

John Harris / GISCOMBE'S GISCOME¹

In this autobiographical memoir, Cecil S. Giscombe, fairly well-known black American professor-poet, tries to discover the nature of his genetic connection to fairly well-known nineteenth-century black Canadian miner-explorer John R. Giscome, and to explain why he wants to discover and articulate this connection.

John R.'s fame is not itself the attraction: "I regard devotion to family trees with a mix of suspicion and uninterest — there's something irritatingly civic about the enterprise that verges on boosterism" (10). The real attraction is that fairly famous black explorers are rare in northern North America. "The tales of pioneers enduring the hardships of the West for the promise of immense wealth are *not* the tales of black America," Cecil says quoting Houston Baker and adding his own emphasis. "Yet there's my man John R, up in the Cariboo, the Peace, the Cassiar, the Omineca" (243-4). John R. is a "singularity, an anomaly, the thing that Giscombes, if I understand my family, tend to become as we age" (98).

So the search for John R. is mainly a search for a hero, the suggestion of a genetic connection making the hero's influence more potent. The search is done "on behalf of" his family, or "for" his family, and done using the "lens of family" (113). It is a study of Giscombe-ness, an exploration of "family tendencies" (122) that might be epitomized in a person of prominence who could, for better or worse, indicate to various Giscombes, including Cecil, a destiny.

The search begins when it's brought to Cecil's attention that there's a town named Giscome on a map of British Columbia near

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the city of Prince George in the very centre of the province. A book of place names reads: "Named for John Robert Giscome, a negro miner." The sense of the anomaly of John R. increases as Cecil studies the historical record. John R. was no piker. He got his name on the map in honor of his discovering, in 1863, an important route through the Rocky Mountains from the Central Interior into the Peace River country. A less famous but still very impressive accomplishment was that John R., at the request of officials in Fort (now Prince) George, stopped on his way up the Fraser River to discover the fates of three lost white overlanders coming from the east to the goldfields of the Cariboo (250). This was a mission of some delicacy as it involved mainly inquiring of local Indians who had reported, along with the three deaths, the fact that the whites had resorted to cannibalism. Once John R. was on the scene, his note-taking made the Indians suspect that he suspected them (which he did) of killing the last survivor. Finally, John R. found gold in the Cassiar. He retired to Victoria with the equivalent in today's money of a half a million dollars (95). In Victoria, he extended his fortune by speculating in real estate.

John R.'s tendencies or qualities have to be inferred from the historical record. Cecil finds this out when he tracks John R.'s descendents to Prattville, Jamaica, and discovers that they have no clearer a notion of the man than Cecil himself has. John Aaron Giscombe, John R.'s great nephew, the one person who might be expected to remember some old family stories, is in the early stages of Alzheimer's and just keeps repeating "his property was worth twenty-five *t'ousand* dollars" (19). Cecil also discovers, in Jamaica, that his and John R.'s Giscombes aren't on the same tree, though the two trees are rooted in suspiciously close proximity on the north-east coast of Jamaica.

John R.'s achievements imply certain qualities: courage, endurance, intelligence, versatility, ambition. And, most interestingly, and scarily, since the historical record in British Columbia boosts these qualities in whites only, John R.'s achievements imply whiteness. Does this quality have something to do with the anomaly that most Giscombes turn into?

John R., somehow, got “all outside the lines that geography, race, and the languages of white people had made for him” (151). He got inside the expectations set for whites, fulfilling them with a success that very few whites could boast of.

Cecil’s research gradually fills in the story. Besides fame and money, John R. got respect. After arriving in B.C. (following a stint as a laborer on the Panama Canal, a job not many Jamaicans survived), John R. worked as a cook for Peter Dunlevy, one of B.C.’s first big entrepreneurs. As a cook, he was still emphatically “within the lines” prescribed for him. But it was Dunlevy, ultimately, who proposed John R.’s name to the Grand Trunk Railway when it wanted to assign a name to its pit stop on the Fraser River near the Giscombe portage. Dunlevy’s action suggests a good relationship between the two, perhaps even a friendship.

