

David Bradley

Excerpt from *The Bondage Hypothesis: Meditations on Race and History*

"Harwz's your flat?" asks Earnest Host, extending a gnarly-knuckled hand. I recognize him by his voice—we've spoken by phone—and am not surprised to see he has a square and manly jaw, squint-lined, spit-colored eyes, and a full head of sandy hair that's tousled by the winter wind that's sweeping 'cross the plains. His boots are scuffed but his jeans are ironed and, though the chill factor's minus two, his parka is unzipped, revealing a work shirt of blue chambray and a tie that shrieks of Father's Day.

I take his hand warily. So far everything—from the propeller-driven puddle-jumper operated by a national airline under an assumed identity to the airport terminal liberated from a model-train layout—seems on the up-and-up, but everything usually does... at first. Next thing you know, you're knee deep in nasty nonsense. The opening handshake can be your only warning to wear your waders.

That's how it was three years ago, in Northern Ohio, when Earnest Host's handshake was as limp as overdone linguine; he was telling me how he'd marched with Martin Luther King before we got out of baggage claim. Two years ago, in Western Texas, Earnest Host tried to grind my metacarpals into bone meal; instead of driving me to the usual No-Tell Motel, he whisked me to the wrong side of the Rio Grande, ostensibly for menudo and tortillas, but actually for putas and mescal. Last year, in Eastern Arkansas, Earnest Host offered her left hand—I couldn't miss the wedding band—and allowed me to touch only the very tips of her elegant alabaster fingers; after three glasses of Chardonnay, she was offering to demonstrate her theory on what really happened between Bigger Thomas and Mary Dalton on page seventy-three of *Native Son*. Last week, in a state whose name is spelled entirely with vowels, Earnest Host's handshake was a hard high five; two hours later he was telling me he didn't mind being the only black on the faculty and got along fine with all his

colleagues... and showing me his gun collection. And as I left he hugged me, right there in the Lionelland™ Airport. So I'm delighted this Earnest Host's handshake is one-pump, no-squeeze—and with luck no socio-political complications.

"The wings stayed on," I reply. I don't complain about the three-hour layover at the hub airport, or the lack of stewardum or toilet on the plane, or the "prop-lag"—disorientation due to flying for six hours and ending up in the same time zone—because it all goes with the territory, which is: Charolais State College, in Goodplacetoraisekids City, which straddles the Neverheardofit River, in the eastern region of a state whose name, in some ancient tribal tongue, means "flat land, white people, and what you doin' here, buffalo soldier?"

Making wampum, Squanto. It's February.

Ah, yes, February. A/K/A Black History Month. During which we recognize an under-recognized aspect of soi-disant American History. Which under-recognition, any Liberal will attest, has had deleterious effects which can be alleviated (not eliminated; Liberals don't want to eliminate anything) by a twenty-eight-day shock treatment of factoids about people of the black persuasion, preferably administered by a person of said persuasion, if you have one—or the funding to fly one in.

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