

Appall-o-Meter

The In These Times Index of Indecencies

By David Futrelle

White Humor (9.5)

What better way to celebrate Labor Day than to dress in blackface and stage a comedic re-enactment of a brutal racially motivated slaying? In this year's Labor Day Mardi Gras Parade, sponsored by the village of Broad Channel's volunteer fire department, a group of men from the mostly white neighborhood in Queens, N.Y., covered themselves in blackface makeup and danced in the back of a pickup truck while drinking from 40-oz. bottles. "One member of the group briefly hung from the moving truck's tailgate in an apparent mockery of the dragging death of a black man in Texas earlier this year," *Newsday* noted.

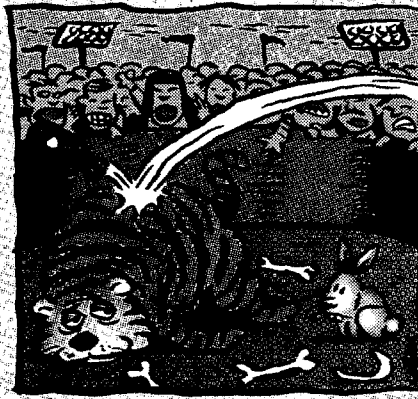
After the incident came to media attention and was denounced by everyone from New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to Al Sharpton, several of the blackface actors came forward at a news conference to offer an explanation. "The men said they had entered floats in Broad Channel's Labor Day Mardi Gras parade for the last nine years," *Newsday* reported. "Many of the floats had racial themes and were well received."

One of the men went so far as to apologize—sort of—for this year's not-so-well received entry. "We are all appalled that anyone was offended," 28-year-old Kenneth Miller told the

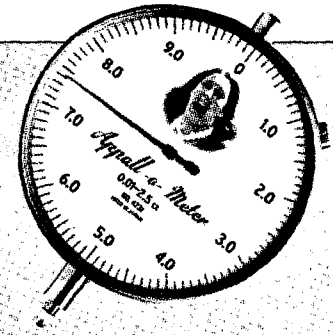
press. "We meant for it to be funny as if it was on *Saturday Night Live*."

When Animals Attack: Live (5.3)

In his own way, Chinese zoologist Liu Xinchun has helped to revive the population of the endangered Siberian tiger: Starting 12 years ago



with a brood of eight bedraggled tigers rescued from miserable Chinese zoos, he has managed to fill the Siberian Tiger Park in Harbin with a population of 110 big cats. Like many institutions in China, the Siberian Tiger Park is short on funds. So Liu has come up with an ingenious way to fill the tigers' bellies and the park's coffers: He charges visitors to watch his tigers kill and eat their prey—chickens, cows, whatever the audience desires. The price for



admission depends on what kind of animal you want to see: \$120 for a pig, only \$12 for a rabbit. The biggest problem the cats have now, a recent report in the *Wall Street Journal* suggests, is choking to death on too much food. The *Journal* notes, "Tourists occasionally complain that the sated tigers"—already stuffed with chickens and cows and who knows what else—"ignore the frightened animals released for them to kill."

Zhirinovskiy Family Values (6.7)

Like everyone else in the world, noted Russian xenophobe Vladimir Zhirinovskiy has an opinion on the Monica Lewinsky matter. He thinks Bill Clinton should be a man and marry the girl. "We, as individuals with high moral character, would prefer not to meet a person who still can't sort out his relationship with his secretary," Zhirinovskiy recently told the Russian parliament. "In such situations, one divorces the old wife and marries the secretary to close the shameful page." As Reuters points out, Zhirinovskiy previously has displayed his moral character by "beating a female deputy on the floor of parliament" and appearing in a film "in which he cavorts with naked women."

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mental engineer in St. Louis who analyzed the impact statement for the Missouri Coalition for the Environment, says the report mistakenly concludes that if a chemical is not immediately toxic, then it is safe.

The Army also has faced an expensive cleanup at Fort Mead McClellan because of widespread contamination by hazardous chemicals. In order to skirt the high cost of decommissioning and decontaminating McClellan, the Army has turned it over to the Justice Department for further use.

