BROWN MAN’S BURDEN: RACE, CULTURE, AND EMPIRE

I. HALF DEVIL AND HALF CHILD?

A. FLUTTERED FOLK AND WILD

English attitudes on race didn’t run in the blood.

As late as the 1700s, a black man or a brown one was seen as

a curiosity

a foreigner

but not as a separate order of Creation.

After all, didn’t we all come from Adam and Eve?

It was assumed that while the Ethiop couldn’t change his skin, he could change his shirt....

He could become English, and so could everyone like him.

That was one reason why slaveholders were so afraid of letting their slaves get Christian teaching.

They would see that they were their master’s brothers.

... that their rights came from God

... that they had an equal chance of Heaven.
But by the late 19th century, “race” was the all-powerful definer.

And not “race” as we would think it, perhaps – white and black; but much narrower, defined not by skin color as by character.

“The Island Race”

“The Imperial Race”
“The Island Breed”

“British stock”

&c.

They didn’t have to think it out.

Whites were superior to dark skinned people.

But the English were superior to everybody.

It was not because of their color.

It was years and years of their culture evolving – society culling and cultivating certain qualities and habits and instincts....

like fair play

A sense for order and justice.

... until English folks were born with them.

Who better then, to rule the world, and put it to rights?¹

B. How the Indians became Bad Children

All the way into the 1800s, the English thought they could make India an England.

The turning point was the Sepoy Rebellion. People they had always trusted turned on them, and behaved in ways no civilized enemy would have behaved.

Was all the civilizing a veneer?

Was everything that darker races learned wasted – or, worse, something that gave them the tools to use in diabolic ways?

Till then, there had been a constant talk that Indians could be uplifted – educated – improved.

Now all that changed.

Onlookers saw them fire cannons at railroad trains and declared:

This proves they don’t like modern technology.

They saw them killing women and children, and said:

This proves that they will never be anything but savages.

Uplifting the Indians was doomed to fail.

“The CHILD and the SAVAGE lie very deeply at the foundations of their being. The varnish of civilization is very thin,
and is put off as promptly as a garment.”

They were, in short, just about the same place as the English during the Dark Ages.

The hope of making these “children” into grownups faded away.

“Don’t you believe that the native is a fool,” one coal mine operator in India warned. “You can train him to everything except responsibility.”

More than that, over the 19th century, England got the scientific backing for an idea of separate races.

Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution didn’t apply to mankind.

At least, HE didn’t think they did.

But Europeans applied them.

If the Bushman didn’t have the wheel –

if the Chinese who invented gunpowder never figured out the breechloading rifle –

didn’t that suggest that they were a lesser breed of human?

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Darwin had talked of how higher forms of life evolved from lower forms.

Weren’t these people who hadn’t evolved?

The advance of life on earth came from the struggle of species. Competition, social scientists declared, was the story of life from the beginning of time.

Whoever fitted the environment best lasted.

Survival of the fittest.

If it was true for mammals and dinosaurs, why not for societies?

Those who failed deserved to fail.

Those who succeeded, the superior races, deserved to rule the earth.

That certainly would explain what happened in the Congo.

And Reap the Old Reward

Leopold and the Belgians

The King of the Belgians had been given the Congo in 1876 because he was a humanitarian.

It wasn’t the Belgian Congo; it was his private preserve.

No empire-builder, he would take good care of the natives.
The slave trade must end.

Christianity and civilization would cure all their ills.

Could a good man do any less than bring light to the dark continent?³

His kind of humanitarian, you could find on Death Row any day.

It was a British subject, journalist Roger Casement, who helped spill the truth.

Slavery was alive and well, to make the Belgian king rich.

Each village had to pay the state 20 loads of rubber – big baskets full – and pay that four times a month.

Twenty baskets took a whole town 10 days of work.,

They got nothing in return.

Their crops withered, untended.

The people starved.

But if they didn’t deliver the rubber supply, soldiers came to

kill them ...

cut off their ears...

carry them away, bound, never to be seen again ...

herded them into their houses and then set them ablaze...

And everywhere stories of the other collection.

Villages that didn’t hand over baskets of rubber, the soldiers came and took away baskets of hands.

