

Preface

On July 5, 1956, eleven-year-old Scott Stone answered a call to audition for a play. It was the same year as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, an act of mass civil disobedience that was a milestone in the flowering of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Earlier that year, the black population of Montgomery, Alabama refused to ride on city busses as long as they remained racially segregated, as long as Negroes were required to sit in the rear portion of the bus and—if a white person could not find a seat—were obligated to surrender their seat so the white might sit.

The boycott was a response to the arrest of Rosa Parks, a seamstress and NAACP activist, in December of the previous year. After a long day's work, Mrs. Parks had refused to surrender her seat to a white man and was incarcerated for this defiant act of tiredness. In Montgomery, a city where white families often relied on the labors of domestic servants, all of whom lived in the black parts of town, the collective act of refusal caused considerable inconvenience. Busses ran empty; servants would not ride them to work for more than a year. Ultimately, the Supreme Court judged the Montgomery bus ordinance unconstitutional. The Montgomery Improvement Association won its battle and segregation on public transportation was outlawed throughout the land.

Scott was not in Montgomery, Alabama. He would pass through the city nearly eight years later but at least for now it was among the furthest places from his mind. Scott, a secularized Jewish kid with an Anglo name from Long Island, a second-generation American was at a summer camp, primarily for Jewish boys, in the Maine woods, about

forty miles from Portland. This was his third summer at Camp Neshoba, located on Long Lake, where activities for campers tended to center around camping, exploring nature, and participating in sports: swimming, water skiing, tennis, golf, basketball, baseball, archery, riflery (where campers earned NRA badges) and other American pastimes. Jews had long been denied access to camps and clubs where such activities took place, but at Neshoba they were enthusiastic participants, unaware of former prohibitions.

Little was made of the common ethnicity of most of its campers, unless a new camper arrived whose features or mannerisms bore the taint of the unfamiliar. This breach of normalcy became an occasion for comment and, depending on the kid's ability to defend himself, petty torments. Food was not kosher, many of the counselors were of Christian backgrounds, and campers played at being mainstream Americans at a time when being American and being mainstream were extremely important.

When Scott heard that auditions for a play were being held, he felt himself drawn to the opportunity. In his fantasy life he imagined himself as the center of attention, which was usually not the case at home. In bed at night, as he drifted off to sleep, he was reincarnated as the charming host of a popular television show. But at daybreak he returned to his childhood and self-doubt. Performing in a play seemed like a perfect opportunity to fulfill his desire to be seen and heard.

On the afternoon of the auditions, the drama counselor stood above a semi-circle of boys, in a field near the big house, and explained in a slow and easy drawl that the auditions were about to begin. The counselor's name was Howard Johnson, a ruddy-skinned white Southerner from Pensacola, in the Deep South of the Florida panhandle. Howard

was one of many white Southerners—college students at Ole Miss, University of Alabama and other mainstays of the Old South—who were recruited to be counselors by the camp owner, Martin Golden, to give his campers a taste of old-time American masculinity.

Speaking to the campers who came to try out for the play, Johnson told them that it was a side-splitting comedy, a short piece that would be great fun to put on and was sure to amuse the audience. He then distributed dog-eared copies of the script so that the boys could take turns reading. When Scott's copy came around, he held it in his hands, staring down at the title page.

The play—Ghoses Er Not Ghoses. A Negro Debate—had been published decades before, in 1916, the year that Scott's mother was born. Gazing out from the cover was the comical face of a monkey, or perhaps it was a man—Scott couldn't quite tell—with bulging eyes, huge red lips and jet-black skin. Given the impenetrable title, Scott had no idea what this play was about.

Without further ado, Howard Johnson explained. This funny play, he told the boys, was to be performed in a “Negro dialect,” a language so garbled that simply hearing it would bring tears of laughter to the audience's eyes. The setting was that of a debate, a formally staged argument, over whether ghosts exist. Negroes, counselor Johnson elucidated, were notoriously afraid of ghosts and the play hilariously presented this inborn dread. The primary role was that of “Rastus Jones,” a debater who nervously, and with intense consternation, spelled out the ever-present hazards posed by the white-sheeted spirits who targeted “darkies” in particular.

