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*Think Piece
What's the Matter with What's the Matter with Kansas
or Why Liberal Whites Worry Black Progressives.
by Tyrone Simpson*

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The most compelling evidence that half of the nation's electorate has raised arms against the other in what author Thomas Frank refers to as "The Great Backlash" comes not necessarily from pop pundits hired to encourage the revolt like Sean Hannity and Ann Coulter, but from the testimony of a less polished commentator like John Rucker, the once brazen Atlanta Braves relief pitcher who was impelled by a heated sports rivalry to voice the rage ostensibly responsible for the ascendancy of our present president. In a 1999 interview with a *Sports Illustrated* reporter, Rucker made clear that his antipathy toward the New York Mets went beyond the distaste that develops between athletic antagonists to a complete revulsion for his opponents' sponsoring city and the degenerate culture that it fostered and contained.

Fulminating so ardently and adroitly in what Frank labels the "plen-T-plaint" ("a curious amassing of petty, unrelated beefs with the world [liberals have created]") that it would cause Rush Limbaugh to fear for his job – or congratulate himself on how effectively he has performed it – Rucker shrieked about the inimitable horror of living in such a place. "It's the most hectic, nerve-racking city. Imagine having to take the Number 7 train to the ballpark, looking like you're [riding through] Beirut next to some kid with purple hair next to some queer with AIDS right next to some dude who just got out of jail for the fourth time right next to some 20-year old mom with four kids. It's depressing."

Were his effusions to conclude there, Rucker could have escaped the interview with the charge of being a law-abiding nationalist who clung to the banner of family values with too much zeal – a perfect acolyte for the Republican Party. But the then 24-year-old native of Statesboro, Georgia was not finished. "The biggest thing I don't like about New York are the foreigners. I'm not a very big fan of foreigners. You can walk an entire block in Times Square and not hear anybody speaking English. Asians and Koreans and Vietnamese and Indians and Russians and Spanish people and everything up there. How the hell did they get in this country?" Rucker's remarks, as could be expected, were greeted with the most robust Bronx cheer that New Yorkers could muster. They also propelled the pitcher to the status of pariah among Americans, baseball enthusiasts or not, who possessed more cosmopolitan propensities. But it is not merely Rucker's invidious commentary that distinguishes the pitcher as the type of "backlasher" that has contorted political

progressivism into the uneasy and desperate prospect that it is (or should be) today. The insights Rocker has derived about himself from the public's sustained denunciation of his prejudices should also cause "liberals" a great deal of angst.

Earlier this year, while plying his trade with a minor league team (located, in of all places, Long Island, New York) in an attempt to rejuvenate his languishing professional career, Rocker claimed that "a lot of maturing ha[d] been done" since he made his impolitic proclamations six years ago and as a result, he had his due fill of admonishments. Any further calumniations directed his way, Rocker suggested, would tip into the realm of the gratuitous. He griped, "I've taken a lot of crap from a lot of people, probably more than anybody in the history of the sport. I know Hank (Aaron) and Jackie (Robinson) took a good deal of crap but I guarantee it wasn't for six years. I just keep thinking, how much am I supposed to take?" Rocker's utterances over the past six years suggest that he has traveled rather swiftly through the attitudinal stages that many Americans experienced in response to the cultural challenges proffered by progressive groups in the 1960s, and by doing so, speak to the very essence of the "backlash" Thomas Frank seeks to understand. In 1999, quite like the Americans who were beguiled by the fantasy of cultural homogeneity in the decade following World War II, Rocker saw those citizens who exhibited any personal difference in comportment from the white, heterosexual, Anglophone to which the pitcher was accustomed as abnormal and un-American. After enduring a protracted period of innumerable censures from the press and the public (the Sixties protest movements should be seen as one large, dramatic censure to such a narrow conception of American identity), Rocker dismisses his former convictions by means of a progress narrative, in which time and (harsh) counsel has divested him of the troglodytic prejudices that afflicted him in his youth. No vestiges of his former way of thinking remain; criticism and the clock have cleansed his soul of bigotry. Rocker's ideological evolution, like that of much of the American populace, culminates in indignation and a curious racechange. The continuing circumspection and criticism that the pitcher encounters because of his past comments has so victimized him that his discomfort allegedly surpasses that felt by baseball icons Robinson and Aaron – black men who sought professional excellence amidst the full bloom of Jim Crow discrimination. The persistent appeal for him to abandon his past prejudices so besiege Rocker that he emerges from the barrage of correctives convinced that his fate approximates the existential hell in which many black Americans have been forced to subsist. This most boisterous of white men has not merely become a kind of black victim, he has become something quite worse and is poised not to endure the abuse one minute more...

