



JULIUS LESTER

The Angry Children of Malcolm X

Sing Out! Oct./Nov. 1966

EXCERPT _____

"Identity," writes Julius Lester, "has always been the key problem for blacks." By the mid sixties, blacks were solving that problem by discovering and embracing "those things that are theirs," and those

things constituted "soul." In this excerpt from "The Angry Children of Malcolm X," Lester captures the rage, frustration, and disillusionment many blacks felt as bullets, bombs, and billy clubs destroyed the hopes of the early civil rights movement. He describes a turning inward, the emotional and psychological counterpart of black political separatism. At one time, he argues, blacks sought to communicate with whites, sought to create the Beloved Community. But now after repeated and violent rejections, whites, for many African Americans, "no longer exist." The white man "is not to be lived with and he is not to be destroyed," Lester writes. "He is simply to be ignored."

Julius Lester (1939-), the son of a Methodist minister, was born in St. Louis, Missouri. In his teen years, he lived in Nashville, Tennessee. When he graduated from Fisk University in 1960, he went to New York to pursue a career as a musician, eventually recording two albums and performing on the folk circuit. In the sixties he also became active in the civil rights movement, heading the photo department of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). His first book, *Look Out Whitey! Black Power Gon' Get Your Mama*, was published in 1968. The American Library Association awarded his second book, *To Be a Slave*, the Newbery Honor Medal, recognizing it as the most distinguished American children's book published in 1968. He began teaching in the Afro-American Studies Department at the University of Massachusetts in 1971. Converting to Judaism, he pursued a scholarly interest in his new faith and in 1988 became a professor in the Judaic and Near Eastern Studies Department.

. . . Of the minority groups in this country, the Negro is the only one lacking a language of his own. This is significant in that this has made it difficult for him to have a clear concept of himself as a Negro. It has made him more susceptible to the American lie of assimilation than the Puerto Rican, Italian or Jew who can remove himself from America with one sentence in his native language. Despite the assimilation lie, America is not a melting pot. It is a nation of national minorities, each living in a well-defined geographical area and retaining enough of the customs of the native land to maintain an identity other than that of an American. The Negro has two native lands: America and Africa. Both have deliberately been denied him.

Identity has always been the key problem for Negroes. Many avoid their blackness as much as possible by trying to become assimilated. They remove all traces of blackness from their lives. Their gestures, speech, habits, cuisine, walk, everything becomes as American Dream as possible. Generally, they are the 'responsible leaders,' the middle class, the undercover, button-down collar Uncle Toms, who front for the white man at a time of racial crisis, reassuring the nation that "responsible Negroes deplore the violence and looting and we ask that law and order be allowed to prevail." A small minority avoid the crux of their blackness by going to another extreme. They identify completely with Africa. Some go to the extent of wearing African clothes and speaking Swahili. They, however, are only unconsciously admitting that the white man is right when he says, Negroes don't have a thing of their own.

For other Negroes the question of identity is only now being solved by the realization of those things that are theirs. Negroes do have a language of their own. The words may be English, but the way a Negro puts them together and the meaning that he gives them creates a new language. He has another language,

too, and that language is rhythm. It is obvious in music, but is also expressed in the way he walks and the way he talks. There is a music and rhythm to the way he dresses and the way he cooks. This has been recognized by Negroes for some time now. “Soul” is how these things peculiarly black are recognized by black men in America. In Africa they speak Negritude. It is the same. The recognition of those things uniquely theirs which separate them from the white man. “Soul” and Negritude become even more precious when it is remembered that the white man in America systematically tried to destroy every vestige of racial identity through slavery and slavery’s little brother, segregation. It is a testament to the power of “Soul” that it not only survived, but thrived.

Now the Negro is beginning to study his past, to learn those things that have been lost, to recreate what the white man destroyed in him and to destroy that which the white man put in its stead. He has stopped being a Negro and has become a black man in recognition of his new identity, his real identity. ‘Negro’ is an American invention which shut him off from those of the same color in Africa. He recognizes now that part of himself is in Africa. Some feel this in a deeply personal way, as did Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer who cried when she was in Africa, because she knew she had relatives there and she would never be able to know them. Her past would always be partially closed.

