

*On the boundary between civilization  
and barbarism*

## Frank Westerman *El Negro and Me*

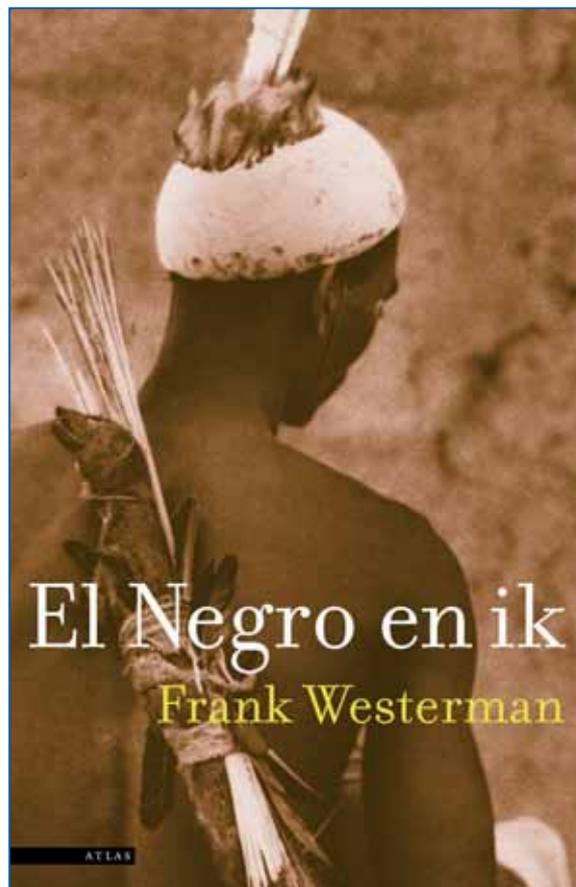
**I**N DECEMBER 1983, Frank Westerman, a 19-year-old student of tropical agriculture, visited a museum in a small Spanish village and found himself eye to eye with a stuffed black man in a glass display case. It was an experience that would remain with him for ever. Twenty years later, by then a well-known journalist and author, he set out to identify the man known simply as El Negro. The Negro. Who was he? When did he live? Where did he come from?

Westerman's painstaking research yielded answers that encompass more than a century and a half. The first reference to El Negro dates from 1831, when he was exported to Paris from Africa, ready stuffed, part of a shipment of exotic animals and birds. He turns out to have come from South Africa and lived to be 27. But even more fascinating for Westerman were the underlying questions that arose. How did he end up in this part of the world, preserved like a prized animal? And what kind of thinking led to his bizarre fate?

Westerman became captivated by the broader history of colonialism and racism, the story of Europe's imagined superiority to the rest of the world. It was a history in which he would later play a brief role himself, in a more enlightened period, as a young idealist whose dreams were quickly shattered by the realities of aid work in developing countries. The book describes this experience as well, hence the title, *El Negro and Me*; two stories on the same theme, intriguing biography and candid autobiography, travel literature and historiography combined.

The clever way these strands are woven together makes *El Negro and Me* read like a very personal history of the civilization of 'old Europe', answering many old questions while subtly suggesting incisive new ones. Are we really so certain where the boundary lies between civilization and barbarism? Does Europe, in an era of development aid, not continue to place itself above other civilizations?

*El Negro's* 'life after death' ended in 2000, when 'Europe' tried to do him justice after all by interring him in African soil. Both storylines lead inexorably to post-apartheid South Africa, where the subjects of race relations, culture and civilization are examined in the harsh light of today's reality.



Frank Westerman is the author of *The Bridge over the Tara*, *Srebrenica: The blackest scenario*, *The Republic of Grain* and *Engineers of the Soul*. The last two books were awarded prestigious prizes in The Netherlands and became bestsellers.

THE PRESS ON *ENGINEERS OF THE SOUL*:

It is cultural history, political history, history of mentality, a travel journal and 'the making of' all in one ... surprising and original, meticulously researched and well written.

DE VOLKSKRANT

A dramaturgic masterpiece.

FRANKFURTER RUNDSCHAU

The best book I've read in years about Russia.

VLADIMIR KAMINER



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by Frank Westerman

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## Prologue

**I**s it possible to determine the cause of death of someone who died more than a hundred and fifty years ago?

A nine-strong autopsy team tried in June 1993. On the table was the well-preserved body of an anonymous African who had died in either 1830 or 1831 – “Object 1004”.

As a precaution, to avoid any semblance of prejudice, the white medical experts – forensic anthropologists, radiologists and toxicologists – took a quotation from Martin Luther King as the motto of their report: “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal.’”

