

“Is That
Guy a Student Here?”

A Profile of Jerome Bibuld

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Thesis Abstract

This project is a personal and biographical sketch of Jerome Bibuld, an octogenarian student at Western Connecticut State University and former colleague of the author on the school newspaper, who is known for his radical-left political beliefs and strong stances against racism. Alternating biographical information with anecdotes about my experiences with him on campus, the project aims to put a face on this unique character.

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Introduction

This project is an attempt to describe one of the strangest individuals I have ever had the experience of knowing. I say “experience” and not “pleasure” or “displeasure,” because while I consider him a friend of sorts, it is hard to say which emotion I have felt around Jerome Bibuld in greater measure. He is at times frustrating to deal with, a man bloated with conviction and self-righteousness.

On the other hand, it is difficult to come up with a real reason to dislike him; his unconventional views, opinions and mannerisms seem natural to him, and while he accepts that they are not shared by many, he considers himself a crusader for the common good. As he puts it early on in one of the twenty-plus chapters of his rambling autobiography (a work in progress):

“I am a United Statesian* male who lives in an imperial society. This imposes certain obligations on me. Firstly, it is my constant duty to combat racism, not only in my society, but, perhaps as importantly, in myself. Secondly, there is the constant responsibility to fight male supremacy in myself, as well as in the society in which I live” (Bibuld II-1).

No one would accuse him of insincerity. Despite being an octogenarian Jewish man from New York City, Bibuld lives with his African-American wife (his fourth wife, no less, and three decades his junior), one of her children (his stepchildren) and grandchildren. His only surviving family members are two brothers, and he has little contact with the older, and none with the younger (with whom he had a strange falling-out). Doing an internet search on his name reveals a few tidbits that reflect his life’s

mission: as a young couple, he and his first wife (also African-American) were involved in a struggle to better the conditions of black New York City schools during the early 1950's, when segregation was still legal. A longtime arbiter in the chess world, he was instrumental in getting a group of South African players banned from FIDE (Fédération Internationale des Échecs, or World Chess Federation) during the apartheid era.

Like myself, Bibuld is an avowed atheist. Unlike myself (an unashamed misanthrope), he is nonetheless deeply concerned for humanity, far more than any once-a-week Christian who pats himself on the back for volunteering at the soup kitchen twice a year. One of his favorite phrases/insults is the term “anti-human,” which he seems to consider anyone (but especially heads of state and politicians) who supports a situation where people may die. A description of alleged JFK assassin Lee Harvey Oswald by Kerry Thornley, one of his fellow Marines, jumped out at me as applying equally to Bibuld:

I have never personally known an individual more motivated by what appeared to be a genuine concern for the human race than Lee Harvey Oswald...His concern for other people, not as individuals but as a mass, was real. Oswald was unselfish. He was so unselfish that he couldn't seem to concentrate on his own affairs. He would rather be busily solving the problems of mankind (Marrs 108).

It is probably no coincidence that while he is not a deranged assassin like Oswald was, Bibuld was also a fervent Communist during his younger years.

I first met Mr. Bibuld, as he insists on being called by everyone who is not a relative (he calls everyone by their surnames), sometime in Spring 2007 after he enrolled at WCSU (having been kicked out of NYU in 1952 for being, as he calls it, a “loose

cannon”). He sticks out on campus like a sore thumb, just as one would expect of an 80 year old man who wears gloves in September, carries a cane, has a voice eerily similar to Marlon Brando’s performance as Col. Kurtz in the film “Apocalypse Now,” and wears a baseball cap with buttons that say things like “US INVADERS OUT OF IRAQ” and “FIGHT TERRORISM: DISSOLVE THE CIA.” He peppers his speech with politically charged phrases, greeting people with “Heil Dubya,” (a not-so-subtle put down of President Bush), referring to all police officers as “members of the army of occupation,” and talking to anyone who listens about how “Afro-America” is a separate country from the United States, and that when it secedes, he hopes to be granted citizenship.

He began appearing at meetings of WCSU’s campus newspaper, The Echo, and worked as copy editor for the 2007-08 year, during which time I came to know him and the outlines of his philosophies fairly well. A running joke among my friends that know Bibuld is that speaking to him is reminiscent of a famous scene in “Last Exit to Springfield,” often considered the greatest episode of the animated TV show “The Simpsons.” The plot revolves around a workers’ strike at the Springfield power plant, and Mr. Burns (the cold-hearted tycoon owner based on Charles Rockefeller) is running out of ideas. Being hopelessly behind the times, he hires a squad of strikebreakers “like the ones they had in the 30’s.” A group of geriatrics in blue suits arrives, led by none other than the doddering Grampa Simpson, who begins describing how they will bust the union:

“We can’t bust heads like we used to, but we have our ways. One trick is to tell 'em stories that don’t go anywhere -- like the time I caught the ferry over to Shelbyville. I needed a new heel for my shoe, so, I decided to go to Morganville, which is what they

called Shelbyville in those days. So I tied an onion to my belt, which was the style at the time. Now, to take the ferry cost a nickel, and in those days, nickels had pictures of bumblebees on 'em. 'Give me five bees for a quarter,' you'd say. Now where were we? Oh yeah -- the important thing was that I had an onion on my belt, which was the style at the time. They didn't have white onions because of the war. The only thing you could get was those big yellow ones..." ("Last Exit to Springfield")

As Grampa Simpson rambles on, Mr. Burns's eyes gradually get heavier and heavier, and he and his assistant heave a deep sigh.

Bibuld seems similar—whether from his age or simply joy at hearing his own voice, he is so good at rambling and sidetracking that I've observed him discuss "Fiddler on the Roof" during a history class on Latin America. Even I have lost track of the subject matter (his life) in some of my interviews for this profile. His memoirs, a work in progress, have the ponderous title of "Towards and Autobiographical Dissertation," and are at 23 chapters and counting. The work seems less like a creative output than an attempt to put down as much of his memories as possible; he sometimes rambles about unimportant topics like his favorite childhood foods while neglecting to write what year he graduated high school. Separating the kernels of wheat from the chaff in his memoirs is often a daunting task.

The idea of writing my thesis on Bibuld emerged as something of a joke among my friends, but as time passed, I came to realize that not only was it a viable idea, but if I did my thesis on anything else, I would wind up regretting it—I realized that he was someone whose story had to be told, and no one else but he would tell it.

