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White Boy (American Hunger) and the Angel of History:  
Russell Banks's Identity Knowledge

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# White Boy (American Hunger) and the Angel of History: Russell Banks's Identity Knowledge

*En Ca on\**

## 1. I t t K P t D

In the first sentence of *Objec Le on* (2012), Robyn Wiegman introduces the term “identity knowledges” to designate the set of “institutional and intellectual formations. . . [for] the study of race, gender, sexuality, and nation” that have emerged over the past four decades and risen to prominence, even predominance, in the US literary academy (1). Wiegman’s book aims to assess some representative triumphs and tribulations of identity knowledges.<sup>1</sup>

The triumphs of these knowledges, at least as measured by their intellectual and institutional proliferation, are evident: *Objec Le on*’





affectively, more vulnerably, and thus taking their—and our—fuller measure (337). As a genre, however, criticism is not well suited to answer Wiegman’s call. Fiction is, and Banks’s fiction does. Animating and inhabiting the historical projections, psychological transferences, political aspirations, and moral anxieties that Wiegman and other academics bring to and discern in the study of identity, the works by Banks that I discuss here imaginatively rework or co-work that project’s informing commitments, desires, and problematics in ways that may point toward an alternative racial ethics. At the least, in a season of disciplinary disquiet about the practical efficacy and the moral and historical self-regard of our hermeneutics of suspicion, we might find in Banks’s writing and thinking object lessons for our own.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. *the* *Bank’s* *the*

The divide between discursive and instantiated pursuits—or less and more “inhabited” forms—of identity knowledge inheres within Banks’s own work on racial identity. His principal discursive or critical approach to the subject shares what Mary Esteve has termed the “evangelical impulses” that have driven US literary studies since the 1980s (531). Written for the 150th anniversary issue of *Harper’s Magazine*, which appeared in the summer of 2000, Banks’s essay is oracularly titled “Who Will Tell the People?” What the (American) people need to have revealed—or what we must acknowledge—Banks argues, is the secret of our birth, the engine of our collective identity. “We the People,” Banks writes, “require a tale that in a plausible way describes and dramatizes our origins,” that “braid[s] together into a single strand” our welter — our our -

ac together

and structural function of one disempowered minority. And it locates “the essential, and specifically American, political and moral meaning of every American’s life” in an ongoing and mutative history of collective violence, trauma, crime, not in a shared governmental tradition or civic ideal (88). “[T]he single defining, linked sequence of stories that all Americans, north, south, and meso-, share,” Banks explains, “the one narrative that we all participate in, is that of the African Diaspora.”

This is the narrative template against which all the others can be measured, fit into, laid over, or veneered onto. It doesn’t matter where in time one enters it . . . or from whose point of view it’s told. For we have all played different roles in that long, serpentine story, and, depending on our racial characteristics, sometimes we have been victim, sometimes victimizer, sometimes merely horrified, or thrilled, onlooker with something important and self-defining to lose or gain in the outcome. It doesn’t matter where it’s located. [For] . . . there is no town, no county, no state in America that has not been profoundly affected by the events, characters, themes, and values dramatized by the story of race in America. It opens in the early seventeenth century, and it continues today in all the Americas and in Europe too, as a late chapter in the Tale of Empire; and in Asia, as that chapter called the Vietnam War; and in Africa itself, in the chapters that describe Liberia’s and Sierra Leone’s tragic, ongoing civil wars, for instance. And you don’t have to be a prophet to see that, if this is indeed the era of the American Empire, the African Diaspora is a tale with chapters that will be set worldwide, wherever there is an American “presence,” well into the next century as well. (86)

Banks thus presents a figure of autochthonous American identity that is the product of diaspora, of national identity that is hemispherically diffused and still transnationally emerging, and of common cultural identity that, though inflected differently by different subject positions (temporal and spatial, as well as racialized, classed, and gendered), is agonistic for all and escapable by none. The moral of this origin story, as Banks tells it, is that “we are undeniably a single, creolized people” (84) who require a contemporary literature “that has at its center the historical and moral facts of creolization” (88). Lacking that, we will continue “to shrug off the deep, connecting complexity of our ongoing culpability and witness” (88) and devolve—so serviceably for our politicians and marketeers—into “noncommunicative, mistrustful colonies of the righteous and the saved” (84), each harboring its “private racial fantasy of violence” and contributing to our

continued enthrallment and ghettoization by violence, fantasy, and race (88). Banks subtitles his essay “On waiting, suffering, and the great Creole-American novel,” and clearly intends “Creole-American” to evoke and commingle many typically opposing racial, geographic, socioeconomic, and linguistic markers and categories of identity. The essay’s informing aspiration is that a “Creole-American” community embrace and imaginative telling of the Creole-American story “would liberate us from our shared blood history” (88). Yet, in 2000, Banks himself had devoted four full novels to attempt to tell that story, none of which, even within their narrative frames, effected anything approaching liberation. What did his fiction know that his criticism did not?





