

THINKING BEYOND RACE

There is no question that blacks have had a harder struggle than most other groups in America. But is race still the greatest obstacle to their progress? The question itself is a sensitive one. Ten years ago, sociologist William Julius Wilson created a furor when he claimed that economics was a greater problem for blacks than race. Received wisdom dies hard. Shelby Steele here argues that the reluctance to think beyond accepted formulas is not only lazy thinking; it is a formidable obstacle to black advancement.

by Shelby Steele

I am a fortyish, middle-class, black American male, with a teaching position at a large state university in California. I have owned my own home for more than ten years, as well as the two cars that are the minimal requirement for life in California. And I will confess to a moderate strain of yuppie hedonism. Year after year my two children are the sole representatives of their race in their classrooms, a fact they sometimes have difficulty remembering. We are the only black family in our suburban neighborhood, and even this claim to specialness is diminished by the fact that my wife is white. I think we are called an "integrated" family, though no one has ever used the term with me. For me to be among large numbers of blacks requires conscientiousness and a long car ride, and, in truth, I have not been very conscientious lately. Though I was raised in an all-black community just south of Chicago, I only occasionally feel nostalgia for such places. Trips to the barbershop now and then usu-

ally satisfy this need, though recently, in the interest of convenience, I've taken to letting my wife cut my hair.

I see in people's eyes from time to time, and hear often in the media, what amounts to a judgment of people like me: You have moved into the great amorphous middle class and lost your connection to your people and your cultural roots. You have become a genuine invisible man. This is a judgment with many obvious dimensions, many arrows of guilt. But, in essence, it charges me with selfishness and inauthenticity.

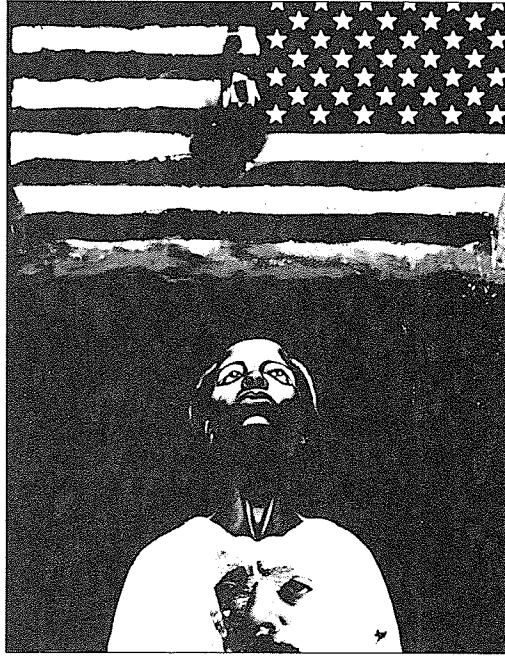
At one point in my life I romanticized my situation, thought of myself as a marginal man. The seductive imagery of alienation supported me in this. But in America today, racial marginality is hard to sell as the stuff of tragedy. The position brings with it an ugly note of self-insistence that annoys people in a society that is, at least officially, desegregated.

For better or worse, I'm not very marginal. In my middle-American world I see

people like myself everywhere. We nod coolly at each other when we're stopped at traffic lights, our eyes connect for an awkward instant in shopping malls, we hear about one another from our white friends. "Have you met the new doctor at the hospital... the engineer at IBM... the new professor in history?" The black middle class is growing in size. We are often said to be sneaking or slipping or creeping unnoticed into the middle class, as though images of stealth best characterized our movement. I picture a kind of underground railroad, delivering us in the dead of night from the inner city to the suburbs.

But even if we aren't very marginal, we are very shy with one another, at least until we've had a chance to meet privately and take our readings. When we first meet one another, we experience a trapped feeling; it is as though we had been confronted by a set of expectations that could rob us of our individuality by reducing us to an exclusively racial dimension. We are a threat, at first, to one another's uniqueness. I have seen the same well-dressed black woman in the supermarket for more than a year now. We do not speak, and we usually pretend not to see each other. But when we turn a corner suddenly and find ourselves staring squarely into each other's eyes, her face freezes and she moves on. I believe she is insisting that both of us be more than black—that we interact only when we have a reason other than the mere fact of our race. Her chilliness enforces a priority that I agree with—individuality over group identity.

