My Racism

"I'm just a soul whose intentions are good –
oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood."
-- Eric Burden and the Animals

I

"Passive Racism"

The New York Times recently ran an article on the controversy surrounding the name of the Washington Redskins, and whether it constitutes a racial slur. The article cited a survey of 504 Native Americans nationwide, who were asked whether they found the team's name offensive (90% did not), and considered the term "redskin" a slur (70% did not). The writer went on to explain the results in terms of "reclaimed epithets" – derogatory racial terms that are subsequently appropriated and used as markers of solidarity and resistance by members of the group against whom the slurs were originally aimed. The "n word", as it is now used by some African Americans, would be another example of a reclaimed epithet.

The article got me to thinking and wondering about some of my own attitudes. On the one hand, the whole idea of reclaimed epithets is, for some reason, reassuring to me. They seem to offer hope – naïve though it may be --

that over time, members of persecuted minorities can, through the power of the ironic imagination, master their persecutors, rise above their detractors, and achieve self-irony in the bargain. All of these possibilities are things to feel good about. (As with the Jews, I like to think, so with Native and African Americans.)

But then, after I'd sent the article to my son and a couple of friends, and begun talking it over with them in emails, I began to feel bad about feeling good. I mean, who was I to feel good about any of this? Who was I to feel reassured? I am clearly a beneficiary of white privilege. Our bigoted society, much as it has changed in many ways, is still set up for people like me. There is really no way I can honestly imagine my way into the actual experience of a person of color. Maybe the only reason I still believe in the power of the imagination to overcome barriers is because I am one of the "haves" who have set up – if only complicitly – those barriers in the first place. Furthermore, as was pointed out in our email exchange, my white sympathy and guilt are really irrelevant to the people at whom they are directed. My son was unsentimentally clear on this point, and his reaction made me feel – well, even more irrelevant. But not in a way

that relieved me of any responsibility. I still felt bad, but now I also felt bad for feeling irrelevant.

But I was well-intentioned, wasn't I? Yes – but it seems my intentions were irrelevant, too. As a white person, I was at best beside the point. And at worst?

At worst, I sometimes had thoughts about black people and Native Americans that focused on their differences from white people, and could be construed as stereotyping, "profiling" (as one of my friends pointed out), and patronizing. If the ideal was to strive to be "color-blind", then I was far from that ideal. I was all too color-aware. True, I consciously strove to think the best of people – all people, regardless of color or creed. That's the way I was raised by my parents, and this high-mindedness was deeply ingrained. But compared to my son, I was still color-aware, and this awareness … well, colored my thoughts.

And my actions? My image of myself was as a person who would never do or say anything bigoted; but if I were to be completely honest with myself, I would have to admit that this idea, too, had not been attained. In college, there had been two instances of what can only be called racial bigotry – one in word, and one in deed. And before that, when I was 13, I had stared at an interracial couple

in a restaurant in a way that was not well-intentioned, and the man, who was black, had called me on it. (I have written about these incidents in a previous book called Shame, and will not rehearse them here.) So I had not always even been well-intentioned. I was, in other words, in the category of what might be called a "passive racist".

But surely not. My father had marched in Selma in '65. I voted twice for Obama, with excitement and pride and righteousness the first time, and a sense of vindication the second. My mother and Aline, our African American housekeeper of 30 years, had been very, very close. (Perhaps you are wincing here, reader. That's OK; I am wincing too. I seem, in those last remarks, to be "protesting too much". And furthermore, I know it would have been better if we hadn't had an African American housekeeper. I was always a little sheepish about that, too. But would it have been better for Aline if she hadn't worked for us? Then she would have worked for someone else – probably another white family. Did that then exonerate us? If so, how, and from what?)