John R. got a taste of the good side of Canadian justice, too. While working as a miner in Barkerville, he began investing in real estate and property mortgages. He gave a mortgage to William Pratt (a black man), and took Pratt’s horses when the money wasn’t paid back on time. There was a fight, and Pratt laid charges — specifically that John R. hit him with an axe. B.C.’s infamous “hanging judge,” Matthew Begbie, upheld John R.’s contract and the seizure of the horses. Also, on the testimony of John Bowron, Barkerville’s librarian and gold assayer, Begbie threw Pratt’s charges out of court. What Cecil calls “the white system” (138) worked as it was supposed to.

Maybe John R. got love as well, and gained family, of sorts. He had his own family, acquired on a trip he (curiously) took to Jamaica in the time between being summoned to and, a year later, appearing in Begbie’s court. In that time he married Sara Page and fathered two daughters (157), but he seems to have had no further contact with this family. He spent his last decade in the boarding house of one Ella Cooness, and he left Ella his entire estate when he died on 24 June 1907. Her husband Stacey (born of a “black-Jewish” mother) died the following year: “Presumably Ella Cooness nursed them both — Stacey and John R. — in their final days, she was the one to walk them out to the edge” (164). When Ella died, in 1934, she was living with her second husband on Saltspring Island, some of the earliest

settlers of which were blacks. She left her husband \$1000, and the rest of her estate went to the hospital in Ganges and the Protestant Orphanage in Victoria.

But there remains a possibility that she ripped off poor old John R. In his will he describes her as a "widow, absolute," though Stacey was still alive and living in the same boarding house. Cecil doesn't like to think of the trickster tricked. He likes to think that, in composing his will, "the power of language" seized John R.:

"I imagine him looking over out [sic] of his own death at Bro. Stacey and deliberately calling Ella widow in that grim way we sometimes have about us" (97).

The first-person plural, here, indicates Giscombes.

Or John R. might have been alluding to the fact that, *without him* she was "widow, absolute."

How was John R. able to do so well in B.C.? Three answers occur to Cecil.

First, John R. could have shared the expectations and ambitions of whites. If Europeans were the first culture weak enough to allow their Promethean urges relative freedom from social taboo, and to start cutting really big Faustian deals, John R., maybe, seeing the results, said to himself "I could do with some of that." Did he then locate the ideal spot to cut such deals, black people being so unusual in B.C. that their subordinate roles had never really been assigned as they had been for First Nations and Chinese? Was he thus able, in this place, to slip into history, his Carrier Indian guides feeling less suspicious of than sorry for him, maybe, and showing him the short cut; the whites at Fort McLeod, taken by surprise but realizing the importance of the route that the Indians had kept from *them*, firing, in their enthusiasm, a 20-gun salute before they had a chance to say to one another "w-a-i-t a minute."

Second, John R. may have been a trickster, a common figure, Cecil says, in the Afro-American literature that he teaches. Such

figures are common in life too — like a black man that Cecil met once at a party in Vancouver. This man, working in a provincial government office in Prince George, was constantly razed by his fellow workers for being citified (in B.C., a person from Vancouver and environs). One day he told his co-workers that there was a moose out on the building's lawn, and they ran out to shoot it, shuffling back in, embarrassed, a few minutes later (100). The trickster subverts the conventional view of success by illustrating how easy it is, for someone who sees the bigger picture, to ridicule and/or achieve that success.

As a trickster, then, did John R., for example, as B.C. historian Linda Eversole told Cecil she suspects (95), smooth his way into the historical record by co-writing the front page, 15 December 1863 *British Colonist* article "Interesting from the Rocky Mountains." This article, the sole source of information on John R.'s main achievement, recounts how John R. and Henry McDame (a man from the Bahamas, whose name appears on a mountain and creek on B.C. maps), made, on the advice of local Indians, a portage of about nine miles to what is now called Summit Lake, after parking their canoes on the Fraser River. At Summit Lake, they picked up a canoe "from an old Indian chief," and came down what's now known as the Crooked River to McLeod Lake. McLeod Lake is one of the headwaters of the Peace River, the way east and north, and the Hudson's Bay Company had built a fort there. At the fort, "a salute of about 20 shots was fired, with firearms, in honor of the arrival of that party through that route which had never been traversed by any others than Indians" (9).

