

I

THE CULT OF VICTIMOLOGY

The fact of slavery refuses to fade, along with the deeply embedded personal attitudes and public policy assumptions that supported it for so long. Indeed, the racism that made slavery feasible is far from dead in the last decade of twentieth-century America; and the civil rights gains, so hard won, are being steadily eroded.

—DERRICK BELL, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, 1992

Tyson is in the pen now. Strange fruit hanging from a different tree. Yet the strangest of all walk among us—as long as they're free, white, male, and twenty-one. The greatest of these qualities is the freedom. I wonder how it feels? I am trapped and can only say "Nooo" and hope my scream is loud enough to discourage the monsters and keep them back until I am strong enough, powerful enough to fight my way free. Powerful enough to slip the noose from my neck and put out the fire on my flesh.

—RALPH WILEY, *What Black People Should Do Now*, 1993

What more do they want? Why in God's name won't they accept me as a full human being? Why am I pigeonholed in a black job? Why am I constantly treated as if I were a drug addict, a thief, or a thug? Why am I still not allowed to aspire to the same things every white person in America takes as a birthright? Why, when I most want to be seen, am I suddenly rendered invisible?

—ELLIS COSE, *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, 1993

These quotes are from books written in the 1990s by successful black men. The conception of black American life they represent is considered accurate, or at least a respectable point of view, by a great many people black and white of all levels of class, education, and income, one indication of which is that all three books were published by major mainstream houses, all were soon released in paperback, and none was even the author's first book.

Yet most of us would be hard pressed to match these portraits with the lives of most of the black people we know. Are we really afraid that, as

"civil rights gains, so hard won, are steadily eroded," Macy's is on the verge of refusing black patronage? Do all the black people we see at the movies, on planes, coping sports trophies, graduating from college, and eating in restaurants appear, even metaphorically, to have fire on their skin? Do we ruefully consider a home, a car, or a college degree—"things every white person in America takes as a birthright"—all but out of reach for the middle-class black people we know, who are the subject of Cose's book? How "invisible" is an author who manages to have books of his opinions regularly published by top presses? How many of us can truly agree with these authors that the Civil Rights revolution has had no notable effect upon black Americans' lives?

Without falling for the line that racism is completely dead, we can admit that these quotes reveal a certain cognitive dissonance with reality. Yet they are anything but rare, and are one of myriad demonstrations that there is, lying at the heart of modern black American thought, a transformation of victimhood from a *problem to be solved* into an *identity in itself*. Because black Americans have obviously made so very much progress since the Civil Rights Act, to adopt victimhood as an identity, a black person, unlike, for example, a Hutu refugee in Central Africa, must exaggerate the extent of his victimhood. The result is a Cult of Victimology, under which remnants of discrimination hold an obsessive, indignant fascination that allows only passing acknowledgment of any signs of progress.

What Is Victimology?

The charge that blacks engage in "peddling victimhood" is not new, but many might wonder how one could possibly criticize a group for calling attention to its victimhood. In this light, we must make a careful distinction. Approaching victimhood constructively will naturally include calling attention to it, and is healthy. However, much more often in modern black American life, victimhood is simply called attention to where it barely exists if at all. Most importantly, all too often this is done not with a view toward forging solutions, but to foster and nurture an unfocused brand of resentment and sense of alienation from the mainstream. This is Victimology.

Two contrasting examples will demonstrate. Marva Collins saw that inner city black students in Chicago were posting the worst grades in the city year after year. She founded a school combining high standards with rich feedback, celebration of progress, and a focus on self-esteem and

upward mobility. Its successful techniques have been adopted by schools elsewhere in the nation. This is addressing victimhood as a problem.

On the other hand, Susan Ferechcio, a reporter for the *Washington Times*, visited the Afrocentric Marcus Garvey School to report on its progress in 1996. Asked to show her notes before she left, she refused according to journalistic protocol. For this, the principal Mary Anigbo told her to "get your white ass out of this school" and led a group of students in taking her notebook and then pushing, smacking, and kicking her from the premises. Anigbo first accused Ferechcio of pulling a knife on a student, then denied the episode ever happened, and then claimed that Ferechcio had deserved it. This was Victimology. What Anigbo did was meant not to allay victimhood but simply to express unfocused hostility: The physical violence Anigbo incited will do nothing to enhance the upward mobility of her students.

In leading black American thought today, Victimology, adopting victimhood as an identity and necessarily exaggerating it, dominates treating victimhood as a problem to be solved. Most black public statements are filtered through it, almost all race-related policy is founded upon it, almost all evaluations by blacks of one another are colored by it. Derrick Bell prefers couching his therapy disguised as reportage as allegorical "stories." Here are some of my stories, only they are real.

Stories of Victimology

The Story of the Party Shelby Steele Is At

A black academic at a predominantly black conference in 1998 once recounted how typical it is at parties thrown by people affiliated with universities to meet "white racists" who say "Oh, there are black people I like, but . . ." Needless to say, the audience ate it up with a spoon, amidst which she added, "Shelby Steele is at those parties. . . ." "Shelby Steele" having become synonymous with "unthinkable sell-out" in black discourse. Yet the audience empathy came at the cost of plausibility. Her scenario so strains reality that we can only take her on faith via condescension. As a black academic, I myself have now spent twelve years attending these very same parties, and I can attest that I have never found myself peering over my glass of Chablis realizing that my evening will entail negotiating a minefield spiked with "white racists." Can we really accept this professor's contention that white Ph.D.s and professionals in the year 2000 regularly say things remotely like this? How many white people has this professor met in the academic/professional world

who even gave any indication of *thinking* this way since about 1974? Perhaps one here and one there, but certainly not enough to imply that such people are *par for the course*. It is significant that the professor used this as an ice-breaker—because Victimology is part of the very fabric of black identity, there is no better way to signal your allegiance with “black folks” than to couch a story in it.

The Story of the Bigoted Math Professor

I will never forget a gathering of black students at Stanford in 1991, when a black undergraduate stood up and recounted that a white mathematics professor had told her to withdraw from a calculus course because black people were not good at math. Quite frankly, I don’t believe her. Where the black professor in the last story exaggerated, this student went beyond this to fabrication. I choose that word carefully, to allow for some possible rootedness in reality: This professor may have told the student that *she* wasn’t good at math, and may perhaps even have displayed some subtly discriminatory attitudes in the classroom. However, frankly, the chances are nil that anyone with the mental equipment to obtain a professorship at Stanford University would, in the late 1980s in as politicized an atmosphere as an elite university, blithely tell a black student that black people cannot do math. Even if he were of this opinion, he would have to have been brain-dead to casually throw it into a black student’s face, possibly risking his job, reputation, and career.

Yet the student was vigorously applauded for airing this demonstration that nothing has changed, by hundreds of black students most of whom who owed their very admission to Stanford to affirmative action, a product of the very societal transformation that Victimology forces them to dismiss.

The Story of the Minstrel Smile

At a conference on black performance I once attended (ironically in the same room that the episode I just described took place in), one audience member claimed during the question session that she is tired of having to put on a happy face and adopt an insouciant, bouncy demeanor whenever she leaves her apartment, otherwise being in danger of harassment by the police since “white people think a serious sister is a criminal.” This observation was greeted with applause and comments of support from black people in the audience.

Inappropriate and abusive racial profiling is a problem in this country, as I will discuss later in this chapter. Yet what this woman said was non-

sense. A quick look at the black women walking down any street in the United States will easily disprove that black women labor under a burden of putting on minstrel smiles in public, and to my knowledge, no police officer interviewed about the cues they seek in stopping-and-frisking people has stated that one of the things that get their antennas up is “black women who aren’t smiling.” Indeed, black women around the country have valid stories of having been detained and humiliated by police officers—but to claim that racism in America is still so tragically omnipresent and inexorable that all black women are required to grin and shuffle their way through any shopping trip on the pain of arrest is an arrogant and callow exaggeration. Furthermore, this woman did not have the excuse of having grown up in an America where profiling and harassment of minorities were more open and accepted and had yet to be publicly decried. She gave her age as twenty-five, which means that her mature life had taken place almost entirely in the 1990s.

This is not to say that this woman may not be occasionally trailed by salesclerks, or that a police officer may not have once stopped her for a drug search. Injustices such as these show that we still have some distance to travel. But transforming them into apocalyptic embroidery does not address victimhood but instead simply celebrates it. Of course, if she were airing a concrete grievance this would be one thing: we certainly must identify problems as part of solving them. But crucially, this woman’s charge was a fantasy, and as such, logic dictates that her aim was not to decry actual injury. Rather, her aim was to dwell in a sense of victimhood as a ritual.

She underlined the essentially ritual, rather than grievance-based, nature of her claim in following it up with an unsolicited performance of a lengthy “slam” poem she had written in hip-hop cadences detailing her dissatisfied *Weltanschauung*. Crucially, much of it was about aspects of her personal life that concerned neither racism nor black performance, and this was not only a time-consuming pit stop in a setting devoted to discussing the invited scholars’ presentations, but also included some naked profanity that was particularly inappropriate given that there were many small children present (including one she was carrying on her back). One could not help considering that the conference was being broadcast on public access and that many of the presenters were professional performing artists. Cloaking herself in the genuine moral grievance that Martin Luther King marshaled to help free us, what this woman was really doing was trying to snag herself some DJ gigs in a quest to become the next Lauryn Hill. In essence, there was no moral

distinction between this incident and someone donning a neck brace after a fender-bender to seek a big settlement in a court case.

And yet of course she brought the house down. To be sure, there were some more constructive approaches to victimhood at this conference. Yet we might ask why this hyperbole and profanity was processed as compatible with the proactive proposals and reality-based expressions of grievance, rather than as an awkward intrusion. The reason was that adopting victimhood as an aspect of identity rather than addressing it as a problem has become an accepted form of black American expression.

All three of these stories spring from a conviction held by many blacks that forty years after the Civil Rights Act, conditions for blacks have not changed substantially enough to mention. Yet basic facts speak against this claim.

In 1960, 55 percent of the black population lived in poverty—that is, every other black person and then some. A substantial band above that were working class; the middle class was a quiet and lucky minority, and the upper class all but statistical noise. A mere 3.8 percent of black men, and 1.8 percent of black women, were managers or proprietors, a situation that had remained essentially unchanged since 1940, when a mayoral report in New York City noted that business outside of Harlem in New York could be divided between “those that employ Negroes in menial positions and those that employ no Negroes at all.” Lawyers numbered 1.8 percent, doctors, 2.8 percent. There were exactly four black congressmen. Of black people twenty-five to twenty-nine years old, just 5.4 percent had college degrees. Today, we associate the Great Migration of blacks from the South with sepia-tinted photos and people now in their nineties, but as late as 1964, of 1.1 million blacks in New York City, no fewer than 970,000 had come in 1945 or after, and 340,000 of them only in the past ten years—in other words, almost every black person in New York was just a step past sharecropper.

That world would be all but unrecognizable to anyone under forty-five as I write. Today (2000), under a quarter of black Americans live in poverty—instead of every other black and then some, today fewer than one in four. Hardly the ideal, but then hardly the steady erosion of the Civil Rights victories Derrick Bell bemoans either. By 1990, one in five blacks was a manager or professional; to put a point on it, by 1996, about one in ten of all female managers in America were black, and about one in twelve male professionals. Twice as many blacks were doctors in 1990 as had been in 1960, and three times as many were lawyers. By 1995,

there were no fewer than forty-one black people in Congress, and 15.4 percent of black people had college degrees (if that number seems small, consider that only 24 percent of whites did). The unofficial slavery of sharecropping is now something most black Americans dimly associate with their great-grandparents, and we are no longer a country folk as we were in 1960, when those born in cities were distinguished as a new group “born on concrete.” The blacks who migrated north in rags starting after World War I would have been flabbergasted, and the ones still alive indeed are.

