

THE CULT OF SEPARATISM

Lost-found Asiatic Black people are, in fact, not members of that union or nation styled the United States of America.

—ERNE SMITH, *The Historical Development of African American Language: The Islamic Black Nationalist Theory*, 1994

Several years ago, an episode of the television crime drama *Jake and the Fat Man* focused on a black female detective played by Nell Carter, as a test run for a possible series. Watching that show was not usually how I chose to utilize my evening time, but I make sure to watch anything Nell Carter appears in. At one point the plot required Carter and her assistant to examine some antique Russian jewelry, and upon catching sight of it the Carter character was enthralled, whispering as the soundtrack welled up, "I love Russian history!" and proceeding to give an account of some obscure monarchical events in Czarist Russia.

It struck me as a false moment, and I wondered whether the script had originally been written with a white actress in mind. I couldn't help thinking of how very few black people I have ever met who were so passionately interested in a subject that had nothing to do with being black. I felt guilty for even having the thought, and considered it progressive of the writers, if they did write the script with Carter in mind, to portray a black woman as having such an arcane interest without making a point of it. But I also found myself thinking that if the writers actually supposed that such an interest was common among black people although unremarked by the media, they were in fact mistaken—they were less filling in a gap than pushing the envelope.

This was just ten seconds of a little TV show, of course, but the thoughts it stirred up stemmed from something much larger, a mighty current of Separatism in black American culture. Separatism is a direct product of Victimology. The sense that whites are an eternally hostile presence has encouraged a conception of black America as a sovereign entity. It would be one thing if within this entity blacks attempted to set up a kind of alternate, but equivalent, universe (as they often did in the first half of the twentieth century). However, because the detachment is

a response to perceived victimhood, the mindset of this sovereign world is refracted through the prism of Victimology, conditioning a restriction of cultural taste, a narrowing of intellectual inquiry, and most importantly, studied dilution of moral judgment.

Separatism may appear to be a simple matter of self-protection, but in practice it narrows horizons, holding blacks back from being the best that they can be. Briefly stated, Separatism both concretely and metaphorically keeps black people in the ghetto.

The Cult of Separatism is manifested primarily in three ways.

The Three Fruits of Separatism

Mainstream Culture as "White" Culture

Under the Cult of Separatism, expressions of mainstream culture considered "default" by most Americans of all colors are processed by many if not most blacks not as common coin, but as "white." This alienates many black people from some of the most well-wrought, emotionally stirring art and ideas that humans have produced, miring the race in a parochialism that clips its spiritual wings.

On a lunch date with a young black woman some time ago, I happened to be carrying a copy of *Jane Eyre*. For whatever it's worth, at any given time I am as likely to be reading Alice Walker or Gloria Naylor as Charlotte Brontë or Henry James; I read Tolstoy not out of a self-hating fascination with white people, but because the man wrote a crackling good and highly affecting story. (*Anna Karenina* so grabbed me that one day when I was reading it in Washington Square, the woman next to me said, "Oh, look, there are Anna and Vronsky over there" and I looked up fully expecting to see them gliding by the skateboarders and drug dealers in their bourgeois finery, so real had they become to me.) However, for my black friend, *Jane Eyre* was not a book, it was a "white book." "Oh, I'd never read something like that," she said, quite casually. She preferred to read only books written by and about her own people. That includes a lot of great literature, but the person who can immerse himself in the richness of James Baldwin but never experiences Tolstoy is like someone who thrills to a Haydn string quartet but refuses to hear one note of a Beethoven symphony. This person never tastes the whole meal.

Yet as I have already said so often, Life Isn't Perfect, and in terms of the world in general, none of us ever gets the *whole* meal. This woman

will live a full life despite missing out on "white" novels. But often this perspective ends up selling out black Americans.

For example, there is a magnificent complete three-CD recording of the original score of the musical *Show Boat*. It is marred at the beginning, however, when what is supposed to be a black chorus of stevedores sing stiffly with slightly British accents. This was a last-minute emergency measure. *Show Boat* was the first American musical to substantially address the tragedy of race relations, and includes a black chorus and a white chorus. Fittingly, a black/American chorus was hired for the recording, but walked out upon being required to sing the original lyrics of the opening chorus "Niggers all work on the Mississippi." The recording was made in London, and while using American performers, had recruited a British white chorus. On such short notice, the producers had no choice but to have them step in to sing the black choruses as well. The accent difference is not a serious problem in the passages for the white chorus, but it naturally stands out much more when these Britishers are supposed to be deep Southern blacks.

Over the years, the lyric in question has indeed been increasingly watered down for new productions in line with increasing racial sensitivity: "Darkies all work . . .," "Colored folks work . . .," and finally, "Here we all work . . ." by the 1960s. This made sense, but by 1988, with *nigger* safely quarantined as one of the most socially inappropriate words in the English language to use in real life, the producers thought that singing the original lyric could be perceived as historical in intent, and furthermore, the original line had a true-to-life power that none of the substitutions have. The "Niggers all work on the Mississippi . . ." line is sung not by a happy shuffling gang of minstrels, but by grim, overworked black laborers bitterly quoting whites' opinions of them; it is also an accurate depiction of the tendency for blacks to use *nigger* among themselves. Whether one calls this a therapeutic defusing of an epithet via appropriation, or evidence of underlying self-hatred (it is in truth both), the fact is that this use of *nigger* is undeniably real.

It is difficult to believe that anyone who actually watches a production of *Show Boat*, seeing how openly and sympathetically it treats the black condition, could fail to understand that the blacks singing this opening chorus "Niggers all work on the Mississippi" are eloquently protesting racism, not underlining it. This opening chorus portrays blacks giving vent to their frustration at their victimhood, surely something these protesters would champion. The only possible reason someone would misunderstand this lyric is, quite simply, not having had occasion to listen to

a recording, see a production, or rent a video. One suspects that these singers were only glancingly familiar with *Show Boat*, out of a sense that it is a "white musical"—"Oh, I'd never go see anything like that." As a result, they passed up an opportunity to lend one of black American culture's most precious legacies, the unique timbre and precision of our choral singing, to this monumental recording, instead leaving our ancestors portrayed by British whites unable to render the material in the authentic style.

This sense of mainstream culture as alien extends into academia as well. Manning Marable has explicitly urged black scholars to restrict their research to black issues, thereby explicitly deeming intellectual curiosity for its own sake to be inappropriate to black American people. Under this rubric, the black scholar is to study slavery, Africa, and social welfare, but never Russian history, *Jane Eyre*, or mainstream theater history. Many will see Marable as "concerned," a "serious brother," or "cool," but obviously it is a short step from Marable to "Oh, I'd never read that" and the *Show Boat* walkout.

Separatism also has a tendency to close black people off to foreign cultures other than black ones. I once met an aspiring black linguist who had spent two years in China without learning Chinese beyond what he needed to buy food at the market. Most people who spend two years in a foreign country come back speaking the language, and this is especially true of linguists, for whom the experience often serves as a basis for a career's work. This was the only linguist I have ever met who spent two years abroad without becoming bilingual, and it is not likely to be accidental that he was black. Separatism has a way of discouraging black Americans from learning foreign languages other than French and Spanish, spoken by many Caribbeans and Africans, and Swahili. In my lifetime, I have known only one black person who studied German (it was a required course), one (a Black Muslim) who took Arabic, and not one who took Russian, Chinese, or Japanese. Certainly there must have been some who studied the latter three (e.g., black political adviser Condoleza Rice speaks Russian). Nevertheless, it is significant that in a thirty-four-year language-centered life, I personally have never met any. What makes black people shy away from these languages—even in elite universities—is a sense that they are not "black" things. This particular branch of Separatist orientation has roots in segregation, of course, and was crystallized in the sixties as Separatism expanded into a general coping strategy. Now, however, this wariness of nonblack culture is too often a barrier sealing the black community off from enriching influences.

This linguist wanted to go on to do academic study of the Chinese sound system, but he will never be competitive—almost every other linguist studying Chinese has learned to speak the language.

