

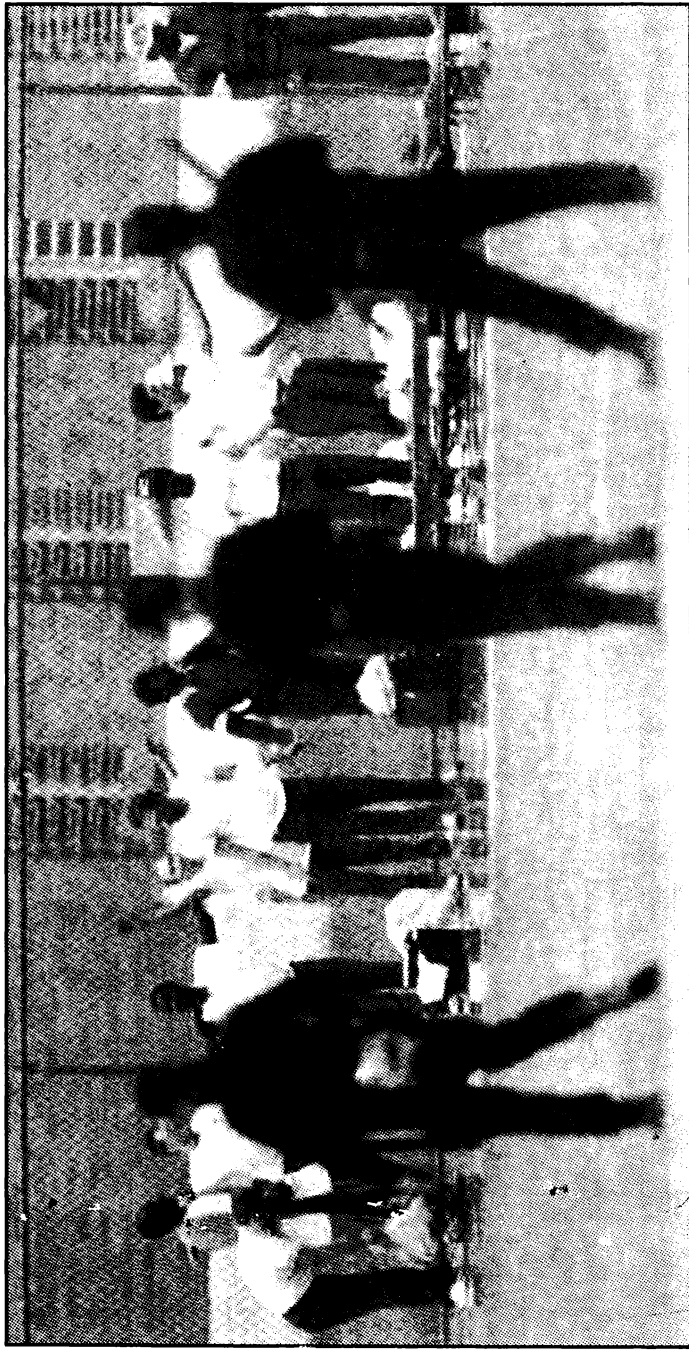
# RACE TRAITOR

Number 3

Spring 1994

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*Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity*



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**Cover photo:** Prisoners surrendering to guards at Southern Ohio Correctional Facility, April 1993.

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# OUT OF WHITENESS

BY CHRISTOPHER DAY

“Faggot” he spit. “Are you a faggot?” and he put his hand on my chest and pushed me back a couple steps. It was like a bad movie. I was with my best friend Marc and we were surrounded by about eight beefy jocks in an alley who wanted to know if I or we were faggots. Marc wasn’t and said so. I was and was scared to death. “Are you a faggot?” the shortest one repeated. “Try me and find out” was the most evasive answer I could summon up, suggesting that maybe both of us were. To save my dignity it was the best answer I could give. To save my skin, it wasn’t. The short jock’s face went red, and I seized on the moment of shock to run like hell. Marc ran with me. They chased us about half a block and threw rocks. We escaped.

Every day in alleys, on schoolyards, outside bars, hundreds or thousands of queer women and men have an experience like this. Sometimes it ends with a dignity crushing lie: “No, I’m not.” Often it ends with a fist in the face, a boot in the gut, a knife stuck somewhere. And sometimes it ends with a corpse. Almost never is it reported to the police for reasons that should be obvious. Only in the handful of cities with strong queer communities are some of the bodies not buried in a closet as well as a casket. Heterosexuality, like whiteness, is enforced with extreme brutality.

