

# AMERICAN IMPRESSIONS

by Fatima Meer

I arrived in the United States of America in the December of 1972 and stayed there until the middle of January 1973. I spent in all six weeks and in that time travelled some ten thousand miles in the country visiting eleven cities, thirteen campuses and almost two dozen community development and welfare organizations. I talked with people on buses, trains and planes, attended revival and election meetings, rapped with students, mayors, congressmen, community leaders, and common folk in pool rooms, and ghetto kids in burger trailers digging juke box fun.

My meetings were so fleeting—I never stayed more than four nights in any one place—that I often questioned the wisdom of the exercise I had undertaken, but in retrospect I rationalise that it drew together the far flung actions of a vast tapestry into a meaningful kaleidoscope of significant impressions that would otherwise have been impossible in so short a time.

I found America to be a cauldron of many cultures and discovered that for all her sky rocketing modernity, she could be as folkish as any peasant community. Jews in New York more numerous than in Israel, preserved a Judaic worldview in some neighbourhoods: Chinatowns sprawled on the edge of Wall Street and in the heart of San Francisco, and in tubes and trains peasant-like Chicanos shared potato chips from brown paper bags. Yet this diversity was drawn together and held in a common society, and no laws barred members from competing equally with each other though few had the means to succeed.

But the American city is by and large an assortment of graffiti-smearing tenements built in the second half of the last century or in the first half of the present for a class of people who have retreated to a suburb and a life-style that has passed into history.

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Locked in my small hotel room through the window of which I could see only dull, dizzy shafts, I grew temporarily desperate and realized how easily I could be driven to plunge down a shaft. I took a lift into the thronging foyer where no one saw me, and stepped into a freezing Broadway alley in search of food. A hundred restaurants—Indian, Italian, Mexican, Greek, Jewish—and a hundred steak houses, flashed their signals. I took my place in the queue and settled down to a burger. Next to me a pair of parents worried over their child's wasted dinner—"finish it or some tramp will come and eat it".

In that large maze of splitting streets and mammoth neighbourhoods the stranger struggles against each other, indifference spreads, fear breeds. A Pakistani doctor commenting on an accident in New York said: 'We were passing in a taxi. My friend said "We better stop. No one will help these poor people." A man was bleeding profusely. We started giving First Aid. The people who were watching told us we shouldn't do that. We would have to give evidence in Court. I told them I would certainly give evidence in Court and very strong evidence too—"against you—you call this a civilized country. God help us from such civilization."

The country is divided among the super rich, the one per cent who own 70 per cent of its productive processes, the middle class suburbanists—95 per cent White, and the ghetto dwellers, Blacks, Puerto Ricans, West Indians and Chicanos. Lost among them in cities and isolated on tribal reservations scattered over 50 million acres of land, are the 600 000 so-called Indians, the original Americans, the most impoverished and culturally depleted of all Americans, clinging desperately to a Bureau of Indian Affairs it cannot love. On the reservations one sees their huts in the distance, and their weaving, pottery and basket work, and beautiful silver jewellery and dolls in museums.

I wanted above all in America to see how the country was bridging the gap between rich and poor, Black and White. So at my first meeting with my programming officer I requested a visit to the ghetto. He was put out. He detailed a number of violences I might suffer, but when I remained adamant, he suggested that perhaps I could accompany the police on patrol duty. South African as I was and Black, I balked and dropped the subject. The next day I made some enquiries at a doughnut stand and reached the ghetto.

I found myself in a neighbourhood of small 'mum and pop' style shops, grimy steak houses and unappetising hamburger stands. I turned into an intersecting street lined with handsome old houses, and latched on to a woman wheeling a trolley and keeping a firm hold on a child. We entered a supermarket. The man at the till was White, the man cleaning the floor and tidying the shelves was Black.

