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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 resisted 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.