Part of the project's challenge—as well as its appeal—is the fact that I have many views almost 180 degrees the opposite to Bibuld's. For example, I am a fiscal conservative (though liberal on almost all social issues such as gay marriage and abortion), very patriotic, and I despise Communism—I consider its ideas of to be contrary to human nature and disastrous when put into practice. I would also probably be considered “anti-human” by Bibuld's definition since I agree with some aspects of social Darwinism and think that war is a sometimes-necessary (if not inevitable) part of human affairs.

It is a bizarre task to work with and accurately profile someone with views so contrary to one's own. On occasion, he has caused me to question opinions that I hold dear. As Jared Sturges, The Echo's news editor, put it: “As much as I think he's a kook, he did get me thinking once in a while.”

This project began as an attempt at simply writing Bibuld's biography, but has evolved into something more complex. It is an attempt to tell two stories—one is the story of Jerome Bibuld's life up to the present, gleaned from interviews with himself and his family and his own rambling memoirs (which he has been sending me as he writes them), as well as a rough outline of his political beliefs. The other story is a combination of my own interactions with Bibuld over the past year and a half, and the interactions of others—students and professors who encountered this character, some of whom have found him endearing, and others infuriating. It is my hope that this project will put a more vivid face on someone who lives in a considerably different reality from most.

* This merits an explanation: Bibuld refuses to refer to Americans as such, instead calling them “United Statesians.” He explains this in his memoirs thusly: “I deny the arrogation of the words, “America” and “American”, to or by the United States of America, for several reasons. In the first place, “America” runs at least from Baffin Bay to Tierra del Fuego. To limit the meaning of the word to the U. S. A. is to deny most of the land area of “the western hemisphere” and most of the humans who live in that part of America that is not part of the U. S. A. Secondly, if one accepts the figure of 300 million as the population of the United States -- which I consider a U. S. governmental lie – one, therefore, denies the existence of more than 600 million persons.”

Chapter I: “Do you truly believe anyone deserves to be tased?”

One of my first memorable encounters with Mr. Bibuld occurred on September 21st, 2007. The Echo staff, which Bibuld had just joined the previous spring as copy editor, was milling around discussing recent events. Someone brought up University of Florida student Andrew Meyer, who that Monday had resisted being led away by police during a Q&A session with former Presidential candidate John Kerry and was subsequently tased. The incident was shown in an Internet video that captured the entire country’s attention for a few weeks.

I believed—and still believe—that Meyer got what was coming to him. He was not interested in having a real discussion with John Kerry but was using the event as a platform for a combative, paranoid monologue for which the Senator would not have had any reasonable answer. After his microphone was cut, he was asked to leave and refused. As he was being dragged out, he physically resisted the police until they decided to handcuff him, which he also did not consent to. Ignoring a warning that could be heard clearly on the video that he would be tased if he didn’t comply, Meyer continued to flail his hands around (again, as can be seen clearly in one of the videos) until the inevitable occurred. The whole event seemed to me to be contrived, and blown completely out of proportion. The fact that Meyer was known to have a penchant for practical jokes, gave a video camera to a friend right before the incident began, and according to the police report, did not act remotely as unhinged in the squad car and station as he did when there were video cameras around, have since convinced me that the event was a publicity stunt.

“He deserved it!” I said with conviction to another Echo member. Unfortunately, Mr. Bibuld was standing right in front of me.

“Mr. Wittstein,” he said, glaring. “Do you really believe that anyone deserves to be tased?”

After a long pause (and noticing that several staff members were watching us with some interest), I finally said, “Yes...on some occasions.”

“Well,” he said, lapsing into the reproachful tone that meant he was going to be speaking for a while, “I am of the opinion that Senator John Kerry is a liar and an asshole, and since he did nothing to stop the assault by the Army of Occupation, as I refer to all members of the police force, he is equally at fault. Not only is tasing anti-human, it is also quite similar to the practice of electro-convulsive therapy that is performed on hapless psychiatric patients as a method of control.

“Well,” I said carefully, already aware of how divergent my opinions were to his own, “ECT is extremely rare nowadays, and it’s now done with the patient’s consent.”

“I do not believe that is the case, Mr. Wittstein,” he said reproachfully. “The Gulags known as mental health facilities have always been designed to control people and keep them in check, and one of the easiest ways to do this is through the pain-pleasure principle.”

“Mr. Bibuld, I can provide you with information showing that ECT is now done voluntarily and has benefits for certain people with serious depression,” I said, exasperated and unwilling to continue the discussion with someone who sidetracked me this badly. With that, the Echo meeting began.

Later that day, I continued to ponder Mr. Bibuld's initial question of whether or not anyone "deserves" to be tased. He had caught me so off guard with his question that I was at first unsure what to say. In retrospect, my answer would have been an obvious yes; the notion that no one deserves to be tased is as fundamentally absurd to me as the notion that no one deserves to be arrested. But Bibuld's tone had sounded so surprised and reprimanding that at first I thought I had said something terrible.

What kind of a reality does someone live in when they don't think that police use of force is necessary on appropriate occasions? Did he truly believe himself, or was it a rhetorical question to get someone (me) to agree with him? This stand against authority—even authority most would consider necessary for civilization to function—is a fundamental aspect of his personality, and one of the many reasons why speaking with him feels to me like talking to an extra-terrestrial.

Chapter II: Bibuld's Life

Jerome Bibuld's life began in the Bronx in 1928, and his earliest memory—as well as the earliest biographical event he mentions in his Dissertation—was his mother's abandonment of himself and his brother in the Israel Orphan Asylum in Manhattan. How much this unfortunate event shaped his current psyche is anyone's guess, but he does not seem to be disturbed or saddened by it, and as he writes, feels that his mother had her reasons:

“I believe that the woman had had enough of her husband's family -- particularly her mother-in-law – and that she truly felt she had to get out of an impossible situation. She was rather young at the time – perhaps 21 years old – “stuck” with a four-year-old and a three-year-old and a husband with a bad heart. (In truth, I'm not at all certain of all these “facts” that I am laying down for the reader and have not done serious research into the matter, but this is the way I think about it.) At any rate, given the circumstances, if they were what I have presented, and not knowing what else to do, she may have thought she would provide for the physical health of her children by leaving them.” (Bibuld III-2)

Bibuld never saw his mother or met any of her family members again (except for a vague memory of an uncle) and has no idea of what became of her, or even her ancestry beyond guessing that her maiden name (Appel) was German or Jewish. His father, stepmother and paternal grandparents (immigrants from Austria by way of Poland)

brought him back from the orphanage and raised him in the Bronx, and later Queens. In high school, he became involved in American Youth for Democracy and Young Communist League, both “communist fringe groups” by his own definition, but claims he was not fully accepted because he was too “dedicated” for their ranks.

