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LOOKING FOR GOD AND RACISM IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

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AND

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In his legendary novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez writes of a mythical town called Macondo and its mythical founding family, the Buendias. Built by the side of a river in the middle of a jungle, Macondo remained isolated for many years—its only contact with the rest of the world: a band of travelling gypsies who would visit the town once a year and bring with them the wonderful inventions of science and civilization. One day the gypsies arrive in Macondo with a daguerreotype camera and laboratory. Jose Arcadio Buendia, the founder of the town and a man of extravagant imagination, becomes fascinated by the new invention and resolves to use it to obtain scientific proof of the existence of God. He sets up the camera in different parts of his house during different times of the day, convinced that through a complicated process of multiple and superimposed exposures he will finally capture a scientific representation of the image of God. Why he wants proof of God and what he intends to do with that proof should he find it, we do not know. In any event, his experiment fails, he does not find proof of God and, in his frustration, he goes mad and ends up spending the rest of his life tied by the waist to the trunk of a tree, speaking in tongues which only he understood.

In 1991 and 1992, America—mostly white America—watched the videotape of the beating of Rodney King, searching its darkly-lit images for proof of the persistence of racism and race hatred in this country, with the same sort of mad intensity and pointless dedication that Jose Arcadio Buendia used to search for the existence of God in the silvery images of daguerreotype photographs. And, just as Jose Arcadio Buendia could not find an image of God no matter how many daguerreotype photographs he took and no matter how many exposures he devised, many white Americans, no matter how many times or how many different ways they watched the videotape, could not seem to see that the five white policemen beat the black motorist simply because he was black.

In fact, the more some white Americans watched the videotape the less they were willing to believe that the beating was the product of race-hatred. During the first few weeks of news coverage of the beating, as

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Rodney King's injuries were paraded on television, the popular consensus was: "My god! How could something like this have happened in America?" In the months that followed, after the tape was dissected on endless talk shows and after the details of Rodney King's criminal past began to surface, the popular response was downgraded to: "Well, maybe we do not really know why this happened." Until finally, after the tape was reconstructed frame by frame by frame in a courtroom in Simi Valley California, and after the jury was told that Rodney King grunted like a bear as he was being beaten, the perhaps not uncommon reaction became: "You know, those policemen may have had a good reason to use force after all."

One wonders about the moral cowardice—to say nothing of the intellectual incoherence—it must have taken to make the journey from: "My God! How could something like this have happened?" to: "You know, these policemen may have a good reason to use force after all." But it is a journey many white Americans took; and a very short journey at that. For the original cri-de-coeur: "My God! How could something like this have happened in America?" was not so much an expression of outrage against an act of clear injustice as it was a fatuous reaction of near disbelief in response to a seemingly inexplicable event. In the eyes of many white Americans, the beating of Rodney King became an aberration, rendered all the more unreal for being replayed nightly on television. They were unable or unwilling to look at the beating through the corridor of American history, to place it in the context of present-day American society or to relate it to their daily American lives. In other words, for many white Americans, the beating of Rodney King was not a haunting sequel to the widespread lynching of blacks in the south during the first half of this century, it was not a vivid parallel to the imprisonment of a third of the young black male population in America in 1992 and it was not even a cruel magnification of the brutalization of millions of black children in inadequate schools in almost every city in this country. Instead, it was a single, isolated, disconnected and ultimately irrelevant event.

Derrick Bell, a law professor who brings to legal discourse the same magical realism that Gabriel Garcia Marquez brings to Latin American fiction, writes in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, that in America "racism lies at the center, not the periphery; in the permanent, not in the fleeting; in the real lives of black and white people, not in the sentimental caverns of the mind." The beating of Rodney King could and should have led Americans to grapple with the racism that lies at the center, in the permanent and in the real lives of black and white people. It did not. Instead, we saw the beating of Rodney King as peripheral, fleeting and unreal. Like Jose Arcadio Buendia searching for evidence of God in daguerreotype photographs and finding none, we searched for evidence of racism in the Rodney King beating and also found none.

Of course, Jose Arcadio Buendia did not have to look for God in the images of daguerreotype photographs. One supposes that he could

have found some evidence of God in the miracle of Macondo, that magical town by the side of the river in the middle of the jungle, or he could have found evidence of God in the love of his family, who after all, took care of him in his madness with a devotion his extravagant search for God had not earned him. In short, he could have found evidence of God in the reality of his own life. Similarly, Americans did not have to look for evidence of racism in the videotape images of the beating of Rodney King. In the words of Derrick Bell, white Americans could have found such evidence at the center, in the permanent, and in their real lives; for example: in the still segregated neighborhoods in which many they live, in the still segregated schools to which many send their children, in the still race-based manner in which many vote and in the still racially-unbalanced places where many work, meet and worship.

That we are somehow unwilling to look for evidence of racism in our real lives means simply this: we, as a people, are still imprisoned by the myths we manufactured in order to evade the moral and political dilemma we engendered when, in August 1619, John Rolfe made that prophetic entry into the journal of Jamestown, Virginia: "about the last of August, there came to Virginia a Dutchman of Warre that sold us twenty negers." From that moment on, most everything white Americans claimed to believe about black Americans represented myths to justify their enslavement, their segregation, their repression or their inequality. We justified slavery with the myth of "the less than human negro." We justified segregation with the myth of "the happy and contented negro." We justified the repression of the civil rights movement with the myth of "the violent and communist negro." Now we justify the built-in injustices of American society with the myth of the "equal negro." But, of course, the myths we create never quite managed to completely suspend reality, and judging from the acquittal of the policemen who beat Rodney King and the ensuing civil unrest in Los Angeles, the current myth of the "equal negro" is proving equally lame.

"We are capable of bearing a great burden," James Baldwin used to say, "once we discover that the burden is reality and arrive where reality is." The reality of which he spoke is the reality of racism in America. And, the burden he seemed convinced we are capable of bearing is the burden of facing and eradicating that racism. But, if the beating of Rodney King proved anything, it is that we have not yet truly discovered the reality of racism in this country. The question then becomes how are we to bear the burden of facing and eradicating it. This question is posed—and this essay is offered—without bitterness and without despair, if only because one realizes after all that as a people we have always managed to eventually arrive where reality is. Granted, sometimes we have been dragged to that place while kicking and screaming, and sometimes we have merely blundered into it. But sooner or later, one way or another, we have gotten there. So there is no reason now to suppose that we cannot get there again.

The essays included in this collection represent in some way the

beginning of discovering the reality of the beating of Rodney King. Remembering the premonitory chants of the Los Angeles civil unrest: "No Justice! No Peace!" it is a reality which we can no longer afford to ignore.