This was really a form of accounting.

The troops wanted to prove that they weren’t wasting ammunition – so they had to bring back a receipt:

a severed hand.

At one mission station, where 40,000 people once lived, there were less than a thousand.

Belgian troops had raided villages to grab villagers for forced labor to provide food for the state, and punished villages that didn’t go along. 4

It was horrible. It gave Joseph Conrad the idea for the horrors he drew upon in HEART OF DARKNESS.

But there were no Leopolds in the British Empire, and it’s worth

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noticing who put a stop to the rape of the Congo.

It was the British who applied the pressure to make the King let go of his colony.

It passed out of his private control.

From then on, the Belgian government would run it.  

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Social Darwinism and Empire

Historians, then, may be jumping the gun, when they jump on Darwin.  

‘Survival of the fittest.”

If we can kill them, that makes us better – and might makes right.

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6 Among the worst perpetrators was William L. Langer, in Diplomacy of Imperialism. But you can find the same idea in Lawrence James, The Rise and Fall of the British Empire (1994); and in Bernard Semmel, Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social-Imperial Thought, 1895-1914 (1960); and Jan Morris, Pax Britannica: The Climax of Empire, 23, 126; and J. M. Mackenzie, ed., Imperialism and Popular Culture, 3, 126, 135.
Certainly there were plenty of social theorists ready to apply Social Darwinism to economics – to who rose and who fell in society.

If you’re poor, you deserve to be poor.

If you’re rich, it comes from better qualities and values.

Why shouldn’t it be applied to lesser races?

And maybe it was – but not in England.

Read Chamberlain’s speeches ...

Or Alfred Lord Milner’s writings in defense of empire.

Or Lord Salisbury.

Or Lord Rosebery

Darwinian theory doesn’t play any part.

Almost everyone writing a justification of Empire finds some other reason why empire is good...

strategic
economic
moral

There are reasons for this.

1. Most people don’t like to think of themselves as predators.
And western ethics systems – Christianity being just one of them, others not being matters of religion –

the ethics system of, say, the English public school..

Play the Game –

aren’t comfortable with the idea that man is just an animal.

We aren’t in the world to get ahead.

We are in it to do well AND do good.

There’s cash & carry; and there’s right & wrong, too.

Social Darwinism as “survival of the fittest” is inherently amoral.

In realpolitik terms, it means, Englishmen have no right to complain if the Turks kill Christians in the Balkans –

‘Cause, haven’t they the power to do it?

They have no right to object if Napoleon overruns all Europe –

‘cause, isn’t he the strongest?

2. The teachings of Darwin could go both ways, not just one.

Because, as some scholars showed, what Darwin really showed was how far chance and luck decided who lived, who died.
Often different species could adapt, as others adapted.

They also co-existed.

Yes, there was constant flux — challenge — displacement.

But all of it took place within a total system that made sense.

Plants and animals weren’t just in constant war.
They depended on each other.

Say you were a tiger. Of course you could eat all the rabbits.

But suppose you were a real success at it — I mean, a real success.

Not a single rabbit escaped your maw.

You’d succeed your way into eating yourself out of a meal-ticket.

You’d succeed until you’d starved yourself to death.

Life isn’t a war. It’s a web — a branching tree of interconnectedness. It’s ....

Aiiiiiiiiiiiiiee!

The Great Circle of Life!

Now, a theory like THAT works every bit as well for Empire.

And it is a lot less ruthless sounding.
We’re good for them – they’re good for us.  

White Man’s Burden

As American schoolteachers and American soldiers made the Philippines part of our overseas empire, Rudyard Kipling gave voice to that ideal of empire at its best, for the inferior races.

Take up the White Man’s burden –
Send forth the best ye breed –
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives’ need;
To wait in heavy harness
On fluttered folk and wild –
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child.

Take up the White Man’s Burden –
In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror
And check the show of pride;
By open speech and simple,
An hundred times made plain,
To seek another’s profit,
And work another’s gain.

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Take up the White Man’s Burden –
The savage wars of peace –
Fill up the mouth of Famine
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
The end for others sought,
Watch Sloth and heathen Folly
Bring all your hope to naught.