On the day my mother died, my father, wife and I were at Aline's funeral. Mom had seemed stable that morning when we left her with her caregivers (two Salvadoran women). But at the meal after the funeral, Diane had a bad

feeling, and said I should call home. When I did, Ada -- one of the caregivers -- told me that Mom was having trouble breathing. We rushed home to the Palisades from Compton, but we didn't make it in time; Mom had just died. She was lying in bed with her head propped up on a pillow, at a slight angle, her eyes half-open, unseeing. I remember my father telling me to run for a mirror to put under her nostrils, which I did; but there was no trace of breath. I will never quite forgive myself for not making it home in time, for not being with her when she died. But if I'd stayed home from Aline's funeral (where I spoke), I never would have forgiven myself either. I do know that Mom would have wanted us to be at the funeral (though we couldn't bring ourselves to tell her where we were going, or even that Aline had died).

Surely these are not the life-facts of a racist in the conventional sense of the word? But wait a minute. That's not the whole of the story, either. I once bought my mom a black ventriloquist's doll for Christmas, and named him Chester. (The present was an inside joke, meant to play to my mother's inveterate fear of ventriloquists' dummies.) Mom put him in the closet – but not before Aline saw him. Also, at the dinner table, when I was 14, I told a joke I'd just heard up at my friend's cabin in the mountains (his

parents were from Virginia) about a crazed black chef on the rampage in the moonlight with a meat cleaver. Aline was eating in the kitchen at the time. (That's bad, too. But she preferred to eat in the kitchen – that was her choice. But why did she prefer it? Did something we did, or said, or somehow projected, cause her to prefer it?) My mom had sensed, in her intuitive way, and before I had even started to tell it, that the joke was going to be bad. Acting on her intuition, she tried to stop me from telling it, but I wouldn't be stopped, and insisted afterwards that it wasn't racist.

OK, so all of this was bad -- but Chester and the black chef joke were the antics of an adolescent, and not to be taken seriously, right? Hmm…

II

My "Mascots"

And then there are the "mascots" to whom I am, at age 62, still unaccountably attached – the characters I mentioned when discussing the Redskins article over email with my son and friends: Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, the Cream of Wheat guy ("Rastus", I found out his name is, or at some point was), and the Banania guy (no name that I am aware of). In case

you don't know the Banania guy, he's the black mascot of a popular French chocolate-banana drink. He wears a fez and a sort of Zouave outfit, and says, "Y'a bon!" -- which I guess is the French equivalent of something like, "Dat's mighty fine!"

I say I am "unaccountably attached" to these mascots, but that's not really true. I think I can account for my attachment. At least I can try.

First of all, my attitude to them is "campy"; that is, it's self-consciously, ironically droll. Tongue-in-cheek. Amusement at one remove. I know these mascots are basically racist images, and I make that knowledge part of my amusement. In fact, I'm attached to them because they are so obviously racist. Not because I think racism is OK, or humorous, or otherwise excusable. It isn't any of those things; it's evil. But what I am attached to, I think, is the outrageousness of these images – the fact that someone, anyone, could ever think it was OK to create and promote them in the first place. Who first came up with the idea? Was it someone in an ad agency? The executives of the companies themselves? Whatever the case, they have clearly now become a part of history – a horrible history, but history nonetheless. (Is that "nonetheless" a cop-out, I wonder? This question is worth exploring further – but not

here.) These mascots originate from a time – how long ago? Maybe 70-80 years ago? A hundred?[1] – when some people; many people; many white people – thought it was OK to create them. And not only that it was OK, but that it was actually sort of good – good for business, for branding, and also maybe even that it was sort of reassuring -- to create them. And of course, some people – many people – also thought it was OK, or even good, to embrace demeaning images of black people. And it is that gap, between what was (presumably) OK then and what is OK now, that the camp sensibility registers, and finds its amusement in. Not in the racism per se, but in the historical-cultural gap in perceptions of what was acceptable. Camp acknowledges the horribleness of the images, without condoning it, or them – but without explicitly condemning them, either. ("It's good because it's awful," concludes Susan Sontag, in her classic 1964 essay, "Notes on Camp", referring to "the good taste of bad taste".) For to condemn these images would be not to appreciate the playful, ironic doubleness of camp – the perception that something can be horrible and funny at

[1] Wikipedia says that the Aunt Jemima logo dates from 1889, and is based on a stock character in minstrel shows. Cream of Wheat's "Rastus", based on chef Frank L. White, was created in 1893. The Banania guy, whose image depicts a generic Senegalese infantryman, first appeared in 1915. Uncle Ben, modeled on Chicago maître d' Frank Brown, is a latecomer (1946).

the same time. (Doubleness, after all, is at the basis of irony, too.) Camp asks us not to take these images completely seriously. It is tongue-in-cheek about the horribleness; it is arch; it is sophisticated, and knowing, and ironic.

