

### 3 White Lies, Black Myths

#### Rape, Race, and the Black "Underclass"

Micaela di Leonardo

Indifferent nature caroled and flickered, a vault of green above me. I was lying on my back at the bottom of a ravine, sometime in the early evening of a sunny July day in a suburban New Haven, Connecticut, neighborhood, and I had just become another statistic.

"All right, I'm leaving. But I'm not going far. If you make a sound, I'll come back and cut your head off." My rapist disappeared up the ravine. No reason to believe him—he was just trying to immobilize me while he escaped—and besides, I felt a desperate need for the safety of human companionship. I pulled on my running clothes and scrambled up after him. I ran out into the middle of the street and jumped in front of the first passing car. "I've been raped, please help me," I pleaded to the older white couple as the woman rolled down the passenger window. "I can't help you," she snapped, and the car sped away. I scanned the houses across the street and pelted up the steps of the only one with a car in the driveway. A black woman in her thirties in a white uniform opened the door and let me in the moment I explained myself. "Please just be quiet because my old people are asleep and I don't want them to know about this." She phoned the police, brought me a glass of water, and when she saw me standing in front of the mirror, picking leaves out of my hair and staring at my cut and bleeding face, advised me not to clean myself up before the cops came. "You know what they're like." Our eyes locked. We knew what they were like.

But I was frantic with the leftover adrenaline of the rape experience. My mind was rushing and tumbling still, reviewing the mental gymnastics I'd gone through, the strategies I'd played to keep the rapist from killing me. Now that I was safe, I wanted him caught. I persuaded my protector to leave the house with me to question a young black couple doing yard work next

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door. Had they seen a man running up the street? No, they hadn't seen anything. There was a silence, and then the guy fixed me with a look: "Was he black?"

"Yeah," I said, "he was black."

I am white.

Or am I? Postmodern-era rhetoric lauds the disclosure of writers' "positionality," since—in the decidedly unpostmodern bromide—"You see from where you stand." I personally don't believe we live in the cacophonous but noncommunicating Tower of Babel universe that genuine adherence to the determinism of positionality would envision. The thrust of twentieth-century anthropology, my chosen field, is the gallant and detailed documentation of our species' capacity to stretch cognition, to empathize with others' positions and apprehensions. But I *do* believe that the "I was there" documentary style is most persuasive in the current climate. So let me persuade you that I have stood and seen from many positions in the American race/class/sex tangle. You might say I'm a hologram of American racial tension and interracial harmony, of class privilege and resentment, of feminist triumph and female victimization. (I'm also an academic specialist on race, class, and gender in America, past and present; nowadays, given right-wing attacks on "tenured radicals" and the unfortunately attackable work some of us have put out, that and a quarter will get you a pack of gum.) So, a report from the holographic front, starting with the image of gender/race/sexual violence.

When I scrambled up that ravine on July 16, 1987, the white couple who spurned me, the black woman who took me in and succored me, and the black man who queried my rapist's race certainly knew I was white. So did the black police, male and female, who came screeching up within minutes. But they and others—many others, for years afterward—also perceived me, iconically, as White Rape Victim of Black Man, the modern Northern embodiment of the Southern rape-lynching complex. I hated to spoil their fun, but I was something else: the former rape crisis counselor and feminist professor who had read the scholarship on rape, who knew the statistics, and who therefore ended up, with no small sense of irony, lecturing cops, coworkers, relatives, and friends alike on the tiny percentage (perhaps one in nine) of all sexual assaults that fit the heavily symbolic strange-black-on-white-woman model. Hell, I had taught classes at Yale on the topic, in those arcadian prerape days when my effervescent teaching assistants joked that I was "into violence against women." And to add to my statistical knowledge, I had been sexually attacked by a stranger and date-raped by an ex-boyfriend—both white—and had been sexually harassed on the street by literally hundreds of men, almost all of them white.

Knowledge, however, does not necessarily command emotion. Among the many violent reactions I had in the weeks following the rape—including despair, helplessness, a sense that my life was over—was a visceral, desperate fear of all strange black and brown men. Walking alone in Mount Pleasant, an inner-city Washington, DC neighborhood, I had a panic attack as it seemed that each of the dozens of Central American men streaming toward and past me on the sidewalk was about to pull a knife and stab me. (I knew, of course, that my country's foreign policy had, metaphorically, pulled a knife and stabbed them.) I flew to Northern California, my childhood home, to stay with a kindly friend in Santa Cruz and to heal among the redwoods. Walking on the campus's fennel- and bay-scented paths above the Pacific, I experienced what I decided was an uncomfortable but salutary shift: I was afraid of *all* the strange men I encountered. And in yuppie-Santa Cruz, nearly all those men were white.

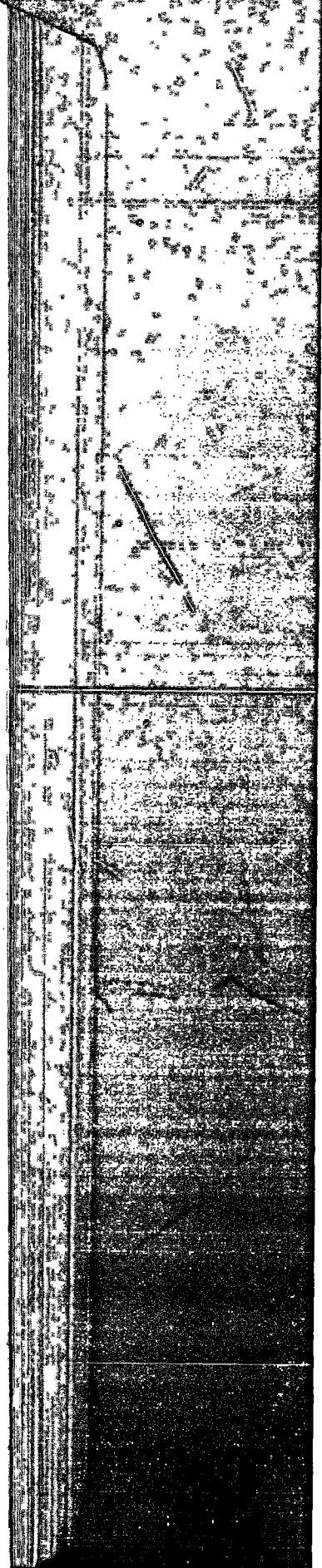
In the months after the rape, the Sinatra ballad "I'll Never Be the Same" ran like a tape loop through my head. I never will be the same. I am permanently more fearful, more anxious, more ready to believe that the frail threads of civility, health, and happiness will unravel; that murder and mayhem, cancer, heart attacks, car and plane crashes, are behind that thin veil, just around that sunny corner. But I know, intellectually, that the world did not change when I was knocked down that ravine. There's a nasty right-wing aphorism from the 1960s: a conservative is a liberal who's been mugged. But individual experiences shouldn't change well-thought-out opinions. I

