

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/08/17/teen-dies-in-solitary-in-georgia-jail-after-alleged-medical-neglect/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | August 17, 2012



In a particularly horrendous story out of Georgia, the [Atlanta Journal-Constitution reports](#) today on the death of a 17-year-old in solitary confinement in a small-town jail last year. The teens mother has now named the town, its police department, the jails nurse and doctor, and four correctional officers in a federal lawsuit claiming wrongful death and civil rights violations, based on allegations that her sons serious medical condition was ignored.

Fabian Avery III weighed 153 pounds when he was transferred from the Fulton County jail in late February 2011 to alleviate overcrowding. The 17-year-old was found dead nearly a month later in an isolation cell at the Mize Street Municipal jail in the south Georgia town of Pelham, his 6-foot-1-inch frame shriveled to 108 pounds, according to reports

Avery died of appendicitis and complications from a bowel obstruction, according to investigative documents compiled by the GBI [Georgia Bureau of Investigation].

He had been arrested in December 2010 on armed robbery charges and was transferred to Pelham on Feb. 15, 2011.

The complaint claims that Avery first reported being ill on Feb. 24, 2011 and was given minimal attention. While he complained of nausea, stomach pains, vomiting and lower back pains, as well as frequently vomiting and defecating on himself, the lawsuit claims jail staff did little to help get Avery the necessary care

Avery was found dead on the morning of March 18, on a mattress on the floor of his 6-by-10-foot isolation cell.

According to the *AJC*, the GBIs investigation found that the teenager had been placed in the hole after he first reported being sick, because he began frequently soiling himself and not cleaning up or showering. The jails nurse reportedly suggested that Avery might have been faking some of his symptoms, despite his apparent extreme weight loss.

The defendants attorney told the *AJC*: This is an unfortunate case. If [the jail staff] had any indication that he needed any more medication, it would have been provided.

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the *Village Voice* and *Mother Jones*, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for *The New Republic* and *Ramparts*, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, *Blood in the Face*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in *The Guardian*, *The Nation*, and *Mother Jones*, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

This is messed up. He took from someone and the ultimate price was his life being taken basically due to neglect. If he killed someone I'd say karma but I hope someone is held accountable to the fullest!!!

Clearly this is an unnecessary case of negligence. The nurse's license should be revoked immediately!

Dis just fukd up but daz tha damn pigs an tha system fo ya.

KD, what do you really know about this situation? What you've read on this poorly reported site? Racially motivated? Where are your facts to support this? Fact is, you have none and Alan Cya is correct that you are the racially motivated hater. How do you know the Sheriff, his/her staff, or nurse are not new Afrikans (I am a black man and take serious offense to this slang generalization of my skin color). Or maybe they are Latino; Asian; Eskimo; etc etc. But in your bias dementia it's black against the world. Fool.

To Lorraine S. Umrall: since you so ungraciously brought it up, allow me to correct YOU. You are wrong, though it's a common mistake. It's the correct spelling/punctuation for when the word is used as a possessive, as in his (not his, hises, or his) and indicates something belonging to it. Example: Lorraine missed the entire point of the important article because she couldn't see the forest for its trees.

If this story is true then where is the video shot by the camera woman? Was the accused a plant? A loose cannon? Or an just a drunk idiot? This type of tic-for-tack news stories are getting old. But they prove that the term racism is still a powerful disruptive force.

Let's focus on the issues and their solutions please.

<http://2012.talkingpointsmemo.com/2012/08/cnn-republican-convention-black-camerawoman.php>

Live by the sword die by the sword. After many catcha news reports over the last decade a reporter is finally caught in the same trap.

<http://www.theatlanticwire.com/politics/2012/08/abc-news-hot-mic-romneys-happy-have-party-black-people-drowning/56330/>

Well the point is that the claim of racism shut down the conversation and was big news on the internet. I gave no opinion on the validity of the claim or the show's appeal.

<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0812/80224.html>

I think you need to read a bit more of what is written. I never claimed there was racism involved in this young man's death however two others on here did and one brought up 400 years of slavery etc.

I am not sure why you hung up on that claim but everyone can have an opinion.

But demonizing an entire race like KD did is not an answer to a suspicious death which could have been the case like you described or even a case of racism. I don't know neither do you. I do know one thing somewhere a white person is probably becoming a victim of revenge who had nothing to do with this. They may rationalize their revenge using the sordid history of slavery and racism.

Possibly the victim is of Slav or Irish decent which would be ironic because these two groups have a long history as slaves themselves.

I previously mentioned the Slavs now here is a link to the Irish history.

If it wasn't so tragic it would be funny that the first AB members were Irish bikers and have been mortal enemies of George Jackson's BGF despite both groups sharing history as slaves.

<http://www.africaresource.com/rasta/sesostri-the-great-the-egyptian-hercules/the-irish-slave-trade-forgotten-white-slaves/>

Trying to unite the advocates against Solitary even if it sounds like I'm preaching.

I would agree the term is often used as a convenient cover for a weak argument by people that have not been trained to question such assertions. Most people are afraid to question this in public because they fear that they will be labeled a racist themselves.