The ghettoization of Academic Work

As the spawn of Victimology, Separatism shares with its progenitor a tendency to be allowed to trump truth in cases that require choosing between them. In this vein, a considerable amount of black academic work downplays logical argument and factual evidence in the service of filling in an idealized vision of the black past and present, which is founded not upon intellectual curiosity but upon raising in-group self-esteem.

Mother Egypt

"Afrocentric History," for example, is primarily founded upon a fragile assemblage of misreadings of classical texts to construct a scenario under which Ancient Egypt was a "black" civilization (was Anwar Sadat a "brother"?), raped by the Ancient Greeks, who therefore owed all notable in their culture to them. Professional classicists easily point out the errors in these claims, only to have their proponents dismiss them as "racists" for having even questioned them, neglecting in the process to provide actual answers. Indeed, to insist upon facts—or apparently, to master the complex classical languages in which the original documents were written—is "inauthentic." The goal here is not to weigh evidence carefully in order to unearth the truth, but to construct interpretations of evidence that bolster a pre-conceived "truth," like "Creation Scientists" whose objectivity is decisively crippled by a fundamental conviction that God must be the driver of the universe. Uninterested in any information inapplicable to the construction of the Afrocentric myth and closed to constructive engagement, these people may be many wonderful things, but one thing they are not is scholars. Yet they are respectfully addressed as "Professor" by gullible students, and one eminent black undergraduate profiled in *Ebony* cited a volume of this kind of history as the most important book she had read that year.

Ideally, an Afrocentric academia is conceivable in which people simply apply the tools of mainstream academia to illuminating black concerns. This is the vision most defenses of Afrocentric work are based on. However, in practice, the centrality of victimhood in the black cultural identity subverts this ideal. All too often, black scholarship is devoted not to general scholarly inquiry about black people, but a subset of this: chron-

icling black victimhood past and present, and to remedy that victimhood, celebration and legitimization of black people past and present. Because black people are no more perfect than anyone else and life past and present is complex, this abridged conception of academic inquiry inherently conflicts with the commitment of mainstream academia to striving for assessment as unbiased as possible. In this conflict between Victimology and truth, Victimology is naturally allowed the upper hand.

The result is a sovereign entity where the outward forms of academia—articles, books, conferences, symposia—are harnessed to a local set of rules: a Separatist conception of academia. In "black" academia, as often as not, comment is preferred over question, folk wisdom is often allowed to trump rigorous argumentation, and sociopolitical intent is weighted more heavily than the empirical soundness of one's conclusions. There are certainly quite a few excellent black scholars, but overall, Separatist academic standards are pervasive enough to make black conferences quite often perceptibly less rigorous than mainstream ones.

Many mainstream scholars would be, or have been, surprised at the sparseness of serious, constructive debate at many black conferences, unaware that because of the grips of Victimology and Separatism, this kind of debate would be superfluous to the proceedings, and even unwelcome. After four decades, many black academics have spent their entire careers in this alternate realm, and as such, have never been required to assess the full range of facts applying to a case, to construct rigorous arguments, or to address anything but the very politest and most superficial of criticism. Here is the beginning of notions at the center of "Afrocentric History" such as that Cleopatra was "black," that Artstotle stole books from an Egyptian library that wasn't even built until twenty-five years after he died, etc. Moderate black academics are more likely to say of the most egregious Afrocentric work that "more work needs to be done" than to actually pin it as nonsense, which makes complete sense when we realize that the fundamental commitment of much black academic work is not assessment of facts and testing of theories, but chronicling victimhood and reinforcing community self-esteem.

Ask Me No Questions . . .

This problem is by no means limited just to the collection of people committed to "Afrocentric History"; it is seldom far from the surface in any scholarly setting in the realm of "Blackademia." At a conference on black performance in 1999, a black scholar from England argued that

whites' tendency to adopt black American popular cultural forms is evidence not of an identification with black people, nor of a desire for cross-cultural harmony or understanding, but of a desire to eliminate the black presence via co-opting what makes them unique.

Interesting idea, but hardly as obvious or incontrovertible as the operations of gravity. Does the white teen who likes Snoop Doggy Dogg want to eliminate niggers, or does he simply like the beat and vibrate in tune with the antestablishment attitude that has enthralled young Westerners since Goethe's Young Werther? Did whites stir the blues and jazz into their marches and jigs to create rock music because they were racists, or because blues and jazz are among the most sublimely intoxicating aesthetic creations humanity has ever known? Here in the Bay Area, I have noticed that white females of ages roughly ten to fourteen are fond of imitating black women's "sassy" "Uh-UHHH! . . ." accompanied by the pushing forward of an admonishing second finger pointed upwards, and waved back and forth in opposition to corresponding "sassy swivel" neck movements (tough to describe on paper—think of Aretha Franklin in *The Blues Brothers*). Perhaps I lack some exotic brand of insight, but I simply do not see subliminated hate in these little girls—on the contrary, they are expressing a joyous admiration of black women's trademark strength; it's the melting pot in all of its glory. Similarly, among the white male high schoolers and undergraduates I see who perform hip-hop, imitating "ghetto" gestures and intonation as closely as they can, what I see is a sincere admiration of a massively compelling art form. A lot of these kids will even say "Sometimes I wish I was black"—and I do not think that what they wish is that they could become black while real black people disappeared; what they wish—regardless of the fact that this would of course be more complicated than a fantasy dwells upon—is to *join* black people.

Some might disagree with me, but just as many would not, and the point is that there are obviously issues to be discussed here. Yet the scholar at this conference simply put forth his declaration that this kind of imitation masks racist hatred without a shred of support. To be sure, his point was rendered especially seductive by the densely elegant jargon in which academics in the humanities are trained to couch their thoughts. Furthermore, this was all delivered in a gorgeous Oxonian accent which, in all of its calfskin suave, also betrayed that he is extremely unlikely to have experienced any of the particular slings and arrows of a black American inner-city, or even middle-class, life. In general, there was not a hint of anything but Sir Alec Guinness in his demeanor, and thus his statement cannot have been informed by any personal discom-

fort with seeing "his" culture "co-opted." Indeed, put aside his references to "mimesis" and "negation," and all this guy was saying was "The only reason they imitate us is because they hate us." Preface the statement with "Yo," and its content remains exactly the same. Yet if "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery" has any value as a general aphorism, his was in essence an extremely underargued thesis. Mainstream conferences are devoted not to tossing out colorful accusations, but to sifting and evaluating the ideas proposed by the participants. Yet despite this man's having presented no evidence or argument whatsoever to support his claim, he was heartily applauded several times, and was one of the hits of the conference—he could barely get out of the auditorium for coffee, so besieged was he by people lauding him for telling it like it is. (No, I was not jealous—I was just attending the conference, not speaking at it!) Because this was a black conference, making an argument was less important than reaffirming common wisdom, and to hear common wisdom dressed up in arcane words and an Alistair Cooke accent is even better, in lending it the air of scholarly authority. The *substance* of scholarly authority, however, was a distinctly lesser concern.

What was significant about this was that for anyone to ask this man to supply evidence for his point would have been as shockingly inappropriate as pulling out a tuba and blowing on it. His point was simply assumed to be true, or at least, by the more exploratorily inclined, "a valid point of view." But what this meant was that this was not a forum devoted to presenting findings or evaluating conflicting interpretations of data or events—i.e., properly speaking it was not an academic exercise at all. It was a rally, designed to reinforce the emotionally based sentiments the audience and participants came in with. After all, even if the man was right, mainstream academia is not inclined to convene conferences with the purpose of proclaiming what is already known. Political science conferences do not feature various speakers presenting nimble variations upon the point that "war is bad"; biologists do not convene to urgently remind one another that all forms of life are based on DNA. The Separatist current makes this kind of thing seem natural to conversers of many black conferences, out of a sense that actual academic debate is somehow "beside the point" for African Americans since our status as eternal victims makes our regularly proclaiming this, as it would be for villagers in Chechnya, a more pressing concern.

