

*Two*

## Dead End



*The White/Black Dichotomy*

### The Shahid Case

*Was Jesus white?* This may seem like a preposterous question, but in 1913 the federal district judge Henry Augustus Middleton Smith needed to devise an answer to this divine conundrum. Faras Shahid, a native of Syria, a Christian, and “in color, he is about that of a walnut,” proudly stood before the Eastern District Court of South Carolina with a simple request: I come from a part of the world that gave birth to the son of God; can I be an American? Am I one of the “free white persons” eligible for citizenship under the laws of the United States of America?<sup>1</sup>

Judge Smith started his answer by complaining about the law. “The statute as it now stands is most uncertain, ambiguous and difficult of both construction and application.” Some judges, for example, used the word *Caucasian* to describe white people; but Judge Smith correctly stressed that the word *Caucasian*—not to mention the word *race*—became popular long after the Founding Fathers decided to exclude everyone except “free white persons.”

Since neither the law nor science offered the judge any sensible

guidelines, he decided to rely on conventional American prejudices. “The meaning of free white persons is to be such as would naturally have been given to it when used in the first naturalization act of 1790.” Thus, the judge artfully drew a circle around Europe and argued that only Europeans could be white in 1790 and hence in 1913. Smith’s “construction of the statute would exclude from naturalization all inhabitants of Asia, Australia, the South Seas, the Malaysian Islands and territories, and of South America, who are not of European descent, or of mixed European and African descent. Under this definition the inhabitants of Syria would be excluded.”

The judge understood the implication of his decision. The son of God could not become an American citizen. However, “if the people of the United States, through their representatives in Congress, see fit to exclude by law from citizenship the most worthy and spiritual inhabitants of the globe, it is not for the courts by judicial legislation to gainsay that law, and substitute for it what in their opinion may be more appropriate and reasonable legislation.”<sup>2</sup>

In ruling against Shahid, Smith enforced the notion that the United States was a white, Christian nation capable of excluding even Jesus Christ. His was the conventional wisdom in 1913. And it still is today; because, just like the Honorable Henry Augustus Middleton Smith, we still have no idea who, exactly, is a white person; nor do we know, ninety-three years later, what color a Syrian is. “Common sense” prejudices still dominate in part because, in 2006, many Arab Americans still clamor for a separate minority status; to American eyes, they are neither white nor black. Instead, they are “invisible,” and many of them resent it. Meanwhile, many of the rest of us try to be color-blind even as we simultaneously use the white/black dichotomy to box out millions of recent immigrants from non-European nations.

The white/black dichotomy was and is the crucial axis on which old-stock Americans base their negative judgments of fifty million none-of-the-above immigrants and seven million fusions. This dichotomy and its exclusionary mandates explode the historical and contemporary legitimacy of the melting pot metaphor.

So, before we examine the mutinous responses of immigrants and fusions, we will first analyze the social constructs that, in the process of

assimilation, immigrants are supposed to embrace. Those white and black constructs often produce what sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann call “cultural dehumanization”; in everyday life, a set of cultural beliefs become so taken for granted that people forget or never learn that all ideas and values are only human creations. Like they do for the weather, people stoically accept the beliefs they receive rather than learn that nothing is set in stone, even the white/black dichotomy.

Sociology teaches that all social constructs can be challenged or even demolished. But to do that in an effective manner we must appreciate the origins of the racial beliefs created by white people and, astonishingly enough, still passionately embraced by black people. As Debra Dickerson stresses in *The End of Blackness*, “no one believes as fervently in the one drop rule as blacks do.”<sup>3</sup>

### In Plain Black and White

*The journalist* George Washington Cable saw her on an Alabama train in September 1884. “Neatly and tastefully dressed in cool fresh muslins,” the black mother and her three- or four-year-old daughter entered the train, squeezed through to the Negroes-only car, and, “very still and quiet,” sat in two corner seats until a “revolting” group of chained black convicts interrupted the other passengers as they came on board. Headed for the mines, some two hundred miles ahead, the twenty or so bound and cuffed convicts threatened to wake the child and anyone else on board with the loud “clanking of their shackles and chains.”

These prisoners wore no striped uniforms. Dressed in “filthy rags,” they instantly filled the car with “vile odors.” A white onlooker noted that it “stank insufferably,” returning to the safety of his car. The mother approached the conductor, requesting permission to move to the white car. He refused her a passport, explaining that moving would only be possible if she worked as a servant for a white family. Instead, she and her child remained, along with the convicts, prisoners of hate.<sup>4</sup>

In 1884, the American system of apartheid made absolutely no allowance for simple common decency. “The hot branding iron of ignominious distinctions” was as fundamental a feature of life in Alabama as southern hospitality. Writing in the *Century*, a national monthly, Cable courageously challenged the system imposed by whites on blacks, calling southern customs “crude, invidious, humiliating and tyrannous.” Only “driveling imbeciles” defended segregation, an evil that extended its tentacles to every state in the union. Cable listened to Yankees’ pious excuses, but, as he reminded his readers, if they craved honesty, they should always remember this fact: “These six million freedmen are dominated by nine million whites immeasurably stronger than they, *backed by the virtual consent of thirty-odd millions more.*”

The dress and comportment of the woman and child on the train clearly signaled their middle-class status. Yet the apartheid system cut six million blacks down to the exact same level. Neither social class, gender, age, education, religion, nor any other variable mattered when the conductor played the white trump card.

Cable wanted to know why. What produced this world of “ignominious distinctions”? To understand it, an outsider needed to know that a Negro “came to our shores a naked, brutish, unclean, captive, pagan savage, to be and remain a kind of connecting link between man and the beasts of burden.” While savages always had trouble when they confronted civilized people, their interactions in the New World produced unique problems. Southerners manfully represented “a superb race of masters”; first in the colonies and then in the United States, the best met the worst, with no one giving forethought to the consequences of sustained contact between the polar opposites on the evolutionary tree.

Cable forcefully opposed prejudice against African Americans. His 1885 article provoked immediate and sustained controversy. In explaining the system, however, he used only one number. “As a social factor he was intended to be as purely zero as the brute at the other end of his plow line.” Every now and then, the masters did “mingle” their blood with that of the savages; whites raped or otherwise force-

fully imposed themselves on black women, but this “worked no change in the sentiment; one, two, four, eight, multiplied or divided into zero still gave zero for the result.”

Negros were human zeros; no dose of white blood ever changed their being and nothingness. But after the Civil War ended, six million former slaves were suddenly endowed with the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. How in this new climate could whites keep mother and daughter in the black car? How could they justify the forced intermingling of a decent, law-abiding woman with a group of convicts?

Cable made a point that is crucial for any understanding of our cultural legacy and its twenty-first-century effects. The new system—Jim Crow—*dramatically intensified* the already divisive consequences of the white/black dichotomy. For all its horror, the plantation system sometimes sanctioned a “patriarchal tie and its really tender and benevolent sentiment of dependence and protection.” War destroyed that sentiment and nothing replaced it; a Negro was now less than a zero. Instead of the Civil War making the two-color dichotomy less important, Jim Crow made it more so. Generations of old and new immigrant Americans would learn to rely on white and black as the essential guideposts of thought and action. Post-Civil War America now devised an endless series of rules that deliberately demeaned blacks and elevated the status of even the most contemptible white people.

