

LURE *and* LOATHING

Essays on Race,
Identity, and the
Ambivalence of
Assimilation

*Edited and With an Introduction by
Gerald Early*



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7. Ibid, p. 69.
8. Meyer Weinberg, ed., *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 13.
9. Ibid., p. 15.
10. Ibid., pp. 11-12.
11. Ibid., pp. 332-33.
12. Cited in Marable, *Black American Politics*, p. 101.
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14. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Whither Now and Why," in *The Education of Black People* (April 2, 1960), pp. 149-58.
15. Herbert Aptheker, "W. E. B. Du Bois and Religion: A Brief Reassessment," *Journal of Religious Thought*: 11.
16. W. E. B. DuBois, "Will the Great Gandhi Live Again?" *National Guardian*, 9 (February 11, 1957): 6-7.
17. The political classifications are wide-ranging, from Americanists, bourgeoisie, neo-conservatives, and reactionaries on the one hand to Africanists, subversives, leftist radicals, separatists, etc., on the other.
18. John Hope Franklin, "Booker T. Washington, Revisited," *The New York Times* (August 1, 1991).
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The Black Table, the Empty Seat, and the Tie

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Once or twice, when I was in law school, the "black table" (as we called our solidaritized corner of the dining hall) was torn by a debate, passionate but friendly, over the question of how we should think of ourselves: as black people who happened to be Yale students? or as Yale students who happened to be black?

The black table itself was a statement of need, and of difference. We were law students, but we were not like everyone else, or at least we didn't think we were. We were as grimly enthusiastic and as secretly ambitious and as ready to work hard as anyone else; we all felt the tug of professional attainment. But there were other pulls. The gray corridors and cavernous classrooms of the Yale Law School were familiar but never home. To be a law student, black or white or any other color, is to be on edge, and also on display. All law students need

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outlets for frustrations, irritations, fears—and joys too. As black law students, we had other needs, as well, needs that seemed to us, at least, not exactly the same as the needs of other students. The need to escape, for example. The need to seek support from each other. The need to be together. And the need to figure out exactly what we were doing there, what our *purpose* was, led us into the fierce but friendly debate over just who we were.

Our argument, never authoritatively resolved, served to remind us of two important truths. The first was that we liked to argue. The second—the more important—was that something was happening to us, something like a coming change in status, as though we were caught in transit, balancing somehow between our origins and our destinations, not fully secure in either. We were all of us children of the civil rights movement: the nation had changed its laws and, in some respects, its ways during our childhoods and adolescences. We were living the opportunities for which generations of black folk had fought and died. Walking paths wet with the blood of our martyrs, we felt an uneasy fear that taking advantage of those opportunities was changing us.

As a law professor at Yale, I look back on those days with a gentle affection, perhaps a wistfulness for the ease with which we bantered. Our heartfelt discussions were themselves happiness of a sort; our enthusiasm was an expression of solidarity, a kind of truth. We were in it together, united by the awarenesses that our shared skin color made possible and the eagerness to know what was right, and no matter how vehement our political differences, the black table remained an axis around which our small worlds revolved. The ease of it all—I miss the ease.

The passage of time has left me in some ways happier, in others much more pensive. Our community seems more divided now, but that perception might represent the fresh perspective that comes when, at last, one must leave the table behind. The *need*, however, is as deep and nagging as ever. Racism was real to me then, in my early twenties,

a brooding enemy one could almost touch; nowadays, something over a decade later, its presence is somehow more sinister, as though it has hidden itself but not really gone away. We are lawyers now, my classmates and I, with professional success behind us and ahead, too. Affirmative action? Who cares? Look at us now! Look at what we have done with the opportunities—

And yet there is this unsettling sense, this mistrust of the world out there. Time has passed, we have moved on, but we cannot honestly say—I can't, anyway—that racism has moved into the past. It is harder to point to it now, people are more careful in what they say and maybe in what they think, too. And yet one senses it there, in the shadows, lurking perhaps around the next brightly lighted corner as one walks the corridor of one's office. We are where we are, we obviously belong, that was settled long ago, and yet—and yet—

