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# A Country of Strangers

BLACKS AND WHITES IN AMERICA

DAVID K. SHIPLER

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David K. Shipler

A Country of Strangers

David K. Shipler is the author of *Russia: Broken Idols, Solemn Dreams* and *Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land*, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize. A graduate of Dartmouth College, he was a *New York Times* reporter for more than twenty years in New York, Saigon, Moscow, Jerusalem, and Washington, and has been a recipient of the George Polk award and the Overseas Press Club award. He was a guest scholar at the Brookings Institution, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Ferris Professor of Journalism and Public Affairs at Princeton University.

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David K. Shipler



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# Preface

Discussions of race are imprisoned by words. The words whose meanings we think we know label and circumscribe peoples and ideas, honeycombing the untamed world with an illusion of clarity and order. As if that were not enough, meanings shift constantly.

“Tolerance” is an example. Long understood by its first definition in the dictionary (recognizing and respecting others), it is now tainted in many minds by its second and third definitions (leeway for variation from a standard and the capacity to endure hardship). Understandably, black Americans do not want to be “tolerated” as one tolerates deviance or pain. Anyone who advocates tolerance today risks being misunderstood as grudgingly accepting the unpleasant qualities of another group. “Integration” is the same. Once the nation’s noblest goal, it is currently taken by some to imply assimilation and loss of identity. Words that seemed so dependable have become little mines planted along our way.

Since words are my only tools, I approach this endeavor in a spirit of careful humility, mindful of how difficult it is to capture the racial reality of America within the matrix of our vocabulary. I use “tolerance” rarely, but I do so in its most generous meaning. I devote the first chapter to exploring the dynamics surrounding “integration.” I employ the latest versions of the self-labeling that has evolved just in the course of my lifetime, from “colored people” to “Negroes” to “blacks” to “African-Americans” to “people of color,” the last embracing all who are not “white.” Since we seem to be stuck in what may be a period of transition, when “black” and “African-American” are still used interchangeably, I follow that style, mixing the two terms without endorsing any of the passion that often attaches to one or the other. Not many years from now, I imagine, this language will seem antiquated, perhaps even offensive, as the ear is trained to hear another lexicon.

Even the concept of “race” is suspect. It is too clear, too categorical to reflect the genetic whirlwind that has deposited humanity at the brink of a new millennium. Too much mixing has occurred to satisfy physical anthropologists that one or another person falls wholly within one or another racial box. Furthermore, those who call themselves “white” and those who call themselves “black” (or “African-American”) imagine their differences not merely as biological but as ethnic and cultural. Many prefer “African-American” precisely because it has an ethnic and cultural connotation, not one of skin color or race. People’s images and prejudices, which may be triggered by the physical characteristics of the other’s body, range far beyond the racial, or biological, and well into realms of ethnicity. I succumb to the necessity of using familiar words: “black,” “white,” “racial.” But much, perhaps most, of what we call “racial conflict” between blacks and whites has all the hallmarks of ethnic conflict. It does not always rely on a belief in genetic inferiority; indeed, it has become fashionable for white bigots to postulate a black *cultural* inferiority. “Racial,” then, is meant to include the swarm of ethnic tensions and interactions that infest the black-white relationship.

“White” is also an unsatisfactory term, for it encompasses a multitude of ethnic groupings and socioeconomic classes that relate to blacks in various ways. Most Americans of Hispanic origin are classified as white, but I use the term to mean whites of European descent, who still form the

country's majority, hold the power, and set the tone of the black-white aversion.

This book focuses on blacks and whites and lets the country's other ethnic and racial divides fade into the background. Volumes could be done on the prejudice and hardship faced by Latinos, Asian Americans, and American Indians and on discrimination among whites of various ethnicities; they have also been crucial in defining the American experience. But the fountainhead of injustice has been located between blacks and whites, and that legacy remains the country's most potent symbol of shame. Nothing tests the nation, or takes the measure of its decency, quite like the rift between black and white. No improvement would be felt as broadly as that between black and white; fundamental progress in that arena would reverberate throughout the other ethnic problems of the land.

I have not written a geographical study to compare South with North or East with West. Each region of the United States has its own history of racial strife that influences the present. But the South's past of slavery and de jure segregation does not exonerate the North, and the North's present of urban poverty and de facto segregation does not exonerate the South. I have sought and found common denominators at a level of attitude that transcend the boundaries of place. Everywhere I have looked I have seen a country where blacks and whites are strangers to each other.

I have avoided the extremes in this book. I have not dwelled on the hate mongers, either white or black, who get so much attention in the press, but rather on the quieter middle ground where ordinary blacks and whites attempt to live their daily lives without a rancorous agenda. This is not to dismiss the poisonous influence of the noisy bigots who disguise themselves as politicians and professors, ministers and talk-show hosts; their coded appeals to fear and their prejudices masquerading as scholarship or Gospel contaminate the atmosphere and impede true dialogue. But my preference is to listen to real people, not performers, who are rarely heard by the larger public and have something to teach us.

All the people in this book are real. There are no composite characters. Those few who did not feel comfortable with their real names in print have been given pseudonyms which are clearly labeled as such, either by quotation marks on the first reference or by explanation in the text. They, as well as those who are named, contributed immensely with their time and insights.

