



# RACE

# BECOMES

# TOMORROW

North Carolina and the Shadow of Civil Rights

GERALD M. SIDER

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*North Carolina and the  
Shadow of Civil Rights*

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FOR MY SONS, MY MENTORS  
BYRON, HUGH, NOAH

FOR ROBIN S  
Who found and helped me see the center

FOR FRANCINE  
My guardian spirit  
Thanks

AND FOR THE  
One African American  
who is shot by police,  
a security guard,  
or a White vigilante  
every twenty-eight hours  
Each  
one among many  
Each  
America's history lesson  
And now . . .

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**We dies in harness. That's what it is to be colored.**

Elderly and very ill African American man,  
fellow restaurant dishwasher, whom I urged  
to go home to take care of his health, 1956

**Ever since the colored got civil rights, we had  
to get rid of them. That's not what colored  
means. We got rid of them and got Mexicans.**

Senior southern county official, describing  
the changing labor demands of the new meat-  
and poultry-packing industries, 2006

**For the master's tools will never dismantle the  
master's house. They may allow us to temporarily  
beat him at his own game, but they will never  
enable us to bring about genuine change.**

Audre Lorde



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## CONTENTS

xi Acknowledgments

1 INTRODUCTION Past History

### PART I Stories

21 1. Did the Conk Rag Lose?

47 2. The Waters of Death and Life

71 3. Cockroach Racing

### PART II Culturing Words

91 4. Naming Troubles

117 5. State Making

137 6. F&N: Intimacy, Distance, Anger

### PART III Beyond

145 7. Living in the Beyond

153 8. “Out Here It’s Dog Eat Dog and Vice Versa”

### PART IV Living Contradictions

175 9. Civil Society and Civil Rights on One Leg

195 10. “We Dies in Harness . . .”: The Tomorrows of Vulnerable People

205 APPENDIX Demographic Post–Civil Rights History of African  
American Towns in Robeson County

215 References

219 Index

*A gallery appears after page 70*

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This is the second of two books to come from a deeply appreciated, and surprisingly difficult pair of exploratory research grants from the National Science Foundation. The first grant from the NSF was joined by supplemental grants from the faculty union and my university (the Professional Staff Congress and the City University of New York) and from the Institute of Social and Economic Research of Memorial University of Newfoundland. These grants supported a decade of work on Native health and well-being in Labrador, where I sought to understand, in useful ways, the epidemics of substance abuse, youth suicide, and domestic violence among the Inuit and Innu (Northern Cree), and the interweaving of health and stress in and against increasingly difficult situations both imposed upon and developing within Native communities. The book that resulted from that work is *Skin for Skin: Death and Life for Inuit and Innu* (Duke University Press, 2014). I pursued these issues further, in a context that focused more on potentially useful confrontations with domination, by examining a similar situation among indigenous Australians: "Making and Breaking the Aboriginal Remote: Realities, Languages, Tomorrows (A Commentary)," *Oceania* 84, no. 2 (July 2014): 158–68.

As the first decade of research was ending, I became interested in the differences between the deepening and intensifying health crises among northern peoples and the comparatively somewhat better, or at least very different, situation of Native American and African American peoples in coastal and central North and South Carolina. These southeastern peoples have had a similar history of severe oppression and collective and personal domination by the larger society and its state as have the northern Native peoples, but they have not engaged as much in communal/collective self-destruction. Simultaneously, the southern peoples have suffered more

directly—not more, just more directly—from what has been done to them by the dominant society and state.

A subsequent NSF exploratory grant made it possible for me to look comparatively at stress and the rapidly changing and, for the poorer people, increasingly difficult circumstances of Native Americans and African Americans in coastal and central North and South Carolina that have developed simultaneously with the gains and victories of the civil rights struggles. After some substantial work on this contradictory situation, I decided to first focus on the changing situation of African Americans in this region. This book takes up that focus, starting with my experiences in the civil rights struggles in Robeson County, North Carolina, on the coastal plain border with South Carolina, where I had worked for sixteen months in 1967–68.

Taken together, these two books are a developing argument about the changing situation of vulnerable peoples as many become not just vulnerable but disposable. Taken together, these two books seek to also address issues of how to usefully grasp—to engage as partisans—such situations, with some understanding. The question of what constitutes a useful social “science,” for the struggles and celebrations—in sum, the lives—of particularly vulnerable people drives this work.

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gave suggestions that have made the work more clear and focused. Thanks all. And may I say, as part of my commitment to collective thinking, that I hope they enjoy being partly responsible for all that follows?

