

The
"Pet Negro"
System

Zora Neale Hurston

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An aspect of the race problem
ignored by zealous reformers:

THE "PET NEGRO" SYSTEM

BY ZORA NEALE HURSTON

Brothers and Sisters, I take my text this morning from the Book of Dixie. I take my text and I take my time.

Now it says here, "And every white man shall be allowed to pet himself a Negro. Yea, he shall take a black man unto himself to pet and to cherish, and this same Negro shall be perfect in his sight. Nor shall hatred among the races of men, nor conditions of strife in the walled cities, cause his pride and pleasure in his own Negro to wane."

Now, belov-ed Brothers and Sisters, I see you have all woke up and you can't wait till the service is over to ask me how come? So I will read you further from the sacred word which says here:

"Thus spake the Prophet of Dixie when slavery was yet a young thing, for he saw the yearning in the hearts of men. And the dwellers in the bleak North, they who pass old-made phrases through their mouths, shall cry out and say, 'What are

these strange utterances? Is it not written that the hand of every white man in the South is raised against his black brother? Do not the sons of Japheth drive the Hammites before them like beasts? Do they not lodge them in shacks and hovels and force them to share the crops? Is not the condition of black men in the South most horrible? Then how doth this scribe named Hurston speak of pet Negroes? Perchance she hath drunk of new wine, and it has stung her like an adder?"

Now, my beloved, before you explode in fury you might look to see if you know your facts or if you merely know your phrases. It happens that there are more angles to this race-adjustment business than are ever pointed out to the public, white, black or in-between. Well-meaning outsiders make plans that look perfect from where they sit, possibly in some New York office. But these plans get wrecked on hidden snags. John Brown at Harpers Ferry is a notable instance. The simple race-agin-race pattern of those articles and speeches on the subject is not that simple at all. The actual conditions do not jibe with the fulminations of the so-called spokesmen of the white South, nor with the rhetoric of the champions of the Negro cause either.

II

Big men like Bilbo, Heflin and Tillman bellow threats which they know they couldn't carry out even in their own districts. The orators at both extremes may glint and glitter in generalities, but the South lives and thinks in individuals. The

North has no interest in the particular Negro, but talks of justice for the whole. The South has no interest, and pretends none, in the mass of Negroes but is very much concerned about the individual. So that brings us to the pet Negro, because to me at least it symbolizes the web of feelings and mutual dependencies spun by generations and generations of living together and natural adjustment. It isn't half as pretty as the ideal adjustment of theorizers, but it's a lot more real and durable, and a lot of black folk, I'm afraid, find it mighty cosy.

The pet Negro, beloved, is someone whom a particular white person or persons wants to have and to do all the things forbidden to other Negroes. It can be Aunt Sue, Uncle Stump, or the black man at the head of some Negro organization. Let us call him John Harper. John is the pet of Colonel Cary and his lady, and Colonel Cary swings a lot of weight in his community.

The Colonel will tell you that he opposes higher education for Negroes. It makes them mean and cunning. Bad stuff for Negroes. He is against having lovely, simple blacks turned into rascals by too much schooling. But there are exceptions. Take John, for instance. Worked hard, saved up his money and went up there to Howard University and got his degree in education. Smart as a whip! Seeing that John had such a fine head, of course he helped John out when necessary. Not that he would do such a thing for the average darky, no sir! He is no nigger lover. Strictly unconstructed Southerner, willing to battle for white supremacy! But his John is different.

So naturally when John finished college and came home, Colonel Cary knew he was the very man to be principal of the

Negro high school, and John got the post even though someone else had to be eased out. And making a fine job of it. Decent, self-respecting fellow. Built himself a nice home and bought himself a nice car. John's wife is county nurse; the Colonel spoke to a few people about it and she got the job. John's children are smart and have good manners. If all the Negroes were like them he wouldn't mind what advancement they made. But the rest of them, of course, lie like the cross-ties from New York to Key West. They steal things and get drunk. Too bad, but Negroes are like that.

Now there are some prominent white folk who don't see eye to eye with Colonel Cary about this John Harper. They each have a Negro in mind who is far superior to John. They listen to eulogies about John only because they wish to be listened to about their own pets. They pull strings for the Colonel's favorites knowing that they will get the same thing done for theirs.

Now, how can the Colonel make his attitude towards John Harper jibe with his general attitude towards Negroes? Easy enough. He got his general attitude by tradition, and he has no quarrel with it. But he found John truthful and honest, clean, reliable and a faithful friend. He likes John and so considers him as white inside as anyone else. The treatment made and provided for Negroes generally is suspended, restrained and done away with. He knows that John is able to learn what white people of similar opportunities learn. Colonel Cary's affection and respect for John, however, in no way extend to black folk in general.