didn't need the rape to become a feminist; and, in corollary, the rape could not make me a racist. What we need as American citizens, it seems to me, is what my post-rape interlocutors—many of whom were black—needed: a bracing dose of the facts. I'll never forget the poignant scene in which a friend's lover, a working-class black man I was meeting for the first time, offered me a heartfelt apology for his race. His ignorance of the facts of race and rape was far more painful to me—and to him—than were the racist assumptions of some of my white coworkers. That ignorance and those assumptions, though, are mixed indissolubly in our American stew of white racism, racial self-hatred and whistle-in-the-dark racial defense. But our collective national supper of ignorance has many more courses than race and sexual violence; our daily diet of lies and half-truths is so abundant, comes from so many sources, that it seems impossible to reform. But let me try. We are living in the midst of a terrible new gestalt, as bad as the old Southern rape complex—or worse, because now there's almost nowhere to hide. The discourse is no longer regional but national, and, unlike the last time around, it is widely believed across class, race, and former political divides. After all, William Julius Wilson, a liberal black sociologist, is the architect of “underclass” theory. But in order to address this issue, let me add another angle of diffraction to my autobiographical holographic image, to enter into the real world of gender, class, and race in America.

In the years since the rape, I've become another sort of statistic. A black colleague and I fell in love and married, and I inherited a black teenage son and a large, lively, and far-flung black family. I now “pass” in many directions, living out the real Italian American/black alliance so far beyond Spike Lee's cartoonish and misogynist vision. I've become an “honorary” black American, warmly welcomed among kin, friends, and in public places. (There are few more courteous environments in America than black working-class bars.) And I see and feel in both black and white. At one and the same time now, I fear for my purse and person around young kids, who are often black and brown—and fear for my husband's and son's safety at the hands of white mobs and police. And not without cause: each of them has been threatened by whites and harassed unjustly by police. In a final ironic twist on my own rape experience, a frantic white woman called Yale library security guards on my middle-aged professor husband when he stooped down to retrieve a book on a shelf near her.

My newly expanded understanding of white danger to black Americans, however, is not purely altruistic. In the eyes of many whites, I am now, as they say, tarred with the same brush. I, not my husband, was the victim of the sly, sexually insinuating remarks made by male and female faculty at a Southern university where we were being recruited for jobs. And the new racist right has a special place in its heart—and its plans—for me and my intermarrying sisters. William Pierce's *The Turner Diaries*—offered for sale, according to Elinor Langer in *The Nation*, by every far-right mail order business in America—is a fantasy of the violent overthrow of the U.S. government by “patriots.” The entry for “August 1, 1993” describes in loving detail the Los Angeles streetscape after the Day of the Rope: miscegenating women hang “from tens of thousands of lampposts,” their “grisly forms” hung with placards stating “I defiled my race.” Just as I had never given out my last name when I volunteered as a rape counselor (rapists had deliberately targeted pioneering women in crisis centers), we decided, when we married, not to place announcements in newspapers. It was bad enough that my husband received hate mail at the University every time he gave an interview or published an op-ed piece.

But white Americans have been reading and hearing about the daily insults, discrimination, and dangers minority Americans face for three decades now. Unfortunately, no matter how many careful statistical studies of mortgage discrimination are published, no matter how many police beatings are videotaped, such publicity is mere sideshow to the main event in mass media and white public life since Reagan: the unremitting representation of black and brown violence, crime, laziness, and sexual profligacy. This discourse is our current national morality play, and it authorizes certain standard white scripts—scripts that are no less intensely felt at the grassroots for



being written and disseminated from above. There are more or less genteel lines in our race play, dinner theater vs. soap opera versions, but they all tie directly into our new American orthodoxy, belief in an urban "underclass." This term has gained currency in both yellow journalism's accounts of inner-city "jungles" of drugs and crime and in the rarified reaches of quantitative social science. It's a grab-bag word with no fixed meaning. Writers have variously defined underclass membership in terms of residence (inner city), employment and housing status (illegal only; tenements, shelters, or the streets), reproductive status (illegitimate children, no attentive fathers), criminal status (non-white collar only), and drug use (preferably crack cocaine). Media stories abound of "wilding" youth, crack babies, shoot-outs in high schools, teenage drug dealers with gold chains, beepers, and BMWs; and the ubiquitous news standbys of whites mugged, raped, and killed by street criminals of color all conduce to our public sense of American cities as menaced by dark, savage hordes.

Writers explain the underclass according to political allegiance. Conservatives rely on the new scientific racism, proclaiming that black and brown Americans are culturally or even genetically inferior. They were "conditioned by 10,000 years of selective breeding for personal combat and the anti-work ethic of jungle freedoms," according to Marianne Mele Hall, the notorious Reagan administration appointee, and were therefore unfit for civic life. Great Society programs just "spoiled" them, encouraging a sense of entitlement that led to laziness, drug use, and crime, particularly crime against whites. Liberals focus on the deindustrialization of American cities, painting a historical picture of the simultaneous flight from inner cities of jobs for the unskilled and of middle-class minorities, leaving behind a jobless black and brown population with no role models to check irresponsible behavior. Both conservatives and liberals pat themselves on the back for their new "toughness" in admitting minorities' "moral failures" and encourage invidious comparisons with so-called model minorities. These are usually Asian Americans, but sometimes particular Hispanic populations such as Cubans (but not Puerto Ricans) and Mexicans (but only in Chicago, not California, where *they're* the underclass) will do.

Model minority rhetoric is actually a very old American movie script, produced each generation with new titles and character names. When I was an anthropologist among my own ethnic population in the 1970s, I discovered an entire scholarly literature purporting to investigate American economic mobility that was actually in the business of assigning ethnic report cards: Poles B-, Italians C+, Irish B+, Jews A-, etc. The grades differed according to the criteria used (including—surprise!—the ethnicity of the evaluator), but the key principles were constant: ethnic populations' differential economic statuses were solely due to their "culturally determined" differential behaviors. Sound familiar? The whole schmear, to stay in period, has simply been transposed from intrawhite ethnic to black versus Latino versus Asian. My people, in other words, used to be the underclass.

My family's history, in fact, helps to explain what the shift in blame-labeling really means, helps to answer the heartfelt we've-been-through-the-Depression white ethnic cry: Why can't they be like us?

Well, why can't they? What exactly are and were "we" like? Members of my father's family certainly suffered, worked hard, and were exploited on the road to social mobility. My grandparents were immigrant agricultural laborers and cannery workers in Northern California. Each of their eight children also worked in fields and canneries. The Depression transformed ordinary immigrant poverty into acute suffering. Children were pulled out of school and set to work or to mind even younger children. When they whined that they were hungry, my grandmother told them, with baleful realism, to "eat knuckles." There was an organizing drive and a strike at the cannery, and my grandfather crossed picket lines to bring home a meager salary. My teenage uncle Tony, the oldest son, unable to bear the severe work regimen imposed on him by his parents, ran away and went on the bum. Years later, my father looked up from the school playground to see his disheveled brother staring at him through the holes in the fence.