They set to work cautiously, starting with an external examination. Every square inch of the body was tapped and palpated and studied under a magnifying glass. On the left side, from hip to armpit, there seemed to be a long scar – like the zip of a wetsuit. It was an incision, shallow and sewn up with a basting stitch. The only other mutilation was the absence of a piece of foreskin: the deceased was circumcised. The rest of the body was free of abrasions, bruising and other injuries.

The report summarises: “We failed to observe any signs of external violence that might indicate a traumatic death.”

Analysis of the teeth showed that the man was twenty-seven years old – with a margin of error of plus or minus three years. He was small: alive he must have stood four foot five, four seven at the most. His toes were splayed, which may have indicated that he covered great distances barefoot.

Dermatological investigation showed that the skin had been tanned like the hide of a calf. The pores contained an arsenic residue that had affected the pigment – bleaching the skin. To counteract this process, several layers of shoe polish had been applied.

The radiologists slid the body into the X-ray machine in the Dr. Josef Trueta Hospital of the provincial Catalan city of Girona. Mounted on a light box, the X-

rays showed that the spinal column had been replaced by two metal bars. Like a concrete sculpture, this man had been reinforced by a pair of iron rods extending from heel to crown.

At the level of the collarbone, the radiographic examination revealed a wooden crosspiece serving as shoulders, with the authentic arm bones (*humerus, radius, ulna*) suspended from it. Muscle fibre, organs and fat layers were all absent; the body was stuffed with straw.

The team praised the work of the taxidermist. Although the man's backbone had been removed, his body was still "perfectly proportioned".

To determine the race of Object 1004, the post-mortem investigators resorted to anthropometry. This technique for classifying human ethnicity assumes the existence of three main groups: the Caucasian, Mongoloid and Negroid races. On the basis of a dozen criteria, including the cephalic index (breadth of the skull divided by its length, times 100) and the morphology of the nasal cavity (teardrop, round or oval), the research team observed that the body they were investigating was that of "a Negroid with the characteristics of an African Bushman".

An indication, and the only one, of the possible cause of death was the clubbing of the finger- and toenails, which suggested the possibility of pneumonia with a fatal outcome.

To determine the DNA profile, the medical team took a sample from the sparse organic material (to be precise: from the pubic hair). This genetic code is not included in the report, but is stored in a safe in the Girona town hall.

## In the Human Room

Banyoles, 1983

Hitchhiking is like bullfighting. The hitcher braces himself on the side of the road – leaning forward, but proud – and holds a cardboard flap close to his body. The car charges up and roars past. And if the driver does take you somewhere, you have no idea where you'll end up.

In December 1983, I was hitchhiking in Spain. Together with a friend (like me, a first-year university student), I sauntered along the parking lane in front of a ceramics wholesaler. The low sun was shining in our eyes, feeble enough for us to look back without blinking. A red glow lit up the hectometre posts alongside the road and the stacks of pots and amphoras behind us. Forelegs stretched out in front of them, two plaster lions were guarding the entrance to Cerámica García S.A..

We were nineteen. What did we care that we weren't making any progress? Or that the bed showroom, the polytunnels and the trucker's café made the outskirts of Girona look scruffy and run-down? In the distance the teeth of the Pyrenees were snapping at the sky and that was a spectacular sight. We took turns at holding up the sign with our destination, FIGUERES – concentrated and hopeful at first, but after a couple of hours imploring and increasingly theatrical. The passing drivers tapped their steering wheels or their foreheads. Spain was a hopeless country for hitchhiking, populated by xenophobes who moved around in the isolation of tin shells. Barcelona to Girona alone (less than a hundred kilometres) had taken us eight hours.

As the sun went down, the temperature followed and suddenly a cold wind was blowing right through our coats. When a Renault 4 finally skidded to a halt, a good distance past the lions, we rushed up to it with our gear. A bearded face emerged through the driver's window. He wasn't going to Figueres, he wasn't even going in that direction (I made out the word *dirección*) but, if we liked, he could give us a ride to Banyoles.

We got in without hesitating. Me in the front, to keep the conversation rolling. I had spent a term chewing on Spanish words in a Dutch language laboratory. *Cuanto antes*, the method was called, “As fast as possible”. But listening to a cassette through a pair of headphones and endlessly repeating the recipe for gazpacho was not enough to learn Spanish. For that, you had to go to Spain itself.

With a stiff lower jaw, I said that it was getting cold, especially with the wind.