And make no mistake—the same priorities reign even without plummy accents and Judith Butler jargon. I once attended a conference where a black woman gave a paper taking issue with an article which, by

her reading, denied that black female speech had any unique patterns. After criticizing the author, with the unspoken implication that this writer was one more oppressor trying to deny black people their identity, the professor presented a few features of black female speech. In the question session afterwards, a white woman very politely pointed out that the author of the article in question was quite aware of the uniqueness and richness of black female speech, and that the professor's interpretation was based on a misreading of the author's phrasing.

Ordinarily in academia, the presenter would defend herself by making specific reference to the article and its argumentation. Here, however, was a conflict between the tenets of mainstream academia and the very different ones of black academia. The professor's sole answer was, "Well, I read it as denying the uniqueness of black female speech, and that was my interpretation." Period. It did not appear to even occur to her that an actual address of the issue might be germane. Unlike mainstream academics who come to a conference prepared to field criticism during question sessions, she considered herself to have done her job in simply presenting the list of black female speech traits—and at a black conference, she had.

Indeed, her presentation was constructed not as a reasoned demonstration but as a backyard "calling-out" of the author in the name of injured pride. She opened by reading a passage from the author's paper and then repeating it in a challenging intonation of mock disbelief, with friends in the audience assigned to shout back the phrase in the same tone of voice to evoke the black church's call-and-response tradition; she then did this with two more phrases. This was cute, but couching an academic paper as the prelude to a ghetto catfight renders one's presentation inherently immune to constructive discussion. To criticize it in any way, even politely, is to question not the lines of an argument, but an expression of cultural identity—and thus the person themselves. Indeed, the professor's set jaw at being questioned made it painfully clear that any further dwelling upon the point would be processed as a slight against her and her race, and the questioner was hip enough to intuit the conflict in traditions here and dutifully sit down.

Furthermore, the misreading was not due to the writing of the scholar under fire, quite clear by any standard, but was of a sort suggesting that this professor was not particularly well attuned to the basic nuances of nonfiction prose. The author she was criticizing is in fact a vocal and passionate advocate of minority rights and even is a minority herself; the article, for example, was based on an extended study of how language

was used to foil Anita Hill. The unavoidable impression one got from such a stark misreading of an actually rather simple article is that this professor was simply not much of a reader—at least of nonfiction and scholarly writing. This seemingly ironic combination of a doctorate with an ambivalent relationship to the printed page was not an accident: Chronicling victimhood requires less of a passion for the book than chronicling a whole picture, and one does not need to master as vast a literature to chart a victory as to formulate and test a theory.

One could see the Separatist academic tradition being passed on at the same conference when a student went up to the microphone and introduced himself as a "doctorial" student. We need not make light of the mispronunciation in itself—we all mispronounce the occasional word (I pronounced *albeit* as "all-BITE" until I was about twenty-eight). However, this particular mispronunciation was symbolic—the graduate student who says "doctorial" reveals himself as unimmersed in academia as a whole. The mechanic does not come home from the garage saying "curburetor," because being surrounded all day by people saying *curburetor* would get him on track after about an hour. In the same way, a graduate student in daily interaction with professors well-ensconced in the academic world, and immersed in books and articles tailored to scholars, is inevitably and unconsciously taught out of saying something like "doctorial." Predictably, this student was in a highly Afrocentric language and education program founded upon a conception of Black English as an African language with English words. This conception has no scholarly foundation and can only be imparted via personal tutelage by a small number of adherents or via a few unpublished pamphlets written by a Black Nationalist medical school teacher (quoted at the opening of the chapter). Yet the student was piqued that the conference attendees were giving this school of thought short shrift, either unaware that solid scholarship is backed by published work or convinced that racism has kept these ideas off the presses. One can only laud his aim of helping inner-city black students, but it is obvious that he will become one more black professor granted a Ph.D. with no conception of the meaning of scholarly assessment and debate. I would not be surprised to see him several years from now giving a paper and being offended at serious questions.

Hollywood's Depiction of Black People

Few topics reveal the Separatist conception of academia more vividly and regularly than popular entertainment, whose "academic" discussion

in African-American settings regularly centers upon a self-generating, circular indignation over the television and film industry supposedly refusing to portray black people as anything but, to use film scholar Donald Bogle's terms from his book title, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks. Obviously this was true in the past. However, it remains a truism in most black American thought despite the fact that it has not been true for fifteen years at the very least, and most significantly, to the extent that this change is acknowledged, it is regularly assailed as denying black people their individuality.

At one conference I remember a black professor complaining that in black-white "buddy" pictures, the white man always learns by taking on traits of the black man ("loosening up," etc.) while the black man never learns from the white man, the idea being that this showed whites' resistance to allowing blacks to fully take part in mainstream culture. Yet if in *48 Hours*, Eddie Murphy had learned a certain amount of social reserve and shed some of his comfort with Black English, then by now there would be several academic papers in the journals and anthologies decrying how Hollywood is determined to strip African Americans of their culture, "neutering" poor Eddie Murphy in the name of a racist hegemony. Once again, the purpose of accusations like this is not constructive discussion, but reinforcement of reflexive, aimless bitterness. Sadly, it always works—when the professor made this point, the blacks in the audience spontaneously erupted with a chorus of "Mm-hmm"s, finger snaps, and "All right?!"s. To question the logic of what the professor said would have been processed not as intellectual engagement, but as an unwelcome gaffe (while it was at this same conference that the young woman I mentioned in the last chapter had presented her long, profane rap unrelated to the topic of discussion to enthusiastic applause).

But how could the black people in the audience help it when, as well educated as many of them were, they are fed this line about American entertainment year after year by educated black leaders and scholars regardless of what is actually being produced? A few weeks later a superb black actor said of Hollywood in a newspaper interview that "When we see a mainstream work, and a black actor enters, he is the representative of the black guy. It's so absurd." Mm-hmm!, All right?!—but no; when people used to say this when I was little in the 1970s it was true, but today it simply isn't anymore. Morgan Freeman as the president of the United States in *Deep Impact* (1998), with his race never so much as mentioned, was not "the black guy," nor was Wesley Snipes, married to Chinese Ming-Na Wen, romancing Nastassja Kinski and best friend to

Kyle MacLachlan, again with his race immaterial to the proceedings, a "black man" in *One Night Stand* (1997), nor was Halle Berry's temptress character in *The Flintstones* (1994) ever designated "black." These were all major releases shown across the country, sold on video by the millions, rerun endlessly on myriad cable stations, and dubbed into several foreign languages to be shown around the world; Samuel L. Jackson and Angela Bassett also play an increasing number of race-neutral parts. Yet all of us black and white are encouraged to either pretend that these films were never made, or to decry them for denying black people their "essence."

Recall that Hazel Carby sees sublimated homoeroticism and coded racism in the *Lethal Weapon* series' depiction of the friendship between Mel Gibson and Danny Glover as one between individual human beings, rather than between a White Man and a Black Man. In that same vein, I would not be the least bit surprised to find that somewhere someone has written, or said at a conference, that Berry's character in *The Flintstones* was "white people encoding deep-seated primitivization of the African into the farthest possible reaches of their history to reinforce the preservation of the racist impulse in the present." And yet if Halle Berry had played a buttoned-up next-door neighbor in the movie while, say, Michelle Pfeiffer had been the sexpot, then Hollywood would be guilty of "suppressing the sexuality of a beautiful black woman in the indelible tradition of negating the fundamental humanity and fertility of African peoples out of the deep-seated antimiscegenationist impulse born of fear and self-doubt."

The tragic thing is that it is never even considered that the logic here is hopelessly circular, such that there is nothing whatsoever Hollywood could do that would meet with the satisfaction of the African Americans considered to be "telling it like it is." This is because the aim is not reason but Victimology-based indignation, and as such, a great deal of black academic work on popular culture—an arena in which we have made some of our richest and most profoundly influential contributions—does not qualify as intellectual investigation or exploration. This work, "Afrocentric History," and its ilk, elevating attitude over analysis, fruitlessly mischannel our mental energies and thus debilitate the race from within.

