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THE GEORGIA REVIEW

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Pieces toward a Just Whole

MEMORY: the summer we stayed home. Not that we traveled more than a week or two any summer, if at all, but in 1968 we *stayed* home, in Washington, D.C. To the child I was, the weeks from April through June weighed ugly, and for the adult I am, memory stays sharp: the morning news sputters black-and-white from the television I watch over a bowl of cereal. I ask my parents in the other room, "Why is Bobby Kennedy lying on the floor?" Daddy's words run in with him: "Not again."

Other memories of that time don't let go. A little boy, a classmate, calls across the schoolyard to me, *"Ugly nigger, colored nigger."* This will not be the only time. In my child-mind's eye "colored" had meant that sun lay in my skin and sky flowed in my veins. Even though I run home to hide, the sounds of *that* word made ugly, and of the uglier word, cling like spittle. I am eight years old when I learn what I cannot understand.

On 5 April 1968, the day after Martin Luther King Jr. was killed and two months before Robert F. Kennedy's own death, the senator addressed the City Club of Cleveland on one of his presidential campaign stops. Instead of discussing politics he spoke on the "mindless menace of violence" that had stained "our land and every one of us" the previous day in Memphis. This menace degrades the nation, Kennedy said, as "we seemingly tolerate a rising level of violence that ignores our common humanity and our claims to civilization alike. We calmly accept newspaper reports of civilian slaughter in far-off lands. We glorify killing on movie and television screens and call it entertainment." Kennedy also identified "the violence of institutions," which is characterized by "indifference and inaction and slow decay. This is the violence that afflicts the poor, that poisons relations between men because their

skin has different colors. This is a slow destruction of a child by hunger, and schools without books and homes without heat in the winter."

Not again. Colored. Nigger. In 1968 my innocent sense of fairness and of good in the world began to erode.

Scott Russell Sanders' essay "Simplicity and Sanity" urges all of us, all Americans, to rethink our conduct in life, our "vision and practice," as an initial step to ending "the vandalism of the many" in our wasteful, wealth-and-technology-driven, environment-damaging society. Inspired by Henry David Thoreau's thinking and words, Sanders asks each of us to choose to lead materially simpler lives, "to conserve rather than consume," and "to launch our own experiments in simplicity" while minding the word's root: "all of a piece, single, whole."

Yes. I offer a wholehearted "Yes, thank you," but . . . still . . . I feel a troubling unease. What of those Americans who don't have the freedom, agency, or economic privilege to choose? What of Americans whose lives and experiences have been poverty-bound or degraded?

For Gunnar Myrdal, writing more than six decades ago in his massive study *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, the paradox was that this nation "believes in and aspires to something much higher than its plane of actual life." Writing now, forty years after 1968's spring of assassinations, I grieve for a nation that remains accustomed to what should be unacceptable. Huge disparities in opportunity and income remain, with protected, vested wealth for a few. Violence continues against people who are often out of mainstream-media sight—whether in ghettos, barrios, reservations, labor camps, prisons, or elsewhere—and thus not heard. America's invasions of other lands for resources and power are cloaked as wars for peace and democracy, and thereby prioritized over the basic human needs of our own citizens. The dilemma that Myrdal observed remains: How does one reconcile ideals and principles of freedom and justice with actual life in this nation—that is, how does one move beyond hope and lip service to principled engagement?

Wendell Berry wrote *The Hidden Wound* half a year after Robert Kennedy was assassinated, while secluded in Stanford University's library over the 1968–69 winter holiday. Influenced by what he called "the civil rights agitation" on campus and elsewhere, this descendant of a Kentucky family that

had enslaved African Americans tried to face his and his ancestors' unspoken complicity in history and thereby heal in himself the diseased hidden wound of racism. Berry recognized that our public language "conveys what we *wish* had been true" and that the too-common "lack of critical self-knowledge . . . is the historical and psychological vacuum in which the Walt Disney version of American history was not only possible but inevitable." I think self-protective denial and silence have kept too much of America from knowing who "we the people" really are, thereby keeping our vision and language of possibility impoverished. Such denial, such not-remembering, *dis*-members us. There is no single coherent American society, no homogeneous melting pot. We are not whole.

The fulfillment of Euro-America's exploration and empire-building—land acquisition and use, with the expansion of a new nation on what was believed to be a clean slate of wilderness—owed much to colonization, enslavement of Africans, and the dispossession and forced removal of indigenous people from homeland to reservation. There was a time when only white, property-owning men could vote; women and people of color were thought incapable or undeserving, and an enslaved African American was declared only three-fifths a man, not a citizen. (Words such as *white*, *race*, and *slave* are deceptive in that they are far more ambiguous, complicated, and fraught than their generally casual, unquestioned acceptance and use would indicate. The reader should assume quotation marks around my use of these words.)

