

THE CULT OF ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

We're afraid that black students who perform at that high a level aren't going to be concerned with nurturing an African-American presence at Berkeley.

—Undergraduate black student recruiter, spring 1998

The reader may have detected by now that I watch a lot of television. Another stray moment I remember was an episode of *The Facts of Life* where a black girl (not Kim Fields's Tootie, but a one-shot character) was depicted as being obsessed with Latin. Every now and then she would get up and passionately declaim some Latin phrase to emphasize a point.

It was another moment that struck me as so false that I still remember it almost twenty years later. Latin is harder than French or Spanish, and because it's dead, you don't learn it to express yourself or talk to anyone, but to read mostly formal things written by extremely dead people about a world quite different from ours. In other words, learning Latin is very much an intellectual exercise, which one engages in out of curiosity about a different time and place, and ideas of a universal nature. The little girl in this *Facts of Life* episode struck me as so otherworldly because I had met only one black person in my life who had ever taken Latin; twenty years later I have met one more.

There is a popular motivational book for black people called *Success Runs in Our Race*. In some ways, it does, but that thirty seconds on *The Facts of Life* is a reminder that one area where everyone would have to agree that Success Does Not Run in Our Race is school. Almost forty years after the Civil Rights Act, African-American students on the average are the weakest in the United States, at all ages, in all subjects, and regardless of class level.

The Cult of Victimology insures that this problem is viewed as the result of black suffering. Victimology plays its first hand in infusing almost all discussions of the issue with the tacit assumption that "black" means "poor," when in fact only a portion of black children are poor. From here, it becomes even more natural to attribute this lag in black scholarly per-

formance to inequities in school resources, teachers' racist biases, and chaotic home lives.

We are given this message so steadily and with so little variation that these assumptions can appear unassailable. However, in reality, school funding, racist bias, and quality of home life have the same relationship to why most black students do so badly in school as a weakened immune system has to whether or not one gets a cold. A virus causes the common cold. Various factors make people more susceptible to that virus, but if the virus is not present, not even all of those factors together will cause a cold. In this light, it is important, and insufficiently considered, that (1) the very factors considered to preordain black students to mediocrity do not thwart a great many minority groups from scholarly achievement, and (2) black students as often as not continue to perform below standard level even in plush, enlightened settings where all efforts are being made to help them.

As the common cold is caused by the rhinovirus, black students do so poorly in school decade after decade not because of racism, funding, class, parental education, etc., but because of a virus of Anti-intellectualism that infects the black community. This Anti-intellectual strain is inherited from whites having denied education to blacks for centuries, and has been concentrated by the Separatist trend, which in rejecting the "white" cannot help but cast school and books as suspicious and alien, not to be embraced by the authentically "black" person.

That this attitude is a problem in inner-city communities is not unknown, but it also permeates the whole of black culture, all the way up to the upper class. Certain components of cultural identity are felt more subconsciously than consciously, and often become apparent only upon travel elsewhere, such as the American commitment to the individual over the collective. In this vein, the African-American "cultural disconnect," as a black teacher friend of mine calls it, from the realm of books and learning operates covertly as much as overtly. Yet its pervasive power in either guise renders it, like Victimology and Separatism, a defining feature of cultural blackness today.

Nevertheless, the conviction that black children are barred from doing well in school, rather than culturally disinclined to, is fiercely held, because the reign of Victimology in the media as well as much black American thought makes it so difficult to believe that a race issue might break down in any other way. The problem is that this leads us to aim solutions to black school failure at black victimhood rather than at an unfortunate aspect of the culture. Because these solutions are misaimed, they either

stall or fail outright. The media emphasizes the onset, and later the defense, of such programs rather than their actual results. Yet it is a fact that after the institution of affirmative action, Head Start, campus minority counseling programs, and African-American Studies curricula, black school performance has risen a couple of notches and then plateaued.

This corresponds neatly to the minor extent to which black victimhood contributes to the problem; the rest of it is the culture—just as if all Americans' immune systems were normal, the common cold would be a bit less rampant but would still be around. But Victimology ensures that the failure of educational strategies to make more than a dent in the problem is traced to the eternity of racism, and that the plateau is either attributed to racist "backlash," or more often, simply ignored.

Because of this ideological holding pattern, in our America it is difficult not to feel that black students do poorly in school because the System does them in. The problem is in fact one of modern black American social psychology, and will yield only to solutions that squarely face this uncomfortable but decisive cultural trait.

Many of the things in this chapter were difficult to write about; some may feel, as many black women did during the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas controversy, that I am unjustly airing the community's "dirty laundry." Yet I feel compelled to do so because there are times when airing dirty laundry is the only way to help. Only by taking a deep breath and devoting as much attention to these problems as we currently do to victimhood can we really start black students on the path to doing as well in school as anyone else.

It is important to realize when reading this chapter that it is not intended simply as a survey of unpleasant facts about black students' performance in school. My aim is to carefully build a specific argument—that the appearance that black students do poorly in school because the System does them in is an illusion that denies these students' basic humanity, and that the actual determining factor is a culture-internal legacy. The argument will consist of three parts.

The first part will attempt to undo a natural tendency to associate the black scholarly lag with poor people, and show that it cuts deeply across the culture as a whole. It must be understood that this is the *sole* goal of this upcoming section. I will address the Anti-intellectualism issue *itself* later; however, I cannot productively discuss this until it is clear that the black scholarly lag extends far beyond crumbling schools and violent neighborhoods. It is only this that I am arguing in the following section.

Black Student Performance: The Realities

SAT Scores

Black students' notoriously poor performance on Scholastic Achievement Tests is widely discussed, but few are aware of the breadth between black students and others, and even fewer that the gap has no correlation with income level. Even on the broad level, the numbers are disheartening: From 1981 to 1995, among students at a sample of twenty-eight selective universities, William G. Bowen and Derek Bok found that almost three-quarters of white students taking the SAT nationwide scored over 1200 out of 1600, but little more than one-quarter of black students did. This lag had the effect that, for example, the black students entering Berkeley with the best SAT scores in 1988 clustered in the lowest quarter of scores for all students at the school.

Through the "black is poor" lens that race issues are almost always filtered through in American discourse, statistics like this tend to be attributed to the fact that a greater proportion of blacks are poor than whites. But poverty is only a subsidiary factor in overall black SAT performance: for one, we must consider how few poor black students even take the SAT.

More to the point, in 1995, the mean SAT score for black students nationwide from families making \$50,000 or more was a mere 849 out of 1600. This must be compared with the mean score in 1995 for white students from families earning \$10,000 or less—i.e., really, no money—869. Money isn't everything, but even when we take parents' education into account the facts are the same. In 1995, the mean for black students whose parents had graduate, not just undergraduate, degrees was 844, even lower than the overall middle-class black mean. Statistics can deceive, but here even headcounts tell the story: In 1995, exactly 184 black students in the United States scored over 700 on the verbal portion of the SAT—not even enough to fill a passenger plane. In the math portion, 616 scored over 700. This was 2 percent and 6 percent of the black test takers, whereas five times and almost ten times, respectively, that proportion of white test-takers scored above 700. Many people addressing this issue point to the tricky relationship between income and class; I will discuss this issue later. Few of us, however, could honestly say that so many black people are "poor" financially or culturally that we would expect the entire group of black students in the United States doing better than 700 on the verbal portion of the SAT in an entire year to not even be able to fill one floor of a movie theater. Clearly poverty is not the issue here.

In their pro-affirmative action study *The Shape of the River*, William Bowen and Derek Bok note that most blacks' SAT scores at top schools are above the national white average and that blacks' average scores are better than the national average in 1951, which for everyone was lower. These points distract us from the crucial questions. Even if blacks' average SAT scores at top schools are higher than the national white average, why are they still the lowest in the schools overall? Even if blacks score better on the SAT than Archie Andrews and Henry Aldrich would have in 1951, the important issue is that today's black students' scores are still closer than anyone else's to the lower averages of yesteryear.

*What Does a Black Kid Know About Skiing?
The Validity of the Tests*

A standard answer to this question is that the tests do not measure black students' competence. It is casually assumed in most discussions of black school performance that whatever their SAT scores, black students go on to perform as well in college as other students. At one of many symposia on the demise of affirmative action at UC Berkeley, one particularly vocal (Latino) professor who advocates racial preferences in admissions bellowed to a round of applause "We hear these abstruse philosophical discussions—I got a higher SAT score than you, it's not 'fair'—let's know what SAT scores *mean!*" But there are figures on what they mean, and black students' lower SAT scores mean that they make lower grades in college.

First, SAT tests have been shown to correlate rather well with student performance: There is a tendency for SAT scores to correlate with college grade point average over four years for both whites and blacks. The correlation is nowhere near a lockstep, but neither is there all but no correlation, as is assumed by many. Here, for example, are William G. Bowen and Derek Bok who, although avid advocates of affirmative action, note after tabulating extensive data from twenty-eight selective universities and subjecting it to statistical analysis:

The simple association between SAT scores and grades is clear-cut. As one would have expected, class rank varies directly with SAT scores. Among both black and white students, those in the highest SAT interval had an appreciably higher average rank in class. . . . Moreover, the positive relationship between students' SAT scores and their rank in class . . . remains

after we control for gender, high school grades, socioeconomic status, school selectivity, and major, as well as for race.

Bowen and Bok also found that in the class of 1989, white students' average class rank was in the 53rd percentile, but black students' was in only the 23rd—the bottom quarter. Even after adjustment for factors like SATs, high-school grades, income, major, and others, black students rose only to about the 37th percentile—the lower second quarter. This is only one of many studies, all done by people concerned about black education, confirming the same discrepancy and disproving the commonly believed yet counterintuitive idea that college regularly sparks mediocre high-school performers into high scholarly achievement.

Indeed, studies have shown that SAT scores if anything *overpredict* black students' performance. In other words, the slippage between the score and future performance leans backwards—black students tend to make worse grades in college than white ones with the same SAT scores.

These solid demonstrations of the correlation between SAT scores and performance are a contradiction to the commonly heard assertion that "SATs don't mean anything anyway." Nor is it surprising. Few of us could name students with excellent SAT scores who found themselves at sea in university-level work, unless, of course, there was some extenuating psychological or social factor—the SAT is not, in itself, simply a meaningless hoop students are made to jump through that has no relation to college performance. If it were, then students who made *abysmal* SAT scores would often sail through college with top grades with little effort—yet how many students like this have any of us ever met? No matter what the societal reason, statistics show that there is a meaningful correlation between SAT scores and school performance.

Many will counter that there are plenty of students who do poorly or only okay on standardized tests but do well in school. Yet this does not signify that the SATs are meaningless, because again, the fact remains that students who do well on them almost *always* do well in school. It does mean that the SAT's predictability wanes somewhat in the middle range. So we have two facts. One is that not only statistics, but common sense show that it is reasonable to use the SAT as *one* indicator of how well a student is likely to do in school—for the simple reason that a high SAT score virtually guarantees strong performance in college.

The second is that, contrary to the going wisdom, the black-white SAT lag does signify that the proportion of black high-schoolers who will do well in school is lower than among other groups. It follows from

simple math. For white and Asian students, the proportion who will do well is composed of the ones who do well on SATs *plus* those who do not, but will excel in school anyway. Among black students, however, almost all of those who excel in school are from the second category rather than from a combination of both—which means that *the fraction of black students overall who will excel constitute a lesser fraction than that in other groups*. There might be a temptation to suppose that the fraction is not smaller, and that instead, the proportion of potentially excellent black students is the same as in other groups but that for some reason almost none of them do well on standardized tests. However, this idea forces one to claim that there is something inherent in black psychological makeup that prevents the expression of scholarly aptitude via tests, and our response to that must be, as one hears around nowadays, “Don’t go there! . . .”

Many these days do go there, of course, charging the SAT as inappropriate for minorities in “testing only one kind of intelligence,” what psychologist Howard Gardner calls “linguistic” and “logical-mathematical” intelligence. Gardner urges that teachers take into account spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, existential, musical, and other intelligences as well in communicating ideas. There is much value in this, but until by chance such teaching techniques by chance become established nationwide, “linguistic” and “logical-mathematical” intelligence will remain the most applicable to college material and how it is taught—reading critically, writing coherent papers, doing problem sets. In any case, almost every other group in the country manages to develop its “linguistic” and “logical-mathematical” intelligences and post regular averages or above on the SAT, so once again, our question is why black students are so uncomfortable taking a test that requires these kinds of intelligence. Separatism encourages some to essentialize blacks as having a “black intelligence” separate from wonky “logical-mathematicality,” but let’s be careful—that assertion is ironically reminiscent of some highly unsavory arguments. An America where black students are encouraged to nurture their artistic and spatial intelligence out of respect for their culture is an America where black people are our house entertainers and athletes. Last time I checked we were trying to get past that—isn’t this what *The Bell Curve* told blacks they should sit back and be satisfied with?

Meanwhile, one often hears that high-school grades ought to be the central focus in admissions rather than SATs, out of a belief that performance on standardized tests is unrelated to how students are doing in their actual schoolwork. Yet Lawrence Steinberg and his researchers

have found that in nine high schools in California and Wisconsin, including both predominantly white suburban schools as well as inner-city minority-dominated ones, black (and Latino) students made the lowest grades *regardless of family income*, with low-income Asians regularly outperforming middle-class black ones by a wide margin. Along the same lines, black students in the class admitted to Berkeley had an overall average of B+ while the whites students had straight-A averages.

