

Thoughts Prompted by “Rich Men North of Richmond: Including One About Celebration

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I've been especially taken by the “Rich Men North of Richmond” phenomenon that's so big in the news these days (it's late August of '23). As you know—no need for a lot of exposition here—it's a song by a heretofore unknown singer/songwriter who goes by the name of Oliver Anthony. As [*The New York Times*](#) I read every morning online put it:

The unadorned video suddenly appeared on social media earlier this month: a young man with a bushy red beard and a guitar in a backwoods locale, dogs at his feet and bugs buzzing in the background. In an impassioned drawl, he sings a country-folk anthem about selling his soul “working all day,” and being kept in his place by inflation, high taxes and the elites he holds responsible: “Rich Men North of Richmond.” On Monday, hardly a week after the song's release, the previously unknown songwriter and one-time factory worker who performs as Oliver Anthony made an unprecedented leap straight to No. 1 on the Billboard singles chart topping pop superstars like Taylor Swift and Olivia Rodrigo as well as established country crossover acts including Morgan Wallen and Luke Combs.

I checked out the “[unadorned video](#)” and the lyrics.

I've been sellin' my soul, workin' all day
Overtime hours for bullshit pay
So I can sit out here and waste my life away
Drag back home and drown my troubles away

It's a damn shame what the world's gotten to
For people like me and people like you
Wish I could just wake up and it not be true
But it is, oh, it is

Livin' in the new world
With an old soul
These rich men north of Richmond
Lord knows they all just wanna have total control

Wanna know what you think, wanna know what you do
And they don't think you know, but I know that you do
'Cause your dollar ain't shit and it's taxed to no end
'Cause of rich men north of Richmond

I wish politicians would look out for miners
And not just minors on an island somewhere
Lord, we got folks in the street ain't got nothin' to eat
And the obese milkin' welfare

Well, God, if you're 5-foot-3 and you're 300 pounds
Taxes ought not to pay for your bags of fudge rounds
Young men are puttin' themselves six feet in the ground
'Cause all this damn country does is keep on kickin' them down

Lord, it's a damn shame what the world's gotten to
For people like me and people like you
Wish I could just wake up and it not be true
But it is, oh, it is

Then I watched a [YouTube of the audience](#) watching Anthony's performance of the song and read analyses and commentaries online (for example, [here](#) and [here](#)).

This writing sketches out what came up for me as I took all of this in and what I think it implies for white advocacy discourse, the sort that appears in webzines like this one.

Something about me that will help make sense of what I'm going to be putting out here: I've been scrubbed up and papered over by my advanced schooling and middle-class persona and an academic career, but beneath the veneer—I'm seeing this more and more—I'm still the product of my working class/low-income beginnings. (I'm not going to distinguish here between working class and low income; especially these years, they mix up for me and I'm just going to leave it like that.)

My dad was a barber with very little schooling growing up in the rural South who barely got by in any case and his gambling problem made things worse. Dad and Mother (Mother, not Mom, never thought about it) and I lived at 354 Duke Street in Saint Paul, Minnesota between Schmidt's beer brewery on one side and the city hospital on the other. We rented the upstairs rooms of the home of "Mr. Jensen," as Dad called him, who occupied the first floor with his wife and teenage children Bob and Mary Jean. I grew up to a chorus of the sirens of ambulances rushing to the hospital and Bob and Mary Jean practicing their accordions. Do you by any

chance know the song “Lady of Spain,” where you shimmy the accordion for effect? I sure do.

The only thing I can remember about Mr. Jensen is he had one brown eye and one blue eye. Or is that possible? I swear I remember Mother mentioning it and looking at them, one blue one, one brown one. We almost had to move that time when Mr. Jensen told Dad we’d have to find someplace else to live because Mary Jean was getting married and wanted to live where we were until she could find a better place and that was scary, but then it was OK because Mary Jean changed her mind and we could stay.

Watching the video of “Rich Men North of Richmond,” I picked up the basic idea of the song, but even after reading the lyrics, the particulars pretty much got by me. The big thing I related to was the intensity of Anthony’s voice, bordering on a shout. And “people like me and people like you,” that came through and I connected with it in a visceral way.

An even stronger reaction was to the video of people listening to a live performance of his song. They were the kind of white people you see at stock car races and minor league baseball games like I went to with Mother and Dad. They were pumping their arms and singing along with the song and recording it with their cell phones and celebrating the occasion, *their* occasion, and themselves and their lives and, so I felt, me and my life. There I was, late in life, all alone on this couch I spend my days on, tears welling up, celebrating right along with them. I was joyous and I’m never joyous.

