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Discrimination on the basis of accent

A colleague of mine and her husband lived in Lansing, Mich., during the late 1970s. She, a New Yorker, wrote for the Detroit News. He, a Southerner, was a law student.

They rented an upscale apartment on the river near the governor's mansion. One night while they were shopping, a clerk asked for their address. After the husband gave it, a prosperous-looking man in earshot blurted, "How in the world did you get a place like that with an accent like that?"

In her best New York accent, my colleague dressed down the stranger. "Based on (my husband's) accent, he obviously thought we were hayseeds," she says now. "That was by far the worst example of 'accent bias' (my husband) ever encountered. But so many people made fun of his accent over the years — including some of his classmates — that he and I were very glad to leave the place as soon as law school was over."

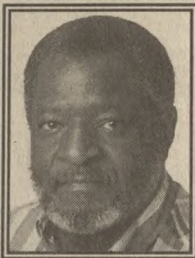
What my colleague's husband experienced occurs all too often and in too many places when people — especially Northerners — hear the sweet tone of the Southern drawl. Misunderstood, castigated and mimicked, the Southern accent can bring ostracism, hurt, anger and feelings of inferiority that may last a lifetime.

Even President Clinton, the most powerful man on Earth, is ridiculed as a "Bubba" because of the Dixieland in his voice.

When I was an English professor at the University of Illinois-Chicago, a Mississippiian, his drawl as slow as a summer afternoon, was in one of my classes. The first time he participated in a discussion, a hush fell over the room. After he stopped speaking, several students laughed.

"Who is that? Gomer Pyle?" a Bostonian

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asked, pointing. The Southerner was mortified. I felt his pain and clumsily said something perfunctory about a university campus and respect for the cultures of others.

He never missed a day. But he never participated in another discussion.

North Carolina native Charles Hadley, a teacher at Queens College in Charlotte and a dialect coach for the movies, has experienced his share of put-downs while working up North. "It's 'Oh, those poor little darling Southerners,'" he said in the Richmond Times-Dispatch. "I have literally seen people lose jobs because of their Southern accents. There's really nothing wrong with having a Southern accent — as long as you don't have to use it in business outside the South."

Michael Montgomery, an English and linguistics professor at the University of South Carolina, agrees, arguing that most Americans think nothing of discriminating against dialects and accents.

"The message given to people is: If you want to get a job anywhere in the country and increasingly in the South, don't talk like a Southerner," he told the Times-Dispatch. "We're supposed to live in an enlightened age. They haul you into court for discriminating on the basis of race, gender or creed, but an accent is supposed to indicate your intelligence. ... Those prejudices and stereotypes are stronger than ever."

Harriet and Mike Abraham, an Alabamian and a Mississippiian respectively, who are Jews, have similar encounters. People think that they, too, should be from New York. Harriet, executive director of the Florida West Coast American Jewish Committee, has one of the most beautiful Southern accents I have ever heard. Many people discount her intelligence until they realize that they have done exactly what she expects — and wants — of them.

Mike, a lawyer, loves to litigate against his silk-suited Yankee peers. By underestimating his intelligence, these hotshots suffer the agony of defeat every time. And Mike? He smiles self-deprecatingly all the while.

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”

— Michael Montgomery
English and linguistics
professor

This element of surprise — the underestimation of the Southerner's intelligence — is a recurring theme in the comments of my Southern colleagues.

My good friend Stephen Jackson, an Alabamian who teaches journalism at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, offers an amusing twist on the Southern drawl. Having spent many years in Colombia, Steve speaks fluent Spanish.

His problem? "I even speak Spanish with a Southern accent," he said. "Vamos, y'all! I always say in Spanish, meaning 'Let's go, you all.' Colombians are very patient with me. They know that I'm a gringo speaking Spanish. Unlike Americans, they are not judging my intelligence by my accent — as far as I can tell."

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Born in the South, but not Southern

I love the South and, until quite recently, fancied myself a Southerner. Even though I was born and reared in the South and do not plan to ever leave it, I no longer believe that an African-American can be a Southerner.