Roger Pryor, executive director of the Missouri Coalition for the Environment, says the Army has turned over contaminated nuclear facilities to different government organizations in the past. Many contaminated sites are "grandfathered" under law, meaning no one has to clean them up if they keep operating.

The Army still is not satisfied with the oil fog restrictions in its permit. In the environmental impact statement, the Army contends that the chemical school must burn 84,500 gallons of fuel oil per year—33 percent more than the permit

allows—to train soldiers adequately. But, if necessary, the chemical school would accept the permit's current restrictions.

The question is, for how long? Kay Drey of the Missouri Coalition for the Environment says if the school isn't closed, the Army will keep coming back to the state to raise its pollution limits. Meanwhile, the disruption and destruction of the Mark Twain National Forest will get worse. ■

Peter Downs is a freelance writer based in St. Louis.

Return of the *Braceros*

By Ron Bigler

Across the country, millions of formerly undocumented workers are leading lives as U.S. citizens and workers, thanks to an immigration amnesty program enacted by Congress in 1986. For many—especially exploited farm workers—the 1986 amnesty provided an opportunity to join unions and organize for better living and working conditions. Now, a bill in Congress that would make it easier for farmers and growers to legally hire temporary foreign labor is threatening the jobs and economic security of these new immigrants.

On July 23, the Senate added an amendment to a \$33 billion appropriations bill that would grant thousands of temporary visas to foreign workers seeking jobs on farms in the United States. This could allow employers to replace their entire labor force with temporary, non-resident workers who lack the rights or protections of resident workers.

Sponsored by Sens. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and Gordon Smith (R-Ore.), the guest worker amendment would aid American growers and farmers who complain that they cannot find enough cheap labor to harvest their crops. The amendment, which provoked no public hearing and only minimal debate in Congress, was approved by 68 to 31, with only Democrats voting against it. Congress is expected to vote on the appropriations bill before the end of the legislative session. Opponents are hoping President Clinton will veto the spending bill if it passes Congress with the amendment.

The UFW, the AFL-CIO, the Farmworker Justice Fund, the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) and other farm worker advocates say the guest worker amendment will eliminate existing protections for migrant farm workers, depress wages, fail to provide

adequate housing and expose workers to unsafe working conditions. "The growers and farmers in Washington state, Oregon, California and elsewhere want to bring back a legalized form of slavery in the United States," says Miguel Juarez, an organizer with the UFW in Washington. "They don't want to pay decent wages and give jobs to the work-



LONNY SHAVELSON/IMPACT VISUALS

Will child labor return to the fields?

ers who are already living here; they just want temporary workers to come here and leave."

While the guest worker amendment does allow some guest workers to apply for permanent visas, that provision is coming under fire by House Republicans who oppose any new measures that would permit legal immigration. The amendment's backers, led by the American Farm Bureau Federation and the National Council of Agricultural Employees, cite studies showing that an increasing number of migrants have been searching for work in urban areas where work is more

steady and the pay is sometimes better. This, they say, is evidence of an agricultural labor shortage.

Opponents, however, point to a General Accounting Office investigation published last December, which concluded that a severe labor shortage in the agricultural sector is "unlikely to occur in the near future." They say that if farmers and growers want to attract more local workers, they should start by offering better wages and working conditions and ending the practice of hiring undocumented workers through labor contractors.

Essentially, the proposed guest worker program is a new version of the *bracero* program instituted by the U.S. government in 1942 due to wartime labor shortages. Most *braceros* (Spanish for "strong arms") traveled to border towns where they signed temporary labor contracts, and then went off to work in the fields, helping the United States develop the world's most productive agricultural economy.

Under the *bracero* program, the United States granted 4.6 million temporary work permits. The program was abolished in 1964 after reports of scandalous working and living conditions. Squalid, overcrowded housing, a lack of running water or bathrooms, exposure to pesticides and 14-hour workdays were just some of the realities brought to the attention of the American public.

