

Color Was Everything: The American Racial Hierarchy in Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*

Like Kurt Vonnegut does for *Breakfast of Champions*, I feel it necessary to give my own preface. I will quote directly from the text and say words I do not agree with using, so if you are as uncomfortable hearing the N-word as I may be when I say it, you may want to cover your ears. I will be impolite. Being polite about race in contemporary society functions as a way to cover over racial stratification, but being impolite can be liberating. I am taking a cue from Vonnegut, who took his cue from Phoebe Hurty, who “taught [him] to be impolite in conversation not only about sexual matters, but about American history and famous heroes, about the distribution of wealth, about school, about everything” (Vonnegut 2). Race is certainly a part of American history, is intricately related to education and the distribution of wealth, and is most definitely a part of everything.

In his preface to *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut describes how he wants to empty his brain of the arbitrary signs of social politics in the United States, or what he calls all the junk other people have put in his head. Vonnegut throws these pieces of trash over his shoulders and onto the metaphorical sidewalk that is *Breakfast of Champions*. He suspects “that this is something that most white Americans, and nonwhite Americans who imitate white Americans, should do” (5). Within this statement, Vonnegut acknowledges the American racial hierarchy and the importance of ridding the collective consciousness of that particular piece of trash. Through the stories of its characters, *Breakfast of Champions* dissects American culture, overtly acknowledging a truth that many Americans still elide, that even though people of all racial backgrounds were deemed equal on paper after the Civil Rights Movement, in practice, there remains a sustained racial stratification.

Michelle Alexander refers to this racial stratification as a “racial caste” in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Alexander defines racial caste as “a stigmatized racial group locked into an inferior position by law and custom” (12). The purpose of Alexander’s book is to describe the ways in which the War on Drugs and the mass incarceration that results from it represent an institutionalized targeting and degradation of black men in ways that mirror Jim Crow, and in order to support her claim, she provides a brief history of the transition from Jim Crow laws to the Civil Rights Movement to the War on Drugs. According to Alexander, mass incarceration as a form of racially-motivated social control began in the late 1950s, when Southern government officers and law enforcement mobilized behind “the rhetoric of ‘law and order’ . . . to generate and mobilize white opposition to the Civil Rights Movement” (40). Those who opposed the Civil Rights Movement frequently depicted protests “as criminal rather than political in nature” (41), and “by 1968, 81 percent of those responding to the Gallup Poll agreed with the statement that ‘law and order has broken down in this country,’ and the majority blamed ‘Negroes who start riots and communists’” (46). This sociopolitical climate surrounding race in the United States during the late 1960s is important to understanding Vonnegut’s treatment of race in *Breakfast of Champions*, written and published in the early 1970s. Though his blunt racial language is offensive to those who want to believe the current widespread illusion that the United States is a colorblind society, the racial epithets speak to the dominant ideology of the time.

The dominant ideology reflects the resistance to change that Alexander describes in *The New Jim Crow*. Alexander asserts, “following the collapse of each system of control, there has been a period of confusion—transition—in which those who are most committed to racial hierarchy search for new means to achieve their goals within the rules of the game as currently defined”

(21). According to Alexander, lower-class whites are some of the most racist people because they want to maintain some privilege in the American hierarchy and do so by steadfastly elevating themselves above blacks. In *Breakfast of Champions*, Dwayne Hoover's adoptive father embodies the overtly-racist, lower-class white perspective, while Harry and Grace LeSabre embody a less hostile but perhaps more insidious reaction to the changing racial landscape.

Harry and Grace use a code word so as not to offend anyone or appear racist when discussing their feelings about black people. Their code word is "reindeer," and they use it not only to discuss their black maid but also as "their code word for black people in general," which, according to the text, allows "them to speak of the black problem in the city, which was a big one, without giving offense to any black person who might overhear" (167-68). Alexander points to this overarching shift toward more inconspicuous language when she argues, "what has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than the language we use to justify it...Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color 'criminals' and then engage people in all the practices we supposedly left behind" (2). The contemporary practice of referring to undesirable black people as thugs echoes the language change Alexander mentions. Because the United States is supposedly colorblind, it would be unacceptable for someone to overtly say that black people are dangerous or are lowering the property value of a neighborhood. Instead, the language revolves around "thugs," a term which, on the surface, has no racial grounding. This seemingly benign language allows law enforcement to effectively remove the racial bias from their activities by declaring an opposition to thugs, rather than to people of color. Vonnegut predicts the current racially-motivated war on crime as the result of his own sociopolitical climate when he writes that the predominately white

Midland City Police Department and the Midland County Sheriff's Department "had racks and racks of sub-machine guns and twelve-gauge automatic shotguns for an open season on reindeer, which was bound to come" (168). Using euphemistic language to disguise racial motivation ultimately fails, but is less likely to initially offend than an easily identifiable racial slur.

