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Eula Biss *Northwestern University*

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Writing Public Culture

Back to Buxton

Eula Biss

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Each of us has certain clichés, I suspect, to which we are particularly vulnerable, certain songs we are compelled to play over and over again, certain words that undo us with their simple syllables. For years now I have been unable to think clearly if the lyrics of "Sweet Home Alabama" are within my hearing, or "Take Me Home, Country Road," or even "Long Walk Home."

Not long after I began college, when it was dawning on me that, having left my family, I would never again feel as essential, as integral as I had once felt among them, a friend of mine said, "You know, you can never go home." Because I did not yet recognize that phrase as a cliché, the truth of it rang through me.

And that was even before I really, truly left home — before I moved from the familiar landscape of rural Massachusetts to New York City, and then to San Diego, and then to Iowa City. Iowa City, where I would eventually find myself sitting alone in a small windowless room in a big university library, crying while I watched, for the second time, the videotape of an Iowa Public Television documentary titled *You Can't Go Back to Buxton*.

Buxton, Iowa is now just a stack of bricks and a small flock of grave stones in a farmer's field, but was once an unincorporated mining camp of five thousand, an integrated town with a majority black population in the mostly white state of Iowa during the Jim Crow era. Buxton was built in 1900, and it was a ghost town by 1920, but it continues on in books and songs and folklore and public television documentaries as a myth and a specter and, as I came to see it, a kind of promise. But before I understood Buxton's significance in that way, I understood it as I did when I was sitting in the library among boxes of documents waiting to be archived, leaning towards the small television where old folks in faded living rooms spoke of Buxton in that deeply wistful way that is reserved only for The Place You Came From.

I came, at one time, from a place by a river, where we lived under the flight path of an airport and I could see the bolts on the bottoms of the passenger jets as they passed overhead. It was a place of unmown fields and sand pits and back waters where I rode my bike with boys whose houses were flooded by the rising river every spring.

Now, the road through that place has widened by several lanes, and is lined with K-Marts and Walmarts and a mall called Latham Farms, which sits on land where there were once, in my childhood, actual farms. The airport has sheared off the tops of trees for greater visibility, the next-door neighbor who used to give me books about Sodom and Gomorrah has died, both of my parents have moved away, and I will never live there again.

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On the evening of my first day in Iowa, in a humid darkness full of the purring of cicadas, I finally went down to the river, where I had been waiting to go all day, ever since I first saw the water from the car as I drove into town that afternoon. When I stepped onto the bridge over the Iowa River and stood looking out across the water, I knew I was home. I was wrong about that, as it turns out. And I know now that my certainty was based on a series of troubling misconceptions, but it would be years before I would lose the comfort that certainty gave me. At that moment the air over the river smelled thick and slightly fishy and sweet with grass and leaves, like all the Augusts of my childhood. And as I looked down into the water where some tremendously huge carp were swimming against the current, I thanked God for bringing me home.

Buxton was a company town, owned and operated by Consolidated Coal. Located equal distance from three mines on a gently sloping hill, Buxton was more carefully planned than most coal camps, which were often roughly built, poorly drained, temporary barracks next to the coal tipples. The houses Consolidated built for its workers were bigger than in most coal camps, and they were set far enough apart to allow for gardens. The miners in Buxton were not required to buy their goods from the company store, and thus not required to go into debt to the company. Buxton had two roller skating rinks, a swimming pool, and a YMCA sponsored by Consolidated Coal. Buxton was larger than most coal camps and it would thrive for twice as long, but like any other camp it would last only as long as the mines. When the town began to empty after a fire and the collapse of one mine, it emptied very rapidly, so that by 1919 there were only about four hundred people left in Buxton.

Initially, the population of Buxton was just over half black, and it would eventually drop to just under half black. Some of the black miners in Buxton might have originally been recruited by Consolidated to break a strike in an all white mine at Muchakinock, Iowa. When that mine shut, most of the miners there, many of them black, were relocated to Buxton. It was common, during that period, for companies to pit one racial group against another.