Rocker's conceptualization of his own plight should teach analysts of the Backlash and its electoral consequences three things: one, that though Rocker's 1999 diatribe – and others like it – didn't say so explicitly, his anti-urban, anti-criminal, xenophobic, homophobic, family-values-laden rant contained a lingering ambivalence about whether blacks deserved the broadening citizenship that Civil Rights successes had bestowed upon them (the rhetoric of strong families and law and order have long been canonized conservative code in public discourse for the continuing repression of black citizenship since the Moynihan report and the days of Nixon). That we must read racialized concerns out of the lining of Rocker's early statement signals the pitcher's "tolerance" – that is, his public speech, *not his thought*, had acquiesced to the will of progressive politics, which had rendered racially offensive speech intolerable and subject to vehement condemnation (for the purposes of understanding, we may call this the "Trent Lott principle"). Two, that the efficacy of Sixties progressivism and its vigilance against public expressions of prejudice has combined with the enfeebling effect time has on memory to inspire many Rocker-like whites to experience resentment toward liberalism's seemingly long-tenured ascendancy (as these groups have been able to compel government and economic elites to respond to their grievances) as a form of social injury.

This sense of victimization can only be sustained, of course, with a strong, if not willful, dose of historical ignorance, or through an infantile and selfish individualism that makes one believe that the redress of racial wrongs can occur without personal inconvenience (not quite getting the contract, the job, or the school that you want), or more crassly, a belief that the nation is indeed their property; one which they should not be asked to share with people who differ from them. The fact that their narrow conception of America lost its

hold on popular consensus, making it impossible for them to exclude these progressive constituencies from enjoying the full privileges of American citizenship, profoundly vexes such Rocker-like whites. Their sense of esteem, as well as their sense of injury, pivots on the extent to which they feel themselves to be privileged citizens of the nation. Three, that it is patently impossible for Rocker-like whites to conceive of privileges and disadvantages, social injury and social health, outside of a racialized idiom in which they engage in near involuntary comparisons between their well-being and that of blacks. This reflex has much to do with the facts that black subordination was once a promise that the United States vouchsafed for its citizens and that in the last 35 years, Rocker-like whites have seen such a promise suspended in what appears to be the government's interest in pampering blacks with undue protections. This point explains Rocker's befuddling allusion to what he sees as the more minor injuries (than his) of Aaron and Robinson. He hopes that by testifying to his seemingly lengthy forbearance as a national pariah, the public will step in and rescue him (as it allegedly did for the aforementioned black super-athletes – I am trying really hard not to remark on the megalomania required of Rocker to compare himself to these black heroes) from further verbal molestation.

What I am trying to suggest from this delicate explication of Rocker's commentary is that the "Great Backlash" upon which Thomas Frank meditates cannot thrive anywhere in this country without a profound discomfort with post-Civil Rights blackness at its foundation and that to suggest so is injudicious and intellectually irresponsible.

My complaint here is not to imply that misconception mars the entire argument of *What's the Matter with Kansas*. Rather, it is Frank's generally shrewd and articulate account of how the last century and a quarter has witnessed the Sunflower State's gradual transformation from a den of worker radicalism into a region meekly prostrate to corporate aggression and Republican manipulation that makes his misreading of the racial aspects of Kansas's conservative backlash jarringly discordant. For those crestfallen progressives flummoxed by how Mr. Bush has maintained his claim on the presidency while grossly mismanaging the state throughout his tenure, moreover, Frank offers a theory capable of quelling the consternation (a virtue, which, in itself, makes his work worth a reader's time). If culture and economics constitute the essence of a nation, Frank proposes that the Democratic Party snubs the American working class on both counts whereas its Republican counterpart only does so on one.