Dwayne's adoptive father has no problem bluntly indicating his racism. When Dwayne was young, his adoptive father told him about the origins of some of the racial tensions in Midland City. When Dwayne's adoptive parents arrived in Midland City from West Virginia, "they had their name changed legally from Hoobler to Hoover, because there were so many black people in Midland City with the name Hoobler" (134). Dwayne's adoptive father explained to Dwayne that the family changed its name because "it was embarrassing. Everybody [in Midland City] naturally assumed Hoobler was a *Nigger* name" (134). During the First World War, many black people migrated to industrial cities like Midland City for work. Similarly, Dwayne's adoptive parents and other lower-class whites also migrated "in order to make big money as factory workers" (45). According to Dwayne's adoptive father, "there was such a labor shortage that even Niggers who couldn't read or write could get factory jobs" (245). This put lower-class whites in direct competition with blacks for low-skilled jobs, which led to the racism Dwayne's adoptive father displays. The racist attitude is clear not only from his use of an emotionally-charged racial slur but also from his embarrassment at a potential association with black people.

Dwayne's adoptive father's incessant use of the word "Nigger" is offensive not only because of its association with slavery and Jim Crow but also because citizens of the United States like to deny, or at the very least disassociate from, the country's racist and genocidal history. Vonnegut draws attention to the ways in which American children are educated from a

very young age to avoid these issues. He describes how children are taught that 1492 was the year the “continent was discovered by human beings,” but, in actuality, 1492 “was simply the year in which sea pirates began to cheat and rob and kill” the millions of copper-colored people “already living full and imaginative lives on the continent” (11). Vonnegut goes on to remind his readers that some these sea pirates, the so-called founding fathers of the United States and its government, were white and “used human beings for machinery[, and]...when slavery was introduced on the continent, the slaves were black. Color was everything” (11). What can potentially offend readers about some of the ideas and language in *Breakfast of Champions* is that it draws attention to the great crimes that the text argues are concealed by some the United State’s credos.

Slavery and genocide are indeed great crimes, and so too are the long-lasting residual effects of those crimes. One of these residual effects is the difference between the opportunities and experiences available to individuals based upon their race. Vonnegut highlights these differences when he describes how “a lot of citizens,” namely, those of color, “were so ignored and cheated and insulted that they thought they might be in the wrong country.” The juxtaposition between Dwayne Hoover and Wayne Hoobler further shows the stark contrast between the opportunities afforded to white people and those available to black people.

Despite a few similarities, Dwayne and Wayne’s racial difference substantially alters the trajectories of their lives. Both men are orphans, and while Dwayne was adopted and became fabulously well-to-do, Wayne “had been in orphanages and youth shelters and prisons of one sort or another in the Midland City area since he was nine years old” (99). Wayne “had just been paroled from the Adult Correctional Institution at Shepherdstown. He needed work right away or he would starve to death” (99), unlike Dwayne who owns many businesses around the Midland

City area, including a Burger Chef and a Holiday Inn. While Wayne is conscious that he might “be ordered off the property for hanging around the used cars” (136), Dwayne has a kind of supernatural presence because of his wealth and power, at least according to Patty Keen, a young waitress at Burger Chef. Arguably, the difference between Dwayne and Wayne is an extension of the distinction between their last names: one is white and one is black.

Over forty years later, when not much has changed structurally or in practice with regard to race in the United States, what are readers to do besides feel incredibly saddened by and powerless to the American racial hierarchy? By ending the novel with etc., “an abbreviation which means sameness without end,” which the text claims is “the proper ending for any story about people,” (234), Vonnegut implies that none of this will change. Conversely, there is a ray of hope in the form of each human being’s awareness, which the text defines as an unwavering band of light. Through Dwayne’s rampage, where he brutalizes others because he believes they are unfeeling machines, *Breakfast of Champions* cautions against denying anyone’s unwavering band of light, which is sacred. The pessimism of the novel stems from the persistence of social hierarchies, but hope lies discarding that junk. When Vonnegut says in his preface that he is travelling back to the day he was born and closes with Kilgore Trout asking to be made young again, Vonnegut seems to be pointing to the ways in which the American racial hierarchy is learned garbage that can be stopped by not instilling it in our young people and instead teaching them to recognize the unwavering band of light in each human being.

Works Cited

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2012. Print.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Breakfast of Champions*. 1973. New York: Dell Publishing. 1999. Print.