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## Introduction   Past History

This book is about the changing ways race is lived, primarily in the southeastern United States and in New York City. It is also about how and why race cannot be lived. We cannot be what society at large, and the dominant society in particular, tries with some success to make us be. The history of race—the history of how race is continually made, unmade, and remade—emerges in good part from the paradox that race simultaneously can and cannot be lived. The point is not to play with the paradoxes of life but to use them to get our hands on what is and has been happening, so that we can help make more livable lives.

More: race thrives on yesterday, while tomorrow intrudes. That provides a further fundamental tension in our lives. This book is about both these tensions: between a race making that both must be and cannot be lived by its victims (who are not just African Americans) and a changing history that will not either let go of yesterday or fully deny tomorrow. This book is about the struggles that emerge within and against these tensions.

Race can at times, often many times, be lived gladly, as people find joy, comfort, satisfaction, and much more in their identities. It can also be lived as a lurking danger, collective and personal, as race gets woven into racism. And this is a continually changing mixture. The focus here will be from the 1960s to the present—the ways that past and still current struggles against racism and especially against the surprising consequences both of racism



and of our victories against it have been and are now being shaped since the civil rights victories of the 1960s.

An old friend, a single woman, White, adopted an African American daughter. When the daughter was about six, one of her playmates asked her, “How come your mother is White?” and the child answered, within her mother’s hearing, “Because she was born that way.”

People are born with different colored skin and different looks, but race is made. This is a book about the making of race *from* the lives of the victims of that process, those made more vulnerable by the making. This includes not just Black and White but also a range of Latino/a and Native American peoples who think of themselves, and in a few ways are, in between Black and White.

Note that the perspective of this book is not “for” the vulnerable, or “about” the vulnerable, but *from*. It is a book about how life at the far end of inequality is lived within, against, and apart from the making of race, and it includes those who dance with the fantasy that we are above all that. To write from the perspective of the vulnerable is not just to write about how race is and is not lived but also to address the inescapable questions in such lives: What can be done? What can we do?

Making race is always, of course, making races: race, like class, is meaningless if there is only one. And there is more to the process than making races to make race. Race turns out to be made twice, simultaneously: between and within each race. And the issue before us is not just making race but living race. Living race also must be done twice: between and within. But the relation of “between and within” changes dramatically over time, and some of the changes are more than surprising.

At the center of this work are, first, what seem to be stories, and then, what seem to be either the open wounds of our world or the not yet resolvable, or perhaps irresolvable, struggles. Yet the focus of the book goes well beyond these, first into what the stories actually tell, and how, and then to the problems of making new struggles in a world whose changes are both constantly surprising and constantly predictable.

To introduce both story and struggle:

I. Robert Piglia, in discussing the logic of stories, wrote:

In one of his notebooks, Chekhov recorded the following anecdote: “a man in Monte Carlo goes to the casino, wins a million, returns home, commits suicide.” The classic form of the short story is condensed

within the nucleus of that future, unwritten story. Contrary to the predictable and conventional (gamble-lose-commits suicide), the intrigue is presented as a paradox. The anecdote disconnects the story of the gambling and the story of the suicide. That rupture is the key to defining the double character of the story's form. First thesis: a . . . story always tells two stories. . . .

Each of the two stories is told in a different manner. Working with two stories means working with two different systems of causality. The same events enter simultaneously into two antagonistic . . . logics. . . . The points where they intersect are the foundations of the story's construction. (2011, 63)

Start there, but go further, for we will be dealing not just with stories that are told or written but with what is lived, and what can be lived. It is not always clear that what Piglia calls "the antagonistic logics" within a story, or more simply the parts in our lives that don't quite fit together, ever "intersect," ever connect in ways that form a coherent whole. Sometimes, and in important ways, the point of a story about lives that are actually lived is that things do not come together: nothing fits together, nothing works. That, as we shall see, may be part of our strength.

More: the (at least) two stories in any real story often take place not simply at the same time but in the not quite past and in the impending tomorrow. The stories that people live are often happening in a past that will not stay past, and simultaneously in a future that struggles to be born. Among the many tasks of the stories that follow is to show what the struggles for rights have been and are now, and how complex, how contradictory, how chaotic, how uncivil, and eventually how wonderful are the struggles for a different and a better tomorrow, while yesterday is still thrown in our faces or evades our attempts to hold on to it.

2. A story whose echoes I still live with, here partly to introduce what starts out as a simple and obvious point: that we do not choose, or we are not allowed to choose, all the struggles we must engage, though surely we do choose some. The complexities will develop as we continue.