But I believe I see something else in this woman, which I also see in myself and in many other middle-class blacks. It is a kind of race fatigue, a deep weariness with things racial, resulting from the fact that our lives are more integrated than they have ever been before. Race does not determine our fates as powerfully as it once did, which means it is not the vital personal concern it once was. Before the sixties, race set the boundaries of black life. Now, especially for middle-class blacks, it is far less a factor, even though we don't always like to admit it. Because blacks still suffer from racism, we must be alert to the problem, but the imperative to be concerned with what is not personally urgent ultimately



Yes, Leroi, by David P. Bradford (1968).

mately makes for race fatigue.

I have a friend who did poorly in the insurance business for years. "People won't buy insurance from a black man," he always said. Two years ago another black man and a black woman joined his office. Almost immediately both did twice the business my friend was doing, with the same largely white clientele.

Integration shock is essentially the shock of being suddenly accountable on strictly personal terms. It occurs in situations that disallow race as an excuse for personal shortcomings, and it therefore exposes vulnerabilities that previously were hidden. One response to such shock is to face up to the self-doubts that it occasions and then to act on the basis of what we learn about ourselves. After some struggle, my friend was able to do this. He completely revised his sales technique, asked himself some hard questions about his motivation, and resolved to work more diligently.

But when one lacks the courage to face oneself fully, a fear of hidden vulnerabilities triggers a fright-flight response to integration shock. Instead of admitting that racism

has declined, we argue all the harder that it is still alive and more insidious than ever. We hold race up to shield us from what we do not want to see in ourselves. My friend did this at first, saying that the two blacks in his office were doing better than he was because they knew how to "kiss white ass." Here he was race-holding, using race to keep from looking at himself.

Recently I read an article in the local paper that explored the question of whether blacks could feel comfortable living in the largely white Silicon Valley. The article focused on a black family that had been living for more than a decade in Saratoga, a very well-to-do white community. The neighborhood, the children's schools, the parents' places of employment, the shopping areas and parks—the entire physical environment—were populated by affluent whites. Yet during the interview, the wife said they had made two firm rules for their children: that they go to all-black colleges back East and that they do "no dating outside the race, period."

I have pushed enough black history and culture on my own children to be able to identify with the impulse behind the first of these rules. Black children in largely white situations must understand and appreciate their cultural background. But the rigidity of these rules, not to mention the rules themselves, points to more than a concern with transmitting heritage or gaining experience with other blacks. Rigidity arises from fear and self-doubt. These people, I believed, were afraid of something.

What was striking to me about their rules, especially the one prohibiting interracial dating, was their tone of rejection. The black parents seemed as determined to reject the white world as to embrace the black one. Why? I would say because of integration shock. Their integrated lives have opened up vulnerabilities that they do not wish to face. But what vulnerabilities? In this case I think a particularly embarrassing one. On some level, I suspect, they doubt whether they are as good as the

white people who live around them. You cannot be raised in a culture that was for centuries committed to the notion of your inferiority and not have some doubt in this regard—doubt that is likely to be aggravated most in integrated situations. So the rejecting tone of their rules is self-protective. "I will reject you before you have a chance to reject me." But all of this is covered over by race. The Saratoga family invokes racial pride to shield themselves from a doubt they are afraid to acknowledge. Unacknowledged, this doubt gains a negative power inside the personality that expresses itself in the rigidity and absolutism of their rules. Repressed fears tend always to escalate their campaign for our attention by pushing us further and further into irrationality and rigidity.

The refusal to see something unflattering in ourselves always triggers the snap from race fatigue to race-holding. And once that happens, we are caught, like this family, in a jumble of racial ironies. The parents in Saratoga, who have chosen to live integrated lives, impose a kind of segregation on their children. Rules that would be racist in the mouth of any white person are created and enforced with pride. Their unexamined self-doubt also leaves them unable to exploit the freedom they and their ancestors worked hard to attain. Race fatigue makes them run to a place like Saratoga, but integration shock makes them hold race protectively. They end up clinging to what they've sought to escape.

Once race-holding is triggered by fear, it ensnares us in a web of self-defeating attitudes that prevents us from taking advantage of the new freedoms we've won over the past several decades. I have seen its corrosive effects in my own life and in the lives of virtually every black person I've known. Some are only mildly touched by it, while others seem incapacitated by it. But race-holding is as unavoidable as defensiveness itself, and I am convinced that it is one of the most debilitating, yet unrecognized, forces in black life today.