The signs of progress are stark, relentless, and certainly cause for celebration. In 1940, only one in one hundred black people were middle class, with “middle class” defined traditionally as earning twice the poverty rate. The victimologist response here is to question whether twice the poverty rate is truly “middle class.” This is not the book to dwell upon that point, but for these purposes note that twelve times that proportion of whites were middle-class by that same metric in 1940. By 1970, 39 percent of black people were middle-class by this metric, while 70 percent of whites were. Today, Ralph Wiley screams “Nooo,” but almost half of African Americans are middle class today, having increased by 10 percent since 1970—while the white middle class has increased by only 5 percent.

The social landscape of modern America also incontrovertibly shows that something significant has been afoot since 1964. In the early 1960s, when the Civil Rights victory was just over the horizon, the author of the play *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry, and her white husband, Robert Nemiroff, were often refused service in restaurants in New York City—in Greenwich Village, which had been the most notoriously bohemian, open-minded area of the city for fifty years. Even when I was a child in the late 1960s and early 1970s, an “interracial couple” like Hansberry and Nemiroff was a curiosity, their children automatically “torn.” Today, black-white relationships and marriages are so common in many parts of the country that they do not even arouse comment. Certainly this is not the case everywhere—yet most people reading this can think of a number of black-white couples they know for whom the race question has been barely an issue if at all for them, their families, or their friends, and what is important is that this would have been all but impossible just twenty-five years ago. The film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is increasingly a period piece rather than topical, and it is not accidental that there have been no moves to “remake” it—the shock that the interracial relationship arouses in an educated

liberal white couple simply would not make sense today. In 1963, a minuscule 0.7 percent of black Americans were not married to other black people; in 1993 the figure was 12.1 percent, about four times what it was even in 1970 (2.6 percent). I don't think I personally have referred to a black-white couple as "interracial" since about 1983, and George Jefferson's hostility toward the interracial Willises on the old sitcom *The Jeffersons* is today quaint.

The institutionalized housing segregation so searingly depicted in Hansberry's play is still occasionally encountered, but only marginally. Much of it that remains is due to self-segregation in the name of cultural fellowship by working and middle-class blacks themselves, a largely harmless phenomenon. (My family moved to the all-black New Jersey town of Lawnside in the 1970s from a very peaceful integrated Philadelphia neighborhood because it reminded my mother of the warmth of black Atlanta.) Hansberry was the first black woman to have a play produced on Broadway when *Raisin in the Sun* premiered in 1959, but today, there are barely any "firsts" left to be. African Americans now hold, or have held, so very many top-echelon positions in American life that to even begin the usual list headed by Colin Powell would be a cliché. These leaders are now far too numerous to be dismissed as tokens—note that even "token black" is becoming a rather hoary concept—and importantly, the holding of these positions by black people would have been all but unthinkable as recently as 1970.

The Foundation of Victimology: The Articles of Faith

To be sure, none of these things mean that race has no meaning in America. Neither, however, do these things mean all but nothing—and it would be difficult for any intelligent person not to wonder upon what basis the latter could be said.

Yet Derrick Bell, Ralph Wiley, Ellis Cose, and a great many black Americans would consider that question as to why a black person would still consider America a racial war zone too obvious to merit an answer. What do these writers and their ilk know that we don't?

What Bell, Wiley, Cose, and all of the subjects of my stories consider themselves to know is that the statistics, the marriages, and the success stories are all just so much glitter, and that people like me just don't "get" the truth. "What's really goin' down," according to this perspective, consists of a certain seven Articles of Faith carefully taught and fiercely re-sented in the black community. They are so deeply entrenched in

African-American thought that any argument outside of the Victimologist box falls largely on deaf ears, white as often as black.

These Articles of Faith are not the famous street conspiracies such as that whites have infected blacks with AIDS. These Articles of Faith are much broader and less fantastical indictments of white America, but all of them are either outright myths or vast exaggerations and distortions, born via the filtering of a subtle and always improving reality through the prism of Victimology, with its seductive goal of aimless indignation over solving problems.

Article of Faith Number One: Most Black People Are Poor

In a 1991 Gallup Poll, almost half of the African Americans polled thought that three out of four black people lived in the ghetto. This reflected that one can be certain that a good number of black people one talks to assume that most black people are poor or close to it.

This conception is mistaken. The number of black people who lived in ghettos in 1995 was a low one in five. The number of black families who were poor in 1996 was roughly one in four (26.4 to be specific). One statistic often heard is that 41.5 percent of black children are poor (as of 1995). This understandably leads one to suppose that about 40 percent of black people as a whole are poor, but the figure for children is skewed because of the high birthrate of unwed inner-city mothers.

The inner cities are, in my view, America's worst problem. However, this does not gainsay the basic fact that *most black people are neither poor nor close to it.*

Article of Faith Number Two: Black People Get Paid Less Than Whites for the Same Job

In 1995, the median income for black families was \$25,970, while the figure for whites was \$42,646. The figures were quickly translated into the claim that "black people make 61 percent of what white people make" and taken to mean that black people are regularly paid less than whites for the same work, so that, for example, the black assistant manager takes home a salary about 40 percent smaller than the white one working in the office next door. This is naturally read as indicating a deep-seated racism in the American fabric far outweighing the significance of increased numbers of doctors or interracial couples or black characters on TV.

But the figure is extremely misleading. The black median income is dragged down, again, by the extenuating factor of the low income of unwed mothers living on welfare, a larger proportion of the black population than the white. The median income of black *two-parent families* is about \$41,307, as opposed to about \$47,000 for whites. Even here, the gap is extremely difficult to pin on racism. In 1995, 56 percent of black Americans lived in the South, and wages are lower there. Finally, as often as not today, black two-parent families earn *more* than whites—they did in about 130 cities and counties in 1994, and in the mid-90s, their median income was rising faster than whites' was.

Thus it simply is not true that black people are paid less than white people for doing the same work, on any level. The proportion of black poor unwed mothers is a problem, but no one would argue that they get less welfare than their white counterparts; they do, however, pull down the aggregate figure for black American earnings as a whole.

The famous 61 percent figure is another thing that many people, shaking their heads in disgust, see as an incontestable rebuke to any argument that black people are not still in chains. This Article of Faith is a fiction, but *Victimology*, which primes black Americans to hear and pass on bad news instead of good, has rooted the figure in black consciousness.

Black Americans are no strangers to paying close attention to the treachery of statistics when the moral absolution of perpetual victimhood is threatened. A standard defense against the charge that too many blacks were on welfare, for example, used to be that greater numbers of white people were on welfare nationwide even if a greater *proportion* of blacks were. This continued to be a community mantra even long after it was no longer true, whereas the 61 percent figure has been subjected to no such scrutiny, because doing so would not feed the flames of *Victimology*.

Article of Faith Number Three: There Is an Epidemic of Racist Arson of Black Churches

Between January 1995 and June 1996, thirty-four black churches were burned. Since then, it has become common wisdom in black America that these burnings are part of an imminent return to the naked white persecution of blacks in the past. The burnings were seen as reminiscent of the burning of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham in 1963 in which four black girls were killed; by 1997, Spike Lee had filmed a wrenching documentary about this earlier tragedy (*Four Little Girls*).

The burning of a church is an unspeakable evil. However, the idea that there is an epidemic of *black* church burnings is, like the 61 percent figure, pure fiction. From 1990 to 1996, about eighty black churches were burned. During the same period, however, over *seven times* that many white churches were burned *every year*. Thus during a typical year, six hundred white churches burned while only about fifteen black churches did. In other words, there is a regrettable practice afoot in America of setting fires to churches, period. Because black people live in America we certainly would not expect such an epidemic to mysteriously bypass black people entirely—however, the epidemic has no racist source.

Furthermore, investigators have been able to turn up no racist motivations for these burnings, and church burnings in general have been decreasing steadily since the 1980s. Finally, in South Carolina, eighteen arsonists have been apprehended, and of these, eight are black.

Victimology, however, has ensured that the black community heard only the initial misleading report without the figures for white churches.

Article of Faith Number Four: The U.S. Government Fummeled Crack into South Central Los Angeles

In 1996, Gary Webb wrote a three-part report for *The San Jose Mercury* describing how the Central Intelligence Agency had deliberately sold crack cocaine to dealers in South Central Los Angeles to fund the Nicaraguan contras in the 1980s. Later that year the newspaper retraced the story, because it turned out that Webb had never found anything even resembling proof of this arrangement. Yet Congresswoman Maxine Waters has continued to demand further investigation of the case, convinced that the inner-city crack epidemic could only be explained by racism.

The chances that the CIA, by the 1980s notoriously inept, could have managed such an endeavor are slight to say the least, and the notion of officials in Washington openly devising, endorsing, and putting into action such a blatantly racist policy strains credibility, seeming no more likely than white doctors injecting blacks with AIDS.

Yet a great many blacks find such ideas plausible nevertheless, and assume (with many whites) that the editor of the *Mercury* was simply cavorting in to coercion from the Powers That Be. For the sake of argument, let's say that the CIA was actually guilty as charged.

The first problem is that if they did this, they were throwing a match into a blaze that had been raging for decades—the inner city

was created through the confluence of white flight, deindustrialization, and the expansion of welfare benefits. The first of these factors, white flight, was racism but hardly directed from Washington, and made possible by a general suburban expansion which was indeed encouraged on the Federal level, but for financial reasons unconnected with racial concerns. The second, deindustrialization, has been a matter of faceless economics (no one would argue that corporations have moved to the suburbs and overseas to escape black people). The third, the expansion of welfare, can only be interpreted as benevolence. Even if the CIA were caught red-handed, this would not indicate that the horror of the inner city was a deliberate creation of racists in the U.S. government.

Second, even if the CIA had channeled crack into South Central, how do we explain the same inner-city horrors in all of the other American cities, like Philadelphia, New York, Detroit, Atlanta, St. Louis, Oakland, and dozens of others? Unless we believe that the CIA also funneled crack into each and every one of these cities, then the question arises: If conditions got to the point they did in all of these other cities, then what makes it necessary or even worth pondering that South Central resulted from CIA intervention?

And finally, even if with great effort we could somehow find a smoking gun proving the implausible scenario of the CIA devoting its overextended energies to carefully funneling crack into just the black communities of over a hundred American cities, then *what would that do for the people suffering in South Central today?* Wouldn't Maxine Waters be better serving her constituency by focusing on concrete efforts to better their lives? The aimless obsession with this is a waste of precious energy, but it makes sense as yet another demonstration of how addressing racism constructively has taken a backseat to simply crying racism to sa-
vor whites' humiliation.

Importantly, however, no one has ever proven that the CIA funneled crack into South Central or anywhere else, not Maxine Waters, and not even a reporter who spent months searching for such proof, whose reputation hung on the case, and who could resuscitate his reputation by at last finding the smoking gun. If the issue were something black people had done, we can be sure that the case would long ago have been considered closed in the black community, with any efforts to revive it signs of racism (can we say "O.J.?"?). Victimology, however, will ensure that even educated and successful black Americans like Bill Cosby will continue to trace the crack epidemic to the CIA.

Article of Faith Number Five: The Number of Black Men in Prison Is Due to a Racist Justice System

In 1995, one in three black men in their twenties was either in jail, on probation, or on parole (the statistic is often distorted as "one in three black men" period, rather than in their twenties, but the truth is awful enough). More to the point, almost half of the United States prison population is black.

This is generally interpreted as evidence that black people are arrested out of proportion to their numbers in society, since they constitute only 13 percent of the population. However, the figures must be seen in light of the fact that as sad as it is, nationwide blacks commit not 13 percent, but 42 percent of the violent crimes in the country. In other words, contrary to the idea that blacks are arrested disproportionately, their proportion of the prison population nearly reflects the rate at which they commit crimes. The *reason* they commit more crimes is surely traceable to racism, which left a disenfranchised people on the margins of society and most vulnerable to antisocial behavior. However, this does not mean that the percentage of the black prison population above 13 percent were put behind bars for no reason.

Yet the general feeling is that even if blacks are arrested in proportion to the crimes they commit, that there is a bias in the severity of their sentences. However, one study after another, even by scholars expecting their results to reveal racism, show no such bias. When prior records, gravity of the crime, and use of weapons is taken into account, there is no sentencing bias against blacks. Contrary to another piece of common wisdom, black people are not sent to death row disproportionately. Their numbers there also correspond with the proportion of crimes blacks commit, 40 percent in 1994 (also, whites are more likely than blacks to be executed).

