

James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*.
Harvard U. Press, 1997

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White Ethnicity

Entering Flaming Gorge, we quickly run through it on a swift current, and emerge into a little park. Half a mile below, the river wheels sharply to the left, and we turn into another canyon cut into the mountain. We enter the narrow passage. On either side, the walls rapidly increase in altitude. On the left are overhanging ledges and cliffs five hundred—a thousand—fifteen hundred feet high.*

He entered the IRT 7th Avenue subway at West 116th Street (Columbia University) and headed downtown on the local. Uptown would take him to 125th Street (Harlem) and to unknown parts of the Upper West Side. First stop downtown: 110th Street (OK to get out, and walk uptown or west); next 103rd Street (not OK to get out); then 96th Street (change for the express). The downtown express to Brooklyn rumbled into the station from Harlem. The passengers from the two subways mixed quickly. Express stops, downtown: 72nd Street (with its narrow platforms and stairs), 42nd (screeching wheels on the many switches, mobs of people pushing at the doors), 34th Street, Pennsylvania Station (entry and exit of suitcases), 14th Street (get off here, or take the local, one stop to Sheridan

*John Wesley Powell, *The Exploration of the Colorado River* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957; orig. pub. 1875). Further quotes from this source are marked with an asterisk.

Square). He pushed against a heavy revolving gate and climbed out into the "Village."

We trudged up the hill past the Stardust Lounge, Micky's Hair-Styling—Hot and Cold Press, the Harlem Bop Lounge, the Dream Cafe, the Freedom Barber Shop, and the Optimo Cigar Shop which seemed to decorate every important street corner of those years. There was the Aunt May Eat Shoppe, and Sadie's Ladies and Children's Wear. There was Lum's Chop Suey Bar, and the Shiloh Baptist Mission Church painted white with colored storefront windows, the Record store with its big radio chained outside setting a beat to the warming morning sidewalk. And on the corner of Seventh Avenue, as we waited for the green light arm in arm, the yeasty and suggestively mysterious smell issuing from the cool dark beyond the swinging half-doors of the Noon Saloon.**

In Greenwich Village he discovered folk music, and the Left. There was Gerde's Folk City and the Village Gate. There were scratchy folkways records of Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, and Pete Seeger, Vanguard recordings of Odetta, Joan Baez. In the Eighth Street bookstore: Genet, Sartre, Pirandello, Brecht, Beckett, Albee: the "Theater of the Absurd." And every Sunday he unpacked a long-neck banjo at the fountain in Washington Square: "This Little Light of Mine," "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" "Ain't Gonna Study War No More." He was a folkie. First (a dark secret) came the Kingston Trio, then Joan Baez and the Weavers. A sequence of Seegers (Pete, Peggy, Penny, and Mike) led him to old-time country music and, inexorably it seemed, to bluegrass. He went into the subway at 116th Street and traveled, a hundred blocks south, to Kentucky.

We take with us rations deemed sufficient to last ten months; for we expect, when winter comes on and the river is filled with ice, to lie over at some point until spring arrives; so we take with us abundant supplies of clothing. We have also a large quantity of ammunition and two or three dozen traps. For the purpose of building cabins, repairing boats, and meeting other exigencies, we are supplied with axes, hammers, saws, augurs, and other tools, and a quantity of nails and screws. For scientific

**Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1992). Further quotes from this source are marked with a double asterisk.

work, we have two sextants, four chronometers, a number of barometers, thermometers, compasses, and other instruments.*

We talked about leaving New York, about homesteading somewhere in the West where a Black woman and a white woman could live together in peace. Muriel's dream was to live on a farm and it felt like a good life to me. I borrowed pamphlets from the library, and we wrote to all the appropriate government offices to find out if there were any homestead lands still available anywhere in the continental United States.**

On his way home from Greenwich Village (and often from school) he passed through the 96th Street station, uptown platform. Here the 7th Avenue local and express trains diverged. The local continued to the Columbia University stop on Morningside Heights. The express veered off. Visitors from downtown had to be warned: if you make a mistake you'll emerge at the "wrong 116th Street." He was always troubled by the existence of another station with that number, across Morningside Park in the dangerous, off-limits world he never saw called Harlem. He recalled once (or was it fantasy?) forgetting to leave the express at 96th and getting off where everyone and everything, including the "116" set in tiles on each pillar (exactly like "our stop"), was unfamiliar. Eyes down, he hurried to the opposite platform and waited, **exposed in his whiteness**, for the train back. Later he recognized 96th Street in the film *Brother from Another Planet*. The subway pulls into a station and a white kid tells the black alien that he is going to perform a magic trick. "I'm going to make all the white people disappear!" The doors open and all the whites exit, including the magician who waves goodbye as the doors of the Harlem express close.