I define a holding as any self-description

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that serves to justify or camouflage a person's fears, weaknesses, and inadequacies. Holdings are the little and big exaggerations, distortions, and lies about ourselves that prop us up and let us move along the compromised paths we follow. We develop them to defend ourselves against threats to our self-esteem, threats that make us feel vulnerable and that plant a seed of fear. This fear can work like wind on a brush fire, spreading self-doubt far beyond what the initial threat would warrant. As a result, we become even weaker and thus more needy of holdings. Since holdings justify our reticence and cowardice, they are usually expressed in the form of high belief or earthy wisdom. A man whose business fails from his own indifference holds an image of himself as a man too honest to be a good businessman—a self-description that draws a veil over his weakness.

For some years I have noticed that I can walk into any of my classes on the first day of the semester, identify the black students, and be sadly confident that on the last day of the semester a disproportionate number of them will be at the bottom of the class, far behind any number of white students of equal or even lesser native ability. More to the point, they will have performed far beneath their own native ability. Self-fulfilling-prophecy theory says that their schools have always expected them to do poorly, and that they have simply internalized this message. But this deterministic theory sees blacks only as victims, without any margin of choice. It cannot fully explain the poor performances of these black students, because it identifies only the forces that pressure them to do poorly. By overlooking the margin of choice open to them, this theory fails to recognize the degree to which they are responsible for their own poor showing. (The irony of this oversight is that it takes the power for positive change away from the students and puts it in the hands of the very institutions that failed them in the first place.)

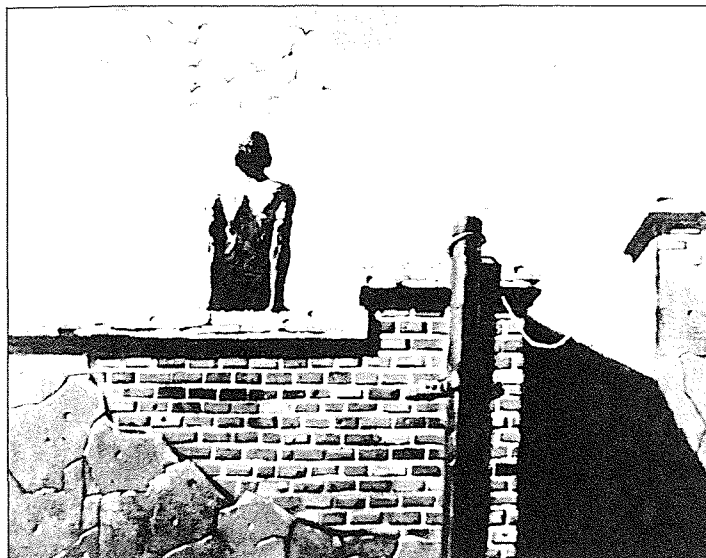
The theory of race-holding is based on the assumption that a margin of choice is always open to blacks (even to slaves, who had some choice). And it tries to make clear the mechanisms by which we relinquish that choice in the name of race. With the decline in racism, the margin of black

choice has greatly expanded, which is probably why race-holding is so much more visible today than ever before. But anything that prevents us from exploiting our new freedom to the fullest is now as serious a barrier to us as racism once was.

Self-fulfilling-prophecy theory is no doubt correct that black students, like the ones I regularly see in my classes, internalize a message of inferiority that they receive from school and the larger society around them. But the relevant question in the 1990s is why they choose to internalize this view of themselves. Why do they voluntarily perceive themselves as inferior? We can talk about the weakened black family and countless other scars of oppression and poverty. And certainly these things have much to do with the image these students have of themselves. But they do not fully explain this self-image, because none of them entirely eliminates the margin of choice that remains open. Choice lives in the most blighted circumstances, and it certainly lives in the lives of these black college students.

I think they choose to believe in their inferiority not to fulfill society's prophesy about them but to evade individual responsibility. Their margin of choice scares them, as it does all people. They are naturally intimidated by that eternal tussle between the freedom to act and the responsibility we must take for our actions. To some extent, all of us balk in the face of this. The difference is that these students use their race to conceal the fact that they are balking. Their "inferiority" shields them from having to see that they are afraid of all-out competition with white students. And it isn't even an honest inferiority. I don't think they really believe it. It is a false inferiority, chosen over an honest and productive confrontation with their real fears—a strategy that allows them to stay comfortably on the sidelines in a university environment that all but showers them with opportunity.

"I'm doing okay for a black student," a student once told me. "I'm doing well considering where I came from," I have told myself on many occasions. Race allows us both to hide from the real question, which is, "Am I doing what I can, considering my



Boy on Roof, by Hughie Lee-Smith (1967).

talents and energies?"

