

What Shouldn't Exist: Lessons on Race from the Hardwood

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I
My mother died in 1969, at the end of my sixth-grade year, and one year later, during the summer before eighth grade, my father remarried and moved the family from suburban mid-Long Island back to our former home on the East End, a full hundred miles from New York City in the sleepy seaside town of Amagansett where haul-seiners still cast their nets each morning into the ocean.

Already extremely shy, my mother dying, compounded by our family's reconfiguration and move, jolted me from shyness into numbness, and when it came to school and my main passion, sports, I found myself on the outside looking in, for a period that lasted three years, eighth grade until eleventh. Still teaching "up island" at Dowling College, my dad was rarely around, and I'd spend afternoons at the neighborhood playground which had a pristine basketball court with nylon nets and freshly painted lines. Tucked behind the Amagansett grade school, the court was sheltered from the wind and the eyes of adults, and I joined a motley assortment of other outliers, sons of tradesmen and fishermen, making mischief and doing what I loved most, playing basketball.

One afternoon during the spring of my ninth grade year at East Hampton High, halfway through my three-year hiatus, a group of varsity players, having discovered our oasis, showed up at the Amagansett court and, needing one more, pulled me into a game. I remember getting the ball on a breakaway, hurrying the shot and missing the layup. Running back up the court, a black guy named Frosty, starting point guard, middle linebacker on the football team, a barrel-chested dude renowned on the East End for his strength and toughness, jogged past me and said, "Don't be scared, man."

The first time I'd ventured onto the court with the town's best players, Frosty, the toughest dude in East Hampton, was telling me I could play with them — if I let myself enter the fray.

Two years later, once I'd returned to school activity and made the varsity team as an unknown junior — I was now six-foot-one, able to dunk with relative ease — Coach took me aside after the first game and told me he was sending me down to the JV so I could get more experience and be ready for next season. I was

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disappointed, of course, but also understood — I had only played on one actual basketball team before and that one, a seventh-grade team cobbled together by an English teacher before we moved back east, had played a total of one game.

During the first JV game, I was playing cautiously when during a stoppage for a pair of free throws a few black guys from the varsity team called to me from where they stood beyond the endline, one of them my fellow junior, Gilbert Mabry, who'd been playing varsity since he was a freshman. "Skip!" Gilbert called, using my nickname. He flicked his wrist from his forehead in a shooting motion. "Let it go, dude."

From that point on, I shot nearly every time I got the ball, and though I missed more than I made, I felt I'd been given permission to *let it go*. I didn't quite break out of the bubble that contained me, but I at least began to push myself against it.

II

One early summer afternoon after my ninth-grade year, as I stood in the outfield on the East Hampton village playground during a pickup softball game, a black friend named John Hudson leaned out from the window of his mother's passing car and called, "Skip! You want a job?" The car pulled over, I climbed in the backseat, and John's mother dropped us outside the village at the hot Hamptons restaurant, Bruce's, named for the chef and owner, Bruce Weed.

From that first night in June through Labor Day, I washed dishes five, sometimes six, nights a week at Bruce's. Although John soon got pulled onto the cooking staff, he and his mother usually gave me rides to work, and he and I would hitchhike home afterward, generally at one or two in the morning, though on busy weekend nights not till three or four.

It was amazing how hard we worked, trying to keep up with the summer crush of diners in the undersized kitchen, the bus staff carrying in tray after tray piled high with dishes to me and a second dishwasher, one of us emptying the glasses, scraping the plates, loading the machine, the other unloading, stacking dishes, racks

of glasses, and hustling them back out to the bussing station. The Hamptons were just becoming *the Hamptons*, and the staffs at this and a few other restaurants were feeling the early tremors as the ground beneath us started to shift.

At the end of the night, sweaty and grimy, John and I would drink a Heineken while mopping the floor, lock up the kitchen, and walk out to the highway to hitchhike home. John off to the outskirts of the black neighborhood, an area still identified on some maps as Freetown, an historical settlement of small houses for freed slaves and displaced Native Americans, and me to Amagansett. Many nights it would be so late that the highway would be empty, and John and I would playact beside the street in the far reaches of the restaurant's exterior flood lamps.

Over the first few weeks, our characters, at John's direction, took shape. He, at six foot-two and more than 200 pounds, became the angry black bear of a servant. And pre-growth-spurt me, at five-foot-six and 125, transformed into the white master trying to keep him in check.

"I can't take it no more," John would grumble, pacing before me on the shoulder of the roadway in the faint light.

"What can't you take?" I'd say. "Doing what I tell you?"