“The *tramontana*,” the driver said, sliding the heating lever from blue to red. “It blasts down off the snow on the mountains.”

Our driver looked wild, as if he was the one who had been standing there hitchhiking. The lines in his face radiated out in all directions around the tip of his nose. Even the veins in the corners of his eyes accentuated that star shape.

He was called Ricardo and he was a geologist or, more precisely, a vulcanologist, employed as a supervisor in Garrotxa Volcanic Park. Did we know that the region we were driving into was pocked with more than thirty-four extinct craters?

It was news to us.

“Lake Banyoles is directly connected to the volcanoes. It is fed from the depths.”

Scarcely five minutes before we had learned of the existence of the city of Banyoles (or was it a village?), and now it turned out that there was a lake with the same name. I got the impression that our driver was glad to be carrying us away from Figueres.

As if he could read my thoughts, he said, “And what made you come up with the idea of going to Figueres?”

I mentioned the Salvador Dalí museum. “My friend is studying at the art academy.” *Acadèmia del arte*, I heard myself saying.

The vulcanologist didn’t respond. Perhaps he preferred the realism of forests to the surrealism of melting watches.

After a minute or two of silence, Ricardo remarked, “Your Castilian is not bad at all.”

It sounded like a compliment, but to be honest I didn't understand. Castilian? Was there something funny about my accent? Or did he mean Catalan?

“Castilian,” he repeated. “The language of Madrid.”

“Right,” I said dully – fully aware of how I had just demonstrated my naivety. Flames shot up from under my collar and, while I looked away at a hillside ribbed with vines, it began to dawn on me why the Spanish I had practised with such enthusiasm provoked annoyance as well as sympathy. If I asked for directions to Gerona, I would receive pointed instructions for the road to Girona. The Catalans were evidently so proud of their own language that they preferred to refer to Spanish as Castilian, thus downgrading it from a national to a regional language; you had Catalonia with Barcelona as its capital, and then there was Castile, centred on Madrid. In other words, two distinct and *equal* entities.

“Exactly,” the vulcanologist said. He peered into his side mirror before overtaking a truck. The road became windier and started to climb as well – there was a danger of deer for the next three kilometres. Ricardo told me that he worked for a mountaineering magazine. It was published in Catalan and had existed since 1925. “Under Franco we always featured a monthly report about a ski slope or a new climb. We made sure that the subject on the cover was as innocuous as possible. That was crucial to being able to continue appearing in Catalan.” In reality, he explained, the cover article was just that, a cover, because inside the magazine the editors created a semi-legal sanctuary to keep Catalan culture alive. Between maps of cross-country ski routes and black-and-white photos of refuge huts, they hid stories about folklore and archaeology, sometimes even about the civil war.

“Even though Franco has been dead for eight years, we still have the status of a resistance paper,” said Ricardo.

I had read George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* at school and knew that in 1937 the Generalissimo had called in the German Condor Legion to carpet bomb Guernica in order to break the morale of the Basques. But I had never realised

that Franco had also combated separatism by silencing the regional languages, in this case Catalan.

“Ten years ago books in Catalan were almost impossible to find around here. It was contraband,” said Ricardo. “You had to cross the Pyrenees to get them in Perpignan.”

We passed a factory with CHOCOLATES TORRAS on the roof in red neon. The next moment we were driving, with no apparent reduction in speed, through the outskirts of Banyoles. I remember a roundabout in front of the local hospital with an outsized concrete aspirin in the middle. Otherwise lots of plane trees, skilfully pruned and polled, and an ancient Plaza Major where the local youths gathered around their scooters.

It was obvious that we would be spending the night in Banyoles. Ricardo dropped us off on a corner in the middle of town and apologised for not being able to take us to Figueres. “But if you’re still interested in culture,” he said in parting, “Banyoles has a fabulous natural history museum. The oldest in the province and famed for its stuffed Negro.”

He actually used the diminutive: *negrito*.

Art wasn’t really my thing. My room in the student’s house *was* decorated with a poster of M.C. Escher’s perpetual watercourse, and Magritte’s pipe with “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe*” written under it was obviously brilliant, but to me most artists came over as ego-trippers, and if they did aspire to some kind of role in society, they seldom lived up to it. No matter how often we discussed it on the road, my friend and I disagreed on this point with all our hearts. I was just different to him; my goals were more down to earth. I wanted to become a development worker, someone who made himself useful by conveying practical knowledge to the oppressed and exploited. The course I had started, tropical land development, produced agricultural engineers who designed and built irrigation systems in Third World countries.

