



Memoir of a Race Traitor

Mab Segrest

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Against a backdrop of nine generations of her family's history, Mab Segrest explores her experience as a white lesbian organizing against a virulent Far Right movement in North Carolina.

Memoir of a Race Traitor Details

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From Reader Review Memoir of a Race Traitor for online ebook

Roxanne Cordonier says

An interesting compilation of stories and facts about racism and the KKK in North Carolina in the 1980's. Segrest's rambling style of writing made this book a bit of a slog at times. It was fascinating to know some of these stories but I wish the writing had been tighter and the book shorter.

Amanda says

i have been reading this book forever. it's a book that i had on my mental "to-read" list for awhile, but i finally got around to it when chris gave me a copy. however, i haven't been able to get into it. there's not much of a narrative and it's hard to pick up and get into it. it's not a subway book, and that's where i do most of my reading. but it is next to my bed, and i should get back to it. i'm hoping that posting it here will be the push i need to finish it.

Hannah says

this book is three parts: a memoir of mab segrest's time doing intense anti-klan organizing in the south; a brief tracing of the lineage of racism in the united states; and her 1993 creating change keynote speech called "a bridge, not a wedge," which outlines the future of fascism in unsurprisingly prescient ways, and proposes queer socialism as the politic of our future. i wish queer socialism had prevailed instead of homonationalist assimilationism and i hope to see more of us moving towards this as resistance to fascism rises.

we seem to have found ourselves in an era where it's kind of taboo for white people to write/speak about race in social justice/anti-oppressive circles, which i understand because 90% of the time white people do a fuckered job of it, but which i'm also finding leaves me and many white folks who are trying to figure out antiracism in a strange place. we can listen to BIPOC and learn a million things and become more whole in our humanity through our connection and learning, and yet, there is a gap: whiteness is still a thing and white embodiment needs mentorship from older more experienced antiracist white bodies to transform.

i need real-life models and examples and experiences of existing in multiracial contexts and doing antiracist work, both because this uses the past rather than denying or wasting it, and because this gives a sense of connection and community, which we, as humans who are pack animals, need when we are intentionally walking the line of impacting our existing white families and communities & risking degrees of rejection/ostracism for being/doing/living antiracism to the best of our abilities. this is a lineage & we need it at our backs in order to create the legacies we are committed to. so, i'm grateful for these treasures from a previous era of antiracism, where occasionally white antiracist activists did speak from their perspectives and memories, and i am also grieving that there are so few of these treasures, and none that quite speak to my own lineage (west coast origins, immigrant to so-called canada, no experience in mass civil rights or anti-klan organizing due to time & place & other context.)

thank you, mab segrest, for your mentorship.

TJ says

The first, largest section of this book is the memoir part of the book, what the book takes its title from. It is largely a memoir of Segrest's time doing anti-racist organizing in North Carolina, set against the backdrop of her white family's long history of perpetuating white supremacy -- both her close, immediate family and her distant, long-dead relatives. She isn't too ashamed to write of the Black men her relatives killed, or the organizing her father did against desegregated schools in Alabama, or of any of their acts of racist violence, knowing rightly what little good her shame could do anyone. And she understands the value in exposing legacies of racism and racist violence in white families. And she isn't afraid to make herself vulnerable and doesn't hold herself above criticism, doesn't write herself in a soft, favorable light, doesn't wholly set herself in opposition to her roots. She knows that she is intricately tangled in them. She's constantly struggling to understand her family rather than demonizing them, while still maintaining a healthy balance of anger and shock and disgust at both their racism and the homophobia she experiences from them.

But, as I mentioned earlier, her family and its history is largely the backdrop that informs and enriches her writing of her organizing against racist violence in North Carolina. This section of the book really does so much -- it's partly a chilling history of racist violence in civil-rights era Alabama & 1980's North Carolina, partly a history of those racist judicial systems, partly a window into what organizing work looks like, partly a window into what it was like to organize as a lesbian in the 80's, partly a window into how Segrest, as a lesbian, was affected by AIDS, partly a reflection on what it means to be white and doing anti-racist work (to be a "race-traitor"), partly a reflection on memoir itself -- it does so much, and so much more than what I've named, even. And it does it in a messy, emotional, beautiful way.

