

Abducted by Puritans: Adoption, Submergence, and the New Frontier

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In a nomination acceptance speech delivered at the Democratic National Convention on July 16, 1960, John F. Kennedy declared that “we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier.” Some six months before, I, a six-year old child of African American and Korean ancestry, had come kicking and screaming off a plane in Minneapolis only to be deposited on a new frontier of my very own in the middle of North Dakota, at a “remove” of some 8,000 miles from the orphanage in Seoul, Korea, where I had started. I use the term “remove” as a way of connecting my story with Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative, the Ur-text of the structure of separation, regression, and regeneration through violence that Richard Slotkin has identified as the narrative schema at the heart of the myth of the frontier. There are other ways, however, in which I come by the “puritanness” of this encounter, ways perhaps more honest or “authentic” than through Slotkin or Rowlandson, both of whom are rather late arrivals on the primal scene of my naturalization: my parents, a UCC minister and his wife, were transplanted New Englanders; and the Sunday School of my mom’s home church, the First Congregational Church of Wethersfield, Connecticut (“gathered” or established in 1635), helped sponsor my adoption by paying the cost of getting me from Seoul to North Dakota.

While the information above may set up the historical and cultural context in which imagining my life as a Puritan captivity narrative makes sense, I would like to explore some of the ramifications of my “regeneration” as a member of a new family and, later, as a freshly minted U.S. citizen, in relation to two separate but related narratives of submergence. I spent the formative first six years of my American life on the Fort Berthold Reservation, home of the Three Affiliated Tribes (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara). Significant portions of the land-base of the Affiliated Tribes have been submerged since the 1950s when the Army Corps of Engineers built the Garrison Reservoir. Caught between the binary opposition of “Indian” and “white,” I learned, very rapidly, what it meant to be an American, or not, on the dry land that was left. Also submerged beneath the land, east toward the Air Force base at Minot, were several pockets of long-range Minute Man missiles aimed alarmingly close to where I had just come from. My non-fiction meditation will analyze the tensions between adoption, naturalization, and these twin submergences as, these days, a third submergence rises up from the drowned Indian fishing villages and the binding energy of all that is buried fury, as if to say, “remember me.”

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of Soul: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Teleology of Race” in *Re-Cognizing W.E.B. Du Bois in the 21st Century*, eds. Mary Keller and Chester J. Fontenot, Jr., pp. 172-215 (currently being proofed; Mercer University Press, projected Spring 2007); “Making It Home: Cap Anson, Fleet Walker, and the Romance of the National Pastime” in *The Northsiders: Essays in the Social History of the Chicago Cubs* (working title), Gerald C. Wood and Andrew Hazucha, eds. (forthcoming, McFarland and Company, projected Spring 2007); Poetry: “Mission: a complex,” *Platte Valley Review*, v. 29.2 (Fall 2001); “Talking the Walk,” *Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature*, v. 19.2 (Spring 2002); “Some Things,” *Cold Mountain Review*, v. 31.1 (Fall 2002); “I go long,” *Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature*, v. 23.1 (Fall 2005).