TES IN AMERICA BLACKS AND WH PLER THE PULITZER PRIZE

A Country of Strangers

Blacks and Whites in America

David K. Shipler



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

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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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

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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 only 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; these 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 Preface xi

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, as 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 judgments 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; it has 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,

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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 Smothers, 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 Rattner.

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 that 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 12, 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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A Country of Strangers

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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 sidewalks from the gutters glistening with broken glass, the neat boutiques and trim houses from the check-cashing joints and irongrilled 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 Tony 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 an 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.

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 Dart-

mouth. We sat backstage in an auditorium where he was to speak, and I can still hear the majestic timbre of his voice, the weary outrage as he told of his young daughter seeing an amusement park near Atlanta, called Funland or Playland, as I recall. 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 as 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 on 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 to 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 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 more 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 signifi-