Black People Can Do No Wrong

The most crippling symptom of Separatist thought is a conviction, sometimes explicit and sometimes tacit, that because black people endure such victimhood at every turn, they cannot be held responsible for im-

moral or destructive actions, these being "understandable" responses to frustration and pain. Victimology channels through Separatism to create a sentiment that black people are still so mired in oppression that to express any real criticism of them is to kick them while they're down, like castigating a person bleeding on the ground for using foul language when he cries out in pain.

This began as romantic Black Power rhetoric, which made somewhat more sense when a larger proportion of the black population was still figuratively in chains. An example is Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice*, widely read in the 1960s and 1970s by young blacks, saying that black prisoners are "the victims of a vicious, dog-eat-dog social system that is so heinous as to cancel the prisoners' own malefactions." Cleaver was talking about the poor, but today this idea has expanded to a sense of moral absolution for anyone with black skin.

Nothing demonstrated this more conclusively than the O.J. Simpson trial, followed closely by most black Americans. The evidence of Simpson's guilt was absolutely crushing. It is widely believed in the black community that the drops of Simpson's blood at the scene were planted by the LAPD. They cannot have been, but this is not the place to dwell on that; for our purposes, there was a mountain of other evidence that made the chance that Simpson was not a murderer extremely small—and the facts would be thus even if the murder had taken place in Birmingham with Bull Connor heading the police force. Simpson's dog didn't bark when Nicole Simpson was killed, suggesting that he knew the killer. Fibers matching the carpet in Simpson's Ford Bronco were found at the scene, fibers from Simpson's shirt and hairs from his head were found on Ronald Goldman, Mrs. Simpson's friend who was killed with her. A bloody shoe print at the scene is from a rare shoe, sold in only forty stores during two years, during which time Simpson was a regular customer at one of the stores; Simpson denied he had any such "ugly ass" shoes but turned out to be wearing them in several photos. Simpson had nasty cuts and scrapes on his left hand which he never gave the same explanation for twice; a blood trail at the murder scene was from a left hand. Simpson never accounted for where he had been at the time of the murder; a limousine driver waiting to take him to the airport at that time got no answer at his house; Simpson was sweating during the limousine drive despite air-conditioning. Simpson never asked about his children when informed of his wife's death. Simpson claimed that he would try to find the real killer, but refused the LAPD's offer to help him in this search, and has made no such search since his acquittal.

I listed these things, which are only about a quarter of the total case against Simpson, to make clear how minuscule the possibility was that Simpson was innocent. A legacy of violent confrontation with abusive police forces led the jury, composed largely of blacks with little education, as well as many other less educated blacks, to insist that Simpson was innocent. Black people with more education and less alienation from whites, however, are often aware that despite the real problem of police brutality, this particular evidence was too damning to indicate anything but guilt. Nevertheless, despite the cold-hearted brutal double murder that this evidence suggests, to this day, very few black people of any level of education could bring themselves to simply say that Simpson was guilty. There are those who can utter it, but only by immediately following it with *but*, and then saying that "what we really need to talk about is why the media pays so much attention to scandals involving black public figures" (JonBenet Ramsey? Joey Buttafuoco?) or, as was common at the time, "I'm tired of the whole thing" (in contrast, we are urged to keep the Tawana Brawley case as a communal memory). For most African Americans, to say out loud with no qualifications or deflections that O.J. Simpson murdered two people would be as uncomfortable as admitting out loud that one has a favorite child.

This demonstrates the pervasiveness of the Separatist sense of morality: what Simpson did is processed as having been on a different plane than a white man having done the same thing because blackness is seen as absolving one from real guilt. Tupac Shakur is absolved from judgment despite having sought, rather than been born in, pathology; conversely, Simpson is absolved despite having been born in but having long left behind the kind of lifestyle that makes committing murder a virtual destiny. Simpson had done nothing for black causes, had left his first wife for a young blond white one, and thereafter rejected black romantic company ("I don't shovel coal" is how he is reported to have put it). Yet even those who see that he was probably guilty withhold him from criticism, even despite the extreme edginess of the interracial dating issue among many blacks. Like Victimology, Separatism trumps truth: a decorated football hero with a lavish lifestyle, beautiful (white) women at his disposal, and the LAPD in his pocket is nevertheless processed as so much a victim of racism that if he kills two people in cold blood, it is thought cruel to explicitly hold him accountable for it or even to say it too loud. Maya Angelou urged whites to let blacks "take care of" Simpson, with the implication that in our arms he would be lovingly shown the error of his ways, rather than treated as the murderer he probably was.

For many, the issue is perhaps less protecting Simpson than protecting the black community: we are not to say out loud that Simpson was guilty because we are not to call attention to the fact that black people in general are fallible. But this leads us right back to appearing dim, because "protecting" the black community in this way requires that one abstain from grappling with the simple logic of the Simpson case, and thus appear congenitally incapable of doing so.

Indeed, this kind of reflexive absolution goes far beyond the barber-shop, extending even into academia. To take the Simpson example again, a black professor at Berkeley I had yet to meet once e-mailed me to ask if I would come speak to his class about how language use in the media had affected the controversy over the Simpson case. I responded that I would be glad to, but that he might want to know in advance that I thought Simpson was guilty and that Johnnie Cochran was no hero of mine.

I never heard from the man again, and when I later happened to meet him he was distinctly cool toward me, obviously having decided that I was no hero of his. His feeling this way only makes sense when we view it as an index of Separatist morality: Whatever the formal logic of thinking that Simpson was guilty, to this man, for a black professor to intend to say so before a predominantly black class was a faux pas. My opinion as a linguist on the Simpson issue was not what he was really seeking. In an institution devoted to the free exchange of ideas, presumably my stance would not be assumed beforehand, and the value of my thoughts would be in training students how to come to their own conclusions about important issues. What this man was seeking was for me to explain how the media's use of language during the controversy indicated how deeply racism pervades society, all delivered with a coded wink to the black students in the class. Therefore, my opinion made me not simply someone with an opinion that differed from his, but someone unfit to speak before his class, and, more to the point, a jerk.

This episode was a demonstration of how black academics are required to shade and edit their statements about current affairs according to Separatist tribal norms. People like this mild-mannered and genial professor, not given to extremes of ideology, would not recognize themselves as part of the Separatist problem, identifying it instead with extremists like the leaders of the Nation of Islam. However, Louis Farrakhan and his ilk are mere extremes of a phenomenon of which people like this professor are nothing less than the heart.

Like Victimology, Separatism is not formal or conscious much beyond the temples of the Nation of Islam and Al Sharpton's office. Just as you

barely notice the orchestra playing for a musical unless a player makes a mistake, the Separatist requirement only becomes obvious when flouted. It had surely never even occurred to this professor that I might not share his and most black people's opinion. Although he would not overtly put it this way, there was only one opinion that a "brother" could have. This man will sit at commencements and symposia supposing himself to be committed to giving students a liberal arts education. However, he has also been inculcated into the Separatist mindset, sadly at odds with the goals of liberal arts education, which allows a wide range of conclusions about an issue as long as each is supported by fact and coherent argument. Separatism, on the other hand, requires a bedrock assumption that because all black people are eternally victims, they are exempt from censure.

It follows naturally that at heart, this professor considers his job to be to teach black students not how to carefully assess an issue, but something much more specific, much easier, and ultimately limiting—how to resist any interpretation of any racial issue not founded upon the notion that blackness in America is a fundamentally tragic condition absolving one from serious judgment. If a black person is accused of doing something wrong, deny it unless the evidence is far more watertight than what you would require in deciding whether a white person did something wrong. If he turns out to have done it anyway, then remember that it's okay if he grew up in the ghetto. If he didn't grow up in the ghetto or hasn't lived there for decades, then think less about the person than the fact that the media called attention to him at all. Etc., etc. The unspoken consensus among many blacks in the academy is that this kind of narrow distortion of what it means to be educated is the most important benefit a young black person gains from higher education aside from increased earning power.