Finally, the idea that SAT scores are culturally biased is an anachronism. The formulators of standardized tests are now dedicated almost to the point of obsession to eliminating all possible instances of cultural bias: How many of us have ever heard a black student complaining that the SAT she took assumed that students knew which wine goes with chicken? In any case, the rare examples of this type that used to elicit complaint only applied to the few poor black students who took the SAT (a classic example being references to skiing, a sport alien to an inner-city resident).

The performance gap continues in postgraduate school. There were 420 black students in the 27,000 who entered the top 18 law schools in 1991, but only 24 of them would have been admitted without racial preference policies. In New York in 1992, 63 percent of black takers of the bar exam failed while only 18 percent of the whites did. In 1988, 51.1 percent of blacks, but just 12.3 percent of whites, failed the first part of the National Board of Medical Examiners exam.

Thus all of the relevant evidence confirms that black students tend strongly to underperform in college, and most important, this is regardless of class or parental income. The figures are not simply drawn down by those contributed by poor students, then; we are faced with a culture-wide problem.

So far, of course, all I have given is numbers. But the numbers reflect concrete experience. At Berkeley, I have had occasion to teach large numbers of both black and other students. I spent a long time resisting acknowledging something that ultimately became too consistent and obvious to ignore, which was that black undergraduates at Berkeley tended to be among the worst students on campus, by any estimation. I tried my very best to chalk up each experience I had to local factors and personalities, but as one episode piled upon another, it got to the point where pretending that there was not a connection among them all would have required a suspension of disbelief beyond my capacity.

What sort of episodes do I mean?

* * *

A black student intended to write a senior honors thesis under my supervision transforming episodes of her family history into fiction. At the beginning of the semester she submitted a three-page selection she had written for a previous class. As the semester passed, while my white senior honors students were engaged in research for their papers and consulting with me weekly or biweekly, this student came by only twice, regaling me with tales of her family history and promising written work "soon." I let her know that she would have to submit some kind of written material to me before the end of the semester so that I could grade her for her semester's "work." Even that was generous, of course, but I got nothing from her until just before Christmas break, and what she handed me was, quite simply, her family tree, drawn in pencil on a piece of notebook paper. I never saw her again.

That same year another black student writing an honors thesis under me managed to turn in a brief progress report before Christmas, but had obviously only looked at one book. She was diligent enough to report to my office every two weeks, but while by the second semester my white students were turning in chapters, she would always come empty-handed, with vague plans for traveling to do research. In the end she handed in an eleven-page thesis, in contrast to the thirty-page average of the others, and it was obviously a last-minute job based more on impressionistic reflection at her desk than on research.

A black student in one of my classes turned in a midterm so poor that it was difficult to believe that he had actually been physically present in the class, and after this disappeared for five weeks. Most students if they miss more than one class tend to call, leave a note, or send an e-mail explaining why, but sadly, black students often do not. He finally reappeared saying that he had been very sick and that he would get notes from the previous classes and attend regularly from then on, resisting my gentle suggestion that he drop the class. Nevertheless, his attendance thereafter was spotty, his final was predictably even worse than the midterm and made it clear that he had never gotten notes for the classes he missed, and he did not submit a final paper. I could not help but flunk him, but a few months later he came to my office hoping I would retract the F because it would interfere with his continuing to get the scholarship paying his tuition.

Another black student joined one of my linguistics classes. He had not

was not as important as it is in many other linguistics classes, and I assured him that I would help him through any rough spots he encountered. He was very good in class at giving dramatic speeches about discrimination when race issues happened to come up. But his homework showed that he was not taking in the ideas that I was teaching, and he did not improve even after I had more than once tutored him in my office. Shortly before the final, he vanished, and I did not hear from him again until months later, when he said he had simply frozen at the thought of taking the final.

Within reason, I try to give black students as much slack as possible. I used to do it out of a conventional vague sense that black students were "victims" on some level, but lately I have come to do it out of a sense that most of them are caught in a cultural holding pattern they cannot help. In any case, I made an arrangement with this student to take another of my classes, an African-American Studies course assuming no linguistics background, where he could use his grade to cancel out the F I had had to give him in the previous course.

Yet in that class, the story was the same: an almost strangely clueless first midterm, spotty attendance, and one day he even showed up at the end of a class eating a plate of food from the campus eatery, having come by just to pick up a handout (as well as another one for his friend, who had simply not shown up at all). He disappeared before the second midterm, later explaining that a relative had died. When he came back, because it would have been easy for him to get answers to the midterm by talking to the students who had already taken it (and also because I could not imagine it not being a disaster anyway), I made up a few extra credit research questions for him to take home and answer. I based the questions entirely upon class material and was extremely explicit about the kinds of answers I wanted.

What he gave me back had obviously involved effort, but what he had done was go to the library and look up new information, having learned so little from the class that he did not perceive the connection between the questions I gave him and the material I had been covering. Furthermore, the material he presented was largely undigested paraphrasing of his sources and had only diagonal connection to the questions I asked. Later on, this student came to my office hoping I could raise the C I gave him, as well as write him a recommendation for law school.

A student came to not one but both of my African-American Studies classes six weeks into the semester to enroll. She seemed strangely casual about joining classes when so much material had already been cov-

ered, but said that she had been having trouble with the administration, and desperately needed my classes for credit. She claimed to be a good reader and seemed mature and sure of herself, so I took a chance. I let her know that in one of the classes, there was no textbook and that class notes were essential, such that to prepare for the upcoming midterm she would need to borrow someone's notes. Yet two days before the midterm, I asked her how her studying was going and she told me she had only been going through the course reader, which contained only about 10 percent of the information I was going to test the students on. I arranged for her to borrow notes from one of the better students in the class. Unsurprisingly, she did very badly on the midterm, but then most of us would in a class where we had only seen most of the material as someone else's notes and only heard a few of the professor's lectures.

In the other class, there were two midterms and then a final, and the student had joined that class right after the first midterm. On my way to the classroom to give out the second one, I ran into her on her way to my office to tell me that she just "couldn't" take the midterm. She couldn't give a reason why, and therefore I insisted that she come along with me and take it and do her best, since she had been present in all of the classes that the midterm covered, and to give her a dispensation would be unfair to the other students. She did very poorly, to an extent which again left me wondering how she could have been present in the class and taken in so little.

Shortly before the end of the term she disappeared from both classes with no explanation. In the other class, the students were assigned to write final papers about some aspect of Black Musical Theater. I gave them free rein on topics, with the exception that they were not to write biographies of performers, since it would be too easy to merely paraphrase a couple of books. I said this often and had written it in the syllabus. In the middle of the summer, I found a paper from this student under my office door, marked "I didn't write this for a grade, just the credit." That message was not only rather enigmatic, but sad, because I still wondered whether something terrible happened to her, or whether she had been overwhelmed by university work; to this day I don't know. But what was even sadder was that her paper was a biographical sketch of a black performer, derived entirely from one book.

In a large class that I taught not long ago, one black student attended class only rarely. Each student was enrolled in a section run by a teaching assistant, and in an assigned debate on a societal issue, this student

argued for her position based only on folk wisdom I had carefully shown the errors in and even told the class not to resort to in the debates. Another black student failed the midterm, telling the teaching assistant that he had not been able to study because his car broke down. However, he hadn't been doing well in previous assignments either, and the fact is that a car breakdown does not prevent a diligent student from studying. By hook or by crook, diligent students study—or let the professor know that they have had an unusual problem and make arrangements to take tests the next day, etc. Yet I frequently get inadequate excuses from black students—when I get any excuse at all.

These stories go on and on; for each one, I could tell another two. One student's answer to an essay question was two literally incomprehensible sentences, and she handed in the test with a jolly, salutary smile. There was one student who kept not showing up to class on days when I had seen him socializing on campus; one day I asked him what was up and he said that he had been in a car accident not long ago that had sent him into a depression which led him to come to campus but not go to classes. (To his credit, he at least admitted that this was not right.)

The reader might justifiably wonder whether there is something intimidating about my classes that elicits these reactions. I can only say that in my years of teaching, I have never had a student disappear without explanation, or turn in a test that made me wonder how she could have attended class and done so badly, who was not African American. The reader might also wonder whether the problem lies in my making these students uncomfortable personally. I should first note that I have never shared any of the kinds of views I am putting forth in this book in these classes, none of which have been on sociological or political topics. Moreover, I can only say that on the personal level, many of these students tend to be my favorites. Despite the against-the-grain sociopolitical opinions I am sharing here, there is a special comfort I feel with black students, and I would venture to say that most of them found me more accessible than most of their professors, partly because of my relative youth (this, for example, partly explains why so many of them ask me for recommendations and favors). I liked most of these students as people and most of them (at least, perhaps, until they got their grades) liked me, and that is much of why it pains me to write this section, or to even re-read it as I edit it.

In any case, however, something I cannot stress enough about all of the students I have mentioned is that not a single one of them grew up

in the ghetto or has ever known poverty or anything close (this was part of why I chose them to write about). Opinions differ on what "middle class" means, but none of these students would even strike most of us as "working class"—all of them are more *The Preacher's Wife* than 227. We must resist a possible tendency to envision me as a stand-in for Jaime Escalante in *Stand and Deliver*, facing surly students fresh off violent streets slouched in their chairs with knives in their pockets, complaining that school is for "chumps." Black Berkeley undergraduates are almost all upwardly mobile, bright-eyed young people, many with cars, none of whom would be uncomfortable in a nice restaurant and many of whom probably do know what wine goes with chicken.

Thus these students' behavior has nothing to do with the 'hood. Many might respond to these stories by pointing out that there are bad white students as well. Of course this is true; I have my stories of white (and even Asian) slackers, too. Importantly, however, despite the fact that white and Asian students vastly outnumber black ones, I encounter episodes like this with white and Asian students perhaps once or twice a year. More to the point, sad as it is to say this, I have gradually had to admit that this sort of thing has been the *norm* for black students I have taught.

None of this is to say that there are not excellent black students—I have had those, too. In the same large class I recently taught that the two unfortunate cases I described not long ago were in, another black student was one of the best out of 180. In particular, my impression, albeit limited, has been that black students at the very best schools perform more or less at the same level as others; the handful of black students I encountered during the year I taught at Cornell were nothing less than exemplary, and I have reason to suppose that the facts are similar at other top schools. But the existence of these people does not belie my sad point about the culture as a whole, because as the very cream of the crop, they are *exceptions*, not the rule. At Berkeley, I have found it impossible to avoid nothing less than fearing that a black student in my class is likely to be a problem case. We are trained to say at this point that I am "stereotyping," but I have come to expect this for the simple reason that it has been true, class after class, year after year. A few white professors I have spoken to reluctantly admit that they have had the same experience over their careers.

And finally, we must remember that I am writing about UC Berkeley—these students are among the best black scholars in the state of California.

It is not fun to write this; I would rather just let these crummy episodes fade into history. It might be useful to restate here that I am recording these stories not to criticize, but to build a point—that the black scholarly lag is not merely due to a drag exerted by inner-city casualties, nor is it a mysterious statistical point that has no reflection on the ground in real life. On the contrary, what stories like these show is that black students of all classes exhibit a strong tendency to dedicate themselves less to schoolwork than do other students, regardless of life history or present conditions.

Facing this without turning away is, in my view, so important that I feel compelled to address it a bit further. The urge is very strong to frame each of these black students as individuals and not "stereotype," or to resort to "There's some of that" (which essentially translates as "The real problem is racism"). This is how I myself tried to deal with the issue for years at Berkeley, but besides my and others' anecdotal experience about individual students, another factor made it painfully clear to me that something much larger than isolated "cases" is involved. At Berkeley, I have had occasion to teach first nearly all-white and then nearly all-black versions of two classes on completely distinct topics. The contrast between the white and black versions of these classes as a whole was too stark and too consistent to be explainable as anything but a general factor, and that factor was not the 'hood.

One of the classes was a course on the history of black musical theater. One year most of the students were white or Asian; the next time I taught it almost all of the students were black. The white version of the class was, if I may, a success. The students loved the material, many of them wrote great papers, and some of them kept in touch afterward. I looked forward to teaching it again, but the black version was another world.

The white students had enjoyed the historical material, such as anecdotes about bygone creators and performers, old recordings, and weird old film clips. However, presenting the same material to the black students, I might as well have been reading out of the phone book. The glazed eyes and aggressive doodling (during class one student even read a comic book) were things I had never encountered in a classroom. Two white students from the Linguistics Department who had enjoyed a class they had taken with me sat in for fun, and were also struck by how different the atmosphere was from that of our other class together. Attendance was terrible; after the first couple of weeks I was lucky to have half of the class in the room on the same day, and some came so seldom that

I assumed they had dropped the class, only to see them turn up for the midterm (something not unknown in large classes, but rare in classes of twenty or so like this one).