This book has been something of a family project. In our house there was no escape from the subject, since I was consumed with it for many years. My wife, Debby, offered perceptive judgment on racial interaction from the standpoint of mother, teacher, family therapist, and critical reader. Many of my observations originated with her. She added substantially to my understanding of what I was seeing and hearing, she made crucial suggestions on organizing the material, and she deftly took her pencil to the manuscript. Two of my children, Laura and Michael, came of age with this book; their lives have been shaped by their experiences, and their experiences have probably been shaped in part by my fascination with the problem. Laura was a constant source of ideas, anecdotes, and creative thinking about race; she read the entire manuscript and proved to be a tough and sensitive editor. Michael, who was twelve when I signed the contract and will be twenty when the book is published, acted as an extra pair of eyes and ears, providing a steady stream of vignettes and insights that enriched my understanding of racial encounters, especially among teenagers. He also made incisive comments on parts of the manuscript. My oldest, Jonathan, was well into adulthood and therefore less a captive of my obsession, but he was always a good listener to my endless tales of discovery.

Roger Wilkins helped orient me at the outset of my journey, tuning me in to the nuances of black-white miscommunication and giving me a sense of what I ought to look for on my search. At the end he read the manuscript and offered good guidance. David Burnham assisted me on police matters.

crime statistics, the case of Richard Arrington, and other aspects of the book, which he also read. My agent, Julie Fallowfield, supported me with encouragement (and chiding) through these long years and my editor, Jonathan Segal, skillfully zeroed in on the weak spots and provoked improvements.

To a larger degree than I have been able to indicate in the text, I owe gratitude to many others for their assistance along the way, including Fox Butterfield, Mary Childers, James DeLaney, Ann Grimes, Ted Hitchcock, Ronald Joe, Robert Lerman, Evan Lieberman, Charles Miller, Charles Moskos, Jim Newton, Don Offerman, Clarence Page, Dorothy Redford, Sherlynn Reid, Ron Smotherman, Lucia Stanton, Roberto Suro, and Amy Wallace. Maggie Nyabera checked Swahili translations, and a few friends and relatives let me freeload in an extra bedroom as I traveled the country: my cousin Betty Wojciechowski, Ed and Michelle Walsh, Nancy Uscher and Bill Barrett, and Tim Ratner.

I am grateful to William Diaz, at whose initiative the Ford Foundation provided me with a grant to study Teaneck, New Jersey, in the aftermath of the police shooting of a black youth. The Council on Foreign Relations and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, which sent me to lecture in various parts of the country, made it financially possible for me to get to many places where I could also do research on race.

My thinking about race and group identity has been heavily influenced by the work of my father-in-law, the late Harold R. Isaacs, whose *Idols of the Tribe* gave me the idea to organize the middle section of this book around bundles of stereotypes. The title of [Chapter 4](#), “Body,” comes from the book, and the subtitle, “Dark Against the Sky,” from Gwendolyn B. Bennett’s poem “Heritage”:

*I want to see lithe Negro girls,  
Etched dark against the sky  
While sunset lingers.*

A few sections include passages from an op-ed piece I did for *The New York Times* on April 1, 1993; my review of *Kwanzaa and Me* in the *Times* of February 19, 1995; and my piece on affirmative action in the *Times*’s “Week in Review” of March 5, 1995.

It has often been said that every American is an expert on race. I have concluded the opposite: that no American is an expert on race. Each of us has our own experience, and sometimes it is intense enough to make us think that we know the subject thoroughly. When we recognize that we do not, we will have taken the first step toward learning.

D.K.S.  
January 1997



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*In memory  
of my father and friend,  
Guy Emery Shipler Jr.*

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For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

—*I Corinthians 13:12*

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# Introduction

## *The Color Line*

Behold, human beings living in an underground den...here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move...and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave....To them, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

—Plato,  
Republic, *Book VII*

A line runs through the heart of America. It divides Oak Park from Chicago's West Side along the stark frontier of Austin Boulevard, splitting the two sides of the street into two nations, separating the carefully integrated town from the black ghetto, the middle class from the poor, the swept sidewalk from the gutters glistening with broken glass, the neat boutiques and trim houses from the check-cashing joints and iron-grilled liquor stores.

The line follows stretches of the Santa Monica Freeway in Los Angeles and Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C. It runs along the white picket fence that divides the manicured grounds from the empty field where the slaves' shacks once stood at Somerset Place plantation in North Carolina. It cuts across the high, curved dais of the Etowah County Commission in Alabama, where one black member sits with five whites. It encircles the "black tables" where African-Americans cluster together during meals at Princeton University, Lexington High School in Massachusetts, and a thousand corporate cafeterias across the country.

At eleven o'clock Sunday morning, which has been called the most segregated hour in America, the line neatly separates black churches from white churches. It intertwines itself through police departments and courtrooms and jury rooms, through textbooks and classrooms and dormitories through ballot boxes and offices, through theaters and movie houses, through television and radio through slang and music and humor, and even through families. The line passes gently between Tom and Gina Wyatt of Florida; he is black, she is white, and they both reach gracefully across the border. It tangles the identity of their teenage son, Justin, who looks white but feels black.