The racism. Not so much something to blame for our setbacks as something about which we might often wonder when we think of what we will do next. And yet, the truth is that there is no time to worry, no time and no space, not for the professional. We are too busy being busy to let racism slow us down. We are lawyers now, as I said, nearly all of us, and we have moved on in our profession, a profession defined and dominated by generations of white folk, mostly men, mostly dead, many of whose sour portraits line the corridors and classrooms of Yale and of other leading law schools. (The portraits: Once, when I was in law school, a group of students organized a conference around the theme of sexism in the legal system. Those of us who attended were divided into groups, and one of the assignments was to work out what the law school would be like were the force of sexism less apparent. One of the groups brought a hush, then loud applause, when it reported its solution: *More portraits of dead women on the walls*. Chilling, but precisely right. History is itself a message.) The profession has rules and standards and expectations, and to move upward is to swim in a sea of white people's making. The profession is more integrated than it once was, but the rewards, and most of the

punishments, are still distributed by people who are white. Black lawyers in the United States of America number something above twenty-five thousand, a very impressive number indeed, until one realizes that the total number of lawyers is well over seven hundred thousand. There are people of color who deny the right of white folk to shape the profession and insist that other voices be heard—exemplified, in the legal academe, by the Critical Race Theory Movement—and one can but wish them well, even if one wonders which they suppose to be the voices that matter. Law itself remains a conservative force, even though lawyers themselves are more progressive than they once were and, in opinion surveys, are more liberal than the nation as a whole on almost every issue. In the meantime, the profession remains what it is, and the same question we argued over the table, yet unanswered, sits more heavily as one grows older. Who exactly are we, dark-skinned lawyers in a white-skinned profession? What have we gained by our choices? And what have we cast aside? Yes, we are black . . . but *how* are we black?

Differentiating

Let me begin with an uneasy truth: I scare people. I write these words as I sit on an Amtrak train hurrying south along the Northeast Corridor, a six-foot-three-inch male in a sober navy suit, blue oxford shirt, and conservative tie, bent over a laptop computer, the very image, one might suppose, of the seamless dull gray professional. But a professional, of course, with a difference, one that is brought home to me as I watch with mixed feelings the stream of fellow business travelers, the white ones, anyway, treating the seat next to me as though it is already occupied. Of white women this is particularly true: to sit next to a black man, even a well-attired one, is a choice to be made only

when no other seat is available, and even then to be avoided if possible, occasionally by standing.

Few of us who are black and professional are unfamiliar with this circumstance. And in our irritation (although it is nice, in the abstract, to have the elbow room of two seats for the price of one), many of us readily describe the attitude of the white people so reluctant to sit next to us as racism. This description makes for an awkward and threatening world: since most white people pass the empty seat and leave it as they found it, most white people must be racist. As I sit here, waiting for the seat to be filled (and now, at last, it has been, by a person neither white nor male—the other seats, I note in passing, are all taken), I wonder whether my friends who so readily call the reluctance racism can possibly be right.

To be a professional is to be spared the worst ravages of racism, but the many small daily slights that are the price of living here add up to a miasma of racial exclusion. It is almost a cliché that if you are black you can't get a taxi in a major city, and it isn't quite true—but it isn't quite false, either. Even in a business suit, it can be difficult; if one is dressed more casually, it can prove impossible. When in New York, for example, if I am traveling with a white person, I frequently swallow my pride and allow my companion to summon the taxi as I hang back—for to stand up for my rights and raise the arm myself would buy only a tired arm and no ride. For a black male, blue jeans in New York are a guarantee of ill-treatment. There are the jewelry-store buzzers that will not ring, the counter clerks who will not say "Sir," the men's departments with no staff to be found. I shop mostly at Brooks Brothers, but I always dress for it, recalling, from my childhood, a complicated tale involving my paternal grandmother, a rude shopkeeper, an expensive fur, and a change of tune.

Ah, I sometimes think, to be able to hit them over the head with my résumé! In my mind's silly eye, I can see the paper slamming down, as I await the grimace, the shout of pain, then the recognition and apology. Oddly, that might even do some good. Social psychol-

ogists who study racial stereotyping report that even white people who indulge in a great deal of stereotyping will alter their opinions of black people who possess a variety of identifiable status attainments, such as advanced degrees. This will not alter by a single iota, however, their judgments on other black people, about whom they know less, which means that even in the act of dressing to shop I am putting a distance between myself and my people. So there, already, is a division among us, a tax that racism imposes on success: Yes, we will treat you differently from the way we treat your brethren and sistren, but only if you first mark yourself as different. If I am willing to divide myself from the whole, even symbolically, I earn a reward for it. How terrifying!