I see all of this as pretty much a subconscious process, fear working on a subterranean level to let us reduce our margin of choice in the name of race. Consciously, we tell ourselves that we are only identifying with our race, but fear bloats our racial identity to an unnatural size and then uses it as cover for its subversive work. The more severe the integration shock, the more cover is needed.

Doesn't race enhance individuality? I think it does, but only when individuality is nurtured and developed apart from race. The race-holder, inside the bubble of his separate self, feels inadequate or insecure; so he seeks reassurance through race. When, instead, a sense of self arises from individual achievement and self-realization, when self-esteem is established apart from race, then racial identity can only enhance, because it is no longer needed for any other purpose.

The word individualism began to connote selfishness and even betrayal to many blacks during the 1960s. Individualism was seen as a threat to the solidarity that blacks needed during those years of confrontation. Despite the decline in racism, these connotations have lingered. Race-holding keeps them alive, because they serve the race-holder's need to exaggerate the impor-

tance of race as well as to justify a fear of individual responsibility. Race-holding makes fluid the boundary between race and self, group and individual identity, allowing race to swing over at a moment's notice and fill in where fears leave a vacuum.

This is a worse problem than it at first seems, because the individual is the seat of all energy, creativity, motivation, and power. We are most strongly motivated when we want something for ourselves. When our personal wants are best achieved through group action, as in the civil-rights movement, we lend our energy to the group, and it be-

comes as strong as the sum of our energies. When the need for group action recedes, more energy is available to us as individuals. But race-holding intercedes here by affixing the race-holder too tightly to this racial identity and causing him to see the locus of power in race rather than in himself. In this way race-holding corrupts the greatest source of power and strength available to blacks—the energy latent in our personal desires.

One of my favorite passages in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is his description of the problem of blacks as

not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of [our] race, but of creating the *uncreated features of [our] face*. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals. . . . We create the race by creating ourselves and then to our great astonishment we will have created something far more important: We will have created a culture.

These lines hold up well close to 40 years after they were written. They seem to suggest a kind of Adam Smith vision of culture: When the individual makes himself, he makes culture. An "invisible hand" uses individual effort to define and broaden culture. In the 1990s we blacks are more than ever in a position in which our common

good will best be served by the determined pursuit of our most personal aspirations.

I think the key to this pursuit, and the answer to race-holding generally, is personal responsibility, a source of great power that race-holding does its best to conceal.

Some years ago I made a mistake at a neighbor's cocktail party that taught me something about personal responsibility. I went to the party for the thinnest of reasons, mere politeness, though the afternoon was hot and I was already in a peevish mood. The event would have been problematic even if I weren't the only black at the party. But I was, and on this afternoon I chose to make note of the fact, though it was hardly a new experience for me. As I strolled around the sun-baked patio, avoiding people more than engaging them, I held this fact more and more tightly until I came to believe it had a profound meaning I needed to understand. After a while I decided that others needed to understand it too.

During the 1960s, blacks and white liberals often engaged in something that might be called the harangue-flagellation ritual. Blacks felt anger, white liberals felt guilt, and when they came together, blacks would vent their anger by haranguing the whites, who often allowed themselves to be scourged as a kind of penance. The "official" black purpose of this rite was to "educate" whites on the issue of race, and during the '60s this purpose may sometimes have been served. But by the 1980s, after a marked decline in racism and two decades of consciousness-raising, the rite had become both anachronistic and, I think, irresponsible. Nevertheless, it suited my mood on this hot afternoon; so I retrieved it from its dusty bin and tried to make it fashionable again.

A woman at the party said how much she liked Jesse Jackson's rhetorical style. Was "style" the only thing she liked? I asked, with an edge to my voice. The woman gave me a curious and exasperated look, but I pushed on anyway. Soon I was lecturing the six or seven people around me: I told them that racism had been driven underground in the 1960s and '70s, where more insidious strategies for foiling

the possibilities of black people had evolved. I pointed to the black unemployment rate, the continued segregation of many schools, housing discrimination, and many other problems. Soon I saw that the old harangue-flagellation ritual was firmly back in place. I was shaming these people, and they nodded at what I said in a way that gratified me.

But at home that night I felt a stinging shame, and even weeks later the thought of that afternoon made me cringe. Eventually I saw why. For one thing, I was trading on my race with those people, using the very thing I claimed to be so concerned with to buy my way out of certain anxieties. Like the Saratoga family, I was race-holding in response to the integration shock I felt in this integrated situation. I had begun to feel vulnerable, and I hit those people with race before they could hit me with it. My vulnerabilities, of course, were essentially the same as the Saratoga family's. On some level I doubted myself in relation to these whites, and my insecurities drove me into an offense that was really a defense. The shame I began to feel, though I could not identify it at the time, was essentially the shame of cowardice. I felt as though I'd run away from something and used race to cover my tracks.