After turning 18 in 1946, Bibuld enlisted in the army—somewhat surprising, given his current feelings toward the United States (which he frequently refers to as “the most vicious anti-human society in the history of the human species”). His sentiments had not hardened to the point that they did later, and although he was against the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he considered himself an American (not yet a “United Statesian”) “at great odds – but stuck – with his country” (Bibuld 14-2). He was stationed in Venice and Trieste immediately after the birth of the Italian Republic, and was an editor of the 88th Division’s weekly newspaper, the *Blue Devil*. Though Bibuld devotes nearly three chapters of his memoirs to his time in the army, most of it describes operas that he saw and prostitutes with whom he cavorted. One anecdote, however, stood out as representative of what a hothead he may have been (the incident entertainingly reminded me of his tenure on *The Echo*). Major Conrad, whom Bibuld calls a “representative United Statesian asshole,” wanted the *Blue Devil* to run a story about how a visiting general’s son was being awarded a bronze star for his service during the war as the front page headline, while Bibuld felt it was more important to run an announcement that the company was switching from the OD’s (the winter uniform) to sun tans (the spring/summer uniform).

“Unfortunately, Major Conrad didn’t agree with me, so we came to a standstill, at which point I told him that he could do what he wanted, because he was the commanding officer, but that I was going home. They finally got the paper done, as Conrad wanted, under the guidance of Smitty, but not until almost 0500 hours. At close to 0600 hours, Lenny Cullen was banging on my front door to tell me that I’d better get my ass down to Headquarters Company, because I was being court-martialed for disobeying a direct order.” (Bibuld XV-3).

Though he was not heavily reprimanded, Bibuld’s time in the army after that was limited. He refused to be deployed to Korea on the grounds that he would “not participate in the invasion of East Asia.” He was discharged in 1949, and was married on New Years Eve of that year to one Elaine Jones, who he had met only three months prior at a rally for Ben Davis (the first black man and second communist) to be elected to the City Council of New York).

Bibuld became involved in the Communist Party USA following his discharge, which at the time had been renamed the Communist Political Association under the leadership of William Z. Foster. Cold War hysteria had just begun to set in, and the House Committee on Un-American Activities had assembled its infamous “Hollywood Blacklist.”

One of Bibuld’s more radical aphorisms took shape around this time; that “you do not spit in the face of a member of the army of occupation in broad daylight; you shoot them in the back in a dark alley.” It now seems to apply chiefly to the police, but his split

with the CPA came about for applying this principle: he advocated guerrilla tactics against the government, because he believed the United States to be beyond salvation.

“I believed that the Party should go underground,” he told me. “But the CPA said that it was all right to be legitimate. I was called a Trotskyite, as well, simply because I said the United States was beyond redemption at the early 1950s, when the House Un-American Affairs Committee was taking place. I said that we should not fight them legally, we should fight them illegally, because they are anti-human.”

“I still agree with the ideas of Marxism, but not so much European communism because I consider almost all Europeans, and I include the United States in my definition of Europe, to be antihuman and racist,” he continued. “To me it is one species; there are no races and when I talk about racism, I talk about something systemic and endemic, not something that applies to individuals except to the extent that individuals reflect their societies.”

One of the more peculiar aspects of Bibuld’s personality is that while he considers it his life’s duty to fight racism and he is so hyper-aware of racism that he sees it everywhere he goes, he seriously believes himself to be at risk of being racist, just by virtue of the fact that he has grown up in what he considers a racist society. I had an extended discussion with him about this that did not go anywhere meaningful; arguing with Bibuld has reminded me of watching interviews with the mass murderer Charles Manson (minus the homicidal tendencies); instead of having an exchange of ideas, he takes every advantage to confuse, sidetrack, and obfuscate the issue until his interlocutor simply gives up.

On asking Bibuld how he could possibly consider himself a racist, he told me, “because I am always aware of the color of skin in an individual. Being aware that someone has darker skin is itself racist. In history class, I have mentioned that I have one son who is darker than any other member of the family except his paternal grandmother. In our family it means nothing, but even so, I notice it enough to have mentioned it in that classroom. Racism is recognizing that there is more than one human race.”

“How is this racist?” I asked.

“Well, this is the essence of racial recognition in our society.”

“But the essence of racism is saying that people don’t just look different, they fundamentally are different from oneself,” I countered.

“Well, that’s the logical extension of the essence,” he said.

“But it’s not logical! Racism is itself illogical!”

“Yes, very much so. But, for example, when we look at other animals, we don’t look particularly at their color, except for purposes of description,” Bibuld responded. “We don’t, for example, say a dark skinned or furred collie is different from a light one, except to describe the two. But in Europe and most of the rest of the world, when we talk about race, we define race by a color of a person’s skin. So it is racism to note a person’s skin color, in my opinion. Racism is endemic in our society. I also feel less comfortable walking down the street in Harlem than I do in Danbury. I have been mugged four times in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and I have never been mugged in Danbury. People treat me with more respect than I deserve here. I also try to use Spanish or Portuguese with persons whom I think to be of Spanish descent.”

“So it goes,” as Bibuld likes to say. I decided to learn what he believed a person’s duty was to combat racism in themselves.

“How can someone possibly get around this, short of going blind?” I asked.

“One simply acts as one would with other animals. For example, when you think of a collie, one simply thinks of the shape of body head, not color of the fur. It is the same thing to fight racism in a human being. One should think in terms of male female, tall short, fat skinny, but absolutely not in terms of the color of skin. Because the results are disastrous for society.”

However he may feel about race as an idea from which humans must distance themselves, Bibuld is a strong believer in a Marxist version of nationalism; so much so, in fact, that he considers black America (or Afro-America as he calls it), to be a separate entity from the United States that will inevitably separate.