In the late 1950s I went to college in Philadelphia and mostly supported myself by washing dishes at night in a coffeehouse restaurant. Week-day nights I was alone at this task; weekends I was joined by an elderly Black man.

One Friday evening he came to work clearly sick and hurting. He was pale, and he leaned hard against a sink while he worked, ignoring the water that splashed down his front. I urged him to go home and rest, telling him that for an evening or two I could work fast enough and hard enough to cover for him. He just shook his head no. When I repeated my urging, he looked at me and just said, “We dies in harness. That’s what it is to be colored.”

Not that’s what it means, but that’s what it is.

That named one of his struggles, and also ours. Both his and our struggles, as we shall see, necessarily change even faster than our situations, for otherwise domination defines us. To put it more simply and directly, but only here by way of introduction: the struggles we cannot avoid are not always, and never fully, defined by the situations imposed upon us.

Two further stories will begin to highlight the struggles of race as they become shaped by the uncertain connections between yesterday and tomorrow. These stories come from my work in Robeson County, North Carolina, which began with civil rights organizing for a year and a half in 1967–68 and has continued, for an expanding variety of purposes, episodically but continually, since.

First: On the evening of April 5, 1968, the day after the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered, there was a memorial march along the main street of Lumberton, North Carolina. Lumberton is the county seat of Robeson County, on the North Carolina–South Carolina border: the old, then still openly violent, coastal plantation country. The march went north up Elm Street, then the town’s main shopping street, starting at the northern end of the Black neighborhood on the swampy southeast of Lumberton, and ending in front of the county courthouse, with its Civil War memorial statue on a tall pedestal in front, to go back to the churches in the Black neighborhood.

It was a very scary march. On top of the two-story, flat-roofed stores were police—state troopers, town cops, and sheriff’s deputies—with shotguns and searchlights pointing at us, and walking alongside us were more police, also with shotguns and pistols in open holsters. The march was sorrow-soaked and utterly peaceful. People were crying, and saying prayers, and quietly singing hymns, and mostly consoling and holding one another. There were, I would guess, several hundred African Americans, perhaps five to six hundred or more, and a few Whites and Native Americans.

While the marchers were mostly crying, the police looked mostly scared and were trying to look aggressive. They were in any case very scary: a frightened cop is a dangerous creature. Despite the cops in our faces, and despite the planned and controlled march route, the sorrow and the sense of loss emerging from the parade were close to, or beyond, overwhelming.

At the western edge of Lumberton, a town of about fifteen thousand people in the 1960s, is the main East Coast north–south interstate highway, 1-95. And Lumberton has long had both east–west and north–south railroads. So the town has had a fairly viable economy since the mid-nineteenth century, first on the basis of agricultural and forest products shipped out of the county, and then with manufacturing that depends on highway and railroad access, plus more recently a lot of transient tourist dollars, for Lumberton is about halfway between New York City and the winter beaches of Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and Palm Beach.

Twenty-five miles west of Lumberton and Interstate 95 is the small town of Maxton, North Carolina. Since the transformations that ended southern small-scale agriculture, which culminated in the 1960s, the old market towns like Maxton are often economically finished. Small-scale local-supply markets and local-sale market agriculture were replaced by large, highly mechanized corporate farming. These corporate farms did not buy their major supplies or equipment from small-town dealers, did not sell their produce to local warehouses, and did not hire much local labor of the sort that had to shop locally year-round. What labor they hired, beyond the few skilled equipment drivers, was largely seasonal, and very substantially composed of undocumented workers who disappeared after harvest. A great many small market towns have been increasingly doomed by the disappearance of small-scale farming. If these old market towns were close to an interstate highway, and had the resources and skills to offer the kinds of incentives that attracted new industries, they managed to do reasonably well. But Maxton was twenty-five miles west of 1-95, beyond what the newer industries consider acceptable, and so it started, by the late 1960s, on a relentless downward economic slide that, with Whites fleeing, turned it into a predominantly African American town. That had several advantages and several costs for those who remained.

All this, and more important its consequences for local “race relations,” will soon be discussed in detail. For the moment, all that needs to be said is that in just twenty-five years since the spring of 1968, when Dr. King was murdered, Maxton shifted from a totally White-dominated, mildly

prosperous town to an economically struggling town with a Black mayor and town council. Fueling this transition was a substantial population shift, as a great many Whites moved away from the seriously declining economy. In addition to all the social and cultural gains that Black control of the town brought to Black people and neighborhoods, which had their physical infrastructure significantly improved, Maxton became a place where it was very much harder for many, perhaps most, African Americans to earn a living, and very much harder for tax revenues to sustain the current town costs.