Now some would say this combination of attitudes towards racist imagery is in fact rather hateful, and part of the problem. I can understand their position – and I partly share it. I am troubled by my campy attachments to Uncle Ben and Company. I wouldn't be writing about them if I weren't. (Let us not forget the Calumet Baking Powder Indian, either – unnamed, but he has the same birth year as the Aunt Jemima logo.) I mean, how much is campy, and how much is just another form of racism – all the more hateful for being arch and ironic? The campy humor of privilege – my privilege -- reeks of entitlement and complacency. Yes – but it also squirms with uneasiness: the self-conscious uneasiness of my sense of complicity in the underlying racism of these images; the uneasiness produced by the knowledge of my attitude's own doubleness and inauthenticity, its role-playing. ("Being-as-Playing-a-Role", as Sontag has it.) And perhaps, deeper still, its underlying guilt. The guilt that shows through the mask of camp.

I want to clarify something about the camp quality of these images. It's not the images themselves that are intended to be campy; they themselves are innocent, or at least naïve, in their ostensible blandness. (Sontag differentiates between "naïve" and "deliberate" camp. To illustrate the difference, you might think about the current use of "retro" images of popular design from the 50's and 60's. The very idea of "retro", in this sense, is self-conscious, contrived, and therefore campy from the outset.) It is rather my appreciation of them, my attitude towards them, that are campy. My attitude says, in effect: "Aren't these images in unconsciously bad taste? Aren't they unknowingly offensive to African and Native Americans? Is it not inappropriate [a word I normally abjure because of its prissiness, but am using here to signal my own political correctness, which does not entirely please me, either, but which, because I am a guilty white liberal, I cannot entirely disavow, either; political correctness seems to be one of the burdens that liberals are destined to carry] – is it not inappropriate to use the image of a member of a group that has suffered unspeakably to market a product to the public, a public that also includes members of that same group? And given all of this," my attitude says, "this bad taste, offensiveness, and inappropriateness

– isn't there also a way to look at these images that takes an ironic stance on all of their social, historical and cultural baggage? A way that says, 'See how our attitudes have changed, such that we can appreciate the distance between then and now? And the distance, also, between a person who would take these images 'straight' and a person who would find them humorous, for the reasons just given?'"

My attitude also says, "Look at me, and my relationship to these images. I am aware of all the baggage they carry. And I am aware of the disjunction between that baggage and the images' own blandness and (ascribed) benignity. The real people behind the fictitious personages depicted have actually been defrauded, terrorized, raped, mutilated and murdered – yet these fictitious personages show no sign of this treatment on their smiling faces. They are friendly, not angry or resentful; they are benign, even forgiving. (Or, in the case of the Calumet Indian, dignified – which is not at all the way his people (peoples, actually) were treated by the ancestors of many of the people buying this product.)"

Now you may ask, at this point, Am I overcomplicating things? Perhaps I am – although the phenomenon of camp is itself a rather complicated matter, as Sontag illustrates throughout her essay. (It contains 58 numbered "notes",

attempting to describe something that Sontag says has never been described in criticism before.) But in any case, the idea of complex, campy humor doesn't fully explain my attraction to Uncle Ben and company. This attraction is as much visceral as it is conceptual. For there is also the matter of "reassurance" that I mentioned earlier – a reassurance that is not felt ironically; or not entirely ironically, anyway. You see, I seek exculpation. I want to be forgiven. Forgiven for what? For being a "passive racist"? For being, in my lack of proactivism, part of the problem, rather than the solution? For being silently complicit? Yes – all of the above. And for being white and privileged. I feel guilty about all of this. Not guilty <u>of</u> it or <u>for</u> it, exactly, but guilty <u>about</u> it. Many horrible things have been done, and are continuing to be done, by white people to black people. And yet one wonders, in the touchingly artless words of Rodney King – one of the people to whom horrible things have been done, and with impunity -- "Can't we all get along?" And the images of Uncle Ben and company, you see, reassure me, in my white guilt, that we can. We can all get along.