Like all nations, Bibuld considers Afro-America to be “a community of human beings with a common history, psychology, and economy, and territory, and language. It is a colony of the United States, which I believe aspires, as all colonies, to state sovereignty. If things don’t change too much with the election of Senator Obama, among other things, Afro-America will become a sovereign state. I am not as sure as I was six months ago, but I believe it still is moving still sovereignty, and I shall apply for citizenship.”

Chapter III: Ron and the Ghost

Bibuld had a tendency when he was on the staff to drag Echo meetings and conversations out longer than they needed to be, due to his slow speech and constant pontification. It was something that, after a while, we had all learned to live with. That being said, there was once incident early in the Spring 2008 when for the first time, I truly saw Mr. Bibuld's level of ire toward racism (whether real or perceived).

It was late, and the Echo meeting was dragging on. We were all sitting in the conference room down the hall from our office, with the understanding that there were far too many distractions (computers, gizmos laying around, etc) in the main room. We had that week published an article about Ron Tulsidas, a Liberian janitor who claimed that a ghost haunted Berkshire Hall after hours. Throughout the article, he had been referred to simply as "Ron."

I could tell as Bibuld began speaking that this had been on his mind all week, and now that the meeting was in open discussion, we were going to hear all about it.

"First of all," he wheezed, "While I am, like most everyone else in this room, a United Statesian, I nevertheless consider myself a member of Afro-America. I am the only United Statesian member of an Afro-American household, and I believe that when Afro-America forms, I will be given citizenship. I say all of this because of the article published this week by Mr. Perkins on the janitor who believes a ghost haunts the campus. The janitor is Afro-American, and throughout the article is referred to by his first

name--‘Ron.’”

As Bibuld rambled on, I noticed a new found energy in his eyes and voice, which I could tell came from a deep-seated anger.

“This is racism!” he continued, glaring at all of us across the table. “Referring to an Afro-American by his or her first name was a not-so-subtle form of racism in the old South. Since it is Associated Press style to refer to an interview subject by his or her surname, I believe that the Echo staff—and the writer—whether this was intended or not, did not give the interview subject the treatment afforded to others due to his race.” Before he had even finished his speech, I was noticing a few glares being directed back at the frail figure from across the conference table.

“How the HELL can something be racist when there isn’t any goddamn racist intent in writing it?” demanded Jared Sturges, the news editor. “There has to be some fucking ELEMENT of racism on the part of the person who wrote the goddamn article!” Mr. Bibuld didn’t even seem to hear him, and Editor in Chief Michael Schwartz was rather taken aback, even after having dealt with Bibuld for the past several months. The entire room seemed to radiate with annoyance and weariness.

Knowing Bibuld, I decided to try to quell the disagreement and time wasted over something this ludicrous by explaining how this snafu came about.

“Mr. Bibuld, while I agree with you that it was not appropriate in the confines of AP style to call him by his first name, we referred to him as Ron because the students and faculty here all know him as Ron. It has nothing to do with the color of his skin and it never did, and I don’t think it is reasonable to accuse the entire editorial board of racism because of this.”

The meeting ended soon afterward, and I spent the drive home in amazement that Bibuld had both caught something so innocuous, and pounced on it as a sign of injustice. I also wondered if perhaps he had been correct. Maybe we didn't catch the mistake because it subconsciously seemed appropriate to us to refer to a janitor and a black man by his first name only.

As much as I disagreed with Bibuld on almost everything else, I had to admire, somewhat, the level of passion and watchfulness with which he caught even the slightest inkling of racism. Even though I did not agree with a word that he had said, it would have been foolish not at least to be impressed.

Chapter IV: Bibuld's Life Continued

Bibuld began working at a Manhattan health insurance company called Group Health, Inc. during the 1950's, and never left for the rest of his working life, eventually being promoted to Vice President despite having no college degree. Interestingly, he alternately refers to his title at GHI as "Chief Shop Steward" or "Vice President in Charge of Clerical Trivialities." While he enjoyed the work, he does not seem to consider it a part of his life's mission or goals, and in fact never mentioned what he had done for a living until I asked him. Regardless, this afforded him a comfortable career until he retired in the 1980's with a full pension.

Amazingly, he had no experiences at GHI that he felt were indicative of racism like he has in nearly every other avenue of his life. His boss Joe Fleming was "very good and open" to Bibuld's biracial family. He cheerfully recalled being arrested several dozen times during protests and sit-ins, and was one of the few (if only) employees who was still paid his wages in full by GHI while in prison.

Bibuld stayed with Elaine Jones for a quarter century, but other than taking joy in the four children they had together, the marriage was not a happy one. Jones, an African-American woman from a comparatively well-off family, had nonetheless been abused by the brother of one of her foster parents and had been emotionally scarred.

"She could not understand that anybody loved her," he told me with regret. An enlightening comment made by Bibuld's best friend which he included in his

“Dissertation,” was that Elaine “thought she was marrying a white man and you thought you were marrying a black woman” (Bibuld XVIII-7).

“I was very radical and Afro-American conscious, what we call ‘pro Afro-American nationalist,’ and while she claimed to be, I think she was an inter-racialist,” Bibuld said when I asked him to elaborate on this comment. “She just deferred to me on a lot of political things.”

Bibuld and Jones divorced in 1975, and he almost immediately began seeing an employee at Group Health, Inc., another African-American woman named Rose Davidson. Their marriage only lasted three years, largely (according to Bibuld) because of Rose’s 11-year-old daughter from a previous marriage, Audrey.

“Audrey hated my guts,” Bibuld said. “Her father had left shortly after she was born, and mother and daughter wrapped themselves around each other. Audrey felt that I’d kicked her out of her mother’s bed, and refused to acknowledge me while I was in the same room. Her mother never wore a watch and I always did, so if Audrey wanted to know what time it was, she would make it a point ask her mother, who would have to ask me—even if I was standing a foot away. Rose tried to reconcile us, but didn’t know how, since she would not discipline Audrey.”

Bibuld also related two other sad anecdotes about his stepdaughter’s hostility toward him: one day he got on a Brooklyn bus and noticed that she was sitting alone, so he sat down next to her—only for her to jump up and move to another seat as though he was a stranger to her.

