



# **A LATE RADICALIZATION**

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## **B** LACK FATHER, BLACK SUN

My father was a truck driver. He hauled food for a supermarket chain in New York in the early seventies. One of my earliest memories of work, which I am sure my father wanted to impress upon me, was of getting up at five in the morning, after he had already spent two hours getting his truck loaded with produce, and heading out with him for deliveries. On these mornings my mother would wake me, make me a bowl of oatmeal, ensure I was properly dressed, and when his truck pulled up I would run downstairs from our tenth floor apartment in the projects. I then had to climb up to the truck's door. I was maybe thirteen years old, a time when everything still seemed so big.

Only now, four decades later, am I beginning to realize what a powerful effect those trips had on me. The work was fabulously difficult. Even though my father rarely spoke, I learned more about him in the first outing than I'd ever known before. My father was a simple man with a sixth-grade education whose strengths were those of a laborer. He knew the city; all of it. New York was his route and he could fit his tractor-trailer in places I would have never thought possible. I spent half of every trip cringing as he turned corners. He never had an accident, he was never late, he was never unprofessional. He was a machine.

A powerfully built man, he unloaded his eighteen-wheelers by hand. Each wooden tray of milk held eight gallons and he moved them as if they barely had any weight at all. I couldn't lift even one. Instead, I moved the fruits and vegetable pallets, offering very little in the way of help. However, these trips were not about the help I could provide; they were my father's transference of a work ethic: a man labors, provides, and does

whatever it takes for his family to survive; no matter the weather, no matter how he feels.

My father began to turn gray in his early thirties, an advanced aging I attributed to the stress of his job; the self-medication of his smoking, drinking, and gambling; and the fact that he had four kids he could barely afford to feed. By his early forties he walked with a limp from an earlier work injury. He would die of cancer before he reached fifty.

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Ours was a painful and complex relationship. There was nearly no room for love in our dynamic, particularly once I learned that he was my father by effort but not by blood. I didn't resent him for this, but I did naïvely maintain some belief that my biological father might in fact be better than the man who took part in raising me. In time, though, I would learn that the man who left me was worse in person than the effects his absence had caused.

## **BLACK DESTRUCTION, BLACK DESTROYER**

By sixteen I was failing at school, angry all of the time, and had been kicked out of my home. The foolish confidence provided by youth told me I was better off. I slept on other people's floors and couches for nearly a year; after a few run-ins with the police, I went into a boarding home. It was here that I had an epiphany: no one cares what happens to you as an individual, especially as a black individual. I was placed in this facility because it was expedient to put me there, and for me it was better

than sleeping on the street.

Nine months later, I joined the military and asked how far away from New York they could send me. “That depends on your test score,” explained the recruiter. My Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (better known as the ASVAB) scores were very high, and I had my choice of career and almost any duty station I wanted. As six long years passed I grew out of my old mind, and into a new one filled with concepts I never truly dealt with. One of the most important of these was the false concept of race. The expression, “You can’t go home again” has nothing to do with the place where you lived; it has to do with the person you were.

In boot camp I was forced to discard my ideas of right, wrong, race, and religion. The anti-intellectualism of my upbringing was replaced with a new education, new languages, and new cultures. My ingrained belief in the inferiority of my Blackness was removed. All that I would become was seeded by those critical, contained months. I was hardened, fashioned for military use, divorced from my previous life, and remade. I believed in order and structure, and I fought against entropy in all its forms.

While I was in the military, my brother ended his life at the age of twenty-five. Back home, I saw that my father was extremely sick; his cancer resulted in the removal of one organ at a time until he died. During that visit, with my brother gone and my father going, I experienced the effects of despair, the frailties of being human, and the suffering of both mind and body. I vowed to never let that happen to me.

When I left the military, I was in my mid-twenties but

felt vastly older. I attempted to go home to New York to live with my mother; we could not live together, so I headed to California. I do not talk much about my mother in this essay, but it is important to note that although I left, she was the single most influential person in my life. It was her drive, her ambition to overcome her past, and her ability to bear witness to the pain, loss, and struggle of being a black woman in America that would be the lodestar of my entire life.

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While I struggled to find my way, alone and without family, I began to notice how much the civilian world differed from the military world I had become accustomed to. Race was suddenly a factor. Well-spoken, highly trained, and familiar with technology, I found myself unable to find work. Unlike my time in the Deep South, there were no cutting remarks—no “Hey, boy,” no “Don’t let the sun go down on your ass in this town.” Instead, the west coast—much like the mid-western states and the cities up and down the eastern corridor—had a similar message with less animus: “No work, not here. Not for you.”