My thinking began to evolve about two years ago shortly after referring to myself as a Southerner in a column and receiving letters from white males in South Carolina arguing otherwise.

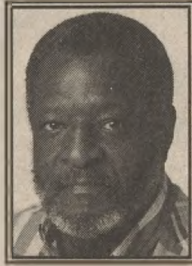
"Sir," one writer commented, "a nigger can't be a Southerner. You and your kind have never belonged here. My people committed the sin of bringing your kind to our great region in the first place."

Initially, I was angry but calmed down after viewing the comments intellectually. I, a student of the Civil War, was reminded of this issue again in April when Marion Lambert, a member of the Tampa Bay chapter of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, a group of history buffs and Confederate descendants, invited blacks to their annual Confederate Memorial Day celebration. He told the St. Petersburg Times that "African-Americans should celebrate this ... day because they are Southerners."

Most blacks scoffed at the invitation and condemned black singer Belinda Womack, who performed at the gathering. The cause of their reactions goes to the heart of the question of whether or not a black can be a Southerner.

I have asked whites and blacks this question. Liberal whites have said, with-

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out apparent reflection, that a black can be a Southerner. White conservatives, especially males, have become defensive, but most have said that a black can be a Southerner. All but one African-American, a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, have agreed.

In politics, is the quintessential Southerner a "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman, a George Wallace, a Eugene "Bull" Connor? In literature, a Eudora Welty, a William Styron, a Flannery O'Connor, a William Faulkner? What about enlightened journalists such as Hodding Carter, Ralph McGill and Eugene Patterson who risked everything to support blacks? In average life, is the redneck our model Southerner?

The definitions of a Southerner are as varied as the people who address the issue. The Southerner has been defined as anyone born in the South, one reared here or even as one who adopts the region as home. Some people say that being a Southerner, like the South itself, is a state of mind.

"A Southerner," an 80-year-old white man said, "is anyone, black or white, who loves the land of their Southern birth. Southerners love the land in a way that people in other parts of the country do not."

A colleague's wife said: "Southerners believe that God is in charge of our world, that family is important and that we are supposed to help each other. Those beliefs seem to be stronger in the South than in most other regions. Those beliefs don't depend on being a certain color, a certain gender or being in a particular financial class."

As sincere as the above attempts are, they, like most others, ignore centuries of historical, social, cultural and political forces that prevent African-Americans from being true Southerners.

“
Yet in this region of ironies, the supreme irony was that the two races lived side by side for centuries and knew each other not at all. The sin of (white) race pride had come between them and created an abyss so deep that few held out hope for reconciliation.
”

— David R. Goldfield

Although their sweat was essential to the economy, African-Americans have never been a natural part of the South. Brought here as slaves, they were declared subhuman — creatures without souls and, therefore, unable to experience Christian redemption. From the outset, they became a segregated pariah class in a region already distinct from the rest of the nation.

"The Negro," David L. Cohen wrote for *Look* magazine in 1955, "did not seek to come to the United States; he was dragged here to satisfy white greed. He alone, of all the racial stocks here, was satisfied to remain in his native home. The others came to either to improve their condition economically or spiritually, or because they were run out of town."

The African-American, as imported chattel, was the South's original exile, the bastard who could not join the fraternity. Many critics of my position argue that the descendants of black slaves are now bona fide Southerners.

But are they?

"To be born with a dark skin is unforgivable in the South," wrote Louis E. Austin, "and only the Negro must forever be assigned a place of hatred in the heart of the Southerner... So deep are the roots and so well fertilized have they been by generation after generation of his ancestors that long before he is born, the pattern, the way of life for the white child in the South has already been provided."

At an early age, white children know to despise blacks. Sure, many blacks and whites worked the land together, worshiped the same God and experienced the same poverty. "Yet, in this region of ironies," writes David R. Goldfield, "the supreme irony was that the two races lived side by side for centuries and knew each other not at all. The sin of (white) race pride had come between them and created an abyss so deep that few held out hope for reconciliation."