We face many crucial challenges, including global climate change, as well as the loss of biological diversity and ecosystem integrity. The question we all need to answer is this: how, if at all, can the deeply rooted values and economic norms that institutionalized the exploiting and manipulating of the natural world be separated from what marginalizes human lives? Elemental to *our* American past and present are the omissions that have allowed separatisms by race, class, and gender, inequities in privilege and power, to remain.

The complexities and ambiguities of this nation's intercultural past and present, and the ways in which white America has perceived, used, or impacted the Earth, cannot be separated from what drives racism and other inequities in political and economic power. If seen in terms of process and response, the dynamics of the past several hundred years on this continent have yielded very different kinds of estrangement for those in power and those

at the margins. Although it may be desirable to think of the past as long over, we all carry history within us, our pasts becoming present in what we think and do, in who we are.

Consider that America has been a land of enslavers and enslaved for much more of its existence than not—that in 1790, at the birth of this new republic, about one-third of America's population was enslaved. Chattel slavery produced the large-scale agricultural crops (tobacco, rice, sugar, cotton) that plantation owners sold on international markets. By both providing a labor force and bringing capital into all of the colonies and new states, slavery and its profits largely funded the nation's infrastructure—not just the South's—until the Civil War.

Slavery's profits and privilege are limited neither to the South nor to the past. Major American financial institutions such as predecessor banks of J. P. Morgan Chase and Bank of America, institutions of higher education such as Brown and Yale universities and Williams College, as well as newspaper, tobacco, textile, and railroad companies, either amassed their wealth from or were otherwise supported by slavery and/or the trade in enslaved human beings. To condemn chattel slavery while ignoring what originally made the system possible and has continuously fed a caste system up into the present seems an all too common practice, even among liberal Americans. A refusal to acknowledge how privilege connects with historical injustices is difficult to dismantle. Even the ways most Americans talk about skin color and race is residue of centuries-old ideas grounded in, and ground down by, stereotypes.

A supposed absence of obvious de jure discrimination today, and the presidential election of Barack Obama, might suggest that racism is a thing of the past—or that we have achieved, at least, racial neutrality if not equality. But the removal of barriers via legislated equality is a fiction we live by while our judicial system in fact weakens—by not enforcing and by narrowly interpreting—key laws enacted during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The federal government's failure to enforce such laws is at least as old as its abandonment of Reconstruction with the 1876–77 presidential election.

Perhaps it is easy for some to think that the inequality experienced by African Americans ended with the Jim Crow era. However, even as civil rights activists in the early 1960s struggled daily and risked their lives, much of so-

called white America perceived no need for change. Tim Wise, educator-activist and author of *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*, reports that of white Americans polled by Gallup in 1962 about whether they thought black children had equal educational opportunities in their communities, almost 90 percent said yes. Polled in 1963 about whether they thought racial minorities were treated equally in their communities, four-fifths said yes. Wise also notes that two-thirds of white Americans polled by *Newsweek* around the time of the March on Washington in 1963 said Dr. King and the movement were pushing too far and asking for too much, too soon, too fast.

Robert F. Kennedy continued his speech to the Cleveland City Club by saying that when we are taught "to hate and fear" we "learn to confront others not as fellow citizens but as enemies—to be met not with cooperation but with conquest, to be subjugated and mastered. We learn, at the last, to look at our brothers as aliens, men with whom we share a city, but not a community, men bound to us in common dwelling, but not in common effort."

Can we work toward simplicity without community or common effort? Can we be whole if structural elements of America's daily motion—including education, employment, health care, immigration policies, public housing and transportation, and the criminal justice system—are not neutral? As human-rights and social-justice advocates repeatedly point out, blind interactions of existing policies, practices, and institutions tend to perpetuate injustice and barriers.

Education, for example, is not a fundamental right under the Constitution, and public schools are now more segregated by class and race than in 1970, before the Supreme Court approved busing. Public school enrollments in most major cities—New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles among them—are three-quarters or more African American and Latino. Jonathan Kozol calls this "educational apartheid," as public schools once integrated (by law or voluntarily) resegregated, and schools already deeply segregated remained so. He also cites a legacy betrayed as schools named for civil rights leaders often are the most segregated, underfunded, underserviced, and poorly maintained. For example, Manhattan's Martin Luther King Jr. High School, located in an upper-middle-class white neighborhood, was once a hope for true community integration in the best sense. Today it is separate and unequal, with few white children.

