

What Shall I Do with These Memories?

by Samuel HUX (November 2016)



What indeed? We humans are so time-bound: trapped in Past-Present-Future. The Future is not here yet but will be when this fraction of a second we call the Present passes into the Past. When we wonder *what will be* we are not reflecting on *what is* at this vanishing present second: we are wondering how different or similar things *will be* compared to what *has been*. Which means most of our conscious life is about the Past, the longest thing we have. To an extraordinary degree, then, *My Life is my Memories*.

But they are so incorrect, these memories, by the standards of Proper Think, as will shortly be obvious. Nonetheless, I am fond of contemplating them, these specifically.

I came of age in a small city in eastern North Carolina, the county seat, to

which the family moved when I was five. Before that we lived on my maternal grandparents' farm five or six miles away on "Holland's Road." (I didn't know it by that name, my mother's maiden name, until many decades later when, rifling through a used-book table in mid-town Manhattan, I picked up a copy of a road-map, the only such item there, and was stunned to see it was of that county-Pitt-in North Carolina. I purchased it of course and, sad to confess, I have since lost it, like so much else.)

My mother was from sturdy farming stock, English and Scots-Irish, in the township of Pactolus (as I knew it when a kid, but known to my mother, when she was a kid, as Monkey Den). A very pretty woman, tall and thin-my sister is fortunate to resemble her. She was a college graduate, the first in her extended family to achieve that distinction; but she got her bachelor's only when I was in high school: before that she was a normal-school-trained third grade teacher. So she was "more educated" than my probably-smarter, certainly more sophisticated, father, who, yielding to economic necessities, never finished high school. Her people were probably a social step or three above my father's people, mixed English, Scots-Irish and German (lots of Germans in North Carolina, about as culturally Teutonic as your average Mongolian); that is to say, my father was a generation removed from poor white trash. It seems somehow appropriate that the unincorporated community of Aurelian Springs was known when my father was growing up there as Buzzard Town.

My pre-school years were Southern-mythic: in retrospect it seems I might have been written by William Faulkner. According to my mother, when as an infant I had trouble digesting food, and there being no Gerber's available, an elderly black woman who worked in my grandmother's kitchen chewed the victuals for me and then spooned them into my mouth. Told of this years later I was so charmed by the story that I failed to ask my mother why she didn't do the chewing herself. Just another southern contradiction incomprehensible to those who just know in right-thinking certainty what the South must have been like. My playmate-really my keeper I suppose-was a black kid named Doot, perhaps five years older than I, from whom I could not bear to suffer separation. Doot, who lived on the farm as a member of a share-cropper family, was already in school, so I would follow him and play in the schoolyard until school was out and walk back to the farm with him. It was years before I realized that the memory I spelled "D-o-o-t" must have been short for Deuteronomy. In any case he was soon

out of my life when we moved from the farm, although my father would for years remind me of my first friendship. But the idyll was over. Faulkner gave way to normality, or perhaps banality.

The Greenville, N.C., of my youth (hardly recognizable now) was a totally segregated town: separate churches, schools, restaurants, movie-houses, neighborhoods. Retail establishments were of course "integrated," although the word did not exist, yet there were the classier haberdasheries in which you *never* saw a black person. The municipal swimming pool was "Whites Only." Blacks after all had the Tar River. Next to which was one of the black neighborhoods, alternately called "Colored-towns" or "Negro-towns." (Pronounced "Niggruh." The difference between that and what we now call the N-word was profound.) A block and a half from this Negro-town was the house in which I lived from third-grade through my sophomore year of high school. This does not mean we lived in a transition area. No: First Street was totally black; Second Street was totally white; we were halfway down Washington Street towards Third. You have to imagine a row of bushes visually blocking off the backyards of Second from those of First. Two little worlds totally disconnected. Second Street was paved, by the way; First was not. And of course I took all this as quite natural, I who had digested an ancient black woman's residual saliva. . . and had adored Doot. Doot was the past. I knew no blacks, save by sight those who passed north on Washington to get to their homes and those who worked for my father or helped my mother with menial tasks.