American racism was a new and crushing reality that my parents had to deal with every day of their lives once they came to this country. They handled it as a private woe. My mother and father believed that they could best protect their children from the realities of race in America and the fact of American racism by **never giving them a name, much less discussing their nature.** We were told we must never trust white people, but **why was never explained, nor the nature of their ill will.** Like so many other vital pieces of information in my childhood, **I was supposed to know without being told.****

On weekdays, when he was old enough, he took the subway or the Amsterdam bus downtown to school. He enjoyed the independence; and on the way home he would linger with his best friend, Chung, stopping on Broadway for a slice of pizza. But he always walked the two blocks around school, Amsterdam and 94th Street, quickly. In spring and fall people were visible at the brownstones' open windows, or out on the stoops, talking, laughing, arguing—looking him over. There was a smell of garbage, and of pungent cooking. In winter the sidewalks were treacherous. He had to watch for snowballs. Spanish voices: "Mira! Mira!" (He heard "Meedal Meedal" . . . and didn't look up.) His only wish was to get through the two blocks **without attracting attention.** Were they talking to him? Did he hear the Caribbean music that would later become so interesting? He heard no music at all. Each morning the school doors closed behind him; it was quiet inside. He read at old tables among plants in brass pots.

I sat on the floor with my back against the wooden cabinet radio, *The Blue Fairy Book* on my lap. I loved to read and listen to the radio at the same time, feeling the vibrations of sound through my back like an activating background to the pictures that streamed through my head, spun by the fairy tales. I looked up, momentarily confused and disoriented as I usually was when I stopped reading suddenly. Had the trolls really attacked a harbor where some hidden treasure of pearls was buried?***

The river is very deep, the canyon very narrow, and still obstructed, so that there is no steady flow of the stream; but the waters wheel, and roll, and boil, and we are scarcely able to determine where we can go. Now the boat is carried to the right, perhaps close to the wall; again, she is shot into the stream, and perhaps is dragged over to the other side, where, caught in a whirlpool, she spins about. **We can neither land nor run as we please.** The boats are entirely unmanageable; **no order in their running can be preserved; now one, now another, is ahead, each crew laboring for its own preservation.***

As a boy, he always wanted to be in the first car. There he could press against the glass of the forward door, cupping his hands on either side of his face to block the reflected light from inside the train. This gave him a view of the track like that of the motorman (whom he could hear shuffling

behind the locked door to his right). As the subway rushed through the dark, there were exciting glimpses of ladders and passageways. Who went there? And occasionally, with blaring horn and screeching wheels, they would pass work crews pressed against the walls, or leaning casually on pickaxes . . . almost touching the deadly third rail. At times a red light stopped them for long minutes in the dark. Then, the surge of power. Dirty lightbulbs flashed by; the subway rocked noisily on its tracks. When a station approached (the bright ring of lights rushing toward them) he feared, for an instant, that the motorman had forgotten to brake, or had died between stations. He pressed his body against the glass with a mixed feeling of **arousal and fear**.