The roots of this Separatist morality in Victimology showed themselves in the alacrity of the professor's dismissal of me, reminiscent of the abrupt indignation with which one is rejected by many blacks for questioning that racism cripples all black lives. After my response, nothing—no questions as to what led to my opinion, no dialogue, not even a token excuse. Having revealed that I did not adhere to the party line, I was immediately and unequivocally *persona non grata* and cut dead. The black academic who is unable to suspend intellectual engagement is sharply rejected as "against us," "not one of us"—indeed, because today, exempting all blacks from general standards of evaluation is a defining thread of what it has become to be "culturally black"; like Victimology it affects individuals to varying degrees but is rarely completely absent.

One also encounters compromised standards of evaluation in the writings of many black academics. I once saw a black professor on a talk show discussing his new biography of Elijah Muhammad, one of the founders of the Nation of Islam. Muhammad may well have "done some good things," as is often said in the black community. However, he tortured and killed, even extending this savagery to having Malcolm X assassinated.

Yet this professor, calm and eloquent as he was, sitting coiffed in his smart suit and sipping a cup of tea, conveyed with his every inflection, with his quiet "cool cat" smile, and with an ever-so-subtle smug drop of the eyelids, that he considered this man certainly no saint, but fundamentally "okay," a "brother," whose deeds were justified by his membership in an oppressed race. For example, he made sure to have the interviewer show photos from the book of Southern lynchings of the sort Muhammad had seen in his childhood. A quiet but powerful subtext of this man's message was ultimately "Okay, I have the fancy degree but don't sweat it, I'm down with y'all." Okay in itself, but isn't it sad, then, that immersion in black culture in this case meant a lack of serious engagement with the moral issues inherent to any scholarly assessment of an Elijah Muhammad?

After all, we must ask—to respect this professor as a thinking person—did even seeing lynched black men as a child justify having Malcolm X gunned down in cold blood? It's one thing for uneducated inner-city teenagers to worship criminality and ignorance—we all would if we grew up as they do. But how noble is it for a college professor with a doctorate to write a book about Elijah Muhammad whose main approach to the man—even if dutifully criticizing this or that—is one of respect, who gives an interview about Muhammad where, if one hadn't caught the name of the subject, one might suppose he was talking about Medgar Evers or Bayard Rustin?

Of course, one can write a biography of a rascal and still come out admiring the subject; it has even been said that a good biographer must on some level like his subject. One comes to the end of many a biography of a person who slept around, stole money, and abused people feeling that his flaws were balanced by just as many good points, that his imperfections were inevitable by-products of what was at heart the kind of elemental élan that moves the world forward and makes life worth living. Adam Clayton Powell exemplifies this for me—he was a self-glorifying, opportunistic philanderer, but he also laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement, playing a vital part in creating the world we know to-

day, and was a walking good time in the bargain; I wish I had known him. One senses an irresistible life force, a charisma, pulsing through the man, and anyone who knew him corroborates this.

But Elijah Muhammad? The racism is "understandable"; I personally would be a racist too if I had been born before 1960. But meanwhile, the man claimed to be a paragon of Islamic faith in direct communion with Allah while womanizing shamelessly, giving the excuse that he was relieving the sins of the prophets in order to recapitulate their journeys toward redemption. He ordered or condoned the savage beatings of any member of the church who went against the party line; Malcolm X's assassination was only the culmination of business as usual. He scorned the Civil Rights Movement, considered Martin Luther King a "fool," scoffed at young blacks participating in sit-ins, and played no part in paving the way for blacks' successes today. And as for the Nation of Islam, they have indeed "done some good things," but last time I checked, the ghettos were still thriving, and none of the gains blacks in America have made since the founding of the great Nation trace to their efforts. And on top of all of this, one does not even sense the infectious charisma in Muhammad that draws one irresistibly to the likes of an Adam Clayton Powell or even a Richard Nixon. This is a hero? Can't we do better than this? Haven't we?

To be sure, the author is no hagiographer. His book is a massively researched and carefully reasoned piece of scholarship. He quite openly and at length chronicles Muhammad's myriad and glaring flaws, and has little respect for the uncritical deification of Muhammad from some quarters, including previous biographies. I learned most of the bad things I know about Muhammad from his book, for example. Thus I intend no criticism of his scholarly abilities of any kind; it's the implications he draws from the material that I find indicative. In the end, he sums Muhammad up as "misunderstood," and it is clear that at heart, he thinks Muhammad was a chill brother because he founded the Nation of Islam.

The tragedy is that somehow we don't find this surprising in a black college professor—somehow it's "understandable." But imagine an Italian-American college professor writing a book about Al Capone as a hero, justifying his actions on the basis of the oppression of immigrants from Southern Europe in the early twentieth century (which was often as virulent as that against blacks)? The professor might well occasionally pause to praise Capone's intelligence, observe the personal charisma that allowed him to rule men, or marvel at the intricately configured op-

erations of his Mafia squads, but we would expect that the fundamental stance of anyone treating Capone would be that the man was a thug, someone the world would have been better off without. We will see no scholarly works on Al Capone judging him in the afterword as "misunderstood." Those commissioned to do society's highest-level thinking do not sing paeans to the worst of human nature.

Yet we can be sure this black professor will hear no such thing from black colleagues. So powerful are the Victimologist and Separatist strains in black American culture that the black professor with a "black identity" cannot help but fall into moral lapses like winking and letting Elijah Muhammad pass. Suspending moral judgment in the name of racial solidarity is an integral part of being culturally black in America today.

One also encounters this sense of blacks as morally pristine among students. I once found a class of black students good-naturedly but steadfastly reluctant to accept that most slaves were sold to Europeans by other Africans, with only a small portion captured directly by Europeans with lassos as is shown, for obvious dramatic reasons, in *Roots* and *Amistad*. The students had no trouble processing the evil of the whites, but simply could not imagine that black people could be so cruel as to sell one another into servitude. Even after I presented them a week later with more detailed information and figures, much of which my personal work has brought me into direct contact with, a few of them were still skeptical. One student even explicitly told me that she was disappointed that whites did not carry the whole of the guilt.

At another time, the one nonblack woman in a class I was teaching said that she was offended by the misogyny in "gangsta" rap music lyrics. One of the women in the class—who for the record had grown up nowhere near a ghetto—snapped that she had no right to criticize what she hadn't grown up in, and was joined by a few other students. The non-black woman (actually Bolivian) tried to defend herself but quickly elicited responses sharp enough to leave her in tears. So deeply runs the sense that no black person can do wrong that this woman had to be put in her place, in front-stoop tones otherwise all but unheard of in a college classroom.

Black students are immersed in this kind of sentiment in the four years of college, often coming out with a Separatist bent they did not have as freshmen. A friend of mine's niece came back after four years at Howard University with a leaning toward Black Nationalism, as well as the feeling that it was "possible" that whites had created AIDS. "Don't

you feel oppressed?" she asked me—being carefully taught that one is a victim, and that the white world ought be conceived as one apart, is often a signal experience for a black undergraduate. The feeling runs so deep—from Stanford through Rutgers down to the humblest community college—that rejecting that message often requires dissociation from the campus black community.

This absolutism is extended beyond reconstructable, long past, or artistically rendered murder into concrete maiming and killing. After the Rodney King verdict, Damian Williams and three other young black men crushed innocent white truck driver Reginald Denny's jaw up into his sinuses with a brick, smashed a bottle in a Japanese man's face leaving him half-deaf and partially paralyzed, and robbed and beat a Latino man and painted his testicles black while he lay unconscious. Yet Williams and his "crew" were considered nothing less than heroes in the Los Angeles black community and beyond, under the idea that their actions were justifiable rebellion against racism. The Nation of Islam, doing one of their "good things," I suppose, set up a defense fund, and the roots of Separatist morality in Victimology showed with unusual explicitness in Williams defending himself on the basis of having been abandoned by his father.

This episode also showed that we cannot sweep Separatist morality under the rug as a mere "understandable" reluctance to air dirty laundry, in the vein of the ambivalence toward openly discussing O. J. Simpson as what he is. In cases where the crime is too obvious to talk around, Separatist morality drives eminent blacks to send the dirty laundry on tour and call it our Sunday best.