Except for a couple of the World War II years when he was a foreman in a ship-building yard (with interesting sad stories to tell of U-boats sinking shipping off the North Carolina coast), my father was a tobacco auctioneer who speculated on the leaf on the side—which meant that he followed the market as far away as Georgia and Tennessee, and before I began grammar school we followed him. Life was an adventure: long car rides over the Smokies (some of the roads still gravel), residence for weeks in a hotel (while other kids lived in mere houses!). Life was an introduction to independent travel and cultural exploration: when I was six I went all alone the 45 miles from Clarksville, Tennessee to Nashville; my father handed me over to the conductor on the intra-city trolley who when we got to Nashville pointed to a movie theatre two blocks away to which I walked, bought a ticket, and marveled at the animated movie "Gulliver's Travels." (Something I shudder at thinking of a child doing, or a

parent allowing, today).

All of this made my school years emptier the months my father was away, so that his returns I still recall as some of the happiest days of my life. Although a small-time operator of no significant achievement, he was a romantic figure to me. Dayton, Tennessee, was the site of the Monkey Trial circus, but when I learned of it in school I knew my father had as a young man *been there*. I loved him without reservation, I'm not embarrassed to say. Freud is an intellectual hero of mine, but the Oedipus Complex remains to me an interesting chapter in the history of ideas with no personal application. He was a handsome man: a full head of grey hair with never a hint of balding, pleasant smile and strong features, lean-Spencer Tracy could have been his stockier brother. I have never known a more attractive man, put the physical and characterological together. Men admired him and women adored him. He was probably a feminist's nightmare, calling all women "Sugar": it was as if he assumed the responsibility of making waitresses feel like a million dollars.

Once a year a half-dozen or so black men would assemble on our front porch, those chosen to be my father's "hands," as workers were called. They were to attend with him in a neighboring tobacco market where he would arrange for their bed and board in the most respectable Negro-town. My father's middle name, McDaniel, made him "Mack" or sometimes "Max"; he was to his hands of course Mr. Mack. But it was clear that to work for him was fortunate. This is not to suggest that he was a racial egalitarian. Not at all. He was a paternalist. Paternalism is now rated to be just a superficially more benign form of bigotry. Well, you can't ask my father's hands, so we'll let it go. But given what he could have been at that time and in that place, what he was was a blessing. And to assume (or rather to assert, with pop-sociological certainty) that his black hands did not admire him as other men did is to insult their humanity for the sake of an ideological point.

I am trying to suggest to you a home and familial atmosphere that, while a constituent platoon in a racist society, was not totally benighted. And I am suggesting this in order to deny myself as much credit as I can for where these memories tend. I had become "Little Max," a perfectly normal southern boy for that time, so it was no surprise that I thought of blacks as what I would never have called Doot. So once at dinner—I must have been about ten—I referred to my mother's some-time helper Big Helen as "just a nigger." My father stood up,

leaned over the table, and slapped me out of my chair. "Don't talk like white trash!" he said. I was lucky he had the presence of mind to hit me with his left hand. He'd had his right amputated after a printing-press accident when yet short of twenty and wore over his wrist a U-shaped piece of steel covered by a leather case. (He used it as a hammer when we built a garage together.) This preface is longer than the conclusions to follow. Well, that's life. By which I mean that one's life is always preface to any single significant experience.

I confess that I know I am being consciously provocative: let me let you know that I know that I am walking on the edge, a white Southerner (although living in the North since his mid-twenties) venturing opinions about the American experience of race which may offend racist and conventional right-thinker alike. Why do I do it? In part because I have been instructed by William James in the ethics of disputation. In his classic essay "The Dilemma of Determinism" James says he prefers to use the rather pejorative word *chance* rather than the eulogistic *freedom* in order to stack the deck against himself so that if his anti-determinism argument succeeds the success will have been *earned*. (Imagine—not James's example—an abortion proponent who calls his position "pro-fetus-killing" instead of "pro-choice.") So—in this spirit, as it were—I choose to be a bit obnoxious, not wishing to win the reader over through my irresistible native charm. And in part because I am convinced that most of what has been written about race in the U.S. is next to worthless if not all the way there, especially, I am afraid, that written by the right-thinking. Not that that written by the classical racist is worthy—it's just that his certainties are clearly unworthy while the right-thinker's are unclearly so. Like an adverb, which can be dropped practically anywhere in a sentence, the remarks immediately to follow don't have to be dropped precisely *here*, but this is as good a place as any, so I herewith get them off my mind and between the reader and his endorsement of my views. A kind of challenge.