Thus the black community sentiment, nurtured by white comrades-in-arms, that the railroadng of Mumia Abu-Jamal represents life as usual for black men in America is wrong. All evidence does suggest that crucial exonerating evidence was barred from Abu-Jamal's trial and that he does not deserve to be in prison, much less to die. Yet without minimizing the unspeakable injustice of his incarceration, Abu-Jamal's story is today a freak tragedy, not business as usual. He was cursed by a combination of variables: having been a Black Panther in a city with a particularly racist police chief, having then been a particularly effective gadfly journalist, and falling under the jurisdiction of a particularly racist judge. But the facts above remain: Mumia Abu-Jamal is one person, and

studies show that blacks are not discriminated against in general under the legal system. The vile Judge Albert Sabo who sentenced Abu-Jamal is an exception, not the rule. Many would vigorously disagree, thinking about some other racist judge they have heard about, but certainly there are individual racist judges—we're not on the mountaintop just yet. The point is that if the justice system was racist overall, then the proportion of blacks in jail would be greater than the proportion of crimes they commit—but it isn't, and no amount of justifiable sympathy for Abu-Jamal can erase that fact. Sabo is also elderly, i.e., a relic of the past, and the incident that entangled Abu-Jamal in this web was in what is now virtually another time, almost twenty years ago.

The prison statistics are also widely attributed to the disparity in sentencing for possession of crack cocaine versus powdered cocaine, which according to common wisdom in the black community was instituted in order to corral black people, who mostly use crack, into prison.

Yet how racist can a law be which the Congressional Black Caucus vigorously supported and even considered too weak? If we had asked these black congresspeople in 1986 why they supported these laws, they would have said that they were aimed at breaking the horror of the crack culture, which had turned inner cities into war zones by the mid-1980s. Indeed, the sentencing laws were *not* designed to catch white users even though there are more of them—because the whites were not part of the murderous culture that was decimating blacks young and old in the inner cities. The people who put these laws into effect—prominent blacks among them—were quite explicit about having the inner-city crack culture in mind rather than the white investment banker doing some lines after work in his apartment.

And what we must keep constantly in mind as we evaluate the appropriateness of these laws is something very simple that is tellingly almost never mentioned when the issue comes up: namely, they worked. The world depicted in films like *Colors* and *Boyz N the Hood* is quickly becoming history: Crack no longer terrorizes the inner cities as it once did. Of course none of us rejoice at the spectacle of so many young black men behind bars. But let's face it, they didn't get there for playing jacks. Because their being put there solved a problem, our question is whether having them out of prison would be worth going back to the world of *Boyz N the Hood*.

It is true, however, that these sentencing laws have *now* outlived their usefulness and beg revision. Because they succeeded in breaking the crack culture, today we are seeing increasing numbers of people quite

unconnected to the warring crack trade of yore thrown into jail for ten years, or even life, for possession of small amounts of drugs, and this burden falls disproportionately upon lower-class people, a great many of course black. I perform on stage as a hobby, and recreational drug use is par for the course among many of the twenty-something white people of the theater world; it often sobers me to think that the only thing standing between me and ten years in jail if I happened to be pulled over while carrying a bag of something would be the possibility that the status of my job as a college professor and my "middle-class" demeanor *might* incline a prosecutor to get me community service instead of jail time. However, the fact remains that fifteen years ago, the laws were instituted not simply to give black people a hard time, but as an emergency measure—openly and heartily supported by the Congressional Black Caucus—to break the crack culture terrorizing black communities nationwide.

Yet apparently, to critics of the crack policy young black men being arrested in large numbers is such anathema that they would rather have seen these guys be allowed to stay on the street and do their business. But how might these professors, lawyers, politicians, and journalists crying "racism" feel if it had been *their* children and family and friends being iced while walking down the wrong street on the wrong evening? Are these people really this cold-blooded?

Certainly not. In the 1970s and 1980s, the New York City police department were walking by drug transactions in cold daylight, hamstrung by liberal enforcement rules favoring the criminal. At the time, it was fashionable to say that whites were hoping that black people would just kill each other off. But now that whites have dedicated themselves to getting these people off the streets and succeeded, they are charged with trying to decimate the black male population. What exactly, then, do these critics want?

That's not a rhetorical question, because it is clear what such people want. Their refusal to be satisfied stems from a guiding commitment not to any concrete plan to rescue the inner cities, but to crying "racism" whatever the circumstances. Victimology strikes again, so powerful that it perverts us into seeing the taming of a murderous scourge as a reversal.

Article of Faith Number Six: The Police Stop-and-Frisk More Black People Than Whites Because of Racism

Unlike the 61 percent and church-burning myths, it is true that black men are more likely to be stopped by the police than white. It is also true

that as often as not, police tend to be discourteous and sometimes even physically abusive during these encounters.

There is no excuse whatsoever for police brutality, an important subject that I will discuss shortly. Here my focus is on stop-and-frisk encounters, with the unpleasantness they often include, but not those involving physical abuse, which I will discuss in the next section. Even so, neither is there justification for someone being screamed at or unduly detained in the process of a police check.

Many people claim, however, that regardless of whether harassment or violence is involved, to focus at all on minorities in preventing crime is based on "racist stereotyping." However, there are some unpleasant but vital realities that we must keep in mind when addressing this issue for the future. I will give two examples.

In 1989 the New York police department conducted an antidrug effort at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Indeed, 65 to 75 percent of the people they stopped were black or Latino, while only 35 percent of those stopped were white. According to the wisdom that the concentration on blacks and Latinos was racist, they should have been a much lower percentage of the people actually carrying drugs than 65 percent, and certainly no more than 75 percent. The actual figures: the blacks and Latinos were 99 percent of those found to be carrying drugs (208 out of 210). Obviously their being stopped in larger numbers guaranteed that they would constitute a larger portion of those on whom drugs were found: but the fact that almost *no one* carrying drugs was not black or Latino was significant.

In New York City in 1999, four policemen shot and killed an unarmed Guinean immigrant named Amadou Diallo in the course of interrogating him during a search for a rapist, allegedly because he somehow appeared to be armed. This killing took place within the context of a citywide crackdown on crime instituted by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Based on William Bratton's "Broken Windows" theory of crime-fighting, the crackdown emphasized stiff penalties even for small infractions like jumping down emphasized stiff penalties even for small infractions like jumping turnstiles and defacing property, on the assumption that such things discourage more pernicious behaviors from settling in a neighborhood. Clearly, Amadou Diallo's killing took this punitive approach much, much too far, and in general the New York City police were rightly considered to have been much too harsh in their dealings with minorities in general. Nevertheless, after Diallo's death, under the glare of the media the

New York City Street Crimes Unit started making many fewer arrests (291 in the seven weeks after the shooting, compared to 705 during the same weeks the previous year). The number of shootings promptly went up within the Street Crimes Unit's area of operation: that is, more people, most of them black or Latino, died or suffered serious injury.

What these episodes show is the following:

Even a police force devoid of racism, and never abusive or discourteous in stop-and-frisk encounters, would in some areas have to stop more black people than white to prevent crime effectively.

The ultimate reason for this is, of course, racist disenfranchisement in the past (or, depending on how you view the inner city, even the present). But *in the present*, let's face it—crime is crime.

What this means is that in certain areas where certain kinds of crime are rampant, a police officer can, quite reasonably, stop more young black people, especially males, than any other type of person without being racist at all; on the contrary, to do so is often the only logical way to effectively fight crime. This is not a pleasant thought. But if this attention to minorities were unfair, then the minorities checked would almost always come up empty-handed. But as we have seen, all too often this is not the case. All of us know that, especially since the 1980s, there has been a violent drug trade run by urban minority men. Certainly this would lead black men in certain places to be more likely to be carrying drugs. Figures like the ones from the Port Authority, which are quite typical, prove this empirically.

One of many things showing that "profiling" is not proof of the eternity of racism is that black police officers are as notorious for it as white. "I mean, you're a cop. You know who's committing the crimes. It's your neighborhood. That's how it works," one in Philadelphia has said. How many of us could look this man in the eye and tell him he should concentrate on the Latina mothers pushing baby carriages and the white Temple University professors waiting at traffic lights driving to work? At Baltimore's main train station, a black police officer unhesitatingly notes that young black women who favor certain accoutrements are known for delivering drugs and money for New York dealers. Especially since the "profile" is but a subset of the black female population (middle-aged black women with their children are not focused upon), is this man a "racist" for concentrating upon these particular women in trying to

stanch the degradation that drugs wreak upon the New York City black community? How likely is it that the black dealers in Harlem have also incorporated paunchy middle-aged white businessmen in gray suits commuting from Washington into their networks? Many black police officers are as disenchanting with the analysis of profiling as racist as white ones are; as this Baltimore officer says, "The problem with black politicians is that they think the cop is automatically guilty."

This is certainly not to say that there have not been areas where profiling has gotten out of hand. This is particularly true of one kind of profiling, the concentration on black people when making random stops of cars to check for drugs. For example, it has been discovered that while 75 percent of the cars New Jersey police officers had been stopping were driven by minorities, an average of only 13 percent of the drivers had been found to be carrying drugs, while 10 percent of the white drivers had. Similar evidence has come forth in other states, such as Florida and Maryland, and suggests that randomly stopping black drivers on the "D.W.B." (Driving While Black) charge is ineffective, and thus inappropriate and wrong.

However, there are two things that tend to get lost on the "D.W.B." issue when it comes to deciding whether racism rages eternal in America. One is that the officers guilty of this practice were working under the pressures of quotas, stopping more black drivers out of a sense that they were more likely to be carrying drugs. It was concretely documented in one state, for instance, that minority stops were concentrated during the last two weeks of any given month, just as parking tickets traditionally are. Even though the profiling was inappropriate and has since been prosecuted, our issue is whether or not these officers were motivated by racism, and in that light, what motivated them was in fact pragmatism, misaimed though it turned out to be—based on the fact that it is true, regardless of its cause or the justice of that cause, that black people do commit crimes in this country in disproportion to their numbers. This is indeed what officers have often stated on the subject. We need not pretend that there is no racism among some of these officers, *but even if there were none whatsoever, the result would have been the same, especially since black officers have been as guilty of profiling as white ones.* These officers black and white were overgeneralizing on the basis of concrete experience, as all humans black and white tend to. Clumsy and cynical, yes. But racist? Life is more complicated than that.

This brings us to the second issue. Stopping cars is but one form of profiling, not its totality. This is important because it returns us to the

fact that profiling by officers patrolling certain neighborhoods or public settings and stopping people on foot has resulted in rooting out a significant amount of criminal behavior, as we have seen in the Port Authority case and in New York after the Diallo shooting. What has been discovered is not that racial profiling serves no purpose in fighting crime. It was instead found that concentrating on blacks in fighting crime via the particular method of highway pullovers was inappropriate, and thankfully, the practice was condemned and changed (this in itself yet one more instance of the ebbing of racism in American institutions).

This is hardly to say that there are not times when the police have overstepped their bounds in profiling black people on foot, as in a notorious case when middle-class black boys were arrested at a shopping mall clothing store for shoplifting when one was wearing a shirt he had bought there previously. But cases like these are individual ones; it has not been shown, for example, that concentrating on young black men in intercepting drugs on the street in North Philadelphia turns up no more contraband than if people were stopped randomly. There will always be some bad cops—there are bad black people and good black people, bad white people and good white people. Life isn't perfect. But just as one black person's bad conduct cannot be interpreted as an indictment of the race as a whole, isolated incidents of excess from whites cannot be taken as evidence that a whole system is racist. Only the *prevalence* of excess could be interpreted this way, and as we have seen, 99 percent of the people caught carrying drugs at Port Authority were minorities, and black-on-black crime went up immediately in the districts of New York City where officers relaxed their patrols after Amadou Diallo's death.