All this was a special enough experience for me to want to write about what came out of it and I thought I was done writing about anything.

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To the degree I’m known at all, it’s for my white racial advocacy writing, books and articles.¹ Sitting here the last couple days after taking in all that about “Rich Men North of Richmond,” it’s hit me how much my writings over the years have dealt with social class along with race. I’ll list illustrations of that from the vast number of possibilities that are coming to me in waves sitting here typing this up.

Back in the early ‘90s, I wrote a book on kids and sports that included this:

Last week I was watching a comic do his routine on a late-night television talk show [Letterman]. The comic had performed in a small town in Alabama and was relating his experience there as part of his act, which included mocking the "backward" white

speech and going on about how dumb and out of touch they all were. In one of his jokes, he said we should send dentists and doctors down to those people: dentists to fix their teeth and doctors to castrate them. This brought torrents of laughter from the audience.²

This was as much about class as race. Letterman's comic wasn't talking about white attorneys in Birmingham or Atlanta, he was talking about the white people in places like Deep Step, Georgia where my dad was from. And this was a white guy saying this.

Another illustration, from a book of interviews I put together called *One Sheaf, One Vine: Racially Conscious White Americans Talk About Race*. The class resentment of this interviewee comes through loud and clear:

People who think of themselves as enlightened and on the moral high ground in matters of race write off people like me as ignorant racists. Unlike them, so it goes, we pre-judge people. If only we were exposed to racial and ethnic diversity, we would learn to value different kinds of people—etcetera, etcetera, you've heard the line. You'll notice that most of these people doing the pontificating and finger pointing about racial equality and harmony and the virtues of integration and multi-racialism do it from the far distance of the leafy suburbs or a university campus somewhere. The fact of the matter is that, unlike practically all of them, I have lived close up with the reality of race in America. And regardless of what they might like to think, I am not stupid or unenlightened or their moral inferior. The people who look down their noses at people like me should come live for a year or two or three where my family and millions of other white families live. Let their children grow up and go to school in this pigsty and be threatened and attacked and robbed and raped. Then they can talk.³

My concern for lower social status white people prompted me to write about the tragedy of opioid addiction, not your usual topic in white racial dialogue and debate.

Big news currently is that opioid use among white people has risen dramatically in recent years. It particularly breaks my heart to see this happen with kids, so new to the world, so suggestible, so precious.⁴

This same concern led me to stress the necessity of self-help in a world where the powerful are disdainful of working class and low-income whites and indifferent to their fate. In an article about '20s president Calvin Coolidge, I wrote:

I'll venture a guess that Calvin Coolidge would approach the current opioid crisis with this message (I'm far more verbose here than he would be, but this is what he would get across): "If you are destroying your life with opioids and in the process hurting those close to you, I care deeply about what's going on with you. But I'm going to level with you. All the government programs in the world aren't going to save you from opioids. If it's going to happen, you are going to have to save yourself. The way to get clear of your opioid self-abuse is to stop taking opioids. It comes down to that. And you can do it. It might be difficult at first, but you are going to see that you are able to center your life around building yourself up rather than tearing yourself down. And when you do that, you'll be proud of yourself and the people in your life will be proud of you."⁵

From a review I wrote of the movie "Moneyball." This quote is about race, but it is also about class:

None of [heroes] Beane/Brand's maneuvers go over with the [villains] crusty A's scouts and their beer-bellied field manager, Art Howe. It's important to note in this context that these are white guys; there is something really white about the antagonists in "Moneyball," it jumps out. In fact, they are archetypal white guys: from small town or rural backgrounds or the South and of the sort likely to be fundamentalist Christians.⁶

And there's this from three movie reviews I included in an article called "Three Fine Films":

What tied these three films together for me is that they were all compelling dramas about the lives of the white working poor, people rarely the protagonists in contemporary cinema.⁷

From a recent article called "The American Political System and White Racial Discourse" which argued for the American constitutional republican form of government in contrast to a democracy:

Ironically given how it is pitched as putting the masses in charge of their fate, democracy paves the way for minority control. Among

the possibilities: resentful, revengeful, and exploitive anti-white ethnic and racial elements; self-anointed media elites: kowtow-to-me grievants and scolds; I'll-handle-it managers and bureaucrats; paid-off and intimidated politicians; and bullshitters.⁸

This year, in a reply to a newspaper reporter writing an article about the scary activities of the Nationalist Social Club, a white activist group with a predominantly working-class membership:

Groups like the Nationalist Social Club differ from most white nationalists, who tend to be talkers, headier, and not in-your-face, street-oriented confronters. Personally, I wouldn't be threatened around these people [the reporter had asked me if I would feel threatened around them]—perhaps you can point out examples of actual violence they've perpetrated I don't know about. And the truth, it's gratifying for me to see white people standing up for themselves.⁹

I picked up on the last sentence of this quote, about it being gratifying for me to see white people—lower social status white people in particular--standing up for themselves. I'm realizing as I go along here that I'm standing up for myself right now with this writing, and for Mother and Dad, who took crap all their lives from the supposed finer folk.