We moved out of the store and down the street. We passed a block of empty apartments. They looked solid and good to me and so I asked why they were empty. 'Roaches and rats and landlords who don't care' was the

reply. I was to hear later that there were close on 200 000 houses rotting into the pavements of America. At a party in New York I was told of the 'terrible plight of landlords', 'They can't raise the rents. The people resist it and they can't move the people. So they just leave the houses alone and let them go to rack and ruin. When they finally fall over the tenants they will move and then the landlords will be able to do something about it.'

We came to a block of burnt down apartments and shops and the burnt down mess continued for several blocks. 'That's from the fire the last time'. Was her mind too, Baldwin-like, on the fire the next time?

The fire had raged in the 1960's in Harlem, Brooklyn, Watts, Newark and Detroit when Black pain had exploded and ravaged the neighbourhoods. The embers still smouldered. This was the American ghetto—a ghetto born not so much of material deprivation as of inequality and injustice: and the ghetto was in one piece—in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Boston, New York packed in triple storeyed red bricked row houses that had once done their house owners proud. But as the cities had become congested and polluted, the original occupants had fled to the suburbs and waves of new Whites had moved in as on a station awaiting their turn to move out and up. By the time the Blacks had come, the handsome houses pinned to the pavements by Black balustrades, had been reduced to shells of their former glories. Blacks complain that no train appears to move them out and up.



Fatima Meer

(Natal Witness)

Blacks see themselves as trapped in rotting cities that can only be salvaged through drastic urban renewal. To date the government has shown little interest in this. Its financial commitments have been in favour of middle class suburban housing. Thus since the last World War the government insured the financing of 10 million homes for middle class dwellers, but financed only 800 000 urban units. 'The suburban commuter draws large profits from the city, practically monopolises its amenities—its culture houses, libraries and transport facilities. Yet he contributes no taxes to it', complained an irate ghetto leader in Philadelphia.

Half of the country's Blacks are concentrated in 50 cities; six cities have Black majorities, in eight Blacks constitute over 40 per cent of the population. The urban problem is increasingly becoming the Black problem.

The deputy-director of the Industrial Opportunities Centre in Pittsburgh is a college graduate who looks and speaks like a top executive. 'The young have had outraging experiences. They are angry and disillusioned. They are out to get their rights no matter how. They will burn, loot, kill if necessary. Sure Blacks have a higher crime rate, but do you blame them seeing where they come from?'

His young assistant added, 'We gotta be shrewd, we gotta be sharp. We can't go around with our eyes shut and our minds closed anymore. We gotta holler and if necessary we gotta burn to let them know that it can't go on like this.'

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In Boston's run down ghetto, I was addressing a house-meeting. Some two dozen people had gathered—some middle aged and some young Black Power people. The meeting had started with the singing of spirituals, the hostesses spoke with pain about imprisoned friends a young woman volunteered "I think our trouble is that we don't believe in God." One of the Black Power men complained that Black people from Africa did not like Afro-Americans when they came to America and they lived and mixed with White people and criticised the way Black folk spoke English. At a seminar at the American University in Washington, a light complexioned Black laid similar charges against Indians "They only mix with Whites and Turks. We are of the same class, but they don't want to know us. There was a sudden tremendous crash. A rock came hurtling through the window, the meeting in Boston broke. We ran out to see our assailants but there was no one

The black militant was spawned in the church, but Christianity was for many years denied him. The white man feared that it would make him saucy and proud, and so he had bolted himself in his church in the eighteenth century; and only when it seemed that he himself would be suffocated by that bolting, he crashed open its doors and exploded Christianity on to the streets. The Black man's Christianity is traced to the Christian Revival movement. He learnt it, it is said, ranting and repenting with the whites at revival meetings, but in these repentings he realised his soul with a passion that made up for lost time.

The Black Preacher was the first Black leader recognised by Whites, he was even allowed to serve as pastor for Whites at times but by and large the presence of Blacks in Churches irked Whites and the break came in 1787 when Blacks in prayer were ordered to get up and move back in Philidelphia. Black churchmen walked out and formed their own Black church and appointed their own Black bishop: so the independent African church was born.