What's wrong with most commentary on race is that it is too black and white—and I mean no cheap joke here. For all the rhetorical assurance that "this is a complicated issue," little complication, little gut-wrenching irony, is evident. Things in the history of race in this country are just not what they appear; which does not mean that I think I can clarify what things really are or have been: I can only make it harder for us to think we see things with total clarity. We know what the classical racist would have us think. (For easy

reference read any KKK diatribe, published by the way by the same publisher, Riverside Press, that produces Holocaust-denial literature.) Are we equally clear what the conventional right-thinker and the black hustler-racist would have one believe? They would have one believe, for pop-cultural instance, that the fictional life to which Hattie McDaniel gave dramatic life in Margaret Mitchell's epic was a living lie—to believe which cruel vulgarization would make my life and yours poorer. They would have one believe that Malcolm's rage was braver than Miss McDaniel's sad dignity. They would have me believe—pop-cultural reference aside now—that an old black granny who masticated my home-made baby food was symbolically and consciously spitting in young massa's a white mouth; and that young Doot reciprocated not one iota of my childish love, that, rather, his seemingly loving attentions were actually a silent triumphant condescension toward a juvenile version of Mr. Charlie. Of course I who knew Doot cannot prove he didn't conform to the newer ideological wisdom; he who rhetoricizes that he did does not have to prove that he's right, being right by liberal definition.

And what would he make of, what would anyone make of, a stunning recollection by the late Guy Davenport in an essay in his *Geography of the Imagination*, "Findings"? Davenport recalls the days when he and his father Guy Senior—this seems to have been in the mid-1930s—would wander the South Carolina back-country looking for, finding, Indian arrowheads. One day they asked permission of an ancient black farmer to walk about his spread. Permission granted, search over, the Davenports were saying goodbye when the ancient black invited them to chat. When host and guests discovered they all bore the same surname, Guy Junior and Senior were treated "like visiting royalty." There followed an afternoon of memories, memories, which the old man punctuated as goodbyes were exchanged with "Oh Mr. Guy, don't you wish it was them good old slavery days again?" Davenport does not force conclusions upon the moment; nor shall I. All the "acceptable" responses will miss the point. Whether "What an ironist, the old black man, putting poor Guy Senior on," or "What a despicable instance of Uncle Tom *Sklavenmoral*," the acceptable responses are too comfortably assured and too nervously comfortable to do justice to the unique moment. Better just simple speechless amazement, an admission that in this instance we are in over our heads. The correct-thinkers are untouched by a poignant, morally ambiguous, disturbing, yet elevating lost moment in the sub-history of race. . . a moment which should leave us, if we are honest, in befuddled contemplation of an old black man whose experience and needs *none* of us can imagine, with a kind of

quantum leap of emotion, and with a conclusion (although I promised none) that when we speak authoritatively / historically of race we usually don't know what the hell we're talking about. You can google your head off looking for hits on Davenport's essay. I have found but one: an Englishman who after quoting the passage wrote "Oh dear!" I will borrow his comment to apply to most racial commentaries. "Oh dear."

This is not to suggest for a moment that I think there is or was some unconscious yearning for "them good old slavery days," not even by the Davenports' host. But it is to say—and I repeat—when most contemporary commentators (with notable exceptions such as Shelby Steele) talk about race "we usually don't know what the hell we're talking about." I suspect that what we need, to use Daniel Patrick Moynihan's old phrase, is "benign neglect." I don't have to understand, we don't have to understand, all the variables in the history of race in this nation in order to practice decency toward one another. To think that such behavior cannot occur without complete comprehension of where this culture has been is delusional. Enough. *Basta. Genug*. This is not the last time that I will say that the last thing we need is a "national discourse on race." That would/will do no more than give a stage to pontificating liberals and professional race-hustlers.