Seven years ago, I wrote this about the Vermonters I have lived and worked with for a half century:

As far as I can tell, Vermonters these years possess no particular cultural or geographic identity, no allegiance to a tradition or way of life, no feeling of obligation to their ancestors to keep anything going or build on anything. It seems that there's been a cultural as well as political transformation in this state in the time I've been here [prime examples, New York transplants Ben and Jerry with their ice cream and Bernie Sanders].¹⁰

The reflections prompted by Oliver Anthony's song, and before that, Jason Aldean's "Try That in a Small Town," have led me to conclude that back then I may well have missed a deeper, positive, reality.

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So what am I left with? Three thoughts/feelings:

The first is hope. Those of us expressing ourselves in the public arena about white racial matters can get mired in ain't-it-awful fatalism and pessimism. Without realizing it, we buy the message from our adversaries, "It's all over for you, we're in charge now and that will never change, so put up with it, over on the side." We need to be vigilant not to fall into that hole.

The second is to keep class and income in mind as we think about and express ourselves around race. Whites aren't a uniform whole; we're not all alike. We get through our lives one at a time, as the people we uniquely are and in our particular circumstance. The challenges and ways forward for one white person are not necessarily the same as those of another white person. We all know that, but sometimes we don't take it into account enough or at all.

The third is the need to do something I referred to early on in this piece: celebrate our lives and ourselves. As I was putting together the quotes that comprise this writing, I came across a letter to the editor by a former student of mine he sent to a newspaper that had published a "racist professor menace" article about me that generated a barrage of "Yeah, get him!" comments. Here's an excerpt from that letter.

In a private conversation, Professor Griffin encouraged me to never allow anyone to make me feel ashamed of where I came from. I was a rural farm boy in the enlightened university. I think Professor Griffin only asks that everybody play by the same rules. If we can encourage black youths in urban areas not to be ashamed of their heritage, we ought to tell rural farm boys like me the same thing. This was the exact opposite message that I received in the university's mandatory race and culture class, where I was made to be more ashamed on my skin color than I ever thought possible.

In the grand scheme of things, this letter to a newspaper doesn't matter for much of anything beyond making me feel better about my life and myself this Friday morning. I hope what I did matters to my former student and to some people who read his comment, but even if it only matters to me, that matters, because I matter (coming from where I've come from, it has taken me a long, long time to realize that).

To end this writing, how about right now you think of some good thing you have done in your life—in any area, big or small, whenever it was--and its positive consequences. Celebrate that.

Endnotes

1. My best-known writing is the book about the white advocate William Pierce published over two decades ago, [*The Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds*](#), 1stBooks Library, 2001. And here's an archive of short writings on the Occidental Observer webzine site. <https://www.theoccidentalobserver.net/author/robert-s-griffin/>
2. As quoted in Robert S. Griffin, [*Living White: Writings on Race 2000-2005*](#), AuthorHouse, 2006, p. 8.
3. Robert S. Griffin, [*One Sheaf, One Vine: Racially Conscious Americans Talk About Race*](#), 1stBooks Library, 2004, 154-155.
4. "[Addictions: An Example of the Interplay of the Public and Private](#)," Robert S. Griffin, *The Occidental Observer*, November 8, 2017.
5. "[Where is Calvin Coolidge When We Need Him?](#)" Robert S. Griffin, *The Occidental Observer*, posted March 30, 2019.
- 6 "["Moneybull": An Inquiry into Media Manipulation](#)," Robert S. Griffin, *The Occidental Observer*, posted December 1, 2017.
7. "[Three Fine Films](#)," Robert S. Griffin, *The Occidental Observer*, posted January 2, 2021.
8. "[The American Political System and White Racial Discourse](#)," Robert S. Griffin, *The Occidental Observer*, posted December 13, 2022.
9. "[An Exchange with a Newspaper Reporter](#)," Robert S. Griffin, *The Occidental Observer*, posted July 28, 2023.
10. "[From a Chat to Metapolitics](#)," Robert S. Griffin, *The Occidental Observer*, posted September 7, 2016.