"The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line," W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in 1901; the prophetic words became the opening declaration of his lyrical work *The Souls of Black Folk*. In the succeeding decades, that line has been blurred and bent by the demise of legal segregation and the upward movement of many blacks through the strata of American opportunity. But it remains forbidding to black people left behind in poverty and to others, more successful, who may suddenly confront what Du Bois called a "vast veil"—the curtain of rejection drawn around those whose ancestors were brought in chains from Africa. Today, when sensibilities have been tuned and blatant bigotry has grown unfashionable in most quarters, racist thoughts are given subtler expression, making the veil permeable and often difficult to discern. Sometimes its presence is perceived only as a flicker across a face, as when a white patient looks up from her hospital bed to discover that a

attending physician is an African-American.

And so, as the close of the century now approaches, I offer this journey along the color line. It is a boundary that delineates not only skin color and race but also class and culture. It traces the landscape where blacks and whites find mutual encounters, and it fragments into a multitude of fissures that divide blacks and whites not only from each other, but also among themselves.

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Americans of my generation, who were youngsters when the civil rights movement began in the 1950s, grew up on awful, indelible images. I am haunted still by the cute little white girls who twisted their faces into screams of hatred as black children were escorted into schools. I saw for the first time that the face of pristine innocence could be merely a mask.

Here was the enemy. And the solution seemed obvious: Break down the barriers and let people mingle and know one another, and the importance of race would fade in favor of individual qualities. Blacks would be judged, as Martin Luther King Jr. was preaching, not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. The perfect righteousness of that precept summoned the conscience of America, and I remember how King translated the argument into touching personal terms when I interviewed him once for the college radio station at Dartmouth. We sat backstage in a spacious auditorium where he was to speak, and I can still hear the majestic timbre of his voice, the weariness and outrage as he told of his young daughter Yolanda seeing an amusement park near Atlanta, called Funtown. Again and again she asked to go, and her father tried and tried to avoid confronting her with the angry truth. Finally, he had to explain that she could not go, because she was not white.

The simplicity of the injustice made it seem brittle and vulnerable to attack. And the next time I saw King, at the Lincoln Memorial in that summer's March on Washington in 1963, the clarity of his call for the liberty of his dream infused the multitudes of us, black and white, who were packed together across the Mall, with the conviction that history was being made at that moment, and that the country would never be the same.

That turned out to be true, but we did not get the revolution we anticipated. As the Jim Crow segregation laws were overturned, less tractable problems were revealed, and they frustrated King toward the end of his life as he tried to bring his campaign to cities in the North. There, villainy was less easily identified. Rooted in the prejudices, the poverty, the poor education, and the culture of hopelessness that divided blacks and whites, the racial predicament proved too deeply embedded in the society to be pried out by mere personal contact and legal equality. Perhaps it was naïve to think that all that would have to happen was for people to look into each other's eyes, to give blacks the same many opportunities as whites, to open the doors. I put this to Reverend Bill Lawson, the black pastor of the Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church in Houston, who had been in the movement and had a long perspective.

"You're not naïve," he said generously. "You share what most of us share. This is a can-do country. It's a nation that came from nothing. We were people who were fleeing tyranny, and we established a frontier this little set of colonies, and out of that we built a nation which ultimately became one of the most respected nations in the world. And we've been proud of this country, and we've made some assumptions about it, one of them being that there's a national conscience, and that if you appeal to that national conscience, you will do what is right. So, everybody from Dr. Martin Luther King down to the smallest of us who was out there marching someplace believed that the American dream was

not only a reality but was a reality that was close to being fulfilled, and that all we needed to do was let the American people know “You’re in error here. And here is the right way to go, so if the children of slaves and the children of slaveholders can join hands’...” And here his voice trailed off for a moment. “So it was not a matter of naïveté. I think that it really was a matter of optimism, of good American optimism, and I think we still have it to some extent. And frankly, I’m glad that we do.”

Lawson was tall, slim, and distinguished-looking. A smattering of gray salted his short, kinky hair and he dressed carefully: light brown jacket, dark slacks, cream-colored shirt, and rust-colored tie. Settled into a deep leather chair in his spacious office, he spoke precisely about the limitations of the change induced by the civil rights movement: the public versus the private. “I think that there has been a redefinition of relationships over the last, say, forty years,” he said. “There has been, on the one hand, a push toward eliminating the old segregation laws and, on the other hand, a resistance to changing community and neighborhood patterns. So there has been a tension between what we felt was right and what we felt was expedient. There has been the allowance of public contacts. Blacks can ride in the fronts of buses or eat at lunch counters. There has not been a significant change in intimate personal attitudes. There is still some feeling that we don’t want to live too close together, that we don’t want to have too many close connections in places [where] we worship, or that we don’t want to have too much family contact. We still have some problems with dating and marriage. So in the most public relationships, there has been at least a tolerance that says, let’s each one have our own freedom. But anything that becomes more intimate or personal, we tend to have a little bit more resistance.”

In Birmingham, Alabama, an old civil rights warrior, Reverend Abraham Lincoln Woods of the St. Joseph Baptist Church, saw the movement’s accomplishments as more cosmetic than substantive. “Birmingham has gone through tremendous changes,” he said, “and the fact that we have gone from a city where blacks were shut out of the process to having a black mayor and a predominantly black city council—we now have black policemen, in fact we have a black chief now—many things have changed of that kind. But I find that in spite of what seems to be a tolerance of the races and a working together, I find still, somewhat beneath the surface, sometimes not too deeply, those same old attitudes.”