Henry Grady, the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, responded to Cable’s critique with an article entitled “In Plain Black and White: A Reply to Mr. Cable.”<sup>5</sup> Grady, the self-appointed representative of the “New South,” welcomed the opportunity to explain postwar southern manners. In preaching constitutional equality, Cable placed the laws of man over the laws of God. If people mixed whenever they wished, “mere prejudice would not long survive perfect equality and social intermingling; and the prejudice once gone, intermarrying would begin.”

Grady openly walked into a minefield of contradiction and confusion. If a God-given instinct prevented “intermingling,” how could it occur? And was Grady trying to prevent interaction or preserve prejudice? Apparently, despite our God-given dose of instinctual resistance,

people proved to be so unreliable that they actually got to know one another, with the awful prospect that “mere prejudice would not long survive.” This possibility petrified the New South, so Grady made a transparent statement of fact. “We add in perfect frankness that if no such instinct existed, or if the South had reasonable doubts of its existence, it would, by every means in its power, so strengthen the race prejudice that it would do the work and hold the stubbornness and strength of instinct.”

Henry Grady succeeded. His ideas are still central in our cultural inheritance 120 years later. Grady’s template of separation still functions, all too often, with the force of instinct, an “instinct” based in distinctions of white and black.

Consider the behavior of the actor Michael Richards, from the television show *Seinfeld*, when, in late 2006, he spewed racial venom at a heckler in a California comedy store. He could have called the fellow a jerk or a fool. Instead, he saw color, reached into his cultural pre-conscious, and reacted with hate. This is the dehumanization highlighted by sociology. Richards used skin color as a traffic sign. He obeyed the racial rules, poisonously attached to the cement, like beliefs, that keeps the signs in place. When a contrite Richards later sought explanations for his contemptible behavior, he only needed to look at history. His racial tirade shows that, in 2006, the words *white* and *black* still function as echoes for the beliefs of men like Henry Grady. Forget that fact and we forget the first reason that many none-of-the-above Americans argue that the dichotomy is a national dead end. *Thinking in white and black perpetuates, however faintly and unintentionally, the beliefs, values, and practices of the very worst representatives of U.S. culture.*

Slavery gave expression to the dichotomy, but after the Civil War the New South and the rest of the United States significantly strengthened the old prejudices by using the words *white* and *black* as guideposts to “intermingling.” The hate embodied in the distinctions has certainly dissipated, but the cultural poles of our thinking remain, as Henry Grady put it, in plain black and white.

Even if we all move to the center, the poles set the limits of our sociological imaginations. Thus, none-of-the-above immigrants argue that

we need to consider bulldozing the poles, if only because every time an immigrant learns to think in white and black he or she symbolically sustains, in the new millennium, the future redesigned in the New South.

### Mountains, Myths, and the Concept of Race

*German naturalist* J. F. Blumenbach liked skulls. He precisely and lovingly scrutinized their every nook and cranny, their shapes, their colors, their folds, their size, and their capacity. When he examined bony remains, he rigorously performed every available analytical test. Having paid his debt to science, Blumenbach let his imagination run wild, right to the Caucasus Mountains. Like Christian theologians who once argued that the earth was the center of the universe, Blumenbach pointed to his beloved mass of rocks as the probable origin of all humankind. The Caucasus was the racial axis of the universe, and its southern slopes “produced the most beautiful race of men.”<sup>6</sup>

Of course, Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, or Mexican people embraced their own standards of beauty. And scholars studying other collections of skulls produced different results. But Blumenbach’s pictures were worth far more than words. In an 1865 edition of the *Natural Varieties of Mankind*, the five black and white skulls form a racial pyramid. On the top sits the head of a “Caucasian,” named after “the ark of Noah” once stranded on Mount Ararat. Presumably from the mountain’s southern slopes, the skull was presented as the apex of a scale of “degeneration”; people slowly got uglier (not less intelligent or morally deficient) as one moved from the Caucasian peaks to the Oriental and African flatland.<sup>7</sup>

In the mid-nineteenth century, Blumenbach’s concept of race fit like a white glove over the ignominious distinctions established by slavery and the Jim Crow system. Science suddenly provided powerful new reasons to cherish the old dichotomy of black and white.

Judges used the new “knowledge” to justify a wave of segregationist decisions. When Congress established the first naturalization laws in 1790, it limited citizenship to free white persons. Neither the modern concept of race nor even the word *Caucasian* existed at the time. But,

eighty years later, educated Americans accepted the concept of multiple races in general and Caucasians in particular. When a judge now considered someone for citizenship, he needed to know if whites and Caucasians were synonymous. Did race trump skin color as a cause of exclusion? How many races were there? Did Congress mean to say no to everyone except those who traced their roots to the southern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains? Or, was the label “white” even more inclusive?

When Ah Yup, “a native and citizen of the empire of China,” applied for naturalization in 1878, he became the human guinea pig for a forty-year series of “prerequisite cases.”<sup>8</sup> As Judge Sawyer of the Circuit Court of California stressed, this was “the first application made by a native Chinaman”; the courts needed to tell the nation “if a person of the Mongolian race is a white person within the meaning of the statute.”

Judge Sawyer began by affirming the problem with the color white. It “constituted a very indefinite description of a class of persons, where none can be said to be literally white, and those called white may be found of every shade from the lightest blonde to the most swarthy brunette.” That said, Judge Sawyer turned to “common popular speech” and argued that, “as ordinarily used everywhere in the United States, one would scarcely fail to understand that the party employing the words ‘white person’ would intend a person of the Caucasian race.”

Sawyer used Blumenbach as his scientific standard for defining whiteness, slipping the looser-fitting label of Caucasian over the indefiniteness of human color; he summarily rejected Ah Yup’s petition because “I am of the opinion that a native of China, of the Mongolian race, is not a white person within the meaning of the act of Congress.”

In making this decision, Sawyer formally initiated the legal creation of millions of “others,” millions of what we today call none-of-the-aboves. After the Civil War, persons of African ancestry acquired the right to citizenship. But by limiting that right to Caucasians and people of African descent judges like Sawyer helped create a culture that deliberately excluded what Blumenbach called the “uglier” races. Conventional wisdom soon came to regard lesser races as such inferior peoples that they needed to be prevented from infecting Caucasians.

In many of these cases scientific race trumped color; in others, such as the Shahid case involving Jesus, color trumped race. But no matter which set of prejudices won out, racial thinking was woven ever more deeply into the fabric of American culture. At least seven generations of Americans learned that races actually exist, a reality that makes it much harder to dispense with white and black thinking. As we will see subsequently, race is a scientific fallacy, yet every time we use the word we reaffirm the supposed distinctions between whites, blacks, and other races; worse still, these supposed differences are too often translated into value judgments of those around us.