Though still a boy, Scott had been well prepared for this role. He had never heard about the ghost connection, but on the television he had seen a program called *Amos n' Andy*, where one character in particular had provided him with the necessary linguistic training. The "Kingfish," a calculating con man, and denizen of the Lodge of the Mystic Knights of the Sea—where much of the program's antics took place—had a round, clownish voice and bizarrely physical way of mouthing his words that, for Scott, seemed perfect. "Well, hello there, Sapphire!" the Kingfish would say to his usually disapproving wife, each time she surprised him in the midst of a scheme. Scott and his friends on Long Island would laughingly repeat the line to each other again and again, and had the accent down pat. The TV program starred black actors, with Tim Moore playing the irascible George "Kingfish" Stevens. Scott had a close friend who was a Negro, Leon Hawkins, and a black woman whom he deeply loved, Edith Byrd, took care of him when his mother was away. Neither of them fit the *Amos n' Andy* molds, but Scott made no connection between these actual people in his life and the ridiculous characters he saw on TV.

Scott was unaware that the program began on radio in the late 1920s, during the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, and that the on air voices of these buffoons were the creation of two white actors, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll. Gosden was a native of Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy, while Correll was a Midwesterner, from Peoria, Illinois, a hub of Klan activities in the 1920s. While the two would make public appearances wearing blackface greasepaint, the coming of television required a more convincing cast and black actors were assembled to assume the characters created

by Gosden and Correll. While the program had been taken off of CBS in 1953, it remained in syndication into the 1960s and was a familiar part of the popular culture on which Scott and others were raised.

When it came time for Scott to read for the part, he faithfully carried the “Kingfish” into his fervent interpretation of Rastus Jones. As he recited the words, he saw that Howard Johnson was very pleased, and this approval only added to the quality of his performance. After all the boys had read, Scott was far and away the biggest ham, and won the part of Rastus without any serious competition.

The play would take place in three weeks time, and in the intervening days there would be a number of rehearsals. The first would be a dramatic read-through of the script. Johnson encouraged the boys to start learning their lines, but said they could consult their scripts for this rehearsal. Given the opportunity, and other diversions, Scott didn’t bother to learn a word, knowing he could rely on his newly discovered dramatic skills at the rehearsal.

The rehearsal went fairly well, but when Howard Johnson noticed that his star was reading throughout, he firmly encouraged the boy to head to his cabin and start learning his lines. Scott knew that the counselor was right, but there was something inside of him that resisted committing Ghoses Er Not Ghoses to memory. It was nothing rational; he still relished the prospect of starring in the play, but there was something about the play that troubled him. He continued not to learn his lines, though he created the illusion that he was by memorizing bits and pieces of the play for rehearsals, while relying primarily on his script.

By the third rehearsal, Howard Johnson was livid. “This little Jew,” he thought to himself, “is about to ruin my play.” “Scott,” he told the boy, “we’re heading towards a dress rehearsal in a few days and if you don’t learn those lines you’re going to be in serious trouble.” Beneath the relative decorum of this warning, Scott Stone smelled danger. This guy was really mad. It wasn’t just the play. The level of the drama counselor’s palpable fury suggested that issues ran far deeper. Johnson assumed that the severity of his admonition would be enough to scare his recalcitrant lead into line.

The day of the dress rehearsal arrived. Ludicrous costumes, that would add a visual absurdity to the debate, had been prepared. A tin of blackface make-up was open on a table, and one-by-one, the boys had the greasepaint smeared over their faces and necks. An inch-wide space for the lips was left without make-up; creating the appearance of the preposterously huge mouth that Scott saw each time he looked at the cover of his script.

When it came time for Scott to be blackened up, he sat down at the table, but instead of submitting to the ritual he tremulously turned to Howard Johnson and told him, in so many words, that he had not learned his lines and could not perform in the play. Johnson had a paroxysm.

Without Scott, the play was nothing. All was lost. His face turned beat red, and he spat white salvos of saliva as he told the boy that he had “wrecked the play for everyone.” He turned to the other boys—all made up—and with a glance communicated the order that Scott be shunned for his unpardonable transgression.