In such a place we come to another rapid. Two of the boats run it perforce. One succeeds in landing, but there is no foothold by which to make a portage, and she is pushed out again into the stream. The next minute a great reflex wave fills the open compartment; she is waterlogged, and drifts unmanageable. Breaker after breaker rolls over her, and one capsizes her. The men are thrown out; but they cling to the boat, and she drifts down some distance, alongside of us, and we are able to catch her.*

As I continued to pound the spice, a vital connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my fingers curved tightly around the smooth pestle in its insistent downward motion, and the molten core of my body whose source emanated from a new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach. That invisible thread, taut and sensitive as a clitoris exposed, stretched through my curled fingers up my round brown arm into the moist reality of my armpits, whose warm sharp odor with a strange new overlay mixed with the ripe garlic smells from the mortar and the general sweat-heavy aromas of high summer.**

His subway pass gave him the freedom of the city. He could get on and ride . . . **Three basic routes: one of exploration, one of everyday anxiety, one forbidden.** The first, "downtown," was defined by the IRT 7th Avenue line. (Certain stops: subway freedom is the power to duck under unpleasant places.) The end of the trip was usually the Village. On weekdays he followed the second path, to his school in a "changing neighborhood." This route was safe and familiar, though tinged with anxiety on the two blocks between Broadway and Columbus. (It was the 1950s, when a

third—the largest—wave of Puerto Rican immigration transformed sections of the city.) His third route was marked by the magic trick performed on the uptown platform at 96th Street: it was the express train to Harlem, never taken. His freedom, his city. Routes and roots.

But there was no black-elm in Harlem, no black-oak leaves to be had in New York City. Ma-Mariah, her root-woman grandmother, had taught her well under the trees of Noel's Hill in Grenville, Grenada, overlooking the sea. Aunt Anni and Ma-Liz, Linda's mother, had carried it on. But there was no call for this knowledge now; and her husband Byron did not like to talk about home because it made him sad, and weakened his resolve to make a kingdom for himself in this new world. . . . She did not know if the stories about white slavers she read in the *Daily News* were true or not, but she knew to forbid her children ever to set foot in any candystore. We were not even allowed to buy penny gumballs from the machines in the subway. Besides being a waste of precious money, the machines were slot machines and therefore evil, or at least suspect as connected with **white slavery—the most vicious kind**, she'd say ominously.**

His uncle, who had been a hobo, strummed and sang "Mountain Dew" or "Mama Don't Allow No Guitar Playin'." His father, a professor of English literature, sang sentimental cowboy ballads. He was raised on Verdi and on Gilbert and Sullivan. On the weekend trips downtown, he became a fan of the Weavers. Pete Seeger's wavering voice and twangy banjo, especially, excited him. He learned to play and sing like Pete. The Weavers performed medleys: "Songs around the World." An Irish fiddle tune, a Virginia reel, an African chant, a Negro spiritual, an Israeli hora, a Japanese song about the Hiroshima bomb. Every **song and tradition was accessible, noble, progressive.** All "folk music."

It was in Mexico City those first few weeks that I started to break my lifelong habit of looking down at my feet as I walked along the street. There was always so much to see, and so many interesting and open faces to read, that I practiced holding my head up as I walked, and the sun felt hot and good on my face. Wherever I went, there were brown faces of every hue meeting mine, and **seeing my own color reflected upon the streets in such great numbers was an affirmation for me that was brand-**

*interesting they felt comfortable being
seen this way while whiteboy felt
uncomfortable being seen*

new and very exciting. I had never felt visible before, nor even known I lacked it.**

In the city he was surrounded by black rhythm and blues, gospel, and soul, by music from the Caribbean, by rock 'n' roll. He learned to dance to these beats later, in college. Entering the subway at Columbia University, he emerged, a hundred blocks south, in a global village. Folk music included every people and culture—so long as they hadn't been "commercialized." ("To everyone in all the world, I reach my hand. I shake their hand.") In his village, there were no uncomfortable antagonisms. ("He's got the whole world in his hands.") Race meant we shall overcome; class meant solidarity forever; gender meant love oh careless love; sexuality . . . ? He disapproved when Bob Dylan "sold out" by playing an electric guitar. Chuck Berry and Little Richard were alien bodies.

