

Growing Up Cracker

**Reflections on White Supremacy and the Election from a Bitter Pennsylvanian
Hockey Mom**

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When I first learned of the July 2008 brutal beating of Luis Ramirez in Shenandoah, Pa., I felt nauseous. Absolutely sick to my stomach. Plenty of stories in the news and distributed over listserves can and do make me queasy, and mad as hell, but this one hit so close to home, I had to pause for a few deep breaths.

For those who haven't heard of the case, which has garnered national media attention (including a People magazine spread on September 8), here's a quick summary: Undocumented Mexican worker walks down residential street, gets jumped by four white high school football heroes, is left unconscious and foaming at the mouth, dies two days later. For a fuller report, see the Washington Post's September 2 story, which paints a pretty accurate picture of the region. Or just google "Luis Ramirez Shenandoah," but be forewarned: You're going to encounter a whole lot of vitriol.

Luis Ramirez was in the US "illegally" for six years before his death. He was engaged to Crystal Dillman, a white woman born and raised in "Shen'doh," to use the local vernacular. He was the biological father of two of her children, and she says he treated her other child like his own. Dillman has no doubt that her fiancé's death was racially motivated, and she has been anything but quiet about it. "People in this town are very racist toward Hispanic people. They think right away if you're Mexican, you're illegal, and you're no good," she told an AP reporter. A witness to Ramirez' final fight recalled, "I heard a lot of screaming. A female saying, 'Stop beating him. Stop hitting him.' They said, 'You fucking bitch. Tell your fucking Mexican friends if they don't get out of Shenandoah they're going to be laying next to him.'"

My immediate reaction to hearing that Ramirez was murdered by four high school football players drunk on malt liquor was this: They'll get off. Maybe they'll get probation — maybe — but nothing worse. This is rural Pennsylvania, after all: The good ol' boys always win.

Sure enough, already a judge has reduced the teens' charges from first and second degree homicide to third-degree manslaughter. The boys' attorneys, demonstrating they obviously know a thing or two about the region, have opted to get them tried as adults, even though all are under 18. This means they'll have a jury trial — and, tell me, how are you going to assemble an impartial jury within 100 miles of Shen'doh?

I stand by my prediction: the boys will go free.

How would I know? I grew up not in Shen'doh, but 30 miles away, in a rundown, rough-and-tumble, working class town a smidge larger than Shen'doh but no less white, where the common creed is "God, Country, Football" — not always in that order. Turns out Luis Ramirez held a second job there, picking fruit. As I said, close to home.

I can vividly recall the night two adolescent black men who were dating my good friends (white girls like me) were literally chased out of town, threatened by a pack of our testosterone-charged high school classmates to "Leave, or else." Smartly, the "outsiders," visiting from a nearby university town, didn't stick around to find out what the "or else" was. Quite possibly they could have suffered the same fate Luis Ramirez did 20 years later. Their skin was darker than Luis', but the message to both was the same: Go back where you came from. Yes, those were formative years.

Let's get something straight: My hometown is not 100% lily white. Nor is it a sundown town. A few black families are longtime residents, and as far as I can tell, they get along fine. That is, if one defines "fine" as complacently tolerating being called "Oreos" — black on the outside but white on the inside — an epithet I heard in many hallways and locker rooms. For whatever reason — and in this football-crazy town, the fact that some of their youth have contributed to

gridiron success can't be overlooked — these select families have been allowed to be part of the fabric of the town. They have, for the majority of the townspeople, “become white.” Or white enough, anyway.

Ethnic hatred is of course not new to the anthracite coal region. According to Philip Jenkins, author of *Hoods and Shirts: The Extreme Right in Pennsylvania*, eighty years ago, 57 of Pennsylvania's 423 Ku Klux Klan klaverns were located in eight anthracite counties centered on Scranton (Joe Biden's childhood stomping grounds), Wilkes-Barre, Pottsville, and Hazleton. There were as many as 40,000 members in this region alone, mostly Protestants whose ancestors were the first to arrive — Scottish, English, Welsh and so on — trying to prevent “new immigrant” Catholics like Irish, Poles, Slovaks, and Italians from taking their jobs in the mines and elsewhere. Schuylkill County, where Shen'doh is located, had 11 klaverns. A few years ago, I did some geneological research and learned that my great-grandmother, a working-class (read: poor) single mother whose husband died in a coal mine, was in the Ladies' Auxiliary of the KKK, which supported the building of a public elementary school in 1925; the Klansman's Creed, “anti-foreigner” through and through, was printed in its entirety in the school dedication program, along with the names and photos (sans hoods) of the Knights of the KKK.

Fast-forward 80 years, and the region is still a hotbed of white supremacy, in the streets and in the courts. In Hazleton, Pa., less than 20 miles from Shenandoah, Mayor Lou Barletta has gained a national reputation as the “English-only mayor,” and according to the latest polls, he appears to be well on his way to unseating longtime incumbent Democratic Rep. Paul Kanjorski, who has not seen a serious challenge in 12 terms. In 2006, Barletta championed city-wide legislation that would have punished businesses who hire documented immigrants and fined landlords who rent to them. He has repeatedly asserted that undocumented immigrants are responsible for an increase in local crime, despite having no evidence to support his claims. The ordinances were set to go into effect November 1, 2006 but were blocked first by a federal judge issuing a restraining order, then by a landmark trial decision that declared the laws unconstitutional. The ACLU, who argued the case with co-counsel, applauded the decision; the City of Hazleton has vowed to appeal all the way to the Supreme Court, so stay tuned.