Inequity continues in many other areas as well. More than forty-five million Americans have no health insurance, according to the Census Bureau in 2007, with the percentage of uninsured people of color twice that of whites. The highest number of housing discrimination complaints on record to date came not years ago but in 2006 and 2007, and most of them were related to disability and race. The recent environmental-justice study *Toxic Waste and Race at Twenty, 1987–2007*, published by the United Church of Christ, reports that more than half of the nine million people living within two miles of hazardous waste sites across the country are people of color. The Southern Poverty Law Center counted 888 active hate groups in the United States in 2007, an increase of nearly 50 percent since 2000 driven largely by anti-immigrant movements. Federal laws do not protect migrant workers from unfair labor practices, nor do they provide for overtime pay or even a guaranteed minimum wage.

We can also consider a single place, such as New Orleans, to see the breadth and embedded depth of injustice through time. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, particularly the levee failure, points to a long history of de jure and de facto segregation along the Gulf Coast. Although some affluent white communities, like Lakefront in New Orleans, were devastated, the disproportionate burden fell on poor people of color more vulnerable to flooding by living in lowland areas and having limited access to evacuation, rescue, recovery, and rebuilding efforts. This pattern is not new along the Gulf Coast, as those without forewarning, mobility, access to shelter or higher ground, or adequate relief assistance—from enslaved Africans to migrant workers—have suffered disproportionately over centuries. Before the mid-1960s, lawful segregation of public housing and transportation further entrenched the region's geography of poverty and race.

All told, the hurricane and its aftereffects displaced more than a million people, dispersing not just families but a deeply rooted culture. Of the impacted people of color, many were home renters, most were uninsured, and most did not own or have access to a car. *Reconstruction* in this place and context is a burdened word—and current efforts by both the public and private sectors still fail to address the existing risks, vulnerabilities, and inequalities of an infrastructure already weakened by racism. In New Orleans, building permits are less common in the lowest-income areas. Rents are climbing beyond reach while state programs tend to help property owners return to

their homes, but not renters who couldn't afford to own. Thousands of public housing units have been demolished.

When polled on whether Hurricane Katrina and its impact pointed to persistent racial inequality, fewer than half of white Americans thought it did, while over three-quarters of African Americans in the country said yes.

In his chapter "Economy" in *Walden*, Thoreau wrote, "The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run." Rightly, as Scott Russell Sanders points out, the measure of cost (life required) should extend beyond the context of an individual and his or her property if we are to understand our larger impacts in the world. But shouldn't this critical metric also be applied across different scales of time, geography, and human institutions to recognize and include distinct interactions of race, class, gender, power, and privilege? How, for example, might thinking in terms of migrant labor define at least some of the costs (life required in exchange) of producing and consuming?

The *ecological footprint*, commonly described as a "sustainability indicator" or a "resource management tool," is a measure of the resources people consume and the wastes—including carbon emissions—that they produce, expressed in terms of the amount of productive land and water needed to provide those resources. Such measurements are typically done for an individual, for the "average" American couple or family or other group, for a country, and for the global impact of the human race. According to the public-policy institute Redefining Progress, that global impact has now exceeded Earth's ecological limits by more than a third. The World Wildlife Fund agrees that "humanity is no longer living off nature's interest, but drawing down its capital," noting that the United States has the largest per-person footprint of any nation.

Key to this measure is the word *resource*, the root of which comes from the Old French (from Latin) meaning "to rise again, recover." Dictionary definitions in common use refer to a stock or supply of materials or assets that can be drawn on, or a country's collective means of supporting itself or becoming wealthier, as represented by its minerals, land, and other assets.

A wiser measure of our ecological footprint would also include human beings and their cultural histories, or at least their labor, and would factor in the losses of lifetime relationships with land, losses of self-determination,

and losses of health or life. What if this footprint measured, over time, upon whom and what the nation's foot has trod—that is, at the cost of whose lives has America's relative prosperity evolved? We need to know the cumulative ecological footprint of our long-term consumption of others' labor, land, and rights. Consider the energy derived by the undervalued toil of others: enslaved plantation labor, migrants, sharecroppers, and today's guest-worker labor. Consider the resources acquired through a sanctioned dispossessing of others, which would include "natural resources" gained from the many removals of the continent's indigenous nations, as well as the ongoing estrangements from homelands owing to environmental and health impacts, such as those of uranium mining and unreclaimed tailings on native peoples in the American Southwest.

In early spring 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King went to Memphis to support 1,300 sanitation workers on a sixty-four-day strike for better working conditions, improved wages, and some tangible recognition of their worth as human beings. I still recall those images of *I AM A MAN* on countless signs floating above crowds walking shoulder-to-shoulder. Recognizing how violence—including the undeclared war in Vietnam—linked with poverty in America, King had planned a "Poor People's Encampment" in Washington, D.C., for later that year. Among his last public words, in that last speech given in Memphis: "All we say to America is, 'Be true to what you said on paper.'"

