

Black and Blue at The Wash

VOLUNTEER SLAVERY **My Authentic Negro Experience**

By Jill Nelson
Noble Press. 219 pp. \$21.95

By Susan Jacoby

IN 1965, Jill Nelson would have been described by disapproving elders as "a girl with a chip on her shoulder." By 1970, she would have been called "strident" or "militant" (with either "feminist" or "black" following the adjectives). Today, she's got "an attitude."

In any case, Nelson is a talented writer who has spent most of her career as a freelancer and an impassioned advocacy journalist. Read the first three paragraphs of anything she's ever written and you know she would be spectacularly unsuited, by philosophy and temperament, to a powerful mainstream newspaper like The Washington Post.

So naturally, The Post had to lure Nelson away from the lively but impecunious life of a freelance writer in New York. As an added bonus for the Department of Dopey Hiring, Nelson knew almost nothing about Washington and disliked what little she did know.

Institutions do this all the time. They try to convince a prospective employee that they covet her unique way of doing things when they really want another company woman (or man). In the end, both parties go away mad.

Nelson is still mad, as she makes clear in this scathing, sometimes scathingly funny, account of her unhappy tenure at The Post from 1986 to 1990. Unfortunately, she is so

Susan Jacoby, a New York writer, was a Washington Post reporter from 1965 to 1971.

mad that she makes it all too easy for her former colleagues to dismiss the issues she raises about the way the white media perceives, and misperceives, the African-American community.

During her initial interview with then-executive editor Benjamin C. Bradlee, Nelson mentioned her family's summer home on Martha's Vineyard. "So you're part of that whole black bourgeoisie scene with the Bullocks and the Washingtons?" Bradlee reportedly asked. This less-than-tactful remark (Bradlee might have done well to consult Miss Manners on interview techniques) prompted Nelson to muse that "the notion of myself as part of the black socialite scene I've spent a lifetime avoiding on and off the Vineyard strikes me as laughable. So does his evocation of the Bullocks, old Washingtonians, and former Mayor Walter Washington, who is married to a Bullock."

Nelson then carefully points out that the Washingtons don't actually own their vacation home but visit—"an important distinction in Vineyard society." Tsk, tsk. Or as E. Franklin Frazier might have said, You can take the girl out of the black bourgeoisie but you can't take the black bourgeoisie out of the girl.

Nelson is much better when she turns her attention to The Post's coverage of the black community. On Sept. 7, 1986, The Post's revamped Sunday magazine made a much-ballyhooed debut with an issue that included a cover story on a black rap singer accused of murder and a column by Richard Cohen sympathizing with merchants who refuse to unlock their doors to young black men.

It was surely predictable that black Washington would be outraged at the juxtaposition of two articles focusing on black crime

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in the premiere issue of the magazine. Predictable, that is, to nearly everyone except The Post's management.

Nelson correctly notes that debacles of this nature are rarely produced by conspiracy. It did not occur to Nelson's furious black acquaintances—being held accountable by their peers for everything their employer does is a rarely discussed problem of minority employees—"that the institution that is The Washington Post seldom devotes much thought to black people at all, and that the editors and managers aren't diabolical, just screwed-up."

In fact, The Post's management has, for at least 30 years, devoted considerable thought to the black community and how to cover it. The difficulty is that the men in charge do not think about certain subjects—as they did not evaluate their magazine in 1986—from the perspective of African-American readers.

The Janet Cooke affair, in 1980-81, raised closely related issues. If a white reporter had produced the same fiction about a white 8-year-old heroin addict as Cooke did about "Jimmy," the story would probably have been unmasked before publication. Editors would have demanded sources, because they would not have been predisposed to believe in the existence of white addicts in white elementary schools. Then the Pulitzer Prize board would never have had the opportunity to act on its own predispositions.

Nelson has something important to say about the ways in which the insecurities of *some* black professionals feed into the willingness of *some* whites to assume the worst of blacks.

The author does not justify Cooke's actions but does attempt to explain them. "Clearly the sister had some severe ethical,

moral and psychological problems that caused her to mistake fiction for journalism, and self-hating journalism at that," she says. "But . . . [Cooke] knew she would be outshone, discarded, and forgotten unless she did something—quick—to earn the approval of the powers that be. What better way than following the honored tradition of writing an expose of pathological Negroes? After all, when you're black in corporate America, self-hatred often passes for being well-adjusted, competent, assimilated, and objective."

The most powerful sections of Nelson's book deal—sometimes explicitly—with the conjunction of personal and social pressures in the lives of successful black Americans. The author offers one of the most harrowing accounts in recent literature of what would have once been described as a nervous breakdown, aggravated by mind-bending antidepressants. The narrative ends with Nelson's departure from The Post—a step she clearly considered crucial to her emotional recovery.

Jill Nelson and The Post were a toxic combination, and it is clear that the poisonous brew was composed not only of white assumptions but of the author's internal conflicts over taking money and perks from a white institution. The title, *Volunteer Slavery*, says it all.

It would be a mistake—and another example of racial stereotyping—to conclude that all successful African-Americans are as alienated from white institutions as Nelson. Yet it would be equally misguided to dismiss this account as the raving of a disgruntled ex-employee. For the toxins Nelson describes are pervasive, even though the capacity to resist the poison is highly individual.