The second story: Thirty-five years after I marched with that heart-clawing parade in Lumberton to mark the murder of our dear Rev. Dr. King, grown even dearer and closer to many since his death, I walked in a commemorative parade down the main street of Maxton, on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, 2003. The march went down Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, as the street had been renamed. It was previously State Highway 74, until Maxton was bypassed by a new highway. Several of the African American town policemen marched with us, talking with us, not to control the march but to join it, and also to stop traffic for us at the crossroads. So did the African American mayor, several African American town councillors and ministers, a hundred or so local Black people, a White minister, and the White leader of the local Boy Scouts. It was a quiet and short march, following some predictable and gentle speeches in the gym of the local elementary school. There could not have been a more different march from what had happened in Lumberton.

The starting question is what was hiding underneath these two marches, for in both cases there was indeed an incredibly powerful, almost invisible underground. In the 1968 march, with all the guns pointed directly at us, some right in our faces by the cops walking alongside us, the social relations that the theater and reality of White against Black violence were designed to produce were almost dead. That was the last gasp, as we shall see, of the world of domination that made, and tried increasingly unsuccessfully to still make, a category and a people they called “niggers.”

To write about the production of race in the United States, it is, unfortunately, necessary to write about the production of “niggers,” and the production of the kinds of “Whites” that went with this. Slavery, lynching, segregated schools, and the current Supreme Court–endorsed restrictions on African American voting rights were not used to produce “the N-word.” Chapter 6 directly addresses what the current, more polite language of rac-

ism and sexism avoids, what it conceals, and how this newly “polite” language constructs what W. E. B. Du Bois so insightfully called, in the title of one of his very special books, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* ([1920] 2007). Not behind, within. The voice is the veil, in many cases, despite the fact that it is now far less insulting, far less demeaning, far less hurtful. What is veiled, above all, is not just the continuing abuse hidden within the newly polite language, but in both cases—the hard words and the more polite words—the social and cultural practices the words point toward and also conceal.

The names—labels, categories, hurts—given to oppressed and exploited people are never just names; much more important, they are never just insults, although they are intended to be, and are, deeply insulting. The names take on their cultural, social, and political force because they also point toward what was done and will be done to a people so categorized.

In this book, in some restricted instances, the word “nigger” is used. It is used in the context of a direct quote or an attribution. It is, in particular, used to name a social process designed to produce both a useful and a disposable people. The South, when it needed the least expensive possible labor, with the fewest possible rights, did not try to produce “N-words,” so to use that euphemism or any other to discuss what was and has been happening is to conceal and minimize the brutality and the violence of the processes making inequality. It is also thus to minimize the strength and the resources of the opposition among the victims of this process and their allies.

Hopefully, by the end of the book, those who rightly find such direct language shocking and upsetting, which it truly is, will also find the concealment of what is now happening behind a language of politeness and pretend constitutionalism equally scary, and equally offensive. Chapter 6 deals with this issue in detail.

The central point of this process was both to make a kind of people to use for their labor in mostly hard and unrewarding ways, and also to make people who during and after these hard and poorly paid uses could be more or less readily controlled. The inner strengths and resourcefulness that it took to sustain being used so hard continually undermined the continuing attempts at control. Making Blacks largely in this way was also making Whites—not only as a different identity but also as differently uncontrollable,

in their often violent relations to Blacks. Despite and against clear laws to the contrary, attempts by the state to suppress White violence against Blacks have been few and far between. Contradictions emerge at both ends of the processes creating difference, and in both cases these contradictions give shape and substance to what is and is not happening.

The mechanical cotton picker and the mechanization of other crops made ultra-low-cost hand labor almost useless. The world that needed to produce masses of such workers, readily available for one of the most grueling jobs in the world, was gone. All that physical and cultural violence increasingly, but never yet finally, became almost yesterday, became a past that is unfortunately very far from actually being past, despite the speeches, the new names for roads and streets, and even the holiday in dear Dr. King's name.

Farm labor is still rather brutally organized, but as we shall see in chapter 2, soon after African Americans got some civil rights they were replaced, as farm labor, with the peoples called "Mexicans," mostly undocumented and thus without rights. Even the "foreign" farmworkers who are officially recruited with government and state programs have very few rights, and the people here without documents have even fewer.