But it is behavior, not attitudes, that concerns David Swanston, a white advertising executive whose wife, Walterene, is black. He sat in his handsome town house in McLean, Virginia, one evening and took the measure of America in terms of his own interracial marriage. “It was against the law in a number of states twenty-five years ago,” he observed. “It just seems to me that this world was institutionally significantly more racist, overtly racist, than today. Now, each individual black and white within the country may be about the same place they were twenty-five years ago, as regarding interracial marriages and other issues. But it seems to me that’s very secondary to the fact that institutionally, we are much beyond that—and it’s the institutions that hurt you, that can have the impact on your lives. And by and large, if the twenty people we see in the mall don’t like it, and those twenty people wouldn’t have liked it twenty-five years ago, I don’t really care. The fact that our marriage is recognized by the Commonwealth of Virginia, that we’re not criminals, those are the areas where it just seems to me incredible change has been made.”

The disjunction between attitude and behavior was not that clear-cut for Steve Suitts, a white Alabamian in his forties, a tall man with sandy brown hair. As the executive director of an old-line civil rights organization, the Southern Regional Council in Atlanta, he had done more thinking than most whites about race. Yet before he answered a question, he considered it silently for a long time and then spoke slowly, reflectively, sometimes repeating the question or rephrasing it as he looked

down at the floor or out the window of his nineteenth-story office on Peachtree Street. “When do making people feel better about each other translate into making life better for each other?” he asked himself. “I don’t know. I think we’ve assumed...that if you could somehow get people to understand each other a little better, they would do better by each other.”

In the South, he noted, bigotry often coexisted with friendship, challenging the assumption that association tempered prejudice. “During the latter days of legal segregation,” Suitts explained, “you could always—even among the ardent, rabid segregationists—you could almost always find a caring relationship, not necessarily equal, but a genuinely caring relationship between that white and black....The paradox was that southern whites loved blacks as individuals and hated them as a group. Something beyond contact was needed. “It is a sense more of sharing than of understanding,” Suitts said, “sharing not just their lives, but sharing things that matter, like sharing power, sharing responsibilities, being placed in a situation where your future, your success is directly related to how someone of another race also performs in the workplace.” People whose interests overlap can find their commonalities, he thought. “Nevertheless, for those of us who grew up in a segregated society and who had been inculcated by segregation’s ways, both blacks and whites, it is a constant vigil to try to—even when you have those sorts of sharing experiences—to not let old stereotypes seep into new relationships.”

Unlike most other parts of the country, the South has confronted its racism and struggled through momentous change. Many blacks find white southerners more overt and easier to read than white northerners, who are often suspected of opaque duplicity. As a northerner, I find the South more complex: Liberal southern whites are the deepest and most interesting of any whites I have interviewed on race. But the transparency that blacks see in other southerners eludes me; many whites in the South sugarcoat their hostile views and exaggerate their region’s tolerance in a kind of gauzy self-congratulation, which can be penetrated perceptively by blacks with a southern background. After roaming the country, I have a strong sense that “old stereotypes seep into new relationships everywhere, not just below the Mason-Dixon Line. Geographical boundaries are intriguing but hardly decisive in describing patterns of attitude. So, in diagnosing the South, Steve Suitts spots the universal American cancer of embedded prejudices—sometimes latent, ever ready to work their will.

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There is scarcely a consequential interaction between a black and a white in the United States in which race is not a factor. Even as it goes unmentioned, as it normally does, race is rarely a neutral element in the equation. It may provoke aversion, fear, or just awkwardness, on the one hand, or, on the other, eager friendliness and unnatural dialogue. Even in easy contacts that are fleeting and impersonal—between a diner and a waiter, a customer and a salesperson, a passenger and a bus driver—race does not always drop to zero; it possesses weight and plays some role in the chemical reaction. “There is always something there,” said a young white Princeton graduate working for the *National Journal*, a Washington magazine. “It can be mitigated or it can be worsened by a lot of other factors: social class, culture, the status hierarchy in the office.” But it never quite goes away, as he realized when he observed how the mixture of race, class, and hierarchy led him to feel more comfortable with the white reporters than with the black secretaries and receptionists.

If race distorts individual relations, it also magnifies most major social and policy issues facing the American public. Poverty, crime, drugs, gangs, welfare, teenage pregnancy, chronic joblessness, homelessness, illiteracy, and the failure of inner-city public schools are usually viewed through the



racial prism. They are seen as black problems or as problems created by blacks. The most popular solutions—cuts in welfare for teenage mothers and long sentences for repeat offenders—are codes for cracking down on blacks' misdeeds. Where race enters the realms of politics, health care, economic injustice, and occasionally foreign policy (as in Haiti and South Africa), the debates are charged with an additional layer of emotion. Despite the upheavals brought by the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling against segregated schools in *Brown v. Board of Education*, by the civil rights movement, and by the resulting 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, race is still central to the American psychological experience, as it has been for more than two hundred years.