The term is more powerful than ever.

Just watch this debate deteriorate over such claims:

http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3036789/ns/msnbc_tv-morning_joe/#48799877

You cant be serious!

To use that segment of MSNBC/MorningJoe to buttress your assertion that the term is more powerful than ever when it was hardly even used in this vid is comical! Its a good laugh!

Esp. when you choose an edition of joe w/Chris Matthews! I refuse to watch MSNBC on account of its megaton of liberal bias& the theatrics deployed by Matthews & his ilk on this show. All Matthews ever wants to do is out-shout & voice-over, interrupt, run interference.w/anybody w/a view oppositional to his, as evidenced by his behavior on this segment.

So, anyway, getting back to the topic @ hand: wheres the evidence, where is the proof, that racism had ANYTHING to do with the death of this teenager while in state custody? Is the fact that he is black & died in state custody prima-facie evidence that racism is involved?

OR, could OTHER factors be @ fault here, such as incompetence, negligence and/or ignorance on the part of the states employees?

Pray tell.

Ooops, forgot this is last reply

Saul Bellow is spot-on w/that assessmentshort, pithy & to the point is far better than its opposite.

The story of a African American dying in a small southern town will always invoke a suspicion of racism.

The question is do we look any further for answers?

A racism claim is easy to make and hard to refute. Answers to such claims cannot be one liners. Most people making these claims find little resistance because of our nations history.

I agree that racism has not been proven or even claimed in this article. However such claims could have been anticipated just by the way the subject was presented.

Left unchallenged such claims of racism become truths and justification for revenge. Those that suspect there might be other answers need to question the validity of such claims.

Your point about the length of such counterpoints is well taken for as Saul Bellow wrote:

No one will be heard in the future that does not speak in short bursts of truth.

Would you agree that the term racism has lost much of its meaning (since Im not sure when)?

That it is overused, & misused?

@Kiwidinok: Ill concede that racism is alive and well and used to justify unspeakable acts of violence on others. As far as the stats are concerned we first need to make a careful analysis of the numbers held in these units state by state. Take for instance CA, my home state, you can read a SWs report on CA and the census figures in my comments here:

<http://solitarywatch.com/2011/09/08/a-form-of-torture-testimony-of-laura-magnani-on-solitary-confinement/>

At a time when black justices were almost nonexistent, researchers had assumed that disparities in sentences resulted from racism by white judges against black defendants. (Meyer and Jesilow, Doing Justice in the Peoples Court p. 42.) The studies that have examined the effect of the characteristics of judges have generally found little differences in judicial decisions between black and white judges. (Frazier and Bock, Effects of Court Officials on Sentence Severity; Gruhl et al., Women as Policy) The method used in this paper controls for differences in judges race, ethnicity, gender, and time served on the bench.

Controlling for such factors as the sentence recommended by the Pennsylvania sentencing guidelines showed that black judges handed down longer incarceration sentences than white judges. Further, although white judges did not tend to sentence black offenders any more severely than they did white offenders, black judges did tend to sentence black offenders to longer prison terms than white judges gave to white offenders.

This may stem from higher victimization rates in the black community. Black judges simply may be more sensitive to the plight of the victims.

So the sociological analysis of racial injustice has recently shifted from uncovering individual acts of racial bias to explaining how racial hierarchies are embedded in social institutions and practices.

The disproportionate incarceration of African Americans results more from systemic factors, such as law enforcement priorities and sentencing legislation, than from biased decision making in individual cases. Police officers, prosecutors, and judges, moreover, rarely articulate racist reasons for their actions.

Jeffrey Reiman wrote in *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison*.

For the same criminal behavior, the poor are more likely to be arrested; if arrested, they are more likely to be charged; if charged, more likely to be convicted; if convicted, more likely to be sentenced to prison; and if sentenced, more likely to be given longer prison terms than members of the middle and upper classes.

For many of those in the lowest reaches of the social structure, the American Dream is a hallucination.

In the book titled *Ain't No Makin It* MacLeod writes under the subtitle of *Poverty: A Class Issue*. This book shows clearly that poverty is not a black issue. In absolute terms, most poor people are white, although a disproportionate number of African Americans are impoverished. Many of the black poor live in ghettos: urban neighborhoods that are racially segregated, economically devastated, socially stigmatized, and politically abandoned. As government and civic institutions have crumbled and the labor market has declined, the vacuum has largely been filled by the blossoming of an underground economy dominated by the only expanding employment sector to which poor minority youths miseducated by the public school can readily accede: the retail trade of drugs. As a result these enclaves of concentrated and pernicious poverty have become virtual war zones where terror, despair, and death are commonplace.

Far from being a distinctive breed apart, the urban poor are ordinary human beings struggling to cope as best they can under oppressive circumstances. Poverty is not a moral problem, much less a black moral or cultural problem.

The following article was written for the National Forum, in the summer 1996, by Wayne Flynt. I extracted the main points that I felt relevant here.