Like Jim Crow, the idea of race reinforces and rejuvenates the thinking of slave masters because it legitimates the idea of homogeneous, biological groups. Slavers created the white/black dichotomy, but Blumenbach and the social Darwinists claim to have traced its roots back to the laws of nature and the survival of the fittest. The worst people got the best scientific support for the ugliest prejudices of American society.<sup>9</sup>

As journalist Ellis Cose wrote at the turn of the twenty-first century: “For most of us, race is simply accepted as a given, and on faith, no more subject to questioning than the reality of our existence.”<sup>10</sup>

To the extent that Cose is correct, all Americans remain prisoners of a concept devised by a man fixated on the southern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains. So, fusions and none-of-the-above immigrants argue that we do have a choice: blindly follow Blumenbach or use our minds to replace race with a concept that accurately reflects the nature of the globe’s more than six billion inhabitants.

### The Concept of Race

*The idea of race* is rooted in the unprovable assumption that once upon a time “huge numbers of people, distributed over broad masses of land, were biologically fairly homogeneous within their group and different from the (relatively few) other groups.”<sup>11</sup> Make this assumption and you instantly make another: people are mixed, mongrels, impure, half-breeds, or mestizo because you unite two supposedly homoge-

neous groups. Over time, half-breeds became the worst made-in-America creation of all. And the problems of mixed-race students trace their roots to the erroneous idea of racially homogenous groups.

In the United States, color remains the principal standard by which people separate themselves into homogenous, racial groups. Color retains its hold even though molecular biologists have indisputably shown that, of our fifty thousand to one hundred thousand gene pairs, less than fifty have anything to do with the color of our skin. Some biologists put the number of important pairs at six to ten. Even figuring conservatively, that translates into a conception of race based on .001 percent of our total genetic endowment.<sup>12</sup>

From the dawn of racial thinking, the crucial question has always been the same: what physical traits (skin color, eyes, height, and hair) are most important in defining racial groups? Where do you draw the line between one group and another? Blumenbach posited five races, but other systems have described anywhere from twelve to one hundred. The breaks are as subjective as the criteria employed, and all categorizations fail because it is impossible to find the homogeneous biological groups assumed by the race concept. Estonians in eastern Europe boast blood types that are “nearly identical” to those of the Japanese. A study of Germans found that their blood types turned out to be “virtually the same” as a large sample of New Guineans. And 70–80 percent of light-skinned Scots, dark-skinned central Africans, and brown-skinned Aborigines all have type O blood.<sup>13</sup> For homogeneous groups to exist, genetic endowments need to be “concordant.” For example, American thinking teaches that dark skin color and curly hair go together. However, many Indians from South Asia have dark skin and straight hair.

There is frequently more variation within supposed races than between them. In 1931, a researcher spilled phenylthiocarbamide (PTC) on a laboratory floor. Some of his colleagues instantly complained about a bitter taste in their mouths; others were ready to rush to lunch. Eventually anthropological research was able to divide the world into those who sense PTC and those who do not. The tasters make up anywhere from 15–40 percent of the population of Asia, but

Japan has twice as many nontasters as China and more than three times as many as Malaysia. Meanwhile, the percentages of American and Japanese tasters are quite similar.<sup>14</sup>

The problem with using skin color or eye shape as racial indicators is that the traits we see do not match up with the traits that remain hidden to the naked eye. Despite superficial differences, humans are remarkably similar. “All humans are identical for fully 75% of the human genome. This is a higher percentage than in chimpanzees.”<sup>15</sup> In a world devoted to the truth, we might regard our physical differences as magnificent expressions of an underlying, indissoluble unity. Instead, we perpetuate the poisonous white/black dichotomy.

In the United States, whites and blacks alike often learn to see Africa as full of black people. Sometimes they are savages; sometimes they are civilized, but, whatever their statuses, Africans are black. Yet, as Jared Diamond notes in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, when the European colonists first invaded Africa, the continent actually harbored significant somatic differences; and if we recall that “one-quarter of the world’s languages are spoken only in Africa, the truth is that *no other continent approaches this human diversity*.” We forget or never learn that Winston Churchill and his fellow colonists killed off most of the Hottentots, whose real name is the Khoisans. Some still live in southern Africa, where their yellowish skins and “almost oriental” features mock the notion of a one-color continent. Egyptians, Moroccans, and Algerians defy racial stereotypes as well, and 250 miles to the southeast of Africa is the island of Madagascar, home to a significant number of people from Borneo. Somehow, seafarers from Indonesia crossed 4,000 miles of ocean, settled in Madagascar, and created a fused group of people whose features suggest Southeast Asia rather than the color and facial homogeneity taught in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

Race is a very expensive illusion. It nourishes and sustains the false assumption of homogeneity, masking ignorance—witness Africa—about the world that is actually there. We inherited a mountain of Caucasian nonsense, but even scholars who agree that race is a social construct see radical change as a utopian dream. From this perspective race is such an axis of modern thought that we cannot get beyond

it. Our only sensible option is to accept race “as a dimension of human representation rather than an illusion.”<sup>17</sup>

This is dehumanized, sociological nonsense. Recall the “Rough on Rats” advertisement about Chinese immigrants. As a human representation, how many of us would assent to its use? So why fight the stereotypes? Why change the language? And then refuse to challenge the concept that reinforces the worst thinking of the worst Americans?

Race forcefully supports the white/black dichotomy as it systematically excludes, in the twenty-first century, the same people it excluded in the nineteenth century. Remember Ah Yup. The judge refused his petition because he was neither a Caucasian nor a person of African descent. When we placed the white glove of race over our traditional prejudices, we married skin color to an alleged biological grouping. Caucasian became the archetypical category for judging the world, and we said no to most of it because Asians, Indians, and Arabs were outside the zone of acceptability “on the negative side.” We can never become whole until we bury the concept of race where it rightfully belongs: on the southern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains.

### The United States of Demographic Extremes

*In geographical terms*, the United States represents stark demographic contrasts. Here are some 2004 U.S. Census numbers from the Northeast: Maine, 97 percent white, 0.5 percent black; New Hampshire, 96 percent white, 0.7 percent black; Vermont, 96.8 percent white, 0.5 percent black; Massachusetts, 84.5 percent white, 5.4 percent black.

The southern states look quite different. In 1865, the vast majority of African Americans lived in the South. In 2004, 55 percent of African Americans lived in the South, and this percentage is still rising: Georgia, 65 percent white, 29 percent black; Alabama, 71 percent white, 26 percent black; Arkansas, 80 percent white, 16 percent black; Mississippi, 61 percent white, 36 percent black; and Louisiana, 64 percent white, 33 percent black.

Midwestern numbers often tend to mirror the statistics from the highly segregated Northeast: Iowa, 94 percent white, 2 percent black;

Minnesota, 89 percent white, 3.5 percent black; North Dakota, 92 percent white, 0.6 percent black; South Dakota, 89 percent white, 0.6 percent black.