Over their entire history on this continent, African-Americans have struggled as a people in every conceivable way, short of widespread armed insurrection, to share in the pursuit of happiness. Either by social reflex or by calculation, by happenstance or ideology, blacks have been servile and militaristic, passive and hardworking, dependent and self-sufficient. They have used the church, the mosque, the schoolhouse, the university, the military, and the corporation in an effort to advance. They have tried to go back to Africa, and they have tried to function within the political system of the United States. They have tried peaceful demonstrations and violent street riots. They have tried sweet reason and angry rhetoric, assimilation and separatism. They have appealed to the nation's conscience and to its fears. It would be wrong to say that none of this has worked: Individuals have succeeded. But neither deference nor defiance has been effective for black Americans as a whole. No degree of personal success quite erases the stigma of black skin, as many achieving blacks realize when they step outside their family, neighborhood, or professional environment into a setting where their rank and station and accomplishments are not known. "I didn't come from a deprived family," says Floyd Donald, who owns a small radio station in Gadsden, Alabama. "I grew up with books. I grew up with china. I grew up with silver. My background is impeccable, so far as my education and my parents' education and their positions in life and their abilities and so forth. So I had that advantage. However, out of my community, I was just another black. You see, it doesn't make much difference about the status that a black achieves. He is black in America."

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In five years of crisscrossing the country to research this book, I was struck by the ease with which most blacks I interviewed were able to discuss race and the difficulty most whites had with the subject. I had anticipated a certain wariness among African-Americans, who might wonder why they should let a white man probe their inner feelings and painful memories. In reality, however, only one out of all the hundreds of people I met raised such a concern. She was Colette Walker, a junior at Drew University who came from Roselle, New Jersey, and sat mostly in silence through a long evening I had with black students on campus. Finally, toward the end, she told me angrily that it was useless for me to do a book. "Racism is a big business now, so they're writing these books," she scoffed. "But nobody I know will buy it. First of all, they can feed a family of three on what it costs to buy a hardcover book these days. There are no bookstores in my neighborhood. And the people who are going to pick it up and read it—they know it or they don't know it." Anybody who wants to know should talk to her, she said; she could tell them better than any book could.

The next day, she happened to be in a class where I spoke, and she raised the issue again but in a way indicating that she had been pondering the phenomenon of a white writing about race and had grown more curious than challenging. Did I really think this book would change anybody's mind? she asked skeptically. Why was I doing it? I told her that it was my way of coming home. After many

years abroad, after writing about the countries I had lived in—Vietnam, Russia, and Israel—I wanted to write again about the country I was living in: my own country. And in my own country, there was no more intractable, pervasive issue than race. I didn't know if this book would change minds or help people to think differently, but I knew that I had to do it for myself. To understand my own country, I had to attempt to unravel racial attitudes, to dig and question and try to comprehend. It was an act of discovery, and I needed to undertake it as a personal quest. She nodded, and I thought there was a little less anger in her gaze.

Otherwise, black Americans were enormously generous of spirit and time in reaching into their own experiences to lay them out for me. Gradually, I came to understand what should have been obvious from the outset: that a black person cannot go very long without thinking about race; she has already asked herself every question that I could possibly pose.

By contrast, most whites rarely have to give race much thought. They do not begin childhood with advice from parents about how to cope with racial bias or how to discern the racial overtones in a comment or a manner. They do not have to search for themselves in history books or literature courses. In most parts of America, their color does not make them feel alone in a crowd; they are not looked to as representatives of their people. And they almost never have to wonder whether they are rejected—or accepted—because of their genuine level of ability or the color of their skin. As a result, few whites I interviewed had considered the questions I put to them. Many struggled to be introspective, but most found that I was taking them into uncharted territory, full of dangers that they were quickly surrounded with layers of defensiveness.

Still, my white friends and acquaintances were always keen to hear what I was learning. The news that I was working on race was a real conversation starter, as my wife, Debby, noted after a party one evening. I would be questioned closely or told unsolicited stories in which whites were often the victims. Two white professors at a conference on international issues approached me separately to talk lightheartedly about playing basketball with blacks. One, as a boy in New York City, had gotten into a fracas as the only white on a black team and had been rescued by a huge black kid who had lifted the black antagonist off the ground and said, "Don't mess with my white hope." The memory still made him smile. The other professor had been playing a pickup game with a black who took long, inaccurate shots without ever passing to him, even when he was in good position. Finally, he and another white had decided to sit down on the court in protest. The black stopped, stunned. "We're staging a Montgomery sit-in," the white professor said. The black laughed, got the message, and started cooperating.

But other discussions were sometimes disheartening, for they revealed dimensions of attitude I had not seen before, even in people I had known for years in other contexts where we had talked about politics or Russia or the Middle East but not about race.

"Jim," a middle-aged professional who shared my interest in Russia, took a long detour during a phone call one day to make me understand how little initiative black children had. At a PTA meeting, it seemed, he and other parents had complained about poor teaching of grammar and writing at the children's elementary school. In the tradition of American voluntarism, they had been invited to do something about it, so three of them had agreed to teach a writing course several mornings a week for fifth- and sixth-graders.

Only one black pupil had signed up, Jim said, pausing to let the significance of that fact sink in. (He did not say how many white children had failed to enroll.) And when he had told the class that each child would need \$21 for a grammar book not provided by the school, the black girl had informed him

that under some scholarship arrangement with the school system, she was not required to pay any extra fees. Jim had then bought the book for her himself, but she had never returned to the class. I was bitter. He noted that two Chinese girls had come and worked hard; in ten years they would probably be at Harvard or Yale, he said, and the black girl would be yelling for affirmative action.