The second section of the book is titled "On Being White and Other Lies: A History of Racism in the United States." The history begins with English settlement, and, as the first section of the book, is informed by Segrest's family history, which can be traced in North America to the near-beginning of English settlement. It very clearly and concisely lays out a history of racism and capitalism in the U.S (and globally, to an extent, as the U.S. is and is not an island). I found it useful in the (ongoing/never-ending) work of organizing and plotting history in my head. I plan on reading it about 5 more times to help some of the information densely contained in it solidify.

The third section, "A Bridge, Not a Wedge," was sort of an addendum to the second. It was originally delivered as a keynote for a National Gay and Lesbian Task Force conference in 1993, which helps explain why it was my least favorite section, as it was written with that audience in mind, one that Segrest assumed might be reluctant to accept its charge -- that queer organizing must too be anti-racist organizing, must work with anti-racist organizers, that white queers must understand race and racism. Still, I was a sucker for how poetically this section (and the book) ended.

This book gave me basically everything I wanted from a book, ever! And more things done well in one short book than I could have imagined?? I learned so much?? I was so moved?? It gave me so much perspective?? Segrest, of course, has minor flounders at times, but still, I didn't really think that a white person could write so well about race and I'm glad to be wrong.

Mary says

Of the three books of Mab Segrest's I've read, I think this is my favorite. Her stories of her own evolution are amazing. I think what really gets to me is that 1) how recently (last 20-30 years) some of these events occurred and 2) The more things change, the more they stay the same, unfortunately. Mab has done a great deal of work in the South, fighting against the KKK and fighting for racial justice. Many times I found myself shaking my head wondering how come we humans can't learn from our mistakes and learn to get along?? The abuses that occurred to people of color - in a time and place where we were supposed to be past Jim Crow and more evolved - and yet for many people they were treated as 2nd class citizens or less.

If you are interested in civil rights, read this book to get a unique perspective - especially one that isn't coming from a place of white male privileged. I don't think you will be disappointed.

Jenny Yates says

What a great book! Segrest is a clear and perceptive thinker and an eloquent writer, and her story is definitely worth telling and remembering.

Most of the book tells us about Segrest's work combating the Klan, the White Patriot Party, and other racist forces in the South. Alongside this is her own family's story. She describes their history, their contradictions, and their adoption of the racist beliefs of their Southern community. And she details her own reaction to the dramatic events of the Civil Rights struggle, her turning away from her family's beliefs, and her sense of herself as both insider and outsider.

When she came out as a lesbian, the outsider status became more defined, and she started working to bring all the different parts of herself together – as Southerner, as privileged white person, as invisible lesbian. It was then she began to join with others, and to take an active role in the struggle against hate crimes.

Segrest follows these personal and political histories with an essay, “A History of Racism in the US”, which describes the way racism has enabled a small elite to hang on to power throughout different economic models. It's interesting to read how being “white” became an identity. Basically, it was a way of dividing up the underclass so they wouldn't get together and fight the owning class. It was a privilege conferred, and it was shored up with lots of “us vs. them” propaganda. Definitely a clever diversion, and it hasn't stopped working – at least not yet.

My favorite part of the book is the last essay, “A Bridge, Not a Wedge”, in which Segrest tells a gay and lesbian audience why we need to pay attention to racism – both in our community and outside it. It's passionate, exciting, and beautifully written, and I think I will be referring to it for many years.

Scott Moore says

Autobiography of a white lesbian radically organizing and fighting racism and the KKK through the 1970's and 80's.

David says

I am reading this for an anti-racist discussion/reflection group. I was excited to be reading the same book as others because it reminds me of being smart and in university. I am going to read this book faster than everyone in the discussion group. "Let the race begin" (pun intended).

Least importantly I did not win the race... I was second of the group to finish the book. We will discuss it in a few weeks.

Anyway, the book is a reflection of Segrest's efforts to dismantle the threat of the KKK in North Carolina. I was somewhat surprised at the dark shadow they were casting in the 1980s. She ruminated about her own background and identity and how that influenced her politics and actions- I really loved the honesty in this approach.