Maxine Waters framed the ensuing trial as "revenge" for the Rodney King verdict and said "If we don't get justice, we're going to have a civil war." But what kind of "justice"? Apparently a "black" justice: Williams's lawyers even argued that individual guilt is a tool of the white establishment. That argument tied into a frequently encountered attempt to defend negative black behavior by claiming that it is conventional "white" behavior that is deviant. This emerged alongside the white counterculture's indictment of middle-class American mores, and was summed up by eminent black sociologist Kenneth Clark, who said in 1965 that blacks should "reject notions which demand that the Negro change himself and accept the requirement that society itself must change." It wasn't long before the African-American Teachers Association in New York declared that disruptive black students were "high-spirited nonconformists" resisting the repression of middle-class white values.

That may sound a bit forced thirty years later, when it would be difficult to tell a teacher that the student pulling a knife on her in class is merely "expressing himself." But echoes of such statements strongly determine black community attitudes toward black people's behavior, be the perpetrator an inner city thug or a religious leader. Cultural blackness may not necessarily be hair, dancing, dialect, or KFC, but one thing it is a sense that the black person is an eternal innocent, who deserves at most a slap on the hand by a fellow black (Maya Angelou "taking care of" O.J. Simpson), but no criticism more sustained or serious than this, and certainly never society-wide condemnation.

Aiding and Abetting: Whites and Separatism

Whites today nurture Separatism in line with political and ideological goals of their own. Often under the impression that they are working on behalf of the oppressed, they fail to realize that they are feeding hatred against themselves, which also in turn discourages blacks from helping themselves to be helped, by infecting them with the idea that they are hunkered behind a barracks against a barrage of outrageous racism.

Nothing exemplifies this better than welfare. We naturally tend to think today that open-ended and generous welfare was an emergency measure instituted to help people in the spreading inner cities of the late 1960s. In fact, black employment was growing in New York City when welfare was expanded there. However, an influential cadre of white leftist activist intellectuals became convinced that to expect blacks to work their way out of poverty was reminiscent of debt peonage in the South and thus unethical. White guilt fed directly into Separatist sentiments already sanctioned in the black community by Kenneth Clark and Elbridge Cleaver. Today's black welfare clients in New York do not know that their grandparents were often carefully ushered into welfare, often urged to give up jobs and get on the rolls.

Certainly our country needs a welfare program of some kind to assist those helpless, down on their luck, or disabled. Furthermore, it must also be granted that Frances Fox Piven, Richard Cloward, Edward Sparer, and Richard Elman's position was based not on an outright sense that black people must be exempt from hard work, but on a contention that blacks in America were caught in a special sociohistorical bind. They argued that the fast rise of automation justified a special exemption for blacks from working upwards on the social scale themselves, since so many blacks were hobbled by the poor educations they had gotten in the

segregated South. But there are two problems here. First, their assessment turns out to have underestimated black strength. Today we are faced with the uncomfortable juxtaposition of third-generation black welfare cases left culturally unable to adjust to working for a living on the one hand, and on the other, new immigrants, many not even comfortable in the English language, providing their children with the wherewithal for middle-class lives amidst much more automation. And many of these immigrants are black Caribbeans and Africans.

Second and most importantly, whatever the theoretical or even sympathetic basis of these intellectuals' original intent, it is now lost to history. The present-tense result of their efforts thirty years later is a three-generations-deep culture of black (and Latino) people who have known nothing but handouts, such that self-support and personal responsibility may be seen on television but are virtually unknown among family and friends. Yes, for a long time there were more whites on welfare nationwide, but the problem has been the greater *proportion* of people *within the black community* who have been shuttled into this existence, despite simple cross-racial headcounts. The people locked into this existence have had no way of knowing the arcane facts of political history that played a major part in ensuring their fates in New York City. What they know is what they grew up in, and that is a world where a great many of the black people they know work rarely, if at all. No one disputes the importance of role models. Most of us, growing up seeing most adults working, develop a natural, even subconscious, prototype of the adult life as including work. Deprived of role models who work, welfare children cannot help but develop a much less strong sense of work as central to adult existence. Here is the rub. More specifically, what the black child sees is the black adults around him not working while white ones around him do. Result: a Separatist sense that work is an option rather than a given when it comes to black people.

Thus Piven and Cloward, with their good intentions, ended up feeding the Separatist morality of a great many black Americans.

We cannot file away Piven and the other Columbia radicals as extremists spawned by the heat of the countercultural revolution. There is a direct line from them to what is now called Critical Race Theory, typical of which is Richard Delgado urging blacks to conceive of themselves as victims not based on the "rigid" structures of objective truth, but as inextricable parts of a "broad story of dashed hopes and centuries-long mistreatment that afflicts an entire people and forms the historical and cultural background of your complaint." This is the product of a pre-

dictable synergy between the leftist leaning among academics and the idea fashionable among them that there is no objective truth, and people like Delgado, like the Columbia radicals, are ultimately motivated by sympathy. But the detriment to the black community far outweighs the satisfaction of intellectualized good intentions. It is a short step from a "broad story of dashed hopes" to Separatist standards of moral evaluation in the black community: Tawana Brawley ten years after her fabrication of being raped by white police officers declaring to a black audience that "something happened to me" without specifying what and getting a standing ovation; a black jury openly ignoring DNA evidence and letting O.J. Simpson free on the basis of "payback justice." If Richard Delgado and his ilk think that this kind of crippling paranoia, and the often violent reverse racism that goes with it, are good things, then we must question the wisdom of their being allowed to inflict such humble expectations of life upon the rest of us.

Black Culture Versus Separatist Culture

Like Victimology, Separatism—the sense that to be black is to restrict one's full commitment to black-oriented culture and to be subject to different rules of argumentation and morality—is today so deeply rooted in the black American consciousness that many might find it difficult to imagine that anyone could be culturally black without situating herself within this sovereign universe, which is felt to be nothing less than "black culture" itself. To be sure, if asked "Do you believe that black people are subject to a different morality?" few blacks would answer yes. In practice, however, the culturally black person is from birth subtly inculcated with the idea that the black person—*any* black person—is not to be judged "cold," but considered in light of the acknowledgment that black people have suffered. As uncomfortable with such a description as many blacks might be, the stark split on the O.J. Simpson verdict was eloquent testimony to its reality.

June Jordan once hammered through a poem of hers on National Public Radio, where she is assured frequent appearances as a mediagenic proponent of Victimology. In the poem she accused Clarence Thomas of being "not a proper black man"—i.e., the person who believes that eternal set-asides are ultimately harmful to a race has not an alternate opinion but one disqualifying him from sanction as "black" at all. To be meaningfully "black," it is assumed that a black person will spontaneously filter all of his opinions through in-group Separatism, which fo-

cuses on victimhood. This is not a conscious phenomenon. No one is taken into a corner and told what he "must" say like a Serbian reporter; black academics and journalists do not sit in their studies yearning to assess a case objectively but "forced" to "follow the party line." Separatist morality, despite the temptation that certain academic theories offer to analyze it this way, is not a strategy wielded deliberately to amass resources or shape thought or gain power. It is a cultural thought pattern: the culturally black person does not need to be told or taught what to say any more than a child has to be taught to swallow; the black academics and journalists who dwell in Separatism do not know any other way to think, and indeed are appalled to encounter black people who do not think like them. Because Separatism is so much more psychologically deep-seated than a mere political pose, it is that much more difficult to imagine being culturally "black" without.

Because a third generation of blacks is now coming of age steeped from birth in Separatist ideology, it is easy to miss today how unusually narrow the boundaries of "blackness" have become in the name of distance from "whiteness" and the absolutism conditioned by victimhood. There is a scene in the Marx Brothers movie *Animal Crackers* (1930) where the brothers "out" a snobbish art critic as having begun as "Abie the Fishman," news the man is none too comfortable to have shouted gleefully through the mansionful of aristos. A man named Abie who sold fish during the first two decades of the twentieth century in New York was a Lower East Side Jew, but the Jewish Marx Brothers are needing the man not for any perceived incompatibility between Jewishness and status, but simply for the man's general class pretensions. Their mockery is not based on a sense that a Jew who is successful has stepped outside of his "proper realm." In contrast, sixty years later in the comedy *Strictly Business* (1991), when black street cat Tommy Davidson mocks straight-backed businessman Joseph C. Phillips (perhaps best known as Denise's husband on *The Cosby Show*), he is riding him for not being "black" enough, predictably he has a light-skinned, proper-talking wife who is had in bed. Jewishness, despite the hideous suffering that Jews have endured throughout history, has always been much less restrictive in terms of speech, body language, dress style, and politics than blackness is, and indeed there is no tighter in-group definition in America today than blackness.