“This was especially embarrassing to me, since I was the only United Statesian on a bus full of Afro-Americans,” Bibuld recalled. “On top of that, she would sometimes

point to the mailbox in front of our home and shout at me, ‘you see this? It says DAVIDSON! That’s the way it is, and that’s the way it’s ALWAYS going to be!’”

Whatever may have come of their marriage without their stepdaughter’s problems will never be known. The two divorced in 1978 when Bibuld again became engaged, this time to his only non-African-American wife Betty Bast, who had two sons of her own.

His marriage with Betty Bast lasted until 2001, when they separated and divorced. The split was not fully explained, but seems largely to have occurred because Betty Bast was not what he had expected, ideologically:

“I thought she was a ‘freak’ like me, due to my so-called racial views, and she wasn’t. I suspected her of being a racist as well: we visited her children much more than mine, and there was definitely the sense between us that her sons Michael and Steven were worth visiting more than Douglas and Carrington. She would arrange for us to visit Michael very often, but never cared much about seeing her husband’s children.”

Bibuld had thought that his grown stepsons were close to him, but is now convinced he was wrong; when the time came, Michael, an attorney, used all his legal clout against Bibuld in divorce court.

It should be pointed out that this project is not meant to be an exploration of Bibuld’s personal life, and it is difficult to tie the relevance of his marriages into the rest of this project. If nothing else, his attitude toward the past shows that for all his personal convictions about his duty to fight the evils of society, he is far from viewing himself as a saint. He considers himself at least partially responsible for the failure of his prior marriages, and finds his track record strange, considering he feels himself to be a “one woman man.” And while he was frank and forthcoming with most details (even on a level

that made me uncomfortable at times), there is undoubtedly more to the story of each marriage than what he presented.

When I interviewed Joel Bibula (Bibuld's half brother by his father and stepmother), he echoed Bibuld's sentiments, saying, "We both don't like to be alone, since we both have wives or girlfriends all the time. It's not the women's fault: we've both always had wonderful, wonderful women. I remember Lydia, and she was a doll."

Whatever problems he may have had in his marriages, Bibuld remains proud and protective of his children, and sensitive to any hints of racism toward them on a fanatical level.

Bibuld has two brothers; an older brother named Seymour Bibula, whom I was unable to contact for this project, and Joel Bibula (when Jerome entered the army, his last name was for some reason changed to "Bibuld," and he decided to keep it). While Bibuld remains friendly with Seymour, he and Joel have not spoken for almost twenty years. I learned early on from Bibuld that in 1990, Joel was having a wedding for his daughter and invited his brothers Seymour and Jerome, but none of their children (Seymour is also married, or was at the time, to an African-American woman, with whom he had several children).

Bibuld's immediate reaction, and his opinion to this day, was that Joel did not invite Bibuld's children because of the color of their skin. All of Joel's attempts to explain himself—that there were already well over 200 people at the wedding, which he hadn't even planned, and that his daughter didn't even know the color of her cousins' skin—did not budge Bibuld an inch, and he remains convinced that Joel had snubbed his children due to racism.

Bibuld told me this story sitting at his kitchen table one May afternoon, and I was dumbfounded—I could not understand (and still don't) how he could be so convinced that his brother was a racist and cut off all contact with him.

“Did your brother Seymour feel the same way for Joel not inviting his children either?” I asked.

“No, I don't believe so.”

“And you don't think his excuse that it was a small wedding had any merit?”

“Well, it may have been a small wedding, but I don't know since I didn't attend,” he said simply. “But it was due to racism.”

Bibuld's readiness to cut off contact with a family member for something as miniscule as this was in sharp contrast to what I'd learned later about his attitude toward his son Carrington's enlistment in 1974. Needless to say, Bibuld's attitude toward the Armed Forces is not a positive one. In his memoirs, he bluntly states:

“I am opposed to a standing army for the United States, which I often have called the most vicious anti-human society in history. If we **must** have a standing army, I think it should be as small as possible. Senator Obama, on the contrary, often talks about how he wants to increase the strength of the U. S. armed forces. In this connection, I disagree completely with Senator Obama's constant references to the 'service' rendered the people of the United States by Senator McCain. I believe that McCain in Vietnam was a hired assassin. Rather than honoring him for his 'service,' I would indict him and try him as a war criminal.” (Bibuld VI-4)

Apparently knowing his father's attitude, Carrington was so frightened of his father's reaction that he made his mother, brother, and sisters all swear to secrecy and tell Bibuld that they had no idea where he had gone. When the truth came out, Bibuld says, his reaction was much lighter than anyone had expected: he didn't care.

"Did it bother you to know he had done this?" I asked.

"Well, he was still my son, and I was annoyed, but not really...but he was scared out of his wits, the poor kid," Bibuld said warmly. "He thought I would disown him! But I cannot take umbrage with a love-son if he lives the way I wanted him to: that is, in accordance with his own thoughts. He enlisted, he told me later, to straighten himself out, and he thinks it helped. But just like his father, though, he couldn't take the discipline. I also have a grandson who was an officer who was sent to Iraq and hated it, and says he will never fight again."

I later learned from Bibuld's current wife, however, that when this grandson got married a few years ago, Bibuld almost refused to go to the wedding on the basis of this grandson's Iraq tour (he eventually attended at the behest of his wife). Blood isn't too much thicker than water.

Chapter V: Faculty Experiences

Bibuld's lasting impression on *The Echo*—and the reason why he was not voted back in for the 2008-2009 school year—is that I found him something of an embarrassment. I felt guilty about this, but there is only so much Marxist rhetoric a student club can take. New staff writers would be put off by the sight of an 80-year-old man sitting with a group of college students, immediately demanding to know their surnames when they introduced themselves, and people approached me regularly to ask if he was even, in fact, a student. One of the final straws finally came when a professor who encountered him nearly complained to our advisor.

I was sitting in the *Echo* office one afternoon in late February when the phone rang. A familiar sounding female voice answered my greeting with, “Hello, I was wondering who your advisor was?”

“Our advisor is John Briggs,” I said cautiously. “May I ask whom I’m speaking to?”

“This is Kate Allocco,” she said, identifying herself as my professor for History 288.

“Oh, hey!” I said. This is Max. I’ll see you in class Tuesday.”

I was mystified as to why my professor would call without telling us why, but didn’t think much until later (I have since learned that when someone calls the *Echo* office and demands to know our advisor’s identity, it’s usually a sign that we are in trouble.)