Black congregations provided the basis for Black political movements and these held the embryo of Black power.

The "Nation of Islam" accuses the White man of having rebuffed God's priestine message communicated to him by Jesus and Moses. He sees him to be an abberant offshoot of the Black man, evil in nature and in cohorts with the devil. The Black man by contrast is the original man, divine by nature and naturally good.

The "Nation" is one of the best organised Black Groups in America. Its followers estimated at 100 000 in 1960 have probably doubled today. Christian Blacks regard it with deep respect and admiration. They point to its discipline, and cleanliness, its campaign against alcoholism, crime and drugs and above all its programmes for self help. Gloria in Little Rock speaks enviously of the ordered existence of her Muslim neighbours "The bus comes every morning to coliect the children. 'The Nation' takes over all your problems, plans out your day, it is wonderful." It is as if ghetto Blacks deprived of family and discipline are realising these through the "Nation". Gloria's husband said that he would join the Muslims, "But I can't do without pork." Mohammed Speaks, the "Nation's" paper is the most widely circulated Black paper in the country (400 000). According to its advertisements, there are at least 57 temples and the "Nation" beams 174 weekly radio programmes throughout the country.

But the "Nation of Islam" excluded me from its fraternity. I introduced myself in a Harlem temple as 'Black' and 'Muslim'. But was politely turned away by the well groomed grey suited fezed brothers. "Sister you are pure. Our message is for the impure". Undaunted I hung around the entrance watching the pre-meeting activity—women arriving in taxis, attired in virginal white, long sleeved, ankle length gowns beneath fur coats, their clean scrubbed faces, radiant beneath high draped head gears. The assembling congregation appeared better dressed than the audience at the Metropolitan Opera House the previous evening. The brothers at the door decided that I was causing a blockage and politely but firmly asked me to leave "But I want to hear the minister". I was told I could do so on the radio. I settled for that and settling down in the cafe next door listened to Minister Farakhan's blast against Whites.

He addressed himself to Black Christians, he told them that they had been misled into the heaven of integration. He told them that Christianity was not a religion of love and warned them that Christians were destined for hell, "We left our forefathers 400 years ago. We came into the Western Hemisphere among a strange people. We tried to join them as citizens. If their destination is hell, we must get out while there is time. He ridiculed the notion that



Eldridge Cleaver

Blacks needed Whites, "How did we make it before you, White man? You were not always here, you must remember your fathers murdered our fathers, no wonder the Black people are murderers. They had murderers for teachers. You taught us Black hate we remained like dead men and you and your children have picked on our flesh and picked it clean. You wicked people, your police officers prey on us because we have no weapons. You rob us of our labour, you turn your clock back, you rob us dumb, deaf and blind. Then you offer us some whisky and a little free sex . . . look at yourself Black man and woman . . . you have become their expression. You express their evil and their filth." The congregation echoed solemn "Amens" at each denouncement of White evil.

This was not to be the first and last time that I, a Black South African was classified as "White" and discriminated against as such. I had received an enthusiastic invitation to lecture at Boston University but the invitation was subsequently cancelled on the cool note that the Department had been misled and it had now learnt that "Professor Meer was not a Black but a light skinned Indian." I lost a 100 dollars and the promise of a rewarding seminar.

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My experiences with the Black Panthers were different. They accepted me as a fellow exploited from the third world. I met Bobby Seal, co-founder of the Party with Huey Newton in Oakland, and Bernese Jones, New York Party boss at Harlem.

Bobby Seal was inaugurating his mayoral campaign, Black Panther woman Eileen Brown was running with him for Councilman. Bobby Seal said that he hoped that a Chicano would also offer himself for election.

The election office teemed with people, soul music and soul food. Large Black women in Afro robes signed on

volunteers, young White women in sweaters and jeans and with babies on backs, spilled onto the pavements. Young Black men in dashikis distributed leaflets. There was animated discussion about Seal's chances. The fact that he "grew up in the street" was used both to strengthen and weaken his case. He was too much radical, too much Panther, stood too much for violence and in violence was one opinion. How could the White people vote for him but the White people were there.