But then, like the twentieth-century god from a machine, came the war. The canneries went on overtime schedules to cope with government production demands, and there was abundant work for everyone. Even better, Hammond Aircraft in South San Francisco geared up for war construction, and my aunts Ann and Rosalie quit the cannery and took the commuter train daily from Sunnyvale. Yes, Rose (but never Rosie) was a riveter. Uncle Tony got work as a carpenter, was classified as part of essential war production, and spent the duration stateside. Uncle Sam enlisted in the Navy, and my father, trying to beat bad eyesight into the Air Force, went to Hawaii after Pearl Harbor to do construction work—the folklore was that Island physical standards were lower. He finally gave up and enlisted in the Army.

No one died, no one was even wounded. My father and uncle Sam were demobbed. Sam, married, with a son, got work as a car salesman. My father, who had desultorily attended San Jose State before the war (I've seen his transcript, which gives credence to all those tales of pool halls, reefer, and hitchhiking to San Francisco), moved back home and enrolled in a special University of Santa Clara combined A.B./law school program for returned vets. His law school class was a panoply of the Santa Clara County ethnic Catholic population—Irish, Italian, Eastern European, Spanish (but not Mexican; they were beyond the pale until the civil rights movement). He married my mother, who supported him by working as a department store buyer through the end of the program. My aunts, shut out of their high-paying wartime jobs, joined the burgeoning ranks of postwar women clericals. Lucille and Jeannie took advantage of the high quality, low-cost California junior college system to gain further business skills, and Rosalie, who had married a small businessman, took night school classes to become a bookkeeper.

Everyone married, everyone bought houses on the GI Bill, often in new developments around the Valley that one of my uncles, a contractor, helped to build. Most had children who, with the exception of Tony's parochial school phalanx, went to well-funded public schools. And, even with largely working-class careers, the Silicon Valley downturn, the national recession, four divorces, and two early widowhoods in the original sibling group, the entire family today is in relatively comfortable straits. Individuals are working toward or are on pensions. Houses are valued at up to twenty times their original prices. Two families have sold out and retired to cheaper Central Valley locations on the proceeds.

It's obvious that my kin benefited from the growing Santa Clara Valley economy from the 1940s on and from the formerly liberal California government, which took responsibility for maintaining public services and infrastructure—highways, public transportation, libraries, schools. I myself went to Berkeley as an undergraduate and graduate student, working my way through most of my graduate career and emerging debt free, thanks to then cheap rental housing and a tuition bill that today looks like the price of a loaf of bread. My father's legal career got an early boost precisely because the expansive postwar state government condemned vast tracts of farmland for roads and public buildings. Panicked immigrant farmers flocked to his office, where he adjusted them to the inevitability of losing their land, fought the state to jack up the selling price—and took a healthy cut for himself.

But we all profited in many other ways that aren't so obvious. Proposition 13, for example, was voted in just in time to roll back my relatives' property taxes—but after their children had benefited from good public schools. Now that cash-strapped California has pulled the plug on schools and whole districts have gone belly up, most of my cousins can afford to pay for private education for their children. And as California has gone, so has the nation. Buying into the housing market, relying on public transportation, getting unionized jobs with decent pension plans—it's all the same story. What was, is no longer. Those attempting to enter the mobility queue—not because they just got here but because they've been kept off until recently—just aren't facing the same circumstances. For many of them, it's as if the Depression never ended.

Well, and what if it hadn't?

If the Depression hadn't ended, if gnawing poverty, a sense that things might never get better,

a feeling that they were appallingly low on the status hierarchy (the local WASP doctor forbade his daughter to date my father), had gone on year after year, a horrified social worker entering the Di Leonardo household would without doubt have certified it "underclass." After all, they were ten of them crowded into a three-bedroom house; they received government surplus food and clothing; children were both forced to work illegally and often left unsupervised. (During one afternoon my father persuaded my spunky Aunt Ann to climb into a spare tire and rolled her down a hill. Then there was the time that two of the aunts, little girls, were trying to cut a rock with a knife, and the knife slipped.) My grandfather drank home-made wine to excess and, in his frustration, beat his children. During one thrashing my father shouted, "But Pop, I didn't do anything!" "You will," was the grim reply. Nor was drug abuse confined to my grandfather. During another unsupervised lull, one of my aunts (who would not like to be named), a toddler, got into the wine cache. She was found later, drunk as a skunk, beating her round Di Leonardo skull against the wall and shouting, "My head is an egg and I can't break it."

These are the stories they tell around the dinner table, at rosaries and weddings and Christmas parties, with consummate narrative skill. I can see them: I'm in my teens and twenties, my father is still alive, and he and my uncles and aunts, one after the other, shout that no, that isn't the way it happened, you sit down and I'll tell it. Lovely Ann jumps up, her brown eyes sparkling with intelligence. How beautiful, how stylish, how witty they all are—and how much I love them. It is only years later that I realize how painful are the materials they have transformed rhetorically into affectionate familial humor.

But what about those current model minorities? Granted that my people (and, by extension, all working-class American white ethnics), after much suffering, got a well-deserved, government-funded leg up during and after the war—a leg that wasn't there for minorities. Granted that after years of interethnic comparisons, nobody much cares anymore whether Irish, Jews, Poles or Italians have higher median incomes, better families, or lower crime rates. Nor do scholars now glibly claim, as did Harvard historian Stephen Thernstrom in 1973, that Irish Americans "lacked any entrepreneurial tradition" or that Italian Americans lived in a subculture "that directed energies away from work." What about current groups, like Cubans and Koreans who, without extra help, seem to be such hard-working, prosperous good citizens? Isn't it true that they just have better cultures?

Well, no, it isn't true—unless "culture" means being floated upward on a tide of U.S. foreign policy dollars. Pre-Mariel Cuban migrants were the elite of that country, arriving with cash and cushy educational training; and, as Joan Didion and others have noted, were bankrolled at very high levels, as "anti-Castro activists," by the CIA. You can start a lot of small businesses from the CIA welfare rolls. Korea's "economic miracle" was stimulated by heavy American anticommunist military spending. Some of its beneficiaries, in terms both of excellent educations and pioneering grubstakes, have largely replaced American Jews in the inner-city small entrepreneur niche.

These considerations of access to cash and class background rarely occur to whites when they wave Asian, Cuban, and other groups' economic report cards in black, Puerto Rican, and Mexican faces. But equally important to our current morality play are presumptions about how American cities have declined, and about black and brown predilections to vice as the "urban underclass."