As a counterweight to his ~~un~~comfortable

Have never before felt so alone, yet so much in the world at the very same time: a shaking up of all my conventions. . . . Still spending most of every day & night as intellectual and spiritual ecstatic (as in “hysterical”). Will take me years to sort this all out, to know how much has to do w/race, poverty, place, true anthropological difference, or simple expectation & projection. But regardless, I believe I am a changed person by this experience. (“Apr. 16, 1976”)

Banks’s state of troubled ecstasy—the racial, spatial, and psychological “shaking up” of his identity that has yielded a euphoric presentiment of a transformed, truer, creolized self—is represented in his novel by a 15-page section, nearly 200 pages in, in which the narration abruptly changes from first- to second-person. Johnny’s initial stay on the island has concluded with a prophecy by Mr. Mann, the old Maroon spokesperson and the American’s host in the village that the novel calls Nyamkopong, ManManManManMann,

ManManMann,

this is what he is promised: “Now you will see what you want to see” his Maroon associates repeatedly assure him (186, 246).

This promise is fulfilled, but, as its sibylline resonance might have forewarned, tragically, and not in the manner Johnny expects. What Johnny sees in the concluding episodes is not his desire’s revelatory object but its distorted product. Impelled by his limited vision, Johnny achieves on this simultaneously alien and natal ground an Oedipal sort of agency, fatal and unconscious. His attempt to repudiate and redress his racial and class position in Jamaica’s bloody history only renders that history bloodier. Banks, in turn, underscores the abortion of his progress toward a transformed racial subjectivity or a deeper self-knowledge by rendering the novel’s denouement in a flat, detached third-person narration.

At the close, Johnny’s insistence on completing a mediatory errand that has long since gone awry yields a final emblematic tableau. “When Johnny tried to step onto the porch with his suitcase and typewriter, he disrupted the precise positioning of the crowd there, forcing people to nudge and bump and squeeze against each other in ways that confused them . . . saying, S’cuse me, sorry, sorry, as he

and temporality rather than interpersonal economic agency.<sup>5</sup>  
“Trade,” of course, signifies the slave trade, America’s original night signi

Eventually, in ways that remain deeply compromised, Bob comes to see blacks—and particularly the illegal Haitian immigrants whose American dream fatally entwines with his—not as alien others but as bearers of a complex subjectivity that at once eludes and encompasses his own, as it somehow holds the key to his self-realization. Having agreed, in his economic desperation, to smuggle Haitians to Florida on a fishing boat owned by a childhood friend, Bob is awed by his human cargo's uncanny

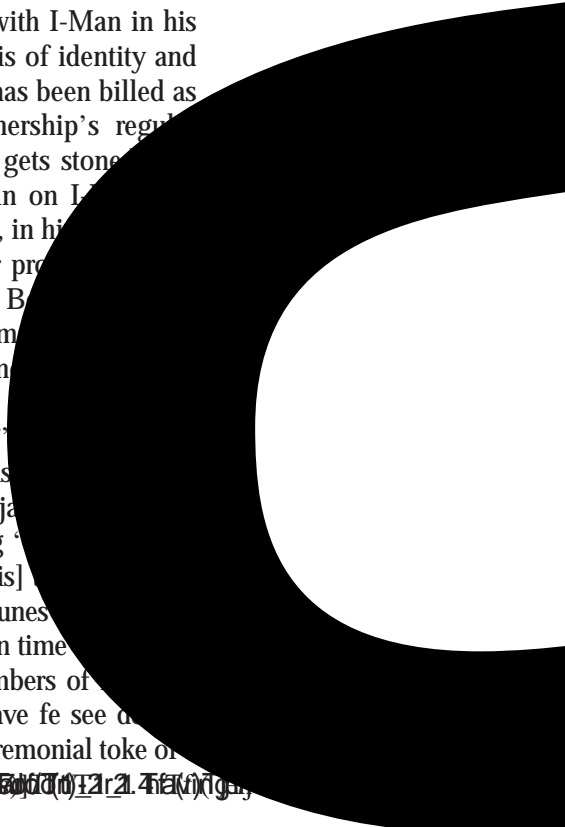
to escape the border.



their small town

Star's home—Bone dubs it the Mothership—and with I-Man in his thatched bamboo compound in the woods. His crisis of identity and allegiance occurs on his 15th birthday, when what has been billed as a party for him devolves into one of the Mothership's regular drunken bashes in which he is ignored, his father gets stoned, and Bone, wandering around the house alone, walks in on I-Man and Evening Star having sex in the laundry room. When, in his anger and hurt, he tells Dorset what he's seen, his father produces a gun to kill the "little nigger" (302). At this point, Bone, by his own choice, misdirects the white man, warns the black man to stay with him to his hideout in the cratered, impenetrable Maroon Country of the Maroons.