I brought it up Mary, another classmate friendly with Dr. Allocco.

“Yeah, she was really pissed off at Mr. Bibuld,” she said flippantly, apparently unaware or uncaring that it was (usually) bad for people to be pissed off at us. “He interviewed her about Women’s History Month and drove her up the wall.”

I considered it my responsibility (and still do) to deal with people who are angry at Echo staff members, and to apologize for them when I feel it necessary. I approached Dr. Allocco after class the next week and said, “I heard you had an encounter with Mr. Bibuld.”

An angry shadow crossed the normally cheerful professor’s face.

“Yes,” she said without elaboration.

“And I heard he was rude to you,” I said.

“Yes,” she said again.

“I’m sorry,” I said nervously. “I’m the managing editor of The Echo--Can you tell me a bit about what happened?”

“Well, he went to my office to interview me for an article about Women’s History Month, because I was on the planning committee for it. First he told me that I was a racist, then told me women’s history month was stupid, then rambled about himself for 20 minutes, and then asked about four questions and left.”

“Oh dear,” I said, knowing Dr. Allocco to consider herself a feminist. “I can see why that would annoy you.”

“I was more than annoyed, I was furious,” she said, a bit more calmly than before but still apparently reliving her fresh memory. “I was stomping around campus with my fists balled up cursing to myself. That’s why I called and asked for your advisor.”

“I’m really sorry. He’s kind of obsessed with racism.”

“Well, he’s an ideologue,” she said. “He sees racism everywhere he goes because that’s what he wants to see.”

“I know,” I sighed. “You should hear what he said about this article we published about a black janitor who—”

“Oh, I heard already. He told me all about it.”

The next time I saw Bibuld, I brought up what Dr. Allocco had said and he seemed genuinely surprised and concerned. I asked him if he would agree not to write any more news stories from that point on, and he reluctantly agreed.

Speaking with Dr. Allocco a few months later, she elaborated on what had annoyed her so much. Bibuld, who had agreed to write an Echo story on the events WestConn was hosting for Women’s History Month, had been playing phone tag with her for a few days before arriving at her office. After sitting down, he had noticed a poster on the wall advertising the events and featured, among other famous female figures, black classical singer and Danbury resident Marian Anderson on the front.

“He apparently recognized Anderson, looked at the poster more closely, and saw that the text about her was in a smaller font than the others,” Allocco recalled. “He ranted that this was racist—when the poster had in fact been made by Darla Shaw, the Minority Recruitment coordinator in the Education Department. He then told me how un-racist he was because he was married to a black woman—not that he ever bothered to ask me if I was married to a black man.”

“He then told me Women’s History Month was unnecessary, because everyone knew women have never *really* been oppressed. After that he finally asked me a few

questions about the events, and left. He called me back once to confirm the quotes, which was very professional, and the article itself came out fine. But I couldn't believe how hostile and rude he initially was! Racism seems to be the lens through which he views the world.”

Dr. Allocco was not the only member of the faculty to have an encounter with the strange worldview of Jerome Bibuld—and while she may have been irritated by his bloviation, she only had to deal with him for a few minutes. Joshua Rosenthal, WCSU's Latin American history professor, had him three days a week for an entire semester. During the current semester, my interviews with Bibuld have also been peppered by watching his interactions with Dr. Rosenthal in history class. Even with his laid back demeanor, Rosenthal had his patience challenged on a regular basis. Each 50-minute session of class had at least 10 minutes devoted to answering questions, rants, or totally irrelevant comments made by Mr. Bibuld. It is unfortunate I didn't take notes, but I saw Bibuld bring up “Fiddler on the Roof,” the “anti-humanity” of every U.S. President since George Washington, the works of Mark Twain at least a dozen times, obscure operas, and his own diet. His breathy voice and sometimes agonizingly slow cadence often made me cringe when he raised his hand.

Dr. Rosenthal was justifiably annoyed at the beginning of the course, because in his own words, “Bibuld would critique me on the reading I had assigned when he hadn't done it. At first, I wanted to kick him out of class. He was so annoying...you try to respect different kinds of students and work around peoples' limitations, but his habits of interacting in class were very distracting and difficult.”

Later on in the semester, the interjections by Bibuld became more along the lines of good-natured ribbing as the two got to know each other better. The other students in class did not seem to have a clue what to make of him, but I saw Dr. Rosenthal gradually go from seeing Bibuld as a nuisance that still needed to be treated with grudgingly necessary courtesy, to coming to an humorous understanding about each other's differences. Two instances stuck out with me as the most bizarre and memorable interactions between student and teacher I have ever seen.

One day as the class was analyzing legal documents from the Colonial period, Dr. Rosenthal made an analogy between Spanish courts' treatment of natives and the clogged legal system of today, where people (in Rosenthal's words) "file ridiculous lawsuits against each other because they're petty and vindictive."

Mr. Bibuld's hand immediately shot up (or rather, was raised, since he can't really "shoot" any limb), and he began expostulating: "Well, I don't believe that that is because people are petty and vindictive..."

"Or if it's the evil capitalist system that makes them that way!" Dr. Rosenthal interjected. "I KNOW you now, Mr. Bibuld, and I KNOW where you're going with this!"

A more surreal interaction occurred later in November, when Rosenthal was discussing the salt trade in the pre-industrial world. Again, Mr. Bibuld's hand shot up.

"My wife and I," he said proudly, "consume very little salt because it is bad for our health. We do not salt any of our food. There is excellent information on the internet that explains how to lower one's salt consumption."

“We are not here for self-improvement!” said Dr. Rosenthal cheerfully, and without pausing to consider the irrelevance of Bibuld’s statement. “We are here to look down on people from the past in order to feel superior about ourselves!”

Rosenthal and Bibuld have high opinions of one another; Bibuld considered Rosenthal a “wonderful” professor, and Rosenthal found Bibuld to be as fascinating as I do.

“I have very preset notions of where I would like a conversation to go, but when people are engaged, they can change the conversation of the day,” Rosenthal told me later. “But Bibuld would just throw me off my stride, because he speaks very quietly, so the people in back have a difficult time hearing him, completely ignore the previous discussion, take one little thing in the material and go on a rant. Imagine if you were teaching 20th century history—with my material, I can box him into a corner and get him to admit he doesn’t actually know anything about 18th century Brazil. But imagine teaching the civil rights movement—it would be freaking impossible!”