Sugar cane planters in Hawaii hired Portuguese workers to break the strikes of Japanese workers, the owner of a shoe factory in Massachusetts broke a strike of Irish workers by hiring Chinese immigrants, and the Central Pacific Railroad in California considered bringing ten thousand blacks across the country to break a strike of Chinese workers. Some historians have suggested that we have early capitalism to thank for the traditional animosity in this country between racial groups who vied for jobs. But that animosity didn't take in Buxton. The management of the mine was actively recruiting black workers from the South until at least 1910, but those workers were not breaking strikes in Buxton or working for lower wages than the white workers. And they were not, for the most part, locked out of the most desirable or the most lucrative jobs in the mines. Both black and white miners in Buxton belonged to the United Mine Workers, a union that demanded equal pay for equal work.

The editor of the *Iowa State Bystander*, an African American newspaper, described Buxton as "the colored man's mecca of Iowa" and the "Negro Athens of the Northwest." Buxton had integrated schools and an integrated baseball team, the Buxton Wonders. Both blacks and whites operated independent businesses in town. There was a black dentist, a black tailor, a black midwife, black newspaper publishers, black doctors, black pharmacists, black lawyers, black undertakers, a black postmaster, a black Justice of the Peace, black constables, black teachers and principles, and black members of the school board.

In Buxton, Dorothy Collier's family had a green plush sofa and a new cookstove. Marjorie Brown's family had a carpet and a piano in the parlor. "In Buxton," Bessie Lewis said, "you didn't have to want for nothing." It was a prosperous place. But more than that, it was a place that enjoyed unusually good race relations. And this is why former residents would describe it as "a kind of heaven." This is why they would continue to return for picnics forty years after Consolidated Coal had dismantled the last of the houses there. And this is why three scholars from Iowa State University would set out to study the town in the early 1980s, to determine if it had been as racially harmonious as it was rumored to have been. Their results were not the results one might expect from such a study. After interviewing seventy-five former residents, black and white, after analyzing payroll records and census records and company records, after reading decades of local newspaper accounts, after looking for evidence of discrimination in housing and schooling, they determined that, yes, Buxton had been "a utopia."

I enjoyed, when I first arrived in Iowa City, a kind of giddy, blind happiness. By then I had moved often enough not to have the usual illusions about a clean slate or a fresh start or a new life. I knew

that I could not escape myself. And the idea of beginning again, with no furniture and no friends, was exhausting. So my happiness then is hard to explain. I am tempted now to believe that entering the life one is meant to inhabit is a thrilling sensation and that is all. But I am haunted by the possibility that I was happy when I arrived in Iowa at least in part because of my misconception that I had come to a place where the people were like me.

At the time, I am sure I would have denied that race had anything to with my sense of belonging, but I would not have denied that certain everyday actions, like walking to the grocery store, were more comfortable because I was not in a place where my race was noticed. A friend of mine once described reveling in the anonymity of Harlem after having grown up on Cape Cod, where his family was one of only a few black families. In Harlem, he told me, he was invisible for the first time in his life. And another friend of mine, a black woman, once described to me her experience walking through a Walmart in rural Iowa, where she was stared at until she could not bear the attention any more. Her husband suggested that she take off her glasses so that she could not see the stares, and that, she said, helped.

There are plenty of things, I now know, that I value much more than invisibility. But at the time that I moved to Iowa City I longed for it. I was tired of being seen, and, worse, of seeing myself be seen. I was tired of that odd caricature of myself that danced in front of me like a puppet as I walked through the streets of places where my race was noticed. In those places I saw, as I imagined everyone else did, my whiteness, dancing there, mocking me, daring me to try to understand it. And I tried. But by the time I arrived in Iowa I was frustrated by the effort, and ready to remove my glasses.

If invisibility was all I expected out of Iowa City I would never have become disillusioned there. In the end I suffered not for lack of anonymity, but for lack of a community to which I belonged in some essential way. Iowa City was a town of writers, a town where the waitresses and the bartenders and the guys who changed the oil in my car were writers, and it was a town of scholars, a liberal town, a town, in other words, full of people like me. But belonging, I would learn there, is much more complicated than that.

It was in the late nineteenth century, Lewis Atherton writes, that people in the towns of the Middle West began to lose their sense of belonging to the larger communities in which they lived. And so began what he calls the "twentieth century cult of joining." In Buxton, a town of only five thousand, a town a fraction of the size of Iowa City, a town in which members of almost every family worked,

in some capacity, for the mines, there were dozens of social clubs and secret societies. There was the Odd Fellows lodge, the Masonic Order, the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks, the True Reformers, the Ladies' Industrial Club, the Sweet Magnolia Club, the Fidelity Club, the Mutual Benefit Literary Society, the Etude Music Club, the Self-Culture Club....