The highest concentration of American poverty exists in rural America. Rural poverty rates as a percentage of rural population are higher than urban poverty rates as a percentage of urban population. Two-thirds of the rural poor are white and non-Hispanic. Rural poverty is not necessarily the result of laziness and personal failure. Half the rural poor work, and one-quarter of rural poor families have two family members who work; yet the families remain poor.

Other Factors Driving Imbalance in Prison

So why is there this racial imbalance in prison? I don't believe it is due to the superior morals of whites nor do I believe it is due solely to racism. These points are common sense after reading all the above and having lived in inner city, rural and suburban poverty. By the way suburban was the worst for me as a youth in that it was very alienating.

- 1) Access to victims; there are just many more potential targets (victims) in and around a crowded inner city where you find higher concentrations of impoverished minorities.
- 2) Accumulative effect; the enduring effects of slavery, racism and poverty have meant that many of the black poor are resigned to their social position. Without the sense that they have a place at the table they turn against the systems structural favoritism of whites in large numbers believing it is primarily responsible for their condition.
- 3) Aggressive posture; to survive in the rough inner city neighborhoods or prison for that matter, an intimidating presence is helpful to ward off attacks. This same 'don't mess with me' image is not very useful however when standing before a judge or a potential employer. Therefore a judge may indeed deem that an individual with these particular traits is a menace that needs to be taken off the street for the protection of the community. This can be interpreted as racism though often as has been shown above the judge himself is a minority.
- 4) Anonymity; it is easier to go unrecognized in an urban setting than in a small town where everyone knows everyone else. Of course it is also easier to objectify and victimize people that we don't know than those that we know or like. In a small town the latter is more likely to be the case. Also in a small town an officer or judge might be reluctant to seek maximum punishment on charges against a member of a family that he is personally familiar with.
- 5) Allotment of resources; Politicians use the media's interest in inner city crime to build their image as being tough on crime. The result is greater resources targeting inner city crime in the form of policemen, squad cars, communication equipment, and crime labs. These resources result in a greater number of arrests and convictions.
- 5) Association; Many criminals associate their victims with their oppression. This can happen when whites venture into these neighborhoods either mistakenly or in search of drugs or prostitution services. While purchasing such services they expose themselves as easy targets for criminals and are a source of resentment for others who live there.

I now live in an upper middle class neighborhood where most of my neighbors are black in fact on both sides and across the street of my home. They are good people.

The nearest ghetto is a mostly white trailer park about a mile and a half away. You'll find a few racists in there I'm sure because it is always those that are made to compete on the bottom for scraps that are the most racist. Thank the media which strives to divide us for their racist views.

What about staying on topic?

There's a lot of posts here that are really irrelevant to the subject @ hand. What's the proof, what's the evidence, indeed, if there IS anything racist (a word that's lost its meaning on account of so many things being ascribed to it) played ANY part small/insignificant to major/important in this young man's death?

No screeds/tirades/diatribes about (topics unrelated to this teen's death in custody) please.
Thank you.

Racism is alive & well This month the United States celebrates the Selma-to-Montgomery marches of 1965 to commemorate our shared history of the civil rights movement and our nations continued progress towards racial equality. Yet decades later a broken criminal-justice system has proven that we still have a long way to go in achieving racial equality.

Today people of color continue to be disproportionately incarcerated, policed, and sentenced to death at significantly higher rates than their white counterparts. Further, racial disparities in the criminal-justice system threaten communities of color disenfranchising thousands by limiting voting rights and denying equal access to employment, housing, public benefits, and education to millions more. In light of these disparities, it is imperative that criminal-justice reform evolves as the civil rights issue of the 21st century.

Kiwidinok;

Would you mind explaining the RELEVANCE of your your little dissertation above TO the death of this young man while in state custody?

Thank you.

I think there has been a few articles on here critical of privatization of prisons. Do a search if youre interested in opposing views.

This is for KD: While I was incarcerated blacks were especially proud of Egyptian culture:

Origin of the word slave:

12501300; Middle English so called because Slavs were commonly enslaved in the early Middle Ages; see Slav

In Leila Ahmeds memoir titled A Border Passage she writes on page 98: My mothers grandmother from Russian Georgia, had been given as a gift by the khedive to my great-grandfather Several centuries back, in the Mamluk era, a good proportion of the upper classes in Egypt were slaves or the descendants of slaves. The ruling class was made up of men and women (and their descendants) originally captured as children, mainly from the Slav and Balkan regions, and brought Egypt..

To us, with our notions of slavery grounded in the history of American society, the very idea that slaves constituted the upper classes is so counter-intuitive as to seem almost nonsensical. But in the Middle East, slaves and slave origins were so fundamentally part of aristocratic and royal life that for over a thousand years nearly all caliphs, kings and sultans in the region were the sons of slave mothers.

Oh I found a reference to possibly a later article in Ebony magazine. Here is an excerpt:

In an article, White Servitude in the United States, Ebony Magazine, November, 1969, the African American historian Lerone Bennett, Jr., gives the following information about this period: When someone removes the cataracts of whiteness from our eyes, and when we look with unclouded vision on the bloody shadows of the American past, we will recognize for the first time that the Afro-American, who was so often second in freedom, was also second in slavery.