Whether by intention or accident, in many midwestern and north-eastern states, the concentration of whites is so extreme that whites have few opportunities for a meaningful encounter with blacks. The assumptions embedded in the dichotomy are likely to dominate their assessments of blacks because they never or rarely meet the very people who could challenge what the culture teaches.

In Maine, the *Portland Sunday Telegram* openly expressed this concern: “Imagine the white Maine kid growing up in an all-white community, going to a virtually all-white university or college, getting a job in an all-white establishment, and someday leaving the state to learn that most of the world is composed of people of color . . . the culture shock could be severe.”<sup>18</sup>

Friends of ours from Portland came to visit us in Connecticut during the O. J. Simpson trial. Driving through Hartford, our friends’ then eight-year-old daughter saw an African American man who was wearing black leather gloves. She yelled, “Look, Mom, there’s O.J.” Given this level of learned ignorance, the dichotomy often or even always directs behavior because it is the only perceptual tool, the only filtering device, offered by the child’s culture and his or her everyday experiences.

In the South, everyday interactions take on a different tenor. In *Sons of Mississippi* (published in 2003), Paul Hendrikson discusses rituals associated with University of Mississippi football games. “Until a few years ago it was commonplace for Rebel fans in Vaught-Hemingway Stadium to wave their Confederate battle flags after great plays. You’d even see the little flags being waved during the playing of the National Anthem before the first whistle. Recalcitrants still do it.” They also still join and support whites-only golf clubs and talk like this. In his cotton mill, Scott Middleton said, “we work blacks here.” A second later he also said, “I didn’t mean it to come out that way. I’ll apologize for that. Sounds like plantation stuff.”<sup>19</sup>

In discussing the consequences of our history, analysts understandably focus on the extraordinary levels of continuing, intentional

racial segregation. They devise white and black isolation indexes and then measure cities accordingly. Despite some improvements, the picture they paint is not a pretty one. Even in our most cosmopolitan locales, blacks and whites often remain quite isolated from one another.<sup>20</sup> However, by focusing on deliberate segregation, we miss its “accidental” companion: regional segregation between southern states dominated by whites and blacks and much more homogeneous midwestern and northeastern states where living patterns assure few everyday contacts between whites and blacks.

However unintentionally, our demographic extremes make the white/black dichotomy more crucial than ever. Despite great progress over the last forty years, the color white still governs as the racial thinking of blacks as much as whites and others. As Bruce Jacobs lamented in *Race Manners*, “we strain our eyes looking for color and in the process lose all our other senses.”<sup>21</sup>

### Whites Are . . . White

*What is a white person?* I asked at least fifty white people in Connecticut to answer this question: Without writing a term paper, just tell me the everyday meaning of a white person in ten, fifty, a hundred words. My aim was to get streetwise answers from people across a wide variety of educational and occupational levels.

The responses were surprising. Many respondents expressed a genuine sense of bewilderment. Apparently, no one had ever posed this question before. “Gee, I never thought about that,” they would say. “What an odd question to ask.” Some people attempted a humorous answer: “A white person is someone who stays out of the sun.” Others responded by striving for political correctness: “A white person is just like anybody else. How’s that?” Some folks focused on geography: A white person “is someone of European ancestry.” Or, “Image conjured up by a white person: light skinned, speaking European-based language and with European physical features (i.e., not a light skinned African).” Negatives figured in the responses of other people. “A white person is someone who is not black or red skinned.” Or, “A white person is someone who is not black and is of white skin color.”

The distant past was revived in many responses. “A white person is a Caucasian.” Or, “A white person is generally an individual whose parents were both Caucasian or whose parents’ lineage may not have been Caucasian but over many generations and through successive marriages and intermarriages predominately with Caucasians produced individuals considered white.” When asked about the origin of the term *Caucasian* even many very well-educated respondents knew nothing about Blumenbach and his love of the Caucasus Mountains. People repeated what they learned in school. More than two hundred years after he borrowed the name from Noah and his ark, Blumenbach’s nomenclature still provides the right word for a white person.

In all the responses, two consistencies seemed most important. First, virtually no one had ever given the meaning of the term *white* any serious thought. Like the sky, it was an omnipresent feature of social life but only the concern of specialists. Second, no one—not one person—had any nice things to say about white people. Language, culture, architecture, democracy, art: No one attached any positive achievements to the word *white* or the people called white. For my Connecticut respondents the color seemed to be a giant vacuum, devoid of meaning or content. An alien might conclude that, given their lack of positive attributes, no one would want to pal around with white people. They apparently offer nothing interesting, stimulating, creative, or important to potential friends or acquaintances.

White people are nothing. Yet white people run the United States. It is a puzzle with a solution. On the one hand, whiteness is one of the most positive and powerful ideas in America. Yet most whites rarely think about—or ask others to think about—the beliefs, values, and *privileges* associated with the word. The color is instead “an invisible knapsack”<sup>22</sup> of cultural content; arbitrarily acquired at birth, it is worn by whites from the cradle to the grave. We unthinkingly dip into the bag when we need to define a situation, and we rarely challenge the culture, even when it offers contradictory and ridiculous information. For example, whites may disparage dark-skinned people yet pay substantial amounts to get a tan and possible skin cancer. Apparently, there is a difference between the shade of brown that attracts the opposite sex and the shade that deserves prejudice and discrimination.

One way to focus on the contemporary cultural content of the word *white* is to use the philosopher George Herbert Mead's notion of self-concept. Simply put, a self-concept is what you think of you about a particular characteristic. Saying "I am white" may not sound like an arrogant and obnoxious declaration of superiority until you examine the four types of information simultaneously warehoused in this or any other self-concept. White says something about you; about others; about behavior (what whites and blacks do); and about life's prospects, that is, what whites and nonwhites should and can expect.

The words *white* and *black* function as terribly efficient storehouses of cultural knowledge. The dichotomy is not crucial in and of itself; it is crucial because, like the script for a play, the words *white* and *black* tell us how to think and behave in countless social situations. At its worst, we see black and think white.

Start with the supposedly simple self-image. When I say I am white, I use the color to say something about myself. Perhaps it is a response as succinct as the comments of my respondents: "I am white, that is, a Caucasian" or "A white is someone who is not black." Either way, in saying I am white I also simultaneously draw in, like a magnet, blacks and others. In social life, opposites not only attract; they need one another to exist. Short assumes tall; fat assumes thin; young assumes old; and, in the United States, white assumes black and especially "nonwhite."

The identity white divides and conquers because, as the default category of American "racial" thinking—recall the Crayola crayon boxes that once had a "flesh tone" selection—it partitions the society into one archetypal group and the rest of us. Even so-called people of color only exist in comparison to the assumption that white, which looks like a ("flesh tone") color in everyday life, is not a color in everyday life.

As we walk through a day's experiences, the supposed negative content of white (i.e., I am not black or Asian or Indian) turns into a perpetual positive, because the denotation of white is clear: Whites have what I lack; whites are *the* designer original, while the rest of us are knockoffs.