Significantly, even in the case of these excesses, progress is being made. As the ebbing of racism would lead us to predict, we are in fact getting ever closer to the hypothetical ideal police forces mentioned at the outset of this section. Tragedies have a way of forging change. In the wake of the Diallo tragedy Mayor Giuliani, while not exactly a model of tact in his public statements, submitted the police force to sensitivity training and replaced fifty members of the 380-man Street Crimes Unit with minorities. In a similar crackdown effort in Boston a few years before, events had never even reached a point of crisis. The police certainly focused on minorities in their searches, but also forged links with inner-city communities and trained officers in restraint and cultural sensitivity. Such things are concrete evidence that stop-and-frisks are yet one more realm where racism is abating. It would be quite impossible for anyone surveying the national scene on this score in the year 2000 to construct

even a tentative case that in this area racism is holding firm, and to show that it was getting worse would be utterly hopeless.

Yet at the end of the day, it must always be remembered that even though blacks do commit more crimes than whites, most blacks *don't* commit crimes. Our goal must be that those detained be treated with the utmost of respect, with not the slightest assumption of guilt without just cause. However, to detain more black people than white in many neighborhoods and settings is sadly nothing less than necessary, because black people commit proportionately more crimes than whites.

This is particularly important given that we often lose sight of the fact that the criminals in question mostly ravage the lives of *other black people*. Unfortunately but urgently, crack is likely to have a nastier effect on demoralized inner-city residents (and their children and the younger siblings who look to them as models) than on the affluent investment banker on Wall Street who likes to snort up before a party. What this means is that current realities are such that, *unless we approve of drugs making their way into inner-city black lives*, in certain neighborhoods young black men must be checked more often than their white equivalents. They must be treated with the utmost civility when stopped, because indeed a great many, even most, of them will turn out to be innocent. But to refrain from stopping them at all is to put more black lives at risk. To eliminate profiling entirely would be to deprive not as much white as *black* people of their right to as much protection as possible from the depredations of criminals. To ignore this is to unintentionally turn a cold shoulder to true suffering.

Maybe I sound a little callous here, and the reader might be wondering "Has it happened to him?" Well, yes, I do have my story, although not one as unpleasant as many black men have. One night at about 1:00 A.M. I was walking to a convenience store. I was dressed not in my usual Gap/khaki clothes but in jeans, sneakers, and a short-sleeved button-down shirt open over a T-shirt, with my hands in my pockets; I had a few days' worth of stubble. I crossed a two-lane street far from the traffic light or crosswalk, and when I saw a car coming at about twenty-five yards away I broke into a quick trot to get across before it got to where I was (I am a Northeastern city-bred street crosser, and must admit that I do tend to be rather independent in crossing the street, especially at one in the morning).

I hadn't realized that the car was a police car, and the officer quickly turned on the siren, made a screeching U-turn, and pulled up to me on the other side of the street. The window rolled down, revealing a white

man who would have been played by Danny Aiello if it had been a movie. "You always cross streets whenever you feel like it like that?" he sneered. "I'm sorry, officer," I said. "I wasn't thinking." "Even in front of a police car?" he growled threateningly. My stomach jumped, and I realized that at that moment, despite being a tenured professor at an elite university, to this man I was a black street thug, a "youth." I simply cannot imagine him stopping like this if a white man of the same age in the same clothes with the same stubble had done the exact same thing; he was trawling through a neighborhood which, unfortunately, does sometimes harbor a certain amount of questionable behavior by young black men on that street at that time of night, and to him, the color of my skin rendered me a suspect. I explained again as calmly as I could that I had meant no disrespect. I frankly suspect that the educated tone of my voice, so often an inconvenience in my life, was part of what made him pull off—"Not the type," he was probably thinking. But if I had answered in a black-inflected voice with the subtle mannerisms that distinguish one as "street," the encounter would quite possibly have gone on longer and maybe even gotten ugly. He pulled off, and left me shaken and violated.

I cannot say, however, that I walked away from that episode furious that I had just been swiped by the long arm of white racism eternally tainting all black lives. I felt that what had happened was a sign that the black underclass is America's greatest injustice, and that I ought take it as a call to action to do as much as I can to help rescue the underclass so that such encounters with the police won't be necessary. Yes, *necessary*—because under current conditions, whether we like it or not, they are. If I had gotten *beaten up* by that officer and his partner, then I would have felt different—see the next section. But while we can certainly trim the excesses—such as the highway stops—if we complain about being singled out *at all* in such searches without offering any alternative strategy, we are giving in to victimhood—not only ours but that of the increased number of minorities killed in New York after the Diallo incident—rather than working to eradicate it.

Article of Faith Number Seven: Police Brutality Against Black People Reveals the Eternity of Racism

Police brutality is the only issue out of all of the ones the Articles of Faith concern which does demonstrate racism. The disproportionate police brutality against minorities is not a myth, nor is it a sad but inevitable by-product of historical inequities like the crack and stop-and-frisk issues

are. There was no excuse for Amadou Diallo's death. There was no excuse for Haitian immigrant Abner Louima having a plunger stick shoved up his rectum in New York. Rodney King was no saint, being drunk and quite belligerent when stopped by police officers in Los Angeles, but the savagery with which the officers beat him into submission went far beyond necessity and revealed, on videotape for all to see, primitive barbarity in the name of detention. The transparent antiblack fervor that the Los Angeles Police Department had barely bothered to conceal over the decades also made it clear that a white belligerent drunk would have been much less likely to suffer the same treatment.

Thus there is no question that police brutality is racism. However, my point in this chapter is not whether or not racism exists; we all know it does. My point is whether or not it is gradually disappearing. In this light, police brutality is not a demonstration that, as Derrick Bell has it, "slavery refuses to fade."

The traditional view of police brutality is that it is "one more thing" showing that racism reigns as strongly as it did in 1950. However, as we have seen, blacks have made great strides in all areas of American life, blacks are part of the American social fabric to a degree unthinkable forty years ago, most black people are not poor, black people are not paid less for the same work than whites, there is no epidemic of black church burnings, the CIA did not funnel crack into South Central, black men are not sent to prison out of proportion to the crimes they commit, and black people are not stopped for drug checks out of proportion to their participation in the drug trade. Clearly these things mean something, even if the reader disagrees with a point or two.

In that light, police brutality is not "one more thing"—it is the *last* thing—or even if you disagree with one or two of my points, one of the last things.

Importantly, police brutality is exactly what one would expect the last major type of racism to be, and as such, is one more demonstration that racism is on its way out, not holding firm. Most police officers are working-class people from tight-knit communities, of modest education. As Orlando Patterson notes in *The Ordeal of Integration*, these are just the white people most likely to retain a degree of racism now all but absent at "the parties Shelby Steele is at" and in most of American society, the kinds of people who would make me uneasy walking through a white working-class neighborhood in the "Great Northeast" region of my hometown of Philadelphia at night. Furthermore, the nature of police

work brings out the mob mentality, making the police behave more violently and impulsively than they might otherwise.

Yet the tendency among a great many is to view the tape of Rodney King and think "the only difference between them and all white people is the uniforms." This tendency, however, is based on the Articles of Faith, and therefore does not square with modern reality. If those officers really did represent white America as a whole, then we can be sure that a lot more than one in four black people would be poor, that interracial couples would still be a beleaguered oddity, that there really would be an epidemic of racist church burnings—in other words, it would be 1960. We need be under no impression that white America would not be capable of keeping us in that state, because after all, it did for 350 years.

What happened to Rodney King, like what happened to Mumia Abu-Jamal, is not the state of the art—it is a remnant. We could predict, in other words, that racism would make its last stand. That racism is a minor factor just about everywhere in American society except among such undereducated, parochial churls is, in itself, one more proof that it is on its way out in America. When a house burns down, often the only thing left standing is the chimney, whose materials resist burning. Often one has to go break up the chimney by hand before clearing the site and building a new house. Yet no one takes the chimney as evidence that the house didn't burn down, and certainly not as a sign that the house is on its way to reconstituting itself. In fact, a standing chimney surrounded by wreckage is, in itself, an indication that the house burned down.

Some might reject the chimney analogy and object that police brutality signals not the end of racism, but just a way of expressing it eternally when other channels have been closed—"if they have to pay us, live near us, eat with us, and hire us, then they're gonna make damned sure they can at least beat the hell out of us whenever they feel like it." This is a tempting notion, but in fact, police brutality, like all other racism in America, is *on the wane*.

Our tendency, for example, is to freeze in time the LAPD that caught Rodney King. This, however, was almost ten years ago by the time you read this, and by the mid-nineties, the LAPD had cleaned up its act in response to the harsh glare of world opprobrium that the King episode focused upon it. Racist police chief Daryl Gates is history. In 1996, the department was no fewer than 53 percent women and minorities, and 15 percent of the police officers were black (a higher proportion than blacks even represent in Los Angeles as a whole). Police brutality and bias com-

plaints are increasingly rare; a 1998 survey by the U.S. Justice Department found that 82 percent of Los Angeles black people are satisfied with the police force. The claim that racism is *not* on the wane would predict that the LAPD today would be business as usual, with the status quo returning as soon as the news trucks packed up and went home. But that prediction is not borne out. Instead, Rodney King's beating and the officers' exoneration were so appalling to the American public that the department was completely overhauled, despite having for decades been virtually unaccountable to the municipal government by the dictates of the city's constitution. The officers who beat Rodney King got off—life isn't perfect—but the LAPD was never the same again. Even as I write this, the department is still revisiting evidence of injustices of the past to redress them where possible—this was not happening in 1991.

On the subject of New York, as I write this, the assault there on police brutality is proceeding so briskly that it continually outstrips my ability to submit a final draft of this chapter. When Officer Justin Volpe beat Haitian immigrant Abner Louima and then sodomized him with a broomstick and held the stick to his face, Volpe claimed innocence and assumed, along with racism-forever advocates, that the traditional blue wall of silence would protect him from punishment. Yet once again the facts went against Derrick Bell and Ralph Wiley's smug fatalism. One by one, officers came forward at Volpe's trial and confirmed what Volpe had done so incontestably that he was forced to take the stand and plead guilty in sniveling humiliation; he was sentenced to thirty years in prison. One would search the news archives in vain for a similar scenario—the times are changing. Even Volpe himself, in all of his ignominy, presented a more nuanced picture of the state of race relations than one might expect. On the one hand, one cannot help suspecting that he would not have treated a fellow white Staten Islander, or any white person, so brutally. On the other hand, Volpe, born not in 1947 but 1972, was engaged to a black woman.

The battle surely is not won yet. But today's events must be seen in historical perspective. In 1953, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. launched a major effort to expose police brutality against black people in New York City, but even one of the most brilliant and effective Civil Rights legislators in American history, at the very top of his game, couldn't break down the blue wall of silence. Clearly, it is significant that today there are stories like Los Angeles, Boston, and New York.

Police brutality against minorities has not evaporated; however, it is on the wane, fast, and most important, there is no other manifestation of

racism left in this society that even approaches it in force or spread. Police brutality is a fact, but it is not evidence that racism overall is impregnable, and therefore does not make Pollyannas of the increasing numbers of people noting that so much of the news in black America is good.

Transition Versus Backslide

In 1992, I saw Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* with a college student born in the Czech Republic. After the movie, she said to me, "I can see how bad it was for black people years ago. But now they're in the schools, they can go anywhere they want, they can have any job they want, and it's practically illegal to say anything bad about them in public. So what's the problem?"

Obviously the question is naive, stemming from her status as a partial outsider to American culture. She knew little of ghettos, and it would have taken an afternoon to explain to her the subtle forms that racism can take even in the absence of signs on water fountains.

Nevertheless, it is significant that forty years ago a Czech who had been in America for a week would not have had to ask that question, even in the North. Whites, privately haunted by more informed versions of the Czech's question, but cowed by the insistence of so many black people that the country is still a racist war zone, tend to assume that there are things that they will simply "never know," and blacks tend to support them in that feeling. Yet most of what blacks assume whites "don't know" is founded upon seven Articles of Faith which are all either outright myths or distorted readings of historically based discrepancies, none of which give any indication that racism is unchanged, and certainly not that it is back on the rise.

Thus my point is not that bad things are not still happening; all one has to do is open a newspaper to see that this would not correspond with reality. Yet the popular stance, reigning from the Halls of Ivy down through boardrooms, barbershops, and barrooms, that nothing has changed or that things are getting worse does not correspond with reality either.