Still, I do not insist that the taxi drivers who will not stop unless I am dressed as they prefer—unless I send the right signal of my difference from those they fear—are racists in the same sense that members of the Ku Klux Klan are racists. People are more complicated than that, and I have little doubt that some of the same people who will not open the doors of their jewelry stores when I am in my blue jeans will send large contributions to the Southern Poverty Law Center to do the good work of keeping the Klan at bay. For doing so, I charge them with neither insincerity nor hypocrisy—simply with normal human complexity. Similarly, I do not insist that my colleagues are racist when their evaluations of the work of a person of color differ from mine; or that law firms are racist when their record on hiring people of color is less impressive than I might like. To choose “racism” as a category to capture all of that complexity is much like suggesting that those who opposed the Persian Gulf War were not supporting America or that those who think the First Amendment protects exploitative pornography support the oppression of women. Each is a clever rhetorical point that drains the principal horror—racism, treason, sexism—of most of its normative content. Yes, of course, there is racism in the legal profession, but we must not be so blinded by our search for the covert kind that we miss the overt kind. There are

people out there, people with power—fewer, I think, than some fear, but clearly too many—people with power who hate us. A white collar is no insulation against either side of *that* relationship. And dressing to shop, or to work, will change the relationship marginally, but one must not make the mistake of thinking (or desiring) that this cosmetic change also works a change in morphology sufficiently dramatic that there is a sudden and sharp discontinuity in one’s life situation. There is a better job and more pay (and more white friends if that is what one desires); but there is also the lingering question, from the days of the black table, about what else one puts on when one puts on a tie.

Which brings us back to the train. Where I do wear a tie, always as careful in dressing for travel as in dressing to shop. I am not a different person with a tie than without one, even though some people’s perceptions of me will change with my clothes. Even my fellow passengers, reluctant as they are to take the seat next to mine, probably look at me *a little bit* differently than they would were I in my jeans. They do not want to sit next to me, but they are not rushing to the conductor to demand that I be tossed off the train. And besides—not to put too fine a point on it—in the end, who cares about them anyway? Beyond a certain point, reached very early in my dialogue with myself, I lose interest in their opinions of me, or even in whether they are racists or not.

Not long ago, I published a book entitled *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby*, in which I urged those of us who are in the professions to quit worrying about what our white colleagues feel, to meet the “qualification question”—*Did you get here because of affirmative action?*—with a studied *Yes, so what?* I also argued that the best way to frustrate our detractors is to overachieve, to shape ourselves into a generation of black professionals too good to ignore.

Some black professionals were angered by what I wrote. I was told that I was naïve, that there was more racism in the professions than I evidently supposed, so that hard work alone would not be enough to get ahead. Others took me to task for worrying too much about

what white people think. And some suggested that the call for overachievement was unfair and ill conceived, suggesting that I was the shade of Booker Washington come back to life, urging us to cast down our buckets where we are, to work hard to please the white man.

I had thought that I answered all of these points in the book, but perhaps I did not write as clearly as I should have. The objection that I was worried too much about what white people think particularly rankled, however; it was my intention to argue the other way around, that we who are black worry too much about what white people think, and that our obsession with their good opinions—the same obsession, incidentally, that in the minds of some black people transforms affirmative action into a stigma—has got to stop.

Still, back on Amtrak, still heading south,* I cannot quite succeed in the pretense that the white people who will not sit next to me do not actually exist. I know they are there and I know they are avoiding me—how could I not? And while their behavior does not make me think less of myself, it does seem to me to demand a bit of analysis as one works through the matter of one's professional identity, and of why one wears a tie. As I have noted, the usual explanation for their refusal to sit next to black people is racism. I see little point, however, in being so harsh on my fellow passengers, or indeed, for marking them as particularly culpable. All they are doing, really, is thinking in racial terms. They are using race as shorthand for other characteristics that they find unpleasant: a tendency toward criminality, perhaps. Before one rushes to say that this is precisely what is meant by the word *racism*, let me caution that using race as a shorthand for other characteristics is precisely what affirmative action (to take the most obvious example) necessarily does. People of color who are swept, willingly or not, into the swirling maelstrom of racial preferences are presumed to share a common history or a common perspective or a