Indeed, it will be revealed that the Afro-American was third in slavery. For he inherited his chains, in a manner of speaking, from the pioneer bondsmen, who were red and white.

The enslavement of both red men and white men in the early American colonies was a contradiction of English law. The colonies were founded with the understanding that neither chattel slavery nor villeinage would be recognized. Yet, forced labor was widely used in England. This system was transferred to the colonies and used to justify a form of slavery that was visited upon red and white men. Concise information on this system and how it developed is revealed in the book, Slavery and Abolition, 1831-1841 by Albert Bushnell Hart, first published in 1906.

It was decreed that the apprentice must serve his seven years, and take floggings as his master saw fit; the hired servant must carry out his contract for his term of service; convicts of the state, often including political offenders, were slaves of the state and sometimes sold to private owners overseas. The colonists claimed those rights over some of their white fellow countrymen. A large class of redemptioners had agreed that their service should be sold for a brief term of years to pay their passage money. There was also a class of indentured or indented servants bought by their masters and under legal obligation to serve for a term of years and subject to the same penalties of branding, whipping and mutilation as African slaves. These forms of servitude were supposed to be limited in duration and transmitted no claim to the servants children. In spite of this servitude, the presumption, in law, was that a white man was born free.

The English settlers had, at once, begun to enslave their Indian neighbors, soothing to enslave their consciences with the argument that it was right to make slaves of pagans. In large numbers, the Indians fled or died in captivity, leaving few of their descendants in bondage. The virgin soil of the new English settlements continued to need more labor. This led to a fierce search for white labor that subsequently led to a search for Black labor.

The continuation of Lerone Bennetts comments on this situation is, It has been estimated that at least two out of every three white colonists worked for a term of years in the fields or kitchens as semi-slaves white servitude was the historic foundation upon which the system of black slavery was constructed.

Shared history indeed. Read Malcolm Xs comments after returning.

So common is white slavery in Turkey (Mamluks in Ahmeds book) still that the slang term for a prostitute is still referred to as a Nikita. A common Slav name.

@Holt: And what more can be said about this man then whats been written in the article its a sad case and it could happen to inmates of any race without outside monitoring.

Race based prison gangs and the violence they produce using such inflammatory statements as devils has everything to do with solitary

confinement. After all it is the rational for the creation of the supermax and the over use of solitary confinement in the first place.

Understanding the rational of different gangs is the foundation necessary in order to reduce the conflict between them which the authorities then point to whenever we question the need for these places.

I'll add to my dissertation with this quote on the means of the elites thought control.

American journalism has experienced a shift in the balance of power away from citizens, toward powerful institutions. With competition disappearing, today's moguls see objectivity as an obstacle that can be overcome.

Like Charles Foster Kane before them, they want people to think what they tell them to think and with newspaper competition a thing of the past, their wish is coming true.

<http://harpers.org/archive/2012/08/hbc-90008782>

That is why such sites as this are necessary.

But I'm still waiting for you to elevate the conversation with your own thoughts and not just criticize other people's concerns. .

I don't doubt for a minute that Solitary Watch is doing a good work in what it's doing with this blog.

What we have right now are jails & prisons run by the government, w/ the government as watch-dog over its own facilities. That'll never work well.

I am all for privatizing what can be privatized well having the private sector perform what are now govt functions, that is & having govt oversight of the business/institution. I believe that much of the abuse/neglect that goes on behind prison walls/fences/bars would drop dramatically if ALL prisons were in private, rather than government, hands. It's really hard for the govt to hold itself accountable, but is not usually difficult for the govt to hold sectors of private enterprise accountable.

I believe I made my thoughts pretty clear w/ the first post I made above..

@Holt: While I share your view that this is not a race issue I chose to try and explain it using the research of scholars.

KD wrote George (Jackson) was not foolish enough to believe that all of a sudden white people woke up today and started to love their 400 year old slave. I myself was nurtured, revolutionized by being oppressed under the yoke of the slave masters whip (in prison) and I do not judge the world through virgin eyes.

This sentiment is widely held in prison and people are killed because of it. So it is necessary to expand on it at times in order to bring up things that we all have in common.

I first read an article addressing this view in an issue of Ebony magazine in my cell in 1968. The article was about indentured slavery. Yes I read such articles and books written for a black audience, in an atmosphere where young blacks espoused racial hatred of whites using the fiery theoretic of George Jackson, Malcolm X and others. In fact the Ebony article was even a condemnation of the morals of white people who were using it to show the depravity of whites in that we even abused our own brethren. A point that KD also pointed out. But I saw another side to this article and under further investigation I found that white indentured slaves and African slaves actually joined forces and rebelled against their masters and the system.

In fact I was four years old when I was first called a blue eyed devil back in 1956 in the all black housing projects of Hunters Point near San Francisco where we had moved because we couldn't afford to live anywhere else. My brother integrated the all black elementary school before Little Rock High school was integrated. I am sure KD can imagine how we were greeted. So I am all too well acquainted with his views.