This fissure is narrow, and I try to climb up to the bench, which is about forty feet overhead. I have a barometer on my back, which rather impedes my climbing. The walls of the fissure are of smooth limestone, offering neither foot nor hand hold. So I support myself by pressing my back against one wall and my knees against the other, and, in this way, lift my body, in a shuffling manner, a few inches at a time, until I have, perhaps, made twenty-five feet of the distance, when the crevice widens a little, I cannot press my knees against the rock in front with sufficient power to give me support in lifting my body, and I try to go back. This I cannot do without falling.*

He had one recurring nightmare about the city. It was dark, and he was sprinting along his home block . . . chased by "gangs." They had switch-blades and wide, garrison belts with sharp buckles. The dream would end with him frantically fumbling for his keys at the apartment-house door. Gang members wore black leather jackets. The beats, in the Village, wore black. The white girls with long hair who emerged from the subway at Sheridan Square wore black tights and turtlenecks. (He wore bluejeans and checked shirts.) What did blackness mean? He wished he had dark hair, like a "real" New Yorker (did he mean Jew?). He wished he could slick back his dark hair, a long comb in his back pocket (did he mean Elvis?). Rock 'n' roll was for the ones in black leather. What did blackness

mean to him? He wished he could play better blues guitar (but he never got around to learning).

That summer all of New York, including its museums and parks and avenues, was our backyard. . . . When we decided to be workers, we wore loose pants and packed our shoe-dyed lunchboxes, and tied red bandannas around our throats. We rode up and down fifth avenue on the old open double-decker omnibuses, shouting and singing union songs at the top of our lungs. . . . When we decided to be hussies we wore tight skirts and high heels that hurt, and followed handsome respectable-looking lawyer types down Fifth and Park Avenues, making what we thought were salacious worldly comments about their anatomies in loud voices. . . . When we were African we wrapped our heads in gaily printed skirts and talked our own made-up language in the subway on the way down to the Village. When we were Mexican, we wore full skirts and peasant blouses and huaraches and ate tacos, which we bought at a little stall in front of Fred Leighton's on MacDougal Street. Once we exchanged the word "fucker" for "mother" in a whole day's conversation, and got put off the Number 5 bus by an irate driver.**

His parents, born and raised in Evansville, Indiana, moved to New York when he was three months old. His father once spent several years in Arizona, teaching at a ranch school for boys, where he learned to twirl a rope and jump through it. His ten-gallon hat smelled of sweat and was incredibly heavy. Once near Tucson, so the story went, his father climbed the Enchanted Mesa, at hair-raising risk, dangling out over sheer cliffs. His grandparents in Evansville were pillars of the community, church people, founders of Evansville College. Some of them were members of a teetotalers' club, the "Pink Poppers," who picnicked, Sunday afternoons, on sandbars in the Ohio River. (The Mason-Dixon Line ran along the river at that spot.) They didn't cross much into Kentucky, except for a trip to Mammoth Cave. Their grandson went into the 7th Avenue subway at 116th Street, and came home singing music from across the river, the hillbilly music they heard on their radios and turned off.

On Saturday afternoons, sometimes, after my mother finished cleaning the house, we would go looking for some park to sit in and watch the trees. Sometimes we went to the edge of the Harlem river at 142nd Street to

watch the water. Sometimes we took the D train and went to the sea. Whenever we were close to water, my mother grew quiet and soft and absent-minded. Then she would tell us wonderful stories about Carriacou, where she had been born, amid the heavy smell of limes. She told us stories about plants that healed and about plants that drove you crazy, and none of it made much sense to us children because we had never seen any of them.**

His grandmother had a room in their New York apartment, when she was past eighty and he was five. She had come there to die. White-haired and going blind, she walked with a cane; he was her eyes, crossing the street with her on her daily walk. She spoke to him as if he were an adult, about the Korean War (she was a pacifist) and about her fantastic trip around the world. When she was twenty, she had accompanied a friend from college, daughter of a famous diplomat, on a semi-official mission to Europe, Egypt, India, and China. Her room in the apartment was different, furnished with favorite antiques brought from Indiana. There was a big four-poster bed, where she entertained her grandchildren with early-morning stories. There was an oriental rug, a massive, polished bureau, a writing desk with many pigeonholes, a globe, and a trunk holding papers and large brown photos: the pyramids, the Ganges, the Taj Mahal. In his grandmother's room he saw a picture of Mount Everest. (She told how she had watched the clouds miraculously lift to reveal the summit.) And a giant brick from the Great Wall of China.