It is difficult for me to separate in my mind my queerness from my race treachery. I am a bisexual man. When I use the term queer I am referring to the full range of individual sexualities that include the refusal of compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory masculine and feminine gender roles --lesbians, bisexuals, gay men, transsexuals, and transvestites.

I want to make several points here. First, that sexual identities are socially constructed, and that heterosexuality and whiteness fulfill similar functions in the enforcement of authoritarian social relations. Second, that the community of race traitors will naturally draw disproportionately from those people who have already defined themselves as traitors to the way this society seeks to shape their identity, a significant proportion of whom are queer. Finally, that there is a need to more fully elaborate the politics of race treason and to begin talking about class and gender treason.

Race treachery ultimately implies a revolutionary politics that reaches well beyond questions of race. In much the same way that the aboli-

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tionist movement necessarily set in motion a civil war, the birth of the women's liberation movement, a flowering of distinctly American music and literature, and during Reconstruction the first American experiences of workers power, I believe that the effort to abolish whiteness can send similar shockwaves through the whole structure of this authoritarian society.

### TALKING TREASON

White supremacy plays a unique role in US society. In many respects I believe that it occupies a position of strategic centrality for those of us who wish to see this system come crashing down. The grip that whiteness has on the consciousness of the majority of people in this society is an immediate and persistent obstacle to building any serious movement for radical change in this country. I believe that it is possible for white people to break with whiteness and join the rest of humanity in the fight for a better world. But I don't believe there is any simple formula, any appeal to immediate material interests, any slogan that can bring this about. It is not a simple matter of doing the right thing, because whiteness obscures in our minds what the right thing is. What is needed is treason. To be a traitor to whiteness starts with an honest acknowledgement of how whiteness has deeply shaped me. To bring down white supremacy will involve a collective struggle. But to bring together a community or group of people who can launch that attack involves an existential struggle, a determination to abandon what is a deep part of ourselves and to throw ourselves into what? Loyalty to humanity is weak broth these days, but it is precisely what is needed to sustain us.

If white supremacy has played a unique role in US society that is not to suggest that other forms of authoritarian social relations are subordinate to it. The idea of race treason begs the question of other kinds of treason. It begs this question in two ways. First there is the simple matter of carrying the idea to its logical extremes, to see where it goes. Secondly there is the concrete question of where to find treasonous souls. From a very early age I have known that this society was deeply rotten. Coming to the point of identifying myself as a race traitor helped me clarify my own history, helped me to see the thread that has run through my life as one of trying to find other people willing to join me in some act of treason to this system or another. If whiteness has a peculiar grip on the minds of many people in the US, the relations between men and women and the various hypocritical sexual moralities that prevail in almost every corner of the planet are no less deranged. And it is on this terrain of sexuality that I think we can find probably the richest practice of treachery to the existing order. Looking back and trying to untangle the way in which I came to despise not just this society but the way that

it had insinuated itself into my self-identity it is consistently my resistance to having the truth of my sexuality crushed that has kept my edge sharp.

It is perhaps inevitable in a misogynistic and heterosexist society that a community of race traitors will to some extent reproduce the prevailing power relations of gender and sexuality. What is not yet determined is how we will respond to this problem. In order to succeed, and simply because it is right, the community of race traitors must be a place where women are able to speak and be heard and where queer people can be out and proud. Of course this is easier said than done. The most effective way to make this happen is to make clear the way that whiteness, heterosexuality, and traditional gender categories are interdependent, and the way that a small tear in the fabric of one can turn into an unpatchable rip in the whole cloth of oppressive and authoritarian social relations.

### THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUAL IDENTITIES

An elementary principle of race treason is that whiteness is a social construction and not a biological fact. This understanding at least gains some support from even the most lukewarm liberal variety of anti-racism. But the pseudoscientific categories of “race” retain their scientific veneer in the minds of most people and it was not so long ago that they went virtually unchallenged. We need to be equally as critical of the categories of gender and sexuality that are represented to us still as scientific facts. We need to understand how these categories have arisen out of particular historical processes and how they serve to perpetuate systems of oppression and exploitation.