If you read my posts above you will see how the elite have managed to divide the groups that threatened them. Here is a recent article about how the new elite continue to divide us.

> Ideological divisions over the past thirty years has enabled very large businesses to push for and adopt a series of policies that deregulated national currencies and banking systems and enabled the globalized economy of a Superclass.

Globalization, in its present form, strengthens a cadre of very large businesses that Rothkopf calls supercitizens, and diminishes government, which is becoming, in his nice phrase, too small to succeed. The result is that there has been a decoupling of the interests of supercitizens and those of the ordinary people around them, between those who represent the views of people who must necessarily live within borders and those for whom borders no longer have meaning, between those who require jobs and capital flows and those who view people, villages, cities, and states as economic options, part of a constantly changing calculus in which efficiencies and profits rule.

http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2012/04/23/120423crat_atlarge_lemann#ixzz21jqQSsY9

A few stats:

The three richest people in the world control more wealth than all 600 million people living in the world's poorest countries.

The richest 225 people in the world control more wealth than the poorest 2.5 billion people.

In the US where opportunity is increasingly tied to education and educational performance is tied to income and wealth our social mobility between generations ranks near the bottom of developed nations.

Increasingly a upper class of highly educated elite live in unprecedented geographic and social isolation from the poor and working

people in what has been called by Charles Murray an archipelago of SuperZips.

Howard Zinn wrote about this in his book.

Page 632: The American system is the most ingenious system of control in world history.

With a country so rich in natural resources, talent, and labor power the system can afford to distribute just enough wealth to just enough people to limit discontent to a troublesome minority. It is a country so powerful, so big, so pleasing to so many of its citizens that it can afford to give freedom of dissent to the small number who are not pleased.

There is no system of control with more openings, apertures, lee-ways, flexibilities, rewards for the chosen, winning tickets in lotteries. There is none that disperses its controls more complexly though the voting system, the work situation, the church, the family, the school, the mass medianone more successful in mollifying opposition with reforms, isolating people from one another, creating patriotic loyalty.

One percent of the nation owns a third of the wealth. The rest of the wealth is distributed in such a way as to turn those in the 99 percent against one another: small property owners against the propertyless, black against white, the native-born against the foreign-born, intellectuals and professionals against the uneducated and unskilled. These groups have resented one another and warred against one another with such vehemence and violence as to obscure their common position as sharers of leftovers in a very wealthy country.

Being aware of how this small minority, comprised of many different races not just whites, use our own emotions to control us is necessary to build a united front and confront such human rights violations as this young mans sad and scandalous death.

This STILL has NOTHING whatever to do w/the death by way of possible negligence, ignorance & incompetence on the part of state employees of a young black man while in state custody.

You can say all you want on these topics in this dissertation of yours, but NONE of them have a THING to do with the topic @ hand.

In reading most of these posts here, the death of this young man who seems to have died under suspicious circumstances while in state custody has a whole flippin TON of relevance to SLAVERY! in the 19th century!

Boy, even the death of Trayvon Martin didnt bring that on! Whats so special about THIS teenager? Tells me that theres plenty of race whores & -baiters wholl never miss a chance to connect an event completely & totally irrelevant to slavery & RACISM! to the two.

Have @ it, if it makes you feel better.

@KD: Id now like to share another part of Lourys speech. The story behind the story.

I grew up on the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s and the 1960s. A formative experience for me occurred during one of those earnest political rallies so typical of the period. Woody, who had been my best friend since boyhood, suggested that we attend. The rally was called by the Black Panther Party to galvanize our communitys response to the killing by the Chicago police of party activists Fred Hampton and Mark Clark during an early-morning raid on their apartment in one of the citys many all-black neighborhoods. I can remember even now how agitated about it we all were. And, judging by his demeanor, Woody was amongst the most zealous.

Despite this zeal, it took real courage for Woody to attend that meeting. For, although he proclaimed his blackness often, and though he had descended from Negro grandparents on either side of his family, he nevertheless looked to the entire world like your typical white guy. Everyone, on first meeting him, assumed as much. I did, too, when we began to play together a decade earlier, just after I had moved into the middle-class neighborhood called Park Manor where Woodys family had been living for some time. There were a number of white families on our block when we first arrived; within a couple of years they had all been replaced by aspiring black families like our own. Yet, Woodys parents never moved, which puzzled me. Then one day I overheard his mother declare to one of her new neighbors, We just wouldnt run from our own kind. Somewhat later, while watching the film *Imitation of Life* on TV, my mother explained how someone could be black even though they looked white. She told me about people like that in our own family second cousins who lived in a fashionable suburb and on whom one would never dare simply to drop in because they were passing for white. This was my earliest glimpse of the truth that racial identity in America is inherently a social and cultural, not simply a biological construct that it necessarily involves an irreducible element of choice.

