
Wendell Berry’s long-awaited reflection on race has finally been published. It is difficult to sum up Berry’s thoughts in this nearly 500-page work that, in a sense, took him more than 50 years to compose. In 1969 Berry published *The Hidden Wound*, which was his first direct foray into the topic of race for the then-budding agrarian writer. As Berry alludes to in the first few pages of *The Need to Be Whole*, one way to understand the work is as his attempt to come full circle on the topic of race in his writing.

Like in *The Hidden Wound*, Berry relies heavily on his own history and the history of his native Henry County, Kentucky. Such personal reflections serve as an entry point to his thoughts on race. This is not a matter of inattention by Berry to wider conversations about race in the United States, but rather his way of grounding what he says in his own experience of living on the land with people of varying racial backgrounds who share (agri)cultural connections.

The personal appeal, however, is doubly valuable for Berry. He argues that racism in America is a disease that afflicts us all ‘however unequally the burdens may have been distributed’ (p. 57). This idea relates to a core concern of his that, often in public, political, corporate, and academic discourses, issues are separated from one another. Rather than attending to things in their broader contexts, people cut and divide topics, referring to them as if they exist in a vacuum.

As one might suspect from such a prolific writer as Berry, there are many moments in the work where his age-old thoughtfulness shines through. I was particularly struck by what is one of his most extensive diatribes on work in all of his writings (Ch. 8). He argues that black America’s desire for freedom from slavery and the post-Civil War promise of 40 acres and a mule offered former slaves a real opportunity for self-sufficiency and economic advancement. However, as Reconstruction failed and the prejudiced standards of Jim Crow set in, such possibilities vanished.

One of the enduring tragedies, according to Berry, of this failure by the American government to grant land, and thus new life, to black Americans was the re-instantiation of the same principles of slavery in sharecropping. In both systems, the idea that certain work fell far below the humanity of the slaveholder class and the landowner class could not be more evident (p. 465). Though private and governmental entities were not interested in sustained assistance to help black Americans acquire land, they were interested in keeping these valuable black bodies working for little return. As Berry notes, the only other classes fit for such ‘degrading work’ with low wages were poor whites and, in later generations,
immigrants from across the world (p. 297ff). In customary Berry fashion, he rejects that manual labor is degrading. And yet, he notes that presently—as in the past—often when such work is performed for others (slaveholders, landowners, corporate executives) rather than for oneself, the profits unevenly benefit the powerful.

Though these sections of the book are praiseworthy, others leave the reader befuddled. For example, Berry argues that Robert E. Lee’s interest in fighting for and leading the Confederate troops during the Civil War was out of an interest to defend his native Virginia rather than to maintain the institution of slavery (p. 198—99). Berry states that he is attempting to reject ‘a total hatred or total anger’ toward the Confederate General (p. 215). If this is the fullness of Berry’s argument, one might agree with his defense of writing this section (p. 214—15). And yet, it is troubling that Berry has a ‘similar sympathy’ for Lee as for Crazy Horse, on the grounds that both fought to defend their homelands from ‘invaders’ (p. 204). One might also reasonably be troubled when Berry writes that ‘victories, by whichever side’ of the Civil War ‘were outweighed by losses’ (p. 206). On this final point, I take his meaning that wars, even the most just wars, always result in nearly unbearable losses, particularly for the loved ones of those lost in war but also for the destruction to the earth. But it seems the eradication of the institution of slavery on account of the American Civil War would certainly be considered a victory in the eyes of any who believe wars can be waged justly. Maybe there, though, lies the core of Berry’s conviction.

Berry is influenced by Lee’s rejection of service in the Union Army on the grounds that he could not fight against the people and culture of his home state of Virginia, a Confederate State. Nevertheless, it seems one can appreciate Lee’s devotion to his place and people or even the incomplete gains of the Civil War without drawing the conclusions Berry does. Regardless of how one reads these sections, his claims about neighborliness, love, and attention to actual people and their stories (cf. p. 129, 319) remain salient all the same.

The book takes its title from Berry’s deeply rooted sense that the world’s multifaceted wholeness cannot thrive through division, prejudice, and arrogance. Berry calls to mind the environmental wholeness ecologists speak of (p. 337). For too long, humans have fought each other and the earth in an effort to assert their dominance rather than find their place in the wholeness. Berry believes these urges toward violence and arrogance drive both racial prejudice and ecological destruction. To right these wrongs, Berry advocates for what the late US Congressperson and Civil Rights activist John Lewis spoke of when he said that ‘there are no losers when justice is achieved’ (p. 449). When read in its fullness, The Need to Be Whole embodies this ideal. What Berry desires most is a world where no person’s stories or experiences are ignored. Some of these stories might be filled with hatred and prejudice that must be addressed, but he believes, at their core, these people’s lives and the life of the whole planet is dependent on all others. In such circumstances, we must work together as neighbors, rather than competitors, to make the world habitable for all. This is a book for all audiences. In spite of its length, it reads easily, like many of Berry’s writings. But as I have attempted to highlight here, many of the ideas present in the book deserve careful and critical consideration.

Wade Casey
Independent Scholar
Fort Collins, Colorado
wadecasey@gmail.com