Underclass ideology, like all Big Lies, employs partial truths to propel its narrative. (The Nazis, after all, told the truth about German Jewish prominence in trade and finance. They simply failed to admit that anti-Semitic law and practice had squeezed Jews into those occupational niches.) It's certainly true that American urban areas and the United States as a whole have deindustrialized, that upwardly mobile minorities have dispersed from former ghettos, and that unemployment, street crime, and female-headed households are more common in black and brown poor neighborhoods than elsewhere. But just exactly how did this state of affairs come to pass and what does it really mean? Here underclass writers fall back on those mainstays of the fuzzy-minded under-

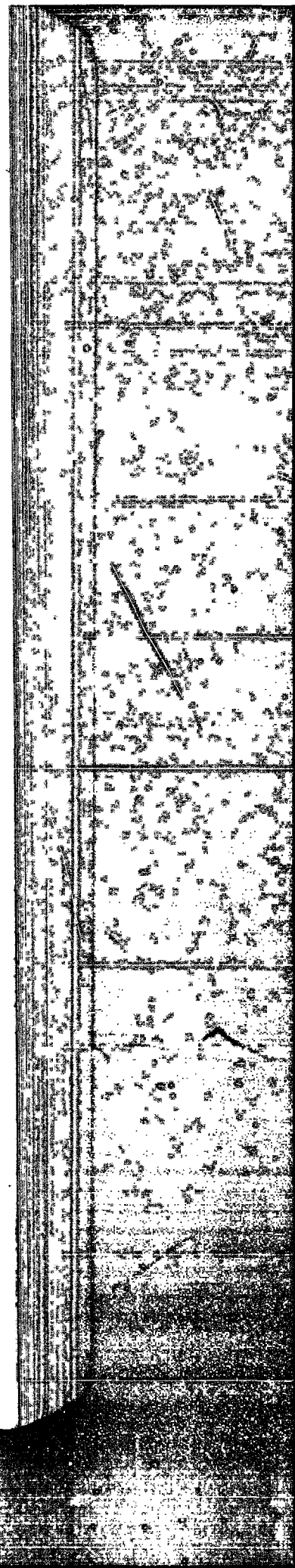
graduate, the use of passive verb forms and of reifications to avoid dealing with the complexities and stark politics of real human agents.

The wide array of postwar government subsidies that so coddled my relatives and other white Americans not only did not help minorities: they literally made things worse for them. The FHA deliberately fostered segregated white housing until the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968. Government subsidies for suburban infrastructures not only encouraged the often-remarked hemorrhage of higher-income taxpayers from cities but also drained infrastructure funding from urban areas. And then that much-heralded government infusion of cash, urban renewal, actually exchanged cheap housing for hospitals, sports arenas, and convention centers—all nice things to have, no doubt, but not if they put you out on the street. (Ninety percent of all the housing destroyed by urban renewal was never replaced, and two-thirds of those displaced were black or Hispanic.) The real estate speculation spiral of the 1970s and 1980s was the poison cherry on the arsenic cake for poor minorities' housing aspirations, pricing them out of the private housing market just as the federal government abandoned its commitment to the provision of low-cost housing. We white, middle-class Americans know what housing price inflation has meant in our lives—higher and higher shares of income siphoned off, being unable to buy a house or apartment, or becoming so ridiculously house-poor that you can't afford a meal out. Just imagine, then, what it has meant for those not only poor or working class but also minority, since it's well documented that high percentages of banks, landlords, and realtors still discriminate by race. My relatives had to endure a great deal in their youth, but never this particular combination of disastrous economic shift and overwhelming social bias.

It's the same story with jobs. Just as civil rights laws come into effect, boom, employers move good working-class jobs to the suburbs and abroad, unions lose ground and accept cutbacks and givebacks. And then schools: Jonathon Kozol points out that American schools are now more segregated—both by race and by resources—than they were in the 1960s. And of course higher education now costs much more and delivers less, in terms of position and salary, than it did thirty years ago. Even those minorities who persevere find their rewards appallingly low: black men with four years of college make, on average, the same salaries as white male high school graduates. Law firms hire very few blacks—or minorities, period. Even that bastion of political correctness, the American academy, provides little refuge. Disproving white male Ph.D.s whining about affirmative action candidates taking all their jobs, the proportion of all American professors who are black has risen only one-tenth of one percent since 1960.

All of these "statistical patterns" and "economic forces" are the results of hundreds of thousands of *intentional* decisions over time. Individuals and government agencies act both to exclude minorities and to defund public venues where they are concentrated. Against such overwhelming odds, a few years of half-hearted affirmative action has been just spitting into the wind. Black and brown comfort, convenience—lives themselves—just don't seem as valuable to whites. And they act accordingly, from the White House to the state house to the courthouse, townhouse, and tract house. But what about the argument that minorities have just brought discrimination on themselves by, in the black phrase, acting ugly? After all, aren't blacks and Hispanics simply more likely to have bad families, use drugs, commit crimes, be on welfare when they could be working?

The short, surprising answer is no. The longer answer engages our perceptions of social phenomena through class and racial lenses. Returning to my *paesani*: Progressive Era reformers, social scientists in the 1950s, even into the 1960s, perceived Italian American and other ethnic families as purely pathological. Edward Banfield dubbed the southern Italian *Weltanschauung* "amoral familism" and saw the contamination spreading in the United States. With the white ethnic movement of the 1970s, though, "ethnic families" were reworked in the public mind as warm, cozy, and close—as opposed to "disorganized" black families and "cold" WASP families with their newly absent "selfish, professional" feminist wives and mothers (never mind that white ethnic women were quite prominent among early feminists). So a great deal depends on spin, and the political power to enforce your spin on the public mind.



Our national family spin has undergone some instructive curlicues in the past two decades. In the 1970s we heard a great deal about the American family crisis: that turned out to be about rising divorce rates and women working outside the home. Although rightists still engage in some obligatory hand-wringing, American mass media have now accepted as *faits accomplis*, the ubiquity of divorce and remarriage, blended families, and working mothers. Single motherhood, pioneered by entertainment figures, is also widely accepted, despite Dan Quayle—as long as the single mother is a white professional. Here we enter the two-tiered system: in other words, what's sauce for middle-class whites is not sauce for working-class and impoverished minorities. But as a public, we don't even have an accurate sense of what sauces we're judging. Most Americans, for example, believe that we are witnessing an "epidemic" of black teenage pregnancy and that women on welfare have many children, possibly to qualify for increased benefits. But black teenage birth rates have been going *down* for more than three decades, and the majority of women on welfare (who aren't black, anyway) have only one or two children, fewer than women *not* on welfare—not to mention that increased benefits wouldn't even keep you in diapers. It's true that black women tend to have their children at earlier ages than do whites, but University of Michigan public health professor Arline Geronimus has proven, through careful quantitative work, that having babies earlier doesn't make poor women poorer. In fact, given the accumulated physical stresses of extreme poverty, early childbearing may be better for the health of mother and child and takes advantage of grandmothers' energies before they become too run-down to help out. The point, one would hope, is to raise poor people out of poverty, not to prevent them from reproducing at all. There is overwhelming global demographic evidence, in any event, that raised standards of living, especially women's perceptions of rising social and economic opportunity, lead to later births and smaller families.

