

# From the Other Side of the Tracks

Julius Lester

Reprinted with permission of the *Guardian*, independent radical weekly, NYC

One of the most difficult responsibilities of the revolutionary is to be self-critical. To be self-critical means being able to ask yourself if you are wrong, and if so, to admit the fact and correct it. Revolutionary self-criticism also involves the necessity to see the mistakes before they actually happen, and thus avoid them. However, to engage in self-criticism affords no guarantee that errors will be avoided or corrected. Self-criticism can lead to its own mistakes. The only thing the revolutionary knows for sure is that poverty, exploitation in all of its infinite varieties and racism must be destroyed. It is the question of “how” which involves the revolutionary and the concomitant responsibility to be self-critical.

The movement has reached an important plateau where the question of “how” echoes through every meeting, rally, demonstration and conversation. And it is to the long-range answer to that question that attention must now be turned. To say armed struggle is to say little except the obvious. Armed struggle is the tracks upon which the revolution must travel. But what the design of the train will be, how many cars it should be composed of, and exactly what fuel the train will use are some of the questions which must be answered.

For somewhat more than a year, this column has appeared in the *Guardian* and other newspapers around the country. During that time it has sought to raise questions, answer questions and present the viewpoint of one black individual involved in the revolutionary process. More often than not, these columns have reflected the thinking of a poet rather than a theoretician, which is not to denigrate whatever value the columns may have had, but simply to define them and to understand what their function has been.

The writer of a weekly column, if he aspires to be a revolutionary, is soon faced with the overwhelming problem of trying to say something relevant and meaningful each and every week. This is the revolutionary's responsibility to make every word and every act, political and personal, fraught with meaning, meaning which will further the revolutionary process. Such a responsibility is almost too much for any single individual. Yet it is the responsibility each of us has.

At the same time, a writer may find himself faced with the problem of people responding so completely to what he writes that they look upon him as an oracle, a symbol, a model. This is, perhaps, unavoidable but it places upon that writer an even more immense responsibility. If what he says affects people to some degree, he in turn becomes partially responsible for those people. The writer cannot turn from that responsibility. Neither can he mistake the people's bestowing of this responsibility upon him as a means of self-aggrandizement. The only result of this will be an ego-trip into increasing irrelevance.

In attempting to shoulder this responsibility, the writer must always be aware of when he has something to say and when he doesn't. The greatest danger comes when he has nothing to say, but continues to speak because it is expected of him. But the words that are not written are as much, if not more, a part of writing than the words which are written.

When this column began, it tried to speak to the asked and unasked questions in people's minds. A year and some months later, new questions face us. Those questions must and will be answered by the movement. Whatever role

this writer might be able to play in the search toward the right answers cannot be fulfilled at the present time if the necessity to write a column each and every week continues. This is not a sudden decision, but one reached after some three months of intense questioning. How long this column will be absent from these pages is uncertain. Perhaps it will never return.

There is much that we don't know. In fact, our ignorance is greater than our knowledge, which means that there is much study to be done and much work. Just as the revolutionary artists and writers of Cuba and China find it necessary to go to the fields and factories to work and live, this writer finds that he can best fulfill his responsibilities at the present time by working in the fields to combat his own ignorance in each of its manifestations.

It is not without great reluctance and sadness that this decision has been reached. Perhaps self-criticism in this instance led to the wrong decision. If so, the necessary correction will be made. Some have inquired if it wouldn't be possible for the columns which have appeared here to be published in a book. That is being done; a book of these columns will appear late in the spring of this year.

The revolution proceeds not by steps of a league at a time, but slowly, painfully slowly, and its steps are often so small as to be unnoticeable. The revolution proceeds not by speeches at the barricades, but from one person to another person in conversation and in work. The revolution proceeds not at the pace of our desires, but by its-own laws. To break down the old and build the new is not a task accomplished in one generation or several, or by one individual more than another. It is accomplished only when each feels as responsible for the other as he does for himself and acts in accordance with that responsibility.

We have reached a plateau. Some have started the excruciating climb to the next. Others have need of new supplies and new materials before they can begin the journey to the next plateau. The face of the mountain is rough and complex and, in many places, totally unknown. Each has a job to do and each has to prepare.

So be it.

# fifth Estate

Julius Lester  
From the Other Side of the Tracks

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/73-february-20-march-5-1969/from-the-other-side-of-the-tracks>  
Fifth Estate #73, February 20-March 5, 1969

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org)**