Whites Shackled Themselves to Race and Blacks Have Yet to Free Ourselves

It's culture, not color, that defines us;
It's culture, not color, that will move us forward

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Leonce Gaiter

LEGBA BOOKS

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Definitions

African-American—Any American citizen of African ancestry. He or she could be descended from slaves who were brought here in 1700 or be recent Cuban or Ghanaian immigrants who were naturalized yesterday. African-Americans can hail from many different countries and regions and thus may have few, if any, cultural similarities—no more than a recent white German immigrant would have with a recent Italian immigrant. Color is not culture, white or black.

Black—Used interchangeably and synonymous with "African-American."

Afro-American—Denotes the distinct culture of the American descendants of African slaves. This is America's predominant African-American culture and the one that we often mean to invoke when we use the far less specific terms 'black' and "African-American."

Many of the issues that impact Afro-Americans also impact African-Americans more generally. Americans have never been surgical about our prejudice and race hatred. Historically, black skin alone has been enough to trigger it. However, Afro-Americans bear the cultural legacy of America's great crime—slavery and the subsequent 100+ years of both legal and socially accepted apartheid and second-class citizenship, seasoned with terror, violence, and lack of access to educational, political, and financial opportunities that white Americans considered their birthright.

These terms will be used throughout as defined.

Preface

In 2016, a plurality of voting white men and women elevated a man with a long history of racist actions and statements to the highest office in the land, the presidency. American men and women who identify as 'white' elevated a man who had named a white nationalist as his campaign manager. They chose as president a man who wanted to ban an entire religious group from the United States, labeled an entire ethnic group as "rapists," prescribed a national program of the "stop and frisk" policies that courts have labeled discriminatory against minorities, and called for the execution of five young black men who had been proven innocent by both DNA evidence and a confession from the real assailant.

With his vulgar, over-the-top, race-baiting demeanor, Donald Trump is a white Louis Farrakhan—a bombastic, autocratic racist. Farrakhan was universally reviled in the press, but Trump was treated respectfully. Why? Because his shtick was so familiar. Yes, he was a fringe figure, but one dragged into the mainstream through particularly deft use of the tools forged by conservatives since the Civil Rights Movement, which a George Wallace campaign aide described as "promise them the moon and holler 'nigger'"—and in this case, epithets for Muslims and Hispanics as well. Trump baked the usual modern conservative cake—bogus claims of voter fraud aimed at minority voters, attacks on "political correctness" as advocacy for full-throated expressions of white supremacy. It was the usual post–civil-rights-era conservative playbook, just with less suit-and-tied respectability. With appeals to race hatred that garnered a loyal following of Klansmen, neo-Nazis, and white supremacists of all stripes, Trump promised everything, from the magical re-emergence of manufacturing jobs to the magical delivery of compromise-free health care, while attacking minorities as undeserving interlopers. "Make America Great Again," was correctly unpacked as code for "Make America White Again."

Watching Trump's rise, I couldn't help thinking that the lessons we took from Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement were wrong.

We refer constantly to America as a land of inclusion, but that's not true and it never has been. In America, "inclusiveness" has always been far more aspirational than actual. For a brief time, after the rights movements of the sixties and early seventies, elites gave lip service to American inclusiveness, but only lip service. Modern conservatism's winks and nods to America's proud history of discrimination and white supremacy has been helping it win statehouses and state

legislatures for 50 years—with black faces sprinkled here and there as human shields against their actions being labeled racist. When Barack Obama won the presidency, conservatism's foundational commitment to white supremacy came to the fore. Republicans broke all political norms to thwart Obama's presidency, from tolerating the "birther" lies, to habitual use of the filibuster to block legislation, to shouting "You lie" at a State of the Union Address, to refusing to consider his Supreme Court nominee.

Recent history, culminating in Donald Trump, should finally force black Americans to reject mainstream post–civil-rights-era revisionism glorifying the perfectibility of white people and propping up the lie that black Americans had only to wait for white folks to "come around," that "brotherhood," unicorn-like, would emerge from the mist in the dell to envelop us all in its warmth.

White supremacy is an inescapable nutrient lurking in American soil. Inclusion does not inevitably grow there. Our black skin will always mark us as the people whites evolved their very identity—their pseudo-ethnic 'white' identity—to enslave. And the people adopting this hate-fed identity did so while proclaiming themselves the divinely anointed keepers of fairness and justice.

Can we now—finally—take the first step and free ourselves from the "race" shackles that white Americans clamped on us all those centuries ago—their definition of the black race being negative stereotypes tied to skin color—and define ourselves as the vital American *cultural* force that we have become? Can we then—finally—use that elevated self-image to teach ourselves to live and thrive in the foundationally racist America we have, as opposed to the inclusive fantasy to which a great man sometimes paid lip service and to which the majority delusionally cling? Only then can we move beyond politics and its inevitable focus on redeeming white people and focus instead on ourselves—our history and the culture it's bred—to provide our young the sense of cultural superiority that is the birthright of every child and on which every viable culture propagates itself.

Foreword

Nigger. Negro. Colored. Black. All these terms are sociological, racial identities imposed on us from without. All are the results of whites' economic desire for a permanent source of free labor and their use of negative racial categorization to justify the barbaric system devised to provide it. That system was American chattel slavery. Its viciousness was so extreme that it still afflicts America hundreds of years later.

Having been branded in the late 17th century as a subspecies by the new form of racial categorization, we've spent the remainder of our history ingeniously sloughing off the physical and legal shackles it bred. However, by necessity, we've done it through the lens of that same racial categorization imposed on us. As they chained us, whites insisted that we were no more than the negative traits their racial categorization defined: we were lazy, violent, ignorant—all traits imposed from without to sanction their brutality toward us. Even as we bravely fought those negatives, we accepted the categorization as a racial caste defined largely by our skin color—and by inevitable association, the negativity whites attached to it.