I don't need—to speak of a popular analogy—nobody with basic intelligence needs, to know the historical roots and the historical career of anti-Semitism, often called "the oldest hatred," to know that the vice is beneath human dignity, stupid, to be avoided like a plague, which is what it is. Walter Laqueur, Robert Wistrich, Bernard Lewis, to name a few historians of the subject, sate my curiosity to a degree, but none of them are dispositive one way or another toward my feelings for the Jewess I love nor my respect for my friends. Furthermore, nothing I am likely to read, because I am not going to read neo-Nazi or KKK screeds, is going to fracture my relationship with my beloved or with my friends, or create some harmful confusion between us. I cannot say the same, however, for much of the supposedly respectable writing on black-white relationships and attitudes in this nation; hence my half-serious and half-doubtful desire for benign neglect.

When I called anti-Semitism "the oldest hatred" above I knew I would offend some; because I know from personal experience that some black intellectuals (or academics, not necessarily the same thing) feel very competitive with Jews in

the suffering department, as if not to have the worst and oldest experience implies some discrimination, some not-getting-due-credit, and basic lack of respect. I could tell you stories. Well, I'll tell one. When Herman Wouk's novel *War and Remembrance* was televised as a miniseries a colleague was enraged that Jews were getting so much publicity: he was particularly upset that his daughter, having just seen the Auschwitz episode, said to him, "Daddy, but the Jews really suffered too." But the fact is that anti-Semitism is so very ancient while animus toward blacks is relatively recent, as no one in Europe was even thinking about Africans until roughly the Renaissance. And as horrible and unforgiveable as segregation and slavery were, neither was a case of genocide, unless you think talking metaphorically is the same as talking literally.

Which makes some talk about reparations irrelevant, such as "The Case for Reparations" in the June 2014 *Atlantic* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (the new James Baldwin according to Toni Morrison), a work that can do no more than fracture and confuse relations between blacks and whites. Coates's historical presentation of the facts of racial injustice in American history well into our own times is clear and compelling, and the reader will learn a lot, even about some real-estate practices he probably has little grasp of. But this is all in service of the article's purpose, as the title has it, the case for reparations—and Coates prefers to ignore the fact that reparations are in fact precisely what affirmative action programs are intended to be. Since financial payments to the African-American population are not likely by a long shot to occur, the only likely results of his insistence on their justification is to make blacks feel cheated and whites feel they are viewed as no good sons of bitches. What a happy future! Coates's clinching argument, the healthy addition to the Israeli economy through German reparations payments, is as misguided as he thinks it a bang-up unanswerable so-there! It is another instance of an inability, or a refusal, to tell the difference between a nation trying to make up for past injustices, and succeeding to a remarkable degree, and a nation taking responsibility for its parents' governors committing a one-third successful genocide of a transnational ethno-religious group—that is, murdering one third of the world's Jews. We need contributions like this to a national discourse on race like a hole in the head.

The same could be said of Coates's celebrated book, *Between the World and Me*, which *The Atlantic* has been kind enough to excerpt as "Letter to My Son"

(September 2015), the magazine's kindness, quite unintentionally, lying in the fact that it saves the reader from wasting quite as much time (unless the reader is a damned fool) on an unreadable screed (unless the reader confuses the cozy feeling of enjoying the tone of avant-garde bravery with reading). The book is a fraud from the get-go, no letter to anyone's son, but a pseudo-poetic prose rant against "those Americans who believe that they are white" (a trope lifted from Baldwin) and, to be as blunt as possible, a racist implication of black superiority. Not an *argument*, I should say—for an argument requires a series of connected intelligent (or at least intelligible) statements, not a series of ostensibly provocative metaphors which neither expand nor clarify meaning, as in "This need to be always on guard was an unmeasured expenditure of energy, the slow siphoning of the essence. It contributed to the fast breakdown of our bodies."

Seldom seeing the *Washington Post* and no longer a habitual reader of the *New York Times* (how liberating), I have to trust Christopher Caldwell (*The Weekly Standard*, 8/17/2015) that a *Post* writer announced that "Coates has won that title [America's foremost 'public intellectual'] for himself, and it isn't even close," and that a *Times* staffer judged Coates's book thus: "'Must read' doesn't even come close. This from @tanehisicoates is essential, like water and air." Sycophants. Coates is so intelligent (I am sure he is). . . and so sensitive, this "public intellectual" who is unmoved by the deaths of police and fireman who died 9/11 at the World Trade Center. Despicable.

With such people we are to have "a national discourse on race"? No thank you. I prefer to contemplate my memories.

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