When you understand that, you see why it is so difficult to

change certain things in the South. His particular Negroes are not suffering from the strictures, and the rest are no concern of the Colonel's. Let their own white friends do for them. If they are worth the powder and lead it would take to kill them, they have white friends; if not, then they belong in the "stray nigger" class and nobody gives a damn about them. If John should happen to get arrested for anything except assault and murder upon the person of a white man, or rape, the Colonel is going to stand by him and get him out. It would be a hard-up Negro who would work for a man who couldn't get his black friends out of jail.

And mind you, the Negroes have their pet whites, so to speak. It works both ways. Class-consciousness of Negroes is an angle to be reckoned with in the South. They love to be associated with "the quality" and consequently are ashamed to admit that they are working for "strainers." It is amusing to see a Negro servant chasing the madam or the boss back on his or her pedestal when they behave in an unbecoming manner. Thereby he is to a certain extent preserving his own prestige, derived from association with that family.

If ever it came to the kind of violent showdown the orators hint at, you could count on all the Colonel Carys tipping off and protecting their John Harpers; and you could count on all the John Harpers and Aunt Sues to exempt their special white folk. And that means that pretty nearly everybody on both sides would be exempt, except the "pore white trash" and the "stray niggers," and not all of them.

III

An outsider driving through a street of well-off Negro homes, seeing the great number of high-priced cars, will wonder why he has never heard of this side of Negro life in the South. He has heard about the shacks and the sharecroppers. He has had them before him in literature and editorials and crusading journals. But the other side isn't talked about by the champions of white supremacy, because it makes their stand, and their stated reasons for keeping the Negro down, look a bit foolish. The Negro crusaders and their white adherents can't talk about it because it is obviously bad strategy. The worst aspects must be kept before the public to force action.

It has been so generally accepted that all Negroes in the South are living under horrible conditions that many friends of the Negro up North actually take offense if you don't tell them a tale of horror and suffering. They stroll up to you, cocktail glass in hand, and say, "I am a friend of the Negro, you know, and feel awful about the terrible conditions down there." That's your cue to launch into atrocities amidst murmurs of sympathy. If, on the other hand, just to find out if they really have done some research down there, you ask, "What conditions do you refer to?" you get an injured, and sometimes a malicious, look. Why ask foolish questions? Why drag in the many Negroes of opulence and education? Yet these comfortable, contented Negroes are as real as the sharecroppers.

There is, in normal times, a regular stream of high-powered cars driven by Negroes headed North each summer for a few weeks' vacation. These people go, have their fling, and hurry back home. Doctors, teachers, lawyers, businessmen, they are

living and working in the South because that is where they want to be. And why not? Economically, they are at ease and more. The professional men do not suffer from the competition of their white colleagues to anything like they do up North. Personal vanity, too, is served. The South makes a sharp distinction between the upper-class and lower-class Negro. Businessmen cater to him. His word is *good* downtown. There is some Mr. Big in the background who is interested in him and will back his fall. All the plums that a Negro can get are dropped in his mouth. He wants no part of the cold, impersonal North. He notes that there is segregation and discrimination up there, too, with none of the human touches of the South.

As I have said, belov-ed, these Negroes who are petted by white friends think just as much of their friends across the line. There is a personal attachment that will ride over practically anything that is liable to happen to either. They have their fingers crossed, too, when they say they don't like white people. "White people" does not mean their particular friends, any more than niggers means John Harper to the Colonel. This is important. For anyone, or any group, counting on a solid black South, or a solid white South in opposition to each other will run into a hornet's nest if he discounts these personal relations. Both sides admit the general principle of opposition, but when it comes to putting it into practice, behold what happens. There is a quibbling, a stalling, a backing and filling that nullifies all the purple oratory.

So well is this underground hook-up established, that it is not possible to keep a secret from either side. Nearly everybody spills the beans to his favorite on the other side of the color line—in strictest confidence, of course. That's how

the "petting system" works in the South.

Is it a good thing or a bad thing? Who am I to pass judgment? I am not defending the system, beloved, but trying to explain it. The low-down fact is that it weaves a kind of basic fabric that tends to stabilize relations and give something to work from in adjustments. It works to prevent hasty explosions. There are some people in every community who can always talk things over. It may be the proof that this race situation in America is not entirely hopeless and may even be worked out eventually.