Carriacou was not listed in the index of the *Goode's School Atlas* or in the *Junior Americana World Gazette*, nor appeared on any map that I could find, and so when I hunted for the magic place during geography lessons or in free library time, I never found it, and came to believe my mother's geography was a phantasy or crazy or at least too old-fashioned, and in reality maybe she was talking about the place other people called Curaçao, a Dutch possession on the other side of the Antilles. But underneath it all as I was growing up, *home was still a sweet place somewhere else which they had not managed to capture yet on paper . . .***

The walls, now, are more than a mile in height—a vertical distance difficult to appreciate. Stand on the south steps of the Treasury building, in Washington, and look down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol Park, and

measure this distance overhead, and imagine cliffs to extend to that altitude, and you will understand what I mean; or, stand at Canal street, in New York, and look up Broadway to Grace Church, and you have about the distance; or, stand at Lake street bridge in Chicago, and look down to the Central Depot, and you have it again.*

The Carter Family, Flatt and Scruggs, Bill Monroe—his grandmother's people turned them out. Lower-class, "white-trash" music from across the river. He felt the same about Elvis. But bluegrass, with its roots in traditional country music, moved him. (Later he would discover that bluegrass was never simply from across the river, from the "country." It thrived in industrial centers like Gary or Detroit, and was carried to displaced proletarians not by acoustic banjos and mandolins but by radio waves.) The world he grew up in was *built on a country-city opposition*: school in New York, long summer months in Vermont. His playmates there were farm kids. The country was supposed to be different from the city; you had to "escape" New York in the summer. (But other friends in Vermont were the kids of similar "summer people," mostly ex-Communists from the Village.) He traveled to the country in the city, and vice versa.

The Colorado is never a clear stream, but for the past three or four days it has been raining much of the time, and the floods, which are poured over the walls, have brought down great quantities of mud, making it exceedingly turbid now. The little affluent, which we have discovered here, is a clear, beautiful creek, or river, as it would be termed in this western country, where streams are not abundant. We have named one stream, away above, in honor of the great chief of the "Bad Angels," and, as this is in beautiful contrast to that, we conclude to name it "Bright Angel."*

Pearl Primus, the African American dancer, had come to my high school one day and talked about African women after class, and how beautiful and natural their hair looked curling out into the sun, and as I sat there listening (one of fourteen Black girls in Hunter High School) I thought, that's the way god's mother must have looked and I want to look that way too so help me god. In those days I called it a natural, and kept calling it natural when everyone else called it crazy. It was a strictly homemade job done by a Sufi Muslim on 125th Street, trimmed with the office scissors

and looking pretty ragged. When I came home from school that day my mother beat my behind and cried for a week.**

Surrounded by black and Latin cultures, he traveled to the Village, where he discovered a pure white music. (He read much later about the interconnections of bluegrass and black minstrelsy.) Around him, New York was changing, a place of crossed roots. Rock music—white, black, and Latin—was breaking out all over. Around him, the city was being “Caribbeanized.” But he hardly knew Barbados or Jamaica from Haiti. And “Puerto Rico” meant only a gang of juvenile delinquents in *West Side Story*. He read about all this history later.

I climb so high that the men and boats are lost in the black depths below, and the dashing river is a rippling brook; and still there is more canyon above than below. All about me are interesting geological records. The book is open, and I can read as I run. All about me are grand views, for the clouds are playing again in the gorges. But somehow I think of the nine days' rations, and the bad river, and the lesson of the rocks, and the glory of the scene is but half seen. I push on to an angle, where I hope to get a view of the country beyond, to see, if possible, what the prospect may be of our soon running through this plateau, or, at least, of meeting with some geological change that will let us out of the granite; but, arriving at the point, I can see below only a labyrinth of deep gorges.*

Lying in bed he listened to noises from the court. He could just hear his mother talking on the phone at the far end of the corridor, while Burl Ives 78s spun in a room nearby. The court . . . the court was an accumulator of city sounds, a great conch outside his sixth-floor bedroom. Through the half-opened window he heard snatches of talk, a slammed door, sirens, an airplane, jazz, a car starting, bass notes, a scraping noise, laughter, something crashing, echoing on the pavement far below. His drowsy ear collected all the separate parts of a complex hum that never ceased, day or night. Known and unknown New Yorks.