Scott felt embarrassed and inept. He thought he had done something terribly wrong. At the same time, deep inside, there was a feeling of satisfaction that he would not be

forced to appear publicly in this play with burnt cork on his face. For days, none of the boys would talk to him. He felt very alone.

As time went on, his campmate's anger dissipated, but Howard Johnson's only grew. The level of this anger began with nasty looks and comments. Then, about a week after the blackface debacle, Scott was walking along a dirt hill towards the mess hall when suddenly he was pushed from behind. He felt his hands scraping on the rough terrain and, after looking at his minor abrasions, he turned back and there stood counselor Johnson, smiling over his prone body. "Did our little Rastus hurt himself?"

Fear of the man now entered Scott's universe. He would do his best to avoid him and hope that this was the end of it. But it wasn't. The taunts continued and then, a screen door was slammed in Scott's face. Again, it was Johnson at the wheel. Following this second assault, Scott summed up his courage and went to visit the owner of the camp, Martin Golden. While Scott readily admitted that he had not learned his lines, wouldn't blacken up, and had caused the play's cancellation, he believed that Johnson's treatment was beyond the pale. There was nothing about corporal punishments in the Camp Neshoba brochure, and Golden has assured Scott's parents that the boy was in good hands.

This brought an end to Johnson's harassments. Worried for his job he pulled back from his petulant reign of terror. Still, there were furtive glances and, if Scott understood them correctly, evil eyes.

This childhood tale remained with Scott well into adulthood. It was, for him, a defining moment. Over the years, the events here told faded from Howard Johnson's memory.

But in this confrontation between camper and counselor, as the level of Johnson's fury indicated, lay matters that reached far beyond the individuals involved.

As a white Southerner in 1956, Johnson had been raised in an environment where everything and every person had a designated place. While the world was changing around him, the world he held tightly within his head was propelled by ideas of human inequality. Though he was unaware of it, it was this familiar world that led him to select the play he wished to mount at Camp Neshoba. In being performed, the play would give voice to ideas about African-Americans that his culture had defined for him since he was a boy.

While Scott was only barely aware of events taking place in Alabama, there were things about the world within his head that—without his knowing—had pushed him into an unconscious act of defiance. In spite of his Anglo name, he was a Jew born in the last days of the Holocaust. During his early childhood, there were elusive references to family members who had “died in the camps.” Given the world they had witnessed from the safety of America, Scott's parents had raised the boy to know that “prejudice” was a bad thing and that the “Germans” had murdered millions of Jews and other people because of prejudice and hatred. On occasion, they would talk about “the Negroes,” and the ways that they, like the Jews, were victims of bigotry. Though none of this was at the forefront of his mind when he tried out for *Ghoses or Not Ghoses*, his unwitting refusal to participate in making the play's worldview public, had been shaped by the template of his own mental environment.

The violent reaction that Scott's refusal provoked in Howard Johnson was not simply the result of a personality conflict. The intensity of Johnson's wrath was but an index of the extent to which the boy's non-compliance implicitly challenged a set of comfortable convictions about who was who in the order of things. Embedded within his unconscious mind, Johnson held a set of preconceptions about different groups of people. Oblivious to their influence, the fixed ideas that he carried around with him shaped the way he saw the people he encountered, even before the encounter occurred. Their personhood, in his mind, was secondary to his prefabricated presumptions about them. The play he wished to direct was a cultural expression of these presumptions and, even in 1956, he still felt at ease with them.

Today these fixed ideas that inhabit the psyche, framing the way people experience the world, are known as stereotypes. While some intellectuals—social scientists in particular—had employed the word stereotype to describe these reflexive mental molds since the 1920s, the word was not yet a part of most people's vocabulary.

In 1956 Roget's International Thesaurus offered no synonyms for the noun stereotype that mirrored the way we think of it today. All cognate words related to the printing trades: print, engraving, etching, steel plate, lithograph, type, linotype, font and so forth. As a verb—to stereotype—it was associated with fixing, stabilizing, perpetuating, and establishing, but was devoid of any social connotation. Only as an adjective—stereotyped—did synonyms move somewhat closer: trite, hackneyed, stock, set, banal, familiar, everyday, but still the contemporary usage of the word was not present.