Neither mired in 1960 nor on the mountaintop yet, African Americans are currently in a state of *transition*. In a transition between one phase and another, there will inevitably be transitional points. "When do you want freedom for your people?" Ruth Buzzi asked black Johnny Brown (later better known as Bookman the janitor on *Good Times*) in a black-out sequence on *Laugh-In* in the late 1960s. "Now would be fine!"

Brown quickly answered. But this was a *joke*: how could racism have possibly vanished the morning after the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964? Because we are at a point of transition, nasty episodes, although occurring more often, are nothing less than inevitable, such as the dragging death in Jasper, Texas, of James Byrd in 1998. These things must be identified, condemned, and stamped out. That is what we are doing: For example, Byrd's killer was swiftly apprehended and convicted, with whites from Jasper, traditionally thought to be a bigoted backwater, joining the Byrds and the Jasper black community in mourning Byrd's death. One would die searching newspapers before roughly 1970 describing any such scene.

There are no logical grounds whatsoever for reading any of these increasingly occasional glitches as a slide backwards, as so many seem so inclined, even eager, to do. After an hour in the freezer, a glass of water will still contain some unfrozen pockets, but we do not decide on this basis that it will never freeze, and certainly do not watch it get harder by the hour and yet complain that it is on its way back to water. If someone puts down mothballs in a closet swarming with moths, if he encounters a couple of stray moths in the closet three days later, he does not claim that mothballs do not work. Yellow passes through green to become blue, but if someone held up a blue-green Crayola crayon and told us it was "yellow" despite its appearances, we would suspect some perceptual disorder. In the same way, the professional pessimism maintained by so many African Americans in the face of a miraculous social revolution has fallen so starkly out of sync with reality that it reveals itself to have become a self-perpetuating cancer. As cancer eats away healthy tissue, this Victimology cult, obsessed with what the Man did last week, expends energy that would be better devoted to moving ahead and figuring out what we are going to do next week.

The Roots of the Plague

Why has this mode of thought become common coin in black America? Contrary to appearances, the cause is not simply a sorry case of arrant self-righteousness. Much of it is traceable, ironically, to something miraculous, the forced desegregation of the United States in the 1960s. It is historically unprecedented that a disenfranchised group effected an overhaul of its nation's legal system to rapidly abolish centuries of legalized discrimination. The country as a whole can congratulate itself on this.

One result was that a context was set up in which black Americans

were free to confront whites with their indignation and frustration on a regular basis and be listened to—Jews, the Irish, turn-of-the-century Asian immigrants, and other formerly disenfranchised groups never experienced such a stage in their journey to equality. White Americans have surely learned some long-needed lessons from the endless harangues they have had to suffer at our hands over the past forty years. I grew up watching my mother, who had participated in sit-ins in segregated Atlanta, taking active part in this throughout the 1970s and 1980s as a professor of social work at Temple University in Philadelphia, and I'm glad she did it. Time and again I recall her abruptly wrenching conversations in a direction that revealed to a forty-something pants-suit-clad white woman or sideburned white man the racist feelings underlying their seemingly innocent ideas. Sometimes she overdid it, I thought, but life isn't perfect; even if some of these people privately got a little tired of Mom, they also learned.

Where this mindset has become a problem is in combination with something else: Centuries of abasement and marginalization led African Americans to internalize the way they were perceived by the larger society, resulting in a postcolonial inferiority complex. After centuries of degradation, it would have been astounding if African Americans had *not* inherited one, and thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Kenneth Clark, and Gordon Allport have eloquently testified to its tragic potency.

We do not want to think about this, or at least, I certainly don't. But one of countless ways it reveals itself immediately is in the battle cry "You're still black!" often hurled at African Americans who appear to question their membership in the group for one reason or another. The implausibility of a Jew telling an assimilated child or acquaintance "You're still Jewish!" points up the heart of "You're still black!" The statement implies that being black is in some fundamental way a stain, incommensurate with the hubris perceived in the addressee, and the fury in the delivery makes this even clearer. The black person who, for one reason or another, sheds cultural blackness is viewed with ire in the black community because it is automatically assumed that the person considers herself not simply different from, but *better than*, black people. The Jewish person who sheds cultural Jewishness, on the other hand, is not looked upon fondly by many more conservative Jews, but more out of fear of the disappearance of the race via intermarriage than out of a sense that the strayer might consider herself *better than* Jews.

Another indication that black America suffers a deep-reaching inferiority complex is the oft-heard defense of affirmative action in universi-

ties on the basis that children of alumni and white top-ranking athletes have always been let in under the bar. Five o'clock scholar legacy students and thick-tongued athletes like Moose in *Archib* comic books have always been held in distinctly bad odor. The comfort with which black administrators, professors, and students compare all-black student bodies to people who have always been a campus joke reveals a fundamentally low sense of self-esteem. Once again, note how difficult it is to imagine a rabbi defending affirmative action for Jewish students by drawing such a parallel, even seventy years ago when Jews were still an overtly persecuted group in this country.

Victimology stems from a lethal combination of this inherited inferiority complex with the privilege of dressing down the former oppressor. Encouraged to voice umbrage on one hand, and on the other hand haunted by the former oppressor's lie that black is bad, many African Americans have fallen into a holding pattern of wielding self-righteous indignation less as a spur to action than as a self-standing action in itself because it detracts attention from the inadequacies we perceive in ourselves by highlighting those of the other. An analogy, partial but useful, is the classroom rattle-tale. We all remember this kid, ostensibly committed to keeping everything on the straight and narrow, just as Victimologist blacks are ostensibly committed to rooting out injustice. However, we all knew that the rattle-tale was ultimately motivated less by a desire to improve student conduct than by personal insecurities, especially since the ills he pointed out were almost always minor ones that weren't hurting anybody ("Mrs. Montgomery, Jeffrey is licking the eraser again!"). The analogy with our Derrick Bells, depicting black American life as an apocalyptic nightmare when except for the quarter who are poor, it would, warts and all, be the envy of most people on the planet, is plain. What motivates people like this to keep screaming "Nooo" amidst such a glorious revolution is, at heart, insecurity.

My debt here to Shelby Steele's *The Content of Our Character* is obvious. Because Steele's ideas question the Victimologist mantra that racism is a significant barrier to black achievement, few blacks of any stripe have ever given them any serious thought. Yet they are absolutely key to understanding and getting beyond an America in which views like Derrick Bell's are accepted as a respectable point of view and taught to bright young African Americans as truth.

Steele tends to mostly "preach to the choir" partly because he seems to assume that the falsity of the Articles of Faith is too obvious to merit discussion, and perhaps also because of a sense one gets from his wit-

ings that blacks have nothing at all left to complain about. I in no way mean to imply that we need not sound the alarm, and loudly, at remaining strands of racism. However, when the whistle is frozen at a shrieking level while the conditions that set it off recede ever more each year, it becomes clear that what began as a response has become more of a tic, endlessly retracing the same cycle like a tripped-off car alarm. This cycle is driven not by the mythical America writers like Bell, Wiley, and Cose have created, but by a culturally based insecurity. Only insecurity could make a race downplay and detract attention from its victories, carefully shielding its children from the good in favor of the bad. Black America today is analogous to a wonderful person prevented by insecurity from seeing the good in themselves. Insecurity has sad, masochistic effects—the talented actor who abuses drugs and dies early; the bright, beautiful woman who finds herself only able to develop romantic attraction to heartless men; the brilliant first-time novelist who never manages a second novel out of fear of failure; the race driven by self-hate and fear to spend more time inventing reasons to cry "racism" than working to be the best that it can be. Victimology, in a word, is a disease.

The Ironic Joys of Underdogism

One thing showing that the apocalyptic vision of whites black Americans tend to maintain has lost its moorings in reality is its discrepancy with fact. Another indication is something so common that it is rarely remarked: the fact that many black people decrying their supposed victimhood do so with joy rather than the despair one would expect.

The Reverend Al Sharpton is a useful illustration. Here is an excerpt from *The New York Times* shortly after the murder of Amadou Diallo:

Just before the evening news the other night, the parents of Amadou Diallo, the West African street vendor shot dead by plainclothes police officers last week, walked up to microphones to offer their first extended public remarks about the death of their son. The setting was a second-floor auditorium up a scuffed flight of steps in Harlem. And the host, wearing a crisp, gray three-piece suit and clearly enjoying this latest bus-
 the at his Harlem headquarters, was the Rev. Al Sharpton.

But wait a minute. A man has just been killed and his bereaved parents just stepped up to the microphones. Why is Sharpton enjoying himself? The reporter was not a racist subtly slurring Sharpton—all of us are fa-

miliar with the air of exuberance about Sharpton each time something like this happens. The reason is that he *delights* in this kind of thing. Wouldn't a genuine response to victimhood be indignation? Wouldn't we expect especially a reverent to be consumed with remorse about such a tragic death? But no—Sharpton, as always, revealed in the cheap thrills of getting to stick it to whiter one more time by cloaking blacks as eternal victims and whites as the eternal oppressor.

We are so used to demagogues like Sharpton's that we forget that his is not the only way. For example, we did not see this swagger, this theatrical brightness of the eyes, in Martin Luther King. King was not having a good time, he was forging a revolution out of tragedy. Sharpton is having parties, and is, ironically, one more indication of how much better things have gotten. Before 1970, because there was so much achingly real work to be done, any Civil Rights leader without *gravitas* would have seemed too callow to even consider. Sharpton—a Civil Rights leader delighting in the murder of an innocent black man in cold blood—is possible *because* so much progress has been made that anyone who insists on pretending it's 1910 has to be a cartoon, to exaggerate, to spend years sporting James Brown's campy hairstyle—in other words, to be an actor. Significantly, you will look in vain for any cartoons like Sharpton among black leaders before 1970. Theatricality is one thing: Marcus Garvey had his outfits, Adam Clayton Powell liked to travel in style and was no stranger to twitting the white man for the fun of it. But these men had serious messages and concrete contributions to their credit; all Sharpton does is pose and scream.

Yet this pathologically misplaced joy goes far beyond politicians, percolating deep into the black community. I recall a decidedly Afrocentric schoolteacher describing to a group her life thus far as a litany of discrimination and marginalization because of her color. I cannot speak for the validity of her interpretations of all of these events. What I could not help noting, however, was that all of this was delivered with a beatific smile. One would naturally expect someone who had truly suffered to register pain and resentment—refugees from the Soviet Union and battered wives do not tell their stories with a grin. One does not delight in the noose around one's neck or the fire on one's skin. The only possible explanation for someone deriving pleasure from victimhood, besides outright sadomasochism, is if the victimhood addresses a lack inside of them. Because being the underdog confers a sense of moral absolution, we know what lack victimhood is addressing in people like this—it is serving as a balm for insecurity. What this woman reminded me of was

not a Holocaust survivor but our classroom tattle-tale, who betrays that his motivation is less uplift than personal absolution by the glee with which he reports the torts of others.

Most important, though, a "victimhood" that one can smile through does not deserve the name. Black people do not grin as they narrate true suffering. A family driven from a new home by racist neighbors does not smile as they talk about it. A black woman denied partnership in a law firm after years of top-quality service because she never became "one of the boys" does not smile as she files a suit. The Cult of Victimology has forced people like this schoolteacher into wearing victimhood like a badge and reveling in it for the joys of underdogism that it brings. There is a certain seductive charisma in this—this woman could definitely hold a crowd—but it has nothing to do with moving the race forward.

Two Misconceptions About Victimology

It is not news for many people that a defeatist, paranoid attitude toward whites is not exactly the best recipe for moving the black race forward. However, Victimology is generally parochialized in one of two directions, under the impression that the problem is much less profound than it is.

An Inner-City Pathology?

For example, many are under the impression that this is an inner-city affair, typified by students dropping out of high school under the assumption that they will not be accepted in the white world. To conceive of Victimology this way, however, misses not just some but most of what this thought pattern constitutes. Only one in five black people live in ghettos, while Victimology is just as prevalent among educated people with ample opportunities.