People have almost certainly been having sex with people of the same biological sex as long as there have been people. The pseudoscientific categories of homo- and heterosexuality, however, are creations of the modern world that arose in response to the ideological needs of capitalism as it attempted to impose the repressive sexual regime of the European bourgeois family on the rest of humanity. This is not to say that the suppression of queer sexuality is a historically recent event, but rather that the world of sexual relations we face today is one that has been fundamentally shaped by capitalism. The attitudes of pre-capitalist cultures to queer sexuality were hardly monolithic. Clearly many contemporary attitudes towards sexuality have ancient roots and complex pre-capitalist histories, but for my purposes I will only look at how contemporary categories of sexuality were shaped by the rise of capitalism, and how they are reproduced under capitalism.

Whiteness arose as a response to the needs of capitalism, as an emerging world system, for a loyal mass base to maintain and defend the

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exploitation of far flung colonies in general, and slavery in particular. In *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, Maria Mies investigates how the process of colonizing Africa, Asia and the Americas was accompanied by a brutal war on women that began with the European witch hunts, included the sexual terrorization of African women in the slave trade and the imposition of the bourgeois family structure on women. Mies argues that capitalism has consistently depended on the super-exploitation of, and consequent repression of, those outside the direct relationship between the capitalist and the wage-worker: women, slaves, and colonial subjects. Heterosexuality, like whiteness, arose to fulfill the repressive needs of this system.

Heterosexuality is much more than sex between people of “opposite” biological sexes. It is the exclusive definition of that activity as normal and healthy sexuality. A heterosexual is not someone who has sex with people of the opposite sex, but rather someone who does not have sex with people of the same sex. The very idea of “heterosexuality” arose as part of the late-19th century process of defining “homosexuality” as a medical, and later as a psychological, disorder. Heterosexuality is a category that was created for the purpose of suppressing homosexuality. The suppression of homosexuality fulfilled three important functions for capitalism:

1. As part of an overall imposition of sexual repression the suppression of homosexuality helped impose labor discipline on the recently proletarianized peasantry of the emerging capitalist powers.

2. The suppression of homosexuality also aided in the imposition of the bourgeois family structure on proletarian women and men, ensuring the contribution of women’s unwaged “reproductive” labor to the process of capital accumulation.

3. The suppression of homosexuality helps establish a foundation for male solidarity and collective violence that has been a crucial weapon of enforcement in the maintenance of white supremacy, male supremacy and capitalism.

What I would like to propose is that the successful imposition of the system of white supremacy depended on the sexual terrorization of African women and the imposition of a regime of sexual repression on white women. White supremacy depended on two main weapons of male supremacy: rape and sexual repression. In turn the success of these two tactics depended on a culture of male solidarity that was necessarily homophobic. The hypocritical sexual morality that allowed and encouraged white men to rape Black women while defending the “honor” of white women could not sustain the challenge posed by any open breach of the rules of male solidarity. The first of these rules, of course, is the suppression of any open expression of homoerotic feeling between men.

The crucial term here is “open.” The suppression of homosexuality is not primarily about eliminating same-sex sexual activity, though that is no doubt the intention of its prosecutors. It is primarily about driving it underground. If you want to be “one of the guys,” if you want to be a full member of the community of men, it can be okay to want to suck cock, it can even be okay to do it, but it can never be acknowledged. The consequent self-loathing that comes from living this lie often only turns the man in question into a more brutal enforcer of the whole authoritarian order.

In *From Sundown to Sunup: the Making of the Black Community*, George P. Rawick argues that “Racism came out of the context of (the) revolutionary rechanneling of human personality that was required by the new social, political, and economic order of modern capitalism.” (p. 132) Rawick describes the ways in which the discipline of wage labor depended on the imposition of a puritanical regime of sexual repression.

If the imposition of wage labor demanded the suppression of queer sexuality, the maintenance of white male solidarity in the American South amplified that demand. The bourgeois and patriarchal family structured around the heterosexual couple was a cornerstone in the construction of capitalist relations. It ensured the reproduction of labor power through the unwaged work of the wife, it separated the worker from the larger community of the village and extended family, and compelled the husband to show up promptly for work on Monday if he didn’t want his children to starve. Even if he was not yet an industrial worker himself, the white man in the American South was subject to this same reorganization of his life. Heaped on top of this demand that he repress himself sexually in conformity with the demands of the bourgeois family was the expectation that he participate in the enforcement of the system of slavery and white supremacy. In *Ain’t I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks describes the significant role that rape played in the dehumanization of Africans under slavery. Describing the general process of terrorizing enslaved Africans, hooks argues that “African females received the brunt of this mass brutalization and terrorization not only because they could be victimized via their sexuality but also because they were more likely to work intimately with the white family than the black male.” (pp. 19-20)