I had decided on development aid at secondary school, in circumstances that seemed to leave little room for a more casual “do something you enjoy”. It was related to my Calvinist education: thorough and austere. SO THEY WILL KNOW YOU was written on the wall of the assembly hall in cast-iron letters. In every classroom the day began at quarter past eight with a Bible reading. Day in, day out, we were told to love our neighbours and turn the left cheek to those who struck us on the right. I had embraced this pacifism and could get terribly angry at teachers who preached Christian charity while simultaneously justifying Ronald Reagan’s Star Wars policies. That was hypocritical. I thought you needed to be consistent – by renouncing *all* violence, that was why I wore overalls (a statement in itself) with a broken rifle badge just above the buckle on the left strap. It was around this time that the first Palestinian scarves appeared at our school. We boycotted South African grapefruit, ate muesli biscuits in the teashop and discussed our solidarity with the Nicaraguan revolution – and for us all these likes and dislikes were interrelated.

Looking back, it was the moment that the call up for the army medical fell into my letterbox that decided things. As I picked up the card from the Ministry of Defence, it was already clear to me that, rather than a test of my health, I was facing a test of character.

On the morning of the medical I naturally pulled on the same outfit I always wore – a consequence of wanting to be consistent.

“Everyone undress,” was the first instruction I had to accept from a uniformed soldier. “Keep your jeans and underpants on. I’ll see you in the gym in three minutes.”

With the slow inevitability of an oil tanker, I saw the following scene bearing down on me: the giggles about that one pair of overalls between all those bare chests.

“This is no laughing matter,” said the army doctor from under his moustache. He lined us up, from large to small, and walked down the row for a cursory inspection of our physiques. A pigeon-breasted boy was given a shove as a sign

to go. I was called out to the front. “What’s this?” Without giving me a chance to open my mouth, the doctor pulled down both straps of my overalls.

Later, he took me aside in his check-up room. “So you don’t want to be in the army?”

I was lying on my back on the bed, in my underpants. “I want to do alternative service,” I said.

The army doctor pushed my knees up to my chin one at a time, listening to see if anything cracked. “Exciting! Two years of pencil pushing in the municipal archives – that appeals to you, does it?”

“No,” I said. “I want to go to Africa.”

“To Africa?”

“Or Latin America. Development aid, at least.”

In retrospect, it was that statement at that time which caused a rather murky idea to precipitate as solid lumps of conviction.

Actually ending up in the municipal museum was something we owed to the schoolgirls of Banyoles – even more than to Ricardo. After a breakfast of coffee and *churros*, we had lingered on the pavement in front of Pension Comas the following morning. Left or right? The roofs of Banyoles gleamed in the wintry light – there wasn’t a living soul anywhere. This set remained undisturbed for a few seconds then suddenly filled with the shrieks and giggles of an emptying classroom. Girls with plaits jostled for position under a CHOCOLATES TORRAS awning before spreading out in all directions with steaming cups in their hands.

Walking towards them, I read Darder Museum of Natural History on the façade opposite the school. The entrance was around the corner, behind a trio of leafless planes. The trees looked like candelabras with bent, bony arms sticking up in the air, almost as if they were angry. We fumbled with the door, but the museum was closed.

“Wait,” shouted one of the schoolgirls. “Señora Lola has the key.” She swung a plait over one shoulder and disappeared into a glass-fronted hairdressing salon,

leaving us behind near a bas-relief on the wall. The inscription said, DR. FRANCESCO DARDER (1851-1918). And added, VETERINARIAN, FOUNDER OF THE BARCELONA ZOO. A gentleman was shown in profile wearing a fashionable, elegant hat. Dr. Darder had an angular nose, crow's feet from eyes to sideburns and an intense look as if he were delighting in something hidden from our view. The museum existed by the grace of his private collection of stuffed animals.

“He's real, you know,” shouted a bright ten-year-old.

“Who's real?”

“El Negro!” Her voice blared out over the square – accompanied by the snorts and laughter of her friends.

The next instant Señora Lola stepped out of the hairdressing salon with a cardigan draped over her shoulders. A fragile lady with a pointy chin with a few single hairs growing on it, she turned a key ring around in her fingers like a rosary. Señora Lola opened the museum, sold us two fifty-peseta tickets and pointed us in the direction of the reptiles.

“That way,” she ordered. “Then go through the rooms clockwise.”

We strode into the first room, trailed our fingers over the crest of an iguana and knocked on the giant tortoises hung up in order of size on the wall. At knee height crocodiles were swarming around a sign that said, DON'T TOUCH, as if they – *snap!* – could take off your hand.

