White Negroes and *The Wire*

Daniel McNeil | 29 May 2009 | 4-The Wire Files [May 09]

A hipster moves like a cat, slow walk, quick reflexes; he dresses with a flick of chic; if his dungarees are old, he turns the cuffs at a good angle.
- Norman Mailer, *Hipster and Beatnik: a footnote to The White Negro.*

Just over fifty years ago, Norman Mailer prowled the psychic wilds of Greenwich Village in search of an apocalyptic orgasm. The result of Mailer's cruising was *The White Negro*, an influential essay which encouraged more hipsters to rail against soul-destroying institutions with a little help from a bad ass Black culture. In the twenty-first century one rarely uncovers writers echoing Mailer’s description of white hipsters (with the notable exception of Armond White, a cultural critic for *The New York Press* and author of *The Resistance: Ten Years of Pop Culture that Shook the World*, who repeatedly employs the term to characterise artists such as Quentin Tarantino and Eminem). Rebounding from the term “wigger”, which haunted white fans of hip hop in the 1990s, Mailer’s legacy is transformed into the ironic pose of hot cultural commodities such as *Stuff White People Like*. Christian Lander’s popular blog lists an assortment of hobbies, interests and ornaments craved by white progressives used to footnotes and lists as thick as morons at a Ku Klux Klan meeting. Revealingly, number 85 on Lander’s table is *The Wire*, which purportedly fulfils a need for gritty realism and interracial brotherhood among folks who are also fans of gentrification (number 73). Various articles on the internet will undoubtedly repeat and castigate the ironies inevitable as the artists formerly known as White Negroes search for euphemisms for their status that do not note their economic position. However, we do not have to limit ourselves to the deconstruction of a creative class or a post-racial meritocracy when *The Wire’s* second season pays such an eloquent eulogy to the White Negro and the wigger in a working-class Polish American community.

Mailer’s depiction of *The White Negro* began by confronting the quick death offered by the military-industrial complex as well as the slow death of suburban conformity in the Cold War era.

If the fate of the twentieth-century is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as an immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self.

In order to avoid the mortal coil of conformity, he believed that his masculine heroes needed to turn to African American guides. Why? Because Black bodies had been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries … The cameos of security for the
average white: mother and the home, job and the family, are not even a mockery to millions of Negroes; they are impossible.³

In passages that were regularly invoked as romantic racism 101 during the rise of whiteness studies in the 1990s, readers are told that “the Negro had stayed alive and begun to grow by relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body.”⁴ This primitive authority meant the search for a “good orgasm” and an emotional feeling disseminated across borders by jazz and “the musical states of their artistic expression, without language, without conscious communication.”⁵

Put bluntly, Mailer’s White Negroes accepted the Puritan charge that a Black world was infused with an alternative morality of go-getter pimps and prostitutes. The only difference was that Puritan sociologists sought to sterilise Black bodies; hipsters wanted to inject their lives with a dose of the hyper-virile Blacks who haunted their dreams. Thus Mailer’s rebels can also be read as replicas, accepting the premise that Blacks were ostracized from American mainstream, but choosing to identify with the plight of urban African Americans rather than ascribe guilt and shame. According to Robert Park, an academic hailed as the father of urban sociology by people who ignore W.E.B. Du Bois’s earlier work on The Philadelphia Negro, the great migration of African Americans to Northern cities had produced (tragic, cultural) “mulattoes” who were not willing or able to limit himself to a national identity - much like “the Jew … the first cosmopolite and citizen of the world.”⁶ Similarly, Mailer’s The White Negro was framed in response to attacks on Jewish masculinity and would not find a home in a predominantly Black community; he would only get some satisfaction denigrating the rules and regulations of his parents and teachers via the vicarious consumption of Black music. Unsurprisingly, this liminal figure ended up entering American mythology via the concerns of social workers and politicians, not just the creative productions of hipsters and beats.

Embarking on a crusade to expose the empty soundbites of modern alienation recycled by opinion leaders, with the story arcs of Greek plays and legendary characters borrowed from Westerns, the second season of The Wire sought to capture

the last days of being able to follow in your old man’s footsteps
to make a living if nothing better - and legitimate - came along. It was, said David Simon [the Jewish American creator of The Wire], a twelve-episode wake for the death of work [in Baltimore].⁷

More to the point, this eulogy for working-class Baltimore was inspired by White Negroes and Black Power activists, a link made explicit by Simon’s attack on people and desiring-machines he calls “soulless white guys”, the champions of computers, condominiums and corporate takeovers.⁸ As is made clear by the H.L. Mencken epigram used to frame the shows final episode, it also evokes the sage of Baltimore who was suspicious of “marginal men”. In Mencken’s own words,
I believe that this feeling for the hearth … is infinitely stronger in Baltimore than in New York - that it has better survived there, indeed, than in any other large city of America - and that its persistence accounts for the superior charm of the town. … Human relations [in Baltimore] … tend to assume a solid permanence. A man’s circle of friends becomes a sort of extension of his family circle. His contacts are with men and women who are as rooted as he is. They are not moving all the time, and so they are not changing their friends all the time. Thus abiding relationships tend to be built up, and when fortune brings unexpected changes, they survive those changes.9

In order to symbolise the challenges to Mencken’s solid Baltimore spirit, The Wire’s second season introduces us to Frank Sobotko, the longshorman’s union boss. Sobotko is compromised by his dealings with businessmen involved in the trafficking of drugs, weapons and women, but rationalises his participation as a means to support individual workers who suffer financial hardship or injury and obtain a canal vital to their trade. Without the canal, Sobotko is well aware that his livelihood will be threatened by property developers and a downsized port governed by technocrats.

