

Concerning the Alt-Right Mutations of Linh Dinh

The following is by way of brief preface to an important and thoughtful essay by Mike Boughn, whose piece immediately follows these comments.

Shortly before Christmas, Boughn and I had a very tense email exchange with the notable poet, journalist, and photographer, Linh Dinh. The occasion was a recent article by Dinh, entitled, “Blacks, Jews, and You,” published in the *Unz Review*, one of the most widely read alt-right publications of the United States. When we saw the article, it had already gathered hundreds of comments beneath it, most of them of right-wing--even white-nationalist--tenor, fervently cheering Dinh’s polemic. Both Boughn and I immediately wrote to Dinh, a Contributing Editor at *Dispatches* for the past couple years, to express our dismay about the piece.

Though shock is probably a more apt word. Indeed (and though I’d been myself concerned for some time about his attraction to zany 9/11 conspiracy theories), I considered Linh Dinh a friend and poetic comrade. He and I had long admired, supported, and on a few occasions written about each other’s work. The poisonous views he is now spouting are ones I never would have thought him capable of holding.

The article, “[Blacks, Jews, and You](#),” serves up an extraordinary display of malicious racist and anti-Semitic innuendo, from open suggestions of Black intellectual inferiority and violent predisposition, to outright insinuation that the Holocaust is a largely fabricated myth in service of an amorphous “Jewish power” nexus (Dinh throws last year’s Pittsburgh synagogue shooting by a neo-Nazi into the mix, too, and proposes the slaughter as a similar, if smaller, hoax). As I would come to learn, articles over the past few months by Dinh, preceding “Blacks, Jews, and You,” present similarly bizarre and troubling content.

Initially, Dinh accused Boughn and me of not being able, or of not having the courage, to argue with his “important” arguments. So we invited him to explain himself without constraint at *Dispatches*, warning him that--short of an outright, acceptable apology--we’d be compelled to implacably expose his ideological garbage. He at first agreed to a public back and forth, then quickly changed his mind, citing his busy schedule as manager of his brother’s plastic factory in Vietnam, where he moved some months ago, around the same time as his openly racist and anti-Semitic drivel had begun to appear in the United States. Our emails to him can be found [here](#).

We can’t let this alarming mutation pass without notice. That it could happen to someone of such talent and accomplishment across various disciplines says something about the reaches of the ideological poison that increasingly permeates the general air. It’s certainly not unprecedented, in times of political crisis, for once-progressive intellectuals to sell themselves to the attractions of stardom--even hero worship--that such sudden turn-coating can bring (beneath the “Blacks, Jews, and You” piece, the

adulatory comments from his new fan base are now on the way to 700). But the case of Linh Dinh, once an admired figure of resistance and principle in American poetic circles, is a particularly distressing one.

Please carefully read Mike Boughn's powerful and indignant statement below.

—Kent Johnson

Dispatch #42 – On Linh Dinh's duplicitous, hateful rhetoric

“In every field besides sports, entertainment and politics, blacks are failing spectacularly against all other races, a fact readily admitted to by blacks and black apologists themselves as evidence of America's racism and oppression of blacks. America is racist, but so is every other country and person, for racism, at core, is merely an extension and manifestation of innate self-love. One loves oneself, family then nation, which is made up of those that share one's language, above all, as well as culture and history, if not also a physical similarity. . . . Loving oneself and kind doesn't mean having a right to violate anybody else, obviously, and if one favors another race over one's own, then that, too, is racism. No one is color blind.”