Many things that have happened in the past six years have had little or no meaning for most whites, but have had vital meaning for Negroes. Wasn’t it only a month after the March on Washington that four children were killed in a church bombing in Birmingham? Whites could feel morally outraged, but they couldn’t know the futility, despair and anger that swept through The Nation within a nation — Black

America. There were limits to how much one person could endure and Birmingham Sunday possibly marked that limit. The enemy was not a system. It was an inhuman fiend who never slept, who never rested and no one would stop him. Those Northern protest rallies where Freedom Songs were sung and speeches speeched and applause applauded and afterwards telegrams and letters sent to the President and Congress — they began to look more and more like moral exercises. See, my hands are clean. I do not condone such a foul deed, they said, going back to their magazine and newspapers, feeling purged because they had made their moral witness.

What was needed that Sunday was ol’ John Brown to come riding into Birmingham as he had ridden into Lawrence, Kansas, burning every building that stood and killing every man, woman and child that ran from his onslaught. Killing, killing, killing, turning men into fountains of blood, spouting spouting spouting until Heaven itself drew back before the frothing red ocean.

But the Liberal and his Negro sycophants would’ve cried, Vengeance accomplishes nothing. You are only acting like your oppressor and such an act makes you no better than him. John Brown, his hands and wrists slick with blood, would’ve said, oh so softly and so quietly, Mere Vengeance is folly. Purgation is necessity.



National Archives
March on Washington for Peace and Freedom, 28 August 1963



Library of Congress
March in Washington, DC, 23 September 1963, sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in memory of the four young girls killed a week earlier in the Birmingham, Alabama, church bombing

Now it is over. America has had chance after chance to show that it really meant “that all men are endowed with certain inalienable rights.” America has had precious chances in this decade to make it come true. Now it is over. The days of singing freedom songs and the days of combating bullets and billy clubs with Love. We Shall Overcome (and we have overcome our blindness) sounds old, out-dated and can enter the pantheon of the greats along with the IWW¹ songs and the union songs. As one SNCC² veteran put it after the Mississippi March, “Man, the people are too busy getting ready to fight to bother with singing anymore.” And as for Love? That’s always been better done in bed than on the picket line and marches. Love is fragile and gentle and seeks a like response. They used to sing “I Love Every-body” as they ducked bricks and bottles. Now they sing

Too much love,
Too much love,
Nothing kills a nigger like
Too much love.

They know, because they still get headaches from the beatings they took while love, love, loving. They know, because they died on those highways and in those jail cells, died from trying to change the hearts of men who had none. They know, the ones who have bleeding ulcers when they’re twenty-three and the ones who have to have the eye operations. They know that nothing kills a nigger like too much love.

At one time black people desperately wanted to be American, to communicate with whites, to live in the Beloved Community. Now that is irrelevant. They know that it can’t be until whites want it to be and it is obvious now that whites don’t want it.

Does all of this mean that every American white is now a potential victim for some young Nat Turner? Does it mean the time is imminent when the red blood of blue-eyed, blonde-haired beauties will glisten on black arms and hands?

For many black people, the time is imminent. For others it simply means the white man no longer exists. He is not to be lived with and he is not to be destroyed. He is simply to be ignored, because the time has come for the black man to control the things which effect his life. Like the Irish control Boston, the black man will control Harlem. For so long the black man lived his life in reaction to whites. Now he will live it only within the framework of his own blackness and his blackness links him with the Indians of Peru, the miner in Bolivia, the African and the freedom fighters of Vietnam. What they fight for is what the American black man fights for — the right to govern his own life. If the white man interprets that to mean hatred, it is only a reflection of his own fears and anxieties and black people leave him to deal with it. There is too much to do to waste time and energy hating white people.

The old order passes away. Like the black riderless horse, boots turned the wrong way in the stirrups, following the coffin down the boulevard, it passes away.³ But there are no crowds to watch as it passes. There are no crowds, to mourn, to weep. No eulogies to read and no eternal flame is lit over the grave. There is no time for there are streets to be cleaned, houses painted and clothes washed. Everything must be scoured clean. Trash has to be thrown out. Garbage dumped and everything unfit, burned.

The new order is coming, child.
The old is passing away.

Julius Lester
Atlanta, Georgia
August 8, 1966

¹ IWW: International Workers of the World.

² SNCC: Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

³ Referring to the funeral of President John F. Kennedy, 25 November 1963.