The reader is right to wonder whether the problem was my teaching, but it is important to remember that the other class had eaten up the same lectures and material, and a class about singing and dancing that includes listening to tapes and watching movies is not exactly the hardest to make interesting. It was clear that the material simply did not interest most of the black students. When Todd Duncan, the original *Porgy and Bess*, died during the semester, I did a little tribute to him where I talked about his life, dimmed the lights as a gesture of deliberately stagey yet also sincere gravity, and played one of his recordings. A couple of weeks later, we got to *Porgy and Bess*, and I mentioned him again and even showed a video interview with him made shortly before his death. On the midterm, one question was "Name one of the principal performers in the original production of *Porgy and Bess*." Exactly two people out of about twenty wrote "Todd Duncan"; one person wrote "John Bubbles," who played Sportin' Life; the rest of the class either wrote "Paul Robeson" (who I had explicitly told the class never sang *Porgy*) or left it blank. In general, most of the class did very badly on the midterm, and I had to curve way up to avoid flunking most of them. One student politely expressed surprise that I had expected the students to memorize data; yet I had deliberately avoided making the course an exercise in trivia, only giving names that were important and only requiring students to be able to place a musical within a decade rather than the exact year. I asked him what he was expecting to be on the test, and he wasn't sure.

I couldn't help noticing a particular contrast. In the white class, interest waned a bit as we passed into the 1970s and beyond. The students got a kick out of the vintage stuff; for most of them, *The Wiz* and *Once on This Island* were more recognizable and thus less interesting. The black students, on the other hand, perked up a bit just as we got to the 70s—the official moment was when a few of them boogied a bit in their seats when I played "Ease on Down the Road" from *The Wiz*. They were happy when we got to what they already knew and had a personal relationship to, but the older material, less familiar and requiring more active engagement, was a turn-off, despite all the artists being black. Notably, throughout the semester I could count on a bit of a "click" when I talked about the discrimination people had encountered—they were open to being reinforced in Victimologist ideology. Indeed, many

may have wished that had been the foundation of the whole course, as it was for a black musicals class I sat in on at Stanford years ago. But they were not interested in learning anything new.

I have also taught a course on pidgin and creole languages, Euro-African hybrid languages like Haitian Creole, Jamaican patois, and Papiamentu, to white and black classes, the black one for African-American Studies and assuming no linguistics background. One of the three black versions I taught over the years was especially instructive. There were two white students and seven black. The black students mostly quickly lapsed into spotty attendance, one of them even going as far as not showing up for a midterm, giving no explanation, and coming to the following class casually expecting to be allowed to take it home (I had to dismiss her from the class). One day I gave a lecture on the two main creole languages of Surinam, quite different from one another, with very different histories, and spoken by very different people. Two weeks later before a midterm, two of the black students sought some last-minute clarifications before I gave out the test. I am not generally averse to this kind of thing within reason, but their clarifications included wanting to know what the names of the two creoles were, how they were different, and whether "Surinam" was the name of a country or a language—and one of these students was the only one in the class who had taken linguistics courses. After several weeks of this kind of thing (including the botched extra credit assignment for the student I mentioned earlier), even I began wondering whether I wasn't communicating clearly. But the problem was that the two white students, neither of whom had had any linguistics background, were doing very well, listening to me say the exact same things and watching me put the exact same things on the board. One of them, for instance, was diligent about coming to my office hours for help, while not a single black student ever came.

The difference between black and white here was too obvious to explain away as a matter of isolated characters, and the most striking thing was that the black students were mostly blithe about all of this. Of course, there was a gray zone: One black student did far better than the other black ones. Pointedly, he had been one of the only black students in the white version of the musical theater course, and thus knew my "style." There was also another one who, quite unusually among Berkeley students, had actually had the underprivileged upbringing mythically attributed to all black students. He did not do well, but he was trying as hard as he could, I gave him a lot of extra attention, and I graded him

taking his circumstances into account. But the contrast between the two white students dutifully taking notes and asking thoughtful questions and most of the other black students, including two who regularly whispered in the back like junior high schoolers, was telling.

When I finally realized that there was an unmistakable pattern in the classroom behavior of black students at Berkeley year after year, I began to recall that I had been seeing this pattern at other schools throughout my life. When I was a graduate student at Stanford, I took a course on pidgins and creoles that remains the best I ever had; it was where I chose my career focus. The class mixed undergraduates and graduates, and was a lively, stimulating group, with almost all of the twenty-odd people speaking and commenting often. The one exception was the two black undergraduates, who generally sat politely waiting for the class to be over, with their facial expressions making their lack of interest plain. Both of them later told me that they found the subject ultimately rather pointless. Like most academic subjects, pidgin and creole studies indeed only occasionally has direct application to life as we live it in the United States, where few such languages are spoken natively, but the other students in the class enjoyed the material simply because it was interesting—these two, however, did not. Later I lived with a white engineering graduate student who told me that as much as he hated to say it, he had noticed as a teaching assistant that black students tended strongly not to work as hard and to give up more easily when encountering difficulty.

The two in the pidgins and creoles class reminded me of two other black undergraduates in a strange class I took in Romance languages at Rutgers in 1984. They were relatively interested in the big, familiar languages like Spanish, but as the professor got to the obscure Romance languages like Romanian, Catalan, and languages spoken in Swiss and Italian mountains that few of us will ever hear spoken, their attention waned, and they ended up spending most of the semester passing notes. When I entered a private middle school, my best friend was a black guy from a middle-class, racially mixed neighborhood. He gave no indication of being unintelligent except his silence in the classroom—and the problem was not racial discomfort because our class was taught by a black woman who, actually, had a way of subtly giving special attention to him, me, and the other two black kids in our classroom. Yet the following fall my friend wasn't back; it turned out he had flunked summer school, extremely rare at this school. As I will discuss further in a different context, two years later at the same school I watched several black students leave

after ninth grade, the year schoolwork became much more challenging than it had been in middle school. In fifth grade, a group of black students in my elementary school turned away from schoolwork and, as "cool" kids, gradually dragged a couple of other black students' performance down with theirs. One of my best friends in second grade, a black student, had one problem: not being committed to doing schoolwork. Throughout my life, I have seen that Anti-intellectualism is a central component of black identity. Like a virus, it sets in early, it has no regard for status in society, and once settled, it almost never lets go.

Of course, in the best of all possible worlds, one would base conclusions about black American student performance upon having taught both white and black students in colleges and universities all over the country. Along those lines, one might ask "How can he make these broad claims based on his experiences at one school?" For one, however, since within one lifetime no one person could teach at more than a few schools long enough to see any general trends, to make this objection is to claim that no nationwide generalization about black students' orientation to school is possible at all from one person. In that light, however, we must note that if I were instead saying that my impression was that black students are done in by racism, then not a soul would object that I had no grounds for saying such a thing based upon my experiences at one school!

More to the point, any argument that conclusions based upon experiences at UC Berkeley are somehow not representative is incomplete without an explanation as to what makes Berkeley so different. What precisely would it be about UC Berkeley that would make black student performance there so anomalous compared to black student bodies in the rest of the country? Moreover, while I have used Berkeley as my main source of illustrations, I have also argued based upon my life experiences in Philadelphia, New Jersey, and Palo Alto, which leads to the question as to whether there is some particular element in the water supplies of Berkeley, Palo Alto, Philadelphia, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and Lawnside, New Jersey, that presented me with skewed data unparalleled in Houston, Trenton, Baltimore, or Los Angeles. During the writing of this book I have more than once been told things like "You'd find a lot less of that in the Northeast" or once even (my favorite): "California is not exactly the center of progressive black thought, nor is Philadelphia." Yet never has anyone explained just *why* black people in Cleveland, St. Louis, and Atlanta are apparently so different in their thinking than are those in any of the particular places I happen to have

lived, nor why life seems to have so consistently shuttled me, and just me, into one supposedly backwards locale after another.

In any case, I have only presented my observations as illustrations of national trends in grades and test scores charted in the hard numbers. I began this chapter with, and these nationwide data show that my experiences, as most of us would suspect, reflect general tendencies, not California *bizarrie*.

My point is that there is a misconception that the black scholarly lag is essentially a matter of poverty, and that outside of that context, black students do as well in school as anyone else regardless of their SAT scores. It would be much easier for all of us if this were true, but it isn't. Not only black students' SAT scores, but their high-school and college grades lag behind those of all other groups, and this is not simply because professors grade them down out of racist bias, as many black observers of the issue privately suppose. The sad but simple fact is that while there are some excellent black students, on the average, black students do not try as hard as other students.

The reason they do not try as hard is not because they are inherently lazy, nor is it because they are stupid. Furthermore, while many of these students are quite obviously disinclined to dedicate themselves meaningfully to school, just as many give their best efforts, but are unaware that white and Asian students' best efforts come from a level and depth of commitment beyond theirs. The reason black students so rarely hit that particular bar, while such a disproportionate number are disinclined to even try, is that all of these students belong to a culture infected with an Anti-intellectual strain, which subtly but decisively teaches them from birth not to embrace schoolwork too wholeheartedly.

In today's climate, this statement will naturally be processed as naive at best, traitorous fighting words at worst—and usually the latter. I make the statement not out of any preconceived political bent, nor to contribute to anyone's agenda except my own, which is to forge effective solutions to the problem of the education of black students—a problem urgent in *all* classes. I have arrived at my conclusions based on what I see as empirical evidence.

The typical counterarguments against this view, however, are not based on empirical evidence. Instead, they are perspectives based on the filtering and distortion of the empirical evidence through the treacherous lenses of Victimology and Separatism. Let's take a look at these arguments.

Black Student Performance: The Myths

Class

Victimology ensures that most discussions of black scholarly performance center upon the obvious and well-known barriers to learning in inner-city neighborhoods; "black" is tacitly assumed to be shorthand for "poor." When the fact that these problems persist among middle-class blacks occasionally comes up, it is usually only engaged long enough to be dismissed as due to the fact that a rise in income does not guarantee a rise in class profile. It is widely assumed that the black family considered "middle-class" financially is generally "working-class" or lower culturally, and that their children's poor school performance is traceable to their parents' lack of advanced degrees, the scarcity of books and magazines in their homes, the fact that conversations over dinner do not center upon the issues of the day, etc. The Latino affirmative action advocate who dismissed the value of SATs later touched briefly upon this issue by saying "We hear about 'middle class'—but most of these people are from struggling blue-collar families," "struggling blue-collar" being a phrase that comes up with almost uncanny consistency in this context.

The first problem here is that this speaker had no evidence to back up his characterization of "most" minority students at Berkeley, and in general, the proposition that "most" blacks and Latinos at schools like Berkeley are of "struggling blue-collar" parentage is extremely questionable. Very few of the black students I have met at Berkeley have parents who work for UPS or drive buses; most of their parents are managers, school principals, and even doctors and lawyers. This speaker, who has taught at Berkeley for years, cannot have missed this in itself. Victimology, trumping truth, forces him to maintain a sense that "black" (or Latino) means the ghetto (or barrio) or just a few steps beyond it, and Separatism reinforces this, in creating an uneasy sense that upward mobility threatens "authenticity."

The conflict with truth here reveals itself in the fact that for every Berkeley minority student's parent readily classifiable as "a working person," that this man might meet, another would be quite uncomfortable being designated "working-class" as he glides in his Nissan Altima every day to his job as a middle manager at Pacific Bell. It is also interesting to imagine Ross Perot, or even Daniel Moynihan, making a speech declaring that "regardless of income level or educational achievement, the black American remains blue collar." There would be an indignant barrage in response, furiously pointing to the millions of black families liv-

ing in plush suburban homes, financially defining "middle class" as far downward as possible, and decrying the eternal racism at the heart of Perot's or Moynihan's statements. The fact that once education comes up all black Americans are the Honeymooners is a trick that Victimology and Separatism play on the mind.

How black America would respond to the "black" means 'struggling'" idea outside of education need not be guessed at. For example, upscale car companies have been reported to have a policy against selling advertising time to black and Hispanic radio stations even when their listeners are shown to include people of the financial demographic they target. These companies have decided that whatever proportion of affluent minorities is among the listeners would not justify the payments to the stations—in other words, that generally speaking, black and Latino people are salt-of-the-earth. This has been processed as evidence of the same old racist story by minority movers and shakers: "This report's findings are bleak and shameful but they come as no surprise," said Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, Democratic member of Congress from Michigan.

But when the black scholarly lag is discussed, if anyone points to the burgeoning black middle class, then academics white and black carefully note things such as that blacks with middle-class incomes have less aggregate wealth than other groups in terms of savings, stocks, etc., all dedicated to showing that black success is a marginal phenomenon dwarfed in importance by a fundamental and pervasive lag—i.e., that by and large, black is poor or just getting by and that we'd better not forget it, and that to focus on occasional successes is callous and elitist.

So which is it? If white people agree with that assessment and refrain from paying black stations to run ads for BMWs, then they are racists. If black people say it, then they are "telling it like it is." Or: Whether or not black is poor depends on whether it will get us something. If saying so will get us into top schools or get us breaks on business loans, then black is poor. If saying so denies us radio advertisements, however, then suddenly attention must be paid to the black middle-class success story.