### **BLACK LABOR, BLACK LOSS**

I couldn’t be less Black, but I could outwork my competition, so I did what I was trained to do: I doubled down and eventually, defying discomfort, humiliation, and frustration, found myself in the computer industry as a PC technician. I put in fourteen hours a day. I became a systems administrator, staff IT trainer, digital designer, publisher, grant writer, teacher, administrator

and more. Driven by my unerring will, I advanced in the field. As the years progressed, and my reach extended, I noted greater resistance to the idea that I should be in command of company resources. No one ever said I shouldn't; they just gradually became more resistant. Invisible remarks such as, "Are you sure this is a good idea?" subtly undermined me, even when there wasn't anyone else in the room with my level of experience or capability. As the scope of my duties increased, so did the complexities of my blackness in a dominantly white workplace.

This is where the bodies are buried when you look at the institution of racism: never say no; just never say yes. In this period, I became aware of the hegemony of corporatization. I was able to look back over my career and note my singularity. I was the only person of color everywhere I had ever worked. It had never occurred to me in the moment, because the military had tailored my expectations about race consciousness. So I pushed on, determined to prove my worth. However, the era of my work having value had come to an end; as my rank outpaced my race, I became the enemy: capable of leadership, but not fit to lead.

This would become the stage of my life when I embraced my radicalism, not out of desperation, but from life's experiences and the painful awakening of my limitations. Until then, I had always believed in merit. However, meritocracy, as I was taught by the systems I worked within, was in fact the natural order of things. Around this same period, I watched—as so many Black Americans did—the indignant South Carolina congressman Joe Wilson yell, "You liar!" at the President of the United States. This was not a political outburst; it was a racial attack, a shattering of codes that has infused government and

undone the habit of common decency within the halls of democracy.

From a personal theater of labor, to our most public political stages, blackness was being challenged for having arrived, much like it had been some fifty years earlier, at the soda fountain of Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina. Success had revealed itself to be a grand sit-in.

**This is cultural gentrification, and blacks are not invited to the table.**

**However, if blacks are not in fact the truest Americans, then America does not in fact exist.**

With the economy still reeling, and blacks having been among the most affected across the job market, the hard lessons my mother tried to teach me had become vividly clear. Black Americans had to work twice as hard to be considered half as often as any White person with my same skill set. This was my mother's—and many of her generation's—belief system, and arguably their lived reality. These were rules, rules of blackness, and they had come back to me, unbidden. As the bottom fell out of the workplace, service jobs replaced blue and white collar jobs for people of color, and the corporate workforce whitened.

I stopped trying to find work in 2009.

In this same timeframe, relationships between the races began to deteriorate, quietly, discreetly, with a police shooting of an unarmed man here, an assaulted academic there, a precinct beating, a porch-front shooting, an unarmed teenager killed, a father choked, another dead teenager. Before we knew it, these travesties had become

commonplace. As Black economic wealth collapsed to what it was in 1960—a fraction of white wealth overall—an ominous return to violence and brutality followed.

### **BLACK RATIONAL, BLACK RADICAL**

I am writing my truth, as I see it, in the hope of igniting others from a sense of despair to an acknowledgement of the problems we must all face and surmount if any change is to take place in our lifetimes. In my radicalized state, I find myself speaking words I heard as a child but did not understand. Blacks in America are a Scarlet Letter upon the alabaster linens of what appears to be a prosperous and significant nation. A narrative dependent on a lie, in which hard work leads to prosperity and a nation's prosperity results from its citizenry working hard. However, when white America sees blackness, it is reminded that the wealth of this nation—its invisible labor forces—are what made this country rich. Certainly America was not the only receiver in the global slave trade, but it was the most prosperous, and the most lethal. America churned human lives into exorbitant wealth that millions of whites—not just the Southern elite or the sons of settlers—profited from for more than four hundred years. This is fact: in an America where civic spaces restricted black presence, and banking systems limited black credit lines, everyone—from those arriving on the Mayflower to those fleeing mainland China—has had more to benefit from than the very people whose labor funded the common wealth and infused its economic structure.

Once again, states are petitioning their school boards to revise history, to erase anything that mentions the slave trade, to rewrite the causes of the Civil War, to remove slavery from the American history books. These powers-that-be want to reframe history to disguise tales of previous misconduct—not because of a sense of guilt or

concern with their past, but because of a desire for a more controlled future, one where all issues of supposed injustice can be monetized, socialized, and improved-upon, at a profit.

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This has led me to a question: what will it take to fight back against those who oppress us with the rhetoric of “too big to fail,” and who use our last dollars, our retirement funds, to power their own wasteful legacies? I have become a radical in my late life because, as I see it, the future is unsustainable. The absorption of resources, the plundering of the Commons, and the oppression of masses that suffer unaware point to the voracity of a class capable of usurping all power—natural, material, and technological—to maintain its position and to further concretize its reign. This is the true and unbiased interpretation of “too big to fail”: it was never indexing corporations; it was indexing whiteness and white notions of normality and stability.

We went wrong. We allowed this. I took you on this tour of my life's arc to show how a Black man with limited power lives. I have done what I could with what I had. I may be the villain in the story that is White America, but I am not the enemy.