Each night we'd argue back and forth, John simmering, then erupting. "I said I can't take it no more!" At which point, John would hoist me onto his shoulder, spin around, and flip me to the ground, making sure to land me on my feet.

Often we were so immersed in our roadside theater we'd miss a passing car, though eventually we always got a ride, from late-night revelers winding down or an early morning fisherman heading to Montauk. We'd drop John first, at the second light in East Hampton, half mile or so from Freetown, then me in Amagansett, where I'd walk from the highway down Atlantic Avenue as the first tendrils of light pushed into the eastern sky.

As I think back to when we'd drop John to walk off toward the railway trestle that served as a gateway to Freetown, I can't picture how his nightly journey ended. I have only a vague memory of, maybe, one time seeing his house. Partly, perhaps, because he didn't want me to, many of Freetown's modest homes in states of disrepair, and possibly because I didn't want to, either. The roadside theater was all I could handle.

III

After spending junior year acclimating on the JV, the following season I joined Gilbert and a few other varsity veterans on the starting five.

On the bus rides to and from away games, a group of black players led by Gilbert, would sit in the back of the bus playing the dozens, the verbal put-down game. A forerunner of rap battles, I had read about the dozens in books like Claude McKay's *Manchild in the Promised Land* and Gordon Parks' *The Learning Tree*.

Gilbert erupted with laughter as he described Evelyn, the mother of his backcourt mate, cooking pancakes on the hot summer asphalt street because they couldn't afford a stove.

At this time, black students made up about 10 percent of the population at East Hampton High, 90 or so out of 900 kids. Of the 25 or 30 boys comprising the core of basketball players, about half were black. Of these 15, I can think of seven off the top of my head, including Gilbert, who have died, most before turning 40. Of the 15 or so white guys, I know of one who has.

IV

I feel a lot less nostalgia when it comes to my time playing basketball in college.

After a disappointing freshman year at Ithaca College where, after a serious early-season ankle sprain, I never got on track, I transferred to SUNY Oneonta. There, the first week playing pick-up in the gym, the head coach invited me to join the team for preseason workouts. (NCAA rules prohibited me, as a transfer, from playing on the team until the following year.)

I spent the rest of that first year partying, experimenting with literature classes, and the next fall joined the team for pre-season conditioning. By the time the season began, I had developed a case of patella tendinitis, which got worse as the season progressed, reducing the strength of my left leg to 75, then 50, then 25 percent. But I had other problems too.

Although my laid-back persona had generally been a salve, helping me smooth over, if not sidestep altogether, most conflicts, at Oneonta, it attracted the ire of a couple of teammates. The truth was, it had begun to attract my own ire. Avoiding conflict, along with my ritual of nightly drinking, was getting tiresome, the protective bubble I lived in getting thicker despite my attempts to break out, rather than thinner.

"Damn, Skip," Bobby Colbert, a black kid from Hempstead, Long Island, would say to me after practice in the locker room, "why don't you have any women? Good-looking white dude like you. What's wrong with you, man?" To which I'd respond with a clever rejoinder and continue getting dressed, humor, I'd found long ago, the great deflector.

Some days, Bobby, a thick, powerfully built 6' 3" forward, was friendly and seemed to like, perhaps even admire, me. Yet other days he wouldn't let up. "Just tell me," he'd say, "what's wrong with you, man?"

The second teammate whose ire I aroused was a 6' 8" black dude named Jim Miller. As a transfer from Monmouth College, Jim came in with high expectations, having transferred down from Division One to Division Three, and a good deal of bluster.

The first time Jim and I played together during a preseason pickup game, he made a bogus call, citing a rule that didn't exist. When I questioned him, he shouted across the gym, having no idea I was one of the top players on campus, "You ever play organized ball before?" To which I shot back something to the effect of, "As a matter of fact, yes. And I also learned the rules."

From that point until the season began, Jim and I rarely crossed paths. Two months later during practice, the incident I'd assumed long forgotten, Jim raced in on a two-on-one fast break, me the lone defender, and threw down a fierce one-handed dunk as I stood below. Running back up the court, he turned back to shout, "That's you, pussy!"

Times have changed since the late 1970s, trash-talking now more common. Yet the point wasn't the words but the heat. I took the ball from the net, cocked it at my shoulder to fire at his retreating form, but as I'm wont to do, thought better of it, instead passing to a teammate, and continuing the drill.

Over the years, I have had several encounters on the hoop court with volcanically angry dudes, sometimes white, sometimes black, but never before or since with a teammate over something that seemed so trivial. Yet, there's no question that in the instance of Jim Miller, and likely Bobby Colbert, the disagreements were fueled not merely by my aloof, seemingly untroubled nature, but by race. Just as they were black dudes to me, I must have been a white dude to them. Aloof, untroubled, irritating as hell.