Take up the White Man’s Burden –
No tawdry rule of kings,
But toil of serf and Sweeper --
The tale of common things.
The ports ye shall not enter,
The roads ye shall not tread,
Go make them with your living,
And mark them with your dead!

Take up the White Man’s burden –
And reap the old reward:
The blame of those ye better,
The hate of those ye guard –
The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah, slowly!) Toward the light: –
“Why brought ye us from bondage,
Our loved Egyptian night?”

Take up the White Man’s burden –
Have done with childish days –
The lightly proffered laurel,
The easy, ungrudged praise.
Comes now, to search your manhood
Through all the thankless years,
Cold-edged, with dear-bought wisdom,
The judgment of your peers!

– Rudyard Kipling

And it wasn’t all phony, either. “Go make them with your living./ And mark them with your dead.”

The tropics were the graveyard of English emigrants.
It was an age before medicine discovered the cures for
cholera
yellow fever
malaria

Dysentery had plenty of comic names –
Gippy Tummy
Pooniaitis
Karachi trotters

but it could break a person’s health permanently
or kill him.

Soldiers in India called nervous disorders the “Doo-lally tap”
from a camp near Bombay, Deolalie, where
they were barracked to wait the trek home.

Every year, as of 1880, 1 soldier in 40 died of sickness
in India

Every Indian train carried along coffins, for passengers
who died along the way of cholera or heat-stroke.

By century’s end, it was guessed that there were 1½ million British
graves in India.

You could be patronizing and imperial, and still care about the welfare of
subject peoples.

Queen Victoria did.

One reason she disliked the Boers was their mistreatment of
black Africans.
It griped her, that when British troops fought, the only ones listed in the casualty lists were the white ones.

The Sikhs and Moslems and Ugandans were just as dead and served the colors just as well.

Rather than wanting to see the Zulus wiped out, she wanted to see them made English.

They were MADE for it. They were honest and brave, like boys in a G. A. Henty novel.

And they HAD to have the makings of civilized people in them: they didn’t smoke.

And she had a real appreciation for Indian art.

Her palace at Osborne had one whole room fitted out with murals, drawn by Rudyard Kipling’s father.

**FILL UP THE MOUTH OF FAMINE**

Even as the Queen celebrated her Diamond Jubilee, plague and famine were making India a kingdom of death.

The Raj quarantined the sick.

In plain language, they used troops to keep the sick neighborhoods pent up, so as not to infect the well.
If you weren’t sick, and were in a quarantined town, you couldn’t escape. Chances are, you’d fall sick, too, and maybe die.

Those who tried to break out of quarantine camps were shot.8

It sounds brutal. But the Black Death wasn’t something that authorities knew any other cure for.

And the people that complained about it are hard for us to sympathize with.

They didn’t want women examined by doctors for the symptoms of Black Death – that would defile them religiously.

They killed army doctors and burned down a hospital.

They were convinced that the hospitals were really meant as torture chambers, and that giving a Moslem shots was meant to make him abandon his faith.9

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Famine’s another testing ground. When the rains failed in India, people starved by the millions. It had always been that way.

And in 1876 and 1877, it was that way again, in a broad stretch from Mysore in the south to the Punjab.

58 million people went hungry.

But the Raj wasn’t about to spend money, or tinker with laissez-faire.

And its paper-shufflers just weren’t ready to handle a crisis that big.

In Madras, the official in charge calculated that a man could live on a pound of grain a day: what a prisoner in a Bengali jail got as ration

So he could, maybe – but not if he had to work hard all day digging and carrying dirt for public works.

And that was what the Raj insisted on him doing in return.

The work camps became death camps.

Thousands collapsed and died just trying to get there; because the camps were many miles from where the suffering was.

Before it was over, just in Madras area, some 4 million people died.

In Mysore, one person in four died.

And that was of hunger. Disease thrives when people starve.
Cholera — malaria ... intestinal distempers –
the death rates more than quadrupled.\(^\text{10}\)

Could it have been prevented? Probably. And authorities were determined not to have it again.

You needed railroads, so that supplies could get to the needy fast.

You needed irrigation projects, so that there’d be water even if the rains failed, to grow some crop.