III

The Plea

It is, of course, entirely ridiculous – this false and foolish and sentimental and not even really benign reassurance that I feel. I know that. I know I am fooling myself. Uncle Ben and company are a sentimental travesty, just like our after-the-fact – our after-the-horrible-genocidal-fact -- memorialization of the Indians. There is a strong argument for the abolition of all of these images – especially on the part of those with particular reason to be offended by them. And the fact that one Josh Gidding, beneficiary of white privilege, would be sentimentally, campily sorry to see them go, is certainly no argument for their continued existence.

Is there any argument at all then for their continued existence, other than the self-serving one of corporate branding? Yes, I believe that there is. But maybe it is really more of a plea than an argument; though to label it as such is to acknowledge its inherent polemical and moral weakness and vulnerability. As a plea, it kneels – somewhat in shame – at the feet of its moral superiors (the presumably "signified" of the images, the real peoples behind the mascots), and subjects itself to their judgment,

their greater moral superiority. And, like any plea, it is not to be ignored. Not necessarily to be granted – but not entirely to be ignored. Or, if it is ignored anyway, then at the peril of the moral integrity of the one appealed to.

What is the plea, then? What is the plea I am proposing on behalf of the continued existence of these mascots? The plea that would take the place of an argument? It is a plea, first of all, for self-irony, for not taking yourself too seriously. It is a plea on behalf of the value of reclaimed epithets. A plea for flexibility, for humor. For what Lord Byron called "mobility" – the ability of an individual to be different things to different people, to try on masks, to experiment with identity. To recognize that identity is a fluid, changeable thing.

Of course, I cannot tell anyone else what their attitude towards their own identity – ethnic, religious, historical – should be. I cannot tell anyone what their attitude to the history of their peoples – a history of oppression, persecution and genocide – should be. Not everyone is receptive to self-irony, or Byronic mobility; not everyone can laugh at themselves. And some are quicker to take offense than others. Who am I to tell them they are wrong? The world looks very different to the child of

privilege than to the child of struggle and oppression. Furthermore, I admit to feeling ashamed of my privileged status and perspective. While I cannot in good conscience renounce them – they helped to form me, and they too are deeply ingrained -- I certainly cannot embrace them, either. They are hardly something to be embraced.

Though in another sense I should, and can, and do embrace them, this status and perspective that my life of privilege has arbitrarily endowed me with. For my privilege gives me my congenital guilt, and my guilt keeps me honest. It is true, certainly, that guilt and shame – the burdens of guilt and shame – can and do make people lie. But that is only when they don't fully confront their guilt and shame. When their guilt and shame cause them to conceal and dissemble. My guilt and shame – the guilt and shame of my privilege – cause me to do the opposite: they cause me to spill my guts.

Now, this very well may be an unseemly and distasteful activity. But then I embrace those qualities, too, in the name of honesty. Do I, however, also commit a travesty in the name of honesty? Do I take the name of honesty in vain? It may be that in the eyes of some I do. Under the pretext of honesty I engage in unseemly gut-spilling. And that is one privilege, ironically, that the privileged are

not accorded: the privilege to be self-indulgent – to indulge in bad taste. The self-indulgence of the privileged is considered a kind of obscenity.