There are dangers in the system. Too much depends on the integrity of the Negro so trusted. It cannot be denied that this trust has been abused at times. What was meant for the whole community has been turned to personal profit by the pet. Negroes have long groaned because of this frequent diversion of general favors into the channels of private benefits. Why do we not go to Mr. Big and expose the Negro in question? Sometimes it is because we do not like to let white people know that we have folks of that ilk. Sometimes we make a bad face and console ourselves, "At least one Negro has gotten himself a sinecure not usually dealt out to us." We curse him for a yellow-bellied sea-buzzard, a ground-mole and a woods-pussy, call him a white-folk's nigger, an Uncle Tom, and a handkerchief-head and let it go at that. In all fairness, it must be said that these terms are often flung around out of jealousy: somebody else would like the very cinch that the accused has grabbed himself.

But when everything is discounted, it still remains true that white people North and South have promoted Negroes—

usually in the capacity of "representing the Negro"—with little thought of the ability of the person promoted but in line with the "pet system." In the South it can be pointed to scornfully as a residue of feudalism; in the North no one says what it is. And that, too, is part of the illogical, indefensible but somehow useful "pet system."

IV

The most powerful reason why Negroes do not do more about false "representation" by pets is that they know from experience that the thing is too deep-rooted to be budged. The appointer has his reasons, personal or political. He can always point to the beneficiary and say, "Look, Negroes, you have been taken care of. Didn't I give a member of your group a big job?" White officials assume that the Negro element is satisfied and they do not know what to make of it when later they find that so large a body of Negroes charge indifference and double-dealing. The white friend of the Negroes mumbles about ingratitude and decides that you simply can't understand Negroes ... just like children.

A case in point is Dr. James E. Sheppard, President of the North Carolina State College for Negroes. He has a degree in pharmacy, and no other. For years he ran a one-horse religious school of his own at Durham, North Carolina. But he has always been in politics and has some good friends in power at Raleigh. So the funds for the State College for Negroes were turned over to him, and his little church school became the

Negro college so far as that State is concerned. A fine set of new buildings has been erected. With a host of Negro men highly trained as educators within the State, not to mention others who could be brought in, a pharmacist heads up higher education for Negroes in North Carolina. North Carolina can't grasp why Negroes aren't perfectly happy and grateful.

In every community there is some Negro strong man or woman whose word is going to go. In Jacksonville, Florida, for instance, there is Eartha White. You better see Eartha if you want anything from the white powers-that-be. She happens to be tremendously interested in helping the unfortunates of her city and she does get many things for them from the whites.

I have white friends with whom I would, and do, stand when they have need of me, race counting for nothing at all. Just friendship. All the well-known Negroes could honestly make the same statement. I mean that they all have strong attachments across the line whether they intended them in the beginning or not. Carl Van Vechten and Henry Allen Moe could ask little of me that would be refused. Walter White, the best known race champion of our time, is hand and glove with Supreme Court Justice Black, a native of Alabama and an ex-Klansman. So you see how this friendship business makes a sorry mess of all the rules made and provided. James Weldon Johnson, the crusader for Negro rights, was bogged to his neck in white friends whom he loved and who loved him. Dr. William E. Burkhardt DuBois, the bitterest opponent of the white race that America has ever known, loved Joel Spingarn and was certainly loved in turn by him. The thing doesn't make sense. It just makes beauty.

Friendship, however it comes about, is a beautiful thing. The Negro who loves a white friend is shy in admitting it because he dreads the epithet "white folks' nigger!" The white man is wary of showing too much warmth for his black friends for fear of being called "nigger-lover," so he explains his attachment by extolling the extraordinary merits of his black friend to gain tolerance for it.

This is the inside picture of things, as I see it. Whether you like it or not, is no concern of mine. But it is an important thing to know if you have any plans for racial manipulations in Dixie. You cannot batter in doors down there, and you can save time and trouble, and I do mean trouble, by hunting up the community keys.

In a way, it is a great and heartening tribute to human nature. It will be bound by nothing. The South frankly acknowledged this long ago in its laws against marriage between blacks and whites. If the Southern law-makers were so sure that racial antipathy would take care of racial purity, there would have been no need for the laws.

"And no man shall seek to deprive a man of his Pet Negro. It shall be unwritten-lawful for any to seek to prevent him in his pleasure thereof. Thus spoke the Prophet of Dixie." *Selah.*

[The end of *The "Pet Negro" system* by Zora Neale Hurston]