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The Most Racist Town in America?

Faith Ann Chojar
SUNY Geneseo, fac1@geneseo.edu

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The Most Racist Town in America?

Abstract
Two Christian Identity churches, the Christian Revival Center and Kingdom Identity Ministries, and the mailing address for the National Director of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan are located in Harrison, Arkansas. Christian Identity churches have been recognized as hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center and are centered around racist and anti-Semitic ideologies. The Christian Revival Center is headed by Thomas Robb who is also the National Director of the KKK. Kingdom Identity Ministries is the largest producer of Christian Identity propaganda in the country. There is considerable support for the town of Harrison to retain its reputation as a town steeped in hate from the community. On the contrary, there have been several anti-hate organizations formed in this region which function to denounce the current image of Harrison and promote diversity and change. The small town was dubbed the most racist town in America by British tabloid The Daily Mirror in 2016, yet it is continuously at odds with itself.

Keywords
christian identity, hate groups, white nationalism, KKK, hate, resistance

Disciplines
Geography | Human Geography | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

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The Hate

The two seedline theory which characterizes mainstream Christian Identity churches establishes that when in the Garden of Eden, Eve had sex with two individuals: Adam and a serpent. This resulted in her pregnancy with Cain and Abel. All white, Aryan individuals are seen to be descendant from Abel, who was fathered by Adam. Adam was the only man made in the image of God, making the white race the only pure and holy race. Jewish people are descendant from the serpent Satan. All others are considered “mud people” who preceded Adam and Eve (Anti-Defamation League). This religion is promoted by Thomas Robb in his compound 15 miles outside of Harrison, in Arkansas. They use a Harrison mailing address. The compound is adorned with KKK flags and Christian Identity propaganda (Schulte, 2017). Robb has been the National Director (formerly known as Grand Wizard) of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan since succeeding David Duke in the 1980s (SPLC). The presence of his organizations, the KKK and the Christian Revival Center, alongside the Kingdom Identity Ministries, another Christian Identity church, connote Harrison with racism. This became overt in 2013, when racially targeted billboards began appearing alongside highways in town (Bella, 2014). They read messages of white supremacy and discourage diversity. No individuals claim the responsibility of paying for these boards. On the web, there is a fair amount of support for Harrison to retain its connotation as a racist town. Articles about the town are littered with comments from residents, current and former, justifying the hate which is perpetuated in this town in everyday life, or claiming indifference and ignorance to it.

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Is Harrison Typical?

Harrison is certainly not unique in hosting an institutionalized racist presence. That is evident from Southern Poverty Law Center online records. In other respects, Harrison seems to be emblematic of the very large number of small towns which are mostly hidden in America’s “Flyover Country” heartland. Harrison’s population of approximately 13 thousand souls is 96 percent white (Census Quick Facts, 2018). Its median household income is 62% of the national norm. Harrison has experienced stagnant population growth in the new millennium. It is home to America’s second Walmart (1965) (Braymer, 2014). Almost 76 percent of local voters favored Donald Trump in 2016 (Politico, 2016). Over 85 percent of the area’s church members are Evangelical Protestant (ARDA, 2010). I leave the reader to judge whether Harrison is a “typical” exemplar of the ongoing contest of framing American attitudes towards race.

A Brief History of Harrison

1905

The first race riot occurs in September. A white mob storms a jail and carries several black prisoners outside, whips them and orders them to leave. This mob also travels through the residential community in Harrison, tying men to trees, whipping them, and burning their houses down. This happens again in 1906. Harrison will gain a reputation as a sundown town, it’s population will remain white indefinitely (PBS).

1917

Thomas Robb moves to Harrison, Arkansas. He will become national director of the KKK in the 1980s and will be a prominent pastor in a Christian Identity church which will be established in Zinc (SPLC).

1982

Harrison’s task force on race relations is established by Mike Hallimore (Bella, 2014).

2003

Harrison’s task force on race relations is established. Their mission is to, “to foster and promote the image and reality of Harrison as a cohesive, warm community to all people of peace and goodwill, regardless of race,” (HCTFRR, 2018).

2013

The first racist billboard is erected in Harrison, reading “Anti-Racist is a code word for Anti-White,” (Bella, 2014). Other billboards will be sponsored by both supremacist and resistance groups up until the present day.

2017

Boone County indivisible is formed by Daniela Scott to, “resist Trump’s agenda, focus on local, defensive congressional advocacy and progressive values,” (Boone County Indivisible, 2017).

The Resistance

Resistance centered towards revoking the negative connotation that Harrison holds in the mainstream is relatively recent. Within the last 16 years efforts have been made by various groups of people to unite the town and promote diversity. Many claim Harrison is painted in a bad light by media outlets and liken the presence of these hate groups to a small stain on a perfectly good town. The Harrison Community Task Force on Race Relations was established in 2003 on the premise of unity within the town. Their core values are listed as, “equality, opportunity, economy, prosperity, justice, security, dignity, fellowship, community, inclusiveness,” (HCTFRR, 2018). They continuously cite the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and praise peace while walking the road that will lead to racial justice. There are 938 people following their Facebook page. The group meets twice monthly to with purposes such as, “to discuss our response to any negative media about the community’s alleged racism and ways to promote Harrison as a warm and welcoming community to all people of goodwill,” (HCTFRR, 2013).

Boone County Indivisible is one of the latest additions to the Indivisible Project, a movement sweeping the nation in response to the election of Donald Trump as president. This grassroots project strives to see the creation of thousands of small indivisible groups to “elect progressive leaders, realize bold progressive policies, rebuild our democracy, and defeat the Trump agenda,” (Indivisible Organization). In 2018 Daniella Scott formed Boone County Indivisible in an attempt to change the reputation of Harrison. The group has 208 members actively working to combat hate in their hometown.