common disadvantage or a common need or whatever the most persuasive justification might be. And although their motivations and results obviously differ, there is no *logical* distinction between the assumptions about race underlying affirmative action programs and the assumptions about race underlying the empty seat. Using race as a "bad" shorthand is, of course, far worse than using race as a "good" shorthand, and sometimes doing the second is important. Still, in both cases, the person of color who is the subject of the assumptions is treated as a representative of the people—it is simply that the white people who refuse to sit down, like the black people who pronounce upon the attitudes that one must hold to be truly black, are arrogating to themselves the right to decide what aspects of the people the one that they are looking at represents.

So the problem of the empty seat is not quite like the problem of being the last kid picked when choosing up sides for softball or football back in grade school, for the judgment has nothing to do with skill. Indeed, the fact that it has nothing to do with skill—that none of those who pass the seat know or care whether I am good at my job—makes it much like the forms of exclusion that often cut at the professional soul. One of the reasons that it often makes sense to use affirmative action to lever open the doors is that they are closed for reasons other than a racist desire to oppress; they are closed, rather, because of the prevailing racist stereotypes that render black people beneath the notice of white people. Affirmative action can force white people to take notice, and, if they are not truly or deeply racist, once they take notice, quality will out. For it is their ignorance as much as their hatred that keeps the barriers up—the same reason that I sit alone on the train. There are times when, sitting thus, I long for some instrument of coercive authority, a means to force one or more of the passersby not only to sit but to talk, and to listen. But only brief times. The honest truth is that the good opinion of the people passing by matters to me less and less, both on the train and professionally; what I find I like is the elbow room.

* This part of the description of the train ride was *not* written while on board.

Claiming

So let me begin to explore the question of professional identity at a slightly different place: not with the vision of blackness imposed from without, whether by people who are white or by people who are black, but with the vision of blackness selected from within. For prior to one's professional identity can be, should be, a *personal* identity. One selects it: that's easy, delightfully so, for I'm black and would not be anything else if I could. Yes, I work in a mostly white profession, and, yes, I work at a mostly white law school. But that is not all there is of me and need not even be most of me. My ties with the black community, with black people, are richer and stronger than my bonds to the white. I have no generalized view that white people are racist or insensitive; still, I must confess, the good opinions of black people, to put it simply, matter to me more. That is my choice, and I cannot imagine ever making another.

The choice is partly cultural, partly social, and partly political, but it is mostly affectional. One selects a milieu. It is a choice not about where one lives or how one votes but whom one loves. And the issue is less romantic love (although my wife is black, I recognize that there is such a thing as genuine affection across racial lines) than a sufficient love of one's own identity so that it extends in a special way to the group. I have white friends too, and care for some of them deeply, but that is beside the point. Just as in the days of the black table, simply being around black people—among black people—having that respite, that trust, that common need fulfilled, that *being together*—is something I cherish and something my wife and I are determined to preserve for our children. Which is why, as a black couple living as we do in a mostly white neighborhood, we are not content to trust our social lives to chance, but are constantly on the lookout for new black acquaintances, associates, friends—with children if possible.

Identifying as black is in this sense a decision. Biology plays a role,

but not a complete one, and the pressure of our racist society to treat skin color as destiny is one that some prefer to resist. The pressure *is* oppressive, but resisting it does not require pushing in the other direction; rather, one can, in the manner of the martial artist, use the opponent's strength to go where one wants to go anyway. I realize that there are black people, especially among the professionally successful, for whom connections with people who are white become more important than connections with people who are black, and I feel sorry for them, for what they have lost. Still, that is their choice, and I wish them well of it; mine, however, goes in another direction.

But as for the rest, one's *professional* identity, all that one can do is try on the words, and see which fit. . . .

A law professor.

A black law professor.

A black person who is a law professor.

A law professor who is black.

The transpositions of words, like the ones we batted back and forth in the dining hall, are subtle, but important. A few years ago, I watched a television interview in which a black man who is prominent in the conservative movement was asked whether he preferred to be called "black" or "African American." Without a moment's hesitation, he replied, "I'm an American. That's what I want to be called."