I don't belong to any clubs, and haven't since I was a child. I don't go to church, I don't play any team sports, and I pay my union dues without attending meetings. Not being a joiner, I am forced to believe, even at this late date, one hundred years after Buxton, in community. And so I am forced to be frustrated by the many forces that thwart communities. One of those being, in college towns, the fact that the majority of the population is transient and un-invested and somewhat displaced. And then, of course, there is the fact that college towns are company towns, towns owned, more or less, by institutions, towns polluted by the same problems that plague those institutions.

During my last year in Iowa City, the University released a lengthy report written by the Diversity Action Committee. It was, to me, a troubling and contradictory document. It began with a series of recommendations for recruiting more minority students to the school, followed by some disturbing findings, particularly that many minority students were not especially happy at the University. "Once minority students arrive at the University, many report feeling alienated and alone," the report stated. "Some express frustration that the depictions of the diversity of the University community and Iowa City found on the University's website and in its printed materials are misleading, and some students are shocked to find the minority community — currently 2,678 students of a total student body of 29,642 — so small and so dispersed."

The point at which I began to cry during the documentary about Buxton was the interview with Marjorie Brown, who moved from Buxton to the mostly white town of Cedar Rapids when she was twelve. "And then all at once, with no warning, I no longer existed.... The shock of my life was to go to Cedar Rapids and find out that I didn't exist.... I had to unlearn that Marjorie was an important part of a community."

This was not a comfortable invisibility — this was obscurity. This was, in her words, the loss of her self. And this is what goes unspoken in many of the stories of integration that are told now as stories of heroism and triumph. This is what I heard in the voice of a man on the radio, who, when asked what it was like for him to move to an all white suburb of Chicago in the sixties, explained that

he had children, and that he could put them in better schools there. He wouldn't say, exactly, what it felt like, but he implied it was a sacrifice.

During the years that my cousin worked as an oral historian, she spent quite a bit of time interviewing people from what she calls "the generation of firsts." These were black people who were the first in their families to go to college, or to become professors, or to become professionals — to integrate white institutions. Her father was part of this generation, the first in his family to leave Jamaica and go to Harvard, and she says she saw, as his daughter, what that cost him. When I ask her what it cost him, exactly, and what it cost others of that generation, she will not say at first. She is, she says, uncomfortable saying. After a long silence she says, finally, "My first thought was that it cost them themselves. But I don't think that's fair. I don't think that's a fair thing to say."

"I remember the very day that I became colored," Zora Neale Hurston wrote of the day she left the all black town where she grew up. "I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders, as Zora. When I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl."

Hurston refused to be cast as "tragically colored." And so this new identity was, she maintained, simply a change in consciousness, at worst a discomfort. "No," she wrote, "I do not weep at the world — I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife."

Perhaps it is only through leaving home that you can learn who you are. Or at least who the world thinks you are. And the gap between the one and the other is the painful part, the part that you may, if you are me, or if you are Zora Neale Hurston, keep arguing against for the rest of your life — saying, *No, I am not white in* that *way*, or, *No, I am not black in* that *way*.

I used to say that I did not realize I was white until I moved to New York City, but that is not true. I knew full well by then that I was white. What I realized in New York was what it feels like to be an outsider in your own home, and that is not what it means to be white in this country.

"Nobody knows me," I cried to my mother on the phone during that first year in New York. My days were infused with the isolation and the paranoia of an outsider. I remember, for instance, my persistent suspicion that the little boys in Fort Greene Park peed when they saw me coming. At my most clear-headed, I understood that the boys just happened to have a pissing game and that I just happened to walk through the park while they were at it. But still, I

was nagged by the possibility that the pissing was a message to me, a message that I was unequipped to interpret as an outsider, but that I guessed meant, "We piss on you and your whiteness."

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Along with several boxes of documents about Buxton, there are, in the archives at the University of Iowa Library, a series of oral histories documenting the lives of women from Latino communities in Iowa. Some of these communities date back to the 1880s, to boxcar towns next to railroad yards. And some of the oral histories read, in their incomplete form, because they have not yet been typed by someone who understands Spanish: "My father was born in XXXX in Mexico. His name was Jose XXXX. His mother was XXXXXX." Some include summary: "After fifteen years in Iowa, Carmen feels that she has achieved the community's respect." Some ache: "I came here without my family, without my climate, without my mountains and without my culture."