When Congress votes on the guest worker bill this fall, *braceros* may well return. "Here in Washington we don't need more foreign workers," says Juarez. "We get 10 to 50 people who are legal workers applying each time a new job is announced. Give them the jobs first." ■

Ron Bigler is a freelance writer living in Mexico.

The White House Players Club

By Julianne Malveaux

The *Players Club* was a recent B-movie about young women who strip to earn money for college tuition, fancy cars and a better way of life. It wasn't a very good movie, and I wouldn't have even been watching it had not a friend's daughter been featured in its closing moments. It's a long bridge from the gritty L.A. *Players Club* to the White House, but there is a disturbing line from the movie that resonates: "Use what you got to get what you want."

In *The Players Club*, women used their bodies for money. The Clinton-Lewinsky affair is about two folks who did the same kind of brokering. President Clinton used his appeal (which is at least partly related to power) to get sex from a young woman, while Monica Lewinsky used her youthful guile to access the Oval Office and the world's most powerful man. The president's affair with a White House intern is morally unacceptable, but only potentially impeachable because witch-hunting Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr squandered \$40 million on Whitewater, Travelgate and Filegate before constructing traps involving sex and its inevitable lies. While partisan Republicans say the Starr report is "not just

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about sex," it mentions sex more than 500 times, lying a couple hundred times, a cigar about 40 times and Whitewater only twice. It is impossible for this progressive Democratic feminist to argue in support of President Clinton's behavior, but it is equally impossible to argue that Starr's report is about anything but political entrapment.

Having said all that, where does that leave women in the workplace? Monica Lewinsky is no different from millions of subordinate women who have had to "use what they got to get what they want." Some have done it consensually and eagerly, others haltingly and under duress. In the latter case, we call it sexual harassment and prosecute bosses who coerce sex from their workers. Consensual sex in the workplace, though, is not a victimless event. It boils up, spills over and poisons workplace interactions. That's why the law and the public frown on authority figures who use their power to facilitate relationships with subordinates.

These are not always exploitative relationships, but they have an exploitative appearance because of the

imbalance of power. Those who understand the inequality of power between men and women have consistently been concerned with the inherent possibility for coercion in Clinton-Lewinsky type relationships. They have always disagreed with those who say that women have the right to choose, even if it means choosing dangerous, exploitative relationships with older, often predatory, married men. In some ways, the Clinton-Lewinsky affair has caused women on the left and the right to flip their script. On the left, though the "first feminist" is now the "first fuckup," we are inclined to give him a break because of the Starr inquiry's partisanship and invasion of privacy. On the right, suddenly there are women who, indifferent to Anita Hill's allegations against Clarence Thomas, now say they would punish even consensual behavior because of its moral implications.

Partisanship and power are forcing feminists into a strange kind of shilly-shallying. Those of us who support this president should be able to do so while, at the same time, raising key questions about gender and power. Those who oppose him should make the terms of their opposition clear. Women are no different than men if we take this teachable moment and turn it into just another scorecard in the power game. The rules of that power game are: Go along to get along, don't ring the bell, don't rock the boat, don't call anybody out and "use what you got to get what you want." The problem is, as a sage young woman put it in the closing moments of *The Players Club*, "You can't want much if that is all you got." What did Lewinsky want? And what about Clinton? Have we truly, "come a long way baby," when "use what you got to get what you want" is still one of the rules of the game?

What does this mean for the future of feminism? It means that feminists, like others, must grapple with the ways that personal behavior can be used as a political weapon. It means that feminists, like me, who have asked that the president be "forgiven," must ask whether we are willing or able to forgive others for their peccadilloes. It means that as we decide to separate the sin from the sinner, the adulterer from the policy advocate, we must ask what is lost when we make that separation. Is our president so tarnished that he is useless to feminists? Are we a nation of players, using "what we got to get what we want"? And where does that leave us—feminists, progressives, Americans—when the dust clears? ■

Julianne Malveaux is a Washington, D.C.-based syndicated columnist and economist.