Fair enough: I'm happy to call him what he wants to be called. But I am not happy to think of myself that way. I need the adjective that he seemed content, almost determined, to drop. Oh, yes, I am an American, and I certainly want to be that. I take as much pride in that, I am sure, as anyone. But I am not, in my mind or in my soul, I cannot be, *just* an American, anymore than I am, in my mind or in my soul, or can be, *just* a law professor.

To be a black professional is to lead a dual existence, but that existence need not be uncomfortable. There are some intellectuals—Shelby Steele and Richard Rodriguez perhaps foremost among them—who have suggested that the fact of moving ahead in a predominantly

white profession creates a necessary distance between oneself and one's ethnic community. They have argued, in effect, that the new environment slowly destroys the old, that it is inevitable and perhaps even desirable to be thought of as (or to think of oneself as), say, a professor who happens to be black, rather than a black person who happens to be a professor. And while I have always appreciated the logical force of the argument, it seems to me to be dangerously wrong. My wife, for example, was the first in her family to attend college. By the Steele-Rodriguez argument, I should feel, automatically, a distance from her relatives. But the reverse is true. Slipping warmly and comfortably into the embrace of her family is the most natural feeling in the world.

There are sour moments—I admit it!—when I stride the halls of Yale Law School bitterly, angry at a world that insists on seeing me as a black person who is also a law professor instead of a law professor who is also black. But the moments are few, for most of the time the first of these is my image of myself as well. In that sense, I have resolved that after-dinner argument of so many years ago, and I am what I want to be: a black law professor? Okay. A law professor who is black? Yes, that too. But, better, a law professor who loves black people.

Racial solidarity, in the sense of self-love, is the key to our survival in a frustratingly segregated integrated professional world, just as it is the key to our survival in a frustratingly oppressive nation. Oh, the professions are all integrated now. There are black people in them, fewer than we would like, but more than our detractors would like. Affirmative action, whatever its flaws, has forever changed the face of professional America, and that is all to the good. But so have hard work and perseverance, the willingness to be less concerned with the fairness of the obstacles in one's path than with finding the best way over, around, or through them. Affirmative action can open doors; but running (never walking) through them is our job.

But as we run and run and run, rushing toward professional success before the tiny trapdoor in the glass ceiling slams shut, there remains

the uneasy question from the black table, the question of whether in running toward one thing we are also running from another. I might explain my decision to wear a tie on the train, and elsewhere too, on the ground that the tie is demanded by the profession I have chosen to follow. The question is whether my willingness to wear the tie, or perhaps my insistence upon it, is itself an acceptance of the distinction that my longing for solidarity wants most to deny. If I will vary my plumage to please creatures more powerful than myself, what does that say about my relationship with the flock?

Perhaps it says nothing. Consider the words of Mario Baeza, a black man who is a member of New York's legal elite: "I'm integrated, but I've never tried to be white. That's not what I aspire to in life." Very well, one accepts rules of dress as one accepts rules of grammar, in order to get ahead. That requires a certain ambition, but ambition is not inconsistent with a love of one's people. Solidarity can be the bridge between our roots and our destinations. Claiming one's people gives one an identity. Selecting a destination gives one a profession. The question, then, is whether there is any reason one cannot have both.

Professionalism

In every profession, sometimes even near the top, there are black people, and none can afford to stand still. One moves in one's profession, preferably upward. But as one gains altitude, the ranks of one's people, like the molecules of the air . . . *thin out!*

The faster one advances in the white-dominated world of the professions, the greater the suspicions often generated that one has somehow left one's truest and best self behind. Probably this is truer in the law than in any other profession because law, unlike medicine or banking, say, has the public persona of an engine of policy. Perhaps it was ever

thus, or perhaps this is something new, a way that lawyers (and courts) are viewed in a world in which the correctness of *Roe vs. Wade* is considered a matter of public opinion and the significance of *Brown vs. Board of Education* is a matter of folklore. Oh, those lawyers, those judges, those courts—always off changing the world!

If one has the power to change the world—the power with which popular imagination vests our courts—it is best that one use that power for the good. It is not only black people who feel this, but black people have been losers often enough to feel it more keenly than most. And nowhere was this more apparent than when Thurgood Marshall, one of the towering monuments of twentieth-century jurisprudence, announced his retirement after nearly a quarter century on the Supreme Court of the United States and President Bush nominated Clarence Thomas to take his place. Many black people supported Thomas in a show of racial solidarity, and, in some cases, because they agreed with him on the issues. But one must also recognize that millions of black people saw political cynicism rather than the turning of the wheel of history in the Bush Administration's decision to follow the greatest legal figure of the civil rights movement with a less distinguished legal figure from the conservative movement.