The town of Cook's Point was a small Mexican American community near the city of Davenport, Iowa. It was next to the town dump, on land formerly occupied by lumber mills and owned by a "liquidation corporation." By the 1940s the place was considered a blight and an eyesore, and when the land was sold to an industrial developer, the town of Cook's Point was bulldozed. One old woman remained rocking on her porch as the bulldozers approached, and another family remained in two rooms of their house even as bulldozers ripped off the other half. After paging though a box of documents about Cook's Point, I returned it to the archivist, who in her friendly way remarked that many of the interviews with former residents of Cook's Point revealed a deep nostalgia for the place. This, despite the fact that there was no running water there, no heat in winter, raw sewage in the streets, no drainage or pavement, and entire families living in boxcars and tarpaper shacks. She could understand, the archivist told me, the feelings people had for Buxton, because they had had a good life there, but she could not quite understand why people loved Cook's Point.

A sense of home is, it seems, worth more than any other comfort. And one of the questions I want to answer now, for myself, is what makes a place feel like home. I know that it is not so simple as living where people speak your language and look like you and have lost what you have lost, but there is a kind of comfort in that, too.

The box of documents about Cook's Point revealed, among other things, that the people who lived there were probably not as poor as their conditions might have suggested. The average income in

Cook's Point was very close to the national average. Some families there had savings in the bank, and life insurance, and health insurance, and a number of families owned cars. The people of Cook's Point did not have access, because they were squatting on land they did not own, in a place that was not formally a town, to municipal utilities like running water and electricity, but after Cook's Point was bulldozed and the people who lived there were forced to integrate into Davenport and Moline and Silvis, many bought homes and led middle class lives. What they lost in the process is recorded in the oral histories that baffle the archivist.

"I had been raised in a white surrounding," Lola Reeves said of moving to Buxton from a town where her family was one of three black families. "Going to Buxton with all the people of my own race was a great experience for me.... I could exercise my feelings, my potentials, my talent and my social life and I think Buxton brought a whole lot of joy to me, just to be able to live, a colored girl, in a colored area, feeling like I was one of them and I was happy."

And perhaps this is part of why integration in this country remains as troubled and as incomplete as ever. In 1955, Zora Neale Hurston was among those who opposed the Supreme Court decision to integrate public schools in the South. "The whole matter revolves around the self-respect of my people," she wrote. "How much satisfaction can I get from a court order for somebody to associate with me who does not wish me near them?" The forcible integration of schools on the grounds of offering a better education to black students was, she felt, an insult to black teachers. "It is a contradiction in terms," she wrote, "to scream race pride and equality while at the same time spurning Negro teachers and self-association."

What integration seems to mean to many white people is that a very small number of other people will be accepted into white communities and institutions where they will be "tolerated." I suspect that Hurston, an anthropologist, a collector of culture, understood the implications of this. Assimilation is the unspoken end. But I would like to believe that this country is capable of a version of integration greater, more ambitious, than that.

I found myself wondering, as I read the report on diversity at the University of Iowa, who this particular version of diversity was serving, and who it was intended to serve. For who's sake, I wondered, does the University want to increase the number of minority students from nine percent to ten-point-nine percent. It did not seem to be for the sake of those students, for the sake of their education, or for the sake of their selves. I suspected that it was more for the sake of the institution, so that it could appear

properly progressive. Or perhaps it was for the sake of the white students, so that they might be exposed to a limited degree of diversity and thus be made more worldly. This might help explain some of the disappointment of the minority students who arrived at the University only to find that they were in service to the education of others.

One of the mysteries of Buxton is why Consolidated Coal so actively participated in creating and maintaining a substantially black town in Iowa. The scholars who studied Buxton could not answer this question. The most cynical explanation, that Consolidated wanted to divide its workforce to undermine their collective power, is contradicted not only by the fact that all the miners were unionized, but by the experiences of the people who lived in Buxton. Many of them believed that the company actively discouraged discrimination, both public and private, and that a man could lose his job for spitting on another man.

Whatever the explanation, there was coal to mine in Buxton but there were also lives to lead, and somehow both undertakings turned out alright for awhile. It is naïve, I think, to suppose that Buxton was truly a utopia. But I would still like to believe what one man who used to live there said, decades after he left, "I'm not so sure, I'm not so sure you can't go back to Buxton."

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