And I am certainly not here to claim further privileges – the privilege of self-indulgence, in this case – on behalf of the already-privileged. That would only add to the obscenity. So what exactly, then, am I here to do? Just to spill my guilty guts? Who wants to see that shit? Who wants to read that kind of confession? The confession of the poor little rich boy? There is a place, of course, in our culture for the confession of the poor little rich boy; but it is a place reserved for poor little rich boys who have fallen, with a resounding thud; who have disgraced themselves, somehow – through addiction, often, or some other degradation or public humiliation or scandal. But is there a place for the confession of the poor little rich boy who is not even that rich? Who was never really rich or famous to start with? Who has never been addicted to anything besides caffeine and pasta? Is there a place for the confession of the basically undistinguished? The person living a life of more or less quiet desperation?

Ah, but here I am fooling myself, too, for the voice of the quietly desperate is silent. There will, by definition, be no confession of the quietly desperate; they

suffer in silence. And I was certainly never either quiet or desperate. Neither of these qualities makes up any part of my profile. As I say, self-indulgence is closer to the mark.

Speaking of self-indulgence – of a kind of self-indulgence, anyway -- Blake wrote, "You never know what is enough until you know what is more than enough." And also: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." Wanting to know what will suffice – the all-out effort to determine what will suffice, by experimenting (paradoxically) with extremes of excess – would seem to be a project sanctioned by one of the great English poets. Not that this gives my self-indulgent project here any particular authority. No, not authority – but reassurance, perhaps. It puts me in good company. And reassurance in good company is something I'm looking for.

I've already mentioned that my mascots give me reassurance – the reassurance that I don't need to feel guilty for my white privilege, because the mascots are not angry, or resentful, or accusatory. This reassurance is part of their campy appeal – and therefore no real reassurance at all. For it is of an utterly dubious, false nature. The reassurance of stereotypes – factitious, sentimentalized and false stereotypes. And racist ones, at

that. And the reassurance of a racist stereotype is the opposite of reassurance; it is, rather, a condemnation of the very grounds of one's need for reassurance. One suspects oneself of latent racism, prejudice, false assumptions and wishes, and so one needs reassurance that one is not guilty of those very things that one knows, deep down, one is guilty of. One is guilty – say it, Josh – I am guilty of needing reassurance that I am not really what I know deep down that I am. And what is that? A racist?

Well, not exactly. But I am not exactly innocent of racism, either. I am what I have termed a "passive racist". Because I know that I am part of the problem. The white problem. The privileged white problem of not being part of the solution. Of being too conscious of differences – racial differences: physical, social, cultural – and not doing anything about my over-consciousness. Not challenging my sense of those differences, or asking whether they are relevant, or who – what sort of people -- they are adduced by in the first place, or how they are being used -- in the service of what, or whom, they are being brought forward.

So then, what exactly do we have here? A guilty white person – a privileged person suffering from free-floating white guilt, who is not involved in social activism of any

sort, whose intentions seem good, but who nevertheless suspects those intentions of having something not so good at their core, something perhaps disingenuous, hypocritical, condescending, patronizing, noblesse-oblige-driven (though he is hardly a member of the nobilité – if there is even such a thing in America -- white privilege notwithstanding) – and who sees and acknowledges the inherent racism in his attachment to Uncle Ben & company, but is still attached to them anyway, and doesn't want to see them taken out of commission.

What to make of all this? Mere misguided sentimentality, tinged with a kind of benign racism? And is there even such a thing as "benign racism"? Isn't that sort of like "benign neglect"? Spurious concepts invoked by people with suspect motives? And just what are my motives, anyway?

IV

Scars

In regards to my mascots, maybe it's a case of wanting to have my cake and eat it too. Of wanting to enjoy the camp value of my mascots without being thought, by others or myself, to be in any way racist, condescending,

patronizing, etc. This is another aspect of the "doubleness" I was talking about earlier. I want to find a way to enjoy the campy appeal of my mascots without having to carry around, or be complicit in, any of the racist baggage associated with these images. But I'm not sure this is possible, which is where my uneasiness comes in.

Then again, I'm not sure our motives in this life are ever really pure – except maybe in our love for our children; and maybe not even then. After all, we can't help seeing our children as reflections on ourselves, so how could our feelings about them, or our motives regarding them, ever really be pure? Feelings and motives are different, though. True, but they also influence one another, and neither of them – feelings and motivations regarding our children – can ever really be pure, if only because we can never really entirely separate our children from ourselves. And if we cannot have pure motives about our children, what can we have pure motives about? Certainly not our mascots. So maybe I shouldn't feel so bad.