When it comes to education, we are told that what I am supposedly missing is that there is a slippage between income and class, and that someone with the income to buy a BMW may still not have the cultural background to create a mindset and environment designed to make one's children good students. But the link between class and school performance is vastly exaggerated when black students are discussed. We have no trouble imagining the Chinese immigrant family who run two restaurants, smiling in front of their new Volvo, sending their children to fine

universities. These parents are unlikely to discuss politics over dinner and do not subscribe to *The Economist*, but we do not see their children as cursed by "working-class culture" to make SAT scores under 1000 and only the occasional A. In the 1930s, the Jewish couple in Queens smiling in front of their new Studebaker often produced children who went on to become intellectuals, and no one wondered how they pulled this off, despite their having suffered overt discrimination worse than any black person encounters today, with their own parents often having been tailors, peddlers, and washerwomen on the Lower East Side.

Yet we are told that it is unreasonable to expect the children of the black family smiling in front of their new Lexus to do any better than average in school because their parents grew up working class. But why, precisely, do we consider black people different, and how often have we ever heard anyone even consider it germane to address that question? The idea that a student is only likely to do well in school if she comes from a home with book-lined living rooms, magazines on the coffee table, and lively discussions of current affairs over dinner is a myth, constructed especially to explain black underperformance. This is shown by the millions of people who have gone on to success in school without this, with no one even considering it to merit comment.

My point here is not to simply make a useless and critical charge along the lines of "Heck, why can't they do as well as everybody else—a white kid doesn't have to grow up in Beverly Hills to do well in school." My aim is to show that while there is a reason beyond laziness or mental unfit-ness that the black kids in front of the Lexus are unlikely to be stars in school, that reason is not class. We have expectations of blacks so different from those we have of other groups for a reason: because of something specific to black culture.

Racism

Another truism about black education is that the burdens of societal racism hinder all but a lucky few black children of all classes from doing well in school. This apparently sympathetic notion has transmogrified into nothing less than an infantilization of black people.

Often in this book so far I have noted that racism is not dead, and the proof is not only isolated hate crimes, police brutality, or the (increasingly marginal) unvarnished bigot. Being a middle-class black person in America does involve becoming accustomed to coping with being subtly classified as a second-rung being in all manner of interactions and

activities. This is only rarely a matter of "endemic hostility," as our Ralph Wileys and Derrick Bells would have it; most of it entails unconscious acts and biases on the part of people who would be quite surprised to realize the residual racism inside of them. To compare any of this to what it would have been like to be black in 1950 is like calling a puddle an ocean. Yet the residues of racism can be wearing.

To understand why racism is not a significant factor in black underperformance in school, it helps to take a detour and look at the kinds of racism that the typical middle-class black person encounters in America in the year 2000. This will serve two purposes. First, I hope it will alleviate any reader's sense that my views might stem from an inability to perceive racism where it does exist. Second, the detour will serve as an explicit base upon which I will make my point that these things, unfortunate though they are, do not doom a child to a C+ average.

My Experiences with Racism

When I was a teenager I often took the commuter train between Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey. At rush hour, quite consistently the seat next to me was one of the last to fill up, despite the fact that with my head down reading a book, I cannot have given the appearance of being a hoodlum.

I once applied for a summer job at a food stand in a mall, and as I asked the manager when I might hear whether or not I got the job, I could sense that he was never going to call me. By chance, a woman who worked there was later hired by the company I did get a job with that summer, and she told me that the man had a policy of not hiring blacks (this was 1986 in New Jersey).

I once lived a few doors down from an older (white) couple whose son visited them often and tended to sit outside. He drank a lot, and when one night he had been screaming invective at his girlfriend from 1:00 to 2:00 A.M., I asked him if he could be a little more quiet so I could sleep. He picked an argument and finally I just went in; as I expected, before I shut the door he growled "Just a fuckin' nigger anyway." The man was ordinarily quite the Goodtime Charlie—but it wasn't exactly surprising to find that epithet under the surface of a very parochial, semi-employed, working-class man, especially one drunk and angry.

At the beginning of a semester at Rutgers, I walked into a German class only to have the teacher, a German woman, quickly and irritably say that she was afraid I was in the wrong class. There was no reason whatsoever for her to assume this other than my color. What was even

more surprising was that throughout the semester she made it quite clear that she couldn't stand me, despite the fact that not only was I a quiet student (in that class, at least), but because language is the thing I happen to be hard-wired for, I was the best one. Her naked bias against me became the running joke of the class; she was casually hostile to such a point that I decided to stay in the class just to experience such open racism for the sensationalist thrill of it, like dropping acid or slowing down to check out a grisly car wreck—each class felt like a trip in a time machine. I am not usually one for sadomasochism, but this racism was ultimately harmless—either you get the sentence right or you don't, I fully intended to drag her to the highest court in the land if she tried to give me anything but an A+, her being foreign exoticized and deflected the sting of her racism somewhat, and its openness frankly made me feel superior to her rather than inferior (a sentiment I often wish more African Americans could internalize). But racism it was, and it was about nothing whatsoever but the color of my skin.

Some racism is subtler but no less of a nuisance. In a graduate school history class at New York University, I once made a suggestion (which had nothing to do with race) about the era being discussed, based on a book I had read years ago by eminent historian Daniel Boorstin. The professor said "Well, if you ask me, John, that's just bullshit, because . . ." The class (all white) sucked in their breath, and the teacher apologized, saying that she got the sense from my personal sense of humor that she could say that without me interpreting it as an insult. I could go along with her to a certain point: I did often try to use a little bit of humor in getting a point across. Yet she was a very buttoned-up sort of lady; it was odd to hear speaking that way in a classroom; I had in no sense been the class clown, nor had I even spoken that much; she had never before responded to anything anyone else had said in such a tone; nor did she even have the excuse of having let fly a spontaneous eruption in the rising heat of a lively discussion—it had been, as always, a very calm, quiet class. Today I encourage a fairly jolly discussion atmosphere in my classes, and occasionally tease a student a bit who I sense can take it in the spirit in which it is intended, but never, ever would I tell somebody that what he had said was "bullshit" (even if it was). This woman is unlikely to have burned any crosses on anyone's lawn; she probably supports affirmative action and disapproves of the change in welfare laws a few years ago. Also, contrary to "racism forever" hounds, people in the class came up to me afterward and asked if I was okay, and the professor apologized again after class. But what she did come from subconscious

racism—an automatic denigration (word chosen on purpose) of a black person's ideas. I recently heard her on National Public Radio discussing her latest book on women's history, and I could not help noticing the contrast between her heightened sensitivity to slights against women and how easily she had let that "bullshit" slip from her mouth that night in New York.

My sister, if I may, was one of the most beautiful women in her predominantly white high-school class by any estimation, and yet was asked out on dates barely at all. During those years, she also noticed a certain tendency regarding just which white classmates did ask her out. We all remember the pecking order that develops in middle school and high school on the basis of superficial attributes like looks and clothes. One of the cruelest things about this is the sense that a given person is "out of one's league" to pursue romantically because she is better-looking, or "cooler" in terms of general acceptance. Of course, as we all know, this "pecking order" goes on to become a sad aspect of adult life as well, but never is it as explicitly wielded as in the teen years. One white guy with a weight problem who was generally ostracized was particularly persistent in his attentions to my sister. On one level, we should all take as a compliment that anyone finds us attractive. However, it is also true that this guy was not pursuing the white girls considered the best-looking, because he knew that the vicious "pecking order" would have made success unlikely. As such, we must ask: What made this boy comfortable pursuing my sister? As sweet as he was, my sister said that she couldn't help sensing that underlying his concentrating on her was "I'm fat but you're black." I know many black people who have noticed a similar tendency, and what it signals is an unconscious sense that "black" means lower on the social pecking order. When my sister went to all-black Spelman College, she was immediately pursued by the best-looking and most socially fluent guys—i.e., those at the top of the "pecking order." My sister, for the record, is not one to choose a mate based on where he falls in this cruel hierarchy—but the contrast between her experience in high school and in college is highly significant nevertheless.

I perform on stage as a hobby, and years ago at Stanford, an outside production company staged a workshop performance of a musical. I'm certainly not holding my breath for a call from the Metropolitan Opera anytime soon, but I have been cast in my share of lead singing roles in the Bay Area, and am happy to often be asked to sing solos on the piano bar circuit. Yet this company quickly put me in the chorus while some of the people cast in the male leads were only adequate singers or actors.

This sort of selection process is hardly alien to any black performer, but the bias behind decisions like these raised its head again, and even higher, soon thereafter.

One of the male leads dropped out early in rehearsals. The character was a bass; I am a bass. The character was middle-aged; something about my demeanor almost always gets me cast as middle-aged (I was often told as a kid that I was "born fifty"). The character was sarcastic; sarcastic I definitely am. Yet there was no thought of even letting me read for the part. The company scoured the campus performing community for a replacement, aggressively courting even one actor whose singing voice was barely suitable for the part. With no takers and limited time, they finally asked me to do it, obviously considering the decision a last-ditch compromise.

I am no more likely to ever get a call from the Royal Shakespeare Company than the Met. Sometimes, however, there is a special fit between an actor and a part, and for me, this was that part. After our workshop performance, the company staged a larger, full-dress production in the area with local professionals, and the workshop performers were invited to the after-show reception. No fewer than three people came up to me independently and said that they had seen both productions, and that the only thing they had missed in the larger one was my performance.

I mention this not to toot my own horn; I'm sure nobody even remembers that I was in it today (in fact, recently I worked with the choreographer in another production, and it took him six weeks to recall that we had ever met!). However, we must ask: Had it really been so inconceivable for the producer and director and their aides to see that there might have been *some* reason to give me the part in the first place, or especially after the first actor dropped out? What kept them from considering me was not "racism" per se; in general, they were wonderful people I recall fondly. The producer later even got me a job as music assistant with a regional theater company, without my even asking. What was at work was a different grade of racial bias, what another black Bay Area actor I know calls "lack of imagination." There is a deep-seated sense that "black" is in inherent conflict with parts written as "white" regardless of the performer's ability or even personality type—shades of the "un-American" black corporate manager.

One sees subtle examples of racism throughout American life. On the subject of the performing arts, for instance, too often for it to be accidental, black characters on television shows are given no personalities to

portray, their being black alone being seen as their "character." In the brilliant ensemble comedy *Night Court*, for example, what would we say Charlie Robinson's Mac character was "like"? He had no actual character—his job was to stand around being alternately amazed or frightened at the other characters' clever, eccentric high jinks. Being constantly flabbergasted is not a "character"—how many white characters can we think of in a modern sitcom whose entire personality consists of pacing around saying "Oh my God!?" Victoria Dillard's secretary Janelle on *Spin City* didn't even get this much; while the other characters were given fully fleshed-out personas, her job was simply to blandly set up opportunities for other characters to say funny things. Again, there is no white character so faceless in any sitcom; Janelle's "character" was thought to be "brown skin." How would you have described Gloria Reuben's Jeanie on the first seasons of *ER*? She was HIV-positive, but this is a medical condition, not a personality trait. Her job was to take mechanical part in plot developments propelling other characters to the cover of *TV Guide*, and otherwise to be black and pretty.

It was also extremely telling that in the film *The Pelican Brief* (1993), costars Julia Roberts and Denzel Washington did not become romantically involved. "How come every movie has to have sex in it?" Point taken—but let's face it: if Julia Roberts had been costarred with absolutely any attractive white male working in Hollywood, a romantic angle would have been assumed, you name him—Brad Pitt, Harrison Ford, Mel Gibson, Clint Eastwood (even though he was a sexagenarian at the time), heck, even Matthew Perry, God, Neil Patrick Harris! If there was no such romance in the book, it would have been considered financial suicide not to write one in for the movie. Yet there was America's black matinée idol, who drives black females in movie audiences to unabashed squeals of admiration, on screen with lovely Julia Roberts with her dreamy eyes over that marvelous smudge of a mouth, and the two of them are "friends"—maybe a little "sexual tension" there but that's it. We've come a long way—black-white romances are no longer *causes célèbres* in films or on TV; *Primary Colors* (1998) tossed one in between Adrian Lester and Maura Tierney with no fanfare whatsoever, to note one of many examples. But we are still at a transitional point. When it comes to a blockbuster adaptation of a Grisham novel (as opposed to a background subplot, some indie film, or a TV show at sweeps time), Denzel Washington can be a lead (unthinkable even fifteen years before its premiere—imagine a major release starring a young black man and young white woman in 1978)—but he still has to keep his hands to himself.

On the subject of *TV Guide*, they once did a spread in which one capsule praised Queen Latifah's "grace and style" in her performance on the late, great sitcom *Living Single*. But would Calista Flockhart ever be praised for her obvious "grace and style" in portraying Ally McBeal? No, because it is assumed that attractive young women on television have "grace and style" just as we assume that a barber has scissors. This comment about Queen Latifah unwittingly revealed a sense that "grace and style" are special traits, rather than the norm, for even an attractive, charismatic young black woman. In the same vein, a woman on a talk show once announced the guest appearance of Cuba Gooding, Jr., the next day by mentioning that "He's a nice gentleman—so tune in!" Again, if Keanu Reeves, Brad Pitt, or even a decidedly ungentlemanly young white actor like Sean Penn were slated to appear, he would never be billed as "a nice gentleman." The implication here is that a young black man being a "nice gentleman" rather than a thug is news, an accomplishment.