About this Cecil writes, "I imagine that when people read that description in the newspaper they assumed that our heroes were two white guys; and I imagine John R. smiling as he or the newspaper reporter, or the two of them together, came up with that phrase, 'any others than Indians'". (10) Cecil likes to think of John R. as using his power of eloquence to trick his way through the wilderness and into history.

Cecil proffers a third explanation of John R.'s success. He could've been (that is *looked*) white, even though he is described, in

all the official records, as “negro,” as associating with other negroes like McDame, as living (with McDame) on “Nigger’s Creek” in Quesnel, etc. John Aaron is remembered by family as having referred to John R. as “white English,” and the Giscombe name does seem to trace back to a white planter, James Clarke Giscombe, and a “free black,” Jane Skinner. Some sides of the family gravitate to white, some to black.

If John R. *looked* white, Cecil doesn’t want to know about it (191). That would make John R. much less of an anomaly, and so (in terms of what Cecil can find out about him) of a Giscombe. More anomalous, in the same context, more heroic, would be John R.’s long-time partner Henry McDame, of whom there seems to be a photo. He’s a black black-man, for certain an “inhabitant of the woodpile” (189).

These are all scary considerations, amply justifying Cecil’s careful phrasing, close attention to detail, insistence on accuracy, and ironic distance. They also justify Cecil’s central metaphor — of himself, a black Marlow, seeking, on behalf of himself and his family, John R., a black Kurtz. The search takes place in the North American interior, one of the empty spots on the map, a heart of whiteness. This is a place where the majority of the inhabitants, Europeans, are writing a history that unselfconsciously details what could be described, with a slight modification of Conrad’s description about the colonizing of the Congo, “one of the vilest scrambles for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration.”

If John R. was an “assimilated” negro, who bought into the “conventional” expectations documented and fulfilled by whites, or/ and if he was a “trickster” negro subverting those expectations by fulfilling them, and /or if he was largely “white,” is Cecil then, in some or all of these ways, “related” to John R.?

Cecil, as he describes and reveals himself, is a success in conventional terms, and is in the process of being written into (and writing himself into) contemporary history. Like his grandfather and father (both doctors) he is part of “the white system,” a professional (as is his sister, a Ph.D. in Psychology). Like them he is aware that

professional status and money blur racial lines, ease minority status. He can, as they did, revel (albeit at the same time watching his back) in "the triumph of money over social custom or regulation" (213).

As a professional, Cecil is, evidently, rising to the top of the academic heap, teaching seminars in the various recondite subject areas that must be taken up by doctoral candidates ("proclaiming this and that from various podiums," as Cecil puts it), accumulating fellowships, attending MLA conventions, and acquiring tenure-track positions. He is involved in his studies to the extent that he easily alludes to works by Hemingway, Atwood, Stevens, Eliot, Ondaatje, Auden, and (of course) Conrad. Much of his research into John R. is funded. He is dedicated to his students, too, aware in particular of his black students and their various advantages and disadvantages in "the white system," concerned about what to say to them verbally and on their papers so they will accept what (in his considered opinion) they need to know about writing and literature.

Like his grandfather and father, too (and a great uncle, who went to North Bay), Cecil is moving north (136). Though no Giscombes are moving there as precipitously as John R. did, Cecil's grandfather did once consider moving to B.C. A letter found in his papers indicates that he inquired of provincial authorities about setting up a medical practice. Cecil himself rushes "up" to Canada every year (usually by bicycle) when the university term ends. Canada is "the big otherness" (128) to which he is "always running", and the city in which he would most like to live is Vancouver. He even has a dream of cycling the entire Alaska Highway with his daughter, once she is old enough.

He's also a dedicated (not necessarily always, he implies, successful) husband and father, ever watchful concerning his wife and daughter. His wife is white; at one point they cancel a trip to the South because they don't want to have to deal with that "extra." She has diverticulitis; at another point when she is having an attack Cecil cuts short a trip so he can be with her. He and his wife (a poet and photographer) like to explore, take chances, have what they call "adventures" as a way of opening up their lives and art. Cecil calls this "going to the edge" (119). He watches and listens to his

daughter, aware of the wisdom that a secure and verbally engaged child can come out with. At one point Cecil considers a move to California, which has no racial majority, so his daughter will have an easier time in school. He has a wonderful ritual with his daughter, "night patrol," where they go out into the dark, just before bed, to see what's going on at "the perimeter." "Night patrol" and cycling the Alaska Highway are initiations into Gishompe-ness for his daughter, introductions to "the big otherness," trial runs for later journeys to the "edge."