This shame had another dimension that was even more humiliating than the cowardice I had felt. On that patio I was complaining to white people, beseeching them to see how badly blacks were still treated, and I was gratified to see their heads nod as though they understood. My voice contained no audible whine, but at least some of what I said amounted to a whine. And this is what put the sting in my shame. Cowardice was a common enough fault, but whining was quite another thing.

The race-holder whines or complains indiscriminately not because he seeks redress but because he seeks the status of victim, a status that excuses him from what he fears. A victim is not responsible for his condition, and by claiming a victim's status the race-holder gives up the sense of personal responsibility he needs to better his condition. His unseen purpose is to hide rather than fight; so the anger and, more important, the energy that real racism breeds in him are squandered in self-serv-

ing complaint. The price he pays for the false comfort of his victim's status is a kind of impotence.

The difference between the race-holder who merely complains and the honest protester is that the latter keeps the responsibility for his condition in his own hands. The honest protester may be victimized, but he is not solely a victim. He thinks of himself as fully human and asks only that the rules of the game be made fair. Fairness, rather than entitlement, is his goal. By limiting his demands to fairness, he retains his personal responsibility and the power that grows out of it. But he also understands that he must keep this responsibility, whether or not society is fair. His purpose is to realize himself, to live the fullest possible life, and he is responsible for this, like all men, regardless of how society treats him.

Personal responsibility is the brick and mortar of power. The responsible person knows that the quality of his life is something that he will have to make inside the limits of his fate. Some of these limits he can push back, some he cannot, but in any case the quality of his life will pretty much reflect the quality of his efforts. When this link between well-being and action is truly accepted, the result is power. With this understanding and the knowledge that he is responsible, a person can see his margin of choice. He can choose and act, choose and act again, without illusion. He can create himself and make himself felt in the world. Such a person has power.

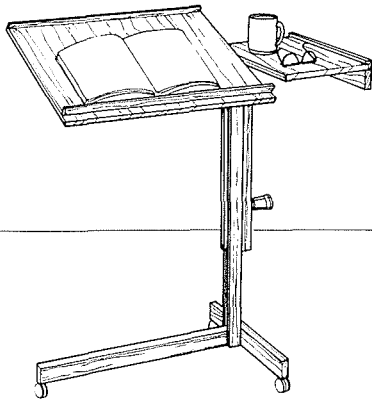
I was neither responsible nor powerful when I stood on my neighbor's patio complaining about racism to people who had only the most removed interest in my racial well-being. In effect I was asking them to

be responsible for something that only I and other blacks can be responsible for. Of course, whites must be fair. But they cannot be fully responsible for the well-being of blacks; they cannot actualize our lives. If I had said this to the people at the party, they might have gone away with a clearer sense of their own responsibilities. But I never considered doing so. The real goal of my complaining was to disguise a fear that I didn't want to acknowledge.

The barriers to black progress in America today are clearly as much psychological as they are social or economic. We have suffered as much as any group in human history, and if this suffering has ennobled us, it has also wounded us and pushed us into defensive strategies that are often self-defeating. But we haven't fully admitted this to ourselves. The psychological realm is murky, frightening, and just plain embarrassing. And a risk is involved in exploring it: the risk of discovering the ways in which we contribute to, if not create, the reality in which we live. Denial, avoidance, and repression intervene to save us from this risk. But, of course, they only energize what is repressed with more and more negative power, so that we are victimized as much by our own buried fears as by racism.

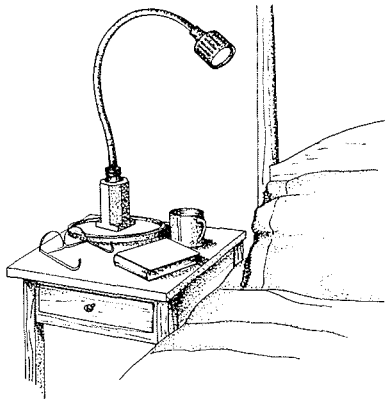
In the deepest sense, the long struggle of blacks in America has always been a struggle to retrieve our full humanity. But now the reactive stance we have adopted to defend ourselves against oppression binds us to the same racial views that oppressed us in the first place. Snakelike, our defense has turned on us. I think it is now the last barrier to the kind of self-possession that will give us our full humanity, and we must overcome it ourselves.

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