People like June Jordan, then, pose a question that is entirely reasonable when we peel away the rhetoric: Can a person who reads *Jane Eyre* as well as *Native Son*, considers Molefi Kete Asante a charlatan, and

thinks of O. J. Simpson as a murderer be culturally black? I am not, as it may well appear, narrowing the focus to myself; quite a few black people fit this profile: We just don't get to hear from them very often.

A trip to the past helps us answer this question. Will Marion Cook was a black theater composer most prominent around the turn of the twentieth century. He could barely be in the same room with fellow black theater composer Bob Cole, because of their different positions on how blacks should contribute to popular culture. Cole, with his partners John Rosamond Johnson and James Weldon Johnson, wrote theater music only minorly distinguishable in style from that of his white contemporaries, and toured singing European vocal pieces onstage in tails as John accompanied him on piano (they would close with a medley of their stage hits). Cole, then, was the "sell-out" by modern standards, and Will Marion Cook would have agreed, infusing his theater music with black church harmonies, syncopated rhythms, and training black choruses to sing it with the particular sonorous robustness that only a black chorus can capture.

Yet there were other things about Cook that translate less easily into modern black consciousness. His musical abilities did not spring from a black musical tradition; he did not play church organ, nor was his the Scott Joplin/Jelly Roll Morton story of coming up through the world of brothels playing honky-tonk piano. On the contrary, he was a virtuoso violinist, who had been classically trained in Europe and studied composition with none other than Antonin Dvorak. His music was "black" by the standards of the era, but it was based in thoroughly European conceptions of harmony and structure and had none of the "groove" that we associate with black church and pop music today. He was a gratingly proud man, sporting a dandyish mustache and tailored clothes. He was so offended by being billed as the world's best black violinist that he left the classical music world, unsatisfied unless he could be considered the best violinist, period.

Cook, then, combined a dedication to his roots with an insistence on being judged according to mainstream standards, with an impatience for the demotion inherent in being designated the best *black* anything. We must remember that he felt this way just two generations past slavery—from our perspective, as if Emancipation had been in the mid-1960s and captured on film, with most blacks over fifty having grown up slaves. He was not unique in his time. If we could bring the blacks living in America in 1900 to spend a week in the year 2000, many of them would casually reveal beliefs that most blacks today would find tricky to square

with the post-Civil Rights conception of "blackness." In the last chapter we saw that modern blacks would be surprised to find the blacks from 1900 rather reluctant to join them in dwelling at length on victimhood. This is also true of Separatism: particularly in the stable working class and above, blacks in 1900 had not been taught that, as Marion Barry would put it eighty years later, "There's a black culture and a white culture; there's a black psychology; and there's a white psychology."

Specifically, Paul Laurence Dunbar or Frederick Douglass, slightly dazed from their resurrection and watching CNN, would be surprised and disappointed by the middle-class black people who hold mainstream culture at arm's length and consider sociohistorical misfortunes as justification for lowered bars of evaluation. In contrast to the black linguist who spent two years in China without learning Chinese, for example, Paul Robeson was proficient in several "white" languages out of simple personal interest, and came back from his years in Russia speaking Russian. Separatism now has it that it is difficult to imagine a black leader having such an interest today (*pace* political adviser Condoleezza Rice), and yet Robeson was no Uncle Tom. As for morality, if all evidence suggested that Robeson, who had been a star football player at Rutgers before his performing career, had killed his wife, then despite how much more open and impregnable police brutality was in the 1930s, the black community would have considered him an embarrassment, not a hero. If the Scottsboro boys had turned out to be guilty, Adam Clayton Powell would not have pardoned them as "rebels" and danced with them in the newsreels.

Of course most of these people would also have had a pronounced ambivalence toward lower-class art forms like rap, and an outright aversion to being associated with African "savages," which would strike us today as rather blinkered and snobbish. Perhaps they could have learned something from us. But their embrace of the mainstream while preserving their heritage, and their insistence that being judged by the same standards as everyone else was the only way to achieve equality regardless of the handicaps to be overcome, are not in themselves so unthinkable for us. Such things even seem rather attractive on paper. In real life, however, they are no longer the way *we* do things.

Few of us would feel that Cook was an oreo for cherishing classical music and insisting on being the best at it. Few would call Louis Armstrong an oreo for not yearning to return to the cutthroat black quarters of New Orleans he grew up in as Lichelle Laws longs for Watts from her bedroom in Baldwin Hills. We do not think of a calendar of historical

black heroes as an Oreo Calendar, despite how baffled almost all of those people gazing stolidly into the camera would be by the Separatist current in modern black American thought. W.E.B. Du Bois did not fight to give four of his descendants, young black men who went on a rampage after the Rodney King verdict, the right to be feted by black public officials as "The L.A. Four" after beating an innocent Hispanic man and leaving his testicles painted black. Yet if the Blacks in Wax aren't meaningfully "black," then I don't know who is—it was just a different way of being black.

What's Wrong with Separatism?

Yet some might ask whether the Blacks in Wax would have indeed been better off reinforcing their self-esteem via constructing a separate but equal conception of blackness as modern blacks have. Isn't Separatism a matter of, as many academics might have it, the "construction of an identity"? Isn't Separatism a healthy example of "the cultural becomes political"?

The problem with the modern "separate but equal" black identity is that, like the low-quality segregated schools that this phrase was used by racist whites to justify, the Separatist world is not equal to the mainstream one. On the contrary, Separatism, in the name of protection, has taught generations of blacks to settle for less. Not just for less integration—I know that less integration would be considered a blessing by most blacks at this point. I mean settling for less as human beings. Separatism makes us small.

Separatism Reinforces the Dumb Black Myth

For one, teaching black people, even passively rather than actively, to allow tribalism to trump logic reinforces the myth of black mental inferiority—a myth that drives the very racism that Separatism responds to.

When even the most eminent black thinkers and public figures insist in the face of overwhelming evidence that O.J. Simpson was probably innocent, or any variation upon this such as the oft-heard one that "He probably knows who did it," the black race looks, quite simply, stupid. Justifications in the name of police brutality ring hollow in this case, because Simpson had been nothing less than coddled by the LAPD in being allowed to regularly beat his wife without punishment. Defenses in this vein are fine fodder for the media and academic discussions, but in

the real world the black community's steadfastness on this almost hopelessly obvious case of murder gives the appearance that black people are incapable of drawing logical conclusions based on simple facts.

When black linguists and education experts look television cameras in the eye and agree that Black English is an African language with English words and that inner-city black students ought to be treated as bilinguals, or wink and let pass this idea by refusing to utter anything but support for a school board that says so, black people once again look like imbeciles. During the Christmas holidays of 1996-97, Americans heard black kids chatting along in what is obviously English every day and came home to watch black people with Ph.D.s on the television news declaring the urgency that we address the "linguistic needs of African-American children." As the country laughed in understandable disbelief, black academics in linguistics and education shook their heads ruing the persistence of racism and hunkered down even more firmly into Separatist logic, when in fact what America was laughing at was what justly appeared to be stupidity.