At the behest of the Democratic Leadership Council and its most successful benefactor, Bill Clinton, the party of FDR forsook its traditional commitment to working class causes in favor of "affluent, white collar professionals who are liberal on social issues." As a result, not only did the Dems become a party of big money, which the GOP has often been, it became officious and preachy; tutoring the populace in racial, religious, and sexual tolerance, touting the virtues of elite and degreed intellectualism, and championing a broader public role for women. Exacerbating the slight in spectacular fashion is the popular culture working class backlashes encounter through mainstream television, radio, and film. In the minds of these scorned Americans, Frank detects, there are discernible connections between Howard Stern's ribaldry, the local abortion clinic, Janet Jackson's right breast, and Bill and Monica's illicit White House trysts. These phenomena seemingly emit from the indomitable demiurge that is the Democratic Party (even if Fox's nighttime television programming suggests otherwise). In contrast, Republican leaders not only encourage the working class to think and talk and live as politically incorrect as it desires, promulgating no other pedagogy than the need to produce profit, they also (unctuously at times) indulge worker' resistance and resentment toward the liberal orthodoxy attributed to the Democrats. These dynamics become manifest at the polls. Republicans conceal their avarice beneath the shiny white suit of family values while their opponents don a cultural decadence that only further tarnishes their cupidity.

To declare that we are caught in the maelstrom of an internecine cultural war that has spilled into the electoral realm, though not a particularly intrepid thesis at this time, is certainly a correct one, and thus not a point that warrants contention. Moreover, Frank adroitly fuses fresh flesh to this observation, demonstrating how since the formidable anti-abortion protests of the "Summer of Mercy" in 1991, Kansas has been a paradigmatic

example of this working class cultural revolt. What demands contradiction, however, is Frank's bold attempt to revise the racialized motivations of this now 50-year war out of existence and the rather meager way in which he attempts to do so. Though he repeats throughout the book that this epic struggle is a product of what many saw as the "world's sheer gone to hellness since the sixties" – a perdition whose flames were significantly stoked by black protest – he curiously submits that "one thing [Kansas] doesn't do is [anti-black] racism." To accept this claim one must be able to imagine that a state that boasts an 88% white population (whether it be New Hampshire, Utah, or rural Texas, black, brown, and yellow people stay clear of these places for a *logical* reason) would not scowl or quiver if it got even the slightest sense that its homogeneity (or should I say, hegemony) was in jeopardy. Without such an active fantasy life, Frank's assertion is sufficiently forceful and bewildering to make progressive readers fumble their Mochaccinos.

As surprising as his claim is the fact that his proof of this matter is not at all satisfying. Among the evidence Frank deploys to defend his assertion is (1) the reticence of a conservative listserv toward the Supreme Court's 2003 lukewarm affirmation of Affirmative Action, (2) the openness of the pious Senatorial neo-con Sam Brownback to friendship with the Black Caucus, to the building of a black history museum, to Latino immigration and religiosity, and to personally adopting Chinese and Guatemalan children, (3) a journalist who fancies himself the Jackie Robinson of his field (because his radical conservatism is so rare in the local press), and (4) Kansas evangelicals who, in imagining themselves as the *new* persecuted minority, experience a sense of kinship with the pilloried of different ilks that have preceded them.

The local and working class nature of Frank's ethnographic subjects explains the cons' lack of response to the issue of racial preferences. If these humble laborers choose to brook the alleged "pretensions" of the collegiate experience, they would most likely do so at nearby institutions. The homogeneity of the local population would disqualify the Court's decision as being seen as a real threat to young Kansans who seek to claim a classroom slot. As to Frank's points about Brownback, though the senator's sympathies with Chicano/Latino/Chinese populations imply a cosmopolitan streak in his personality, they say little about the entire region's posture toward blacks and other minorities and probably much more about its affinity to vulnerable labor pools and depressed wages (especially in relation to the ruthlessly exploitative meat packing industry, which Frank notes, gives Western Kansas its identity). Additionally, since Frank didn't cite how Brownback's friendship with the Caucus (are we not yet past the point when we adduce friendship as evidence of racism's absence?) and support of the museum has resulted in a significant impact in the daily lives of *present-day* blacks, I am inclined to consider the senator's favorable posture toward these institutions as the smiles and handshakes of performative statesmanship.