It's sad enough, for example, that in one poll 18 percent of black high-school graduates thought the U.S. government channeled drugs into poor black neighborhoods while 24 percent thought it might be true. But then 29 percent of black college graduates pegged it as true while 38 percent more thought it might be true—in other words, 67 percent of black college graduates consider Article of Faith Number Four "an issue." This would not surprise anyone with a modicum of experience with black college students, among whom an awareness of pseudofacts and cooked statistics of this kind—i.e., the Articles of Faith—is unofficially considered a vital part of a black person's higher education (*Higher Ed-*

ucation was the title of John Singleton's 1994 film about a race war on a college campus). Outright belief in such things is more typical of the uneducated, but most black college students consider such things at least up for discussion, making clear their sense of the health of racism in America.

Victimology is also a dominant strain of black academic work, far from the streets up in the Ivory Tower. For example, many of us might see Danny Glover's ubiquity in buddy pictures with white men as a sign of progress in race relations. But for Hazel Carby in *Race Men*, Glover's crossover signifies "the exploitative and oppressive nature" of Hollywood, where Glover is used to "expel the black presence" and is bound in a homoerotic relationship with Mel Gibson in their movies together. Carby is no marginal crank; her views of this sort have been rewarded with the chairship of Yale's African-American Studies Department. Yet obviously she could find racism in Glover's career no matter what kinds of films he made, because her central aim is less constructive thought than simply crying "racism" at all costs.

"Identity Politics"?

The other parochialization of Victimology parses it as a political ploy cynically wielded by blacks in high positions to curry power. Shelby Steele's *The Content of Our Character* was a formative experience for me on the level that *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* has been for so many other blacks, articulately and bravely expressing feelings of mine that had been pent up since childhood. However, I depart from Steele's analysis of Victimology as a conscious manipulation strategy: I see it as a subconscious psychological gangrene. But Steele's view corresponds with that of many leftist intellectuals, some under the influence of thinkers like Michel Foucault, who see history as determined by power relations. Making use of the principle "the cultural becomes political," they often cheer on the likes of Al Sharpton and Maxine Waters. Their analysis of Victimology as utilitarian also alleviates the discomfort that illogical, underinformed Victimologist arguments cannot help stir up even in whites deeply committed to justice: "Deep down Derrick Bell must be exaggerating to make a point."

This makes Victimology analogous to the secession movement in Quebec, in which many Quebecers privately admit that they are only using the threat of secession as a way of currying power within the Canadian federation. There is some of this among blacks. Al Sharpton quite ex-

PLICITLY rouses the rabble with the intent of scaring the white man into concessions: "Confrontation works," as he admitted to Tamar Jacoby. But this is merely the tip of the iceberg. Drawing an analogy between black America and Quebec has two incorrect implications: 1) that Victimology is a conscious stunt, and (2) that Victimology is primarily limited to black people in power. But Victimology is not a spectator sport, it's a cultural tragedy.

Subconscious Influence

For one, Victimology is not at all conscious. Instead, it leaves its prey unable to even conceive of ways of looking at race issues outside of the Victimologist box. Most such people are under the impression that they are open to a wide range of views, but in practice assume that a "new view" will present a new way of indicting whiteness. To be sure, one hears calls for blacks to "help themselves," but almost never with concrete suggestions beyond calls for "community," and only as a backhanded slap at whiteness, assumed to have no interest in helping blacks, despite welfare, affirmative action, and decades of enough federal aid to turn Zimbabwe into Brunei.

This dwelling upon a mere subset of possible views is not deliberate; black culture puts a mental block on even conceiving that other views might have any validity. The black person who takes issue with the basic assumption that white racism is omnipresent in all black lives is met with the torrid indignation rained elsewhere upon the Holocaust denier. The messenger is not seen as "out of the box"—because there is no "box" perceived—but out of their head.

Many blacks under the sway of this kind of thinking are outwardly "reasonable," but because Victimology infects the subconscious, it renders them incapable of being open to all sides, or even capable of perceiving most of the sides. A great many sufferers will admit, with a pause and a game swallow, that overall things are somewhat better for black people than they used to be. All too often, however, on this topic they are open even to civil dialogue only to a point. This point is passed the millisecond one suggests that it may no longer be appropriate to view white America as an enemy, at which time one is met with an incredulous scorn and summarily dismissed as evil incarnate. The tripwire alacrity of the transformation often reminds me of a friendly dog licking your hand one minute and then thirty seconds later growling when you pat him while he's eating. Like the dog's growling, Victimologist rancor is too

deeply conditioned to reach or reason with. Some dogs can be trained not to growl when you pat them while they're eating, but the training only masks underlying reality; you can always tell the dog still wants to growl as it stops eating and tenses its shoulders. In the same way, there are some black people who make their best effort not to "go off" in discussions with someone who questions the going wisdom. However, there is always the glint in the eye, the tightened posture, the scornful facial tics, and finally the fact that after this conversation the person is closed to any further exchange beyond civil acknowledgment. Importantly, this response is too real to be a canny put-on.

More precisely, such opinions are considered so logically baseless that it is widely assumed that a black person could only espouse them out of opportunism. Put another way, such views are so utterly unimaginable to many blacks that it is simply beyond their conception that a black person could genuinely believe them, just as we would assume that a sane person insisting the sky was fuchsia had an ulterior motive and was most likely being directed by someone else. Here, for example, is Christopher Edley, a black law professor at Harvard: "I could get an enormous amount of print from the *Wall Street Journal* or *The New Republic* if I decided to attack affirmative action and repudiate mainstream civil-rights positions, and I think there's no shortage of people who have been seduced by the glitter." Such a blithe dismissal of the legitimacy of differing opinions is unexpected from someone trained in the law—unless he is a black American, because Victimology blinds the sufferer to any perspective outside of the Victimologist box.

Beyond the Corridors of Power

Edley, though, has one foot in politics, having served, for example, as top consultant to President Clinton's "Dialogue on Race." This brings us to the power issue. If Victimology were just politics, then presumably academics would chastise the likes of Edley or at least identify their behavior as a ruse. But listen to revered African-American historian John Hope Franklin on the same subject:

You always have such people in any group . . . I suspect they may be Judases of a kind . . . betrayers, opportunists, immoral opportunists. It's very tempting, I suppose, for people of weak character to be co-opted by the majority that can use them. They are rewarded in one way or another. If not on the Supreme Court, then some other way. So many people have a

price, and it's not unusual, it's not surprising. Some blacks have a price. It's just tragic when anyone sells themselves out.

With all due respect for Professor Franklin's legacy, this is vicious, barely processible as coming from an academic, i.e., a high priest of meticulously rational analysis. Imagine Arthur Schlesinger or Daniel Boorstin casually deeming anyone a "Judas" for a sociopolitical opinion—except perhaps, notably, a Holocaust denier. Yet Franklin's life, that of a low-key historian, has not been a quest for power. He holds these views not out of a cynical attempt to hold whitey hostage, but because he really believes them. In his mind as in so many, the persistence of racism as an oppressive plague truly is as unequivocal as the Holocaust. This brings us back to the "reasonable" people who nevertheless cannot hear anything but Victimology without shutting down—changes with people like this are as likely at a backyard barbecue as at a Black Nationalist rally. Victimology infects our whole culture, not just the power seekers.

Spike Lee neatly illustrates all of this in a scene from *Get on the Bus* (1996). In a busful of black men on their way to the Million Man March, Lee includes a wide range of views: One man's girlfriend chews him out for attending a march that excludes women, two of the men are a gay couple, and one of them is even a Republican. However, Lee is ultimately constrained by the Victimologist box. One small-time entrepreneur boards and airs his view that black people simply need to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps—in other words, he does not subscribe to Victimologist thinking. When I first saw the film, after he had said about four lines I was waiting to see how long it was going to take for Lee to bodily hurl this man off the bus, and that is just what happens. Talk about stereotypes: Lee makes sure to make this "Shelbysteele" as repulsive a character as possible. He is only attending the march because it will be a captive crowd to sell his wares to; he is played by a plain, rather squat actor, contrasting with the good-looking ones playing the principal roles; he expresses his views in a grandstanding, mocking manner that would make any message offensive; and unlike most "black conservatives," he lacks compassion for the minority of blacks who are truly suffering. Finally, he is shown grinning maniacally as he is thrown from the bus—which shows that anyone who has such beliefs must be a self-hating lunatic. As always, Lee is brilliant (one of my three favorite directors), but Victimology suffuses much of his work, with whites usually treated from a way and dismissive us-vs.-them perspective. Nor does Lee express this view to gain political leverage; his interviews make it clear that this is his genuine

worldview, not canny "operating." That scene in *Get on the Bus* reflects a strong current in black culture as a whole: the men throwing the apostate off the bus are not acting for Al Sharpton and Maxine Waters; they are acting from deeply felt personal feeling.

Indeed, Victimology is felt like religion. Hell hath no fury like an African American who has judged another one as co-opted by whites, and I can affirm what I have heard from several young black Americans with a sincere interest in integration and getting past America's heritage of interracial warfare, which is that any antagonism encountered about once a year from whites on the basis of our color is vastly dwarfed by the white-hot, proudly unreasoning fury we must learn to cope with on a regular basis from African Americans of all walks of life in any discussion of race issues. If Victimology were simply a disease of politicians, university administrators, and other people courting power, this would be at the margins of our lives, not part of its fabric.

Thus to think of Victimology as only inner-city defeatism, as only Al Sharpton, even as only both, is like thinking of "sexuality" as only procreation, "cars" as only Nissan Sentras. Victimology is today nothing less than a keystone of cultural blackness.

Passing On the Torch: Black and White

Part of the reason many associate Victimology with the inner city or with political chicanery is a natural supposition that such views must either have a concrete basis—genuine disenfranchisement—or at least a proactive motivation—cynical powermongering. Yet because it is a cultural keystone, Victimology, like religion or bigotry, is now passed from one generation to another regardless of external circumstances, and as we have seen, the vast majority of blacks have no stake in utilizing it as a political strategy.

Victimology is understandable, if still pernicious, in people who came of age in segregated America, even its later years. In 1997 a middle-aged black schoolteacher once told me to write one of my books "talking to us—because they only listen to us when they think they're eavesdropping." That assessment does not remotely reflect the world I live in, where whites are rather obsessed with listening to us, but then they most certainly were not before the late 1960s. It is only human to be impressed permanently by formative experiences.

Not long ago, I contracted to perform two plays with a mainstream theater company. In the first play, I was cast in a dull, thankless, under-

written part, which I lacked the acting ability to flesh out. Although I usually get along well with theater people, even before rehearsals it became clear that I was not the director and stage manager's cup of tea, for reasons that had nothing to do with racism. The backstage cast chemistry was all but nil. Having to perform a dull part badly where I was not wanted night after night left me bitter, but I was stuck doing the next show. This one, however, was a joy: I had a dandy character role that fit me well enough that I did a decent job in it; I got to do a solo on the ocarina ("sweet potato") of all things; this show had a different stage manager I got along fine with; the cast was a lovefest. The only major thing the show had in common with the previous one was the director, but I had little contact with him after the run started.

Yet every night driving to the theater to do this second show, I had to fight back a primal tendency to curse the production company despite how much fun I was having. To this day I associate the company with marginalization and discomfort, and grumble internally a bit every time I drive by the theater. The first show was such a bad experience that even the wonderful weeks in the second one could not wash the bad taste out of my mouth. This human tendency is what led that teacher to say "They only listen when they think they're eavesdropping," and because he is elderly, it is also probably the source of John Hope Franklin's stance on racism.

But what are we to think of black *high schoolers* serenely convinced in the year 2000 that their lives are proscribed by racism, telling pollsters that they think the government sends drugs to Harlem and injects AIDS into black patients? Eighteen-year-olds in 2000 were born not in 1972 but 1982. They have only the haziest memories of Ronald Reagan's presidency, never saw one of the first three *Star Wars* movies in their first release, and think of *Cheers* as vintage television. They remember neither McDonald's food packed in Styrofoam nor *The Tonight Show* hosted by anyone but Jay Leno, and Atari is as antique to them as Pong is to us. By the time these children came of age, Colin Powell's tenure and the run of *The Cosby Show* were in the past, the statistics on pages 6 to 8 were already in effect, interracial couples were commonplace, and affirmative action was long established. I have stopped mentioning *Roots* when I lecture to undergraduates today, because they weren't born when it aired!