After the reptiles came the birds. I remember a collection of ostrich eggs as big as cobblestones – more impressive than the accompanying ostriches. The more fragile small fry (hummingbirds, canaries, parakeets) were crowded into a glass aviary. Nice for ornithologists, maybe, but it left us cold. We were on our way to the Human Room, an annex of the Mammal Room. Past a climbing wall with apes and the skeleton of a gorilla, our merriment gave way to a slight shudder.

There he was: the stuffed Negro of Banyoles. A spear in his right hand, a shield in his left. Alert and bending slightly, shoulders raised. Half naked, with just a raffia decoration and a coarse orange loincloth. His skin was inhumanly black. I hadn't known that people that black existed, that small and scrawny

either. El Negro turned out to be an adult male, skin and bones, who hardly came up to your elbow. He was standing in the middle of the carpet in a glass case. A plate had been screwed onto the plinth: BUSHMAN FROM THE KALAHARI.

More strongly than with the crocodiles, I had the feeling he could start moving. Or turn his eyes to look at me for a second. In reprimand? Because I had come to ogle him?

This was not Madame Tussaud's. I was not staring at an illusion of authenticity; this Bushman was neither a horrifically effective cast nor a coincidental discovery like a bog body or some other kind of mummy. He was a human being, skinned and then stuffed like an animal. Someone must have done that and obviously the relationships dictated that the taxidermist was a white European and his object a black African. The reverse was unimaginable. I flushed and felt the roots of my hair prickling – simply from a diffuse sense of shame.

Señora Lola didn't have an explanation. She didn't even have a catalogue or a brochure. She tapped a carousel postcard stand and stared at me through her glasses. I took the only card of the Bushman and read on the back: *Museo Darder – Banyoles. Bechuana.*

“Bechuana?”

Señora Lola kept staring at me with that glassy look. Head back, chin jutting forward. “The cards are forty pesetas each,” she said.

I bought two.

A week later, back in the language laboratory, I looked Bechuana up in the dictionary. It turned out to mean an inhabitant of Botswana or, more precisely, a member of Botswana's most numerous population group, the Tswana. Not a Bushman from the Kalahari at all, although most of that desert does lie in Botswana. The Bushmen were actually the least populous people of Botswana, they had virtually died out.

It annoyed me that one of the two was obviously wrong: either the inscription on the plinth or the caption on the postcard. The more I thought about it, the

stranger it seemed: a human being was nailed to a wooden plinth as a “Bushman from the Kalahari” and you could send his image around the world by way of holiday greetings as a “Bechuana”. Which of the two was he? What had happened to him? I wondered who had mounted his body and how he had ended up in god-forsaken Banyoles. Alive? Dead?

The uncertainty about his background illustrated the way he had been stripped of his identity. Along with his insides, he had been robbed of his personality. He no longer had a name, and no one knew the date of his birth or death. All of his characteristics had been lost, so that now there was even confusion about which people he belonged to. For the schoolgirls of Banyoles, and for Ricardo as well, he was simply El Negro. Not: *A* Negro. No, *The* Negro.

I let the consequences of that fact sink in. Blurring the memory of one specific black man’s past had transformed him into *the* Negro. More or less the same thing had happened to the Unknown Soldier. But that comparison didn’t take you anywhere because the differences overshadowed the similarities: the bodily remains of the Unknown Soldier were treated with the utmost dignity and laid to rest under the marble of a magnificent tomb; he was “one of us”. The body of El Negro stood upright in a glass case; for an admission fee of fifty pesetas you could gawk at him as a piece of *exotica*. I had done that too – but not without shame.

I thought: imagine if someone could find out who El Negro was. Then he would become human again and could no longer be exhibited like an object – or an animal. I discussed the idea with my friend from the art academy, who encouraged me to research it further. In turn, I suggested that he could turn it into an art project. We had one of those evenings when you feel like you’re coming up with one brilliant idea after the other (fantasising about a photo series printed in negative to make El Negro appear white, and also about a “kidnapping”, after which he would appear in a number of different locations.) But we couldn’t decide exactly which message we wanted to convey. A statement against racism, that much was certain. But was a prank the right way to go about it?

Something less convoluted – that might even serve the same purpose – was to simply carry on studying. I had chosen a technical course, but more strongly than before I realised that there was much more to tropical land development than diverting water into the desert. It irrevocably confronted you with the chasm between whites and non-whites, and I thought: bridging that gap was quite possibly more important than irrigating the fields. All I had to do, I thought, was make sure I became a damn good development worker.