“Once we hit our rapprochement, we managed to overcome our differences and can now tease each other,” Rosenthal said. “He can take being teased. He’s not humorless, which is the problem with most true believers. He’s full of humor and willing to laugh at himself, which helps because I like being obnoxious and calling him out on his ridiculousness!”

Dr. Rosenthal drew a comparison with Bibuld and fanatical Christians—something which had crossed my mind before. Close-mindedness in one form or another is a characteristic of all true believers, and while Bibuld may (justifiably) pride himself

on his tolerance and his belief in the innate good of humanity, Rosenthal recognized that he analyzes everything through two lenses: racism and class inequality.

“I have family members who are radical Marxists in their political beliefs, and it’s like arguing with a Pentecostal about religion. You will run against an iron-clad worldview, and if you don’t share that worldview and allow an analysis based on it to trump all other analyses, then this person will disagree with you. They won’t incorporate new thinking—they will continue to put any information they receive into their pre-existing categories of analysis. He has a hybrid Marxist class-based analysis, with his notion about black America being a separate nation called Afro-America. It’s his own kind of radical Marxist attack on racism. It makes him fascinating, because there simply aren’t that many octogenarian-Korean-war-veteran-Marxist-anti-racists from a half century of thinking out there. It’s kind of awesome.”

While Rosenthal admitted that Bibuld does not add to the course material, he does create a different social situation in the classroom; one that deviates from the normal student-teacher dynamic in a way Rosenthal finds valuable.

“He does not add concretely to the material, but in terms of class being a forum where ideas are exchanged, he’s added immeasurably. He breaks down the student-teacher demographic; in a small class it becomes a divided space between me and a bunch of students who haven’t done the reading I assigned, and they’ll sit there. Somehow, he pushed me out of my comfort zone as authority by constantly challenging me. I feel that he helped create this clarity that there are different views.”

I have sometimes gotten the impression that Bibuld sidetracks and confuses issues on purpose, at least during discussions where he feels his own viewpoint is being

challenged. However, Rosenthal doesn't see any such intent. He sees, rather, the attempts of a student whose mind is very set in its ways to absorb and discuss new knowledge.

“He sidetracks because he doesn't know anything about the material. I can't imagine how difficult it is to be in your eighties and try to absorb whole new information; it's hard even in my forties to try anything relatively new. So he is trying to perform an analysis in a framework and context in history to which he's never been exposed; I think the subversion is his own random power of chaos. Then again, there is always the possibility he's out-gaming me on three different levels and having me jump through the hoops that he wants me to.”

Rosenthal described the class dynamic as himself assigning texts he considers fascinating, where the other outspoken students are fast to point out the obvious hypocrisy and wrongdoing of Spanish colonists to indigenous peoples, and in the middle of the class, Bibuld rapidly points out what Karl Marx says, and how the professor's very act of assigning the text represents some aspect of capitalist evil.

“My vibe on the student mentality today about colonial Latin America, is that students generally always point out the hypocrisy of various events,” he said. “They have very skeptical views, I have my own view, and Bibuld has another. I think it's helped create a forum where ideas are exchanged before different perspectives. The fact is that he aggressively wants to think of class and race, and those are two of the topics that for me, discussing colonial Latin America, are fundamental approaches to looking at families and society. And since he has common interest in two of those areas, it forced me to explain myself over and over again. But it also exploded my authority model in the

classroom. That's all right with me—as long as we can read the documents and discuss them, then I'm ok with that.”

I wouldn't want him in a math class, though,” Rosenthal added. ”He'd be a nightmare.”

Chapter VI: Joel Bibula and Lydia Allotey

Interviewing Bibul's loved ones was an almost jarring experience. Having dealt with a zealous ideologue for such a long time and gotten used to his mannerisms, for some reason I expected his wife and brother to be like him. When I interviewed one of his brothers and his current wife and found that they consider him to be in his own reality just as much as I do, it threw me for a loop. It made me realize that there truly is no one on Earth quite like Jerome Bibul, and that while I may consider him to be rather close-minded, he does not carry his radical views because he was indoctrinated by anyone; he is a free thinker who has come to his conclusions through his own studies and experiences.

Speaking with Joel Bibula, Bibul's estranged half-brother, was far different than what I had expected. I called him at his home on Staten Island, half expecting him to tell me that he wouldn't discuss family matters with me and slam the phone down in true soap opera fashion. To my surprise, the voice on the phone (which sounded as much like Joe Pesci or Robert De Niro in "Goodfellas" as Bibul sounds like Marlon Brando in "Apocalypse Now") was quite happy to talk about his brother, and had good things to say about "old Jerry." He is a loud, brash, energetic New Yorker, and like his brother, he has been married four times; "It runs in the family," he told me. "We don't like to be left alone."

Joel Bibula is thirteen years younger than his half brother. Jerome had left to join the army when Joel was only five; therefore, he was not a part of Joel's early life. I was

slightly disappointed because I was hoping to learn what Bibuld had been like as a child, but he still offered perspectives that illuminated his older brother's character.

“Jerry left the house when I was a little boy, and I remember him sending me a children's book of ‘Peter and the Wolf’ in Italian and English. I treasured that for a lot of years,” Joel told me. “Then I didn't see him much. He came once when I was ten years old and took me to an opera—he was a big opera freak back then just like he is now.”

Joel couldn't say exactly when his brother began to synthesize his political beliefs or what had inspired them, but he guessed that it began when he was stationed in Italy. I asked Joel how he felt about his brother's political views concerning Afro-American separatism, and whether Joel believed in them himself.

“Absolutely not,” he said with conviction. “I know Jerry does, though...when he sets his sights on something, you cannot make him change. I feel like black and white is like a piano; you got to have both keys to play, baby.”

Surprisingly, I didn't have to ask Joel about the issue with his daughter's wedding that led to them not speaking; he brought it up himself as an anecdote of his brother's hardheadedness. His version did not differ from his Jerome's: In 1990, Joel's daughter was getting married, and she had never met any of her uncles or their kids. Joel invited both Seymour (who also had children with an African-American woman) and Jerome, but not their kids, and Bibuld was quick to claim that it was because his own children were black and has not spoken to his brother since. Oddly enough, Joel insisted he wasn't upset by it, and accepted it as being one of his idiosyncrasies.

