

Trotter Review

Volume 3
Issue 1 *Trotter Institute Review*

Article 6

January 1989

Tri-Racial Enculturation: Red, White, and Black in the South

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Recommended Citation

Jones, Rhett S. (1989) "Tri-Racial Enculturation: Red, White, and Black in the South," *Trotter Review*. Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol3/iss1/6

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The Negro in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts,” white residents of the Bay Colony; increasingly uncomfortable with blacks as the seventeenth century drew to an end, gradually began to pass laws aimed at better controlling black behavior. Piersen points out that black Yankees developed a derisive folklore that mocked what blacks saw as pompous pretension among whites in their attempts to dominate Afro-Americans.

Other aspects of white life, Cottrol and Piersen agree, blacks found less amusing. While many black Yankees became Christians, others objected to the growing eighteenth-century tendency among New England’s whites to segregate the Lord’s House. Blacks were relegated either to the rear of churches or to balconies specially constructed for them. According to Cottrol, some Providence blacks scornfully referred to these separate seats as “pigeon holes.” Later, Providence blacks were to term the section “Nigger heaven” and refuse to attend segregated churches. Cottrol offers detail on the evolution of Providence’s black churches, formed for the most part by black Christians who would

accept neither segregation nor exclusion from the governance of their congregations. Piersen argues that Christianity was not in harmony with the emotional and intellectual needs of black folk. As Piersen sees it, even those blacks who were born in New England continued to be influenced by West African religious beliefs. Rhett Jones’ 1986 article, “Plantation Slavery in the Narragansett Country of Rhode Island,” concludes that while many blacks attended church in southern Rhode Island, many others did not and were believed by whites to practice non-Christian rituals.

In addition to exploring such issues as black Yankee demographics, community formation, folklore, and family life, Cottrol and Piersen also examine the roots of black political thought in the region, the election of black officials, the meaning of slavery, and black mastery of the rhetoric of the American Revolution. Together Cottrol and Piersen make excellent contributions to the expanding knowledge of Afro-Yankees, contributions in the finest tradition of scholarship established by Lorenzo Greene.

Tri-Racial Enculturation: Red, White, and Black in The South

by
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The Cherokee Ghost Dance: Essays on the Southeastern Indians, 1789-1861 by William G. McLoughlin (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984)

White Society in the Antebellum South by Bruce Collins (New York: Longman, 1985)

Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage by William Loren Katz (New York: Atheneum, 1986)

In an essay published in *The Western Journal of Black Studies* (1977) I pointed out that while for many years the study of relations between blacks and Native Americans had been neglected by historians and other scholars, recent studies had acknowledged that red folk and black often influenced one another. What I did not point out was that, for the United States, studies of tri-racial contact were almost nonexistent. Things were quite different in studies of Latin America where the realities of social and

sexual contact among all three races were reflected not only in works by historians but in those of anthropologists and others. Unfortunately, students of the United States and the 13 colonies that preceded its formation have, until recently, tended to focus either on black/white relations or on relations between whites and Amerindians. Seldom have they coped with the complex reality that all three races were present from the seventeenth century English settlements on. To discuss only one race or the relations between any two is to distort the past.

Each of these recently published books is notable for three reasons. First, each has approached southern history by recognizing that three races were present, each conscious of and influenced by the other two. Second, in very different ways, each author is influenced by the values, normative expectations, and behavior of the other two. Third, each traces the evolution of tri-racial enculturation through time. All conclude relations among the three and their mixed blood offspring races were quite different in the mid-nineteenth century than they had been 200 years earlier.

Beyond that the works are quite different. William McLoughlin, a long-time student of relations between the Cherokee, their black slaves, and whites, perhaps offers the most balanced account. McLoughlin, who has published three other book-length works on the slaveholding Cherokee, places their changing relations with their black bondsmen

in the context of their relationship with the white South. While on balance it is fair to say the Cherokee agonized more over the treatment of black folk than did the Choctaw and Creek, it is clear they were never so protective of blacks who lived among them as were the Seminole. Using primary sources, McLoughlin shows that the Cherokee debated the treatment of blacks and, while many of them gradually adopted white racism, there were always Cherokee who sought fair treatment for blacks. Collins, on the other hand, tends to regard both blacks and Indians as objects. By defeating the Indians and enslaving the blacks, as Collins sees it, white southerners were able to find themselves. There is nothing particularly new in this argument: Joel Kovel, in *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (1970), argues that white people found themselves by defining and controlling the black other. Collins' argument differs from that of Kovel in that he includes Indians as well as blacks in tracing the development of southern self-conception. The sensitivity McLoughlin brings to study of all three races, Collins reserves for whites.

It would be unfair, however, to suggest that Collins oversimplifies either the Afro-American or the Amerindian experience. Although he writes as an apologist for white folk, he not only recognizes there were differences among whites, but carefully traces differences among Native American and black Americans as well. Part of the problem in understanding the tri-racial encounter, as Collins rightly sees it, is that not one of the three races was unified. By the 1850s, Collins argues, opposition to slavery had been wiped out in the South, and there were few white southerners prepared to defend the Indians. But at least through the 1830s, Collins shows, there were Euro-Americans who fought for just treatment of Native Americans.

McLoughlin, Collins, and Katz all agree that the decade of the 1820s to 1830s was the crucial one in the South. In this period whites firmly repudiated the implications of revolutionary ideology in deciding the United States was to be a democracy for

white men only, that Indians were to be moved west of the Mississippi, and blacks were to be enslaved. Andrew Jackson, celebrated by generations of Euro-American historians as the symbol of democracy for the common man, built his reputation among his fellow whites by killing Indians. During the same period state after state in both the South and North placed restrictions on free blacks.

This public spectacle of a self-celebrated free people declaring that other races had no democratic rights is an invitation to write a morality play, and that is just what Katz has done. Despite his careful use of scholarly sources, Katz's *Black Indians* was written for young people and is found in the juvenile section of most libraries. In seeking to restore what he calls "hidden heritage," that is knowledge of the cultural and biological intermingling of blacks and Indians through three centuries, Katz makes a contribution to history for both young and old. The many photographs Katz provides offer graphic proof of the mating of Africans and Native Americans in the New World. His brief discussion of the cultural similarities between Native Americans and Africans, while it is not as complex as those provided by Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen: The Voodoo Gods of Haiti* (1970), or Roger Bastide's *The African Religions of Brazil* (1960), nevertheless offers some provocative hypotheses. Katz's central problem is that in his attempts to dramatize his findings for young people, he presents whites primarily as villains determined to drive Indians from their lands and use blacks as slaves. While Katz provides a useful alternative to the Eurocentric history most young Americans read in school, he does so at the cost of ignoring—with some few exceptions—those whites who did not accept negative ideas concerning red folk and black.

While the center of these three books is the old South, all also give considerable attention to blacks, whites, and reds in the West and to a lesser extent those in the North. Together they provide an interesting overview of tri-racial contact and enculturation.