The coldness of this man's tale was startling. He gave no evidence of having asked himself whether other black students, hearing in advance of the fee, had been discouraged from attending, whether they had been gently steered away by teachers who believed they couldn't benefit, whether early academic defeat had already robbed them of the confidence they would need to push themselves and embrace such a course. Nor did he seem to realize that he might have inadvertently embarrassed the black girl who could not afford the book. I asked if he had spoken to her later or inquired as to why she hadn't returned. He said no. His conclusion needed no further research: The incident clearly reinforced all the stereotypes of blacks lacking drive, he declared. To bolster the indictment, he went on to describe two adults, one black and one white, he had recently met working in Ukraine. Their intellectual energies were so disparate that only one of them—guess who?—had bothered to learn the local language. So carrying his baggage with him, Jim saw race alone as the governing variable in his two examples, and armed with these two cases, he confirmed the very prejudices that had shaped his perceptions in the first place.

It was disturbing enough to see a mind that seemed intelligent in other areas trading in simplistic images of race. But equally troubling was how invisible his biases had been through the few years I had known him, how mistaken my sense of him had turned out to be. If he had learned from his teaching experience that images were valid, I learned that they were only shadows on the wall; my earlier picture of him proved as deceptive as his was of blacks. It was a lesson in the insidious camouflage of bigotry.

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Many whites are confused over how they should be thinking about racial issues now. Some adopt an air of smooth indifference, an emotional distance. They often hesitate to say what's on their minds lest they be accused of racism. Others work quietly, sometimes in frustration, to improve black opportunities in their companies or universities or military units; indeed, I have discovered that more sincere effort goes on than ever gets reflected in press portrayals of America's racial problems. But nothing adds up to a neat sum anymore. How does a white person—even a liberal—sort out the anti-white prejudices, the black self-segregation, the manipulation of history, the endless message of white guilt, the visible achievements of prominent blacks coupled with the deepening poverty and violence of the inner cities? Across much of the spectrum of white America run common themes of distress and impatience with the subject of race, a national mood of puzzlement and annoyance.

This is salted with a dash of fear, an anxiety among some whites that the society is disintegrating into warring camps, that blacks may rise up against the system that has oppressed them, or that violent class struggle lies just over the horizon. The apocalyptic vision was held by David Berg, a white lawyer in Houston. "Every major city, including this one, is a racial powder keg, ready to go off," he said. Accommodation between the races was only a thin veneer, he thought. "I promise you, in twenty years, I'm telling you, this country is headed toward revolution if we don't do something about the inner city. If the poor people of this country, black and white and brown, ever realize that what unites them is greater than what divides them, we're in terrible trouble."

That kind of talk seems more prevalent among whites than among blacks, although my daughter

Laura, heard some of it from students at Spelman, the black women's college in Atlanta, where she spent a semester during the second trial of the white policemen in Los Angeles who beat Rodney King, the black motorist. If the cops were not convicted and imprisoned, a couple of black students predicted, rioters the second time would not confine themselves to black neighborhoods but would take guns into white areas. In a course on revolution in Cuba, Nicaragua, and elsewhere, some black students raised the possibility of revolution in the United States; the professor, also black, discounted it as impossible, given the alignments of power.

The question most often asked me by whites is whether racial matters are getting better or worse. It is an odd inquiry for people to make about their own country. I am used to being asked by Americans how things are going in Russia or in the Middle East, where I have lived and traveled and they perhaps have not. But to have so little feel for the situation right at home betrays the corrosive nature of our racial legacy: how it eats away at our equilibrium, our sense of direction, our navigational skills. We simply do not know where we are, and we are not even quite sure where we have been.

What's more, there is no neat answer to the question. Sometimes I ask in return, "What is your reference point? Slavery? Jim Crow? The height of the civil rights movement? The last five years? Are we measuring economic success or personal attitudes? Are we counting black college graduates or anti-black hate crimes? And what if we decide that pockets of hopefulness are tucked into the midst of despair? Shall we feel virtuous and relax?"

If any sum can be reckoned, it is one of acute contradiction. In the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan had about two million members; by the mid-1990s, the estimated membership was down to between 2,500 and 3,000, out of 20,000 or 25,000 altogether in various hate groups, including skinheads and militias. Furthermore, prospects have improved for blacks with high skills or advanced degrees in the sciences, business, law, medicine, and other professions as more and more white-run institutions have grown eager to find talented African-American men and women to serve diverse constituencies, improve profits, and demonstrate a commitment to "equal opportunity." But other black people, dragged down by the whirlpool of poverty and drugs, have fewer and fewer exits. The United States has more black executives and more black prison inmates than a decade ago.

The answer may be that things are getting better and worse at the same time. Racially, America is torn by the crosscurrents of progress and decay. Practically every step forward is accompanied by a subtle erosion of the ground beneath.

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Anyone who left the United States a couple of decades ago and returned today would be stunned by the visible prominence of so many African-Americans. Thirty-five years after Mal Goode became the first black network newscaster (on ABC in 1962), black achievers are all over television screens as correspondents, anchors, actors, comedians, talk-show hosts, and musicians. But every point of progress has a counterpoint: Blacks are also featured on the eleven o'clock news in handcuffs, in pools of blood, in mug shots, in police sketches of wanted men.