These are hard facts, but facts mean little in the face of race, class, and gender bias encouraged from the Oval Office on down. As well, we've been coached to deplore the minority female-headed family, the absent black father, and the drug-taking mother who endangers her fetus's health. But we're scapegoating minorities for being part of larger national trends. The number of *white* female-headed families is rising fast; large proportions of *white* men at all income levels (the higher the level, the higher the proportion) don't pay child support and abandon their children after divorce. And a recent study indicates that pregnant women of all races take drugs that may endanger their fetuses at the same rates, but doctors report black women to the authorities ten times more often than whites. In addition, black women are *less* likely than whites to smoke when pregnant. Even the image of the drug-taking, minority high school dropout is a lie: studies indicate that fewer black than white kids take drugs, and they have virtually the same high school graduation rates.

What really is true is that most minorities are much poorer than most whites—kept poorer by the concatenation of tens of thousands of individual white actions that maintain the condition despite often valiant efforts to escape. And it's also true, that poverty encourages family discord and channels criminal tendencies toward the street. You don't get many chances to run million-dollar white-collar scams from the projects.

Finally, it's really true that many American teenagers of all races and economic statuses are disappointing human beings. But they are so for particular, societywide reasons. They've come of age in the "mean season"—an era of rightist reaction, income bifurcation, and political demobilization—and they're frustrated, angry, and often dumb with it. Every cohort matures physically at a slightly earlier age, is even less able to handle adult responsibilities, and is subject to an even greater mass advertising onslaught. Many want the expensive commodities that are deliberately targeted at them, and if their parents can't buy them, some proportion of kids will steal or rob to get them. (Mercer Sullivan documents, in a New York study, a cohort of working-class white boys who regularly nugged the most vulnerable group in their neighborhood: recent Polish immigrants stumbling out of local bars on weekends.) Antifeminist backlash has hit them hard, and too many adolescent boys of all races and classes identify successful masculinity with exploita-



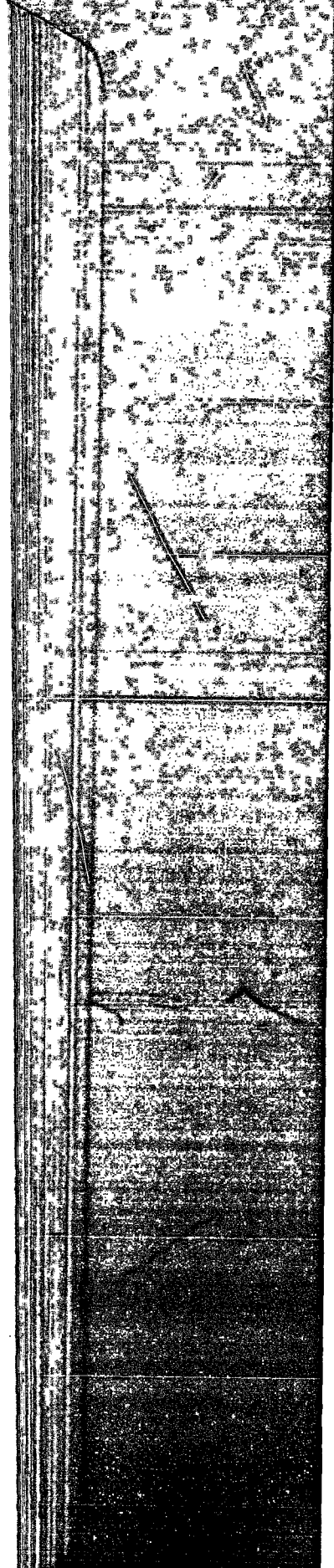
tion of and contempt for girls and women. You didn't like 2 Live Crew? Try Guns 'N' Roses, a phenomenally popular white metal band with explicitly sexist, racist, and homophobic lyrics. From an adult perspective, a significant proportion of all adolescents today are Martians. They wear funny clothes, they like terrible music, they're loud, stupid, vulgar, and disrespectful. The real question is: whose Martians are they? Journalist Ken Auletta claimed that one indication of the existence of a minority underclass was the propensity of adolescents to "walk five abreast . . . seemingly unaware that they are monopolizing the sidewalk." But Yale undergraduates used to shove me right into the gutter with great regularity. Now I'm at Northwestern, where the scrubbed-face, corn-fed students bike and rollerblade on sidewalks all over town, cannoning into the local elderly so often that there is talk of outlawing them (the kids, not the elderly) within a defensive perimeter. But no one claims that elite college students exhibit savage behavior and need (either or both) special role models or preventive detention. We just don't perceive "our" Martians the way we perceive "theirs."

It's not only a matter of perception, but of resources. Affluent white families are able to spread a class net under their deviant, self-destructive, criminally inclined, or just plain dull offspring. Fat camps, computer camps; military schools; high-class drug rehab; hospitalization for anorexia and bulimia; SAT, GRE, LSAT, and MCAT courses; lawyers who swing parole; fines and community service instead of jail time for their clients; entrance to colleges by virtue of family alumni and donations instead of accomplishments—need I go on? I have a file of newspaper wedding announcements detailing the strength of the upper-class safety net: children who clearly didn't even manage to graduate from some fifth-rate school, whose parents then ensconced them in family business sinecures or bought them horse farms or antique stores to run.

My own early inadvertent trampolining on the class net gave me a palpable sense of its resilience. It was 1965. I was fifteen, intellectual, antiwar, rebellious, cloistered by parental strictures and dull suburban residence. My friend Nina, doyenne of the local Unitarian youth group, invited me to an exciting party for local SNCC workers. Since my parents would never have allowed me to attend, we arranged a "sleepover." The party was a bust: the SNCC-ers looked down their elderly interracial activist noses at us. All the kids with cars left early, and the rest were stranded miles from our homes. One boy with a motorcycle set off to ferry one kid home, intending to come back for the rest of us in turn. The cops caught us waiting on the street, enjoyed themselves in elaborate insults of our hippie appearance, and carted us off to the Campbell police station. Terrified of my parents' reaction, I gave a false name and a friend's phone number, hoping that his mother would rescue me. But then not trusting to fate, I determined to try to rescue myself. We'd been dumped, unsupervised, in a waiting room while the cops went off to phone. I got up and tried the door. Unlocked. I flew like a bird from a cage, and began a five-hour trek home, through backyards and side streets (I found out later the entire town force was out in full cry after me), steering by hit-and-miss, asking directions once from a man lying under his car doing a night-owl repair job and once from a Chinese newsboy who lectured me on the grid layout of American streets. At dawn I triumphantly let myself into my parents' home, well prepared with a cover story. My father appeared, tousled and haggard, in the hallway. "So. You really made the festa, eh?" My friends had given me up. The cops were on the way.

Then ensued the requisite conference during which the police decided to take me to juvenile hall and charge me. Halfway there one cop turned around in the seat to say, with the consummate *Schadenfreude* I've come to associate with *Vanity Fair*, "So your parents may have a big house but you're going to juvey anyway." He was wrong. Rich kids can even get away with pissing off the cops. My father had me sprung by noon.