Finn says

I'm having a time in my life right now. I'll spare the details for this forum, but it has lead to my decision to read exclusively lesbian memoirs. I'm needing a bit of reflection in my life.

This book seemed like an obvious choice. I have a lot of surface commonalities with the author, Mab Segrest: we're both gay white female southern anti racists. We also moved from relatively more conservative and stifling places in the South to North Carolina where we found both gay and radical community. But all that is kind of whatever when I think about how I relate to her internal struggles. In her reflections I recognize the same sort of impulse to stand on the right side of history; the personal need to fight the most heinous aspects of the society that produced you and supposes to defend and privilege you because of your racialization as a white person.

And in both of us I see people who are primarily motivated by principles and desires to be accountable that are taken so far that we sometimes unconsciously deny our own human needs and capacities in that process. I had a chuckle when Segrest, in the final chapter, describes her struggle to integrate the wisdom of the serenity prayer, "dear god, give me the courage to change the things I cannot change. -i could never get that goddamned prayer right." It just so happens, a few months ago I made a little card for myself where I wrote out the serenity prayer. I taped it to the dresser and look at it in bewilderment while I lay in my bed most mornings.

But really I'm foregrounding aspects of the book that speak to me, but the pages were much more full with this crazy documentarian look at this perfect (read: fucking scary) storm of white supremacist and homophobic terror and murders happening simultaneously in various corners of North Carolina in the 1980s. Her feminist lesbian collective fell apart around the time that the Greensboro massacre happened in '79. After the klansmen and neo nazi's literally got away with murder in Greensboro, North Carolina became the home of the fastest growing white supremacist movement in america. Segrest wrote: "I left Alabama to get away from violent repression. It had followed me. But I was an adult, not an adolescent. I had unfinished business." And from there unfurls chapter after chapter of details of campaigns against a bunch of terrifying klan and neo nazi organizing and violence told from the perspective of working within a small nonprofit called North Carolinians Against Racist and Religious Violence.

I have to say though, the memoir is rather disjointed, restrained. It's not until the epilogue that Mab Segrest explains the difficulty of writing a memoir that includes the lives of so many other people. It's written only a handful of years after most of the events she depicts. Many of these wingnut racists did not go down for their crimes so I'm sure there remained residual fear and apprehension about letting the whole story hang out. It's also clear she is very concerned with remaining accountable to her loved ones and comrades. This is commendable but also makes for a memoir that gives the reader only snidbits of vulnerability. She spends most of the book retelling traumatizing stories in a factual way that makes you feel like you could be reading a newspaper. Only it's interspersed with paragraphs that seems to drop out of nowhere like a flashback ("trigger"?) where she talks about the immense fear she had driving back roads by herself or checking her car for bombs, or reflecting the pain and lessons she learned from her intense fights with her friend and coworker, Chris (who is Black). And all this goes down against this backdrop of her struggle to grapple with her own relationship with her family, who are white conservative racists in Alabama.

Mab Segrest reckons with her family history in a way I can't quite do. She's from a southern family that has literally documented it's history starting in 1613 in the Jamestown settlement in modern-day Virginia. It's freakishly text book the way the men of her family fit hand in glove with the sickening history of this country. She knows as a matter of fact that her ancestors actively fought to perpetuate institutional white supremacy, and personally benefited over generations through acquiring stolen land, getting higher wages, reserving resources and institutions for their blood relations, and a claiming sense of belonging and entitlement that came at the expense of black and indigenous people. I, however don't know shit about my ancestors other than I have an Irish name and I'm hella pale. So I rely on US history more generally to infer similar conclusions about my own family and what my presence in the US represents.

Which brings us to the secret gem of this book. It's not just a memoir! Tucked at the end is an essay called "On Being White and Other Lies [a title inspired by a James Baldwin essay by the same name]- A History of Racism in the United States."