He's is also, he fairly confesses and illustrates, manipulative, especially when it comes to escaping wife and daughter to do the long-distance bicycle trips to which he has become addicted, both physically and psychologically, since he gave up smoking. And he is a consumer, providing constant commentary (a la Hemingway) on the malls, hotels, and cafes that he frequents.

Cecil's conventional side is illustrated best in a Cosby-like family scenario he relates in the book. Cecil buys a vintage Willys Overlander jeep, on the premise that his wife can drive it to Prince George in December, while he goes to a convention and follows later. He explains to his wife that everyone in Prince George has a four-by-four, the road and climate conditions being extreme. But really he is for the moment as much in love with the Willys as he is with wife and daughter. He knows full well that in the Central Interior the old jeep would be an anomaly, the loggers and mill workers there all driving the latest Fords and Chevs for which parts and service are available. He is relieved, finally, that his wife doesn't have to confront him, as she is so obviously about to do. The ignition on the Willys goes, giving Cecil the perfect excuse to park it in a friend's front yard, put a For Sale sign in the windshield, and — exuding responsibility — take his wife and daughter to the train.

At the same time, Cecil is anything but conventional. At age 10 he fell from a tree, broke both his arms, and lost one to gangrene. He is "other advantaged," an apt euphemism in terms of Cecil's attitude: he gained the "advantages" of a 1-Y deferment during the Vietnam War, "odd ideas about mortality," an inability to play the guitar, and a love for prosthetic jokes like "on the other hand (the one I no longer have)." (41)

But much more unusual, more of an anomaly, is his addiction to the “edge.” He gets there on his bicycle, doing incredible trips (Seattle to Prince George, Prince George to Dawson Creek to Edmonton, Bloomington to North Bay). This memoir could read as a cyclist’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* or *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. It even has some guidebook qualities, names of good and bad places to eat and sleep, descriptions of locales and roads, and accounts of roadside repairs and accidents. These last are interesting because of the prosthetic arm. The book’s title, in fact, comes out of an accident in which Cecil rear-ends a car, flips over it, and hurts his left shoulder, the doctor later remarking that the shoulder, because of the weight of the prosthesis, moves easily “into and out of dislocation.” The arm, when Cecil is riding, is basically locked onto the handlebars; the bike goes where Cecil goes.

The book has overtones of adventure/travel writing, those stories of wackos hurling themselves at Everest, kayaking the Arctic Ocean, pushing wheelbarrows loaded with plastic water bottles from the Mediterranean coast across the Sahara Desert to the Niger.

There is no chronology of his trips, though; Cecil is interested in brooding over related incidents on various trips, seeking connections. He narrates like Marlow, albeit with a touch of apology, his favorite transitions being versions of “as I said.”

It never seems arbitrary that Cecil’s exploration of John R.’s various locales is negotiated largely by bicycle. Cecil was cycling, seriously, before he found the town of Giscome on a map of B.C., and cycling is a perfect way to reconstruct John R.’s experience as a means of getting into his head. The roads follow the rivers, and a bicycle goes at a river’s pace. Most importantly, Cecil is not enclosed. He gets to worry about the weather and bears and, above all, to meet the locals.

Cecil, like John R., needs the locals in order to get through their territory. When we see Cecil getting directions from a gang of mall rats in North Bay or Bloomington, we imagine, as Cecil does, John R. far up the Fraser River, “in the heart of an impenetrable darkness,” negotiating with some Carrier Indians. He would be concerned about leaving his canoe, his ticket out if it came to that;

was this “portage” a scam to get the canoe from him, or to get him off into the bush and kill him? He would feel just the way Cecil does in all the highway pit-stops that offer food, shelter, direction, movies, conversation. Paul Theroux describes the feeling, in his Introduction to *Fresh Air Fiend*, using the words “childlike,” “defensive,” “dim,” “wounded,” or “disabled.” The explorer/adventurer knows that strangers are regarded by locals as not fully human. Only the locals are “The People,” only their place is *the* place, and only their language is “The Word.”