Evidently, Woodys family had been passing for white in pre-integration Park Manor. The neighborhoods changing racial composition had confronted them with a moment of truth, and had led them to elect to stay, instead of fleeing as nearly all of their previous neighbors had done, and to raise their children among their own kind. This was a fateful decision for Woody, who, as he matured, became determined not simply to live among blacks but, perhaps in atonement for what he took to be his parents sins, unambiguously to become black. The boys in the neighborhood didnt make this easy. Many delighted in teasing him about being a white boy, and most simply refused to credit his insistent, often repeated claim: Im a brother, too!

The fact that some of his relatives were passing made Woodys racial identity claims more urgent for him, but less compelling to others. He desperately wanted to be black, but his peers in the neighborhood would not let him. Because he had the option to be white an option he radically rejected at the time those without the option could not accept his claim to a shared racial experience. I knew Woody well. We became good friends, and I wanted to accept him on his own terms. But even I found myself doubting, from time to time, that he fully grasped the pain, frustration, anger, and self-doubt many of us felt upon encountering the intractability of American racism. However much he sympathized with our plight, he seemed to experience it only vicariously.

So there we were, at this boisterous, angry political rally. A critical moment came when Woody, seized by some idea, enthusiastically raised his voice above the murmur to be heard. He was cut short in mid-sentence by one of the dashiki-clad brothers-in-charge who demanded to know how a white boy got the authority to have an opinion on what black people should be doing. A silence fell over the room. Who can vouch for this white boy, asked the brother, indignantly. More excruciating silence ensued. Now was my moment of truth; Woody turned plaintively toward me, but I would not meet his eyes. To my eternal shame, I failed to speak up for my friend, and he was forced to leave the meeting without a word having been uttered in his defense.

That was not exactly a profile in courage on my part, I must confess!

This incident of some forty years ago is etched indelibly in my mind, serving as a kind of private metaphor for me, underscoring just how difficult it can be to live in good faith, and how vitally important it is to try. That moment of truth, in that South Side church basement and my failure in the face of it helped me become aware of the depth of my need for the approval of others particularly co-racialists. The fact is that I willingly betrayed someone whom I loved and who loved me, in order to lessen the risk of being rejected by strangers. In a way, at that moment and often again later in my life, I was passing too that is, hoping to be mistaken for something I was not. I had feared that to proclaim before the radicals in the audience that this supposed white boy at my side was in fact our brother would have compromised my own chance of being received among them as a genuine colleague. The indignant brother who challenged Woodys right to speak was not merely imposing a racial test (only blacks are welcome here), he was mainly applying a loyalty test (you are either with us or against us), and this was a test which anyone present could fail through a lack of conformity with the collectively enforced political norm. I now know that denying ones genuine convictions for the sake of social acceptance is a price which society often demands of the individual, and all too often this is a price that we are willing to pay.

I recall this story about Woody because I think his dilemma (and mine) conveys an important truth about race and identity in American society a truth which has wide application outside the bounds of my personal experience. What made Woodys situation so difficult is the fact that, given the expectations and stereotypes held by others, there seemed to be no way for him to avoid living fraudulently either as a black person who was passing for white, or as a white person trying (too hard) to be black. Actually, it now seems clear to me, he was neither. Woody, like me and like all of us, was a human being trying to make his way in the world, struggling to find himself and seeking recognition on his own terms. As his close friend and frequent companion I had become familiar with, and occasionally shared in, the pitfalls of his situation. People would assume when seeing us together both that he was a white guy and that I was the kind of Negro who hangs-out with white guys. I resented that assumption.

Since then as an intellectual of African descent, making my living as a teacher and writer during a period of great transformation in our society, I have often experienced this dissonance between my self-concept and the socially imputed definition of who I am supposed to be. Many of you, I dare say most, will in one way or another have to confront a similar dilemma. I have had to face the problem of balancing my desire not to disappoint the expectations of others with a conviction that one must strive to live authentically. This does not make me a heroic figure;

<http://today.brown.edu/articles/2008/09/loury>

Howard Zinn The Peoples History of United States

Page 23: Some historians think those first blacks in Virginia were considered as servants, like the white indentured servants brought from Europe.

Page 42: In England, the development of commerce and capitalism in the 1500s and 1600s, the enclosing of land for the production of wool, filled the cities with vagrant poor, and from the reign of Elizabeth on, laws were passed to punish them, imprison them in workhouses, or exile them.

Page 43: Such persons found begging could be stripped to the waist and whipped bloody, could be sent out of the city, sent to workhouses, or transported out of the country.

Abbot Smith, in his study of indentured servitude, *Colonists in Bondage*, writes: From the complex pattern of forces producing emigration to the American colonies one stands out clearly as the most powerful in causing the movement of servants. This was the pecuniary profit to be made by shipping them.

The voyage to America lasted eight, ten, or twelve weeks, and the servants were packed into ships with the same fanatic concern for profits that marked the slave ships.

Page 44: Indentured servants were bought and sold like slaves.

The master tried to control completely the sexual lives of the servants. Servants could not marry without permission, could be separated from their families, could be whipped for various offenses.

