Editor's Note

Manoa, Volume 32, Number 1, 2020, pp. xi-xiv (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/man.2020.0007>

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On a September evening in Atlanta, Georgia, Walter White and his father watched out the front window of their small house as an angry mob of armed men and boys surged in their direction. Part of a citywide riot incited by racist politicians and journalists, the men pointed their torches at Walter's home, while he and his father braced for the attack. It was the first time in his life that thirteen-year-old Walter had held a gun. "Son," his father told him, "don't shoot until the first man puts his foot on the lawn, and then—don't you miss."

There was no doubt in their minds that the mob intended to burn down the home where Walter lived with his parents and five sisters. That night, the mob destroyed many houses and businesses, smashed windows, and beat men and women to death. Suddenly, gunshots rang out from a home close to Walter's and the mob halted. Some of the attackers retreated, while others scattered to look for easier, unarmed households to assault. Finally, around 2 A.M., it started to rain heavily and the drunken rioters went home.

In his autobiography, *A Man Called White*, Walter said it was on this fearful night that he decided he would infinitely rather be what he was than one of the men who hated him, his family, and every person like him—men who had been "made sick and murderous" by their loathing for black people.

In fact, Walter White was not black; that is, he had white skin, blue eyes, and blond hair, and for all his life he was perceived by others to be racially white. Both of his parents had been born into slavery, but they, too, were light skinned and might have passed for white if they had chosen to. His mother, in particular, had aquiline features, light blue eyes, and, Walter wrote, "the most golden hair that I have ever seen."

From his parents, Walter learned the complicated burden of his family's skin color. "If Mother and my sisters boarded a [street]car and sat in the 'Negro' section," he remembered, "they were the objects at best of embarrassing stares and remarks and not infrequently of insults and other indignities from white male passengers. If they had sat in the 'white' section, they would have been accused by some Negroes of 'passing.'" His father, on an evening twenty-five years later, stepped off the curb at an intersection in downtown Atlanta. The traffic light turned green, and his father was hit by a speeding car. The driver was a doctor at the Grady City Hospital. Because Walter's father looked white,

opposite

*Birmingham,
Alabama, 1963.
Civil rights activists
Jimmy Hicks, Julian
Bond, John Lewis,
and Jeremiah X
across from a church
where four young
black girls were killed
in a KKK bombing.*

**© Danny Lyon
Magnum Photos**

the doctor drove him to the modern, well-equipped Grady Hospital, where the best physicians in the city tried to save his life.

Having heard about the accident, his brother-in-law rushed to the older Negro hospital across the street from Grady. Not finding Walter's father there, the brother-in-law crossed over to the white-only hospital, and asked if they'd taken in a hit-and-run victim. In his autobiography, White describes what happened next:

"Do you know who this man is?" he was asked.

"He is my father-in-law," my brother-in-law, whose skin is brown, replied.

"Have we put a nigger in the white ward?" they asked, horrified.

Father was snatched from the examination table lest he contaminate the "white" air, and taken hurriedly across the street in a driving downpour to the "Negro" ward.

Shortly afterwards, White's father died in the shabby, segregated hospital.

Like his parents, White always identified as black, even when it might have saved his life to do otherwise. He went to an historically black college in Atlanta and, while still in school, organized a local chapter of the NAACP. At age twenty-five, he was invited by James Weldon Johnson to move to New York City and join the staff of the organization's national headquarters. When Johnson stepped down, White replaced him as executive director. He became a prolific journalist and reporter, and he also wrote fiction, including two well-received novels; he was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship for fiction and was an early participant in the Harlem Renaissance. White remained head of the NAACP until his death, twenty-five years later.

On assignment for the NAACP and for major newspapers, White was a courageous undercover investigator. He traveled to the Deep South to investigate and report on riots and lynchings. And because he was perceived to be racially white, he was able to interview law enforcement officers, thugs like the ones that had threatened his family, white supremacists, members of the Ku Klux Klan (the "Klucks," as White called them). White's essay in *Tyranny Lessons*, "I Investigate Lynchings," is an example of his powers as a writer and fearless reporter.

Of the forms of oppression in *Tyranny Lessons*, few are as cold blooded as the American-style lynchings that were tolerated during the first half of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, that form of mob brutality is not exclusive to the U.S. As this editor's note is being written, Muslims in Delhi are being burned alive in their homes or dragged into the streets and lynched by mobs incited by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's anti-Muslim legislation. The Indian press is reporting that the police merely look away or even assist the Hindu attackers.

Communal violence in India has a long history, of course. In 2002, for example, when Modi was Chief Minister of State in Gujarat, over 2,000 Muslims and Hindus were killed in mob violence. In 1984, riots targeting Sikhs killed as

many as 8,000 people. None of the incidents compare to the communal violence that took place in 1947 during the Partition, when up to 2 million Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus slaughtered one another. In *Tyranny Lessons*, writer Asghar Wajahat describes the frightening psychology of such violence in “Are You My Enemy?”—a dialogue between friends that begins with acknowledging their shared opinions and values, and then irrationally degenerates into heated accusations that one of them is “responsible for all the problems in the country.” The reference to sectarian bloodshed in South Asia is clear, but the psychology is universal.