Still, one would like one's pleasures to be innocent – some of them, anyway. At least I would. I would like to have some pleasures that are innocent – what I call "blameless". But it seems my pleasures in my mascots are

not destined to be among the blameless ones. And perhaps that is as it should be. Another thing that keeps me honest.

But now I'm just spinning my wheels. Get back on track, Josh. So what was my track? Guilt, innocence, blamelessness, blame. Racism – passive variety. Complicity. What a mess. Just get rid of them – all of the mascots. What would we be losing? Just a lot of pain, marked by scars.

Scars. Of the body politic, social and historical. The scars of our history, covered over – or trying, still trying to be covered over, by the perpetrators of the scars, or their descendants (some of them, anyway), by putting smiles on the faces of Aunt Jemima, and Uncle Ben, and "Rastus", and the Banania guy. (Notice, too, Aunt Jemima's pictorial progression from black minstrel mammie, with the kerchief and the cartoon face, to the much lighter-skinned, supposedly more dignified, executive-chef-like contemporary personage. Ah, the vicissitudes and permutations of Aunt Jemima! But still smiling. Always smiling. Still not angry. Still reassuring. Still exculpatory. Not your fault, Josh – not your fault at all.)

But the scars, too, are still there – in the very continuation of the mascots, persistent in the face of objections to their existence. Persistent, like the memory of a bad dream – this one no dream at all, but the reality of history. The scars of our history. What human beings did to other human beings. African Americans. Americans. Our fellow-Americans. ("Mah fellow-Amurricans…") Our fellow-human beings. The scars of the whippings. The lynchings. The mutilations. The murders. The scars of all the crimes.

That's what my mascots really are – the scars of all the crimes. (Including mine. Petty crimes, perhaps, but a sort of crimes nonetheless. Things for which I feel guilty, and am both punishing myself and atoning for – or attempting to atone for – by writing this essay.) My mascots are not the only scars, to be sure, nor the most egregious, by a long shot – but they are scars nonetheless. Scars of the history that will never go away. That can never go away. That should never go away. My white liberal conscience assures me of this.

"Mit welchem Recht?" (as Freud reportedly once said to Jung, in anger). "With what right?" With what right do I claim a say in someone else's scars? What right do I have to say what they should do with their scars – wear them, or

expunge them? Is it not up to African Americans themselves – the descendants of Frank Brown, and Frank L. White, and all the real people referenced so blithely by the images of Uncle Ben & Company – is it not up to them to say whether these images should live or die? They, and only they, have the right to give the thumbs up or down to these racial gladiators. My own sentiments do not even enter into the contest. I happen to believe that scars, the marks of wounds sustained – the wounds of an agonizing reality – should not be removed. But what place do I have to tell someone else what to do with their scars? None at all.

And there you have it. The images I call "my mascots" are really somebody else's scars, over which I have absolutely no claim, or right, or privilege. Just a sentimental attachment. And now that I see these images as scars, I can't even honestly say that I am really all that attached to them. What right do I have to be?

Certainly, we all have our scars. But other people's are not mine, and mine are not theirs. Mine are the scars of privilege – theirs, of oppression. I wear mine as the marks of my self-loathing, and the vehicle of my self-expression. (This essay itself is a scar – a record of my self-laceration.) I have no right to tell anyone else what to do with theirs. But really, there can and ought to be

no comparison between the two kinds of scars. Mine are mere nicks and scratches, theirs the remembrancers of a life-and-death struggle that continues into today – and tomorrow.