When we came down from the roof later, it was into the sweltering midnight of a west Harlem summer, with canned music in the streets and the disagreeable whines of overtired and overheated children. Nearby, mothers and fathers sat on stoops or milk crates and striped camp chairs,

fanning themselves absently and talking or thinking about work as usual tomorrow and not enough sleep. . . . It was not onto the pale sands of Whydah, nor the beaches of Winneba or Annamabu, with cocopalms softly applauding and crickets keeping time with the pounding of a tar-laden, treacherous, beautiful sea. It was onto 113th Street that we descended after our meeting under the Midsummer Eve's Moon, but the mothers and fathers smiled at us as we strolled down to Eighth Avenue, hand in hand.**

Blanche—he recalled very black skin, glasses, and a voice. For several years, when he was five or six, she was in their apartment twice a week, doing laundry and housecleaning. She was distant, deliberate, a little intimidating. (Much later, he thought he recognized Blanche in an essay by Paule Marshall about the Barbadian women who came to New York during the interwar years—women who worked hard to make a home in “this man's country” while maintaining a certain “aloofness.”) Her speech, the thick Caribbean English, bothered him. Blanche was old. He remembered her worn, pressed workdress, her loose brown stockings, glasses (rimless?), and thin, strong black arms and fingers. Their dog barked and barked each time she came in the front door. She would hurry to a private corner of the pantry, where she hung her coat and changed for work.

Our rations are still spoiling; the bacon is so badly injured that we are compelled to throw it away. By an accident this morning, the saleratus is lost overboard. We have now only musty flour sufficient for ten days, a few dried apples, but plenty of coffee. We must make all haste possible. If we meet with difficulties, as we have done in the canyon above, we may be compelled to give up the expedition, and try to reach the Mormon settlements to the north. Our hopes are that the worst places are passed, but our barometers are all so much injured as to be useless, so we have lost our reckoning in altitude, and know not how much descent the river has yet to make.*

From Barbados by way of Canada, she lived alone somewhere in Harlem. Later, he learned more from his mother, who admired Blanche and regretted not having done more than pay the low, going wage and send in regular Social Security contributions. (“She spent her whole life cleaning other people's dirty houses. And when she retired and went back to

Barbados, she was proud to have saved enough for a burial. That's so important for people like her.") Blanche helped his mother, who struggled to manage a large household, with advice about housework. And she got on well with his grandmother. They were close in age, and shared an old-fashioned courtesy and a Christian outlook. His grandmother always had "colored" help, back in Evansville. Blanche asked for respect and got it from the white-haired lady. (Perhaps they shared, too, a feeling of marginality in the New York apartment, of coming from another time and place.) The same couldn't be said for the kids. He and his sister were sometimes disrespectful, even cruel, in ways (like the dog's prolonged barking) that Blanche knew had to do with her race. She became indignant, lecturing them on their bad behavior.

*And I remember Afrikete, who came out of a dream to me always being hard and real as the fire hairs along the under-edge of my navel. She brought me live things from the bush, and from her farm set out in cocoyams and cassava—those magical fruit which Kitty bought in the West Indian markets along Lenox Avenue in the 140s or in the Puerto Rican bodegas within the bustling market over on Park Avenue and 116th Street under the Central Railroad structures.***

Blanche worked slowly through the apartment. Sometimes she talked to herself. And she asked for just one special thing: that she always have a hot lunch, with meat—a hamburger, whitefish, a chicken pot pie, something. Only after seeing her cold room, which contained a single hotplate, did his mother realize how crucial these "proper" lunches were. She made the journey into Harlem only once, when Blanche was ill and confined to bed. Did she take the express at 96th Street, or was it the 125th Street crosstown bus? His mother couldn't remember much about the trip except *dirty streets, a squalid building, and Blanche's clean, small place.*

The canyon walls, for two thousand five hundred or three thousand feet, are very regular, rising almost perpendicularly, but here and there set with narrow steps, and occasionally we can see away above the broad terrace, to distant cliffs.*