The reader asks of Cecil what Cecil asks of himself and John R. Why? One reviewer, Kalamu ya Salaam of *Cyberdrum* (“a list of more than 500 black writers and diverse supporters of literature”), puts the question this way: “Why would someone who values being able to ‘forget about being black’ choose to live in a mainly nonblack environment, one that is inevitably always reminding one of one’s blackness — an existence too often negatively defined by nonblacks?” Cecil, ya Salaam points out, “treats his blackness like a wound one takes a morbid delight in ‘worrying over.’ Even as he celebrates being different, being an intellectual, being unbound by race, it’s not too long before the finger scratches the scab and the discussion returns to race.”

The answer of course is that Cecil, as he says, regards himself primarily not as black, not as “other advantaged,” not as a poet, but as an anomaly. The word means “different,” “abnormal,” “unusual,” “paradoxical.” He goes to that big otherness, Canada, because it seems to him to be a natural home for a stranger — a big, one-armed black guy on a bicycle asking around about other black people who might have been there before. As Cecil himself explains it, “the touch of the local on one — on myself — is what I’m always wanting when I travel, something specific, an order not with myself at some “still centre” but getting — as we say — over and getting the physical self — *my ass*, as we say — over something in the way, both. Plus there’s the solitude I need, my own restlessness — or rootlessness —, the way my sister and I were raised, the incredible self-consciousness we both have which I trace back in myself at least as far as kindergarten, the self-consciousness that cut me off — as my arm was

severed and yet I am alive, escaped alone to tell thee, from many, many assumptions, from much. The need then to make a knowing cultural statement out of the weight of many things, like jazz is made . . . (54).

Cecil wants to get where *any* individual is an anomaly, where "other" is not just "others" but also (and mostly) weather, space, bears. In such places, black and white are questionable signifiers of race and culture, and anyone could be family. Here's Cecil in North Bay Ontario, trying to find the descendents of his great uncle Charles who left for Canada after a family spat and, in anger, dropped (for a time) the "b" from his surname. The search is not going well (on a subsequent trip it goes better), it's getting late, and Cecil wants to inquire of The People as to the location of a campsite. No one seems to know so finally he asks a group of teenage girls to direct him to the police who, he figures, might be able to tell him where to camp. Their first reaction is "Holy Shit!" in the sense of "who voluntarily seeks out the Ontario Provincial Police?"

Then the leader of the gang, Joyce, gives direction, and Cecil finds family: "She was pale as the other two girls but her skin's definition was different, supple where their's was rough and with a deep glow to it: that and her hair and especially the line of her jaw told me that she had a few African ancestors . . . She directed me, with elaborate gestures and succinct qualifications (first explaining to the others . . . 'we do not know *why* he wishes to see the police, nor shall we inquire') and gave me advice for cycling through North Bay. . . . Fourteen and held in esteem by her friends, a leader of those white girls, the power of language singing out from her . . . I wondered, the next day, did she know she was black. And I wondered later still, two days and a hundred miles up the road it stopped me, at the chance of her being a relative" (123).

This book is, as the critics have said, a fascinating look at issues such as race and family. It fascinates as a story, a quest for a hero, taken on by a narrator who comes across as a human being. The narration never wavers from the truly central issue of individuality. In these terms Cecil is like his hero John R.: genetically and in terms of upbringing, education, and experience as European as he is African

(to use cultural terms) or as white as he is black (to use racial ones). Cecil is not out to acquire a cause, in the form of an African tribal costume or name, in the form of a family tree, or in any other form. The cause that John R. represents is simply a knowledge of self that might enable Cecil to push on through the North American "wilderness," which is home, more efficiently. Cecil wants to move more easily, like his shoulder, "into and out of dislocation."

Those who prefer to take up issues of race, culture, ethnicity, and family *strictly* as partisan, exclusory causes, may find fault with this book. But most will love it, particularly in this country. John R. is, after all, a Canadian hero. And Cecil, in his pursuit of John R., is a Canadian hero too: calm, modest, rational, tough, and humorous.