Thomas was damaged by a confirmation process in which millions of Americans believe he lied under oath in denying Professor Anita Hill's charges of sexual harassment. (I, too, believed Anita Hill.) Still, Thomas has a long tenure ahead, and he could eventually prove to be one of the great Supreme Court justices, although, as of this writing, the evidence is depressingly to the contrary. Of course, there remains the question of what being a great justice means. The answer returns to the image of the legal system as an engine of social change. Thus the real point for his most bitter ideological opponents (and here I exclude Anita Hill, who, despite some of the nonsense spread by her detractors, had no political ax to grind) was that Clarence Thomas was a *lawyer*, and that he would, as a Supreme Court justice, gain a considerable power that most would prefer to see exercised for the

good, by which his opponents generally meant that he should vote as Thurgood Marshall did. But more was involved than the exchange of a liberal for a conservative. As a *black lawyer*, a *black justice*, a *black policymaker*, Clarence Thomas, according to the ideological story, carries a special responsibility to care for his community—and to show that caring by adopting particular political positions. Here is where the answer to the question we posed around the black table begins to cut more sharply than I had thought it ever could: It was not, I thought, our intention to promulgate standards for judging each other's commitment. I had thought we were simply after methods for evaluating ourselves.

To be sure, if some of Clarence Thomas's more vehement political opponents think he has left his community behind, one can understand their anger, for many of his positions are antithetical to the glorious tradition of the civil rights struggle. What must be borne in mind, however, is that all of us who are people of color and also professionals—especially those of us who are lawyers, and, within that group, particularly those who have moved to heights previously reserved for white folk, such as elite corporate practice, teaching at prestigious law schools, and, of course, the federal bench—are always one small step away from the same charge. The moment we put on our ties in order to gain acceptance, we make a choice. It need not carry us far from our origins, but if we are careless, it might.

Fortunately, should any black professionals grow so bold as to imagine that essential power relationships have changed because collars are white, there are sufficient episodes of racism to remind. For there remain many white people at the top who will never accommodate themselves to the presence of black people in the corridors of power, and many others who are not hostile but whose lack of familiarity with us makes our jobs harder. Certainly the glass ceiling still exists. But the glass is cracked and black faces are forcing their way through, even if it means taking some cuts and bruises on the way up. The face of professional America *has* changed, and changed forever. Who would

have thought, back in the mid-sixties, when civil rights marchers faced brutal assaults and official murder, that within a quarter of a century leading figures in the national security establishment—not only the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff but, less known, the principal Soviet expert in the White House—would be black? We are rising not because we are black but because we are good; we will be there forever because our skills are needed. We are being good to America almost before America remembers to be good to us.

As professionals, we can but do our best; that is the ethic. As black professionals, we *must* do our best. There are white people who can slide through life, leaving a trail of massive and unattributed incompetence, but black people, given our position in America, do not have that option. Our parents urged us all to work twice as hard as the white kids. We can do that and perhaps obtain a measure of professional success, but, of course, it comes with a measure of patronizing by white colleagues. The Best Black Syndrome, I have called it elsewhere: You're the best black lawyer or doctor or whatever that I have ever known, say many white people from their thin experience of black folk. Not the best, simply the best black. The enforced narrowness of perspective is infuriating. The legal scholar Patricia Williams has written that she longs to respond, "There are more and better of me"—people, in other words, who have never had a shot at proving what they can do. And the estimable William Coleman, lion of the corporate bar, when patronized by a politician who observed that he, Coleman, should be on a court somewhere, shot back that the man simply had never met the great black lawyers who had no chance, among them Charles Hamilton Houston, principal architect of the legal strategy culminating in *Brown v. Board of Education* and surely one of the canniest and most subtle legal minds of the century.