—Linh Dinh,

Dispatches is sad to note that an old friend and contributing editor has been infected by the current incursion of Typhonic energy raging across the world and taken up its divisive, destructive mission. Linh Dinh has contributed a number of poems and visual pieces to Dispatches over the years. His Photos from “Pax Americana” brilliantly capture the Monotonization of cultures around the world under the onslaught of USAmerican capital and business. Dispatches was proud to post them. Imagine our stunned surprise, then, when we were alerted to his recent essays at *The Unz Review*, a news site that claims to represent “controversial perspectives excluded from the American mainstream media.” With columns variously titled “Films seen from the white Right,” “The Paleolibertarian perspective,” “Republican Revolutionary,” “Human Biodiversity” (including articles on the Vanquished White Male, The Hunt for a Great White Defendant, The Tragedy of Obama Racializing Criminal Justice, etc.), the drift is pretty clear. And Linh Dinh has made it his home. He has moved in lock, stock, and barrel, and settled down with an army of drooling fans ready to leap up at the least sign of criticism to defend Linh /Dinh with brilliant responses along the lines of “You moron,” or “Idiot.”

Dispatches will be the first to acknowledge that Linh Dinh is a terrific writer. His wealth of experience and his discriminating eye yields work with rich, detailed depth and specificity. That's why it is so odd to see him abandon that specificity to reactionary generalizations like “Jewish

Power” and racist stereotypes of African-Americans as violent and irredeemably brutalized by slavery. While his thinking starts in regions we are familiar with – horror at the Israeli treatment of Palestinians, disgust with USAmerica’s ongoing commodification of value around the world – at some point it takes a turn into the darkness of racialized stereotyping and hatred. The very power of his writing serves to disguise that darkness behind a screen of folksy observations of everyday life.

Linh Dinh is able to create space for his particular brand of claptrap because he has the perfect foil – a so-called “left” movement in the US that has taken to totalitarianism as a political strategy. The desire to silence those who disagree with it drives it. Rather than organizing resistance by uniting people around their common experience of the disaster of the current imagination of economic and political probity, the left issues inane slogans promoting the violent repression of ideas it opposes, as if clearing the field of all ideological competition by force was a victory for . . . the catch all words are *equality* and *justice*. Behind them is a reactionary nostalgia for *identity* (even as *non-identity* or *anti-identity*) undisturbed by the profound suspension of sense we are caught up in, the disintegration of the social imaginary significations that have been at the wheel of western civ for the last 500 years. That context, a world in which a particular social/political element uses everything from social media mobs to physical violence to actively stifle and repress ideas it doesn’t like, allows Linh Dinh to characterize his mindless diatribes against Jews and African-Americans as “fearless speech” and to present himself as an intellectual hero, a literary Gary Cooper facing down Frank Miller and his gang, while the townspeople, mealy mouthed academics for the most part, run for cover.

Far from intellectual heroism, his so-called thinking relies on sleazy rhetorical tricks, substituting universals for particulars and particulars for universals in a dazzling display of legerdemain that ends up in vicious stereotypes of Jews and blacks that are impermeable to any reasonable argument. He takes a specific experience common to most situations where people from different ethnic and racialized communities find themselves working together – let’s call it as he does *racist banter* – strips it of its specificity – Vietnamese workers insulting Rade (a tribal group whose land has been occupied by the Vietnamese) workers about their language, and presents the specific conditions of that encounter as universal. Then he can come up with a folksy conclusion that’s a smokescreen for a profound cosmological assumption, as he does in a recent essay, “[Endless Culture War](#)”: “This kind of racist needling or bantering, I’ve heard many times before, but as a minority in the USA. That’s just how knuckleheads talk, the world over. Culture war winners freely crack jokes.”

After establishing himself a subject of such banter, and therefor qualified to judge it, he attributes it to what he calls knuckleheads. It’s a vaguely affectionate address to stupidity, Ralph Cramden calling his buddy, Norton, knucklehead. We all know knuckleheads. They are always with us. What can you do about that other than shake your head? Linh Dinh’s proposal for how knuckleheads talk, however, seems consciously or not to bury significant differences in a generality. Do all knuckleheads talk the same way? Or is this a somewhat ingenuous rhetorical gesture masking a range of possible “talk” that extends from kibitzing, friendly or otherwise, to toxic violence?