Then, beginning in the 1960s, all of this changed. In the wake of the early Civil Rights movement, there was a growing awareness that racial discrimination was not simply about unequal social, economic and political opportunities, but that the institutions of racism were upheld by a prevailing cultural milieu that portrayed black people as unfit for the responsibilities of citizenship; incapable of staying out of trouble; ignorant and uncultured; servile, scheming or brutish.

Other social movements broadened people's consciousness of typecasting as a repressive social practice. The emergence of the women's liberation movement was inseparable from many women's understanding of the ways the mass media projected images of women that ignored all but their sexual and motherly functions. The term "sex object" entered the parlance of society in reaction to stereotypes that denied the full range of women's mental and physical capabilities. The War in Vietnam added to this new consciousness about stereotype, as many saw the ways that the dehumanization of an enemy is indivisible from the pursuit of conquest. Simultaneously, rampant stereotypes of homosexuality began to be looked at as a bulwark that served to dictate proper sexual practices.

In recent decades, a growing number of people have addressed the ways that deeply ingrained stereotypes shed negative light on a wide range of populations and communities. For the most part, this work has addressed the portrayals of particular groups of people. Many scholars, writers, media makers, artists and cultural institutions have explored the stereotyping of African-Americans, women, Jews, Latinos, Asians, American

Indians, gays, immigrants, people with disabilities, and criminals and the poor, who are often conflated with one another.

This has provided disturbing evidence of the ways that entrenched social injustice is often transmitted through the perceptual corridors of “knowledge” and “culture.” Yet such focused approaches have shed little light on the social forces and historical developments that have shaped modern habits of typecasting. The absence of an overarching history was the inspiration for this book. In our research and writing, which took place over a period of eight years, we looked to find connections that would help to illuminate the rise of modern stereotyping itself. The result appears in the book that follows.

This is a critical history of dominant ideas. It explores the relationship between stereotyping as a persistent social, cultural and mental practice, and the rise of modern European and American societies. Rather than dwell on present-day instances of typecasting, the book is designed to provide an historical foundation that, hopefully, will make recent social trends somewhat more intelligible.

Our objective is to provide a vivid portrait of modern stereotyping as it was forged by the emergence of a global economy, colonialism, the matrix of urban life, and the rise of democratic and egalitarian movements and ideas. An ongoing issue of concern is the way that modern visual media—changing standards of visible evidence, and extensive networks of communication—have provided new languages and lubricants for propagating ideas of human inequality. In a progression of sections, the book also examines the ways that modern scientific, aesthetic and religious cosmologies have turned the catego-

ricing of human types from an ancient parochial practice into a globally instrumental expression of Western popular culture.

Most of all, this is a book about people, ideas and deeds. Many of them contributed to an interpretation of the world that naturalized social hierarchies; subtly transmitting prevailing structures of power through the imposing filter of “human nature.” At the same time, those who are naturalized into subordinate positions sometimes break the dominant visual and linguistic codes, piercing through the optic veil, breaching the customs of language, to proclaim and project a critical and oppositional point of view.

Given the breadth of our topic and the scope of the approach we have taken, we decided, very early on, that writing a comprehensive narrative history would be impossible. Instead of attempting to write a conventional history, we chose to devise another approach, to write a series of focused pieces that highlight significant moments and questions.

While the following vignettes are, for the most part, presented chronologically, each addresses particular historical developments and some of the central figures that played a part within them. Each segment explores a theme that offers insight into a particular aspect of our overall subject. Many of the pieces traverse geographic and temporal boundaries, moving from place to place, time to time, bringing together events and ideas that converged to shape the taxonomies of human difference. While there is no all-inclusive narrative, nor could there be, our strategy in writing this book was to present a reader with a succession of stories that would, incrementally, build a deeper historical understanding of a vital, if often slippery, topic.

As we were writing this book, people repeatedly asked us how two people who have lived with each other for so many years could write a book together. Most assumed that the writing was broken up and that each of us took on responsibility for different sections. Nothing could be further from the truth. This book is product of an extended conversation that began in libraries and continued across a table with a laptop computer in the middle. Each sentence and paragraph was sculpted by this conversation, and no word went unturned.

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