Frank's third and fourth observations rudely resurrect the specter of John Rucker and the baseball pitcher's attempt to dramatize his victimization and his courageous response to it by associating himself with injured, heroic blackness. The deployment of this type of metaphoric kinship with blacks and other mistreated minorities by conservative Kansans is equally symbolic, unsubstantial, and offensive.

It is not these phenomena alone, however, that distinguish these denizens of the "heartland" as peculiarly anti-racist in Frank's view. It is instead how these instances of racial progressivism seem to extend from the region's renowned abolitionist history (one that contains the martyred, white, anti-slavery agitator John Brown) and the willingness of Kansas conservatives to present themselves as legatees of the zealous manumission movement. The cultural resonance between today's cons and yesteryear's abolitionists is so palpable to Frank that he appends to his insights on race in the region (those I dispute above) a substantial historical sketch of the state's anti-slavery conflict in the book's ninth chapter, "Kansas Bleeds for Your Sins." Indeed, the antebellum period may have featured a sacrificial Kansas, one that gave its blood over the issue of slavery in a vicious prelude to the Civil War (1854). But the region could not retain for itself the innocence procured by this sanguineous absolution. After all, Kansas was the site of the historic Brown vs. Board of Education decision in 1954 (Frank, in a brow-raising intellectual gymnastic, actually posits this factoid as evidence of the region's anti-racism).

Regardless of the frenzied and ferocious fashion in which antebellum Kansans fought for emancipation, they found a way to segregate themselves from the blacks they helped free. One can read the cons' celebration of the state's abolitionist past, then, as selective and shamelessly strategic. It elevates the virtues of the decade preceding the Civil War, to obscure from view the vices practiced the 100 or more years that followed it.

Exacerbating the discomfort that readers partisan to the well being of African Americans will experience by means of the Rucker-like tricks with time and historical memory that the cons perform and Frank's critique affirms, are the phenomena the author casts as not germane to his analysis of race in the region. In a much earlier chapter of the book, Frank describes how the suburb in which he was raised was transformed from a pre-World War II "semirural retreat" from Kansas City into the "largest metropolitan area in the state" today. In doing so, he details a familiar narrative of urban decline that could be told about almost any American city: cheap federal loans enable white families to abandon the urban core for suburban hearths; desegregation laws speed up the exodus, leaving behind hordes of ethnic poor; deindustrialization renders the non-white city dwellers more economically vulnerable, with the decisive blow coming in the last three decades when local corporate leaders elected to relocate their operations in the suburbs where they and their friends lived or out of the country altogether. This doleful drama of discrimination, one in which the federal government invests in white well being, whites profit from that investment (a process some critics refer to as White Affirmative Action), and then proceed to use their gains to remove all remaining capital from the spaces where non-whites dwell, Frank does address in the footnotes of his "Kansas Bleeds" chapter (to his partial credit), but the matters of loan bias, racial covenants, and housing deprivation are central, not secondary, to the racial analysis of any American region.

In fact, a sober assessment of the author's decision not to place these issues in the foreground of his investigation of race in Kansas would lead one to charge him with either intellectual sloppiness or treachery, particularly because it demonstrates the writer's infidelity to his own critical posture toward the "Backlash" phenomenon. Frank strenuously insists throughout his argument that the "derangement" that the American worker must undergo to participate in this conservative revolt requires the "systematic erasure of the economic" from his/her existential purview. The backlasher must see the preservation of moral values as a more pressing concern than whether corporate officers or political candidates are committed to a fairer distribution of American profits. Yet for Frank to declare that the backlash flourishes in Kansas "without the familiar formula of racial conflict to serve as its interpretative guide," he himself would have to absent the economic as a point of interest. He would have to look at the cheap mortgages and the white wealth, mobility, and esteem, that they enabled as inconsequential to the racialized conditions of the region today. Such a critical gesture would require an authorial schizophrenia of stupefying proportions.