Seal exploded on the stage, that is the pavement, a highly charged young man in a smart new suit who could hardly hold himself still. His rhetoric was easy going and of the street. "They said to me, Bobby you are always criticising the institution why don't you take over the institution and run it yourself. Pah!" He shot out his fingers, "A light bulb went up in my mind and I am here."

He outlined his programme. He would develop the harbour start mobile clinics, put on special buses for relatives to visit prisoners, spread out breakfast for children at school, "Let me take another step, and show you what I mean" he took a step. "I thought I'd get to China before Nixon. But see what's happening. It blows my mind."

He said he'd start a sister city programme with Peking. He attacked the City Council for spending 150 000 dollars on a helicopter flapping in the air while senior citizens were mugged on the ground. He defended himself against the attack of radicalism, "I say if there are hungry children, you need a radical change. You got rats and roaches you need a radical change. You got corrupt officials, you need a radical change."

He rolled his round eyes in mimicry against one opponent and lowered heavy lids over them in disdainful dismissal of another.

The Black Panthers emerging from the slums of Oakland in 1966 galvanised the rising militancy of the Black people. "The Nation of Islam" and Malcolm X had already spurned King's passive resistance. Malcolm had said "The Black man would be more justified when he stands up and starts to protect himself no matter how many necks he has to break and heads he has to crack."

Armed with guns and law books and dressed in black berets, black trousers, powder blue shirts and black leather coats, Huey Newton, Bobby Seal and Eldridge Cleaver, young men in their twenties had trailed the police to protect Black folk from undue harrassment. But if they were tough, they were also compassionate and had given away 50 000 15 lbs food parcels and registered 35 000 Black sickle cell patients; 18 000 voters. Within a few years, they had so changed the Black mood that a considerable body had abandoned King's passive resistance and replaced it with their tough militancy. But in that time, the Panthers were near smashed by the police and the Government. Scores were shot down, two brothers while they slept in their beds in Chicago. Eldridge Cleaver lives in exile in Africa today and the militant eastern wing of the party appears to be in conflict with Bobby Seal's new approach.

Black Americans have never been as sensitive in their

relation to power and poverty as now and the Church is probably the most constant medium through which this relationship has been discussed. In the compelling eloquence of such Black preachers as the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Christ emerges from a Black ghetto here and Christianity is converted into God's special command for Black Liberation. "Jesus came to save you, not to imprison you" the Rev. Jesse Jackson's voice rings out in Chicago. "Christmas is a serious business—the subjection of the child to humiliation and physical pain. The trouble of Mary having to explain a baby without a physical father, of Joseph trying to explain the Holy Ghost as the father."

The Rev. Leon Sullivan's voice rises and drops in Philadelphia as he tells his congregation that Jesus was born with afflictions of the world so that man will know that he has the power to overcome all oppressions, "he was born in a lowly class, he was born in poverty, born of a despised race—to show that it is not class or poverty or race that keeps you down, he was born illegitimate to show that God can make something out of nothing.

In the Glide Memorial Hall in San Francisco, the choir on a Sunday morning is a bunch of barefooted, hair blowing nipple pointing jiving kids—the preachers young men and women and the Rev. Cecil Williams. They preach from the Jesus book to the wretched of the Earth to Black, brown, Chicano and Asian. The agony of Vietnam explodes on the walls, giant images of lips, bloated and pierced, eyes growing wide and closing into nothingness, faces brave, disillusioned questioning. The Rev. Cecil Williams challenges, "Alas for you hypocrites who condemn violence in the streets but condone it in the corporate boardrooms and the Pentagon", Nixon's image is flashed onto the wall.