These children have never remotely known the world that spawned Victimology. Yet its clutches force them to conceive of themselves as victims regardless of their actual experiences. At Stanford University in the late 1980s, black undergraduates were surveyed as to whether they felt

they were living on a racist campus. The survey was conducted in the wake of an incident in which two drunk white students living in the black theme house defaced a flyer for a talk on the possibility that Beethoven had black ancestry. They had made Beethoven's face on the flyer look black. Not the most gracious of pranks, but it was meant as a silly joke rather than a racist slur, and most of all, it was just one dopey little thing.

After this episode, though, most black students agreed that Stanford was a racist campus, but only 30 percent could report direct experience, and almost none of these could, or felt any need to, specify exactly what racist experiences they had had. Instead they reported that the racism was "subtle" and "hard to explain."

I was attending Stanford as a graduate student in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I participated in a lot of theater while there and sat in on a great many undergraduate classes, and so had years of extensive contact with undergraduates of all races. I can confidently report that the reason the black students polled had so much trouble quite "putting their finger" on the racism they had experienced was that they had experienced very little of it, in many cases none. Stanford students are absolutely maimed in racial sensitivity workshops and talks from the minute they hit campus, affirmative action is in full swing, and the "P.C." atmosphere typical of top universities heaps so much opprobrium upon any expression of any kind of "-ism" that only the very occasional jerk strays from the line. There is quite simply nothing more the university could do to work against racism on its campus; the Beethoven prank was an isolated but inevitable event, because Life Isn't Perfect.

If the systematic racism the black students sensed came from a perception that whites live in a separate world, this view was actively maintained less by the white community than the black, a great many of whom displayed a hostile wariness of white people. Most of the white students were baffled at the hostility of so many of the black students, but too censured by the P.C. climate to ever say so too loudly or allow themselves to think that they had done nothing to deserve it. Certainly some of the black students may have had the occasional passing experience in which racism played some part—I did once or twice, as I will discuss in Chapter 3. But to read these fleeting, isolated episodes as evidence that they were living in shackles—only somehow "subtle" shackles—is a massive and transparent exaggeration, stemming from a cultural virus having programmed them to come up with this output despite any input to the contrary.

Fear of this kind does not usually pass down the generations when its source disappears. Women who came of age before the Pill feared premarital sex because of unwanted pregnancy, but their children have naturally not inherited this fear. One thing that makes Victimology so easy to pass on is that the insecurity inherent in adolescence makes black teenagers particularly susceptible to a way of thinking that grants such easy absolution. *Victimology feels good*. In my teens and early twenties I espoused it wholeheartedly. When I was fifteen a high-school homeroom teacher made me sit separately from the other students because I had continued chatting with my friend in what I thought was a quiet voice despite her repeated requests that I stop. Embarrassed at having been singled out this way (in front of a girl I liked), I grumbled that she was putting me aside so that she could only see white faces in front of her—and worst of all addressed this sentiment to her daughter. It felt good at the time, but I still cringe thinking about it now. Racism had not a blessed thing to do with why she was trying to quiet my voice, which for better or for worse happens to be one of those that "carries," and the last thing that kind and enlightened teacher deserved was to be called a bigot. *Victimology seduces young black people just like the crack trade seduces inner-city blacks, virtually irresistible in its offer of an easy road to self-esteem and some cheap thrills on the way.*

Victimology is also kept alive, however, by whites, via a fashion of suspending intelligent disbelief in the face of rantings like Derrick Bell's, in favor of ascribing such melodramatic exaggeration to a vague "native wisdom." For example, every second month from 1989 to 1996 readers of the journal *The Progressive* were served up a column of *Victimology extraordinaire* by June Jordan, professor of African-American Studies at UC Berkeley. Most of these columns could only be described as festivals of hyperbole; here is a typical passage:

Where I live now makes me wonder if Nazi Germany's night skies ever beheld a really big moon—a heavenly light that failed to dispel the cold and bitter winds tormenting the darkness of earth below.

Where I live now there is just such a moon tonight—a useless, huge light above our perishing reasons for hope.

But otherwise, *The Progressive* is a bastion of carefully reasoned sociopolitical thought. Its editors published Jordan's melodramas because her, shall we say, creative approach to truth is considered "understandable" from a black writer.

The condensation in this approach is far more of an insult to black people than anything Jordan and others call insults. Some whites, consciously or unconsciously, classify black statements of this kind as being on some level "poetry," reminiscent of Derrick Bell couching his rantings as "stories." I recall this being one white undergraduate's entranced take on Jordan's contribution to a public forum on Ebonics, a truly brilliant fusion of Victimology, Separatism, and naked Anti-intellectualism in the name of educated insight. Jordan is in fact quite entertaining as a speaker, with an unerring instinct for trenchantly colorful illustrations and a ready chortle that somehow manages to be ingenious and wise at the same time; much of this carries over into her writing. But blacks often complain that white America is only receptive to black people as entertainers and sports figures. There is an eerie parallel between this notion, obsolete Victimology though it is, and *The Progressive* printing Jordan's "understandable" temper tantrums in an otherwise serious journal.

Understandable indeed. There is a number in the musical *Chicago* when a woman who murdered her lover gives a transparently lame defense at a press conference. One of the reporters is an aunt, middle-aged female columnist known for sentimental defenses of the reviled, who like the rest of the press stands to profit from the notoriety of the sensational story. At one point the snappy, tightly choreographed number stops short for the reporter to glide stage center and sing "Understandable/Understandable/Yes, it's perfectly/Understandable, . . ." the song suddenly shifting to a parlor waltz tempo to underline the false sentiment at the heart of the message. Now joined by the murderer's cynical lawyer, she continues "Comprehensible/Comprehensible/Not a bit reprehensible/It's so defensible, . . ." the melody descending and the tempo slowing on the last line to evoke the "Poor babyyy! . . ." purse-lipped way we speak to a child or express mock sympathy. The depth of the reporter's insincerity is socked home when she turns out to be a female impersonator.

The way many whites today support black people in the fiction that persecution is their eternal fate always makes me think of this scene—even though most whites' patronization is neither as deliberate nor as bald as this reporter's. Every time a white person lifts her glass to a black person's Victimology, she is unwittingly contributing to the very interracial strife that she supposes herself to be against—because Victimology is not about change; it is all about nothing but itself.

Jordan, for instance, actually is a poet, and much of her work sets Victimology to verse. Her most recent collection, *Affirmative Acts*, includes

a poem urging Berkeley students to rebel against the ban on affirmative action in admissions instituted as of 1998. Typical of Victimology, Jordan has since dared no rebellious acts to put her tenured position at risk, nor given anyone concrete directives as to how to accomplish such rebellion in her stead. Jordan wrote her poem and went out to dinner: the poem alone, underinformed, aimless complaint, was the sum and total of her "Affirmative Act." The above-quoted "Nazi Germany's night skies" passage from one of her columns was published in January 1995, yet in a column at the end of that very year she exulted, "Just now, I am awfully glad to live nowhere else but here: right here." How seriously, then, were we to take her "perishing reasons for hope" just eleven months before?

Business as usual. Victimology is neither about Acts nor even reality; it is, like a virus, about nothing but keeping itself alive. Whites have neither injected black people with AIDS nor injected the inner cities with crack, but in indulging Victimology out of a combination of guilt and thrill-seeking, white America is helping to spread a virus of a different kind among blacks in America.

What's Wrong with Victimology?

In response to occasional "blacker-than-thou" charges that arise within the black community, it is often said that one need not display certain cultural traits to be "black"—one need not be a good dancer, wear dreadlocks, eat fried chicken, or even speak the dialect. Clearly, however, a black person culturally indistinguishable from a white person would indeed be considered "not black." What, then, is the essence of "black"? One sometime answer is "Being down with us," and that *down* is telling. A large part of being culturally black means operating under a fundamental assumption that all blacks are a persecuted race, still "down" at the bottom of Derrick Bell's well, forty years after the Civil Rights Act.

This is hardly to say that all black people are as strident and utterly impervious to reason as people like Bell, June Jordan, or leaders of the Nation of Islam. Victimology, like any virus, infects in degrees—it bypasses a few, leaves some bedridden, but leaves most with at least a persistent cough. The Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan, for instance, regularly plays to standing-room-only crowds when he speaks; in a Time/CNN poll, 70 percent of blacks said that Farrakhan has a message America should hear. But that message is the likes of "The God who taught me calls white men the skunks of the planet earth." Some say that most blacks only flock to Farrakhan as a sensationalist freak, rather like

white teenagers going to concerts of bloodcurdling music by sociopathic rock stars. But the hundreds of thousands of men at the Million Man March did not give the impression of attending a side show, and Farhahan's audiences regularly give full-throated ovations for his speeches, with no hint of the irony or heckling we would expect of people simply attracted to the fireworks. This man touches a chord even in very ordinary black people—the chord that encourages us to focus on and exaggerate victimhood.

Yet Victimology was not common coin among the black Americans who came before us, even experiencing an overt and omnipresent racism only the elderly remember today. Reading autobiographies and biographies of the Blacks in Wax, one is often struck by the lack of interest most of these people had in dwelling at any length upon their victimhood, despite being barred from hotels and restaurants, being called “boy” and “girl” by whites, and having most prestigious occupations all but closed to them outside of their own communities. Yet I doubt that anyone would accuse pioneer educator Mary McLeod Bethune or inventor George Washington Carver of being oreos.

These people's low interest in airing grievance was partly because mainstream America was not yet interested in hearing it. It was also, however, because it was hopelessly clear that under conditions of true disenfranchisement and unclothed racism, to dwell upon victimhood rather than work against it would be defeatist, polluting spirits needed for concrete uplift. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. (yes, he is my hero) and Martin Luther King did not pave the way for Derrick Bell and June Jordan's lives by merely standing around trying to outdo each other in articulate indignation. There is no logical reason why conditions today, so obviously so very much better than they were for our forebears, somehow call for Victimology where conditions for people two steps past slavery did not. Victimology is, ironically, a *luxury of widened opportunities*; if things were really as bad as we are so often told, natural human resilience would ensure that black people could not afford to caress and exaggerate victimhood—because real suffering would keep it from feeling good. Only when the victimhood one rails against is all but a phantom does one have the luxury of sitting back and enjoying the sweet balm of moral absolutism undisturbed.

But in the end, one might ask, even if Victimology isn't the only way to be black, isn't it a good way? Even if things aren't as bad as they were in 1960, you can never watch your back too much, can you? Wouldn't Mary McLeod Bethune have been better off claiming that black stu-

dents had been denied their due because they actually spoke an African language instead of English? Victimology is thought of as a kind of mental calisthenic in the black community, where “Know your history” is a mantra not directed at a quest for knowledge per se, but at knowing who did what to your ancestors and how badly, to make sure it doesn't happen again. In this light, isn't focusing on victimhood a matter of basic survival?

These are understandable questions, particularly from anyone under about forty-five. There is a theatrical rock concert thrill about Victimology that makes it addictive. However, all that glitters is not gold. The fact is that (1) Victimology would have *prevented* our forebears from turning the country upside down to make our lives possible, and (2) by nurturing Victimology today, Black America is shooting itself in the foot.

Victimology Condones Weakness and Failure

First, a racewide preoccupation with an ever-receding victimhood, which generally entails exaggerating it, gives failure, lack of effort, and criminality a tacit stamp of approval.