From 1971 to 1979, I worked in the Teamsters Union as a freight handler on the waterfront in Toronto. At the time the job paid well—\$9.00 an hour was good money in those days, especially for manual labour. But what made it bearable was the relationships with the other workers, the guys you

spent 8 hours a day, 5 days a week with. They were a motley lot. The older freight handlers, as opposed to truck drivers, were mostly displaced Poles, Ukrainians, Greeks, Macedonians and Italians, refugees who had fled the smouldering ruins of post-World War II Europe. They always spoke of old Harry Smith with gratitude for going out of his way to hire so many refugees after the war. The truck drivers and the younger freight handlers were a variety of Canadians from Newfoundland, Quebec, and Ontario, with a couple of West Indians thrown in.

Difference was front and center. Hey, Polack was a common greeting, as were Newfie, Fudgepacker, Frenchie, Wop, and Bohunk, a rich verbal pool of ethnic insults bandied about with relative abandon and good humour. It was, I suppose, racist behaviour, and in today's political culture, would be explosive, at least in Universities. At the time however, it was just grist for the daily mill, part of a culture of difference working. It's not unlike the "racist needling and bantering" Linh Dinh points to, but at Smith Transport in 1975 that vocabulary wasn't about knuckleheads. It was part of a complex system of negotiating identity in a new world. That identity as alien included bonding with others who were also different, alien, but in the same circumstance. It was the being together of difference, not as unity, but as solidarity within the world not of your making. You enter into an intimacy with someone who articulates your difference, your vulnerability, who sees you and reveals you to the already bonded group. When you engage with the ordeal, when you take it with good humour and respond in kind, preferably with some wit, you enter into a mongrel democracy of alien equals.

For the DP's, as they were wont to refer to themselves, at Smith Transport, the banter acknowledged a common element of difference from the established Anglo-Canadian order. It said, we are not them and we are OK with that. We even understand their racial insults and have neutralized them by making them our own. It reduced everyone to a stereotype. But the stereotype was an entrance to a world of other stereotypes that signalled equality in otherness—equality among the group and otherness from the bosses patrolling the dock or driving you out of the john into the -20C cold at 3:30 AM.

Lin Dinh's knucklehead talk is of another order, arises from a very different sense of relation. "Culture war winners" are able to freely crack jokes at the expense of a defeated minority as a way of asserting their dominance. This is a very specific and different senses of racism, tied to a different history and a different cultural context. But specificity is the enemy of Linh Dinh's obscurantist drivel. He will have none of it. You can marshal legions of specific examples that counter his argument that "in every field besides sports, entertainment and politics, blacks are failing spectacularly against all other races," but it will make no difference. You can point out that according to [the National Women's Business Council](#):

there are currently 1,531,494 black women-owned businesses in the United States, a number which amounts to a 66.9 percent increase since 2007. What's more, the 2016 State of Women-Owned Businesses Report found that whilst women now own 38 percent of all businesses in the United States, 44 percent of those women-owned firms are owned by minority women. Those owned by black women in particular employ around 376,500 workers and generate \$51.4 billion in revenue.

But Linh Dinh will either ignore it, deny its facticity, or claim they are all flukes. You can list the names of significant African-Americans who are neither entertainers nor athletes, say, engineers like Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, Katherine Goble, Erica Baker, Annie Easley, Window Snyder, Melba Roy, Mouton Aisha Bowe, Valerie Taylor, and Lyndsey Scott. You can name the hundreds of black intellectuals, writers, artists, and composers who have fundamentally changed the nature of US American culture. You can point out that according to the [U.S. Black Chamber of Commerce](#):

African-American businesses have grown at an exponential rate in the 21st century.” Four months in and 2018 is already shaping up to be a banner year for African-American entrepreneurship. Currently there are nearly 2.6 million African-American-owned businesses in the U.S., and now there are countless platforms, programs, initiatives and conferences in place to support such exponential growth.