If we can imagine "environment" broadly as sets of circumstances and contexts within which all of us intimately live and die, then the whole we must understand includes those lives whose experiences of place are displaced or alien, migrant or urban, indentured or enslaved, degraded or toxic. How and where we all live, the means and costs of living, must become part of the measure. Each of us must resist a monochromatic sense of culture and knowledge, must recognize human diversity across history and the nation. We and our experiences have direction and magnitude, as vectors in motion across generations.

Land conservation, for example, is antithetical to many communities because for them it has often meant land grab, dispossession, and graft as tools of oppression. It has meant status quo or further exclusion for the poor and for many people of color. Beyond open space, green space, and rural land, we must also consider urban, built environments and include spheres of justice,

sustainability, inclusion, and democracy. But how can we reimagine through the dangers of socially constructed definitions, perceptions, and lenses to more accessible and larger frames—toward a true whole? What is possible? In his 1967 book *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, Dr. King observes, "So much of modern life can be summarized in that suggestive phrase of Thoreau: 'Improved means to an unimproved end.'" A superficial way of living affirms the "external"—"that complex of devices, techniques, mechanisms and instrumentalities by means of which we live"—while it devalues the "internal"—"that realm of spiritual ends expressed in art, literature, morals and religion." King goes on to say that "our hope for creative living in this world house that we have inherited lies in our ability to re-establish the moral ends of our lives in personal characters and social justice. Without this spiritual and moral reawakening we shall destroy ourselves in the misuse of our own instruments."

The lineage of dissident Americans who have tried to rethink the meaning and conduct of life is long, with many branches. Thoreau sought an original relationship with Earth and life, an *ab*-original connection. Something can also be discovered from Frederick Douglass, a man born within a year of Thoreau but under very different circumstances, who asked and answered, "What to the American slave is your Fourth of July?" Or we can learn from Margaret Fuller, a Massachusetts neighbor to Thoreau who was a proponent of women's rights and social reform, as well as coeditor (with Ralph Waldo Emerson) of *The Dial: A Magazine for Literature, Philosophy, and Religion*. So, too, can we learn from countless others who didn't write books but sought answers to the timeless questions of our souls in oral histories and narratives.

After hearing my father's "not again" on that early June morning in 1968, my child-mind's eye began to see the world as empty of goodness. As a young teenager I began to wonder if those who call themselves "white" really had the luxury of not needing to know, or to care about, the truths and realities of those with darker skin—or if the wealthy didn't need to consider those in poverty. I thought that if those without economic power were ignorant of the privileges and power of whiteness, they would find it impossible to survive in this country. Now, years later, I know the edge between despair and hope can be very thin.

I recently visited Canterbury Village, New Hampshire, one of the earliest and longest-standing Shaker communities in the country, active since

1792. Those followers of Ann Lee challenged almost every mainstream ideal of American society with their communitarian ethic. They said, "Do all your work as though you had a thousand years to live and as you would if you knew you must die tomorrow." Something in the peace on that hillside, in addition to Shakerism's call to simplicity, stirred in me a heart memory that beliefs in justice and equality, reverence and trust, *could* be lived largely.

Simplicity: *all of a piece, single, whole.* Having fewer possessions, consuming less energy, having a smaller ecological footprint—all of these are necessary to living simply, but still more is required of us. Appeals to conscience or responsibility will fall short—as will prescribed solutions of what we could, should, or must do—unless "we the people" face honestly all of what we are. Muriel Rukeyser, writing shortly after the end of World War II, declared in *The Life of Poetry,* "We are a people tending toward democracy at the level of hope; on another level, the economy of the nation, the empire of business within the republic, both include in their basic premise the concept of perpetual warfare. . . . Simply, the line of culture was begun in America at a point of open conflict."

The difficult things for us to cultivate are the expansiveness of spirit and heart necessary to respond to life fully and imaginatively—assumptions and stereotypes put aside—and a capacity to ask significant questions about our lives and about lives not our own. We benefit when we acknowledge and honor difference as enriching and at the same time find, across divisions, common interest and common humanity. I believe that we exist in relation—to each other, to the Earth and its inhabitants. We might do well to regard such relation and responsibility as life itself.

By considering geography, race, class, gender, issue, and time, we might come close to being "conservers" as Scott Russell Sanders suggests, but conservers of dignity, people, and communities as well as of land, water, and other so-called resources—especially where a community does not own or control the land and resources. In this sense, being a "conserver" also means resisting the unacceptable degrading of life, as well as holding to account those who profit from violence and poverty and disintegration.

This, perhaps, is life's task without end: to bear witness, to give testimony, to act with respect. The health of the land may reside in its capacity for self-renewal; the health of the human family may, in part, reside in our capacity for locating ourselves within many inheritances, across generations, as citizens of the land, of nations, and of the Earth.

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