A Time of Transition

Thus black students, even middle-class ones, certainly experience racism in their lives and see symptoms of it around them. I certainly have and do.

However, the question is: Would we reasonably expect these things to prevent a person from doing well in school—and the answer here, contrary to popular belief, is no.

For one, there is the all-important issue of degree. In 1950, I would have had to sit in the back of that commuter train if I had lived south of the Mason-Dixon line; northwards, even ten years later than 1950 and even in New Jersey, the seat next to me would sometimes have stayed empty even in a full car. In 1950 I would have been barred from most summer jobs I applied for by my color, rather than meeting one anachronistic racist holdout. I would have been called "nigger" a lot more than once, by sober people, and to my face. I would have been all but barred from white universities, and if admitted to one would have had to live separately from white students, and also would have encountered teachers like the German one on a regular basis, and not filtered through a foreign accent. Being accepted into a graduate program would have been a major hurdle, and I could not have expected to find a teaching job outside of an underfunded, obscure black school. I would have been lucky to get cast even in the chorus of any musical, and if a lead dropped out, they would have cast the prop man in a lead

role before even considering me. Mac on *Night Court* was a cipher, but black Marsha Warfield was dripping with personality and walked away with the show; black Michael Boatman's Carter on *Spin City*, a sharp-tongued, "straight acting" but activist homosexual, was one of freshest characters on television; one of the main purposes Jeanie on *ER* served was as a romantic interest for black Eriq LaSalle's Peter Benton, whose brooding, self-centered yet committed character is another one of the richest black presences in television history.

The often-heard claim that black characters on television and in movies are disproportionately cast as criminals has not been true for at least twenty years: Blacks, 13 percent of the population, commit about 10 percent of the violent crimes on the television shows they appear in today, and in films are regularly cast in roles of status whose real-life models are white, such as Morgan Freeman as president of the United States in *Deep Impact* (also surrounded by many black staff members, unlike current reality at the White House) and James Earl Jones as the sonar operator in *The Hunt for Red October*, in the novel version of which the character had been white.

In other words, we are in a time of transition, and we are a lot closer to the mountaintop than we are to 1950. There comes a point when we must ask not simply *whether* we are dealing with racism—of course we are—but *how much*. A quick glance through a newspaper at interethnic situations around the world sets in a certain perspective the claim that the increasingly occasional and almost always subtle and unintended instances of racism a modern black student usually experiences is enough to crush the inquisitive spirit and make excellent grades and test scores all but an impossibility. The reason for the black scholarly lag lies elsewhere.

I could be accused of lacking empathy here, but perhaps a thought experiment will show how the lenses through which we are trained to reflexively view black people work.

Obstacles and Performance: A Thought Experiment

Imagine a white female student who is considerably overweight. On a day-to-day basis she leads a peaceful, comfortable existence, with a number of friends and recognition of her talents and abilities. But she cannot help but notice that some teachers expect less from her out of a general sense that obesity is due to sloth or weakness; she is never the first one called upon, and has never been singled out for grooming for special scholarships, as opposed to shiny happy skinny kids. She is al-

ways chosen last for sports teams at school; she has gone through high school never having been asked on a date; the lockerroom after gym is a quiet ordeal; and she has in general been quietly but decisively excluded from the heady explorations of romance and sexuality that consume most of the kids around her. Over the years she has built an emotional shield against the taunts and catcalls she can expect from groups of men she passes while walking down a street, although it never stops hurting; she shops for clothes alone and as often as not cannot find what strikes her fancy in her size. Self-image is clearly imperiled here. Yet—do we expect this person to be unable to achieve a GPA above 3.0 or an SAT above 950? Surely not. We'd see such an assumption—despite all she suffers—as condescending.

Now let's try a black person. This eighteen-year-old comes from a two-parent suburban home; his mother is a social work professor and his father is a public university administrator. He goes to good private schools, and on a day-to-day level leads a peaceful, comfortable existence, including a number of white friends and the same basic acknowledgment of his achievements as available to whites. Once in his life he has been called "nigger." He was once explicitly denied a summer job because of race. Once he entered a store only to meet an expression of anxiety on the proprietor's face, and was then followed. He can remember perhaps a few teachers over the years who, while superficially well-intentioned, obviously had rather lower expectations of him than they had of other students. In innumerable ways this person is now and then aware of being perceived, despite superficial and sometimes even excessive respect, as on an inherently lower rung than whites, being a sort of party trick rather than a person.

Do we spontaneously expect this person's experiences to prevent him from achieving a GPA higher than 3.0 or an SAT score above 950? Is this the sort of thing that makes a twenty-year-old student turn in a family tree drawn in pencil on notebook paper as three months' work on an honor's thesis? Can we truly say that it is things like this that render most of a class unable to name a creative figure who has been discussed at length and even been shown on video just a couple of weeks before the test? (A black figure at that—I wasn't asking them to identify Ethel Merman.) Why, exactly, do we expect so little of the black person but not the white one? Precisely what about the fact that the black kids' great-great-grandparents were slaves, or that his grandfather grew up in a segregated Southern town, makes his case so profoundly different from that of the overweight white woman, especially when, for example, if she

is Jewish, her grandfather was severely restricted in where he could work, and even she has probably at least once or twice in her life experienced some form of subtle anti-Semitism? The trickiness of coming up with an explanation is due to how deeply ingrained our association of blackness with victimhood—i.e., weakness and pitiability—has become.

I personally know that the black student should not be expected to phone in his schoolwork, because as you may have already noticed, this person is me at eighteen, and I shudder to imagine my mother's response if I had dared to claim that there was only so much that could have been expected of me in school because of these occasional episodes—and my mother had participated in sit-ins, was deeply aware of racism in American society, and taught a course on the subject at Temple University for years.

And even if I had gone to a public school instead of a private one, and had been stopped and arrested by a surly officer at a shopping mall because he thought I had stolen the shirt I was wearing, does it make that much of a difference? We are underestimating black people. Frankly it insults me. Jews can survive centuries of persecution and the Holocaust and have their children be expected to reach for any bar; Chinese in San Francisco in the early 1900s can be tortured on the streets and barred from employment anywhere but in laundries, sweatshops, and restaurants and have their children be expected to reach for any bar. But pull a well-fed suburban black kid over for a drug check one afternoon and subject him to a couple of teachers who don't call on him as often as other students and he's forever subject to lower expectations.

Victimologist Portraits of Racism on Campus

The Victimologist party line claims that the typical black student encounters racism much more overt than this on a regular basis, but these portraits are more theater than reportage. This view is eloquently laid forth in Beverly Daniel Tatum's *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Here is Tatum's characterization of the typical black experience in college:

Whether it is the loneliness of being routinely overlooked as a lab partner in science courses, the irritation of being continually asked by curious classmates about Black hairstyles, the discomfort of being singled out by a professor to give the "Black perspective" in class discussion, the pain of racist graffiti scrawled on dormitory room doors, the insult of racist jokes circulated through campus e-mail, or the injury inflicted by racist

epithets (and sometimes beer bottles) hurled from a passing car, Black students on predominantly White college campuses must cope with ongoing affronts to their racial identity.

Some of this is overblown. Why is being asked about one's hair a "racist" imposition? And wouldn't Tatum be the first person to complain that black students felt "invisible" and "marginalized" if they *weren't* asked about their "perspective" in class? (One can imagine: "After centuries of persecution, the Black American finds a gaping lack of interest in his heritage or his thoughts, such that one form of dehumanization has replaced another . . .") The openly racist episodes happen, but once again, degree is important, and they are very rare, especially at top universities where such things are so generally deplored. Tatum has gathered isolated anecdotes from various campuses over decades' time into one picture frame and presented it as representative of a black student's daily life, like a natural history diorama that for the sake of convenience depicts dinosaurs that lived in different eras all browsing and hunting around one lake. I have spent over half of my life as a black person on white campuses since the early 1980s, and the implication that white guys yelling "nigger" out of passing cars or that anything of the sort is just a typical occurrence for the black undergraduate, or even that something like this happens to that undergraduate even once in a typical year, is nonsense, pure and simple. Descriptions like John Hope Franklin's in *The Color Line* that "Under the banner of racial neutrality, white students have been encouraged to intimidate, terrorize, and make life miserable for African-American students at many of our institutions of higher learning" are good theater, but they simply do not correspond with the reality I have richly experienced on several campuses. Why is it so easy for us to say that a black student cannot be expected to perform at whites' level because the very occasional idiot acts up in the dorm across campus? Only Victimology makes black thinkers so ominously comfortable portraying their own people as the weakest, least resilient human beings in the history of the species. Note that Tatum writes smiling from the dustcover of a book she couldn't have gotten a major publisher for just thirty years ago.

In this vein, black students often claim that white people on campus throw them "looks"—such as at UC Berkeley where white students and professors are up in arms about the ban on affirmative action, interracial couples are so common as to not even attract notice, and there is both an Ethnic Studies *and* an African-American Studies program (the latter even having recently been expanded), like Ethnic Studies, into a doctoral

program). In my twelve years as a university student, never once did I detect a "look" randomly thrown my way by a white student, and the idea that white undergraduates are truly walking around in the year 2000 grinning at black passers-by is a scenario few of us could accept, as well as a disservice to the black people who really did suffer such treatment on college campuses in the immediate wake of *Brown v. Board of Education* in the 1950s. I do know that people's faces can fall into any number of expressions as they walk along, depending on sunlight, weather, and whatever is on their mind, and that if one was *looking* for it, a white person who glanced up randomly without happening to smile could possibly be misinterpreted as throwing a "look." Students referring to these "looks" have been *taught* by Victimology to consider themselves victims—an easy and comfortable lesson for any human being (witness the new "victimhood" of white males, or Asian students up in arms at the "af-front" of being assumed to be smart).

Teacher Bias?

Racism is also commonly thought to hinder black students in the form of white teachers grading them too harshly or disciplining them disproportionately in the classroom. Surely this phenomenon exists—for example, it is not difficult to imagine that the teacher who called my ideas "bullshit" would be likely to grade a paper by me a notch lower than she would grade the same paper written by someone else, probably white. Our question, though, is whether this would have a *significant* effect: i.e., whether a bit of this kind of bias here and there would restrict the number of black students who turn in stellar SATs to some few hundreds a year, and make it impossible to have a representative number of minorities on a top university campus without lowered standards, even when taking grades as well as SATs into account, etc. Lawrence Steinberg, for example, has found not only that complaints of racist bias from teachers were rare in his extensive survey of twenty thousand teenagers and their families, but that Latinos and Asians registered the same levels of such complaints—and yet *Asians manage to do excellently*. Thus while this kind of biased treatment is certainly unacceptable, the decisive factor in black school failure lies elsewhere. To imply otherwise is to leave us to wonder how a race could survive three hundred years of brutal oppression and yet is left unable to read for comprehension or do higher math simply because the occasional schoolteacher sends black kids into the hall a little more readily than white kids or is more likely to decorate white students' grades with plusses.

The teacher bias argument also falls down when we consider that black students generally do not perform appreciably better in schools where they are taught by mostly or all black teachers (except in the few special small all-minority schools geared toward addressing black students' performance directly and sustainedly with particularly intense teaching strategies). Studies have found only fitful correlation between black teachers and high performance among black students, with the class of the teacher as important as race (apparently both white and black teachers of higher socioeconomic status get better results), and with the results varying significantly by subject. A friend of mine is now teaching in a functioning public school in a big city with a mix of working-class and middle-class black children. He has found himself facing the same basic lack of commitment to school that we hear about so often and which I have described at Berkeley—and yet all of the teachers are black.

The weakness of all of the variants on the racism explanation is decisively revealed in the fact that children of black African and Caribbean immigrants do not underperform in school as black Americans do. Anyone who wants to claim that Caribbeans (with the same legacy of slavery as black Americans) and Africans are not subject to the degree of racism that American blacks are ought to consult Abner Louima (Haitian) or the parents of Amadou Diallo (Guinean), and yet repeatedly I have noticed in my classes that Caribbean and African students usually perform at the same level as whites, something also supported by studies. The traditional wisdom that "racism" distinguishes the intellectual spirit simply does not hold up. For example, a high-school sophomore of Boston born in Cape Verde once said about affirmative action: "I don't believe they gave me some slack on the test. I'd rather not think about that because it would really bring down my self-esteem and how I rate myself as a student." It is sobering to realize how unusual that would sound coming from a black American student today; typically, black American students furiously defend being given the "slack" of affirmative action, and I have never once seen one at all concerned about its impact on self-esteem. This reflects a devaluing of education local to *black American* culture, not the operations of societal racism.

Confidence

In a widely publicized study in 1992, Claude Steele showed that black students at Stanford did better on various SAT-like verbal aptitude test

samples when they were not required to indicate their race or when the test was not presented as measuring racial ability. Less well-known is that these were only one part of the experiment, much of which showed that even when the students were neither required to indicate their race nor presented with the tests as measures of racial ability, they performed less well when the tests were presented as measuring intellectual ability than when it was simply presented as examining "the psychological factors involved in solving verbal problems."