V

Years later, once I'd gone to grad school in Boston (for an MA) and Utah (PhD), at both schools continuing to play intramural and pick-up hoops, I married Page, a mixed-race woman from East Hampton. Her dad is an African American born in the States to Jamaican émigrés, and her mother is of northern European descent. Our wedding was a festive gathering — with many of Page's relatives from her dad's side, and my side mostly white with a few black members mixed in. My sister Terry has four children with her black, Costa Rican husband.

Within a year, Page gave birth to our first child, Talia, and two years later, once we'd moved to California, to our second, Sebastian. Two more years later, Talia now four and Sebastian two, we completed the circle, moving from California back to East Hampton where I took a job at a posh new private high school.

Despite being more developed than when I'd grown up there, the East End, or The Hamptons, remained a difficult-to-reach resort area that was in many ways cut off from the wider world. Yet in other ways, it was less outlier and more microcosm, with its ever-widening class divide, having, on one hand, a perpetually increasing number of wealthy second homeowners, and on the other hand, a continual influx of LatinX laborers to provide the services they required.

Meanwhile, the number of working-class whites and blacks had steadily diminished, some dying off, while most of those who had obtained homes in what had become desirable locales — such places as Lazy Point, a bayside hamlet for fishermen, and Freetown, the historic settlement within the village limits of East Hampton — selling and moving away.

Still, despite the stark social stratification and changing demographics, the overwhelming affluence of the area created an economic bubble in which laborers had a clear path into management and ownership, and the four of us returned to a place that was, still, largely buffered from the tensions of the wider world.

VI

Page being, biologically, one-fourth black, our children at one-eighth (Talia's skin a bit darker than her brother's) grew up with their race rarely coming into question, which is to say, they grew up, by default, white. Still, there were moments that gave them pause, for Talia, the occasional "What are you?" questions from peers, and for both children, the limited options on the demographic sections of those early state-administered standardized tests, "mixed race" or "other" not yet being offered.

My children also received gentle reminders of their mixed-race heritage from their mother, especially when she would cart them off to New York City to visit her cousins, or to DC to visit Talia's godfather, all of whom were black.

In sum, both Page and I were pleased with the smooth introduction to race our children had and, aside from the occasional perplexing questions, they grew up without distress or confusion, Talia, in particular, embracing her role as oldest-child-problem-solver and taking any small bump in stride, always positive, bright, effervescent.

Until, that is, she went off to a large state university in Pennsylvania and saw the world through a wider lens, at which point the implications of those "What are you?" questions asked by friends, and by the state, as well as the occasional intimation by Page or one of her black relatives that being bi-racial was not a simple matter, began to rattle around in her conscience.

Then, about four years ago, the summer before her senior year, Talia had an experience that fully cemented her identity as a person of color.

She and her college roommate, a first-generation American born to Guatemalan immigrants, were on their way back from a spring break trip to Puerto Rico when, passing through rural Pennsylvania en route from the airport, they stopped at a McDonald's. Fresh off the beach, both Talia and her friend's skin had roasted from its normal pale-almond color to a bronzy-brown.

A white dude — nondescript, unshaven, wearing a baseball cap — standing at the register beside them said, not as a question but a statement, “Why don’t you go back to where you came from.” To which Talia’s friend responded, “This is where I came from, but thanks anyway,” at which point a second guy stepped over to the first and said, loud enough for the girls to hear, “I got my 12-gauge in the truck if we need it.”

For the first time in her life, Talia would later tell me, she felt she had not only been singled out because of her darker skin but was in actual physical danger because of it. It wasn’t even a matter of race, or ethnicity, not exactly. These men had no idea if the girls were Latina, African-American, Pacific Islander, Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, Caribbean, Native American — they only knew they were *something*.

The experience hit my daughter like a gut-punch. Now she knew, first-hand, not only what so many people of color have to face, but how insulated from this reality she, and the white people she’d grown up with, had been.

After hearing her tell the story, once my blood had settled, I couldn’t help but wonder if my own whiteness — my approach to race, my aloofness, my choice of where to live — had helped buffer her from a racialism which, despite my wishful thinking, had been growing more toxic rather than less, and if my daughter might, on some level, conscious or unconscious, hold this against me.