In 1987, fifteen-year-old Tawana Brawley constructed a lie about having been raped by white policemen to cover for having stayed away from home to escape the wrath of a severe mother and stepfather. Her story was so transparently false that even those who feel, as Ralph Willey does, fire on their skin tended to suspect something amiss about the story. Brawley claimed to have been left in the winter cold unconscious for days but showed no symptoms of exposure; there were no physical signs of rape; patches of fiber found on her person matched the filling of Brawley's sneakers found sliced open in the apartment she had been staying in, she having obviously intended the fibers to look like white men's hair; and these were just a few in a numbingly long procession of similar facts. When Al Sharpton and his lieutenants insist on defending lies as transparent as Brawley's, anyone who followed the case at the time cannot help wondering whether in the end, Sharpton and his ilk are simply incapable of reason. It is no accident that a *New York Times* article described Sharpton as "developing an articulate public presence," with former mayor Edward Koch noting that Sharpton is "smart." Harmless enough on the surface, but when is the last time you read Bill Clinton described as "articulate" or "smart," despite the fact that he is obviously both? It is simply assumed that white people who have achieved positions of authority and power are "articulate" and "smart," just as we assume that they bathe daily and wear clothes. The fact that such things have to be explicitly said about Sharpton reveals an underlying question as to

whether they are true of him. This is no surprise: Sharpston is the king of Separatist logic, and Separatism forces black people to sacrifice mental acuity in favor of the balm of tribal identity. The very reason Sharpston's open racism rarely attracts much comment is that the man is not considered bright enough to know any better.

Only occasionally will particularly intrepid and antisocial whites, such as Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein in *The Bell Curve*, actually say such things out loud. But Gloria Naylor nicely shows how such things are said without being said in my favorite novel, *Mama Day*, describing an academic trying to get to the bottom of what the flexible colloquial expression "18 and 23" means to a community of black people in the isolated Sea Islands near South Carolina:

He done . . . made it to the conclusion that 18 & 23 wasn't 18 & 23 at all—was really 81 & 32, which just so happened to be the lines of longitude and latitude marking off where Willow Springs sits on the map. And we were just so damned dumb that we turned the whole thing around.

Not that he called it being dumb, mind you, called it "as-setting our cultural identity," "inverting hostile social and political parameters." Cause, see, being we was brought here as slaves, we had no choice but to look at everything upside-down. And then being that we was isolated off here on this island, everybody else in the country went on learning good English and calling things what they really was—in the dictionary and all that—while we kept calling things ass-backwards. And he thought that was just so wonderful and marvelous, etcetera, etcetera.

When blacks hate whites after seeing the Rodney King tape, they are exhibiting a human tendency to generalize. When whites watch blacks regularly indulging in Separatist logic, they exhibit a human tendency to generalize. But in their case the result is a black Columbia Law School graduate described as "a bright, energetic and intellectually curious student who participated vigorously in class discussions and did well with legal intricacies." Picture that said about a Jewish law student—it would only be said about a white *child*, never an adult. Praising a law student for "doing well with legal intricacies" is like praising a surgeon in training for knowing their anatomy; this description unwittingly reveals a sense that for a black person to reason closely is unexpected, a special case. Of course, whites started this, charging blacks as stupid long be-

fore giving them any chance to prove otherwise. But is it any wonder the stereotype continues today when the black community is taught to absolve O. J. Simpson because "If the glove don't fit, you must acquit"?

Many blacks might say "Well, who cares if they think we're dumb?" so deeply has Separatism penetrated modern black consciousness. Of course, for one thing, nurturing that attitude is not the best strategy for integration, or, if one could do without that, even basic harmony. A country where whites (as well as immigrants, as they become acculturated and watch blacks engaging in Separatist logic) quietly consider blacks mentally inferior will forever be one where blacks are condemned to, sowing resentment which leads to the perception of condemnation even where there is none, and on and on. It may feel good to say "Who cares if they think we're dumb?" but deep down, we all know that we care, because if we didn't, knowing they think we're dumb wouldn't hurt so much.

Separatism Is a Drag on Hiring and Career Advancement

For some, even here the answer might be, "Well, we shouldn't care if they think we're dumb." That's a rich point, but it is more important for our purposes that Separatism sabotages black people in a more urgent way.

The black person who processes all whites as surrogates for the policemen who beat Rodney King is often capable of interacting with whites only on a utilitarian, guarded basis. The comfort and vindication he feels is outweighed by the fact that this social distance can interfere with his being employed or promoted by those who will all too often be his interviewers and superiors—and almost all of whom want to go out of their way to avoid hurting him and don't like the LAPD any more than he does.

During my first year of graduate school at Stanford I lived in a law school dormitory, where I got to know most of the black law students. In the spring, every law student, backed by his or her Stanford credentials, got a cushy summer internship at a leading law firm, with a few highly indicative exceptions. Two black students did not have jobs close to the end of the year; one got one at the last minute while the other was given a consolation job by a relative. They naturally considered this evidence that racism marches on. But the fact was that all the other black students got jobs as quickly as the white students. It was not an accident that it was these two students who were quite explicit in black company about not liking white people, and their guarded, thanks-but-no-thanks demeanor

around whites made their sentiments clear. Law firms have to choose from dozens of interviewees for summer positions, and if a white person interviewing one of these men decided that she would rather hire the white guy she interviewed that morning because he laughed at her jokes, seemed like he would be more fun to have around, and in general did not give the impression of hating her, this does not make her a racist, it makes her human. This is especially the case given that often these law firms hired the *black* student who had been able to at least meet them halfway. It was highly indicative that the only two white students who did not get jobs were both quite awkward socially. The two black students were snubbed not because of racist bias, but because of their immersion in a Separatist sense of whites as malevolent aliens.

I once met a black freshman, son of a college professor, who was "black-identified" by his own explicit acknowledgment, and already processing UC Berkeley as a "racist school" after a few months on campus. At our table sat three women, one white, one Asian, and one black. While readily engaging the black woman, this fellow would only give polite answers to the attempts by the two other women to speak to him, and it was clear that for him they essentially did not exist. Twice he drew blanks on casual references they made to campus traditions and landmarks—spiritually he had ensconced himself in "black Berkeley," living on a black dormitory floor and majoring in African-American Studies. Many people would see this student as "nurturing his cultural identity," or as having "inherited the fears of his ancestors." Perhaps—but so determinedly reserving his sincere and open engagement for interactions with blacks only, he, too, is likely to have some trouble getting internships and jobs, and will be warmly supported by his friends in attributing this to racism. However, a white manager can be an outright Negrophile and be chary of hiring someone who gives all appearances of not liking him. If he refrains from hiring this guy because his guarded demeanor makes him seem less pleasant to be around than the equally qualified woman he hires instead, he is not necessarily a racist (especially since the woman he interviewed may herself have been black). This manager is human—people black, white, yellow, and brown would rather not spend time with people who have something against them. The kind of inbred and permanent wariness of whites that this student had is natural in someone who grew up in segregated America, north or south. It is also "understandable" in an inner-city teen today. But in an eighteen-year-old who grew up comfortable in an integrated suburb, this wariness has outlived its usefulness and become a hindrance toward success.

Separatism Makes Us Inferiors

The most damning way in which Separatism forces black Americans into self-sabotage is in identifying cultural blackness with pardoning and even glorifying immoral behavior. This is for the simple reason that the person who cannot be taken to account is not an equal.

In an America where polite discourse requires us to think of a black murderer as a victim, a black lazy person as a nonconformist, and a black person who refuses to reason from A to Z as a storyteller, we have resurrected the Founding Fathers' reprehensible classification of the black American as three-fifths of a person. The positive reception of the O.J. Simpson verdict by educated blacks, the uproar over the restriction of welfare benefits to five years, and the calls to treat Tawana Brawley's callow lie as a "communal truth" are among the issues that keep all of us from being able to imagine even a prosperous black corporate manager living in Palo Alto as a representative "American."

The sovereign world so many black Americans have been driven to hide in by the lethal combination of freedom with insecurity is historically "understandable." In our time, however, this response has spun out of control. The sad fact is that there is not a people in human history who have made any lasting mark in the world—or even been happy—closing themselves off to influence from other cultures, discouraging even their best and brightest from unfettered curiosity and close reasoning, and aggressively pardoning moral lapses and murder. Black America can do better than this, because any humans can, and most have, from the metropolises of Japan to the Congolese rain forest. To do so, however, we must cover our ears to the Victimologist siren song which encourages us, decade after decade, to settle for less and teach our children to do the same.

Few things make this dilemma clearer than the performance of African Americans in school, which is directly traceable to Separatist pollution of the black American soul.