What these experiments suggest is that black students' school performance is hindered by self-doubts brought on by the stereotype of black mental inferiority, and it quickly became accepted in many quarters that "Stereotype Threat" was a major factor in black students' lagging school performance, particularly those performing at relatively higher levels. Predictably, this study has been marshaled to bolster the wisdom that black children are *kept* from doing well in school rather than *disinclined* to, and that what must be addressed in order to make black students do better in school is the societal racism behind the stereotype.

Claude Steele's experiments rather clearly show that black students do less well in contexts where the stereotype of black mental inferiority looms. However, we can be sure that any human being's performance would suffer under equivalent conditions, as has been shown to be the case for women—and even for white men when given tests billed as measuring their abilities against Asians' (another part of Claude Steele's study). Our question, then, is how *important* this factor might be in black students' performance *here in the real world*—where they are never required to indicate their race on their schoolwork, and are only rarely threatened so explicitly with racial stereotypes in the course of being assigned schoolwork.

Of course, Claude Steele's point is that the overall impact of the stereotype "in the air" interferes with black performance. Here one might again ask why this isn't thought to be so crippling for women, but then the answer could be that the stereotype of mental weakness regarding black students is stronger and more deeply entrenched than the one regarding women. There is an argument there. But this is not the only difference between (white and Asian) female students and black ones. Namely, there is a certain smugness and insouciance about many black students' lack of engagement in school (at private schools, Berkeley, and sometimes Stanford, not just in Harlem or South Central) which one does not often encounter in, for example, white women, and which strikes me less as fear than as active dismissal. It is much easier on the

soul to return always to racism to explain black underperformance. I tried to for years, because we would all prefer not to criticize a culture that has suffered so much for so long. But I suspect that many of those who are indignant upon hearing explanations that stray too far from victimhood would see things differently if they could spend just a few days watching the expression on many black students' faces when finding out that they are expected to internalize new ways of thinking for a class rather than simply memorize concrete facts—a slightly amused, quietly disbelieving smirk. I have watched this smirk all of my life, come to realize its meaning and rootedness in black identity itself as I got older, and can richly attest that it is as likely from a doctor's daughter as from a UPS deliveryman's son.

It is tempting to surmise that the smirk is a defense mechanism masking frustration, but where, then, is that smirk on other children's faces? I have almost never seen that smirk on a white or Asian student's face, even when their confidence problems were quite clear. Confidence problems create a look of trepidation. A cultural hallmark creates a smile.

Thus the traditional approach to this issue that Claude Steele's study reflects, that black students want to learn but are thwarted from doing so, is not the usual case. When students cannot remember someone's name or career highlight two weeks after the person has been singled out for a ten-minute eulogy and then discussed, illustrated, and shown on video, when a university student writes me a biographical book report after I have said innumerable times that biographies would not be acceptable, when a student writes two incoherent sentences as the answer to an essay question and hands her test in with a smile, the problem is not confidence. There is an obvious fundamental detachment from learning itself.

Tracing the black scholarly lag to a lack of confidence is also another example of a tendency to suppose that black students are the only ones on earth who can be expected to excel only under ideal conditions. Without denying that "Stereotype Threat" has some effect (I have felt it on occasion), we must ask why we suppose that black students are incapable of rising above this whereas students of various other backgrounds rise above obstacles much more concrete. It would be nothing less than unusual if, for example, a fourteen-year-old Vietnamese immigrant did not feel some trepidation in an American school when he was still learning the language, not at home in the surrounding culture, physically smaller than the average American his age, and even found himself teased and harassed by American kids. Imagine going to high school in

Vietnam, with little hope of ever returning to the United States, and thus with one's fortunes in future life hinging entirely upon one's performance immersed in a language vastly different from yours, which even after six months you can only understand when spoken slowly. Some might object that a stereotype of mental dimness is somehow more of a barrier to learning than a linguistic difference—but then would not many of them at the same time support claims like the Oakland School Board's that black children are hindered from learning to read by the small differences between Black and standard English? If black children are barred from learning to read, and thus learning in general, by the fact that they say *I'm a answer dat person fr's* instead of *I'm going to answer that person frst*, then surely we can muster some empathy for the Vietnamese child whose rendition of that same sentence at home is *Tôi sẽ trả lời cho người đó trước!*

Then some might argue that a stereotype of mental inferiority is more crippling than anything this Vietnamese student undergoes—but upon what grounds? How comfortable would we be telling this student to his face that having been wrenched from one's homeland to make one's way in a country where one is inarticulate and physically small, and where his efforts to assimilate into American peer culture often create sharp frictions with his parents, is somehow less of a sociological burden than being associated with mental mediocrity (and even being occasionally trailed in stores)?

Crucially, these confidence problems are not seen as a sentence for scholarly mediocrity outside of the black community. Every year I have a few Asian immigrant students in my larger classes who dutifully ask me questions in their foreign accents after class, having missed a word or a cultural reference; students like this are legion in California, and they tend to be good ones. They, like women and so many students of other backgrounds, overcome these problems as often as not, even if some get stalled.

In short, certainly racial stereotypes undermine confidence, but confidence cannot be a *significant* reason why even black children of doctors and lawyers make the lowest average grades and test scores in the United States. The minimal effect stereotyping has on so many other students, and the particular tenor of so many black students' attitude toward school, simply do not square with an analysis claiming that confidence is the heart, or even one of the hearts, of the problem we face. To argue that confidence is anything more than a background factor sits well in the Victimologist groove, but only at the expense of implying that black

children are congenitally mentally inferior or possess a tragic dearth of emotional strength. None of us could name a whole ethnic group stalled permanently by mere problems with confidence, and if this were what holds black students back, the gap between white and black students would have virtually closed twenty years ago, with the underprivileged minority creating a small lag.

Underfunded Schools

It is widely believed that the discrepancy between black and white school performance is because suburban white schools are liberally funded while inner-city primarily black schools make do on starvation budgets. Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, widely and closely read by concerned observers and policymakers, has helped to crystallize this perception, such that "Black students are disproportionately represented in underfunded schools" is a virtual mantra one hears in discussions of affirmative action, for instance. However, there are three things which, predictably but hurtfully, are almost never mentioned on this issue.

First, the funding gap is a real one, but its extent over the past thirty years, and the purported lack of effort devoted to closing it, have been greatly exaggerated. Federal funds for schools increased by 122 percent (*with adjustment for inflation*) from 1965 to 1994, with much of the increase shunted to inner-city schools via Head Start and Title I. Contrary to popular belief, this has as often as not meant that inner-city schools got *more* funding than suburban schools. In 1989-90, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that nationwide, heavily minority districts got 15 percent more school funding than predominantly white districts. For example, in 1992, Marion Barry's "underfunded" Washington, D.C., public schools, with 96 percent minority enrollment, were given 55 percent more funding per student than those in nearby ritzy Prince George's County. Moreover, figures like that are not last-minute emergency measures making up for decades of denied funds. "Saturation-level services for ghetto schools, including reduced class sizes, two and sometimes three teachers per class, reading specialists and extended class hours"—sound like a program instituted as an emergency in Newark last year? It is actually a description of New York's More Effective Schools program from 1964!

Of course, often, even liberally funded inner-city schools give substandard educations. Many point out that the pathologies rampant in such schools require even more money, and the unfortunate truth is that

inefficient but politically entrenched bureaucracies often misappropriate educational funds so broadly that no amount of increase would effect more than cosmetic improvements. Along these lines, it is often assumed that black students are disproportionately represented in *bad* schools, regardless of funding, and that their school performance is thus due to "underpreparation." Even this claim, however, is filtered through Separatism.

In mediocre schools throughout the country, children from other groups excel or at least do okay alongside black students failing in large numbers, such as in the classically troubled Oakland schools where black failure rates motivated the Ebonics resolution in 1996. More than one study has found that children of poor refugees from Southeast Asia, arriving with limited English and going to school in the very crumbling, blighted inner-city public schools considered a sentence to failure for black kids, did excellently in school and on standardized tests. Try telling an immigrant from Saigon that a mediocre school bars all but the occasional *Wunderkind* from failure—it simply is nowhere near true; black students are dragged down by something extra.

Finally, the underfunding issue is generally discussed as if such a large proportion of black students attend bombed-out, violent schools that those who do not are barely worth referring to in a general discussion. In fact, however, only a fraction of black students attend such schools—as I have noted before, in the year 2000, *most black Americans are not poor*. Unfortunately the proportion is larger than that of whites, and this is a serious problem—but too often that fact is distorted into a shorthand conception of all but a lucky few black students stuck in inner-city schools. This simply is not true, and as we have seen (and will see even more graphically shortly) overall black students in solid schools do little better than the ones failing in poor schools. Once again, I intend that not as a mere critical charge, but as an indication that our search for the true cause of the black-white scholarly lag must proceed elsewhere.

Tracking

It is also widely assumed that excellent black students are so rare because teachers tend to "track" them into lower ability groups and discourage them from advanced placement tracks. In any discussion of the black education problem, shortly after someone mentions inequities in school funding, one is sure to hear someone talk about how in their high school they remember walking down the hall and seeing all-black low-ability classes and all-white advanced placement tracks. The assumption

is that black children begin school as interested in learning as the others, but that teachers, based on racist stereotypes, dump them in unchallenging tracks and snuff out their commitment to school.

The fact is, though, that when we see an all-black low-ability track, there are two logically possible reasons for it. One is that most of the kids were put there inappropriately out of racist bias. That possibility is predictably assumed to be fact by most black commentators on the subject, because Victimology trains black people to assume that racism rages eternally. We have seen why this thought pattern has set in, but while having empathy, we must also acknowledge that there is another logical possibility.

This alternate possibility is that the students are there because this is what their school performance suggested. This very notion is considered unworthy of address by so many, but as it happens, it is this alternative that not just one, but several studies show: Overall, teachers place students not according to any detectable racial bias, but simply on the basis of prior performance. (See the references section for a partial listing.) These studies have appeared mostly in obscure academic journals, none of their authors have been profiled in *The New York Times* or presented a précis of his findings in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Yet they are all detailed, sober studies by trained practitioners, and they point to something quite opposite from the consensus that tracking is founded upon racism.

At Berkeley High, for example, there has indeed been a long-standing tradition of overrepresentation of black students in the low track, but then 70 percent of the black students generally enter reading below grade level (whereas about 90 percent of the whites enter reading at or above grade level). Tracking critics often suggest that black students are assigned to low tracks on the basis of appearance and a quick interview. That is reasonable fodder for controversy, but it is not the usual basis for tracking when the practice is actually observed and studied. Is a teacher a racist when she decides that a student who reads poorly is unlikely to do well in an advanced placement class?

Of course, one may have encountered the occasional teacher who unreflectively tracks students based on a "horse sense" founded upon stereotypes. But study after study shows that in general, race bias is not a *significant* factor in tracking—i.e., that this could not explain the nationwide, cross-class lag in black school performance.

Most important, there is a phenomenon that clearly demonstrates that black children dissociate themselves from "the school thing" *before* being tracked, rather than because of it, their wariness of school well-de-

veloped long before they have been tracked or, in many cases, even gone to school for very long. I spent most of my childhood living in one of the first deliberately integrated neighborhoods in the country, West Mount Airy in Philadelphia. As it happens, the very first memory of my life is an afternoon in 1968 when a group of black kids, none older than eight, asked me how to spell *concrete*. I spelled it, only to have the eight-year-old bring his little sister to me and have her smack me repeatedly as the rest of the kids laughed and egged her on. From then on, I was often teased in the neighborhood for being "smart." Importantly, however, none of the white kids ever challenged me like this (on the contrary, most of them knew how to spell *concrete* and were proud of it), nor did they tease any white child this way. What was important here was that these kids had only been in school for a few years at most, and none would be "tracked" for several more. Obviously, children who consider *persona non grata* the black kid who likes spelling are not on their way to embracing school with open arms.

It is not uncommon for people who grew up in progressive, treezy West Mount Airy to consider it the most wonderful neighborhood on earth; I do, and I revisit it often. On one of these visits, I recently ran into one of the ringleaders from that scene in 1968 now grown up, smoking on a street corner at two in the afternoon in jeans and a T-shirt. The tensions of our days in the driveway were ancient history, vastly overshadowed by the basic kick of encountering a "blast from the past." "John-John?" he called (my old neighborhood nickname, I suppose inspired by John F. Kennedy's son). We shook hands in joyous shock; when I asked him what he was doing these days he said "not much." He is not the only one of that old crowd who has not gone on to much, and yet he grew up in a quiet middle-class neighborhood, and went to a solid public school nearby where many of the teachers were black mothers from the surrounding blocks. What did this guy in was not racism but a culture, which was passed down to him just as it was that afternoon to the eight-year-old's sister, who in that episode was carefully and explicitly taught what she was not supposed to do—spell, or by extension, give too much effort to school. A boy lifting his sister up to smack somebody for spelling *concrete* is a funny little story today (yes, that is *exactly* what happened, and I don't quite remember why I didn't run away), but it was symbolic of something much larger.

My story is not unique; in telling it I join legions of other black people who have reported in myriad articles and books that they were teased for being "smart." Reports of the strong tendency for young

African Americans to discourage one another from doing well in school are numbingly common both on paper and in oral anecdote from blacks. These reports are significant because they show that quite commonly, black children are disengaged from school *several years before they even confront tracking*.