We had nothing else. We were ripped from homelands, cultures, languages, and customs and dropped in a violent, unfamiliar world that insisted we were no more than beasts. We had no power structures through which to insist otherwise. Legally less than true people, we were, nonetheless here. We were present, and so we became a political issue. To most Americans, and to ourselves, we have remained so—not the vibrant cultural force that we've become, but a political issue born of a baseless racial categorization—a fight against a negative racial categorization that has less to do with us and more to do with the majority's historical, violent rapaciousness, subsequent guilt, and desperate measures to further demonize us to reject or absolve themselves of that guilt.

But as with so much else, we elevated our diminished role as a political issue—as opposed to a fully formed people—and mastered the use of politics to fight for our liberation. Throughout, we stopped on occasion to ponder and correct how we referred to ourselves within the racial categorization imposed on us—and the negative attributes associated with it. We evolved from "Negro" to "colored" to "black" to "African-American," but we never fully upended the categorization itself to acknowledge what we had become. We never ripped off the blindfold of the toxic racialist characterization heaped on us. We sought to redeem it in many ways, but we

never rejected it. We changed the way we referred to our skin within the sociopolitical spheres of American life, but we always adhered to that 400-year-old racial, skin-based characterization.[1] We were either the people the majority abused and despised, or we were reacting against being abused and despised. We were the legal noncitizens, or we were fighting against our status as legal noncitizens. We were the violent, ignorant beasts or fighting that ugly fantasy. The racial categorization imposed upon us offers only two options, both of which are enslaved to it—succumb or fight against it, both acknowledging its primacy. Either way, the negative, baseless racial characterization wins.

This book looks at the cost of seeing ourselves and this country through the lens imposed upon us centuries ago and how to grow beyond it. The book considers how it's robbed us of what has become the Afro-American cultural birthright that, in this 21st century, we have more than earned. It has prevented us from painting ourselves as the rich historical/cultural force that we have become and passing that portrait on to subsequent generations. Psychologist Margo Monteith said, "To the extent we can feel better about our group relative to other groups, we can feel good about ourselves."[i] Primary adherence to the racist construct of "race" imposed on us centuries ago—as opposed to stepping up to the "culture" that we have become—has kept Afro-Americans from teaching our history and culture to ourselves in a way that elevates us, that provides the necessary sense of cultural superiority, that enables the foundational sense of self-worth required to navigate the often-racist America we face versus the colorblind utopia of which we "have a dream," a dream that Donald Trump's elevation to the presidency and its accompanying crescendo of racist speech and policy has proven is just that in today's America—a dream.

[1] African-American was an improvement, but still bears minimal cultural meaning since Afro-Americans were largely severed from African cultures and Africa is home to hundreds of distinct cultures. African-American simply puts our skin categorization in the broadest geographic context.

Introduction—To Culturally Unify DuBois's "Double Consciousness"

> *"After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."*
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> —W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903

Born in 1958, I was raised to think I had something to prove. I was raised to preempt the images my skin would invoke in the whites (and blacks) around me. My father was a military officer, my mother a schoolteacher. During the early 1960s, before the zenith of the Civil Rights Movement, they were stationed all over the country and sometimes abroad. Both Southern and black, they had no illusions about the white men and women with whom they shared workplaces and neighborhoods. They knew they had to protect themselves from anything that would allow the finger-on-the-trigger white minds around them to think the ever-threatened "Nigger." They avoided anything that would make whites think, much less utter, that ever-looming epithet. Once uttered, the effect was inescapable. It was a death sentence without appeal. Thus labeled subhuman, you could not snatch back your humanity; you could not retaliate in kind—there was no such name to similarly dehumanize and humiliate whites. That word would poison the well between my parents and their workplace peers and superiors—the people upon whom they depended for their livelihoods.

My parents lived in fear. They lived DuBois's famous "double consciousness." They were always looking at themselves through the eyes of whites to ensure that they and their children remained impeccable, above reproach, miles from "Nigger." White kids could act up, act out, play with abandon, skirt the rules, let off steam, shout, holler, run around in bare feet and dirty clothes, but I could not. A laughing, dirty white child was playing. A laughing dirty black one was a pickaninny. A white kid in a fight was being a kid. A black kid fighting was a savage. Always, "Nigger" lay in wait, and "Nigger" could affect my parents' ability to gain advancement, make

money and provide us with a middle class life, and the opportunity to finally, the idea went, educate ourselves out of having to consider that word.

We lived in fear. Every day. Every time we stepped outside our door. Fear of the accusatory white minds all around us and fear of the learned self-loathing they could inflame with just a single word. It was as if we'd been brainwashed and programmed to question our worth and the validity of our very existence at the utterance of "Nigger." As DuBois put it, "*measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.*"

I endured the "double consciousness" for half of my life.

With my parents' boundless 1960s ambitions for their children, we attended principally white schools since they were generally the best available. During my time, we lived in principally white neighborhoods because they most often gave access to those good schools. I went to Harvard, then into the film and television industries, and then on to high-tech marketing. White schools, white workplaces, white neighborhoods. My life has been an inadvertent anthropological study of white Americans and their reactions to me as a black man living among them. What I experienced taught me about the depths and breadth of American prejudice and the painful power of the black self-images born from it. It also taught me the possibility of rejecting both and unifying the double consciousness into a single Afro-American *cultural* outlook that denies me nothing of America—for all of it is mine—and nothing of Afro-America (save the negative images whites passed down in tandem with their racial categorizations).