Abbot Smith, after careful study, concludes that colonial society was not democratic and certainly not equalitarian; it was dominated by men who had money enough to make others work for them. And: Few of these men were descended from indentured servants, and practically none had themselves been of that class.

Page 47: Eighty percent of the servants either died during their servitude, returned to England after it was over, or became poor whites. By the second half of the seventeenth-century more than half of Marylands servants, even after ten years of freedom, remained landless. Servants became tenants, providing cheap labor for the large planters both during and after their servitude.

It seems quite clear that class lines hardened through the colonial period; the distinction between rich and poor became sharper.

Page 49: The colonies grew fast in the 1700s.

Though all that growth, the upper class was getting most of the benefits and monopolized political power.

Everywhere the poor were struggling to stay alive, simply to keep from freezing in cold weather.

Page 50: Kenneth Lockridge, in a study of colonial New England, found that vagabonds and paupers kept increasing and the wandering poor were a distinct fact of New England life in the middle 1700s.

Free white workers were better off than slaves or servants, but they still resented unfair treatment by the wealthier classes.

Page 54: .by monopolizing the good land on the eastern seaboard, they forced landless whites to move westward to the frontier.to be a buffer for the seaboard richwhile becoming more dependent on the government for protection. Better to make war on the Indian, gain support of the white, divert possible class conflict by turning poor whites against Indians for the security of the elite.

Might blacks and Indians combine against the white enemy? whites were outnumbered by black slaves and nearby Indian tribes; The white rulersseemed conscious of the need for a policy.so laws were passed prohibiting free blacks from traveling in Indian country. Treaties with Indian tribes contained clauses requiring the return of fugitive slaves.

Page 55: Part of this policy involved using black slaves in the militia to fight Indians.

It was the potential combination of poor whites and blacks that caused the most fear among the wealthy white planters.

What made Bacons Rebellion especially fearsome for the rulers of Virginia was that black slaves and white servants joined forces. All though those early years, black and white slaves and servants ran away together, as shown both by the laws passed to stop this and the records of the courts.

Page 56: In the 1720s, with fear of slave rebellion growing, white servants were allowed in Virginia to join the militia as substitutes for white freemen. At the same time, slave patrols were established in Virginia to deal with the great dangers that may.happen by the insurrections of Negroes. Poor white men would make up the rank and file of these patrols, and get the monetary reward.

Racism was becoming more and more practical. Edmund Morgan, on the basis of his careful study of slavery in Virginia, sees racism not as natural to black-white difference, but something coming out of class scorn, a realistic device for control. If freemen with disappointed hopes should make common cause with slaves of desperate hope, the results might be worse than anything Bacon had done. The answer to the problem, obvious if unspoken and only gradually recognized, was racism, to separate dangerous free whites from dangerous black slaves by a screen of racial contempt.

There was still another control which became handy as the colonies grew, and which had crucial consequences for the continued rule of the elite throughout American history. Along with the very rich and the very poor, there developed a white middle class of small planters, independent farmers, city artisans, who, given small rewards for joining forces with merchants and planters, would be a solid buffer against black slaves, frontier Indians, and very poor whites.

(So we have all been played by a small minority of wealthy people throughout our history.)

@KD I feel your pain and yes I agree that racism is still an issue but we have also come a long way since the prison race wars of the 60s-80s. Although it must be liberating for you to be able to focus your anger on an entire group of people rather than this corrupt system it is a bit more complicated for us. We need to question if the white man in the uniform is evil or not since we cannot hate him merely because he happens to be white. And is it PC for a white inmate to hate a sadistic black guard?

I will share one more story about another brother of mine (actual not figurative) who at the age of 13 was held in solitary for months on end. Like so many others he became angry with his captors which led him to having words with a guard. Well that guard, a large man near 300lbs, later came into his cell holding a towel soaked in urine and with his body weight on top of my 110lb brother he held the towel over my brothers face and smothered him until he fell limp and unconscious. That sadistic guard was black and as you know my brother is white. However we view this incident as an abuse of power but who knows what hatred this man held in his heart in 1962.

I can go on and on about such incidents but this one is enough. I hope you can one day acknowledge that in the early years white indentured slaves joined forces with blacks in rebelling against their masters before the small minority of white landowners divided their slaves along racial lines in order to prevent them from ever joining forces again.

But if you expand your vision to other parts of the world you will find masters come in all colors and so do their slaves. I recently read that 400 families control more wealth than 6 billion people. You have Obama in the White House, Holder as the Attorney General, The Black Caucus, Black Mayors, a Black Governor, black chief of polices and countless black police and correction workers. Is it time to blame them as well?

Dont let this new batch of elite a mere .01% divide us over the issue of solitary as well.

Thank you for your respectful words.

@ Alan Cya #65085

Sir, I know and understand your perspective, view point on things however, you yourself give credence to what I have said. In your first line of defense you said: I can tell you this is not just a racial thing. Well sir, I never said it was a racial thing however, it was and is racially motivated. Just because white people also kill whites doesnt mean they arent racist. If you look at the percentage of deaths perpetuated by prison officials on blacks, and compare the percentages to that of whites, the scales of justice would not favor the blacks i.e. new Afrikans.