In the next twenty years, the Raj doubled the track in India

... by 1900, there were 25,000 miles of it.

And 5000 were laid in just five years.

By 1891 there were over 10 million acres being farmed by irrigation that nobody had farmed before.

One person in eight survived just because of them.

Money was stored for emergencies. Plans were set up for a public works program, trading food for labor on the roads, wells, and reservoirs.\(^\text{11}\)

The test came in 1895 and 1896 when the monsoons passed India by.

\(^{10}\) Lawrence James, \textit{Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India}, 303-04.

\(^{11}\) Lawrence James, \textit{Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India}, 304-05.
Once more the crops failed.

This time, 53 million people faced possible starvation.

This time, government work camps kept 33 million people alive.

The needy were given shovels and hoes and baskets to carry stone and earth in.

They got grain in return.

Charities from as far away as America and societies as poor as Russia loaded rupees on top of government aid.

Death rates doubled in some places.

This time the loss in life wasn’t in the millions.

But it may have been 100,000.12

And in 1899 and 1900, when there was another drought, 800,000 died in the Bombay presidency.

One Common Language I’m Afraid We’ll Never Get

 Transmitting culture meant remaking the way a host of nations spoke.

It was Empire, more than anything else, that made an English-speaking world.

Its economic clout made it the natural language of commerce.

All over the world, imperial governments did their administrating

12 Lawrence James, Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India. 306.
In some places, the Anglicizing of a country was pretty straightforward.

If you fill the place with English and Scots and Irish, then English speaking is what you get.

The Aborigines could talk as they wanted to –

or the Dakota –

or the Maori.

But if they’re dead, it’s hard for them to carry on a conversation for very long.

English is going to reign supreme in Australia and New Zealand in most of Canada and Ireland.

This wasn’t so in places where people COULDN’T be exterminated – white Europeans.

Canada had more French-speakers, to begin with.

And the Boers, with their sort of Dutch language, outnumbered the English, first and last.

There, English might be the official language.

But French and Afrikaan had privileged positions.

The nonwhite colonies had English forced on them.
At first, it was the language of a small set of administrators and traders. You couldn’t make the Ashanti talk like the Cockneys of Covent Garden.

But for natives who wanted a chance to get ahead – a job in the civil service – a place in the business house – learning English became a must.

And soon, authorities were doing all they could to force the use of English in every official function.

If you wanted to register a deed –

if you wanted to swear out a warrant –

if you wanted to make a complaint –

It must be done in English.

Mohandas Gandhi would say that “to give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them.... Is it not a painful thing that if I want to go to a court of justice, I must employ the English language as a medium; that, when I become a Barrister, I may not speak my mother-tongue, and that someone else should have to translate to me from my own language?”

So it might have been – if Gandhi’s “own language” was India’s.

It wasn’t. It was one of India’s many languages.

And odds are, any court that allowed Gandhi’s own language would mean a crushing burden on every other Indian who didn’t
speak Hindi.\textsuperscript{13}

For a century and more, authorities had realized what Gandhi ignored, that one way to make many people into one folk was one language....

...give the people speaking Hindi and Pushtu and Gujerati

\textsuperscript{13} Because the plain statistic is that less than half the people in India could speak Hindi or understand it. And when at Gandhi’s behest, Hindi was proclaimed the official Indian language, blood flowed. The Indian constitution of 1950 recognized that getting people to adapt to Hindi right away was impossible. The provisions made a 15 year period during which Hindi and English would be joint official languages. But when, in 1965, Hindi became the sole official language, and civil servants were given higher seniority for mastering it, there were 111 million people in southern India who spoke Tamil and Teulugu and Kaunala and Malayalam. There were suicides and riots and demonstrations.

The government had to back down. It declared English an “associate” language and allowed applicants on civil service examinations to use regional languages.

Even now, Indians speak 14 major languages and over 800 dialects. The only common language now, as then, is English. See John Clive, \textit{Macauley: The Making of an Historian}, 417-19.
and Marathi and Bengali the same language, and they not only THINK English –

they think INDIAN. They can talk to each other, for the first time.

They can see what they have in common, not just what divides them.