From late elementary school to college, most of my friends were Jewish. I watched them, in their tweens and teens, prepare for Bar Mitzvahs and Bat Mitzvahs, saw the cultural immersion they received from other Jews. They were culturally different and acknowledged themselves as such. They held that difference dear. Hot on the heels of early childhood, they were taught to cherish their difference. From other Jews, they learned their history, the Holocaust, diaspora, the birth of Israel—all from other Jews. This was their religion, their culture, and they asked no one else to validate it. They asked no one else's permission to teach it in whatever way they saw fit, and they cared no more than necessary what others did or did not know about it—all this despite age-old persecution.

I wondered why there was no such systematic, organized historical and cultural education for American descendants of African slaves, though our unique historical place, distinct cultural heritage, and history of oppression seemed to demand it. Only later would I lay the blame at the

feet of continued reliance on the political, racialist categorization on which Afro-Americans still inordinately rely and liberation movements that never grew past it.

With a cultural education at the feet of other African-Americans, akin to the Jewish model, black children would learn the truth about the reception they can expect as they march through their lives in this country. They would be inoculated against much of the prejudice they encounter; they would be less likely to internalize it. They would be armed to know the hows and whys of our place in this nation. They would learn what every other functional culture teaches its young—who they are, the gifts with which they have been blessed, the burdens they will suffer, and why they stand second to no one.

Right now, we relegate this function to schools teaching curricula largely created by and for those who have spent an American history oppressing and belittling us.

Why?

A study by Ming-Te Wang and James P. Huguley of the University of Pittsburgh and Harvard, respectively, found that children of parents who practice "cultural socialization"—the process of instilling racial pride, history, and tradition, as well as "preparation for bias," which prepares children to encounter racial prejudice—show better outcomes in grade point average (GPA), educational aspirations, and the ability to think critically using analysis and problem solving.

> *"Our examination of the moderating effects of racial socialization practices suggests that parents' messages to their children regarding positive aspects of group membership (pride, history, and tradition) attenuate the negative effects of teacher discrimination on both GPA and educational aspirations.*
> *"These findings suggest that cultural socialization and preparation for bias practices interact to make uniquely positive contributions to the education aspirations and school identification of African American adolescents."*[ii]

To provide an expansive vision of Afro-America that allows us to better thrive in this country, we must color outside the lines of the racial classification to which we've adhered throughout our history—even within triumphant moments like the Civil Rights Movement. It demands that we move past merely rejecting racist views born of that classification and shatter the classification itself, thereby sanctioning our possession of everything this country has to offer instead of complying with the notion that most of it is "theirs"—that they hold a more central place

in its history and formation than we—that they bear more credit for its status than we—that they can have a right to more of its fruits than we.

I want to reclaim Afro-American history and its attendant culture for Afro-Americans, outside the confines of the bargain basement bin in which American history relegates "black history." I want choices clearly available outside of mimicking or accepting mainstream racist myths or a lifetime of reacting to them. I want to destroy in the black mind the notion of 'whiteness' outside an overtly racist context and thus open the entirety of this nation, its history and culture, to Afro-American exploitation—because all of it is ours. By shedding reliance on the racist racial categories that have bound us with ropes made of the majority's self-imposed whiteness—and the bigotry the identity was created to foster—we can finally blind the contemptuous "eyes of others" of which the double consciousness speaks.

Breaking the 'White' Racial Shackles on the 'Black Race'

"*When the first Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619, there were no white people there*."
—Theodore Allen

"The result of genetic research on 'race' is that there is no biological basis for human race."
—American Museum of Natural History

"The white race is a historically constructed social formation. It consists of all those who partake of the privileges of the white skin in this society."
—Noel Ignatiev

"Adopting and treasuring a white identity is absolutely a moral choice, since there are no white people. . . . As long as you think you're white, there is no hope for you."
—James Baldwin

There is no genetic basis for race. Race is a social construct, not a biological one. Science has proven that there is more variation within so-called racial groups than between them. The Human Genome Project proved that humans share 99.99% of their genes, regardless of their so-called "race." "And of that tiny 0.1% difference, 94 per cent of the variation is among individuals from the same populations and only six percent between individuals from different populations."[iii] That means that only 6% of 0.1% represents variances between different populations or so-called races.

Thus, the idea of identifying consistent genetic differentiations between groups that represent quantifiable behavioral distinctions that we choose to call 'black' or 'white' is pseudoscientific nonsense. We have never even concretely identified what a 'black' person is. What level of specific genetic material qualifies one as 'black?' We can't answer that, so we rely on self-identification, which is unscientific in the extreme. I have had relatives who make Meryl Streep look dusky but who define themselves as 'black.' Throughout the centuries, light skinned Afro-Americans with two visibly 'black' parents have passed as 'white.' Again, the concept of race as we colloquially understand it is ridiculous.

Why, then, do we constantly refer to ourselves as 'black' or 'white'?

For most of this nation's history, race has defined America. However, there was a time prior to this country's founding when the 'white race' did not exist. For his book *The Invention of the White Race*, Theodore Allen scoured records from 17th-century Virginia, where almost one in

four bond laborers was of African origin. He found no use of the word 'white' in official records until around 1680. Thus, from 1619 to around 1680, despite the presence of both black and white indentured laborers in Virginia, no one was officially categorized or described as 'white.'

> *"Winthrop D. Jordan, author of White Over Black, found that, 'After about 1680, taking the colonies as a whole, a new term appeared—"white." During my own study of page after page of Virginia county records, reel after reel of microfilm prepared by the Virginia Colonial Records Project, and other seventeenth-century sources, I have found no instance of the official use of the word "white" as a token of social status before its appearance in a Virginia law passed in 1691, referring to 'English or other white women'"*[iv]

Allen points out that until the latter 17th century, the term 'white' was not universally accepted and had to be defined for English audiences.