But there’s no point, because Linh Dinh knew somebody who accidentally moved into a black neighbourhood in San Francisco and had to move out because they were scared. He and his cadre of grunting followers are mentally equipped only to recognize the standard stereotypes promoted by the cultural descendants of the Confederacy and the authors of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. These stereotypes are then glorified as the “essential character” that distinct and fixed cultural formations bestow on a people. They are Pure. And any historical development that leads to the blurring of these essences, or, say, the spoiling of their purity, is a move toward degeneration and corruption:

The more multicultural a society, the more muted and blunted each culture within it, and a man can only be fully himself within his own, self-defined context. As soon as a Rade, Indian, Kenyan, Swede or whoever is removed from his native soil, he’s compromised, if not a sick caricature of himself.

I know what Stan Slusarczyk, Harry Vasilchuk, or Tony Costa would say to that: Fuck you, asshole. There is no such animal as a “multi-cultural” society, another of Linh Dinh’s straw dogs. There are heterogeneous cultures, cultures based on difference, living, growing, vital cultures made up of constantly renewed inputs from immigrants and refugees who are hungry for peace and a little prosperity, who change as they adapt to the new world, but who also change that new world so that it’s never the monstrous, totalitarian Unity of Linh Dinh’s sad imagination.

It’s a truism that “no one is colour blind in this world.” For *whatever reason*, we first see each other’s difference in colour. *Whatever reason* here resonates with Giorgio Agamben’s sense of *whatever* as relating “to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property . . . but only in its being *such that it is*.” Skin, then, as first sense of *such that it is*, being the organ that first encounters the real, where skin on skin is the first gesture of meeting, whether with an open palm or a fist. Call it racism as differentiated from Racism, the theory and system of racial superiority invented by Europeans in the 18th century to justify colonial violence and slavery. How we address that whatever reason, what we make of that, what we do with it, is a *remains* to be seen, an exposure of being

beyond what we understand at the edge of vision. And in that lurks an affirmation of our sense of the world, not as it is, but as we will it in our imagination.

We find ourselves in a time when, as Jean-Luc Nancy points out, “everything has become not only worthy of thought but suffers from a lack of being thought. . . . This demands an uprising, an insurrection of thought. Risk, therefore, and upheaval.” The old social imaginary is disintegrating and taking modernity with it. We are caught in its immense historical turbulence and undertow. You can blame that on Rap music, like Linh Dinh does, or some intellectual caricature you label “postmodernism” and lose yourself in reactionary nostalgia for a time of pure, essential identities. Or you can recognize the opportunity “to create concepts, to manhandle languages, to polish styles, to punch holes in thought” that Nancy calls for. “History is a living weapon in your hand,” Diane DiPrima reminds us in her [lecture on Charles Olson](#), “and you have imagined it. . . . It is a relation between things you have imagined.”

The saddest part of the spectacle of Linh Dinh’s public descent into the intellectual sewer of vicious, toxic stereotypes is his duplicitous insistence that no one will address his “ideas,” that he is simply labelled a racist and thereby silenced. For the record, Dispatches has repeatedly tried to engage him in a conversation, hoping that an old friendship might lead to an actual exchange, a real conversation. We have been repeatedly rebuffed, as is evident in the email exchange we have posted [elsewhere](#). Like the rest of his posturing as a Hero of Free Speech, his challenge is just more bullshit cover for the Typhonic infection that has rendered him a spokesman for cretins.

One does love oneself, one’s family, one’s neighbours. But love is not restrictive. On the contrary, it’s expansive. The more you love, the more your love expands to include others. Truly loving yourself and your family opens you to loving other selves and their families. Love breeds and nourishes empathy, not selfishness. Linh Dinh’s rhetoric is all dolled up as “simple, fearless truth.” It’s not. It’s the poisoned language of hatred too embarrassed by its own stupidity to announce itself for what it is.

It is with great sadness that we remove him as a contributing editor to Dispatches.