Goldfield is right. The races have not reconciled because African-Americans cannot meet the two main tests for being a member of the South's clan: having

white skin and accepting the concept of white superiority.

In Ralph Ellison's prize-winning novel, "Invisible Man," the protagonist encapsulates the black man's predicament in the South: "I am invisible, simply because (white) people refuse to see me. When they approach me they only see my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination — indeed, everything and anything except me."

Further, racial etiquette — the institution dictating that blacks must "stay in their place" — did more than anything else to marginalize former slaves, effectively making them permanent aliens.

For too many generations, racial etiquette forced whites and blacks to attend separate schools, drink from separate fountains, eat in separate restaurants, use separate restrooms. The mere labels of "white" and "colored" denoted superiority and inferiority and established a false hierarchy impossible to tear down.

W.E.B. Du Bois, as I do, understood the destructiveness of this hierarchy: "In a world where it means so much to take a man by the hand and sit beside him, to look frankly into his eyes and feel his heart beating with red blood; in a world where a social cigar or a cup of tea together means more than legislative halls and magazine articles and speeches — one can imagine the consequences of the almost utter absence of such social amenities between estranged races."

The late Malcolm X went beyond the question of whether or not a black can be a Southerner: He dared to wonder if a black can be an American.

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The Valdosta Daily Times

Thursday, June 25, 1998 5-A

LOCAL

Morman sworn in as member of Lowndes County Board of Elections

Staff reports

Frank Morman Jr., director of Valdosta's Project Change, was sworn in as a member of the Lowndes County Board of Elections Wednesday afternoon, said Genie Krivanek, supervisor of elections.

Morman was recommended to the Lowndes County Superior Court, by a local grand jury, Krivanek said. The court is responsible for making the appointments.

Morman was chosen for the

job at the end of May, but necessary paperwork has only just come back from the secretary of

state's office, Krivanek said. Morman will serve for three years.

2-A Sunday, June 28, 1998

Klan protests black man's death

The Associated Press

JASPER, Texas — The Ku Klux Klan rallied Saturday to condemn the slaying of a black man who was allegedly dragged to his death behind a pickup truck by three white men.

Black counterdemonstrators carrying guns showed up and police kept the two sides apart, making one arrest as the 90-minute Klan rally ended.

"If nothing else, we've taught Jasper County freedom of speech," Klansman Darrell Flinn said. "And we've gotten to denounce the murder."

James Byrd Jr. was beaten and dragged behind a pickup truck for more than two miles along a rural road in this east Texas town on June 7. Byrd's torso — missing his head and an arm — was found the following morning.

Three white men charged with murder in the killing had ties to white supremacist groups, authorities said.

About 25 Klan members paraded in the courthouse square, with temperatures reaching the 90s in high humidity.

Tensions were heightened when about 50 black activists arrived and made a show of unloading weapons from trunks. Shouting "black power," they pointed shotguns, rifles and other

weapons in the air as they marched.

"These men are here to freely exercise their divine and, yes, constitutional rights after building this country for 400 years to defend ourselves and carry armed and loaded weapons to defend the black community against this murderous and hypocritical outfit known as the Ku Klux Klan," said Malik Z. Shabazz, an attorney for the New Black Panther Party.

Authorities roped off a two-block radius around the square near the courthouse. Texas Rangers, FBI agents and other law officers patrolled the area.

After a white man in the audience heckled blacks, law officers rushed in to prevent a confrontation.

About a dozen armed blacks twice failed twice to pass through a police barricade. Former Nation of Islam spokesman Khalid Muhammad threatened law officers after he was rebuffed, but later retreated and was allowed to keep his gun.

A black anti-Klan demonstrator was arrested when a group confronted Klan members who were leaving the courthouse square after the rally. Police said the arrest came when demonstrators began rocking a vehicle carrying Klan members.