> *"English ship captain Richard Jobson made a trading voyage to Africa in 1620-21, but he refused to engage in trafficking in human beings, because, he said, the English 'were a people who did not deal in any such commodities, neither did we buy or sell one another or any that had our own shapes.' When the local dealer insisted that it was the custom there to sell Africans 'to white men,' Jobson answered 'they [that is 'white men'] were another kinde of people from us.' George Fox, founder of the Quaker religion, in 1671 addressed some members of a Barbados congregation as 'you that are called white.' Another seventeenth-century commentator, Morgan Godwyn, found it necessary to explain to the English at home that, in Barbados, 'white' was 'the general name for Europeans.'"*[v]

Thus, during a time when black bonded servants were often treated similarly to white ones, with evidence of cooperation between the groups, the term 'white' was neither prominent nor used to describe an official category of person. At that time, on what would become American soil, the 'white race' had yet to be established.

That does not mean that the inevitable human failing of prejudice against the odd-looking "other" that presaged and paved the way for chattel slavery did not exist. Allen termed the state of Africans vs. Europeans in 17th-century Chesapeake as "indeterminate":

> *"A 1661 law specifying punishment for runaway bond-laborers referred to 'any negroes who are incapable of makeing satisfaction by addition of time.' In 1668, free African-American women were declared tithable (taxable as laborers, a condition from which European women were exempt) on the explicit grounds that 'though permitted to enjoy their freedome . . . [they] ought not in all respects be admitted to a full fruition of the exemptions and immunities of the English.'"*[vi]

Only with the economic desire to degrade Africans to the role of property did the 'white race' become established. Slave owners had to define a permanent class of persons as so different from themselves that they did not deserve the right to own their own bodies, the fruits of their labors, or their own offspring. This group of humans would hold the status of horses or dogs. They had to be defined as so distinct from slave owners of pale skin, so beneath them, that they deserved no better than their perpetual enslavement. The dark skinned had to be the opposite of the slave owners. And so the 'white race' was born to distinguish itself by solely imbuing 'whites' with the attributes of humanity and blacks with those of beasts.

Our enslavement so impacted this nation, was so central to its existence, that all its majority soon adopted a 'white' racial identity to cement their full humanity. Only that identity ensured their access to freedom. For poor whites, that identity also provided something new and precious—a political, social, and cultural tether to the landed wealthy—a connection that did not exist in class-based European societies, a connection that helped grow the American ideal of upward mobility. In Europe, gentlefolk were akin to a different species from the poor. The poor were a lesser breed by birth. They weren't *sub*humans, just *lesser* ones. They were born to and expected to die in "their place."

Suddenly, as 'white,' the poor shared a bond with the wealthy—they were both 'white' and thus superior to the true subhuman—dark-skinned men and women. There was suddenly a bridge from one group—the poor—to another—the wealthy, between whom there'd previously been an unbridgeable chasm. Suddenly, one could fathom traveling from one to the other, for they now had a common bond and cause—'whiteness.'

W.E.B. DuBois wrote of poor whites overseeing black slaves:

> *"It gave him work and some authority as overseer, slave driver, and member of the patrol system. But above and beyond this, it fed his vanity because it associated him with the masters. Slavery bred in the poor white a dislike of Negro toil of all sorts. He never regarded himself as a laborer, or as part of any labor movement. If he had any ambition at all it was to become a planter and to own 'niggers.'"*[vii]

Consider that the need to denigrate the African slave as subhuman helped give rise to the American ideal of upward mobility—one that we hold precious to this day. It is fitting irony that in the early 21st century, the loss of that ideal of upward mobility—the untethering of the working class from the gentry that we now call the 1%—has led the white working class down a racist,

nativist path, as evidenced by the late 20th-century Republican party and the Trumpism it birthed. The great untethering has led those who embrace a traditional white identity on a frightening quest to reclaim the hate-based glory of that designation.

Everything a human could want, any opportunity for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," became contingent on being white. To be other than white was to be degraded, to be less than human.

Pseudoscience soon worked to provide this new racial categorization the patina of respectability. Scholars using Adam and Eve as points of human origin and genetically segregating the aristocracy from the rabble presaged the racist 20th-century theories of "The Bell Curve," and the 21st-century theories of "A Troublesome Inheritance."

Today, we can barely discuss any aspect of this country or its history without relying on distinctions born of the toxic brew of savage greed and vicious human prejudice that drove the majority to erroneously declare themselves a separate race—the 'white race.' Politics, health care, arts, religion—all are thoroughly infused with race-based distinctions born of the majority's need to subhumanize their dark-skinned slave population.

Something Happened—Something Cultural

Those who declared themselves 'white' made it easy to view the Africans they imported as subhuman. Torn from homeland, language, religion, relations, we were dropped in a new world like traumatized newborns. Further brutalities endemic to American slavery further stunted us. We were not allowed to speak native languages, learn to read or write, worship, marry, or rear our young to anything other than slavery.

But something happened. Even with our lowly status born from the aberrant power of white racial identity, we began to distinguish ourselves *culturally*. We took the religion we were handed (with its white Gods) and reshaped some of it to speak to our lust for freedom. We married the music recalled from homelands with the music absorbed here to create something new. Fresh modes of speech and expression grew from our boundless ingenuity.

We took the empty, violent self-adulation of the fictional 'white race' and redeemed its opposite—us—into a distinct American subculture that has grown to dominate not only America itself but, in multiple arenas, the world. Today in America, when we refer to "black religion" or "black music" or black anything else, we are rarely referring to music made by recent émigré

Liberians or Somalis. We are talking about music born of the American descendants of American slaves. Black religion is the religion born of the American descendants of African slaves. Black idioms are modes of speech born of the American descendants of African slaves. We maintained the ugly, race-based terminology necessitated by the majority's self-expulsion from the human race to become the 'white race' but pulled from it modes of speech, worship, music, movement, and letters that have enlightened the world. We developed the most distinctive and distinguished of American subcultures, but defined it via the only lens historically available to us, the one DuBois described as providing "no true self-consciousness," letting us see ourselves only through "the revelation of the other world" that looks down on us in "amused contempt and pity."