Inner-city blacks resent Koreans for opening businesses in their neighborhoods—but what precisely has made it so impossible for inner-city blacks to open these businesses themselves? If they do not have the funds to do so, what—precisely—has prevented their representatives from formulating plans to pool their resources and provide start-up loans? After all, the government bends over backward to give small-business loans and contracts to minorities. Our tendency is to consider inner-city blacks somehow cosmically “beyond” this, but how clearly could anyone articulate a reason why, beyond appealing to unspecified “racism”? When is the last time Maxine Waters convened a group of thinkers and activists to work out a plan to spark entrepreneurship in South Central, or Charles Rangel in Harlem? If they have, why didn't they follow up on it? Part of the reason is a guiding sense among the legislators and their constituents alike that an undefined but mighty “racism” would hinder any such effort, such that only whites ever propose concrete solutions, such as the misbegotten but at least proactive enterprise zones. Instead, Waters chases a mythical CIA crack conspiracy like Ahab pursued Moby Dick while Rangel gradually warns to Al Sharpton. I do not intend to castigate inner-city residents with this point, but to argue that Victimology hinders black leaders from lending

significant and creative energy to breaking cultural patterns that those born into them are largely powerless to change. Victimology, focusing attention on pointing fingers at whitey, blinds us to the potential for inner-city residents to take part in changing their lives, thus making failure look much more inevitable than it is.

Tupac Shakur grew up middle class in Brooklyn and Baltimore. No butler, no pool—but a child who had the advantage of attending not one but two performing arts schools cannot be said to have grown up “on the street.” Yet Shakur lived a willfully violent life and died young in gang violence of his own instigation, having adopted a Victimologist “gangsta” attitude in both art and life. Shakur was by all accounts a uniquely charismatic soul with great potential, but he also lacked the instinctive recoil from criminality that, say, the child of a Korean shopkeeper in South Central would have. The reason we cannot imagine a Korean teenager choosing this path is that in black culture, Victimology subtly makes criminality seem excusable—and even “cool” as a fight against the onslaught supposedly endured daily by all black Americans.

It’s one thing for inner-city teenagers who suffered the slings and arrows of the old-time LAPD to come out feeling this way. But for Shakur, growing up receiving formal training in performance in fine schools, “gangsta” was a choice, not a destiny; Victimology pulled a promising artist “down” indeed. Predictably he went out as an icon within the black community, while Victimology continues to process Shakur as on some level having been “another brother done in by The Man.” “He was a thug, but that’s what being a black man in America does to you,” a rap journalist told us. That’s good music, but being a thug is only virtually preordained for the sliver of black people who live in ghettos. Being a black man in an even humbler America than Shakur grew up in did not leave Will Smith a thug. Smith’s wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, attended the New York High School of Performing Arts with Shakur, but she neither became nor married a thug; she grew up to be a successful, electrifying—and thoroughly black-identified—actress. It is Victimology that leads Shakur’s fans to turn away from these simple contrasts and emulate his style.

Victimology has a way of deflecting inconvenient facts, like the fact that Shakur’s death was self-imposed, with “There’s some of that.” But when it comes to the celebration of the “gangsta,” the fact that there is *any* of that is more problematic than is often perceived. For example, rapper Lichelle Laws, who grew up in the “Black Beverly Hills” Baldwin

Hills, has sung “trying to get to Watts, but I’m stuck in Baldwin Hills.” A culture in which a message like that is at all valid, let alone heartily accepted and encouraged, is one that glorifies despair and stagnation. Successful Jews in New York in the first half of the twentieth century only sang paean to the Lower East Side tenements they had escaped from in irony and not too often; there was no such thing as a Jewish man or woman standing on stage and singing seriously of how he was “trying to get down to Delancey and Essex but stuck in Murray Hill”; if one tried, he would have been booted, and no record company would have offered a contract.

In the 1980s, some of the most unpleasant experiences of New York City life were encounters with the “squeegee men” who would crowd the ends of exit ramps and wash your windshield with scummy water without your consent, and then require payment on the pain of damaging your car. Mayor Giuliani’s crackdown cleared these men away. It turned out that most of them had homes. No matter how low a Chinatown immigrant sank, we all know we would never have seen one hopping up to our cars with a squeegee in one hand and a crowbar in the other. Yet the squeegee men were innocents in their way: The pall of Victimology over black culture made these men feel that this behavior was on some level pardonable for a black man.

Victimology means Maxine Waters on camera dancing joyously with South Central gang members—a federal official telling professional murderers and drug peddlers that they are okay. This is not the dream Martin Luther King had.

Victimology Hampers Performance

Victimology also hampers any performance from the outset by focusing attention upon obstacles. There is nothing obscure about performance anxiety, a pan-human phenomenon. Asians suffer occasional discrimination on various levels, and yet no one would suggest that they would be better off thinking about these remnants of discrimination constantly, because it would do nothing to eradicate the discrimination, and would hamper the only thing that can, performance. The middle-class black person in the year 2000 is no different. Many blacks suppose that one must know what one is going to “face,” but this feeling is couched in the Articles of Faith. What most black people “face” today is not decisive enough in their life trajectories to merit this kind of obsession.

Victimology Keeps Racism Alive

Many white college students have told me that they left college with warier and more negative feelings about black people than when they arrived. This is because even as people who revile racism and sincerely want to get to know people of other races and learn from them, for four years black professors and students delight in telling them what racist pigs they are without even feeling the need to specify why. When I was an undergraduate at Rutgers in 1983, most of the students demonstrating and sleeping in front of the student center several nights a week in protest of the university's investments in South African companies were white. Yet at the same time the consensus among black students and administrators was that Rutgers was a "racist campus," despite an affirmative action policy that was soon revealed to be among the least nuanced, most bluntly quantitative in the country; the expected battery of minority-oriented services, workshops, counseling; and a social atmosphere in which any overt racism was tantamount to asserting that women should go back to the kitchen.

This was one more demonstration of how yelling "racism" has now much too often lost its connection to reality and become a kind of sport. This ultimately traces to understandable insecurity. But as black Americans get ever closer to the mountaintop, the lack of fit between Victimologist rhetoric and reality is ever widening, and increasing numbers of white people are becoming impatient with suspending their disbelief, and even pitching in to help, only to get kicked in the teeth for their efforts.

The late black performance artist and filmmaker Marlon Riggs was invited to give a presentation at a Queer Studies forum at Stanford in the early 1990s. One of the organizers told me that Riggs casually fired a number of potshots at the audience implying quite directly that they were racists, despite the fact that they had invited, lodged, and paid him, were all politically leftist sorts deeply committed to identity group causes, and were even mostly gay.

It was one thing for a black activist to pull this sort of thing in 1971, the year *All in the Family* premiered, in front of a group of whites most of whom had barely ever conversed with a black person, would have been uneasy to have him in their home, and would have been horrified if one of their daughters had married him. That is "understandable."

But the group Riggs was dissing were those white people's children, many with black intimates and lovers, many active in race-related causes, none who would even have a bigot in their homes. Surely one

does not invite a performance artist to be soothing: None of these people would have had any problem with Riggs exploring the nature of white racism; indeed, this was most likely what he had been invited to do, and most of the audience would have welcomed being made aware of residual racism in themselves. But in the 1990s, did this particular audience deserve to be designated outright as bigots after spending hundreds of dollars from their tiny budget to sit at Riggs's feet, and did this designation serve any purpose? If we consider it unreasonable for young black people to resist feeling deep, inconsolable offense at the slightest hint of racial bias, then how reasonably can we expect young white people not to take offense at being called racists despite their most earnest efforts to transcend their ancestors' mistakes? If some of the people who had paid this man to come enlighten them only to be treated this way started to wonder whether reaching out to black people was worth it, Victimology will say that it is proof that racism never went away. But in the meantime, the bottom of the well will remain that much closer to our feet.

Victimology Is an Affront to Civil Rights Heroes

I have saved this point for last because it is less practical than simply moral. Insisting that black Americans still lead lives of tragedy forty years after the Civil Rights Movement is a desecration of brave and noble black Americans who gave their lives for us. Martin Luther King did not sit in those jail cells so that black professors could make speeches about the hell they live in and then drive to their \$200,000 homes in Lexuses and plan their summer vacations to Antigua. "Why won't they accept me as a human being?" Ellis Cose asks—but it would be interesting to see how disinclined from American society such people would feel after spending about three days in the America our Civil Rights leaders fought to pull down.

As Ralph Ellison put it, "For us to remain in one narrow groove while ranting about 'freedom' strikes me as an affront to those who endured and sacrificed to enable us to become better prepared for our continuing role in the struggle for freedom." Every time a black person outside of a ghetto calls herself oppressed because of scattered inconveniences, as opposed to the brute horrors that our ancestors lived with daily, she is saying that Thurgood Marshall and Martin Luther King didn't accomplish anything but get some signs taken off some water fountains and allow us to sit where we want to on the bus. That, if you ask me, is sacrilege.

There is a flutter of awareness in the black community that crying about victimhood is not exactly the best way to go about solving it. On the late, great comedy variety show *In Living Color*, Damon Wayans's Homey the Clown was a Victimologist *par excellence*, endlessly blaming his lowly job as a clown on a hopelessly exaggerated conception of racist oppression, and in one classic sketch grudgingly taking a job as a busboy at a restaurant called Chez Whitey.

Yet Homey addressed only Victimology this naked; few blacks were aware that these sketches were touching upon a disease that permeates the entire community. For example, I once heard a black stand-up comedian joking that white people try to slip the word *nigger* into conversation without black people hearing, as in saying the name of Arnold Schwarzenegger. The audience was screaming, but then look what happened to David Howard in Washington a few years later. The comedy routine quite literally came to life.

For the record, the *niggardly* episode was no flash in the pan. Soon afterward, an English professor at the University of Wisconsin used the word when discussing *The Canterbury Tales*. A black student approached the teacher about it after class and he explained what the word meant, informing the student that it had no racist connotation. In the next class, he explained its meaning to the class and asked if any students had comments. This time the black student bolted from the class crying because the teacher had repeated the word, and reported him to the faculty senate. She was not just an isolated hothead; just as black talk radio in D.C. supported Anthony Williams in firing David Howard, when this student made her case at a faculty senate meeting on the campus speech code, she was heartily applauded by the black students in the audience. On top of all this, the Wisconsin episode was not part of a "rising tide" after the D.C. episode—*this student had not even heard about what had happened in Washington*.

This student will surely take away from this incident that she encountered racism during her college years, despite the professor having gone as far as to address the class about the issue and try to foster a discussion. But this student could not be satisfied, because the Victimology virus cursed her to seek the cheap thrills of moral indignation regardless of actual circumstances. Importantly, this woman was neither a disaffected inner-city casualty nor a politician seeking power. She was a modern middle-class black woman, and her actions demonstrated that one need neither grow up in South Central nor attend Nation of Islam rallies to fall under the sway of Victimology. One need only grow up with black

parents and black friends. Victimology today pulses through the very bloodstream of African-American identity.

Ralph Wiley will smugly shake his head and sneer that this is merely the armchair musings of an "intellectual" who would change his tune if he spent some time "out there" seeing "what's really goin' down". But what people like this consider themselves to "know" that people like me do not is (1) the first six Articles of Faith, which are all myths, and (2) what can be summed up as "Rodney King," the idea that police brutality means that white America still hates black people. That is one possible interpretation, but it is not supported by facts. Police departments continually improve, and the obvious gains blacks have made throughout society show that police brutality is a final hurdle, not business as usual.

Along those lines, I can guarantee that if I spent a year living in a housing project, teaching in a hopeless school down the street, and was beaten senseless by the police for asking a question during a stop-and-frisk, I would think of myself as having lived with and taught representatives of one-fifth of the black population rather than "black America" in general, and as I fingered my head bandages would think of myself as having caught the vicious tail end of a racism on the wane, not on the march. I would maintain that the black American community as a whole, especially the four-fifths I had spent that year away from, is mentally hobbled by celebrating victimhood instead of addressing it.

The Civil Rights leaders' rabble-rousing, then, is a by-product of a culture-wide disease. They are not posing. They are simply manifesting an inherited black cultural trait in one of many possible ways. In short, today, black is Victimology; and this is a grave detour from the path to the mountaintop. Condemned by Victimology to wink and let failure pass, to choke in performance, and recreate racism where it was receding, we will never savor the freedom Ralph Wiley finds so elusive. In the name of the paradoxical high of underdogism, we have replaced the shackles whites hobbled us with for centuries with new ones of our own.

The direst news is that, like AIDS constantly spawns new strains of itself, Victimology births new viruses. We will meet the next one in Chapter 2.