George Jackson is one of my most celebrated revolutionaries and we must not mis understand or misquote his unique elaborations. Even though George understood the power of unity (of blacks, whites) when it came to revolutionary progress, he still understood that racism wasnt dead. George was not foolish enough to believe that all of a sudden white people woke up today and started to love their 400 year old slave. I myself was nurtured, revolutionized by being oppressed under the yoke of the slave masters whip (in prison) and I do not judge the world through virgin eyes. I HAVE SEEN IT ALL! Including the murder of our black revolutionary comrade John Carter who was recently killed by white prison officials in the R.H.U. on April 26th, 2012. Sir I know its not just a racial issue, but our brother in GA was a victim of racism as well as John Carter who was murdered at S.C.I. Rockview at the tender age of 32.

(R.I.P. Jay Rock! May the ancestors greet you proudly!)

So, if this death was a racial thing as you claim, what do you have to say about whites, Hispanics, Asians who die in custody of the state? Fact is, it isn't. What happened to this young man has 0 whatever to do w/ his skin color. It was 0 but negligence, ignorance & stupidity on the part of the jailers & jail staff.

Makes no difference if you are black or white if you fall into the hands of an a*****e he/she won't care what colour you are. Same as a junky, don't care what colour he buys his stash from! Be aware all.

@Divine: As a formerly incarcerated brother of a white inmate that died while in the SHU I can tell you this is not just a racial thing. Believe me, there is no preference given for being a white inmate.

Before his death George Jackson wrote:

Among people of color in the United States, the quick fix, blame it on whitey mentality has become so prevalent that it shortcuts thinking. Conversely, stereotypes of minorities act as simple-minded tools of divisiveness and oppression.

I'm always telling the brothers some of those whites are willing to work with us against the pigs. All they got to do is stop talking honky. When the races start fighting, all you have is one maniac group against another.

I agree with George on this point although I would have phrased it a bit differently.

Also in the words of Glenn Loury (a black civil rights activist writer and professor) taken from one of his commencement speeches.

We are all familiar with what I'll call the identity reflex we can all hear the call of some tribe or another. We humans are a variegated lot differing by race, ethnicity, cultural heritage, religion, political or sexual orientation. This is, of course, as it should be. Diversity is a good thing.

Still, I am here to tell you that there are times when the call of the tribe just might be a siren's call, and when an excessive focus on identity just might lead one badly astray.

One comes to the university to learn how to think, to gain an awareness of the central questions with which reflective people have struggled over the centuries, and to develop an appreciation for how elusive the answers to such questions can be.

The particular features of one's social condition, the external givens, merely set the stage of one's life. They do not provide a script. That script must be internally generated; it must be a product of a reflective deliberation about the meaning of this existence for which no political or ethnic program could ever substitute.

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* James Joyce says this about Irish nationalism:

When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by these nets. Do you know what Ireland is? Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow.

Wearing one's racial identity too heavily can work similarly to hold back young souls from flight into the open skies of American society or so, at least, it seems to me. Of course there is the constraint of racism that also holds us back. But the trick, as Joyce knew, is to turn such nets into wings, and thus to fly by them. One cannot do that if one refuses to see that ultimately it is neither external constraint nor external opportunity, but rather an in-dwelling spirit, which renders such flight possible.

@Laureen Holt, The only persons my remarks hold no value to are those that lack knowledge of the truth. I refuse to sugarcoat my truthful words to anyone even the Devil himself. Check my race-baiting remarks, hunh? My people are being slaughtered everyday for sport because of the color of our skin. Check yourself and the fictitious imagination you road in here with.

Manslaughter? This is MURDER! #shame

King Divine;

You can check your race-baiting remarks @ the door, prior to posting. No one needs to read that blather of yours having 0 value whatever to anyone. Where's your EVIDENCE for your statement that if this was a white teenager that this wouldn't have happened?

It is truly unfortunate & TRAGIC that this young man died in custody like he did; if any of the jailers on duty that day are found in dereliction of duty/negligence they should be fired & prevented from ever obtaining employment where they are responsible for another human's life or well-being. Let them go work @ a factory doing the most boring & repetitive tasks possible. That sheriff, IF this jail was under his control, needs to be fired.

To those of you that think racism no longer exists, think again because if this young man, whom was a minor at that, was white this would have never happened. I guess the Hippocratic oath goes out the window when it comes to color, hunh? If it is your job to provide healthcare to convicts then do it. When people walk into an ER you know nothing about their personal life or what type of person they may or may not be but since the ER isn't located on hell on earth i.e. prison you do what you can. These correctional departments think they can treat the convicts like cattle especially the black and brown people. Well I am never surprised when the Devil does wrong because I know their true nature. Our people have suffered and endured so much yet the devil always finds away to add insult to injury.

This is very troubling.

This is manslaughter

Not only was he a minor, but when he was arrested he was only age 15.

Was this a privatized jail?

There are far too many errors in this article. Possessives for plurals. Its instead of its. Are you really writers?

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News