In the following chapter, "Bone Goes Native," Bone begins to master the agricultural techniques and speech patterns of the Maroons he is living with. His work in the sun-drenched ganja fields makes his skin coffee-colored, and his acquired habit of saying "I-man" makes him feel "slightly separate from [his] body" as if "[his] body" were "this spirit that can float through the air where it communes with the universe and . . . can even travel backward and forward in time." The night before the harvest, I-Man and several members of the Maroons tell Bone he is ready to enter "the secret Maroon cave fe see de lights of I-self" (314). Once inside, having taken a ceremonial toke of the "special herb" Bone begins to see things differently. He begins to





puts it: “We shouldn’t do a white kid. . . . Too much trouble, especially since he’s American” (339). Understanding that “if I’d been a real Rasta-boy like I’d been pretending to be I’d be dead now” (342), Bone remains in Jamaica just long enough to attack and injure the black member of I-Man’s crew who had participated in his murder (the two white leaders of the killing team are inaccessible to him) and then flees the island as a deckhand on a Florida fishing charter captained by a time-traveling Ave Boone, the irrepressible Tom Sawyer to *Conjunctio*’s lost Huck.<sup>7</sup>

*Conjunctio*, Banks’s next novel, returns to the antebellum moment of Twain’s major work and to the dream of a redemptive, interracial family by way of the historical white family whose lives that dream most profoundly shaped.<sup>8</sup> Banks’s central insight into the life and character of antislavery crusader John Brown derives from his recognition (and rich evocation) of the simultaneously ennobling and distortive capacities of that dream. And his boldest narrative device is his choice to embody those dialectical capacities in the figure of *Conjunctio*’s narrator, Brown’s devoted and damaged son, Owen, and in Owen’s relationship to Lyman Epps, a homesteader in the African-American farming community in North Elba, New York, where the Browns settled in 1849.

The historical Owen, John Brown’s third son and faithful lieutenant in Kansas and at Harpers Ferry, had a crippled arm, never married, and maintained an intense psychological as well as ideological loyalty to his father. In Banks’s hands—and in the consciousness and voice he creates for his narrator—these attributes symbolize a constitutional incompleteness, a developmental stuntedness, a metaphysical loneliness comprising the essential conditions of Owen’s identity. And not just of Owen’s individual identity but, as the earlier



blood money, leaving Owen to “[drop] precipitously down a well of darkness . . . descending into myself once again: no-man” (524).

As in the aftermath of Bone’s disillusionment in the Maroon cave, the black beloved is soon dead. As they silently resume their antislavery assignment, Lyman and Owen encounter a giant mountain lion. (Slavery has earlier been described as a beast that dens in the Browns’s every domestic space and relation.) A poor marksman, Lyman silently hands his pistol to Owen, who cocks it and then, when the beast darts away rather than springs,





experience and complexity of vision clearly superior to the dominant society he is supposed to value and emulate” (24–25). Banks’s Johnny, Bob, Bone, Owen, and







company whose entire operation was domestic—[to come] home, as it were” (1).

As it were. The narrator of “Djinn” makes the most radical and embodied attempt of any of Banks’s white protagonists

*La e a i al a he cene  
of acial con cio ne  
and a ma, bea ing  
p i ilege he ma  
eno nce b canno  
elin i h, and ff ed  
i h an fo ma i e  
de i e incommen a e  
i h ho e of he people of  
colo hom he e i e  
o aid and ga ge hei  
bjec i e an fo ma ion,  
Bank ’ p o agoni  
emain incomple el  
an fo med and ocial  
j ice, “ he poli cal  
de ina ion of [ hei ]  
iden i kno ledge ,”  
emain a d eam  
defe ed. (34–35)*



*Hamil on Sack*, and on its reprise with a difference in the later *African* (1989), Jason Arthur locates Banks's New England fiction in a tradition of "white-authored regionalism [that] corresponds to a long history of white-engineered representations of 'violence' against whiteness" (110). The novels that concern me here in some respects invert this paradigm: in them, white protagonists leave New England, encounter descendants of diasporic Africans, and, in ways at once revelatory and devastating, unintentionally perpetuate the long history of white-engineered violence against people of color. See Arthur, "'Our Business Is Going in the Hole': Russell Banks and the Self-Destruction of New England Fiction," *College Literature* 39 (2012): 106–28.

5. See Russell Banks Papers, Box 13, Folders 1–2.

6. Several commentators have read *Continental Drift*'s blend of exploitative fantasy and transformative desire in Bob's attraction to Marguerite in ways that bear on but differ from my own. In *Dying Fiction: Identity and Resistance in the Contemporary American Novel* (2000), Cathy Moses sees Bob's attempt to reconstruct his identity "in relation to the Africanist Other" (19) as Banks's variation

8. For an account of the extraordinary and intimate interracial solidarity practiced in the daily lives as well as in the antislavery activism of the Brown family between the mid-1840s and 1859, see my *Patriotic Tea on: John Brown and the Soul of America* (2006).

9. After surviving the debacle at Harpers Ferry, Owen more explicitly replicates Bob Dubois's fleeting unvoiced fantasy of an interracial family when he permits himself "the glimmering thought that someday soon I will ask to marry Susan Epps and raise her son and make for us a farm here on the Plains of Abraham . . . one small family free of all the cruel symbolism of race and the ancient curse of slavery." But this indulgent reverie is instantly renounced: "Fantasy, delusion, dream! A guilty white man's chimera, that's all" (*Coldplie* 695–96).

**Notes**

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