Whites only exist in comparison to a negative. It rarely sounds men-

acing until we turn to the crucial connotation of the label “non-white.” As Albert Murray told us more than thirty-five years ago, “thus are all the fundamental assumptions of white supremacy and segregation represented in a word, in one key hyphenating and hyphenated word.”<sup>23</sup> Murray continues: “When your yes-am-is-are white U.S citizen says non-white, he has said it all and given away the game. What he forgets, and much too easily, is the fact that, as the self-chosen model from which the non-white variant is a bad departure, he himself, more often than not, is self-identified, self-certified, and self-elected. He also forgets that he is self-esteemed—and for the most part only self-esteemed.”

White people forget that, by definition, they always carry on their backs the invisible knapsack of privilege, pretension, and self-esteem. No matter how well intentioned, no person defining themselves as white can escape the knapsack and its assumptions. The assessments of positive and negative self-worth attach themselves to the white/black dichotomy and cannot disappear unless we consciously confront the level of dehumanization produced by our contemporary cultural inheritance.

### Caspar the Moor

*In a series* of medieval artworks, King Caspar the Moor suddenly appeared not as a follower of the Three Wise Men but as the wisest man of all. In a 1540 Dutch portrait, the coal-black Caspar appears as “elegant, eager, and well-dressed.” In the late fourteenth and entire fifteenth centuries actors blackened their faces as Caspar. He was the spokesman of the Three Kings, and many inns took the Moorish king as their trademark. Caspar and the American Sambo existed on different continents because, prior to the slave trade, many Europeans accepted “an iconography in which black Africans received a positive representation.”<sup>24</sup>

Caspar was a Moor; and, until the onset of Portuguese slavery, many European cultures employed “Moor,” an ethnic and religious label, to define visitors, soldiers, or immigrants from Africa. “Black”

replaced “Moor” when the Portuguese captured “pagans”; in reality, they captured cultured people from preliterate tribes, who shared few if any of the religious and ethnic characteristics of the Moorish/Muslim cultures. The Portuguese began to use “black Moor and black-amoor” to aggregate the two groups; eventually they and other slavers dropped the ethnic label and focused on color as the key way to distinguish between themselves and the new, preliterate slaves.<sup>25</sup>

Initially, the New England colonists used ethnic, national, religious, or social categories (free, indentured servant) to identify one another. Over time, this vocabulary changed in response to the colonists’ need to classify, *from their perspective*, the slaves they imported. Like some Spanish priests in the Caribbean, colonists could see Indians and Africans as equal creatures of God, but the English chose to create a double negative—“white as not nonwhite”—because, among other things, the colonists sought to justify the horrors of slavery. In rationalizing the new world of masters and slaves, the English sanctioned a typical form of self-centeredness. They labeled outsiders from the perspective of the insiders and created a subhuman category—“blacks”—even before they created whites.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, writers seeking to classify groups of humanity faced the same problem I had in Connecticut: whites lacked any positive, distinguishing characteristics. Nobody said nice things about white people. Historian Scott Malcomson stresses that whites were nothing because the colonial classifiers of humanity lacked plausible options. To give whites specific characteristics “raised the specter of relativism.” One group might be as good as another. So, rather than make whites like the rest of humanity, whites used their nothingness to justify their status as the human role model. “At the birth of the republic whiteness was a concept shaped by a set of absences. The sum of what you were not—Indian, black, slave—made you what you were.” That is, nothing, a white person.

The Declaration of Independence presented a problem to this way of thinking. If all men were created equal, how could the Founding Fathers justify the subjugation of millions of Africans? Jefferson, Monroe, Madison, and others were up against a wall that they themselves

had built out of reason, natural law, and inalienable human rights. Theoretically, it created an impediment to a nation full of slaves and a world full of nonwhites.

Caught in this contradiction, the Founding Fathers decided to blame the English. In an imaginative, ironic reversal of thought, the insiders—the English—became the outsiders. In 1676, the English labeled blacks outsiders from their self-centered perspective; and, in 1776, the new insiders—the Americans—redefined the English from their own, equally self-centered perspective. As Monroe noted, slavery “is an existing evil which commenced under our colonial system, *with which we are not properly charged*” (emphasis added).

The contradiction still existed; if all people were equal, then the white/black dichotomy stood as a terrible example of institutionalized inhumanity. Since slavery could never be justified by a mind interested in consistency, a group of American revolutionaries sheepishly accepted the ideas of their inherited culture. They censured the English for their poisonous prejudices against the original thirteen states, yet they continued to think and act like the English when it came to slavery because any challenge to the double negative—white is not nonwhite—thoroughly undermined the cultural rationalizations and the economic system, created by Portuguese, English, and American slave masters.

We can face this history, or, like the Founding Fathers, we can ignore it. However, to honestly confront our cultural inheritance is to acknowledge the everyday consequences of the dichotomy. Whites are nothing and everything; nonwhites are the more or less awful negative against which everything is measured. As one of my respondents put it on May 18, 2004, “a white person is someone who is not black and is of white skin color.”

### The Sincere Fictions of White People

*So far*, this analysis includes four embedded layers of cultural reality: the dichotomy created by slave traders; the everyday life shaped by Jim Crow; the “scientific” concept of race; and, with Judge Smith’s banishing of Jesus, America’s resistance to immigration by many nonwhites.

But we live in contemporary America. What do we know about what white people in 2007 believe about themselves and about black people?

To answer that question, some researchers begin with a simple question: How many white people claim a black person as a good friend? In one survey, 60–90 percent of whites claimed to have a black person as “a close personal friend.” Given the high degree of segregation in modern-day America, this figure seemed implausibly high. Since the survey asked the respondents no follow-up questions, analysts were stuck. They simply reported what white people said. In another study, when 42 percent of whites said they had a close friend who was black, analysts followed up by asking for the person’s name. Only 6 percent of whites knew the name of the black person “they felt close to.”<sup>26</sup>

In other words, most of these “friendships” were a white lie. Living in a society that most people, at least publicly, endorse as color-blind, whites wish to appear open minded. They lie to the researchers in order to avoid the appearance of prejudice.

But a fiction is more damaging than a lie. The liar is generally aware of his or her falsifications. The person living with a fiction honestly believes something that is false. Reality never shatters what Berger and Luckmann call “false consciousness” because preconceived beliefs direct both perceptions and evaluations of self, others, and society. Lies are a nonissue; self-delusion is the culprit when earnest fictions make an appearance.

In *White Men on Race*, Joe Feagin and Eileen O’Brien contend that many Americans endorse a series of significant fictions about relations between whites and blacks. More than two hundred million people are allegedly implicated in those fictions; whites share them with varying degrees of salience, conviction, and uniformity. Whites are also confused, the authors claim, because the fictions simultaneously include these beliefs: whites are “color-blind, privileged and victimized.”<sup>27</sup> This apparently contradictory combination begins with the belief that contemporary whites are increasingly color-blind.