There is a case study that shows very clearly that black students' aversion to school is brought to school from the outside rather than learned on the inside. In the excellent public schools of the affluent Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights in Ohio, \$10,000 a year is spent per student. Students track themselves into advanced courses rather than the teachers doing it for them. There are after-school, weekend, and summer programs to help children whose grades are slipping, and even a program where older black students help younger ones. As early as kindergarten, students needing help with language arts skills are specially tutored. There are coaching sessions on standardized test-taking. A counselor works with students who have low grades but appear to have high potential.

Shaker Heights is obviously so beautifully tailored to helping black students excel that if one didn't know it was real one might suppose it was a fiction. An observer would be hard pressed (and rather insolent) to call the black families sailing through these wide streets in their Saturns "struggling blue collar"; it would be difficult to see what else the teachers could do to boost black children's confidence; there is obviously no problem with funds; and the only tracking is self-chosen.

According to the traditional assumption that black children are hindered from doing well in school, rather than culturally chary of doing so, we would expect the black children in Shaker Heights to have no major problems with schoolwork. That prediction is not borne out. Black students are half of the student population, but in four recent graduating classes constituted just 7 percent of the top fifth of their class—and 90 percent of the bottom fifth. Of the students who fail at least one portion of the ninth grade proficiency test, 84 percent are black.

None of the old explanations work. The only one that might even retain any influence is "societal racism," but here I will reiterate: To think that the mere whispers of racism that black children in this town experience are enough to forever extinguish their intellectual ability is an infantilization of black people. The Shaker Heights case makes it painfully, but incontrovertibly, obvious that the reason black children underperform in school is that they belong to a culture that discourages them

from applying themselves to books and learning—regardless of income level or class, and regardless of intervention by even the best-intentioned people. The centrality of this factor is quite empirically evident: for example, a black student in Shaker Heights reported that she began as a good student, but that her black friends called her “acting white” and “an oreo” for doing so, and that in order to get back in their good graces she let her grades plummet; meanwhile, a white student at the school felt nothing less than pressured by her peers to succeed.

Finally, Shaker Heights cannot be dismissed as an isolated case. The story actually came as no surprise to me when I found out about it, because it squares so neatly with what I grew up seeing among black students in the private schools I attended in Philadelphia. White teachers and administrators in Shaker Heights are perplexed by the performance of their black students, but few black Americans would be—to be a culturally black American is to be familiar with how commonplace this disengagement from school is among black young people; all of us have seen it, felt it, and possibly even participated in it—even if we grew up in *plush suburbs rather than the ghetto*.

The temptation to blame “class,” racism, lack of confidence, underfunding, or tracking is powerful. Not only are so many trained to frame the black student as a victim, but straying beyond racism-based explanations is uncomfortable because it smacks of feeding into the stereotype of black mental inferiority—“If it’s not racism,” we think, “then what else could it be?” As I will now show, however, this phenomenon has nothing to do with mental power and everything to do with modern black identity. We must confront the task of realizing that the “usual suspect” analyses of this problem miss the target, and address ourselves to the true “root cause” of black underperformance in school.

The Cult of Anti-intellectualism: A Cultural Disconnect from Learning

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, my aim here is neither to simply point out unpleasant things nor to gripe that black students need to just “buck up” and that’s the end of the story. That would serve no purpose and would waste trees. My project is to build an argument that a cultural trait is the driving factor in depressing black scholarly performance. We first saw that the inner city is but a sliver of the problem, and that scholastic underperformance bedevils the race as a whole. Next I showed that the causes generally adduced can only be considered trig-

gers of the problem by casting black students as innately feeble and stupid, because (1) students of other groups (including ones of African descent) readily surmount these factors and (2) the problem continues even when these factors are absent.

Based strictly upon the arguments made so far, I propose the thesis of this final section, which is the point of this chapter: that a cult of Anti-intellectualism infects black America.

Namely, the main reason black students lag behind all others starting in kindergarten and continuing through postgraduate school is that a wariness of books and learning for learning’s sake as “white” has become ingrained in black American culture. Segregation and disenfranchisement, withholding learning from most blacks, had long created a sense of alienation from learning. Separatism, however, which in defining “black” as “that which is not white” cannot help but exclude learning along with more expendable things like rock music and polenta, has focused this alienation into a rejection. To be culturally black, sadly, almost requires that one see books and school as a realm to visit rather than live in.

This analysis in itself is not new. Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu noted in 1986:

One major reason black students do poorly in school is that they experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic effort and success. This problem arose partly because white Americans traditionally refused to acknowledge that black Americans are capable of intellectual achievement, and partly because black Americans subsequently began to doubt their own intellectual ability, began to define academic success as white people’s prerogative, and began to discourage their peers, perhaps unconsciously, from emulating white people in academic striving, i.e., from “acting white.”

Fordham and Ogbu, however, focused on rough urban schools. Especially since their article, it has long been accepted that children in this environment actively reject school. It is less acknowledged, however, that this tendency continues into all classes among black students, and not as mere background noise, but as a pivotal factor, central to the shockingly poor performance of most black students in places like Shaker Heights. Growing up culturally black in America under *any* circumstances typically entails that children learn at an early age that

"black" and "school" do not go together, or at least exist in a delicate, charged relationship. Black students categorize themselves accordingly, take on corresponding attitudes, and are almost always rendered to some extent permanently wary of learning. This is usually overt only in the ghetto and somewhat beyond, but its filtering effect colors the orientation toward school of most black students of all circumstances.

Indeed, like Victimology and Separatism, this current manifests itself in degrees. There are certainly black students who shine brightly. Those at the Browns and Cornells are often barely distracted if at all from wholehearted engagement with learning; there are certainly equally committed black students at other schools; and importantly, my claim is not that all black students besides these have flatly rejected school. Overall, however, the only significant difference between how Anti-intellectualism manifests itself in the inner city versus a tony suburb is how explicitly it is espoused. Only the inner-city casualty is likely to consciously reject school completely; the black child in Shaker Heights—or Mount Airy, Philadelphia, or Brooklyn Heights, New York—rarely does. Yet it is the culture-wide operations of this largely subconscious sense of separation from the scholarly, which misses so few and affects to various degrees almost all, which keeps all but half an airplane full of black students from hitting the top in any given year, and specifically leads to the phenomenon increasingly baffling educators in which even middle-class black students lag behind all others despite active interventions.

The subtleness of the operations of this cultural inheritance is such that it hinders the dedication even of black students who are giving their best efforts, not extinguishing, but quite commonly diluting, their fundamental commitment. As such, as often as not even their strongest effort is unintentionally, but decisively, less than the strongest efforts of other students. In a great many cases, what one sees in black students is less a refusal to contribute any effort, than a sad tendency for their efforts to stop before the finish line. This tendency stems not from laziness or inferior mental power, but from a brake exerted upon them by a cultural inheritance that whispers eternally in their ear that schoolwork is more a pit stop than a place to live.

To the extent that it is acknowledged at any length, this factor is generally referred to by terms such as "oppositional identity," a misleading term. It implies that the culprit is alienation from racist behavior on the part of whites, when in fact today it thrives and is passed on even in the absence of significant experiences with racism. This term furthermore carries a subtle implication that the problem is located among the disad-

vantaged rather than being a general black American cultural inheritance. A preferable term is the one that my friend spontaneously used: A "Cultural Disconnect" from learning endemic in black America.

Positive Evidence of the Cult of Anti-intellectualism

So far I have arrived at the Cult of Anti-intellectualism via a process of elimination, arguing that class, tracking, etc., are seductive but insufficient explanations. At this point I could be accused of being like the researcher who says "Okay, colds are not due to cold air, crowding, or stress, so it must be. . . *squirrels!*" In other words, my argument is incomplete without actual *positive indications* that the Cultural Disconnect from learning is the culprit.

I will now show that there is a great deal of such positive evidence.

Teasing

As I have noted, it is a long-established and well-documented feature of black American culture for children to tease and harass black kids who show an affinity for school. We recall the black student in Shaker Heights. Similarly, a middle-class black student opting for advanced placement classes in an integrated high school in Evanston, Illinois, recounted being told "Oh, you're an oreo" because "getting good grades was always connected to white people." Similar comments were amply reported in the Bay Area in a series on black educational failure in the middle class in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1998. Meanwhile, across the Bay from San Francisco, Berkeley High School principal Theresa Saunders (who is black) notes "We see it time and time again: [black] kids come in quite talented, and by the end of ninth grade year, they're goofing off. The peer culture is such that it doesn't acknowledge or reward academic achievement." "Oh, Joey thinks he's all bad, 'cause he's gettin' a A!" as one Berkeley High teacher quotes hearing among black students.

Note that we cannot simply dismiss this as an inner-city pathology—it is culture-wide. Shaker Heights is a quiet, crime-free middle-class area, and while some of the students at Evanston Township High School and Berkeley High School are of modest means, both are solid and integrated schools with a great many middle-class black students.

And what happened to me in Mount Airy was not a neighborhood fluke. We later moved to a manicured all-black suburban town in New Jersey, where the first friend I made was as nerdy as I was and then some

(he was, in fact, that one other black person I knew at the time who had taken Latin). He was regularly surrounded by groups of black kids and asked how high a building was or how far it was to Florida, and then jeered at and physically taunted when he knew the answer. I must emphasize that this took place, regularly, not on the narrow row house blocks of a "struggling" "urban" neighborhood, but in a quiet, squeaky-clean, airy development of big, beautiful houses, which looked exactly like the set of *Leave It to Beaver*. Furthermore, none of these kids knew the kids back in Mount Airy; they were subconsciously expressing a national subculture. Universally, teasing is one form of cultural maintenance, in this case, unfortunately, of Anti-intellectualism.

Lower Expectations from Parents

The Cultural Disconnect from learning does not dissolve after childhood, but manifests itself in different ways. Studies suggest that one of them is that black parents tend not to require as much of their children in school as white and Asian parents do. When asked in one study (not an inner-city study) what the lowest grade their parents would tolerate their bringing home, black students' average was lower than whites' and Asians'. Asian students often said that the lowest grade their parents would tolerate was an A- (!), and regardless of our feelings about race and education, few of us could realistically say that this is something a black student would be likely to say. In Shaker Heights, while the district is half black, white parents vastly predominate in parent-teacher organizations and as volunteers at the schools. The black parents are surely deeply committed to their children's well-being, but these discrepancies simply reveal the lower priority that "the books" have in black culture—and recall that our subject is not beleaguered welfare mothers but two-parent families living in a plush suburb. A similar tendency has been reported at Berkeley High School.

Certainly black parents want the best for their children; the issue here is one of culturally ordered priorities. In a Jewish or Asian family, if a child is not a great student, then while the child is certainly loved, this is often considered a flaw, one of that child's downsides. In most black American families—of *any class*—if a child is not a great student, it is not "an issue" to this extent. If a black child *happens* to be good in school, then this is considered a nice bonus, like a Jewish or Asian child who turns out to have a great singing voice. But if the black child is not good in school, it is no more of an "issue" than whether or not he turns out to be a good cook. This cultural difference is indicative of the general am-

bivalence toward books and learning that black Americans have been saddled with.

Comfort with Low Bars

There are fewer surer ways to get a whoop out of a black audience than to refer to how strong black people are, how we have survived. *Success Runs in Our Race*, as the book says. Yet somehow, school is reflexively and resolutely considered an exception here—permanent affirmative action is considered a moral absolute even for black children of doctors and lawyers. Asian immigrants' children take on school as a challenge, learning English via immersion, helping one another in study groups, refusing to accept anything but their own best efforts. Black Americans, however, generally consider the particular challenge of school utterly insurmountable without special set-asides (be this in Watts or at Duke); black students are not considered to have even the potential for "Success in Their Veins" when it comes to "the books." One only need imagine the condemnation the black community would feel if the National Basketball Association began accepting black players of lesser ability than the best white players out of a sense that this was the "just" thing to do given the racism that young black men suffer and the crumbling courts an inner-city black man learns the game on. It is no accident that all convictions about black strength fall immediately away when school, and only school, comes up. Black people are taught from the cradle that books are not us.

College Graduation Rates

William Bowen and Derek Bok in *The Shape of the River* report that in three freshman classes from each of twenty-eight universities that they studied over a four-decade period, black students' overall dropout rate was 25 percent, as contrasted to 6 percent among whites—in other words, black students' dropout rate was four times that of white students. Our first suspicion is that this is due to black families having lower aggregate income and wealth than white, and this surely contributes.

Yet if finances were the only significant factor in this discrepancy, then one thing we would expect is that black dropout rates would decrease among those with higher SAT scores, since black SAT scores rise with income level. Yet in fact, the rates decrease only slightly at higher income levels, suggesting that money is only part of the issue.