That lens, that racial frame in which we were introduced to this land and through which we've been seen throughout its history, insisted that we see ourselves through a 'white racial' point of view even if our goal was to see past that point of view. Looking through the lens of the 'white race,' we could view ourselves only in opposition to their view of us—which inherently places a primary value on the point of view you must constantly work to shun. For most of this nation's history, we certainly could not principally define ourselves as a unique American cultural force born of African roots, slavery, liberation, segregation, and political and social rebellion. Thus, the race-based, cultureless "Nigger," "Colored," "Negro," and "Black" predominated. We made progress with "African-American" since it made a broad swipe at tying us to a place and its cultural tradition—it was just the wrong tradition, so tied were we to categories that denied us a place within the American tapestry.

Now, it's possible—no, imperative—to move beyond the lens of the fictitious 'white race,' beyond the holographic wall it imposed between us and this country's mainstream wealth. It is time because that mainstream is ours; it owes as much to us as it does to them. Without our seeing the world through their 'white' racial lens, their seeming ownership of this land evaporates. Without seeing ourselves in their White Racial Frame, the negativity of the double consciousness evaporates. We are no longer watching them look at us and seeing ourselves through their eyes, and reacting in some form or another to what they see. Through taking ownership of our rightful cultural place as a primary source of the best of America, we gain the ability to see this land through our own eyes, to see the distinctly American cultural treasure that is Afro-America, and place every one of us at its heart.

Define "Culture"

> *Webster's Ninth Edition—5a. the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations. 5b. the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.*

Skin colors don't create cultures. Only peoples with histories do that. By kidnapping us from indigenous cultures and subsequently categorizing us as less than human, as nothing more than physical features tied to negative attributes, whites denied us a place at the American table, with the intent of denying us a place in American history. They also intended to deny us the right to create a history of our own. We were property. We had nothing of our own. America was theirs. We were no more than skin-wrapped tools that wept and bled.

Come Jim Crow, freed from slavery, the denial of our rights continued. Denial of the vote, political representation, and equal justice was designed to prolong our omission from benefiting from or contributing to American history.

The majority besmirched this country's ideals and used every mechanism at their disposal to deny us the right to create a history.

We did it anyway.

***

Let's look at American history and culture, which blacks, whites, Jews, Hispanics, Catholics, Asians, Muslims, and all other Americans share. We have our enduring creation myths: the American Revolutionary War was about freedom from tyranny, our Founding Fathers' belief that all men are "created equal," George Washington as a uniquely brilliant military strategist, to name a few. Regardless of the degree to which we accept these myths, as Americans, we imbibe them, and at some point in our lives, accept them. They bind us (to the extremely limited degree we are bound) as Americans. The history surrounding them is part of our public education. We pass this knowledge from generation to generation.

This knowledge—this culture—belongs as much to me, a black man, as it does to any white man or woman. However, much of it lives in opposition to, and therefore in contempt of, my Afro-American history and thus my ability to mold a fully positive conception of self. Founders fighting tyranny qualifies as irony—they owned *slaves*—as does unquestioningly accepting the nobility of

the statement "All men are created equal" when some men were property whose owners could maim or kill them on a whim as legally as they could shatter a similarly owned vase.

For Afro-Americans to fully accept these American historical and cultural myths is to accept our immutable insignificance. To accept them is to insist that there is no irony in slavers crying for freedom or espousing equality for all but you. One can only cry freedom in the midst of slavery by ignoring the enslaved.

Afro-American writer Albert Murray referred to the American descendants of African slaves as "Omni-Americans." He said that our "heroic philosophy of improvisation and adaptation epitomized the national character at its most refined" and that American culture was "'incontestably mulatto': American song, speech, humor, dance and folklore were all thoroughly infused with black idioms."[viii] To Murray, we are the through line of American history.

He was right, and it's time to acknowledge in the popular Afro-American mind that we have now lived a vital history in this country, much of which exists in opposition to the mainstream culture to which we are all exposed. To be blunt, in the physics of American myths, we are the anti(mythical)americans. Our history bears the opposite charge to the majority's myth matter. We negate significant portions of it. Creative destruction of mainstream American myths is a vital part of our history, which distinguishes it from mainstream history. That distinction is crucial to us as a people, for without it, we are prone to be partially erased in our own minds. Trump supporters voted to "Make America Great Again," emphasis on "again," signifying an acceptance of the myth that America was great when its majority waded nose deep in the offal of their race hatred born of their self-expulsion from the human race to join the 'white race.'

This history we've made over the centuries differs from that of the majority. That's why the culture that stems from it differs as well; that is why we must devise systems to take ownership of it and teach it to ourselves.

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To thrive in America, Afro-Americans must be *of* mainstream American culture. We must know it inside and out. We must know the history and customs and mores that grew from it—if only to deflect the arrows they fling at us to preserve an often-racist status quo. We should know it because Albert Murray was right: Laura Nyro and Charles Ives are mine as much as they are any other American's. I know the American history that they lived and the American culture in which they lived as well as any white man or woman.

But then, I also have jazz great Charles Mingus. If whites want him, he can be theirs as well. He is part of their culture too. But with that great man, I share a history and Afro-American culture that will forever be out of reach for most non–Afro-Americans. Just as I, for instance, will never know what it means to be a Native American and watch a typical Hollywood Western or hear a traditional language, few whites will ever fully understand the culture that I share with Mingus and I hear in his music. Yes, I can appreciate the lie of the traditional Hollywood Western as well as a Native American. I can empathize to a point with the pain that it could inflict to see one's indigenous culture portrayed as the interloper, the usurper, but I will never have the experience watching that film that a man or woman of that culture will have because I am not *of* their culture.