I am arguing for a class and race corrective to our tendency to see the minority poor and working class as profoundly different beings from our white middle-class selves, as not quite equal citizens, as people who must behave better than the rest of us just to escape censure. I am *not* saying that we should "excuse and coddle" criminals. I've lived in liberal and leftist circles for



more than two decades, and never yet have I heard anyone say that robbers, rapists, and murderers shouldn't be jailed. Given an adequate weapon at the time, I would cheerfully have killed my rapist. I even become furious with litterers and have been known to slam the occasional umbrella down, on the hoods of cars stopped in pedestrian crosswalks. What I have heard, and what I know to be true on the basis of scholarship—as well as common sense—is that highly stratified economic and political structures give rise to high levels of property crime. Change those structures and you can reduce that crime, just as gun control would slash the murder rate, just as genuine equality for women would reduce incidents of rape and battery—just as real oversight could have prevented the already wealthy from ripping us all off in the S&L, BCCI, HUD, and Wall Street frauds. While the corner mugger is terrifying and may physically harm us, white collar criminals are just as common, and their financial damage to the commonweal is many orders of magnitude greater. Doctors run Medicare mills; scientists fake their data; lawyers bilk old ladies; insurers transfer annuities to companies that go bankrupt, erasing thousands of people's pensions; car dealers defraud manufacturers and customers, and the literate general public is mutilating precious public library books for profit at crisis rates. So who's acting ugly?

We're so accustomed, though, to public sneering against "knee-jerk" liberals that we need to change venue to tell the story straight. Imagine yourself in Victorian London, a city of grotesque poverty and shameless wealth. Vast armies of prostitutes promenaded the streets, alarming the wives and daughters of the bourgeoisie. Public drunkenness—of men and women, even of children—is common, and street crime so ubiquitous that, according to *London Labor and the London Poor* chronicler Henry Mayhew, individuals specialize in stealing and ransoming the dogs of the wealthy, in "child-stripping" (as Dickens's sinister Mrs. Brown does to Florence Dombey), in removing lead from housetops, in stealing handkerchiefs and brooches, and in throwing coal off river barges to be retrieved from the mud.

The immigrant Irish bulk large among the poor and criminal, thus seeming to legitimize theories of their racial inferiority. Prominent, progressive-seeming Victorian writers are as vilely racist toward them as are *soi-disant* liberals toward the black and brown poor today. Thackeray asked, "Have they nothing else to do—or is it that they *will* do nothing but starve, swagger and be idle in the streets?" Arthur Young wrote that Irish prefer "drinking, wrangling, quarreling, fighting, ravishing, etc." Disraeli himself wrote in *The Times* of London that "this wild, reckless, indolent, uncertain and superstitious race have no sympathy with the English character. Their fair ideal of human felicity is an alternation of clannish broils and coarse idolatry."

Sound familiar? Equally familiar is the common bourgeois analysis of the situation: the poor were "demoralized" by charity, which should be ended to force them to toil honestly, and greatly needed the renewed proximity, as behavioral models, of "residents of a better class." But with historical hindsight, we know that economic growth, rising real wages, and the Labour government's provision of subsidized housing, health care, and education swept away all these "moral failings"—until Thatcher re-created them with widespread poverty and homelessness in the 1980s. A similar story with more complicated demographics can be told about the white poor in the United States in the same eras. How then can we be so criminally callous as to mouth the cruel, self-righteous, and empirically bankrupt language of the Victorian victim-blamers? Another clarifying mode of approach, one that makes use of living memory rather than historical research, is the analogy between race and gender bias. Now the race/gender analogy (likening women to oppressed minorities) is, as I frequently warn students, inherently limited and dangerous. If women are like blacks, then who the hell are black women? Most women live intimately with men; native-born racial minorities, now that they are rarely servants, are largely domestically segregated from whites. And so on. But like chemotherapy, the race/gender analogy may be poison but can be used therapeutically when there's a cancer on the body politic.

The year 1970 was a heady one for American feminism but not for me, child bride to a much older professor, desperately trying to ape her sophisticated elders. It's time for after-dinner con-

versation at a Berkeley hills dinner party. Our hosts are urbane belletrists; our fellow guests, an up-and-coming liberal historian and his nonworking wife. The historian expresses himself firmly on the subject of "women's lib": how ridiculous! Our host supports him: when we observe "those women in supermarkets"—dull creatures waddling up the aisles with screaming babies and piled carts—how can we imagine that they have intellectual potential?

Later that evening the historian's wife takes me aside to explain, with tears in her eyes, that she can't possibly go back to school or to work for some years to come. She can't trust her husband not to beat the children in her absence.

How hard can it be to see the analogy? Just as our host despised those fat housewives for not having his class and gender privilege, too many whites and upper-status minorities despise poor black and brown people for not already having been born into middle-class households. Beneath many a waddling housewife's carapace was (and is) the potential to become a doctor, a lawyer, a corporate chief—even without losing weight. Why do we so often assume that Shandra and Tyrone, Isabel and Hector from the projects haven't the same potential? Just as only some women have yet been able to benefit economically from feminist reforms, just as it's clear we're in the middle of a serious gender backlash, so for only a minority of minorities is "equality of opportunity" anything more than a sick joke.

Finally, those bombastic alpha males at the dinner party fully included the females around the table in their contempt for the housewife in the supermarket. We may not have waddled, but we were expected to quack with the rest of the ducks. No more. We know that women vary among themselves as much as they differ from men. Women are serial murderers, child torturers, thieves like Leona Helmsley—and I don't hang my head in shame. In the 1970s, one of my working-class paesans said, "Oh when I read about a criminal, I just pray that his name doesn't end in an e, o, i, or a." But in the 1990s, Italian Americans don't feel soiled by John Gotti's existence. No, that uneasy stance has been bequeathed to blacks and some Latins. When will we progress sufficiently that we don't identify far-flung, variegated minority populations as if they were tiny, homogeneous units?

There is another, more benign, but no less wrong, interpretation of racial minority lives—the contention of "cultural difference." Proponents, especially those concerned with educational issues, adjure us to understand that poor blacks in particular don't think, don't talk, don't behave the same as the rest of us and need special coaching toward assimilation. Or perhaps we need special coaching to be "sensitive." Now, I'm an anthropologist, and my guild *owns* culture; we invented the damned term. But it's become a Frankenstein monster, rampaging across the landscape of national life. Sure, poor minorities are culturally different from whites; but they're also culturally different from each other, and whites are culturally divided too. On the one hand, we're all Americans, we all watch television, we all know who Madonna is. On the other hand, we live in different regions of a large, sprawling country, and we associate with one another along lines of class, race, gender and sexual preference. Have you made a catalogue phone order recently? Chances are you talked to a white Southern woman (the companies can hire them cheaply). If you aren't Southern yourself, you probably found her a little hard to understand. But did you think, "Boy, does she need to assimilate to the rest of us"? No, you probably thought she had a cute accent, reminiscent of mint juleps. Region counts. Outerborough Jews and Italians sound more like outerborough blacks and Puerto Ricans (hey, just listen to Rosie Perez) than like white Chicagoans. White Texans sound more like black Texans than like white Iowans. Social status counts even more. You can buy your way up from "dirty Spic" to "charming Spanish gentleman." Most of all, though, what counts is whether individuals *want* to understand one another, see a benefit in putting effort into it, feel a likeness to one another. Want to, or are forced to. Some anthropologists taped an argument between two black adolescent boys in the early 1970s, just at the point of militant switchover from Negro to black. One boy kept repeating, "I'm not black, I'm reddish brown." His frustrated interlocutor finally invoked the bottom line: "Inna white man's eyes you black."