This claim comes with an obvious problem: How can any American, even one committed to significant change, claim to be color-

blind when we all use the colors white and black as primary forms of self-identification? By definition, the dichotomy and its offspring—for example, nonwhites and people of color—make color blindness impossible; yet many white Americans sincerely believe that skin color is *already* an insignificant factor in their lives and the lives of black people. What seems to happen is that whites correctly see substantial positive change—compared to, say, 1960—and then conclude that color is no longer an issue. Many whites try to not see color in a society that constantly forces them to do so. It is an insuperable task and a sincere fiction because, besides the limitations imposed by our grammar of conduct, the poisonous beliefs attached to the words *white* and *black* still contribute to so much ugliness.

Take, for example, what real estate agents call a box. It can be cardboard, or it can be an old suitcase. What is important is its contents: “Diplomas, artwork, books, music, and especially all the family photos—anything that can identify the family as black.” Homeowners hide the box in a remote part of the house, and they hide themselves, as well. They retreat before prospective buyers arrive, because if a black family wants to sell a house in a predominantly white neighborhood, “they are often advised by friends or their real estate agent to put everything identifiably black—any vestige of who they are—in the box. Otherwise white people may not buy the house.”<sup>28</sup>

Take another example and a fact confirmed in many of my own interviews. According to Ellis Cose in *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, blacks who do go out in public often feel compelled to dress better than the rest of us. I, as a supposed white person, can go to a place like Home Depot unshaven, in my torn and tattered work clothes. But, to avoid being singled out as a possible shoplifter, black customers wear dress clothes, even ties, to purchase anything from drills to Sheetrock, from an appliance at Wal-Mart to the food at the local supermarket.

And yet many whites sincerely believe that they live in a color-blind society. As Debra Dickerson stresses in *The End of Blackness*, it is a fiction, made worse by the whites who argue that, if color *is* still a force in American life, black people must receive the blame. All they think about is race. Blacks allegedly see problems where none exist. If they would just forget about race and color our problems would disappear.

This is at best bizarre. For more than four hundred years, whites constructed and sustained a culture that judged people by the color of their skin. To tell blacks to stop thinking the way whites have forced them to think is to forget the past four centuries and their significant impact on the present. “For centuries, race affected every aspect of American life; now we are to believe it affects nothing.”<sup>29</sup>

Besides the fiction of color blindness, many whites also believe that they are simultaneously privileged and victimized. The privileges come from being white in a supposedly color-blind society. A 2002 FBI Diversity Report indicated that whites felt quite free to express differences “due to cultural backgrounds,” while blacks felt more constrained. The FBI explained the difference this way: “white men, having essentially created the culture of the organization, are more comfortable working in it.”<sup>30</sup>

Despite the FBI reality, whites believe that they are privileged *and* victimized by a society that blames them for the past and that seeks to make up for that past by giving unfair affirmative action advantages to minorities and especially blacks. In my interviews, many whites instantly offer stories about the incompetent black person who got a job; whites also love to describe ideal-type corporations or public agencies that do not and have never existed. In a society that teaches its children that “it is not what you know but who you know,” the advantages of contacts apparently disappear when it comes to black people. Merit is the rule, and no one should get a job unless he or she is fully qualified.

However, the FBI study concluded that informal networks were crucial to successfully climbing the bureau’s ladder of advancement; even more important, despite the sincere fiction of merit-based advancement, the FBI “does not have an effective performance evaluation system. Virtually all components use a pass/fail evaluation system . . . through this and other results it is apparent that the management does not take evaluating employee performance seriously.” Instead, managers “by nature tend to favor applicants with experiences, backgrounds and identities similar to their own.”

This is the real world; yet, when I referred to this study in one of my classes, many white students refused to accept the FBI’s assessment of

itself. Jobs must have been allocated on the basis of merit despite the FBI's self-criticism and despite students' own experiences with university preferences for athletes, legacies, and those with cash or friends. At our Division 1 school, athletes—and only athletes—enjoy the luxury of a separate library facility reserved for them *and their tutors*. Those tutors help the athletes with their papers and homework, and they monitor the athletes' class work by calling faculty to check on the athletes' grades and participation.

Such institutionalized preferences are normal in our society. In addition to allotments for athletes, preferences exist for veterans and for those with workplace seniority; and, in the service of family reunification, America boasts a century-long tradition of offering significant preferences for immigrants with family members already in the United States. Merit never enters the process because the only criterion is the immigrant's familial link to the sponsoring American citizen.

Finally, if professors are honest, they will explain that in many job searches everyone knows the winner before the search takes place. Instead of offering advantages to whites and other minorities, affirmative action is often a farce because minority candidates are only included so that the committee can say they tried but the winner (a college buddy, a colleague's wife) was clearly more qualified.<sup>31</sup>

All too often, when reality meets the sincere fiction of merit-based employment, whites choose the illusion. Like my students, they deny the obvious fact of the importance of subjective factors in achieving personal and organizational success.<sup>32</sup>

When he wrote "In Plain Black and White" in 1885, *Atlanta Constitution* editor Henry Grady worried about the intermingling of the races. Whites and blacks needed to avoid the contacts that led to intercourse, children, and even marriage. In 2006, love and family remain bellwethers of social change. When asked about the extent of continuing discrimination, whites downplay its effects. Blacks are imagining what no longer exists or what exists only in isolated instances. And when it comes to marriage, many whites give responses that seem to mirror those they gave about having close black friends. In one survey, 80 percent of students indicated approval of interracial marriages.

However, when in a smaller group, speaking at length, more than 60 percent of whites changed their minds, citing, among other things, the discrimination that “interracial” couples would inevitably experience. As one father put it, “I would worry about the cultural differences, mainly whether younger adults and all have thought through the various issues in all that they may face from such mixed marriages. And whether, when those issues would eventually . . . arise, they are going to be capable and mature enough to handle it.”<sup>33</sup>

When the belief that we have already achieved equality runs headlong into the possibility of a “mixed” marriage, the discrimination that supposedly did not exist suddenly rears its ugly head. It is a contradiction with deep roots in the thinking of Henry Grady and J. F. Blumenbach. The notion of mixed marriage assumes the existence of “pure or homogenous” groups; and the significant resistance expressed by fathers, mothers, and other relatives is still so strong that only 2.5 percent of whites cross the color line.<sup>34</sup> That number is higher than it ever was in the past—remember the fusions—but still suggests the power of Grady’s “New South” to the new century.

Overall, the fictions and contradictions of many contemporary whites suggest an unwillingness to challenge seriously the dichotomy; the concept of race; or the thinking that created Jim Crow and the exclusion of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Syrian, and other “alien” groups.

Whites remain the designer original, and the dichotomy and its attached beliefs ensure that the idea is protected from challenge. Paradoxically, forty years after the civil rights movement, black thinking is perhaps more dominated by whites than ever before. From Louisiana to California, blacks allegedly use whites as such a negative role model that whites dominate black culture even when—or especially when—blacks see whites as the devil incarnate.<sup>35</sup>

### The Sincere Beliefs of Black People

*In May 2004*, Bill Cosby made an important speech at a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) convention celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Cosby told the black-tie audience, “ladies and gentlemen, the lower economic people are not holding up their end in this deal. These people are not parenting. They are buying things for kids—\$500 sneakers for what? And won’t spend \$200 for Hooked on Phonics.”

