

*Welcome to Braggsville* by T. Geronimo Johnson

Behind the Book Essay

Am I *the* main character? In other words: Am I the model for Achilles Holden Conroy? Readers of my first novel often ask that question. I hope to field similar inquiries about D'aron Davenport, the main character of *Welcome to Braggsville* - even though he is white and I am not.

That wasn't the original plan. When I was scratching out snatches of dialogue and notes to self on napkins and scraps of paper, Daron was black, and not because I am, but because of my abiding interest in how we form identities in hostile environments. More specifically: I am interested in how racism, sexism, or any other jerkoff-ism alters our internal landscapes (our self-confidence, our range of aspirations) and our social landscapes (friendships and amorous engagements). Even more specifically: After living in the lower right hand corner, the left side, and the middle of the contiguous US, I became fascinated by how varied are the experiences of being a black male. Being black in Columbia, Md or Berkeley is not the same as being black in New Orleans or Atlanta (neither is being white).

But when I began writing *Braggsville*, the impulse to lead with a black protagonist was derailed. First, faking a lynching requires a critical—and in this case, comedic—distance. Fear and stress tend to collapse that distance. I had a hard time imagining a black kid from the South returning home to protest a civil war reenactment by staging a death by hanging. Second, research revealed that militias had grown exponentially since Obama's inauguration. Those militias had a very specific membership profile, one that would not surprise a black kid from the south, but might disturb a white kid from the south. One rule novelists could live by: Don't send characters on journeys to discover what they already know. Lastly, while moving around the country I learned that white people who are not racist tend to underestimate the vitriolic nature and enmity of those who are—perhaps blacks overestimate the same—and everyone tends to exaggerate the ills of the South, as if it's the bad sibling in whose company you can't help but shine, that relative you relish calling a "character."

But am I *this* character? The details diverge, but like D'aron/Daron, I live/lived in *at least* two worlds that don't always speak the same language or hold the same values: Columbia Md, a planned community, and New Orleans, planned chaos. I also spent chunks of adulthood in two distinct locales: Atlanta and Berzerkeley, which, like *Braggsville* and the Gully, are on opposite sides of the sun, separated by far more than simple geography.

My Columbia school smelled like wet paint, and boasted an experimental open-space plan with small classes grouped in pods. My New Orleans high school had chipping paint and chattering radiators, a higher student teacher ratio. Street names in Columbia are inspired by Robert Frost poems, Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, and other literary touchstones. My subdivision, Bryant Woods, was named after the poet William Cullen Bryant. Only upon writing this essay did I discover that my village in Columbia—Wilde Lake—was built around a former slave plantation.

When I moved to New Orleans in tenth grade, one of the first things I noticed was that streets were named after military heroes, such as General Lee (*Mom, wasn't he on the other side?*). My taste buds blew a fuse, too, as did my concept of confinement. I was 13 ½ years old, and as far as I could recall, it was my first time in classrooms with doors. The small library, wedged into a corner, was barely a quarter of the size of Columbia's, even though both schools had equal numbers of students. The school didn't have discipline problems, or drug problems, or metal detectors. The school had a waiting list. Yet my tenth grade peers were being taught civics lessons that I had learned in sixth grade.

My biggest lesson: *I talk white*. I learned this in my Nola Spanish class, of all places, where they teased me for sounding white. Not for sounding American when speaking Spanish, but for *sounding white when speaking English!* Yes! I was denounced as a *proper talker*. I say they, but I mean one particular person, the guy who started it by condemning me, then mocking me until I cursed: *Fuck you!* My nemesis's response: *You even cuss white*.

[None of this occurred to me until a job interview years later when the interviewer pontificated about how the US is a country where kids from urban New Orleans public schools can attend Stanford. I was confused until realizing he'd assumed I spent my entire life there, and I thought back to that civics lesson and how most of the kids I met while *at Stanford as a Stegner Fellow, not a student*, were from yet another world - one where the high schools teach two languages plus Greek or Latin (*Mom, how does a language die?*).

But after that interview, when the full weight of my fortune clicked on like neon, I felt survivor's guilt, and sorely divided between who I am and who people think me to be, and just damned lucky, and possessed by a new appreciation for education, and anger at how unprepared my Nola classmates were, and what can I do with that, except write?]

Did I tell you that the kid—Mark, I remember his name now—who teased me for *talking white* later bonded with me over skateboarding? Did I tell you that Mark, who mocked me for not sounding black enough, *was white*, a fact which made zero impression on me at the time? It didn't occur to me until I wrote this essay. Why think about it now? Maybe he was Daron/D'aron, too.