Fifty years after Jackie Robinson first took the field for the Brooklyn Dodgers, highly paid black athletes have the run of the baseball diamond, the football field, and the basketball court, where they project their appeal far across racial lines. But even in the positions they play and the commentary the sportscasters sometimes deliver, blacks are nagged by old expectations that they will be more physical than cerebral.

American letters today would be fundamentally poorer without black poets, novelists, and playwrights. Gwendolyn Brooks, who has written twenty books of poetry, became the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize, in 1950. Alice Walker then won the Pulitzer for *The Color Purple*. August Wilson, the playwright, won it twice, for *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. Toni Morrison received the Pulitzer for her novel *Beloved* and in 1993 was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Walker, Morrison, and other black writers, including poet Maya Angelou, have spent long periods on *The New York Times*' best-seller list. Angelou was invited by President Bill Clinton to compose and recite a poem at his inauguration in 1993; the result, "On the Pulse of the Morning," called powerful upon America to celebrate its diversity. The same year, Rita Dove, also a Pulitzer winner, became the first African-American selected by the librarian of Congress as Poet Laureate of the United States.

In some minds, however, such writers are not quite part of the mainstream: Their works are not on the shelves in the major department of "Literature" at Borders Books & Music, a large and excellent stocked store north of Bethesda, Maryland, but are kept in a separate, smaller section labeled "Black Literature." Numerous colleges also segregate black writers, including them not in regular courses of American literature but in "black literature" classes taken by relatively few white students.

In government, firsts have been scored so often that the news value has diminished even if traditional expectations have been foiled. Republicans have tried hard to find moderate conservative blacks. Twenty-five ran for Congress in 1994, the largest number in history; two of them won seats. In the same year, the Republican governor of New Jersey, Christine Todd Whitman, chose a moderate—James H. Coleman Jr., the son of a sharecropper—as the first black nominee to the State Supreme Court. In 1991, Republican President George Bush, replacing Thurgood Marshall in the "black seat" on the United States Supreme Court, nominated Clarence Thomas in an intriguing concoction of racial and ideological politics. Bush's conservative predecessor, Ronald Reagan, appointed General Colin Powell as the first black national security adviser, and Bush then elevated him to be the first black chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Other inroads have also been made. In 1983, John Charles Thomas, a partner in the Richmond law firm that helped defend the constitutionality of school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*, became Virginia's first black Supreme Court judge. In the same year, Guion S. Bluford Jr. became the first black astronaut to fly in space, and in 1992, after a total of four blacks had gone into orbit, Dr. Mae C. Jemison became the first African-American woman to do so. Dr. David Satcher became director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. President Bill Clinton named four blacks to his first-term cabinet, the largest number in history. And his administration broke the white man's club at the upper echelons of the FBI when a woman, a Hispanic man, and a black named Paul M. Philip were appointed assistant directors. Nonetheless, the FBI's ranks remained hostile to nonwhites according to complaints filed by some black agents.

Very gradually, African-Americans have increased their representation in elective office. In 1992, the first election after the redistricting that followed the 1990 census, the number of blacks in Congress jumped from 26 to 39, and then to 41, the highest in history, after the 1994 election (and slipped to 40 after 1996, then back to 39 after 1998). Between 1970 and 1993, blacks holding elected positions at the federal, state, and local levels went from 1,469 to 8,015. The number of black state legislators rose from 307 in 1979 to 511 in 1993 (amounting to 8.2 percent of all state senators and 7.1 percent of assemblymen); members of city governing bodies went from 1,697 to 3,181 in the same period; school board members from 1,085 to 1,617; and mayors from 48 in 1970 to 338 in 1993. Despite these significant gains, however, blacks counted for only 1.6 percent of all elected officials in the country.

And the Supreme Court had begun whittling away at the practice of drawing electoral districts improve blacks' chances for representation.

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The half-full, half-empty glass in elective politics exists also in academia. Even to recite the gain is to sound a note of regret at how belated the change has been. After 104 years, the *Harvard Law Review* elected its first black president in 1990. After 123 years, Smith College became the first prestigious college in the Northeast to appoint a black president, in 1994: Ruth Simmons, the daughter of a Texas sharecropper. As of 1990, there were only 133 black presidents among the 2,433 colleges and university presidents in the United States.

Many institutions of higher education are scrambling to attract the best and the brightest blacks, undergraduates, and the result has been a narrowing gap between the percentages of whites and blacks with college degrees. In 1940, four times the percentage of whites as of blacks had at least four years of college; by 1996, the multiple had dropped to 1.79 times—24.3 percent of whites against 13.5 percent of blacks, age 25 and over. But 26 percent of blacks in that age bracket still lacked a high school diploma, compared with 17 percent of whites.

Furthermore, few African-Americans go on to graduate work. While black people make up about 12 percent of the country's population, only 4.7 percent of the college professors are black. And the number of blacks earning Ph.D.'s has remained low—1,393 in 1994, just 4.4 percent of the total, and rarely in the sciences. In 1990, not a single black received a Ph.D. in applied mathematics, molecular biology, elementary particle physics, oceanography, philosophy, ecology, geology, or biophysics.

The economic portrait also contains a strange duality. From 1940 to 1990, as the nation's black population doubled, the number of blacks in white-collar jobs rose nearly ten times, from just under 200,000 (mostly teachers, clergymen, and small storekeepers) to nearly 2 million, and they spread into a wide variety of professions. But the burgeoning of the black middle class and the departure of upwardly mobile people from inner-city neighborhoods have also distilled the remaining ghetto populations into a concentration of poverty and social corrosion. Median family income in such neighborhoods has declined; unemployment has grown.