“They’re standing on the corner and they can’t speak English,” Cosby continued. “I can’t even talk the way these people talk: Why you ain’t, Where you is . . . and I blamed the kid until I heard the mother talk . . . Everybody knows it’s important to speak English except these knuckleheads . . . You can’t be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth.”

Cosby ended his speech by focusing on crime: “These are not political criminals. These are people going around stealing Coca-Cola. People getting shot in the back of the head over a piece of pound cake and then we run out and we are outraged, (saying) ‘the cops shouldn’t have shot him’. What the hell was he doing with the pound cake in his hand?”

On the podium, NAACP notables sat “stone-faced.” Theodore Shaw, head of the organization’s Legal Defense Fund, quickly told the audience “that most people on welfare are not African American, and many of the problems his organization (the NAACP) has addressed in the black community were not self-inflicted.”

In the street people got angry. Using the Web, scores of African Americans jumped to Cosby’s defense, praising what they perceived to be a genuine display of honesty and courage. A poster named Fuzzy Rider wrote, “lot of folks have been thinking this for a long time, but have been prohibited from speaking by the ‘crypto-fascist’ politically correct crowd. How can we ever solve a problem if we are not even allowed to talk about it without being vilified?”<sup>36</sup>

This instant response sentiment echoed a theme by John McWhorter in *Authentically Black: Essays for the Black Silent Majority*. He argues that black America is “permeated by a new kind of double consciousness”: In private blacks applaud “personal initiative” and self-determination; in public blacks “dutifully take on the mantle of victimhood” in order to avoid alienating or arousing the media leaders of the black community.<sup>37</sup> No one wants to hear the accusation “you’re a sellout” (to whites) or an Uncle Tom, so blacks supposedly embrace

victimhood even though, like Cosby, they accept varying degrees of responsibility for the problems of African Americans.

In the debate that followed Cosby's comments, Regiwi, who identified himself as a forty-year-old black man, asked, "aren't we sick and tired of being sick and tired . . . I don't want to hear the tired excuse that white people are holding us back . . . we have to CHECK, CHANGE AND UNCHAIN OUR MINDSET, NOW FROM NEGATIVE TO POSITIVE." Another poster who used the tag "Macker" wanted to "see how fast it takes for the NAACP to demonize Doctor Cosby as an Uncle Tom." And still another writer summed up the entire argument in this fashion: "the tensions . . . are between the (this may sound strange) whitecentric, who see white people as the root of all problems . . . and those who are of the personality responsibility mindset, who believe that many problems are self-inflicted, and can be *solved by the black community*."

One powerful segment of the black community—the so-called whitecentrics—blames whites for every black problem, and, more ominously, they define themselves over and against white people. Parents actually resist sending their children to Harvard because, in the words of one parent, "I don't want her to lose her identity." Exposure to so many whites will presumably decrease her level of blackness, so, given the presence of whites, blacks stay home.<sup>38</sup>

Whether by design or by accident, Bill Cosby pressed some very hot buttons. African Americans are no more homogeneous than any other ethnic group: a fierce debate is taking place within the black community. But only one thing is clear. You can passionately reject a culture, yet that culture can still determine your thoughts and actions. If you define blackness as "opposition to whites at all costs,"<sup>39</sup> then, perversely, you only define your behavior in opposition.

For those interested in freedom, it is arguably a perverse outcome: The power of an inherited culture is often greatest when we passionately reject it.<sup>40</sup> I do this because you do that; you are still in charge because my behavior is rooted in a rejection of you. Greater freedom rests on evaluating the culture I received and my reaction to that culture. I am far less free if the only positive thing in my life is using you as the eternal negative. As Cornell West wrote in *Race Matters*, "mature black identity results from an acknowledgment of the specific black

responses to white supremacist abuses and a moral assessment of these responses such that the humanity of black people does not rest on deifying or demonizing others.”<sup>41</sup>

No one can ascertain exactly how much of contemporary black thought is “whitecentric.” But a series of books argue that it is clearly dominant among America’s black leadership. If that is so, the white/black dichotomy is a black hole and in that hole Henry Grady is smiling his diabolical smile.

### White Norms for Black Deviation

*Let’s suppose*, with John McWhorter, that a Jewish person and a black person move from the Bronx to Westchester, from the inner city to the weed-free suburbs. Each leaves his roots, and each weathers criticism from those who remain. The Jewish criticism may center on loss of attachment to “real” religious roots; the presumed switch from orthodox to reform Judaism generates so much criticism that some rabbis actually argue that the suburbanite is no longer Jewish. Losing orthodoxy means losing your Jewish soul.

But the black suburbanite hears a different insult: “You’re still black.” You can run but you cannot hide: no class, religious, or educational climb alters your personal or social status in American society. “You’re still black,” with the unstated assumption “that the person considers himself or herself not simply different from, but *better than*, black people” (emphasis in original).<sup>42</sup>

It is a sharp contrast. The Jewish person risks losing his ethnicity; the African American carries his with him forever. Blackness is a “stain” that cannot be removed. The insult is fired with such precision and fury that some black scholars argue it underlines a fundamental truth: black people believe what the dichotomy teaches. Anyone leveling the ultimate insult presumably thinks that whites are better than blacks. They never disown the suburbanite; they “stick it to him” by using an implied comparison. “You’re still black” because you are not white—and never will be.<sup>43</sup> With the insult, whites direct the action even when blacks focus not on whites but on themselves.

W. E. B. Du Bois addressed this dilemma in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

Published in 1903, the book opens with Du Bois asking himself a question—“How does it feel to be a problem?”—and answering that American culture offered a black person “no true self consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.” By definition, blacks experienced “the peculiar sensation of a double consciousness,” a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>44</sup>

Well into the 1960s this cultural contempt included media portrayals of black people as stupid—Buckwheat in the *Our Gang* comedies—or as servants for their white employers. The civil rights movement finally demanded positive representations of African Americans in the media, but, at the height of the movement for change, social science stepped in and, just as it had done in the nineteenth century, provided evidence justifying the worst portrayals of black people.

No one understood this better than Albert Murray in *The Omni-Americans*. Murray lambastes blacks and whites with equal vigor, yet reserves special anger for social scientists and those gullible enough to accept, like sheep, their scientifically proven and negative judgments of black people. Murray forcefully argues that social scientists create straw men by focusing on white norms and black deviations. The subject could be SAT scores, out-of-wedlock births, crime statistics, or the nature of the family; but whatever the issue, social scientists compiled data on white people, compared them to the data for black people, and then described blacks as deficient.<sup>45</sup>

In response, Albert Murray stresses an obvious fact: White people certainly deserved the lion’s share of the responsibility for the conditions faced by black people—remember that Murray is writing in the mid-1960s—yet whites used the work of social science data to show that blacks were the abnormal group. Given hundreds of years of discrimination, blacks could never compare favorably to whites on, for example, rates of college graduation, yet the social scientists, dutifully following the logic of the dichotomy, compared blacks to whites and highlighted black failures.