Similarly, there are experiences of things Afro-American and black that will forever be out of reach for most others. I have a friend who is obsessed with classic R&B. Knows it backward and sideways. Yet he never fully understood (as in *felt* viscerally) that Aretha Franklin's place was not just musical, but cultural. Hollering "Freedom" in 1967 through every radio in America meant more to blacks than it did to him. To us, it was intuitively political, cultural, and personal. To him, it was spectacular music. As Afro-Americans, we share a slice of America that is out of reach to most. Yet mainstream America and its culture are ours as much as anyone's because we can eat and drink it from birth alongside every American man and woman. The only aspect of mainstream culture that should be out of our reach is its disdain for us and ours—that is, America's historical race hatred. (Unfortunately, we imbibe a good amount of that as well.) Such access to two cultures demands that we embrace the additional burden of teaching ourselves our own history, comings, goings, and the ways of being they have bred in us, even as we also learn all that the majority learn.

This might be asking the extraordinary of Afro-Americans. But this book is about accomplishing the extraordinary. It is about finally dispelling fears, self-doubts, and insecurities born of a racist, color-based history of this . . .

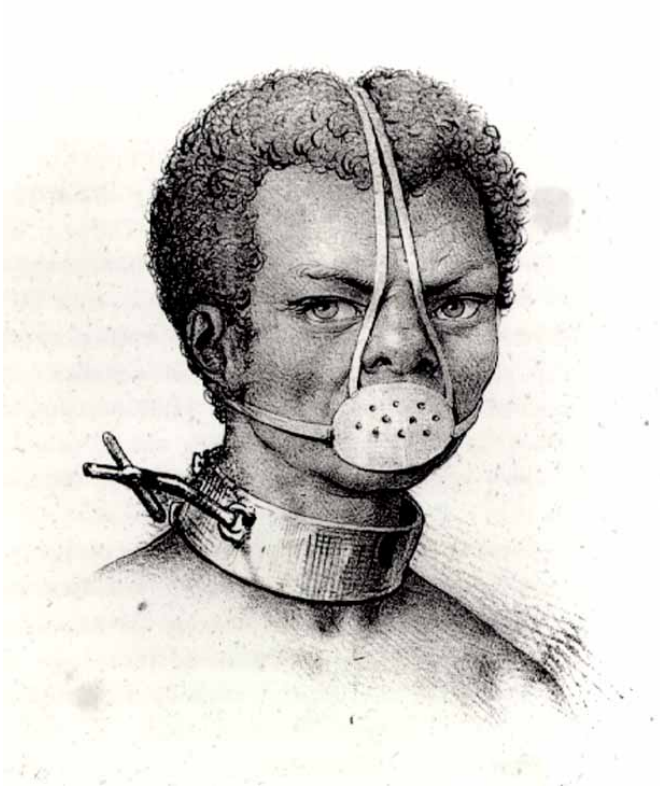

Figure 1 – Slave in iron muzzle

and this . . .

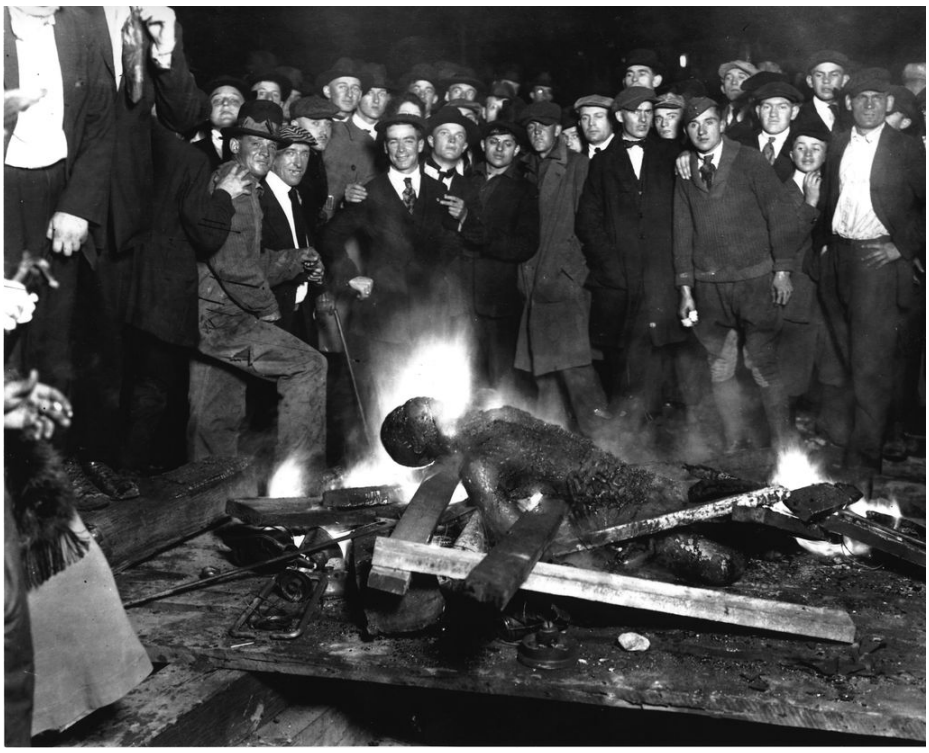

Figure 2 – Omaha race riot lynching of Will Brown, 1919

Figure 3 – Segregated swimming pool sign from Selma, Alabama

and this . . .

Figure 4 – Emmett Till before and after his brutal lynching in 1955

Figure 5 – Civil rights protester being beaten

Figure 6 – Florida Klan rally, 1970s

and this . . .