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The young boy without a jacket and with a dreamy look in his eyes stopped us and stretched out his hand to touch my handsome companion, "Mr. Widener, the Mayor of Berkeley! ?" How's is it eh? He stood back admiring the idea, seeing himself in the Black man in front of him. He savoured the idea, seeing himself in the Black man in front of him. He savoured the status. In his mind, and saw an impossible dream come true. Warren Widener 32, is one of 48 US Black Mayors, his radicalism and his energetic programme to humanise the police and emphasise community development has caused considerable excitement. People come to see him in his office, "Gee we didn't think you were so young. We pictured you as an older man, but we are glad that you are young." "At 11 p.m., after attending a meeting of household mechanics (domestic servants in our terminology) we arrived at a restaurant in San Francisco's famous bay, "Sorry we are closed," said the waiter. But when the White hostess recognised her guest, it was "Anything for you Mr. Widener? "

We were a mixed bag in the Sugar Sack—Irish, Italian, Zulu, Indian, Afro-American and Algerian: But everyone

else was Black hugging their beers and cokes and sitting jam packed around small tables, the air growing thick and dim with smoke, the scene scintillating large brimmed hats and long coats with buckles and buttons that shot beams in the dark. The male singer's voice was sweet and feminine.

"Just want you to know that

I'm so tired baby,

I'm so tired of being wrapped up in your dream,

It's so full of pain

The Irish friend leaned over the Black girl, "I know how

you must feel being a minority in America, like me in this room." They got up and danced on the floor. The crowd broke out in spontaneous and good humoured applause. Outside on the street we formed a chain and Zanele from Zululand tram-tramped the beat from Zorba the Greek and our feet moved fast, faster.

Black and White have never been as close as now in America. Yet they have never hated each other as much as now, but from that fire of hate a new resolution is being forged. We in South Africa have not even begun to talk. We repress our hate. How will we love? □

# UNIQUELY RIGHT FOR ABOLITION

A review of "Migrant Labour" by Francis Wilson (S.A.C.C. and SPROCAS, 1972).

by Mike Murphy

In the Nqutu district in northern Natal people live on 5½ cents per day. In 1951 the area held 32 000 people, in 1970 the figure was 86 000 and by 1980 it will hold about 120 000. In recent years Nqutu has become the destination of thousands of Africans removed from "white" areas by the Government. In 1951 the Government appointed Tomlinson Commission stated that the Nqutu area could provide a living for only 13 000 people. The results of this grotesque disproportion between ideal and reality can be seen — 5½ cents a day, most of it earned by migrant labourers.

*Migrant Labour* by Francis Wilson, published this year by SPROCAS and the South African Council of Churches, is scholarly, rigorously documented, unemotional. Yet to my mind it is probably the most devastating analysis of South African society produced in the last twenty-five years.

Wilson, an economist at the University of Cape Town, concludes that the problem is that white South Africa wants to have its cake and eat it: "So long as South Africa pursues the twin goals of Separate Development and economic growth — so long will the system of migratory labour remain a central feature of the economy, far from withering away, it will continue to expand. And its maintenance will depend increasingly not on the balance of economic pressures but on the force of law."

We have become accustomed to numerous descriptions of the evils of migratory labour — breakup of family life,

degradation of men, venereal disease, drunkenness, etc. Wilson describes these evils too (incidentally displaying a masterly command of the numerous statistics involved) But the book is unique in its explanation of the *why* of migratory labour. Migration has become the harness of necessity for a whole people because their homelands, Bantustans, own areas, reserves call them what you will, exhibit "acute poverty, gross overpopulation, extensive subdivision of the land well below the size adequate for economic units, and a situation where none of the households make a living from farming."

Some of the figures that Wilson presents us with are astounding:

*acute poverty:* average per capita income in the homelands is 9½ cents per day. The Bantustans contribute only 2% to the Gross Domestic Product.

*overpopulation:* population density is three times the national average.

*agricultural decline:* In the Transkei, one of the more arable of the homelands, the annual income per household from farming declined (in real terms) from R34,50 in 1931 to R27,00 in 1951. Without remittances from migrants there would be mass starvation.