One language means PEACE and ORDER and TOLERANCE

All peoples in India meet on equal ground -

no one of them giving up their language to accommodate the other.

Think of what it means in the Gold Coast.

A small area in West Africa – nowhere near as big as Kentucky – had 200 different languages.

Some natives spoke a European tongue...

but it was as likely to be French or Portuguese or Danish

as English.

What we got here is a failure to communicate.

And that means tribalism – a sense that the people down the road are STRANGERS – to be conquered enslaved robbed

warded off.
Give them all English, and they won’t be strangers any more. And any one person can rove the whole length and breadth of the Gold Coast and make himself understood and do business.

Furthermore, English opens the world to people who never saw beyond their own two-by-four kingdom.

Now they can share in the commerce of the seven seas.

Now they are part of the greater community that stretches from the Cape of Good Hope to Cape Fear.

Enslavement? English didn’t enslave these people.

It gave them the tools to see themselves as real nations.

It gave them the tools to work together to throw off British control.

Not for nothing, the slaveowners in America had bought blacks from all over Africa, speaking different languages.

As long as their slaves had no words in common, they couldn’t ACT IN COMMON. They were less likely to rebel.

Nor did the use of English really wipe out native tongues.
As a matter of fact, Empire may just have done more to preserve some of them, at the expense of others.

This wasn’t the administrators’ doing; all honor to the missionaries, instead.

They didn’t care two hoots about linguistics. But they did care about saving souls.

That, you couldn’t do by teaching your potential converts English.

It had to be done in their own words.

If they were going to read the Bible, it must be their own language.

And you must TEACH them to read.

In many cases, their languages had no alphabet of its own.

Often it had an oral tradition, but nothing written down.

So missionaries went forth, to collect the words and write them down and transform them into a printed form, and then teach the natives to read that language.

They made transcriptions of the Bible, and dictionaries, and grammars in Yoruba

Hausa
Kanuri
Igala
Igbo

– all in West Africa.

They set down tracts in Bemba and Fante and Herero.
They created a phonetic version of Samoan.

It was missionaries who compiled the first Chinese-English dictionary of any real size – six volumes – in the early 1800s.

It was one Baptist missionary who did 35 different translations of the Bible for different Indian communities, plus grammars for seven Indian language and dictionaries in Bengali, Sanskrit, Marathi.

Was this a bad thing, this White Man’s Burden?

Some critics think so: certain languages lived, but others died.

The ones nobody wrote a grammar or dictionary to, were squeezed out by those that evangelicals threw onto a printed page.

The language, set down in print, froze. It wasn’t likely to adapt or change as fast as before – it was no longer all that much a work in progress.

And as people got used to seeing history and literature in print, their skill at keeping up the oral tradition faded away.

Those whose languages got the special treatment became the dominant cultures.

Around Lake Victoria in East Africa, it was the Ganda people who gained the most.
Because Buganda became the official language for the state and the church.

Nice, if you’re a Ganda; not at all so good if you happen to be an Acholi.

All this can’t be ignored. But it also may have meant that some languages that would have died, lived and lasted.

Closely tied to language was education. Without teaching people English, the Imperial educational system couldn’t have come about.

And White Man’s Burden certainly meant schooling people and spreading knowledge.

The same could be said of the preservation of knowledge.

English explorers and conquerors didn’t just impose their own culture.

They sent scholars and scientists to study up the cultures they were overthrowing, and to salvage the artwork.

Imitation isn’t always the sincerest form of flattery.

Sometimes THEFT is –

the taking of artifacts and artwork, for your museums you do that because you think there’s something worthwhile in them, not just as trophies of war.
When a British expedition went to war, like the one that invaded Ethiopia in 1868, it took along men with training in the culture.

And when they came back, they brought ancient manuscripts, dating from Old Testament days.

The old and gorgeous temples of Anuradhapura were saved and turned into a sightseeing shrine by the British Archaeological Department, in Ceylon.

On Cyprus, in the Middle East, the British flag flew over diggers and excavators into ancient cultures, and if you want to see the obelisks of ancient Egypt, or mummies’ cases, or the wealth of Tutankhamen, go to London.