Some resolution of traditional wage inequities has taken place between blacks and whites, especially for women. Black women with high school diplomas earn nearly as much as white women (\$966 per whites' \$1,000), and those with four years of college virtually the same (\$1032 per \$1,000). By contrast, black men with high school diplomas and college degrees earn only \$794 and \$799, respectively, for every \$1,000 earned by white men.

Overall, the income distribution of black families has not changed much; if a graph is drawn showing the percentage of families along a scale above and below the median annual income for blacks, the result is anything but a bell curve. At the lower end of the earnings spectrum, on the left, the line looks like a mountain peak, representing a large number of impoverished households. Moving to the right, where earnings exceed the median, the line drops precipitously, indicating how few blacks have made their way above the working class. Moreover, the shape of the curve shows little shift between 1979 and 1996, despite a gradual reduction of the black-white gap. In 1996, according to the Bureau of the Census, 28.4 percent of black Americans lived below the poverty line, compared with 11.2 percent of whites; in 1979, the proportions were 31 percent and 9 percent, respectively.

The median income for black families, figured in constant dollars, rose slightly between 1970 and 1996, from \$21,151 to \$23,482, while white families' annual earnings moved from \$34,481 to \$37,160 in the same period. This basic stability in incomes masked a deteriorating situation that is especially acute for blacks: the widening disparity between the median incomes of married couples and female

headed households. In 1979, black families headed by women with no husband present earned on average 40.8 percent of what black married couples made; by 1996, that percentage had dropped to 37 as the number of female-headed households mushroomed.

A significantly greater disparity between the races is revealed by the gap in family net worth—the savings and property that represent a cumulative history spanning generations. Overall, the most recent figures show the median net worth at \$43,800 for white households and \$3,700 for black. Even blacks and whites with roughly the same income possess such different financial assets and real estate that placing them in the same class of material well-being, as the income statistics generally do, is misleading. The median net worth of those considered middle-class (\$25,000 to \$50,000 in annual income) is \$44,069 for whites and only \$15,250 for blacks. At all other levels, too, the asset gaps are much greater than the income gaps. Consequently, blacks who make it into the middle class often have no cushion; they rightly feel that they are barely hanging on to their newfound status, that a single reverse could drop them back into poverty.

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These are some of the tangible facts that mark the contours of race in America, like rock outcroppings in a turbulent sea. Among them run the deep, abiding currents of racial attitude, which draw on old perceptions and beliefs that submerge but never quite dissipate. In covert form, they can still prevent black youngsters from getting into honors classes, black managers from the circle of decision making, black politicians from commanding solid white support. Fears and assumptions, often far beneath the surface of propriety, tend to prevent honest discussion from taking place in classrooms, corporate conference rooms, and congressional committee rooms. When it comes to race, we do not know how to talk to one another. “We are a country of strangers, and we are having a great deal of difficulty with our differences,” says actress Anna Deavere Smith, “because ultimately, we lack the ability to look at specific human beings.”

This is not a book on statistics or issues of public policy. It is about people and the way they think about blacks and whites and their images of one another, about what happens when their paths intersect. It is a journey along the crucial fault line of America.

It is a book about the present, not the past, but it begins by tracing roots and finding wellsprings. **Part One**, “Origins,” opens with an exploration of the competing impulses of integration and separation, the reference points by which the races navigate as they venture out and withdraw, the biculturalism that many blacks perfect as they move back and forth between the white and the black worlds, and the homesickness some blacks display for the all-black comfort of separateness. There comes a portrayal of interracial families and their multiracial children, who are expert guides through the clashes created by racial blending in a nation that craves simple dichotomy. The final chapter of the first part measures the burden of history, examining the differing ways in which whites and blacks now carry the weight of that troubled legacy.

**Part Two**, “Images,” dissects blacks’ and whites’ stereotypes of each other, laying out the distinctive components: the physical body we see, the mental qualities we imagine, the moral character we attribute to the other and ourselves, the violence we fear, the power we seek or are loath to relinquish.

**Part Three**, “Choices,” recognizes that we have the power to shape our racial landscape—not to eliminate every tension, surely, but to reconstruct the texture of our relationships. Racial strife is not some storm sweeping inexorably across our land; it is of our making, and we can choose something

else. This closing section examines nuances of racism and methods of coping. It assesses the complexity confronting blacks and whites alike as they struggle to define and recognize the racial motivations that may or may not be present in a thought, a word, a deed. It documents the silences that prevail, the listening that isn't done, the conversations that don't take place. It looks at the chemical reactions between victims, including blacks and Jews, blacks and Koreans. It explores the human dimensions of affirmative action, the intricate contacts and misunderstandings across racial lines among coworkers, neighbors, policemen, soldiers, and others who interact daily. It focuses on the expanding universe of attempted remedies, including diversity workshops and sensitivity training especially in the military. The final chapter considers the invisible privileges of whiteness, the black-white chasms that result, and the contradictions of caring and neglect that mark America's approach to its racial dilemma.

A key test for any society is whether or not it is self-correcting. And to be self-correcting, it must first be open and truthful about itself. This work is dedicated to that purpose.



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