ringed with a brick wall were two dozen graves of people whose name I share.

I walked around the grave of John Coming Ball, who had a plantation in Goosecreek Parish. J. C. Ball died, unmarried, in 1792; his estate papers listed 138 slaves. I sat on the stone under which lay Elias Ball, dead at 77 in 1786. His father, Elias Sr., the first Ball in the American colonies, had come from England in 1693, whereupon he procured himself a rice plantation.

The antebellum Ball generations developed the habit of commissioning paintings of themselves, the kind the gentry used to order up to keep one foot in the world as they passed into dust. Elias Jr. is represented in one such portrait. It's a cartoonlike thing, done by a provincial painter who had either not mastered the genre of flattery, or was trying to sneak onto the canvas the truly gamey character of his employer. Half folk art, half aristocratic charade, the image of Elias is deep local whiteness, Carolina Low Country, Revolutionary War period.

In his portrait, Elias is standing bolt upright. He has stuffed a hand into his vest in a supercilious gesture meant to suggest "to the manor born." A collarless jacket struggles unsuccessfully to close over the big belly beneath the hand. Elias's hair looks like a kitchen mop swooped over the ears. His jowls sag, and he has a pie-shaped face. The mouth twists into an uncomfortable smile, and in the eyes is confusion. Elias's gaze drifts past the viewer, as though he is looking at something gathering on the horizon that he can't make out. I sat on Elias's tombstone and wondered where the airs of this foppish man lived on. His whiteness was imprinted in me, and it was indelible. ■