But wait a minute – again. Wait just another minute. The rhetoric of that last paragraph is surely overblown. And does it help to make invidious comparisons between different kinds of scars – and even different kinds of suffering? Can we not also say that suffering is suffering, regardless of the different forms it takes? Sure, we can say that – but distinctions must still be made. The sorts of distinctions signaled, say, by the phrase "first-world problems". To make a distinction, then, between "white people's problems" and "black people's problems" is not to say that whites and blacks don't share many problems in common – poverty, broken families, poor education, unemployment, under-employment, addiction, etc. But white privilege, and racism, are still facts of life for black people in our country, facts that whites simply cannot understand in the same way that blacks do, because they do not experience them in the same way that blacks do. Nicholas Kristof, in The New York Times, has written eloquently on this – on how many whites, including many well-intentioned whites, just "don't get it": don't

understand the experiential particularity of the "Black Lives Matter" movement. Distinctions must be made, and the particularity of black racial experience must be preserved.

There is another sense, though, in which – even if another's scars can never be mine, just as another's experience or suffering or hurts can never be mine – we can try to bridge the experiential gap, and regard the scars of another as if they were ours. We can make the leap of imagination, the empathic imagination, and try to feel what another is feeling, what they have felt, even though we know there will always be that inevitable breach in experience and identity. The scars I see on another, which are the result of injuries sustained in a battle I myself might have fought, might have had to fight, but for the grace of God, as they say – those become my scars, too. That is to say, I imagine them into being my scars, too. And so, in this sense, my attachment to Uncle Ben & Company becomes not just a campy conceit, but something quite different. It becomes an attachment to – and even an affirmation of -- my own scars, too. The scars of the racism I might have experienced, had I been born black instead of white. And the scars of the racism I have been guilty of, in my own thoughtless ways. The scars of false assumptions, stupid jokes, condescending and insulting

attitudes. The scars created by a lack of empathy on my part, which a subsequent (perhaps undeserved) gift of empathy now allows me to feel as my own.

Blake, once again, said it best, in his poem "London":

> In every cry of every Man,
> In every Infants cry of fear,
> In every voice: in every ban,
> The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

This is another instance of Blake's characteristic call for empathy – for the use of the empathic imagination. The "mind-forg'd manacles" Blake invokes here are his metaphor for the idea that tyranny – the many ways in which human beings enslave each other – originates in the mind (that is, the imagination) of the tyrant, as well as the mind of the person he is tyrannizing over. Blake is not blaming the victim; he is, rather, expressing the thought that slavery – the enforced subjection of one person's body to another person's will – begins in the imagination: the imaginations of both slaver and enslaved. To use another Blakean locution, one person "imposes" on another – imposes their ideas, the products of their imagination, upon another, and physical domination follows. An "imposition", for Blake, is an act of both mental and physical domination.

But the imposition affects the imposer, too. The "manacles" created in the mind of the imposer have an effect on that mind. We share in the image of what we imagine. The enslaver is imbruted by his actions, just as his mind is polluted by his conceptions – his imaginings. In that sense, destructive thoughts and actions are also self-destructive: the suicide-bomber; the murderer turning his gun on himself. (Too late for their victims, though.)

This dynamic, it seems to me, also holds for scars, and those who inflict them. Of course, to say that the inflicter of the scar also wears it metaphorically on the inside is of no help to the person who suffers the scar, both inside and out. And the wounds that caused those scars are certainly very different. But yes, we all have our scars – each different, particular, personal – but also common and historical. My historical scar, for instance, is that white Americans enslaved black Americans, and committed genocide against Native Americans. This is sort of like the "German scar": German people were both active and complicit in the extermination of Jews. The German nation as a whole carries that scar, and always will, just as the American nation carries the scars of slavery and genocide, and always will. And my personal scar is that I am guilty of bigoted thoughts, words and actions. My inner

personal scar is my memory; my outer personal scar is my mascots. I keep them near me as a reminder of what I have thought, said and done. I know I cannot speak for anyone else – certainly not for African and Native Americans, and not even for other guilty white liberals, either. I speak for myself, of and through my own scars. If others hear me and identify, so much the better. But to take away the scars – the offending images – is also to try to conceal the offense, to get beyond history, and that is both impossible and dangerous. Long live my mascots – dubious though their conception and birth were. They are, they have become, the vulnerable children of history. A dubious history, to be sure – but it is ours. Let us own it, and move on, into a different one.