A reviewer, responding angrily to the book that I mentioned, was kind enough to say that she suspected that I was twice as good at what I did as my white colleagues. The empirical truth of the matter was not relevant to her rhetorical point. Her point, rather, and a sensible one, is that black people must be better than white people to get as

far as white people can. That is an assumption that black people commonly make, and although it often makes white people uncomfortable, there is plenty of evidence to back it up. Some of the best evidence comes from professional baseball, where the addiction to statistics provides what are generally considered hard and clear measures of differences in talent.* Studies always show that the statistical averages of black players, who are the minority, are significantly above those of white players, who are the majority. How can this be? The answer cannot be that black people simply play baseball better than white people, because were this the case, the white players would have to be at least as good as the black players in order to get a shot, and the statistical differences therefore would not exist. The better answer is that there is discrimination against black players—that black players who are merely as good as white players will not get the same chances that white players do. The black players have higher statistical averages because they had to be better than the white players to get noticed.

Other professions—law and medicine, for example—lack the same hard data for comparison, but most black professionals take this bias as a given. To the extent that the bias exists, one would expect the performances of black people who are near the top of their fields to be better than the performances of white people who attain similar prominence. Maybe this is so; some studies suggest that black professors are paid more than white professors of similar background and achievements. Does this market data suggest a recognition that the black professors had to be better to get to the same place? It's hard to tell, because there have not been enough of us around long enough, not in the corridors of power.

For most of American history, the professions have been segregated.

* Except maybe even the hard statistics of baseball are less clear than one might hope. A Jewish acquaintance tells how, when he was growing up, it was an article of faith in his household that Hank Greenberg would have broken Babe Ruth's single-season home-run record in 1938 (the record was 60 and Greenberg finished with 58) but for the fact that he was a Jew and, therefore, the pitchers walked him or threw him bad pitches in his last few games rather than risk the chance that a Jewish player might become the all-time home-run champ.

Skilled black professionals were long forced—odd word!—to serve only their own people. Black lawyers and doctors and dentists and accountants and the rest served black clientele because white customers would not hire them and, in any event, white professionals, ever mindful of the bottom line, would not allow the competition. (And here I think of Thurgood Marshall's twinkling eye, as he asked us, his law clerks, where we would rather be taken with a gunshot wound, to some nice, clean suburban place where the doctors have never seen one before, or to Harlem Hospital, where they come by the dozens every year?) There they were, generations of smart, hard-working black men and women, prevented from practicing their arts on the wider canvas. Who can measure their greatness now, when so many of them left so little impact on what some Afrocentrists call "white history"—that is, the received tradition of what counts?

Now there are many more of us out there in white-dominated professions, working, sometimes struggling, often achieving. It is said at times that affirmative action, broadly conceived, has skimmed the cream from the black community—that the people who would have been serving black folk in the days of rigid segregation are now, in the era of integration, serving white folk. That is precisely why many of the leading theorists of black nationalism thought affirmative action a terrible idea. Once upon a time, integration of the professions was justified, at least in part, by the role-model argument—the idea that I, as a black law professor, am charged with proving to black and white alike what black people can do. Not a bad argument, either, but one that is in an uneasy tension with the fear that many of the best and the brightest of black people are deserting their communities, in both the geographic and economic senses. Successful black professionals often move into mostly white neighborhoods and also are no longer dependent on black people for income.

The question, then, is whether integration of formerly white professions must inexorably lead to assimilation of "formerly" black professionals—the point of the conversation so many years ago around the

black table at Yale. The question is far from absurd. To succeed in a profession, one adopts the profession's ethos, its aesthetic, its culture. One remakes significant aspects of oneself.

Consider the black lawyers who succeed at one of the most exclusive and least integrated areas of practice, corporate law in large law firms. On campuses and in inner cities, one continues to hear debates over whether what is often called "Black English" is a language with African roots, a dialect with regional American roots, or simply a set of common errors. No matter one's view on that proposition, it is perfectly plain that a legal brief written in Black English would not be an acceptable professional document. Back in the late sixties and through most of the seventies, when the large Afro was the hairstyle of choice among politically and culturally sincere black students, the hair would nonetheless be trimmed if one wanted to work on Wall Street. And today, when many activists in the inner cities favor what they describe as traditional African garb, a black lawyer who wants to work at a corporate law firm must dress in smartly tailored business clothes.* In short, the practice of corporate law demands an aesthetic that many in the black community would describe as imposed by others.