Rape was not an incidental feature of the slave system, it was central to its functioning. But, of course this could never be publicly acknowledged, because that would undermine the functioning of the bourgeois patriarchal family. Repressed in one area of his life, the white man was given full freedom to vent his violent frustrations on African women. In order to prevent this system from spinning hopelessly out of control it

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was necessary for white men to establish a system of solidarity in their sexual crimes against women. The systematic rape of slave women transforms sex into an unquestionable act of domination. For a white man to express sexual desire for another white man is to threaten to either use the weapon of domination within the circle of white men or, more subversively, to refuse to participate in the use of sexuality for domination. Either way, the expression of homoerotic desire becomes an act of treachery against the rules of white male solidarity that maintain the racial, sexual and economic order.

And it still is today. It was no accident that the rise of the civil rights movement coincided with the emergence of rock'n'roll and the birth of a radical counter-culture among white youth. The civil rights movement created a breach into which everybody who felt crushed by the authoritarian structure of American society could step. The civil rights movement challenged whiteness from without and set in motion forces that would eventually challenge it from within. Rock'n'roll and the Gay liberation movement of the 1970s were both expressions of defiance against "white" values, in particular white notions of sexuality that drew in large numbers of white participants. Both were also deeply indebted to the Black community and the Black liberation movement for showing the way in challenging those values. The overlap of whiteness and heterosexuality is probably best illustrated by the multiple meanings of the word "straight" within various counter-cultures, referring both to those who do not embrace Black popular culture and those who obey the rules of heterosexuality.

### THE CHALLENGE OF QUEER LIBERATION

The queer liberation movement that burst forth with the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969 changed the terms under which sexual identity was to be constructed in this society. With the exception of a few earlier and more tentative efforts, the categories of sexuality had up to that moment been defined by the system. The queer liberation movement was first of all an assertion of our humanity, of our agency, of our intent to define ourselves. The process of self-definition is an ongoing one, but it is one that is reaching into every small town, every high school, every institution of this society and shaking it up.

There is nothing about having sex with or being in love with someone of the same sex that is automatically radical or subversive. But to proclaim it proudly, to defy the powers that have attempted to define you as evil or sick, to openly refuse to conform to the standards of being a man or a woman in a society that depends on that conformity is profoundly subversive.

The past decade has seen a dramatic shift in popular attitudes towards queer sexuality. For a variety of reasons, the AIDS epidemic being perhaps the most significant, millions of queer people have come out to friends, family members, co-workers and others. The simple act of coming out of the closet multiplied a million times is slowly eroding the assumption of straightness. This erosion is also creating huge areas of sexual ambiguity that are shaking up the gay and lesbian institutions that have been built up since Stonewall. Where previously the world of sexuality seemed neatly divided between the gay and the straight, now bisexuals, transsexuals and transvestites are asserting their queerness. This has been very threatening for lesbians and gay men who have constructed their self-identity around the duality of homo-and heterosexualities. There is also deep division within the queer community (or to be more precise, queer communities) between those who are seeking the acceptance of straight society, and those who despise straight society and want to see it destroyed. (These contradictions are perhaps most clearly reflected in the language we use: the embrace of "Queer" as a term that is both inclusive of a broad range of sexualities and defiant of assimilation into straight culture has been highly contested.)

### RACE TREASON AND QUEER LIBERATION

It has been argued that it will only take a minority of white people to destroy whiteness because all that is necessary is to cast into doubt that a person who is perceived as white can be counted on to act white. No stronger case can be made for this idea than the experience of the queer liberation movement over the past few years. It has become increasingly difficult in many circles for people to presume that everybody around them is straight, or willing to pretend to be. For those of us who see the revolutionary potential of race treason there are three important things to consider about queer liberation. The first is how the struggle to redefine or destroy the categories of sexuality can inform our efforts to destroy the categories of race (what, for example, might the abolition of whiteness mean for the idea of Blackness?). The second is to understand how the struggle over sexuality that is taking place right now all over the country is shaping much of the terrain on which an attempt to challenge the categories of race in general, and whiteness in particular, will take place. The obstacles that are thrown in the way of that struggle will have to be overcome by us. Finally we need to understand how queer liberation by challenging the church, the family, and male supremacy, is unraveling the fabric of lies and hypocrisy of which whiteness is just one part.