Figure 7 – Eric Garner killed by NYPD officers for selling loose cigarettes in 2014

Rational fears born of experience have led so many Afro-Americans to reject major swaths of the "mainstream" to the point that we don't vote in sufficient numbers, which leads directly to racist policies like stop and frisk, voter suppression, and an unjust justice system. Yes, such rejection of the mainstream is understandable. How do you acknowledge that there is something poisonous in the very culture that literally helped create you while simultaneously embracing that same culture? How do you acknowledge that your existence as a cultural being is due in part to your countrymen's contempt for you? How do you reconcile your fear, and yes, sometimes, hatred of the majority culture for sins it committed and tolerated for so long, with an embrace and mastery of that culture?

These are not esoteric questions. They have enormous real-world consequences. In 2016, Hillary Clinton lost Michigan by about 10,000 votes. Voter turnout in Detroit and Wayne County was 75,000 voters shy of the 2012 turnout.[ix] Matching the 2012 turnout in those regions could have won the state for Clinton. That pattern was similar in Wisconsin and elsewhere. Many blacks stayed home (one hopes) not realizing that by doing so, they voted for cops being able to shoot their unarmed black sons, grandsons, and daughters without facing justice. Not realizing that they were condemning their children to suffer the racist humiliations of stop and frisk and endure emboldened racists openly calling them "monkey" and "nigger" in schools and colleges. Not realizing they would endure even greater voter suppression and suffer minimized protections

against racial discrimination, thus potentially sentencing themselves and their children to substandard jobs, loans, schools, and opportunities. Staying home in 2016, for whatever reason, was a tacit endorsement—a passive vote for—a white supremacist America. The rural whites who turned out in droves knew this and voted for the benefit of their adopted, historically racist white identities. Too many of us, lulled to somnolence by the fantasy of "inclusive" America, the dream that the justice and fairness will out, stayed home. The fact that they didn't know enough of our American history to realize the stakes is no one's fault but our own. How could they know? We never taught them. And no one else will.

Arrogant, Uppity, and Then Some

"Transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations." What knowledge about our distinct subculture do Afro-Americans customarily transmit in an organized fashion from generation to generation? I remember consistently seeing the book *To Be a Jew* on the bookshelves of my high school friends. They had to study and learn about their culture to be formally welcomed into it and into adulthood. For boys, it was the Bar Mitzvah, for girls, the Bat Mitzvah. For many Jews, the symbology is as much cultural as it is religious.

There was no such book in my house regarding being an American descendant of African slaves. I wish there had been. I wish I had had access to a source of American history and culture from an Afro-American perspective. However, I did have some sources of cultural strength. First, I was raised during my parents' rise to the comfortable middle class through my father's promotion in the military, one of the least segregated economic sectors at the time, and my mother's second income as an elementary school teacher. Second, I was 10 in 1968 and living in Washington, DC, which was full of middle class blacks. The Civil Rights Movement had reached its zenith and begun its dissolution into more amorphous rights movements and antiwar protests, and Afro-American life, history, culture, practice, and theory were alive in the air all around me. Finally, my mother was born of a distinct subculture within the Afro-American culture that afforded her many of the benefits I hope for Afro-America at large: a sense of self-worth, entitlement, and yes, even cultural superiority.

My mother was raised a black New Orleans Creole. That means she was part of an upper caste in Afro-American society dating back hundreds of years. These were half-breeds and quadroons considered tainted by their black blood, but afforded special status and privilege due to

their light skin. They were the descendants of white slave masters and overseers, and they seized their special status to become more prosperous than darker-skinned blacks, to use the race hatred all around them to their advantage—though still crimped and frustrated by the hatred they too faced.

Their ability to attain their status was based on a grotesque, colorist belief: the closer to white, the better you were. However, Creoles wrested from this baseness a society they considered as cultured as the white, while taking their place as the elite of the black. In addition, they seem to have considered themselves prettier than either and were not above holding both in contempt.

It was my good fortune (and sometimes misfortune) to be born into such arrogance, to be the progeny of people who somehow managed to consider themselves more clever, more resourceful, and more wise than those around them due to their unique history and place in society—despite all the lies, half-truths, and racist contradictions their place bespoke. Thus, I had a leg up in the battle to slough off the contempt of the majority—the equation of beauty with white skin, of intelligence with white minds, of normality with straight hair. A leg up, I say; I was not immune. No black man, woman, or child is immune to such a dehumanizing deluge. You react. The question is, will that reaction ultimately hinder you or propel you forward? And what tools do you need to achieve the latter?

The tools required are those that deconstruct our conception of ourselves as a racial caste and political issue instead of a cultural entity. We need to acknowledge that we have become one of this nation's most fruitful cultural mines while failing to use that culture to do much other than entertain and amuse our ourselves and our countrymen. We have not used it to do what other sustaining cultures do—teach ourselves our own history and traditions and our cultural contributions and value, and how to wield them to navigate successfully in the larger, often-racist society. When we do that, we will no longer be buffeted between the rock and the hard place of DuBois's hundred-year-old double consciousness, but enveloped in a history told from our own point of view and a grand appreciation of the critical American culture we've pulled from it.

There are multiple reasons we have never done that, but the first surrounds the ethos that has grown from the ashes of the Civil Rights Movement.

Black Americans: Still Believers in the Perfectibility of Whites

Published in the* Los Angeles Times*, February 5, 1995

Conservatives, moderates and liberals alike (black and white) now hurl “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” bromides at the black community. Bill Clinton stands before black Baptist congregations extolling the virtues of “personal responsibility.” These cons, mods and libs often claim (sometimes rightly) that old-style, ’60s, liberal Great Society programs have not yielded adequate results, and that some of the programs have proved counterproductive. Some, particularly the black ones, insist that a “culture of dependence” has caused African Americans to hitch their stars to the government’s supposedly benevolent wagon.