And that's it. The real key to the perception of cultural difference is politics. If populations wish to see themselves as alike because of a common experience of discrimination—or a common perception of group superiority—they will do so. No matter how much effort it takes, they will learn to move their bodies, their tongues, their brains in new ways, all the while protesting that they have always been thus. Or, of course, they can simply ignore the palpable differences among themselves and proclaim a “common culture.”

But if we wish to see a population as distinct from ourselves, we will complain bitterly that we don't understand them and demand that “they” assimilate to some television ideal of middle-class whiteness. So the one cultural marker all black Americans have in common is not “black English,” not signifying, not rapping, but the frustrated knowledge that whites think they're inferior.

In the early 1960s, my father told me with great emphasis of a local white attorney known for civil rights work who happened to be mugged and beaten by blacks. At the hospital, the press moved in like sharks, gleefully asking him how he felt now, after being attacked by “those people.” With great, dignified contempt, the lawyer enunciated through his wired jaw, “It wasn't a feast of giggles.” Nothing much nowadays is a feast of giggles, and what we all need is that attorney's ability *not* to be the “liberal who got mugged,” his ability to distinguish between individual experience and larger social realities. We need not to romanticize, not to play down, not even to forgive street crime, but to speak honestly about and act strongly against the criminals who segregate and further impoverish minorities and so set the stage for street crime—in our names, and with our tax dollars.

I've offered up the multiple facets of a personal hologram, different triangulations of race, class, and gender from the 1930s to the present, from California to Connecticut and points in between. But frankly, to my mind, autobiography is really just *shit*. You could be a white male: you could grow up in Alaska, North Dakota, or Vermont; you could have dated only whites with last names like Jones or Smith; you could be nearly albino yourself; and still grasp the nonreality of the “underclass,” still send back the poisoned courses of our national race supper. All that's necessary is to overcome our collective bad faith, to admit, in detail and with the political will to change, how public policy coddles whites and squeezes minorities. Part of that admission involves giving up our two-tiered sexism, part of it mandates understanding the paradox of race as simultaneously real and socially constructed, part of it turns on how thoroughly government—whether under Democratic or Republican hegemony—shapes all of our social and economic lives.

My father used to tell a wonderful dialect joke in which the paesan faces the judge in the courtroom: “A judge-a, I beena here thirty year now, my children they tell me I got to getta the citizenashippa. I know George Washington-a, I lovva this country, but I can no spikka the English too good. I don know if I can passa the test.” And the judge leans down from the bench and says, “Don ju worry. In thissa court, you gonna get your citizenashippa.”

In a very real sense, the minority poor haven't yet gotten their citizenship. But to what court can we turn in these parlous times?

#### POSTSCRIPT, 1996.

A whimsical greeting card from the 1970s declares “Things are getting worse,” and opens to the request, “Please send chocolate.” In the four years since this piece was published, things have indeed gotten worse: American incomes have become more unequal, the poor are poorer, government is doing less than ever to achieve equal rights, and “common sense,” as evidenced by media clichés and politicians' statements, is more overwhelmingly reflexively racist, sexist, and mean spirited than at any time since the 1960s. Obviously bogus notions that have been repeatedly disproven—such as *The Bell Curve's* claims of race-linked intelligence—receive vast media attention; while heartbreaking, government- and elite-caused inequities—such as widespread homelessness and unemployment—continue to be ignored or attributed to the actions of their

victims. No amount of chocolate could recompense this mean season.

These appalling developments are connected to shifts in what the late Marxist literary critic Raymond Williams called "structures of feeling"—embodied ideas, intellectualized emotions that powerfully frame the ways in which we collectively apprehend human social reality. Our American structures of feeling, in the face of two decades' unremitting war against the poor, are characterized by "compassion fatigue"—a collective weariness of, a desire to avoid taking responsibility for rising human misery in our rich country and abroad. But compassion fatigue arises in particular in boomerang response to the false framing of "compassion" itself as the appropriate response to poverty and unequal opportunity. There is nothing wrong—indeed, there is a great deal right—with feeling empathy with the poor and a desire to do individual good works to ameliorate their lot. But the actions of individuals, in the long run, cannot even begin to overturn the governmental creation and enhancement of poverty. Only forcing government to change its labor, finance, housing, and social welfare policies can reverse our country's production of poverty. Moreover, compassion depends too much, in our cultural context, on the notion of "innocent" victims—on morality plays—rather than on clear thinking about historical shifts and relations among law, finance, real estate, and labor, and their effects on aggregated individuals, whether or they seem as cuddly, as innocent, as dolphins or baby seals.

This confusion of responses to individuals and to media stereotypes—the gangbanger, the minority male rapist, the pregnant crack addict, and the "good" white ethnics of the past who were never feckless or criminal and "made it with no help"—with real social analysis, a genuine consideration of the political economy of race, ethnicity, and gender in the past and present United States, was the impetus for my piece. It struck a chord in readers, and *The Village Voice* was flooded with requests to duplicate it for course and organizing use. Many individuals wrote me personal responses. The most affecting was from a progressive woman whose parents were immigrants from Eastern Europe:

I am 75 now. (yes, 75 yrs.) And, I see a society that has turned its back on understanding others. That is not their interest. All we hear is the rhetoric of anger, hate, excuses and rationale. . . .

I trained to teach deaf children (at Columbia Univ.) My first job was at Maryland School for the Blind, a residential school for blind and deaf children. But when I got there I discovered the black blind and black deaf children were housed in the back—in old, dilapidated buildings, far from the beautiful grounds, far from the white blind children—up front. I taught the black deaf children. The heat was turned off at 10 PM. . . .

As a result [of the witch-hunts of McCarthyism in the 1950s] we have people who are ignorant, misinformed, dis-connected, and victimized. They are constantly manipulated—by the media, by politicians, by so-called leaders. And, they applaud automatically to the rhetoric of "patriotism," "violence," and any other weapons.