Down here it’s still ‘who’s your old man?’ till you got kids of your own and then it’s ‘Who’s your son?’ But after the horror movie I seen today - piers full of robots! - my kid will be lucky if he’s even punching numbers five years from now ….It breaks my fuckin’ heart that there’s no future for the Sobotkas on the waterfront.10

A melodramatic piece of television may have exemplified Frank’s nightmare with a hard-working son determined to honour the family name on the docks; The Wire prefers to unveil the consequences of Frank’s dependence on drug importers through the creeds and deeds of his wayward son. We are regularly reminded that many longshoremen find it difficult to believe that Frank is father to Ziggy, an absent-minded worker mercilessly teased by members of Frank’s union. Failing to find comfort in the culture of longshoremen invested in tradition, Ziggy is left to adopt a hipster pose. He wins the attention of dockers by drawing attention to his source of virility, repeatedly flashing his penis at work and in bars. And, when he is not engaged in flashing his manhood, he flaunts money or expensive clothes.

Such self-fashioning evokes the caricature of superfly anti-heroes in Blaxploitation movies or hip hop videos rather than the values of the African American dockworkers in Ziggy’s community. Indeed, Ziggy is forced to adopt a White Negro pose to lampoon Nate as a buttoned down Black man chained by the union machine when he dares to question why a Sobotka would splurge $2,000 on an Italian leather jacket. However, after using an authoritative African American dockworker to remind us about the consequences of the greed Ziggy has consumed on his days off from work, The Wire has Ziggy’s pretty coat destroyed by a Black drugdealer called Cheese (played with aplomb by the hip hop artist Method Man). However
many times he may have watched *Scarface* or *Shaft*, Ziggy is left speechless by the embodiment of Black machismo, especially when Cheese rips his leather jacket and laughs, “Not even a black man could style that shit.” Left with a tropical shirt and a colourful hat, Ziggy is doomed to live like a tourist in his place of birth, frustrated with the creased shirts of his father’s friends and the over-sized tops of the Blacks in outlaw spaces.

While Ziggy’s White Negro flagrantly uses the n-word (distancing himself from older workers who reluctantly hiss the derogatory term when reminded of exploitation, and announcing his frustration with Blacks who do not fulfil his fantasies), younger white males adopt the word to proclaim their commitment to a hip hop aesthetic. Frog, a pasty drug dealer decked out in a blue velour suit with matching trainers and hat, is sharply reminded of his racial and class location by Nick Sobotko, Ziggy’s cousin. Reminding Frog that the realities of Baltimore society mean that he is racialized as white, Nicky ridicules wiggers who imagine that they are living in a post-racial fantasy where black and white hustlers unite. Nicky, like *The Wire’s* writers, considers it a tragedy that the hard-drinking, hard-working, God-fearing thieves of Baltimore’s docks are destroyed. He is not enamoured with young whites forgetting the uniforms they used to wear to school and church. More pointedly, he is disgusted by the undisciplined behaviour among those that conform to the styles of hip hop videos and, as he spies an old lady ushering young drug dealers away from her stoop, left to reflect on his generation’s failure to uphold or protect the dreams of their elders.

In order to emphasise the tragedy of dockworkers who still want to use Timberland boots for practical purposes, the terminal conditions of White Negroes like Ziggy and wiggers like Frog are ultimately deemed a farce. Yet *The Wire’s* righteous anger does not simply target low-level drugdealers and invites larger questions about structural corruption, inertia and incompetence. Its refusal to forget the revolutionary ideals of Mailer’s White Negroes and the political goals of Black Power - even as it unveils the hypocrisy and compromises of public figures who would use the race card for personal profit - means that self-styled progressives can proudly display the DVD on antique coffee tables and rehearse attacks on multinational corporations blamed for the destruction of the American Dream. Yet as long as *The Wire* audience seize the homes and poses of the previous owners, buy condos on the docks and ripped stevedore T-shirts at vintage outlets, and cast a nostalgic glance at white fans of hip hop who sincerely believe it’s a question of where you’re at rather than where you’re from, Ziggy and Frog will not be the only short-lived characters engulfed by American myth and myopia.

Notes

1. Ben Schwarz, “Intolerant Chic”, *The Atlantic* October 2008 [↩]
3. Mailer, 273 [↩]
4. Mailer, 273 [↩]
5. Mailer, 279, 295
10. *Backwash*, 2.7
11. *Undertow*, 2.5

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