Various forms of modern oppression are described by other writers in *Tyranny Lessons*. American poet David Brunson’s “El Wenufoye” describes the violence of the 1973 military coup in Chile, led by the CIA-backed General Augusto Pinochet. Chile’s president, Salvador Allende, was killed in the attack on the capital. Twelve days later, the poet Pablo Neruda also died, likely murdered on orders from Pinochet.

Efe Duyan, from Turkey, writes powerfully in “A Nightmare of the June 17, 1970, Martial Rule” about the terror unleashed by Turkey’s armed forces when ordered to put down mass protests. Tanks and paratroopers were mobilized against more than 100,000 demonstrators in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmit.

A writer from Bali, Indonesia, Putu Oka Sukanta was one of hundreds of thousands of citizens detained after the country’s 1965 coup, led by General Haji Mohammad Suharto. Between October 1965 and March 1966, the Suharto regime massacred half a million people accused of being Communists. Sukanta was arrested in 1966, beaten, tortured, and imprisoned without trial. After ten years in prison, he was released; the regime kept him under surveillance, and his writing was censored. He was jailed again in 1990. In his poem “It Begins with an ID Card,” he describes the insidious way tyranny may begin grow from a small regulation into total state control.

Latvian poet Arvis Viguls’s poem “Commentary: Mandelstam” reflects on the imprisonment of the great Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, first arrested in 1934 for having written an irreverent poem about Stalin that offended the despot. Tortured in the infamous Lubyanka prison in Moscow and forced to confess, Mandelstam was sentenced to three years in exile for “preparing and distribution of counter-revolutionary literary works.” In 1938, he was arrested again and sentenced to five years in the Russian Far East. He was reported to have died the same year, at age forty-seven, in a Gulag transit camp in the arctic Kolyma. Mandelstam wrote, “Only in Russia is poetry respected—it gets people killed. Is there anywhere else where poetry is so common a motive for murder?”

During the War of 1812, the British offered asylum to American slaves who escaped and the opportunity for them to bear arms, if they went over to the British side to fight. In “Passing the Fire,” an excerpt from his novel *A Wolf by the Ears*, Wayne Karlin imagines an enslaved man, Towerhill, who escapes to freedom and then becomes a sergeant in the British Colonial Marines. In this chapter, Towerhill sets fire to the Capitol, the White House, and the Library of

Congress with other British soldiers and officers. He rages against the hypocrisy and broken promises in the U.S. Constitution, and America's tolerance of slavery.

Some of the writers in *Tyranny Lessons* tell their stories in the form of myths and allegories. Indonesian fiction writer Rio Johan, now living in Paris, creates "Chevalier d'Orange," a tale about the best warrior in an imagined kingdom. A skilled, virtuous, and ideal soldier who many times defended the kingdom with his courage and skill in battle, the Chevalier is also so uncommonly handsome that rumors speculate about his true gender. The king is in a dilemma: if the Chevalier turns out to be a woman, the country will lose its strongest soldier, because women are not allowed in the army. But, pressured by his subjects, the king reluctantly commands the Chevalier to reveal the truth, whatever it might be.

In "Dolphinology," an excerpt from *Acting My Age*, Thomas Farber laments not only man's inhumanity to man, but man's inhumanity to almost everything else, including animals—in this case, species that are captured and exploited by scientists precisely because they may be most like humans in intelligence, though not in morals.

Another form of tyranny is portrayed in novelist Ann Pancake's short story "Epidemic": addiction and its enslavement of the soul. Her main character never makes an appearance, yet over the course of the narrative, the addicted brother becomes as fully present to the reader as to the narrator. Closely linked is the betrayal of family trust and the narrator's horror over the baffling indifference and numbness of the parents.

In 1900, George Henry White (R-N.C.), the only black member of Congress at the time, proposed a bill making lynching a federal crime. The bill went nowhere. Since then, many attempts were made to pass a federal anti-lynching law; all were defeated by defenders of states' rights. In 2005, as some consolation, Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana convinced the Senate to at least pass a resolution apologizing for failing to pass a law. Finally, in 2018, the Senate passed long-delayed anti-lynching legislation, and at the beginning of 2020, the U.S. House passed a similar version—now called the Emmett Till Anti-lynching Act—though not unanimously; once again, states' rights proponents voted no. The Senate will need to approve the House version before the bill is sent to President Donald Trump for his signature.

The Anti-lynching Act cites Walter White for having "meticulously investigated lynchings in the United States and worked tirelessly to end segregation and racialized terror." In this instance, the arc of the moral universe has taken 120 years to start bending toward racial justice. How much time the moral universe takes to bend is one of tyranny's lessons. Another is that whenever one form of tyranny is outlawed, new forms of oppression will always arise. Less certain is that tyranny will eventually be overcome.