This correlates with something I have observed quite often, which is that black college students are more likely than white ones to leave school after two or three years simply because they are not enchanted

with "the school thing," and I refer to thoroughly middle-class students, not students from the inner cities who may be uncomfortable in an environment dominated by mainstream culture. I have often heard stories like this one about middle-class black people I knew growing up: "He went to Syracuse for a while but after a couple of years came back and started working"; "Oh, she's working at such-and-such; yeah, she went to Penn State for a while." Generally when I ask why such people dropped out, the answer is "I'm not sure." Common wisdom tells us that such cases are a matter of finances, and I cannot deny that this may have played a part in instances I did not witness personally. But as a college student, I observed many such cases at close hand where the issue was definitely a lesser personal weighting of getting a degree than is typical of other students—one who left to train as a police officer, about four who left after a year or two for "time off" and never came back, one who was tired of the tight budget of student life, etc. None of the people I remember but one was stymied by the work itself; all of them were smart—and middle-class—people who college did not exert the hold on that it tends to for other students.

White students can doubtless be unenthusiastic about school. Yet they most often see completing their degree as a milestone on the way to adulthood, even if they are not precisely scholars, while black students often see completing their college degree as a less central part of adult identity. This reflects a lesser weighting of education in the black community in contrast to the white one.

Classroom Attitudes

I've noted that it is hard to miss an almost alarming pride in disengagement from learning among many black students, arising more from a sense of cultural identity than problems with confidence and "Stereotype Threat." A (black) friend of mine was frustrated after his first year of teaching in a mostly black, but stable, public school by black students' strong tendency to resist schoolwork, many even going as far as declaring that a given assignment was just "too much work" rather than engaging the challenge of tackling it. (Notably, this man also mentioned, without any prompting from me, the smilk I referred to.)

This issue of attitude is borne out by studies: Lawrence Steinberg found, for example, that across nine high schools of various racial compositions and levels of quality, black (and Latino) students spent less time on homework, cut class more often, and reported zoning out in class much more than Asian and white students.

Some people I talked to while I was struggling with my all-black classes suggested I might need different methods for teaching black students. The sentiment that there is a "black" learning style lies underneath a great many black people's opinions about race and education, and it is neither limited to a few Afrocentric "cranks" nor always thought to apply only to inner-city kids. Derrick Bell, for instance, is reported to have given a speech to black Harvard Law students—*Harvard Law School students*—claiming that they should not expect to do well on their upcoming examinations because they had been written by whites to ensure white hegemony—and this from a man who had previously taught in that law school himself.

But bringing this notion down to nuts and bolts, what exactly would a "black" way of teaching my Black Musical Theater History class have been? Wasn't the very subject matter of the class "black"? Should I have delivered my lectures as Baptist sermons? Brought in a drummer from Senegal to accompany classes? (The ironic thing is that I sincerely believe that if I wrote a grant asking for funds to do just this, UC Berkeley would approve it and duly grant me an award for "innovative teaching.") More to the point, supposing that my teaching was at fault once again requires that the students were thirsty for knowledge but somehow unable to attain it because of their "black" mindsets. The actual problem was one of dismissal rather than confusion, and as such, I did end up using a "special" method to avoid flunking most of these students: making exhaustively explicit what needed to be retained, speaking more slowly and repeating often, and teaching less material. This was treating them not as "Africans" but as people incapable of learning as much or as easily as white students. (Students of African immigrant parents, in fact, would rarely have required these "special" methods, in my experience.) That I had to do this was evidence not of a problem with teaching, but with a culturally-based resistance to learning.

When the underperformance of black students beyond the inner city is acknowledged at all, the general "Civil Rights" consensus is that the students generally are trying as hard as others, only scuttled by "lack of preparation," "stereotype threat," and the fact that their parents did not subscribe to *Harper's*. However, I know what black students look like who are giving their all but are hindered by true underpreparation and a social context where school was a marginal factor in the lives of most of the people they knew. I have had the occasional student of this kind, and what one sees is first, a bright-eyed commitment to getting something out of the class, and second, a sad frustration at how hard this can be

when society has not provided the tools to take advantage of it. This, however, is not the demeanor of a great many of the black students I have known. There is a subtle disconnect from the whole enterprise—an air of "Okay, what's next?" rather than the bright eyes, complacency instead of frustration. Even those who overtly want to do well only rarely seem to develop the minor fixation that leads so many white and Asian students to success. Beyond the inner city and maybe a bit further, the problem is much less societal inequity than the "disconnect" my teacher friend refers to, and it is this which must be addressed if we are to break the cycle of black scholastic underperformance.

"There's Some of That"?

Finally, we must ask why we would *not* suspect that a strong and obvious Anti-intellectual strain in a culture would not be the *dominant* factor in its educational underperformance. What precisely would lead us to suppose that any other factor was more important, when other groups suffer from these same other factors and keep their heads above water in school, while black students continue to fail in large numbers even in places like Shaker Heights?

I emphasize this because a natural tendency might be to suppose that the problem might be due to all of these things—i.e., why can't it just be that "There's some of that but . . ."? Some problems indeed pan out that way—the destruction of the rain forest is due to a combination of overpopulation due to improved nutrition and health care, imperialism, and the increasing centrality of meat to human diets (which requires land to be cleared for cattle to graze). But all problems do not pan out that way. Some problems that appear to be caused by many things are actually caused properly by only one of them, with the other "causes" actually mere facilitators and by-products. To return to colds, for example, they are caused by a virus. Stress, crowding, other sicknesses, and drafts all make one more susceptible to that virus, but take away the virus and no one would catch cold even in a stressful, crowded, freezing-cold roomful of lepers. Take away the black cultural keystone of alienation from books and learning, and things like racism, teacher bias, and school funding would have no more effect than they do on other ethnic groups.

More than a few people might say that this analysis is "naive" without my having spent years teaching in elementary, middle, or high school. We must first note, however, that if I had concluded that black children were indeed done in by funding inequities and racist tracking, not a soul

would claim that I was unqualified to make *that* point without having been a public school teacher—I would be received as one more voice "telling it like it is." In that light, to make the "naivete" charge without being able to explain (1) the success of other minority groups alongside black students under all conditions or (2) the poor performance of black students in places like Shaker Heights, reveals one to be driven more by an understandable reluctance to give short shrift to black victimhood than by a truly comprehensive assessment of the problem at hand.

The holding pattern forcing so many thinkers to reflexively link all black-white disparities to active, present-day racism can even be found in the reasoning of the best-intentioned and most richly informed thinkers on black education. One sociology professor and educational consultant, for example, can go as far as to acknowledge that there is a culture of Anti-intellectualism among black students at Berkeley High School, saying that "Black and Latino students aren't suffering when they're failing. They're having a party. That's a real problem." However, he is dismissive and irritated at the idea that this might suggest that a cultural trait is the central, driving factor in need of address, claiming that such a position:

treats those attitudes as if they exist in a vacuum. Part of it does lie in the fact that among many black parents, the emphasis on doing well in school isn't getting the priority that it should—I'll be honest about that. But part of that is that often the parents have had bad experiences with the school and don't feel as comfortable coming in and meeting with the teacher to talk about what's going on with their kid. With a lot of parents, there's not enough trust there to want to engage on that level.

This professor is an admirable and inspiring figure, having spent a career at the front lines of addressing the black-white achievement gap in school with a dynamic combination of scholarship and activism. Yet his perspectives are founded upon a conviction that black children are prevented from doing well in school by external forces rather than internal, and this conviction rules despite the rich evidence to the contrary that he experiences at uniquely close hand. For example, he considers parents' lack of commitment to school to play a significant role in black students' Anti-intellectualism. This at least addresses something other than manifestations of racism—but it still couches the students as victims of outside forces despite dissonance with the nature of the actual phenom-

enon. Wouldn't parental disengagement lead to simple lack of interest, rather than the particularly pointed teasing and active dismissal we have seen, and which he is surely familiar with? Furthermore, a sociologist is deeply familiar with the role of peer culture, as opposed to parents, in shaping a child's views.

The professor even reveals the operations of this mental filter in his guilty hedge: "I'll be honest about that" when acknowledging the Anti-intellectualism cult at all—to even hint that a culture-internal factor has any bearing upon the issue is a potential faux pas requiring an immediate apology, and significantly, must quickly be followed by a link to racism, in the vein of "I think O.J. did it, *but* . . ." He does not say explicitly that black parents' "bad experiences with the school" were based on racist discrimination, but since white and Asian parents take a much more active role in their children's education at Berkeley High and thus apparently do not suffer unduly from these experiences, we can presume that racism is indeed the purported issue. The professor's position appears to be that the nationwide disparity between black and white school performance, regardless of income level or class, is due in some large part to black parents' having suffered racist treatment from school administrators, and that rampant Anti-intellectualism is a result of this underlying racism, rather than a root cause of the problem.

An interesting thesis: But is perfect harmony between parents and teachers really a *sine qua non* of children's scholastic achievement? What about the subtle discrimination Asian immigrant parents surely suffer in such parent-teacher interactions, with their often limited English and slight acquaintance with the system? They tend strongly to make sure that their children do their best nevertheless, by hook or by crook. Does this not suggest that something—and something dominant and crucial—is at work beyond quality of parent-teacher interaction? Also, Berkeley High was one of the United States' first high schools to voluntarily desegregate, and remains a bastion of commitment to integration. Surely there is most likely the occasional white teacher there who is not crazy about "ethnics"—Life Isn't Perfect—but especially in Berkeley, California, at Berkeley High in the year 2000, are there really *enough* such teachers as to create a *general disinclination* among an *entire city's* black parents to schedule meetings about their children's performance in school? Most important, one cannot help but miss that advocates like this professor, despite rich expertise and commitment to improvement, almost never address uncomfortable questions like these—because of a guiding assumption that racism absolutely must be

the pivotal issue, utterly unquestioned in the same way that all work in astronomy is couched upon the earth revolving around the sun.

None of this is to imply that these points are anything approaching the sum total of this professor's work. However, when it comes to this particular issue, the focus on racism is rather as if someone doing a study of colds had devoted her life's work to studying the benefits of relaxation. Even if she knew that the virus was "a factor," at the end of the day you can be sure that de-stressing would play a larger part in her analysis than it would in any unbiased report—and that following her advice, an awful lot of people would be tipped back in their lawn chairs coughing and blowing their noses. It is indicative that Claude Steele's work on confidence was quickly established "on the vine" among black educators, while Shaker Heights is rarely mentioned. Because the Shaker Heights story cannot by any stretch of the imagination be interpreted through the Victimologist filter, it doesn't fit with the program and makes no lasting impression.

There is no reason to pretend that class issues, societal racism, confidence, school quality, and bias-based tracking play no role whatsoever in black underperformance in school. Nor, however, is there any reason to suppose that these things play anything but an extremely subsidiary role—and I want to stress that this is not a mere guess, but a conclusion based upon (1) the performance of other groups under similar conditions and (2) situations like Shaker Heights. If every black child in the United States came from a book-lined suburban home, met only the kindest and most enlightened of whites, was infused from birth with confidence, and attended a school awash in funding with only voluntary tracking, the average black American GPA and SAT scores would mysteriously remain the lowest in the country, rising slightly only because of the disappearance of truly poor schools and active hostility toward learning engendered by inner-city conditions. Overall, black students would continue to "mysteriously" turn in mediocre school dossiers because of the Anti-intellectual strain in the culture. The Haitian immigrant children succeeding in crumbling urban schools on one hand, and the rampant black American school failure in places like Shaker Heights on the other, allow no other interpretation.

In this chapter, my aim has been to argue that a culturally embedded wariness of scholarly endeavor is the primary cause of the alarmingly persistent achievement gap between black students and most others. So far, I have shown that the problem is culture-wide rather than class-re-

lated, and that its impact is pivotal, rather than marginal, or a mere epiphenomenon of other causes routinely appealed to in addresses of the issue.

In the following chapter, I will explore this crucial phenomenon further, examining the tragic roots of the problem, the forms in which it manifests itself, and its unfortunately defining place in modern black American culture.

4

THE ROOTS OF THE CULT OF ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

As Victimology leads naturally to Separatism, Anti-intellectualism follows from Separatism out of a sense that school is a "white" endeavor. One can often hear this sentiment quite explicitly expressed: Here is a black Berkeley High student in 1999:

When I walk in that gate every morning and I look up and see all those names for poetry and drama and Einstein around here, that doesn't reflect my culture. When I go to chemistry, and they teach me about Erlenmeyer and his flask, I don't know nothing about him. But they won't teach me about people from my culture that have done things that are wonderful. When they teach me about math, they tell me about Pythagoras, but the pyramids were there hella long ago. The Mayans had pyramids, but it's all the Pythagorean theorem? No! That's a lie. And then they teach me all this stuff and then they say, "Oh, I don't know what's wrong with you."

Obviously this particular rhetoric is one this student has inherited from the late 1960s and been Carefully Taught, and her views are far from rare (I have heard similar sentiments from any number of black Berkeley undergraduates); the deep-seated ambivalence toward school that Separatism conditions is clear. Its roots in Victimology—victimhood at all costs—are clear as well, in that Berkeley High in fact has the only secondary school Ethnic Studies program in the United States.

Yet the modern Cult of Separatism merely focuses and reinforces a trait that was indigenous to black culture long before the late sixties. Separatism alone, after all, does not always lead to rejection of the scholarily as "alien"; French Canadians, for example, are not known for lagging scholastically.

Anti-intellectualism has attained such a hold on African Americans first because of how severely the slave system severed Africans from the models in their indigenous cultures of black people living lives of the mind. The Jewish person can look back to countless generations of Jew-