The best idea I can provide of the logic that drove what I am calling "quiet" violence can be grasped from two facts: Robeson County, in the mid-twentieth century, was by reputation the second-wealthiest, or more precisely, second-highest wealth-producing, rural county in the U.S. South based on the value of the agricultural produce shipped from it; at the same time, it was usually said that it was one of the fifty poorest counties in the United States by per capita income. It is still the poorest county in North Carolina. Lumberton was both the county seat, as the administrative center is often called, and the seat of those who administered and sought to maintain that spread—a spread that did not just happen but had to be made. It was, and still is, being made rather quietly and systematically, which does not make it much, if any, easier to oppose.

As the labor needs changed profoundly with mechanization and with the demise of small-scale farming, a whole new way of making different kinds of lives, tied to different kinds of labor needs, became increasingly necessary. A gun pointed directly at you is an act of intense violence, whether or not the trigger is pulled. The old ways of producing vulnerable people were no longer either needed or wanted by the new elites who ran the new factories, and they made it stop. That was part of the transformation in Maxton

in 2003, turning very much away from the whole display of potential and actual state violence against our march in Lumberton, and putting in its place, even in a community where the elected officials were African American, a different kind of attempted control, one that increasingly produced disposable, rather than useful, people at the bottom.

We were witnessing, in this 1968 march in Lumberton, the end times of a long-lasting way of making specific kinds of inequalities, though we were mostly too scared, or more likely too upset by the guns in our faces and the death of our dear Rev. Dr. King, to realize that underneath the theater of total violence against us, and control over us, were the death spasms of a social order. Taking the place of these old ways of producing particularly vulnerable African Americans have been new practices and policies, as we shall see, with somewhat different goals and methods, and with results that include intensifying differentiation within African American communities.

Underneath the very different parade in Maxton, in 2003, was another, less hidden but still uncertain new world, a world struggling to be born but not quite making it. New kinds of suffering and unmet needs were emerging, shaping new kinds of failures in the midst of both new kinds of successes and new kinds of recognized or just barely acknowledged dignity. It is more difficult to describe, or even to point toward, this world that was then and still is not quite born, as opposed to the more easy task of naming a world that is not quite dead, so the discussion of the emerging history half hiding beneath this quiet parade in Maxton will have to wait a bit.

This book examines how race is both socially constructed and lived. It does so in the context of developing a new perspective on the familiar topic of transitions. I am particularly concerned with the transition from yesterday to tomorrow in the often unavoidable struggles that occur in the everyday lives of ordinary people.

The transition from yesterday to tomorrow often is, or seems, deeply chaotic. People all too frequently must be concerned with the “what-ifs” that impinge on their lives: What if the factory does close as the managers threaten it will? What if my flexible job schedules me for hours when I need to pick up my child from school? What if my kid needs to go to the doctor and I am already behind on my rent/mortgage? What if? What if? Then what?



We are entering a terrain of stress, doubt, and uncertainty that I will call the problem of tomorrow. All forms of inequality—race, class, gender, locality, and more—raise the problem of tomorrow with special intensity for those on the more vulnerable end of the continuum. Much of this is intentional, rather than accidental, for all these forms of inequality “work,” as it were, in part by limiting and reshaping the possibilities for tomorrow, and by making tomorrow increasingly uncertain for people at or near the bottom, as they shift from being useful because of their position near the bottom to being disposable—some both useful and disposable, others increasingly not at all wanted, but just disposable.

At the same time, people caught in these confining nets that limit their possible tomorrows also actively and expressively can claim their own tomorrows within, against, and beyond socially constructed and imposed limitations—the constrained futures that so powerfully and painfully shape the now. All three usually come together, as people seek to claim their own lives within, against, and beyond the all too real constraints that are so central to making and continually remaking inequalities.

Here the special focus will be on race, for race is the inequality that is politically and socially still constructed with the most directly applied state violence. After decades in which the left and progressives have focused on “the economy,” we need to pay equal attention to what we might, just to get us started, call “the state.”

Gender violence may well be equally severe and equally pervasive, and equally usually granted impunity to continue by the state. But unless some prominent person is caught as perpetrator or seen as victim, it does not usually get the same media attention as does the violence that continually makes race, so race can seem, more than other forms of inequality except perhaps locality, that what is done to you is done on purpose. No pedestals, no pretense that it is unacceptably wrong, no jail time for the perpetrators, especially when they are employed by the state.

The violence that produces and sustains the inequalities of locality—differential schooling, housing, health care (including toxic waste locations and untreated rodent infestations), transportation, and community services just to begin—is scarcely mentioned or publicly opposed in any sustained ways at all. So the production of inequalities between, as well as within, localities is not widely seen as being a product of state and state violence, to the extent that it actually is. All those just-mentioned expressions of state making, of making unequal neighborhoods and communi-