

Taking No Prisoners

Bread, Roses, Racism and Song

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By Roger Witherspoon

In the nation's coffee houses where live folk music reigns and homage is paid to old fashioned liberalism and the heydays of the union and civil rights movements, the last thing one would expect to encounter is a tribute to racism.

But there is a century-old union song called *Bread and Roses*, which is making comeback rounds and raising eyebrows as some white liberals insist on ignoring history and giving new meaning to old lyrics rather than change some of the words – a common practice in folk music. The song, by James Oppenheim, grew out of the strike by women textile workers in 1912, who carried signs declaring “We Want Bread and Roses Too!”

Oppenheim extolled the rise of women as an integral part of “the rising of the race.” And at that point in time, America was hard at work ensuring white supremacy in virtually every aspect of daily life.

Reggie Harris (<http://www.kimandreggie.com/>), one of the few prominent Blacks on the folk circuit, paused backstage during a break in a coffee house concert in White Plains, New York, and said there was no justification for signing the original lyrics any more.



“Hell no,” he said. “You can’t divorce the lyrics from its history.”

Proponents follow the lead of white music Daniel Patrick Welch, who declared in a 2006 review that in using the phrase ‘the rising of the race’ “Oppenheim obviously means species; yet in perhaps a moment of weakness, others have changed it to ‘the rising of us all’ which of course, necessitates changing the rhyme. Why? As is all too apparent in current struggles, the uplifting of women is the key to uplifting the entire human race.”

He is, of course, entitled to his revisionist view. But it never ceases to amaze me how quickly supposedly progressive whites will adopt and defend indefensible attitudes in an attempt to wish away this nation’s racist, vicious, and violent past. Whites who would not dream of assigning a “modern meaning” to Mein Kampf have no trouble reassigning meaning to mass murder when the victims are black.

Let me walk you through the world of 1912.

To do that, you have to go back to 1896 when the US Supreme Court adopted a 7-2 decision in a case titled *Plessy v Ferguson*. That decision augured in the beginning of the Jim Crow era, a time when *all* major societal institutions – including the labor and women’s movements – reflected and supported the suppression of Blacks.

In the Ferris State University presentation of “What Was Jim Crow?” from their Museum of Racist Memorabilia, <http://www.ferris.edu/JIMCROW/what.htm> ; ”The Jim Crow system was undergirded by the following beliefs or rationalizations: Whites were superior to Blacks in all important ways, including but not limited to intelligence, morality, and civilized behavior; sexual relations between Blacks and Whites would produce a mongrel race that would destroy America; treating Blacks as equals would encourage interracial sexual unions; any activity which suggested social equality encouraged interracial relations; if necessary, violence must be used to keep Blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy....”

It was illegal for Blacks and Whites to shake hands or eat together

- Blacks were not allowed to show public affection towards one another in public, especially kissing, because it offended Whites.
- Whites did not use courtesy titles of respect when referring to Blacks.
- White motorists had the right of way at all intersections at all times.
- Oklahoma prohibited Blacks and Whites from boating together. Separate parks were common, Whites only beaches were the norm.

These prohibitions were codified in hundreds of state laws ranging from the petty – Georgia banned Whites and Blacks from playing checkers together – to the criminal, in which a Black man who looked a White woman in the eye was guilty of “eyeball rape” and subject to immediate lynching.

These laws and practices disenfranchising American citizens were useless unless enforced by violence. Lynchings were not antiseptic affairs involving a rope, a tree, and nightriders.

They were public events, often billed in the local newspapers as “picnics – short for pick a nigger – since in a perversion of Christ and Barabbas, the police would grab three black men at random and keep them in jail. The public had till the week end to place bets on who would last the longest under torture. That would be the victim and the others would be let go.

These were family affairs where women participated in torture and maiming, often using equipment designed to geld bulls to rip off the privates of the Black man. If he had a pregnant wife who protested, there were cases where they tied her up also, cut open her stomach with knives and tossed the fetus to white children to kick around like a soccer ball till they kicked it into the fire. In that way, white kids learned at an early age they had nothing to fear from Blacks since they ruled their lives from birth to death.

In 1910, the Union movement was taking off, fighting the robber barons and seeking a stronger voice for American factory workers. Blacks were not included. The Unions did not see civil rights for Blacks as a common cause, but as a low cost competition. Besides, they enjoyed White privilege. So unions adamantly fought against

hiring blacks or allowing companies to use Black suppliers.

In 1910 Dallas had a city wide party inaugurating a new courthouse complex — which still, stands, though it is now a court annex.; The decision was made, however, that the celebration would not be complete without a nigger hanging from a scaffold in front of the building. So the county sheriff and deputies went to a prominent black-owned business, had a shoot out, arrested the owner, and hung him at the conclusion of the ceremonies. Hundreds of white men and women posed for postcard photos under the swinging legs. Not to be outdone, downstate Houston had its “twin nigger” bridge, since it usually hung blacks in pairs – preferably married couples or a Black man and his son.

The north was no different, though the racism was de facto, rather than de jure. Some of you may be lawyers or had parents who were. My Dad took the bar exam five times before becoming a lawyer; and not because he couldn't grasp legal concepts. But until 1965, when the practice was changed in the face of threatened legal action from lawyers affiliated with Howard University, only the top two Blacks who passed the New York State Bar exam would be “admitted” to the bar. The third time Dad took the test he “failed” with a score of 92. What did you lawyer friends or relatives score on the exam?

I went to the University of Michigan in 1966, and spent the first year under death threat from the student chapter of the KKK. Yes there were recognized student chapters of that group and the Nazis, and you had to pass a confederate battle flag and swastika to get into the Markley Hall dorm. I was 17 when I went to college, and have been crippled ever since as a result of their physical attempt on my life.

And it took decades for the union movement to grudgingly change. As late as 1978, the New York Newspaper Guild threatened to strike the NY Daily News because management agreed to meet with a committee headed by Bob Herbert about the separate and unequal pay scale for black and white reporters. The NY Times had a three part system approved by the guild: separate rates for whites and blacks, and white males with beats received NYT stock while their white female counterparts with beats did not. The union movement was instrumental in enshrining Jim Crow in the workplace and in everyday American life.

This national hatred and violence had its genesis in the period at the end of reconstruction in 1896 through 1930 – by which time the laws were in place, the practices were enshrined, the KKK was at its zenith and lynching, murder, rape, torture, degradation and inequality were the law of the land.

The period in which *Bread and Roses* was written was in the midst of this national movement for white supremacy. The term “rising of the race” was its clarion call.

Anyone who looks back 100 years and tries to put a polite, 2010 veneer on an era of hatred and claim that it represented an all-embracing spirit of humanity is delusional at best.

The lyrics are racist. Singing them today coldly, deliberately, endorses that racism and hatred.