Yet as Talia recounted the incident to me over the phone, still processing what had happened, neither my race nor my attitude came up — in fact, *I* didn’t come up. What my daughter wanted, as she had told me before, and has told me since, was for me to simply listen — not to offer a remedy, or even reassurance, merely to listen. She herself would figure out how to work through this. All Talia wanted was for me, her father, to be there.

VII

My son, Sebastian, began disconnecting from the mainstream when he was still in elementary school, becoming friends with other outliers, mostly kids from low-income families, including several kids of color, a phrase that has broader meaning now with the proportion of LatinXers so much higher.

As a result of his early subversion of our East End class and race stratification, Sebastian never had an epiphany similar to his sister’s, and continues today as a 24-year-old who is every bit as fair-skinned as me, his blonde-haired, freckle-faced father, to move fluidly from his white friends to his black and brown ones.

Up until a few years ago, Sebastian and I played a lot of sports together, in the latter years mostly basketball. Sebastian is a gifted athlete who excelled in school sports until he opted out in 10th grade when the pressures of the long school day became too burdensome.

We continued playing ball together in the gym of the private school where I worked until I gave up teaching a few years ago. Along the way the two of us became avid NBA fans, maintaining an ongoing discussion about our favorite teams and players.

Sebastian's favorite players are often black, though lately a couple of Serbians have moved to the top of his list. What he admires most is brashness combined with grace — flair, swag. At the bottom of his list, often eliciting mockery and scorn, are the American white guys, who, with a few notable exceptions, lack the style and grit of the blacks and Serbs.

In the end, my son's antipathy for American white players has nothing to do with skin color, but is about bearing, style, attitude. Sebastian has always had contempt for authority — schoolteachers, administrators, police — anyone who enforces, upholds, or simply buys into a system that works for some but not others, and certainly not for him. In this sense, with his implicit distrust of the *status quo*, my fair-skinned son may, in some core way, be blacker than his darker-skinned sister.

Sometimes, when we have a disagreement, Sebastian, who has an extremely short fuse, will become especially annoyed with my reasoned calm. As I sit before him in our living room determined to maintain my composure, his voice will rise, his mode of argument shifting from logic to *ad hominem* as he claims how humiliated I must feel knowing I am wrong, that he can see my face growing red with embarrassment. And although I am positive my demeanor betrays none of what he claims, as the sniping continues, the frustration will begin to bubble up into my throat, and the blood into my face, my own anger rising to match the anger that has geysered in my son.

VIII

With strikingly different dispositions, yet each with the direct, on-the-ground view of our world that only the next generation can provide, my children remind me, sometimes gently, other times less so, of the fortress I have long lived in, the defenses forever reconstructing themselves; and too, they remind me it's okay to lower my guard, mix it up, get dirty — no, not okay, *necessary*.

In a country built from its inception upon a color-coded foundation, my mixed-race children remind me that if they are part-black then so too are they part-white, that just as Blackness has become reified, has become a thing, so too must Whiteness be a thing, a color on the same spectrum as the others, subject to the same social fluctuations and shifting political tides, no matter how debasing, how *beneath me*, this may seem.

My children remind me of the cruel paradox that race in America continues to represent — how skin color, a physical characteristic as benign as hair or eye color, has continually, perpetually, virally embodied our most malignant political impulses, resulting in a constitutive, baked-in, American racialism that *shouldn't* exist but does.

Yet, too, my mixed-race children remind me that just as this racialism continues to suffocate us, another paradox may yet offer deliverance. For in the simple act of acknowledging the insidious construct, of owning it, *inhabiting* it, entering my white body into the system we have wrought, our fundamental connectedness might yet be affirmed — Frosty and Gilbert seeing through my reticence; John Hudson pulling me into those cathartic roadside romps; Bobby and Jim challenging my aloofness; and my two children, not demanding so much as requiring that I join them where they live — down here, with them all, on the ground.

Shelby Raebeck, after growing up on the East End of Long Island in Amagansett, spent time studying, playing basketball (high school, college, and a lot of pick-up), teaching, coaching, and writing in such places as New York City, Boston, Virginia, Florida, Louisiana, Utah, and California. In 2000, he returned to the East End with his wife, Page, and their two children, Talia and Sebastian, where he taught English to 11th graders, and published the critically acclaimed *Louse Point: Stories from the East End*, which received a starred review from *Kirkus*, as well as two acclaimed novels, *Amagansett '84* and *East Hampton Blue*. With his children now grown, he currently resides in Salt Lake City where he'll be releasing (Sept. 2025) his new novel, *Wonderless*, a Gen-Z odyssey. He is also at work on two children's books and a memoir, *Playbook for Lost Souls*, from which "What Shouldn't Exist" has been adapted.