Even “decent white people” played with a stacked deck. But Murray reserved a bit of extra outrage for the “naïve Negro spokesmen” who

raised their voices in a “moral outcry.” Black deficiencies proved the need for reform; compared to whites, blacks looked like losers, and their naive representatives rode high on the hot air of academic justifications.<sup>46</sup>

Murray did something radical. He compared white people to white people. Citing “the incredible provincialism of white social science technicians (and their Negro protégés),” he emphasized that the celebrated white norms of “material affluence and power” were “the very features of American life that the greatest artists and intellectuals (think of novelists like F. Scott Fitzgerald or Sinclair Lewis) have always found most highly questionable if not downright objectionable.” Would black people be rewarded if they behaved like Babbitt or worshiped money like the characters in *The Great Gatsby*? Social scientists simply cited numbers and forgot that the winners in the money game often used the most despicable tactics to achieve success. Should blacks imitate that? Would that make them normal instead of deviant?

Murray also notes “the norms of citizenship which are based on the national ideals as established by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The Constitution not only expresses principles of conduct that are valid for mankind as a whole; *it is also the ultimate official source for definitions of desirable and undesirable American behavior.*” Judged against their own standards, white people failed.

In 2003, the then eighty-seven-year-old Murray received a distinguished artist award from Tuskegee University. He deserved it. The problem is that forty years into the civil rights movement many black and white leaders have forgotten or ignored his admonitions. Using the false comparison of white norms and black deviations, “naive” black leaders transformed the notion of “victimhood from *a problem to be solved* into an *identity in itself*.”<sup>47</sup>

### Whites Rule Black Minds

*Bruce Jacobs* and his cousin waited for the light to change at a San Francisco crosswalk. The white woman, in the car nearest the two black men, “nervously” eyed them and then “conspicuously leaned over and locked her door.” Jacobs, “stung” by the woman’s action, wanted to

give his cousin an earful about white people. But his cousin stopped him in midsentence, saying, “Who cares? She’s worried. I’m not.”<sup>48</sup>

His cousin’s remark prompted a flash of understanding: “My preoccupation with her perception of me,” he later wrote—“my need to see how she saw me—was a surrender of the self.” In short, the essential argument of many black critics of black culture is that most of its most renowned leaders abjectly surrender themselves to whites. Obsessed with three themes—victimization, separation, and anti-intellectualism—black leaders define themselves in opposition to whiteness, and, as they compete “for white approval or a white apology,” they play the game on the master’s terms.<sup>49</sup>

In this surrender of self, a victim requires a victimizer. When a black leader demonizes white people he or she keeps whites “at the center of the black agenda.” If only because many whites now also see themselves as victims, stressing the injured party theme is far less effective than it used to be. Each half of the dichotomy screams at the other, locked in a four-hundred-year-old battle.

The deeper problem is that, however accurate the charge, making white people the victimizer gives white people the power to change black lives. The awful logic of the argument goes something like this. If white people produce the problems, only white people can produce the change. As a victim I am “largely powerless” to transform my own life, and, lacking power, failure is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Since whites will not change, how can I?<sup>50</sup>

The need for separatism again puts whites at the center of the black agenda. McWhorter tells a story of having lunch with a black friend. He was carrying a copy of *Jane Eyre*, and she noticed it. “Oh, I’d never read anything like that,” she casually remarked. She preferred to read only books written by and about her own people. Once again, a very intelligent black person defines herself by her distance from anything white. Balzac, Zola, Camus, Nietzsche, Dickens, Dreiser, Fitzgerald: Albert Murray clearly read everybody, yet members of the present generation endlessly recreate a blacklist of only white books.

The final theme—anti-intellectualism—can be clearly traced in the response to the Cosby speech. Steven Armstrong, a teacher for twenty-five years, wrote, “During my career, I met many talented black men.

However, in the vast majority of the cases this talent did not match their performance. For example, I asked one young man, 'Why don't you do your homework?' His response, 'I can't let my friends see me with a book! They will say I'm selling out, trying to be white.'"<sup>51</sup>

The rejection of school and academic excellence is rooted, yet again, in a rejection of whites. Even at the finest universities, black students actually doubt that a youngster who excels is "authentically black." Black men or women admitted to Berkeley on the strength of their record are subject to suspicion from their peers that they were admitted via preferences because excelling at such a high level means having abandoned the black community. In essence, "black students are not *supposed to* be star students, because then they're not exactly black, are they?"<sup>52</sup>

A thorough, nationwide report by the Kaiser Family Foundation in June 2006 confirms many of the chat room conclusions previously discussed. Fully 73 percent of black men and 69 percent of black women thought that black men put too little emphasis on education and (with slightly less agreement) too much emphasis on sports and "maintaining a tough image." A full 59 percent of black men blamed themselves; they believe that racism still exists and have experienced discrimination in their lives but, overall, accept responsibility for the less than successful outcomes of their own lives.<sup>53</sup>

The validity of these self-criticisms is impossible to measure. We are discussing more than thirty-five million people, many of whom have not explicitly described their beliefs about victimization, separation, and education. But existing data do underline a persistent theme in contemporary black culture. In their capacity as negative role models, whites still tell many blacks how to think and act in a wide variety of both incidental and crucial (e.g., education) aspects of their lives. For example, over the three years it took to research this book, my own African American students have consistently affirmed that they experience pressure not to "act white," that is, to do well in college.

Fifty years after the civil rights and black power movements began, whites remain such powerful producers of the black agenda that Debra Dickerson compares them to Harry Houdini, who "once famously struggled for hours picking a jail cell lock, only to lean in

exhaustion and have the door swing open. It had never been locked at all. All that confined him was in his own head. That's blackness."<sup>54</sup>

It is also whiteness. Neither group will think for itself until there is a liberating sense of surgical separation. So, to repeat, the dichotomy is not crucial in and of itself.

It is crucial because the words *white* and *black* store the cultural knowledge that tells us how to think and act in countless social situations.

It is crucial because one dehumanizing consequence of forty years of significant social change is that whites remain an all-powerful negative role model for millions of African Americans.

It is crucial because the dichotomy deliberately directs us to a cultural drama that seats whites down below, blacks in the balcony, and the rest of humanity in standing-room only. In the disunited states of America, we cannot tell Latinos, Asians, Indians, Arabs, Filipinos, and seven million mixed-race Americans to assimilate into a culture that fails to recognize their humanity in a positive sense.

Being outside the dichotomy *and* nonwhite is to wear a six-pointed star designed by Henry Grady. We reiterate "the fundamental assumptions of white supremacy" as we casually use the sinful word that closed America's doors to Jesus Christ in 1913.

After trying to assimilate into the dichotomy, fusions and none-of-the-above immigrants argue that we need to move on. As the rest of the book proves, the newcomers have already reconfigured American culture; and, in the case of Latinos, those who imagine a "presumed alliance" with blacks are in for a rude awakening. Axioms of contemporary Latino thought supposedly include these beliefs: "Since Latinos are not responsible for the Plight of African Americans," Latinos "come to the table with a clear conscience" and a clean slate. They want to transcend the future, not repeat it.<sup>55</sup>