

Swamp Rats & Urban Rats Unite!

George Bradford (David Watson)

1990

a review of

Legend of the Great Dismal Maroons, Presented as a public service of the Grand Ludic Lodge, Ancient Scald Miserable Order, Great Dismal Maroons, celebrating 400 years of struggle for universal jubilation, 1589–1989, by James Koehnline. Panic Publishing, POB 1696, Skokie IL 60076–8696, USA. No price listed.

This short “secret history of ‘the Other America’” in poetry form, calling on all “swamp rats of the world” to unite, tells the story of escaped african slaves and european renegades who fled the colonial settlements of North Carolina to join with native people in creating utopian tribal enclaves in “the nearly impenetrable / Great Dismal Swamp nearby.” These slaves and “Maroons” have always found themselves under attack from Power, as it employs its “mad celestial schematics...to enshroud the earth / to impose the map upon the unruly territory...”

Through war, slavery and ultimately through such genocidal tactics as eugenics and forced sterilization, civilization keeps trying to carry out a Final Solution against “the great, green riot of life... forever poking through the gaps,/ mocking from beyond the edges.” But the stubborn Maroons remain; the “Dismal Swamp” is found in seemingly unlikely places: “...and in the dismal swamp heart of the ‘inner’ city / something stirs. / Still we hide our bones for fear of being born / because birth’s first lesson is loneliness.”

Koehnline seeks this authentic, syncretic, utopian America, this Maroon America, that has sent its tendrils spreading from slave revolts, indigenous surrealism, jazz and beat, ecstasy, communalism, etc. Occasionally his formulations fall short of his vision, as in his use of the word citizenship, or what appears to be (or is it?) a rather traditional misuse of the word wilderness. He speaks of the revolutionary-abolitionist Maroons as “Buffalo soldiers” (this was actually the term of Plains Indians for black troops Who fought in the exterminist U.S. army), and he refers to the enclaves of mixed-blood utopians as “the original Rainbow Coalition” (surely, they represented something more than an anticipation of Jesse Jackson’s top-down political vehicle, something even the “pwogwessive” left has criticized).

Despite these shortcomings, the optimism that a diverse, radical culture can emerge from all the Dismal Swamp refuges (geographic or spiritual) that maintain sparse but sturdy roots in the cracks and fissures of the imperial edifice, is refreshing. Living in one of the Empire’s urban wastelands, this idea gives hope in the way that the occasional madman on a giant, home-made bicycle does, or the ghetto house-turned-shrine of discarded junk holds out against the deadening barrage of uniformity.

Koehnline’s brilliant, lavish collages have in the past blessed the pages of the FE (a few of the graphics from this pamphlet appeared in our Earth Day special last spring). The graphics alone make this a must. There is also an intriguing bibliography for those wishing to follow up on the Maroon tradition. Swamp rats and ghetto rats, unite!

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