

# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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social justice and peace - Providing commentary,  
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## **The Green Party and *Labels*** **Nafsi ya Jamii** **By Wilson Riles** **BC Columnist**

Labels are usually paper tags that you can put on or take off whenever it is useful. If they come in the form of a 'tattoo' – where the wearer deeply imprints themselves and, supposedly, psychologically and emotionally identifies with the **symbols** – then indelible impressions, hard to penetrate assumptions, and sometimes-nefarious, mysterious incantations attach. This human phenomenon is a bud of esoteric cultism and is a sign of a kind of elitism and obscurantism through the use of mesmerizing, misdirecting symbolism and terminology. These are the marks of most authoritarian, supremacist, imperial structures; they brand us. We must resist over identification with labels, especially the 'tattooed in' kind.

Depending on the 'frame' that is used, many – maybe an unlimited number – **labels** could be attached to me; some of them I would accept without objection, some I would enthusiastically seek, others I reject wholesale. We take ourselves away from the reality of our humanness and, therefore, our uniqueness if we get *too* caught up in the unreality of either label rejection or label pursuit. Labels have very limited utility in time, limited probity in identifying a conceptual frame, and they have limits in the integrity of information they may provide. In Buddhist talk, it is like getting attached to "the pointing finger" rather than seeing what the finger is pointing at.

When I turned eighteen, I registered as a Republican, initially. I wanted to see who these strange people were; there were very, very few Republicans in my circle of family and acquaintances. I was interested in the information that might flow to me as a Republican.

Not shortly thereafter, I reregistered as a Democrat. I traversed my college years, the 'black is beautiful years,' the anti-Vietnam-war years, the anti-apartheid years, and entered my partisan electoral activist years as a Democrat. I have served in public office as one of those post-sixties, progressive Democrats. Now I am an inactive Green. My **true** political being changed very little during all of these label changes; I did not go through significant political transformations – my knowledge base broadened and deepened and, therefore, increased my ability to discern the most useful 'frame' and organizational framework that best fit with my contemporaneous goals and talents.

Last weekend, the US Green Party (GPUS) held its convention in Baltimore and chose Dr. Jill Stein as its Presidential nominee and an anti-poverty warrior, Cheri Hunkala, as its VP candidate. There was coverage of the convention on CSPAN and on *Democracy Now*; but mostly the convention was consciously ignored. Even though the Green Party will run a more than \$1 million dollar national campaign in more than forty states, it will garner its most public attention by its activities in the close 'swing' states. Presidential candidate Stein is promising a vigorous GPUS effort in these states. Progressive Democrats' confusion and apoplexy will intensify.

I think my fellow Greens are as over identified with their *label* as Democrats and Republicans are with theirs! When it comes to the fight for justice, peace, and community prosperity, what color you 'wear' or whether you identify with a donkey or an elephant matters little. The '*sturm und drang*' of partisan political campaigns is a lot about "signifying nothing." It is a human drama, a play. We are still left with the corporations in charge of our government and of our private lives; we are still stuck in oligarchy. As George S. Davis, The Singing Miner, wrote in the 1930's. "*Another Day Older and Deeper in Debt; St. Peter don't you call me 'cause I can't go. I owe my soul to the Company Store.*"

In a recent article titled, "*So You'd Like Me to Contribute to the Democratic Campaign?*" John Atcheson quoted those lyrics. Atcheson also said: "In 2007, I gave what was for me, a lot. And I ended up feeling like Charlie Brown after Lucy snatches the football away – fooled again...No more...here's what you have to do to get my money this time. And you'd better start now...Stand for something besides compromise." "Confront *But-We-Might-Lose* - Oh, and don't try snapping that football away this time. Even Charlie Brown wises up after he's been screwed enough times."

After so many years in Democrat Party politics, I have "been screwed enough times." But I am not naive either; I know that politics, as it is practiced particularly at the state and national level, is the art of compromise and that our choices – for those of us who choose to choose – may, for a very long time, be the least-of-the-evils. It is the ground-change that must be the priority focus of those of us who work for justice. It is the people's knowledge, skills, hearts, and minds that we must empower, not parties and certainly not labels. *Labels*, arcane symbolism, and the emotional-vortex nature of the '*sturm und drang*' of US presidential campaigns only lead to confusion, distraction, and declining introspection.

**If** my Party, the GPUS, is serious about its Ten Point Plan [*which includes reparations for African Americans*] and is serious about its fight for justice, I would advise it to organize in those areas of the country where the ground of the people is most fertile and build from there – where there is much common ground. I would contend that these fertile areas are **highly diminished** in the swing states! In the swing states the ground is heavily littered with the labels and heavily trampled by Democrat and Republican battles. A relatively weak Green Party – trying to play the same game with skewed rules – will be very ineffective and inefficient. Not much long lasting is going to come of those efforts except for waving the flag (label) and getting national attention by the corporate media to the degree that this becomes a threat to Obama's margins. Targeting those \$1 million plus dollars to 'decided' Democrat and Republican states is a smarter strategy for the long term of the Party. I agree with the late Howard Zinn when he advised supporters of Ralph Nader to vote for Nader **only** in non-swing states – but I agree with the tactic for different reasons. Greens ought not to pour resources into the swing states – because that is not the best place to build the Party or carry the message.

Lastly, I am recommending work in Republican 'decided' states because I think that there may be some common ground found with young Libertarian Republicans. In my view, the differences between Greens and these Libertarians is no wider than those – all on the left – between violence-optional activist and only-nonviolence activists. It is the mesmerizing nature of labels and misperceived symbols that cause humans to talk past each other. Let's drop assumptions. The urgency of these times and revolutionary patience goads us to step forward and to reach out to build a new consensus of human hearts and minds for justice. Dermatologists have found a way to 'erase' skin tattoos; **do we** have a way to 'erase' political 'tattoos' and to freely remove or

attach labels as it is useful? **Are we** resistant to the methods and the emotional incantations of authoritarian structures? I am **permanently** on **only** the human team.

*For Mr. Riles, the following is an explanation of the meaning of the Swahili term "Nafsi ya Jamii":*

*Nafsi ya Jamii is the Swahili phrase that translates in English to "The Soul Community". Real community is the next phase in the process of seeking individual justice through social change. To be guided by the words of Howard Thurman: "Don't ask what the world needs; ask what makes you come alive, and go do that. What the world needs is people who have come alive." Maintain a Seven Generations perspective in all that is done; honoring the generations who've come before and mindful that our actions will have an impact for the generations who come after. Additionally, recognize that all of us are cultural beings; we include deep cultural understanding and experience in all that is done.*

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