

Jim Beatty: The Economics of Race Relations in John Beecher's "Beaufort Tides"

John Beecher's "Beaufort Tides," takes an astute critical perspective on the history of race relations in the US, especially in the South. The first stanza of the poem sets up a decaying picture of the South. The poem evokes an end to economic prosperity in the same breath that it alludes to the end of slavery. Since the result of "No slavers" conducting commerce is "Rotting hulls / are drawn up on the shore," slavery as a system of racial oppression is articulated to a notion of slavery as the very foundation of the US's economic power. The industrial revolution was truly built on the backs of African slaves. When that foundation of capitalism is taken away from the South, the overt supporters of the system suffer, setting up a stark contrast to the ostensible opponents of slavery, who continued to enjoy the benefits of a capitalist economy born from the enslavement of Africans and people of African descent. In 1934, this scene of economic decay could apply to the entire country—the sins of the South finally coming home to the equally guilty North.

The second stanza begins what is perhaps the most remarkable achievement of the poem, i.e. the articulation of "free, white" subjectivities with that of "enslaved, black." In a number of contemporary critical registers, important theorizings of subjectivity have noted how oppressive economic systems of domination produce not only the subjectivities of the dominated but also that of the dominators. For in example, in postcolonial studies many have noted that both colonial discourse and the material enactments of colonial policies have produced both the colonizer's and the colonized's subjectivity. One of the most famous examples of this argument in an overly exclusively discursive register can be found in the work of Homi Bhabha. Similar arguments have long been made concerning the predication of "whiteness" in the US based upon all the attributes of "blackness" that it is not, a process that could be called "negative identification." Studies by Toni Morrison (*Playing in the Dark*), Eric Lott (*Love and Theft*), and even Leslie Fiedler (*Love and Death in the American Novel*) have demonstrated this phenomenon in US literature and popular culture. And even before these important critical elucidations, arguments that slavery produced—and degraded—both enslaver and enslaved subjectivities have been widespread, especially in the African-American tradition. Such arguments can be found in sources as diverse as the writings of Booker T. Washington, his nemesis WEB Du Bois, as well as numerous 18th and 19th century anti-slavery activists such as Douglass, Walker, and the infamous "Confessions" of Nat Turner.

What is remarkable in "Beaufort Tides" is that an Anglo poet in the 1930s could construct a model of mutually constitutive subjectivities for the South and, by extension, the nation as a whole. The poem describes how the settling of the so-called "New World" was carried out not only by European invaders but also by the African slaves who did all the work: "chained each to each by destiny." Since the Europeans are "chained" just as the Africans are, their subjectivities are just as degraded by the system as those who horrendously suffer its material effects.

In the third stanza, this connection is further solidified, for the Anglos and the Africans are tied not only by the place ("tides") but also by a common history ("time") and even biology

("blood"). This common "blood" evokes the common humanity of slaver and enslaved. It also alludes to the widespread inter-racial sexual affairs in the South, all too often forced upon female slaves by white masters. This only intensifies the "master's" "fear," for the emancipation his slaves defiantly celebrate is also a defiance by the children he has rejected. (Langston Hughes's "Mulatto" comes to mind here). New conflicts arise within these fundamentally mutually dependent groups when the formal means of one's domination over the other have been over-turned.

The final stanza abruptly brings us out of the past and into the narrative present, where both the oppressor and the oppressed now share a common "fear," for the economic collapse brought about by removing the foundation of industrial capital has come home in the Great Depression to threaten both groups. Not only do African Americans continue to suffer under a legacy of slavery and oppression?their former enslavers and current oppressors are also "captives of their [common] history." Since the very subjectivities of both the enslavers and the enslaved have been produced by the evils of slavery, their degraded selves are not equipped to deal with an industrial capitalist machine that is grinding to a halt without the blood that fuels it. Ironically, the "future tide" that will save them was not the founding of a new social-economic order but rather a new infusion of blood into the machine from WWII. In 1934, however, the poem can end with a plaintively hopeful note that both the white enslavers and the black enslaved can be "free" of a mutually degrading history by forging a new common identity that is not based on a hierarchy of power and oppression. "Beaufort Tides" gives a remarkably complex, compact elucidation of the material/economic bases of US race relations.

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