“Everyone's entitled to their own opinion. If I was making the wedding, all my nieces and nephews would have been there. When I asked my daughter if they could

come, they said ‘Daddy, we already have 250 people!’ They didn’t even know my brothers were married to black women, because it wasn’t important to me to tell them! I wasn’t even angry with him; I just thought he was kind of ignorant. The wedding was jammed, man. There were so many kids there, it was worse than cockroaches!”

“I mean, he had never invited any of my children to anything, and I didn’t accuse him of being racist against white people,” he said with a chuckle. “I told him, ‘Jerry, I wouldn’t give a fuck if your kids were purple!’ Seymour called me later and said Jerry was sorry; he realized it’s always something he gets focused on because of the way he is. The first thing I do when I speak to Seymour nowadays is ask him how Jerry’s doing.”

I asked Joel how he and his brother differed the most deeply, and he said jokingly, “Well, we’ve both been married a bunch of times—that runs in the family!”

“I have more of an open mind than Jerry,” he said after some reflection. “His focus goes on something and no matter what, if you see something different, he’ll never bend. I can’t be hard with people like he is. I don’t believe everything in the world is black and white, and I don’t mean that in a racial sense. I think he got that from being left in an orphanage and having to find a way to make things work for him.”

As the conversation concluded, I asked Joel if he had anything else he wanted to tell me, or messages he wanted to be relayed to his brother. He paused, and answered, “I wish he would be a little bit more open minded about people and how we look at them. Anyway, tell him I love him.”

The next day, I chatted with Bibuld and relayed his brother’s message, and he looked pleased. “Joel is a lovely man,” he said thoughtfully. “But he is still a United Statesian, and a racist.”

C'est la vie. The man sticks to his guns.

I managed to meet Lydia Allotey, Bibuld's current spouse, in person, a large woman with a mild Caribbean accent over two decades his junior. (In keeping with his other idiosyncratic speech mannerisms, he never refers to her as "Lydia," or "my wife," but instead as "love woman," "love life," or "beautiful beloved.")

Allotey is of African and West Indian extraction, and was born in New York after her father was exiled from Ghana for his political affiliations. Like Bibuld, Allotey traveled extensively, living in Europe and Africa as a child, and then working as an African art dealer and importing and exporting goods from the African continent. She met Bibuld at a chess tournament in 2001 when he was still active in the international chess world, and they married in October of 2005—her third marriage, and his fourth. It seems a happy one so far.

I asked her if it worried her to be dating someone with three prior failed marriages, and she said that her apprehension was gone after getting to know him and finding out that his convictions truly ran deep.

"He has not disappointed me," Allotey said of her husband. "I found him to be a very interesting human being, and he has turned out to be all that he built himself up to be. When I first met him, I was skeptical. I found out that he was for real; what you saw and got was exactly what it was, there was no show being put on."

It surprised me to learn that Allotey was not a believer in Bibuld's vision of Afro-America any more than his brother Joel; while she considers the United States to have problems with racism, she does not view the country as being beyond redemption.

“That’s what makes him so interesting; we have very interesting conversations and great battles, he has curved some things to my own point of view but he holds his views. I hold some of the same views as him, but I think he is very extreme in many of his thoughts. There are many things we do see eye to eye upon, like the racism in America. But he has not voted for the past 50 years because he felt it was a waste of time to be part of the process. I’ve voted since I was 18 and was not about to change that, just due to being married to this man. Because of me, he actually registered and voted in the primary and the election. I’m very proud of having achieved that.”

It was foolish of me to assume that Ms. Allotey and Mr. Bibuld would hold the same views just because they were married, but in hindsight, that was what I had done. Over dinner, we had a conversation about the 2008 Presidential election that felt almost humdrum compared with her husband’s personal manifestos; her main reasons for voting for Obama had nothing to do with his being black, but rather her belief in a need for socialized health care. This differed drastically from Bibuld’s opinion that Obama simply being an Afro-American (albeit one who had “sold out”) made him the lesser of two evils.

Nonetheless, when the subject of Joel Bibula’s wedding arose, Ms. Allotey sided with her husband; she felt that Joel should have known better than to snub Bibuld’s children.

“When you make those kinds of decisions there are repercussions,” she said. “Jerry will go to war about something he feels deeply about, no matter what the cost.”

Afterword

During the course of this project, I never came to any “Eureka” moment of realization like I had hoped. It is still an enigma to me how Jerome Bibuld became a Jewish octogenarian Marxist Afro-American separatist army veteran, and my hope that talking with Joel Bibula and Lydia Allotey would illuminate this was unfulfilled; they seemed to find his beliefs nearly as strange as I do, and regard him as one who lives in his own world. When I first met him, I assumed that there were others out there like him on whom research could be done—it has certainly felt sometimes like I was writing an ethnography on a different culture rather than one lone eccentric, but this is not the case.

As I dug deeper, I simply became more and more amazed at the details of his life, especially the fact that at age 74, he has taken up anew with a fourth spouse, and seems to finally be happy in his marital life. For Lydia Allotey’s part, she considers herself lucky to have met a man that sticks to his convictions, but will listen to her once in a while; the fact that she got him to vote for Obama is a momentous accomplishment.

Bibuld, will never be explained fully no matter how much digging is done. He became vividly aware of social injustices at a time when they were accepted (if not outright fashionable) in society because of the way his family was treated, and he has seen little enough progress to consider his home country beyond redemption. His brother, wife, and some of the employees and students at WestConn came to accept him for who he is, and even grow to appreciate his eccentricity.

What does the future hold for Jerome Bibuld? While his radicalism has slowed down a bit from his prior years due to health reasons, his resolution seems as strong as

ever. Hopefully his health will allow him to graduate and receive the Bachelor's degree that he never completed in the 1950's.

If I have learned anything from my time with Bibuld, it is to accept individuals for who they are, even if they carry worldviews almost totally contrary to my own. If I had written him off as a random crazy when we first met and made every effort to avoid him, I consider him a friend, and I wish him well. To quote Lydia Allotey, "The way he behaves overrides all of his other idiosyncrasies. He is generous, humane, and has a wonderful sense of humor. His age and experience allow him to override certain things and get to the next point...Jerry is probably the most caring individual I have met."

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