My understanding of how this essay came to be was she was working on this feminist anthology -The Third Wave: Feminist Essays on Racism- with several other (mostly not white) women. They kept blowing Segrests' mind with political and historical insights and she would be like, we should put that in the book! And they would reply, This is too basic. We want to go deeper. But they gave her a bunch of books to read, such as Galeano's Open Veins of Latin America and Zinn's People's History of the US. Out of those readings she wrote this 43-page succinct and accessible history of the US that traces how race and racism was constructed here and laid the foundation for our supposed democracy (for white people) and immense capitalist accumulation (for white people). And she does this really interesting thing where she uses her family tree to situate her own ancestors within history and illustrate the role of white people in this nation's history. (who at certain times might be called "Christians", "English", "settlers" "colonialists" but really only became "white" through a process where they actively -and passively!- perpetuated and justified black and indigenous slavery and genocide.) This essay is worth reading as an introduction to folks trying to understand race and racism in America or as a refresher to anyone who's already studied this stuff.

One last note: Throughout the pages of this memoir, you don't get the sense that she's really a revolutionary. It's not until the intro to the History of Racism in the US essay that it seems like she put together all the interwoven ways racism has embedded itself into the very fabric of our society and culture from the get-go of the "New World." Most notably is the lack of critical reflection about the role of prisons and policing. The way capitalist interests intersect with white supremacy also does not come through in her analysis within the memoir either. The history essay really makes up for this though. And I think we have her feminist co-editors to thank for that.

Libby says

Segrest describes her years fighting White Supremacists in North Carolina in alternating chapters with chapters describing her family background, coming out as a lesbian, and her personal life. After these sections is a condensed but fascinating analysis of race history in the US, and the final section of the book is a speech she gave to a gay & lesbian gathering where she urges the audience to be more involved in anti-racism and involving people of color in the movement.

Bart says

Mab Segrest writes a non-linear autobiography on her anti-Klan work fighting against racism and homophobia. Her accounts are honest and complex. Some of the book was vague and/or missing information - I have heard from others who heard Segrest speak that she did so to protect herself from those perhaps still alive who might retaliate.

HeavyReader says

I think AmyLaura gave me this book and it had a profound impact on me when I read it over a decade ago.

The author is a white Southern woman, a lesbian, and anti-racist. This is the story of her life and how she managed to turn out the way she did.

An excellent read for young radicals.

Ben says

This was a great book in many ways. First I was amazed by the extent of recent horrible activity by the klan in NC. I knew about some of this, but was glad to be exposed to more of the facts through a practically first hand account.

This book did a good job of showing the link between racism and homophobia, and why standing up against both serves the same purpose in striving for a nobler future for humanity. It also convincingly links religious and economic condemnations by the right wing power structure with extremism, violence, and degradation of our society.

It was interesting to read the personal account of Segrest in reconciling her white biased family roots, her identity as a lesbian, and her struggle for survival while continuing to fight against hatred. Having friends in activist jobs, it was interesting to me to hear a veteran's personal perspective on dealing with the stress and reconciliation that is involved with this type of work.

The weaknesses of this book are in its organization and writing. The overall structure seems a bit off. For instance the interesting and concise essay on the history of the united states which traces Segrest's ancestors would have been a great introduction leading into her memories of growing up in her family, and early

memories of racism. Segrest chooses a stream of consciousness structure that jumps back and forth between organizing and personal life rather than a chronological order.

Sometimes her writing becomes awkwardly poetic, and other times the syntax becomes hard to follow. The main points made by Segrest always show clear, but there are so many underlying ideas that are going in different directions at once that it can become overwhelming or hard to follow. I think much of this is due to the complex nature of the issues that Segrest strives to address. With some convolution, her writing is ultimately effective. I certainly could do no better as a writer (as you can see) especially faced with such a task, but I feel that a thoughtful, thorough, and even-handed editor could really improve the book overall.

That being said, it is most certainly a book that needed to be written, providing a first hand account of an important part of recent history, which our society would do well to learn from.

Charlie Hastings II of Sussex says

Had to read this for school, and while some parts are indeed well-researched, it amounts to a lengthy polemic against the author's own heritage.

Colby says

tbh I don't know how I felt about this book. Mad scary to read about the Far Right's organizing late into the 80's. Interesting and weird to read about movement building against the klan and neo-nazis in North Carolina, including Durham and Greensboro during the same time period. But Mab is kindof a burn-out organizer which is not that inspiring. And she didn't seem like a great listener, which is one of the most important parts of anti racist work and organizing.