What these politicians and pundits fail to see is that they’re viewing the situation through the most narrow of lenses. The whole truth is more frightening, because the acknowledgment of it demands enormous changes in the way black Americans view our minority selves in this majority culture. The whole truth is that black Americans are the ultimate American Dreamers. Despite a history that should have taught us better, we still believe in the Constitution. We still believe in the perfectibility of this Republic, of its political and popular culture with respect to us, both of which are most identifiably embodied in the form of the (ever demonized) “White Man.”

Our problem is that we still believe. We believe more in the perfectibility of “them” than we do in the perfectibility of ourselves. We are the last American Dreamers, the last of the true believers.

Perhaps we learned our Christian lessons too well. The civil-rights movement boasted more than its share of reverends. To this day, “reverend” is the most common title for black men (they always are) accorded the mantle of “black leader.” Historically, the reverends were the most educated and worldly men in the pre-civil-rights-era black community. They performed a myriad of tasks. When it came time to demand our rights within the broader culture, we looked to the reverends for leadership. And we got it.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. became the most visible symbol of the movement. His tactical skills were regularly overshadowed by his verbal gifts, which were formed and infused by his sense of Christian mission. King preached to us, to all of America, of her own perfectibility. He made the sins of the majority popular culture—its bigotry, its violence against black citizens—seem so much biblical waywardness, which he, in true Christian fashion, was willing to forgive and forget. He offered America and her people Christian absolution for their sins—literal and political. America prepared to do penance—political, not personal—penance for those sins. The Great Society was that penance. America would make amends.

I often hear expressions of sadness and wonderment that the civil-rights movement failed to achieve the lasting sea-change in race relations that it seemed to portend. Stereotypes still rage, wages still lag, banks continue to redline, white flight still occurs, the suggestion (always erroneous) that most recipients of any government benefit are predominantly black is sufficient to guarantee support for the abolition of that benefit

(when much grander giveaways to all white recipients go unnoticed). In some ways, it seems that little has changed.

In many ways, little has. The civil-rights movement asked precious little. A deeply Christian man and the crusade he symbolized were warmly embraced by a large portion of white America for all the wrong reasons: namely, that the movement preached the perfectibility of the majority and of the society over which they hold sway.

Regarded thus, King becomes a grandly tragic figure with a touch of Ellingtonian plaintiveness about him. His deeply moral beliefs were taken to the hearts of many for self-aggrandizing reasons—less that they could truly claim a lack of prejudice or truly sought to attain such a state, and more a desire to celebrate their own perfectibility without the attendant work of changing the foundation of the way they think. Any non-black individual was welcome to believe that no black person was his or her equal (to believe someone your equal means you acknowledge their potential superiority to you in any given endeavor), but they could join the crowd in saying that the inferior should be treated kindly.

The government offered to make amends, and we (black Americans) believed in the constitutional connection between a government and its people, a connection that has been eroding for at least 30 years, and one in which not even the staunchest flag-waver could believe after the bloodletting of the 1994 political season. We believed that the government actions represented the will of its people. We believed in the goodwill of our countrymen based upon the displays of their “representative” government.

We believed so much that we made the naturally illogical progression to looking to the government to sway its people, looking to political change to stimulate cultural change, asking the cart to pull the horse under the best circumstances—in the forms of, for instance, busing and affirmative action.

The outrageous extent to which we believed was both painfully and poignantly apparent in a journalistic cause celebre a couple of years back. A Yale-educated black lawyer made a big splash with a New York Magazine article in which he chronicled his weeklong exploit as a busboy in a posh lily-white country club. The headline asked why this $105,000-a-year Yale lawyer took a $7-an-hour job as a busboy at the snootiest, whitest country club in Connecticut.

The writer became a mini cause celebre by allowing white readers to feign righteous shock that rich white people uttered the word “nigger” inside an all-white country club. Both the principally white readership and the black writer’s noble reaction to this shocking news—their crudely choreographed dance of indignation—rested upon their mutual assumption of the inherent goodness of white Americans, their inherent fairness toward their black brethren. Only from this assumption could one be shocked that members of a racist club behaved like racists inside it.

This highly educated, intelligent, successful man believed so much in the perfectibility of “them” that he expressed shock that these people weren’t “good” people. He believed so much—in them.

We still believe. Unfortunately, we have made meals of the majority’s contempt for so long, we keep believing in “them,” in “it,” be it a government, an African past from which

we were severed hundreds of years ago as completely as a people could be—anything but our black American selves.

The Afro-American desire (no, demand) for equal access to the fruits of American society is one thing. Putting common sense aside and asking why white people don't just love us is another. It is the securing of effective access routes to America's fruits, based on realities at hand, on which Afro-Americans should concentrate our efforts. Belief is laudable, particularly in martyrs, but it has limited practical applications. We have focused all our extravagant attentions on "The White Man"—getting him or her to change or behave properly—too little on effectively using our own cultural strengths and capital to navigate this particular American racial minefield.

Damn the concept of The White Man—a concept as racist as The Black Man (one can't utter the former reduction without succumbing to the reductions inherent in the latter). There are quiet revolutions going on all about us. The middle class shrinks, the industrial laborer disappears, the work force becomes mobile, the two-party system weakens, the American Dream fades. It is a time for upheaval. Let's start with US this time; and then teach the rest of us (the majority) to see us as we really are, not as its cultural prejudice distorts us—rather than believing so hard that we beg, prod and plead for "them" to change when they have no impetus to do so, save their inherent goodness; and crying and screaming when they do not.

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[iv] Theodore Allen, "Summary of the Argument of *The Invention of the White Race*," (VI, par. 35) 1998.

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[vii] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 1935.

[viii] "Albert Murray's Omni-America," August 26, 2013, Harvard University Press blog.

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