There, in the heart of the city you’ll see Cleopatra’s Needle.

It’s theft – nothing less; and the British Museum is the biggest collection of stolen goods since the Nazis were forced to give back the art they took from occupied countries in the Second World War.

But it was also a testimonial to the idea that these people had cultures worth studying, worth preserving.

Yet, no matter how we look at the White Man’s Burden, the attitude behind it reeked with contempt for people because of their race, and also because of caste and class.
Appreciation for the art of India and the scholarship of Ethiopia came because in some distant way, English people agreed that they were sort of white....

Indians were Aryans, after all.

Ethiopia in legend was the land of the Queen of Sheba.

Its Christian community, the Coptic sect, dated from the days of St. Augustine.

Its kings dated themselves back to Solomon and David.

Wasn’t one of them called “the Lion of Judah”?

But for black Africa – real black Africa – England had no interest at all.

They had no history.

They had no art.

They had no culture.

Actually, they had all three.

But English conquerors neither noticed it nor wanted it.

English governors parked in shrines and temples, commandeered sacred places as their administrative offices.

The Government House in Lahore was the tomb of one of the Moghul princes.
The British lieutenant-governor held his parties in a gorgeous room – where the coffin used to sit.

The throne room in Burma became church for an army garrison.

Civilization therefore couldn’t be given.
   It would have to be imposed – firmly, clearly, and for a long time.

One general said it a little more bluntly, when he declared that the true way to govern India was “one clean-bred, perfectly honest and un bribable Englishman, standing under a tree and, according to his lights, without law or legal procedure, deciding cases on common-sense lines, and to the best of his ability.”

It sounds very nice at first glance, until you think:

   Without law? Without legal procedure?

   It implies that there is some instinctive sense of justice in every decent Englishman, that is GOOD ENOUGH law for the likes of brown folks.

In practice, it’s quite a bit like the doctrine that one white magistrate in Ceylon followed. It was his own system –

“He said niggers were such liars it was useless questioning them, and as he was a good judge of character and countenance, he used to put litigants alongside one another, and not allow them to say anything. After looking at them earnestly for a moment or two, and having made up his mind, he would say to one of them, ‘You are the guilty man,” and dispose of him
accordingly."

There was no need for a black civil service in Africa at all.

So the Crown never bothered to set up schools.

Education it left to missionaries.

Paternalism was something the gentlemen running the empire could show,

because they were the natives’ superior, not just racially but
socially. They were upper class.

But the further down the English social scale you get, the cruder
the White Man’s Burden looks.

For soldiers, often for businessmen, kicking and cuffing your
black or brown underlings was considered one of the
rights that went with the job.

Like bad boys in a public school, a native deserved a good
caning or a swift kick.

In hotels, the management had to put up signs *asking*
guests not to strike the servants.

Soldiers coming to India had to be taught by their
officers to NEVER, NEVER hit a native
in the face: the bruises would show there.

But Indian orderlies had to show soldiers respect.

Before coming into mess hall or barracks
room, they had to take off their
shoes, the way they did when they
went to worship in the temple.
They might have to salaam, the way they
did to their silly gods.

The harshest test of the White Man’s Burden came when the “half Devil and half
child” refused to take dominion like a good sport.

The rules that would have been followed on the continent of Europe
simply weren’t considered.

Against Europeans, would Britain have ...

burned whole towns

wiped out the crops in the fields

and, when a battle was over, killed the wounded?

Against Europeans, would they have used torture to get information?

Or trained their dogs, as Indian officers did, for the fun of it,
to “go for niggers”?

Perhaps. But when they tried much milder tactics than that against
the white civilians of South Africa in the Boer Woer, the
outcry at home brought embarrassment and disgrace upon
Britain and caused a ruckus heard round the world.

It would never have happened that way with the Ashanti or the Zulus.

With justice, Henry Labouchere wrote Kipling in angry reply:
Pile on the Brown Man’s burden!
And if ye rouse his hate,
Meet his old-fashioned reasons
With Maxim’s – up to date –
With shells and Dum-Dum bullets
A hundred times make plain
The Brown Man’s loss must never
Imply the White Man’s gain.¹⁴