Meanwhile, exactly one week after Luis Ramirez' brutal beating, Lou Barletta was named “Mayor of the Year” by the Pennsylvania Mayors Association.

On August 31, 2008, a group that calls itself Voice of the People USA organized a rally in Shenandoah that attracted somewhere between 200 and 600 people, depending on the source; videos posted at the group's website and those of its despicable allies, Diggers Realm and Save Shenandoah, show the latter number is probably more accurate.

Partway through the rally, in an admirably gutsy move, Crystal Dillman showed up with a few friends and unfurled a Mexican flag, sparking a shouting match in which she denounced the crowd as racist and asked them, “Who's going to farm your Christmas trees? Who's going to pick your fruit?” State troopers surrounded Dillman's group and urged calm from the crowd, as they chanted “Go home, Crystal. Go home, Crystal.” No violence erupted — this time.

Eighty years have passed. The names have changed, but has anything else?

Consider this bit from the *Washington Post* story:

“These kids are not bad kids,” says Joe Sobinsky, a bus driver at the high school. “They're normal coal region kids. They got in a fight and people got hurt.” Sobinsky tells the Latino kids on his bus not to speak Spanish because non-Latinos think

they're talking about them. Once a Latino sophomore told him, "You're picking on me because I'm brown!" Sobinsky pointed to the Polish Italian olive hue of his own skin and said: "Before you got here I was the brownest. So you got two shades on me — now get back in line!"

In other words, "You ain't white yet, sonny."

Another bold prediction

Here's another prediction lots of folks in the liberal valley where I've lived for 10 years but can't quite bring myself to call "home" sure don't want to hear: John McCain will be our next president.

What am I, some kind of soothsayer, you ask? Hardly. I don't need a crystal ball to see through the fog that enshrouds Obama believers. It may be a fog of hope, but it's also a fog of denial. Call me a bitter Pennsylvanian if you must, but the bitter truth remains: White supremacy still rules the day in the USA, and that's not going to change come November 4, 2008.

Obama's comments on the people of small towns in Pennsylvania have been widely broadcast, though not always in context:

"You go into some of these small towns in Pennsylvania, and like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years and nothing's replaced them. And they fell through the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration, and each successive administration has said that somehow these communities are gonna regenerate and they have not. And it's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations."

Well, he gets it and yet he doesn't get it. What Obama doesn't say and cannot ever say — even if he does realize it — is that what these folks are clinging to is not just their guns and their religion or their "anti-immigrant sentiment," but their whiteness. Despite everything — the shuttered factories, the barricaded mining shafts, the kids getting drunk on Mickey's every weekend — they can be grateful for one thing: They're white. And you can bet they're going to fight — with their fists or their votes — to make sure that category still counts for something.

Bumblefuck, USA?

Perhaps what frustrates me most about liberals, and even many people on the left, is their notion that places where rednecks live are backwoods and backwards. Trust me, they are neither. Shenandoah is not an anomaly. Neither is Jena, Louisiana, for that matter.

White supremacy is not a rural phenomenon that rears its head in some podunk village off the beaten path. It's smack in the middle of the path. Sometimes it's in your face (like the Minutemen), sometimes you have to watch and listen more closely. From a conversation someone I know overheard between two senior citizens (old white men) in a gym in an affluent New Jersey suburb:

"I'm voting for McCain."

"Why?"

"What other candidate is there?"

"What do you mean, what other candidate is there? What about Obama?"

"I don't like what he has to say."

"And you do like what McCain has to say?"

"Well, he's, well, you know, he's said some good things..."

"Why not vote for Obama?"

"I just don't like him. I don't trust him."

"Why don't you just admit it: you don't want a nigger for president."

Although I have not heard this conversation myself, I am certain it is taking place in hushed (or not so hushed) tones across the United States, in gyms, kitchens, bars, stadiums. Many Obama supporters have been duped into believing that race no longer matters, that Obama has transcended his status as an "African American candidate." Nonsense. Wake up Obamanation: Your candidate is black, and race does still matter.

I'll admit I could be wrong in my election prediction. It's possible this essay might come back to bite me in the ass in November. If so, I'll quit the betting life and brace for some haranguing by my comrades. But, really, does it matter? Elections are the real bridge to nowhere: Regardless of who wins, our capitalist economy will still be in the toilet, shit will still be shit, and most of it will still be slung at poor people of color. (See "After the Election, Then What?"—written four years ago but still relevant.)

Nevertheless, in recent months, I have been paying more attention than usual to election-year shenanigans. Sarah Palin is one reason. Being a hockey mom myself, one who snuggles with pit bulls at that, I've been gobbling up Palin stories against my better judgment (and at the expense of my more worthwhile 'to read' list). My partner laughs at me. But heck, she's like my northern cousin, bad jokes and all! (Wanna know the real difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull? A pit bull wakes up later.) The fact that Palin's a woman is not going to matter to the misogynist men who vote Republican, for they know that if McCain were to kick the bucket while President, yes, Palin would inherit his Oval Office chair, but you can bet she'd have a team of (mostly white) men behind her to make decisions. A black man in power, though? That's another story.

Yes, Pennsylvania matters. But not because it's a swing state.

Pennsylvania matters in the same way every United State (sic) matters. Whether I'm in Alaska or Alabama or true blue Massachusetts, there's one thing I'm betting on: White supremacy is the glue holding this fragile society together. Like Crystal Dillman, we need to take a stand and struggle against it. Smash it to bits, and see what emerges. I predict it'll be a world worth fighting for.

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