Moreover, as incomprehensible as a quasi-socialist critic ignoring the fallout of invidious economic practices is Frank's poor measuring of another aspect of his generally stimulating critique: popular culture. The conservative backlash in Kansas, the writer makes clear, is a product of both local and global forces – news, sports, movies, music, and talk-radio constitute the bulk of the latter. Few would dispute that the images that emerge from this arena of American life have hardly been flattering to African American reputation (since enduring segregation has forced media productions to be the primary means in which audiences encounter the "truth" about blackness). Not only are blacks well represented in pop culture, they have difficulty avoiding the camera (or is it the other way around) when attached to scandal or impropriety. Media have made black public figures (sometimes with the latter's willing collusion) provocative symbols of the nation's moral challenges and dilemmas. In the last 15 years, issues such as child molestation (Michael Jackson or R. Kelly), sexual assault (Kobe Bryant) steroid use (Barry Bonds), domestic violence (O. J. Simpson), gratuitous sexuality (Terrell Owens and the aforementioned Janet), sports protocol (Ron Artest), plagiarism (Jason Blair), and general decency (almost any mainstream hip hop artist), have been considered, debated, and adjudicated with black bodies efficiently functioning as talismans and mnemonic devices. If the backlash is at all a response to the decadent liberalism that pop culture purveys, it is likely also a virulent rejoinder to the impending national dissolution that mediated blackness frequently represents.

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A more sagacious conclusion to this complicated tale of working class life and politics would have been not to declare traditional racism dead or in its last throes, but to proclaim it *effective*. One could even rent Dubya for a day to bellow an exuberant "Mission Accomplished" before an assembly of proud Kansan suburbanites. With the majority of good schools, convenient and quality retail, attractive housing, and reliable public services shifted to spaces on the metropolitan periphery designed for white residents, there is no infrastructure available to support a collective of citizens willing to contest such racialized conditions. These urbanites of color, instead, are preoccupied with trying to survive their deindustrialized, underskilled fate in the new global economy. White Kansans then, with no impending protests to make them anxious, can appreciate the common humanity of their racial others and extend their good will without hesitation. It is not surprising that Frank espied evidence in the prairie of some genuine cross-racial bonhomie. But when warring parties become affable after a rout it astounds no one. The bully takes pleasure in his victory, while the beaten smile widely to avoid further punishment. (Think of how fondly the President speaks of Afghanistan these days.)

As I have been suggesting here, Frank's misperception of race relations in his home state particularly stings at the viscera because it attempts to write *black grievances only* out of the cultural war. If the holy quadrumvirate of race, class, gender, and sexuality provide the raw materials of the Great American Backlash, it is only the first factor that Frank elects to partially disavow. He gives clear evidence that Kansan conservatives can be anti-Semitic (in this era of passionate bible-thumping it would be difficult for such prejudices to remain dormant – if they ever were), sexist (one female activist sees woman suffrage as a sign of moral decline), and homophobic (it is a Kansan who crisscrosses the nation with the placard, "God Hates Fags"). In addition, in the moments when Frank's moral voice is most pronounced, he consecrates the Backlash as a legitimate working class response to the greed, pedantry, and secularism of liberal Americana. Yet the matter of anti-black sentiment, in the vivid world that Frank's narration paints here, dissolves before the reader's eyes like a dying myth that a haunted community, now courageous, has been finally able to lay to rest. How are all other issues in play but this one?

To grant Kansan conservatives, and by implication, other American backlashers an exemption in regards to this form of prejudice suggests not only a flaw in Frank's thinking, but a lamentable failure in liberal cognition and progressive analysis (since we must take the author's meteoric rise and acceptance amongst the punditry class as a sign of consensus). We have reached a moment in American history where left-leaning (particularly, but not only white) thinkers have been decisively influenced by the reluctance of both political parties to act any further in the interest of racial justice. This dynamic breathes life into the mythos that all worthy black grievances have been met, and all frivolous ones have been dutifully cast aside. This mythos deals death – as unemployment rates, incarceration rates, and health statistics will attest – with every instance of its incessant and unchallenged circulation. What do black progressives do when those esteemed enough to lead the nation's discussion about itself fail to speak for African American concerns in even the most feckless manner? We look on from sidelines – attentively. We read some, we write some, and we scream at the walls of our living rooms quite a bit. And we worry.

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