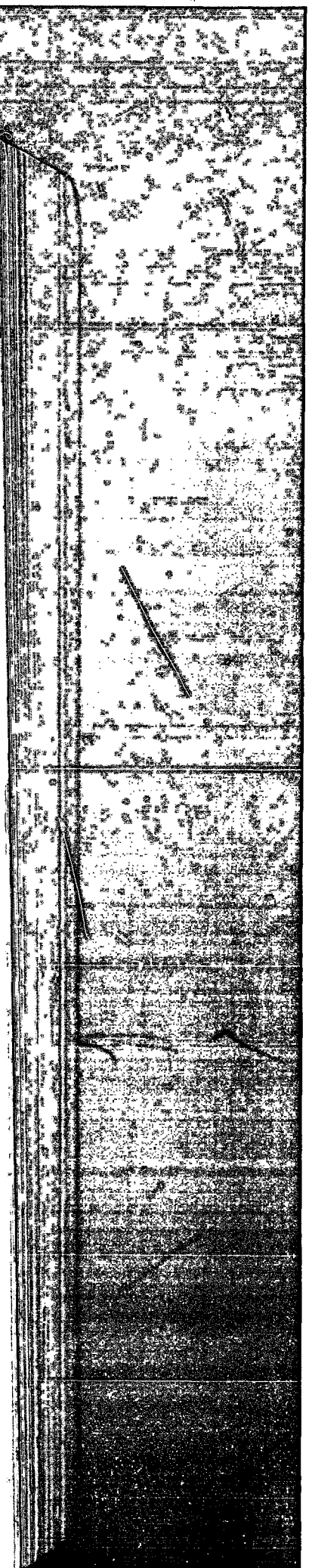
What a waste.

Interesting and instructive as well, though, were the negative responses, particularly the white racist mail. A Louisiana man wrote that I had "studied too many books filled with distortions," and

I felt sorry for her . . . such as her prejudice towards people of the South . . . and her warped views of society when it comes to the police, welfare, and racial attitudes of America. It was obvious she has no knowledge of what goes on in the Deep South . . . especially Louisiana.

He went on to laud former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke's "messages about crime, welfare, and high taxes," while expressing dislike for Duke the person.

An anonymous, handwritten letter extraordinarily exemplifies the frame of mind I wrote against:



I hope I can enlighten you on few things that for all your rhetoric and statistics, you seem to overlook or are unwilling to see . . .

What New York blacks especially fail to understand is that unfortunately human nature goes by one bad apple spoils the whole bunch. I personally believe that anyone who is willing to commit to education and perseverance can achieve their goals no matter what their problems or race.

Also, I think you should be ashamed for degrading your race when we have taken responsibility for the wrongs our ancestors (*not us*) committed. The entire white race is not responsible for the fear blacks have *earned* or for the few misguided white bigots who have committed racial crimes. In spite of that or the statistics anyone quotes, we all know the truth and see everyday that the largest crimes statistics are black on black or black on white. I suggest you remember that the next time you write an article based on half-truths and personal bias . . .

A Concerned Queens Woman

Note that both texts misstate the article's arguments; ignore all the historical material, the race/gender analogy, all considerations of governmental policy (except the man's tossed-off reference to "police and welfare"), and my clear anticrime stance. They attribute my perspective, which they misrepresent as "anti-South" and "antiwhite," either to "books filled with distortions" or to a personal relationship. The "Queens Woman," in her indignation at my degrading my race, fails to notice that the piece is a paean to my dead father, who was most certainly white. Both writers exhibit a deep refusal to credit scholarly work, a kind of militant anti-intellectualism that allows individuals to imagine that political notions need not be justified with reference to the real world beyond personal anecdote. This is even more ironic, given my emphatic and repeated point that I was using the memoir form only to lend emotional force to facts and analysis that might otherwise be ignored as boring.

But this anti-intellectualism is not limited to white racists (who often, of course, appear more "genteel" and "intelligent" than these letter writers); it is also characteristic of black nationalist apprehensions of social reality. A black woman journalist wrote the *Voice* (and I excerpt according to "fair use" provisions):

I'm not an honorary black person. I'm a real one. Therefore, I have very little patience with people like di Leonardo who feel that they know what our problems are, and how to deal with them. Black people have a historical problem with white people attempting to define them and telling them what to do. . . . We already have to deal with racism. Add white paternalism to that and it's no wonder we can't get together among ourselves and work it out.

I responded:

[This woman] "read" my race and marital status, not my article, which had nothing to do with guilt, paternalism, or "telling blacks what to do." She seems unconcerned with my main theme, minority poverty and the race- and gender-biased policies that have created and maintain it. "Real black people" like Clarence Thomas, Thomas Sowell, Louis Sullivan, Glenn Loury, Shelby Steele, Stephen Carter, and Samuel Pierce have participated enthusiastically in constructing "spinning," and enforcing those policies. You can't just read out from appearance to politics. And denying whites the right to speak out against racism just lets them off the hook.

I wrote, of course, about "honorary blackness" and "passing" for rhetorical effect, not to "co-opt" black culture—an entity whose homogeneity I took pains to disprove. (And many black readers wrote to thank me for the article; I was even invited to appear on Black Entertainment Television.) But I think a larger issue is being joined here, in all three letters, one that also surfaced in friends' reports on some classroom responses to the piece. That issue is the triumph of

identity politics in American public culture, of mistaken notions of the literal embodiment of truth.

Identity politics, or the appropriateness of "speaking from experience," without reference beyond the self, as a woman or man, gay or straight or bisexual, black or Latino or Asian or other minority, has become ubiquitous in American life over the past two decades. It derives from the obviously democratic impulse to credit "voices" that had theretofore not been heard in public culture, as well as from the phenomenological insight that knowledge itself is intersubjective—produced through affect-laden human interactions, apprehended differently depending on individuals' social locations and varying social situations.

But the problems with identity politics are manifold. Many critics have pointed out the ways in which it elides class differences and thus allows self-interested conservative members of particular populations to dominate the airwaves, claiming to "speak for" all blacks or all gays or all women, and so on, while ignoring those who are working class or impoverished except to adjure them to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. It is also anti-intellectual, participating in the historical amnesia of American public culture concerning earlier, strongly felt "identities"—such as union membership—for which millions fought and died. It denies the need to, even the possibility of getting beyond the self, of considering aggregate human behavior, capital flows, governmental policies and their entailments. It thus truly assumes a Tower of Babel in which groups can never communicate or act beyond their "primary identities."

And finally, identity politics is always doomed to failure both because it denies the need to organize nonmembers for particular political goals, and because of its essentialism, its falsification, oversimplification of the workings of identity even in the present. Barbara Epstein has tellingly noted that "a politics of identity encounters not only the problem of the fragility of particular categories of identity, but the fact that everyone occupies various categories at once. One may be female and white, or black but male; virtually everyone is vulnerable to some charge of privilege." Identity politics, we might say, assumes an oversimplified body, one that can be socially marked in only one way. This is not how human beings live or ever have lived.

The real key here is our willingness to think about how our socially marked bodies intersect with the rest of the material world, how they are differentially housed, fed, employed, educated: about economic functioning, government policy, institutional structures, and aggregate human social behavior. The only way to construct and test arguments about these phenomena—phenomena that channel all our personal experiences—is to learn enough about them so that we can newly see the ways in which they determine the built environments in which we operate and channel our varying opportunities and constraints, the differing trajectories of our daily lives. For this reason, and to give readers access to the sources of all my specific claims, I offer below a list of books and articles on the topics about which I wrote.

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