It should be possible to adapt to this professional aesthetic and yet retain one's cultural identity—what I have described above as a claim. True, if one wants to move on in a professional world run by people who are white, one must understand the relevant values and respond to them. If one wants to move upward in the professions, one must accept that most of the rewards one seeks will be distributed by white people, according to rules they have worked out. The rules might be fair, they might not be; they might be coherent, they might not be; but even though getting rid of the rules when they aren't fair is one respectable project, playing by them and winning, whether they are fair or not, is another. The second of these, playing by the rules and

* This should not be taken to condone the ridiculous abuse of power by the judge in Washington, D.C., who recently threatened to punish a black lawyer who appeared before him in a kente cloth.

playing as well as everyone else, is what most professionals doubtless desire, and it is what all the best professionals attain. Black professionals can do that, too, and usually we must, at least if we want to move toward the top. And this is an awkward task, because it often will, *pace* Shelby Steele, feel like a surrender to white power.

But all it really is, is wanting to be good at what one does. To want to be a good doctor has nothing to do with wanting to be a white doctor. The fact that professional standards have been laid down before significant numbers of black professionals came on the scene does not by itself prove racism; the need of multinational business firms for skilled legal negotiators is not a function of whether the founders of the firms are white. It is a function of the markets in which the firms must operate. The market in a sense defines the tasks for which it will compensate, and moving up the ladder requires doing one of those tasks better than others.

Being good is not, of course, enough—not always. Black professionals will often question the willingness of white colleagues to be fair, and there is frequently reason to wonder. Bias and favoritism are still rampant. Many of us learn this as a legacy from our parents: white people, we are told, will not be fair to us. This undeniable (if sometimes overbroad) fact of life can point children in two directions: some children might be paralyzed by despair, certain that achievement is impossible; others might be charged with a fiery desire to prove the critics wrong. Our destiny as a people turns on this choice; our hopes must lie with the children in the second group; and our efforts must be to get as many of our children into it as we can.

A principal point of the Black Power movement (and, I hope, a principal point even now of racial solidarity) is to keep us away from the downward slope, to help us find support not simply in the good opinion of white people but in the good opinion of black people, too.

Still, it is possible to take a good thing too far. When, as may happen, one is denied the good opinion of black people for *political* reasons, there might be a temptation to lurch into the arms of a

welcoming white institution. Everyone, after all, wants a home. One of the reasons that I despair at the vehemence with which the political divisions in our community are nurtured is that there is so tremendous a risk of losing sharp minds to those some would call the enemy. Moreover, a growing ethic in many inner-city schools insists that achievement itself is somehow a sign of a lack of solidarity—that doing well in school is something that only white people, or black people who are trying to be white, would seriously want to do. Consistent, if depressing, social science data bear this out. Such ideas as Afrocentric curricula and special schools for black boys are touted as solutions to this problem, and, if they generate a degree of pride that in turn leads to achievement, they might solve some part of it, a possibility that itself might make them worth a try. But one must be cautious, for the Afrocentric curriculum runs a substantial risk of creating a dogma no less damaging than the assertedly Eurocentric curriculum that is deemed the enemy, while the special schools for black boys carry some risk of stereotyping and seem to overlook the fact that black girls are also at risk. Besides, millions of black kids in the past performed quite well in schools—even segregated schools—without the need for special curricula. What their parents and teachers inculcated instead was the importance of training the mind as a way of getting ahead. The world was different then, but one might reasonably conclude, even today, that what our kids need more than a redesigned curriculum is an end to the foolish and destructive notion that achievement is a betrayal. What is needed most is a rededication to excellence.

Of course, I say all of this from the standpoint of one who has, rather obviously, been seduced by the standards under which my white professional world judges achievement. I have always liked the idea that my résumé should be the equal of the résumés of the best of the white kids—or, nowadays, the best of the white adults. Maybe it is, maybe it isn't, but that is hardly the point. The point is that my goal in life, at least since eighth grade, has been to beat them—the white folks—at their own games, whatever those might be. I didn't need

an Afrocentric curriculum to do that; I needed the burning drive to prove the racists wrong. It has been with me a very long time and it has carried me a very long way.

But the distance I have traveled is only a professional distance. The drive to succeed in the white man's world has not carried me far from my community, except in the geographic sense; on the contrary, it has, in many ways, brought me closer. In my junior high school and high school years, as the only black kid in a series of honors and advanced-placement courses, I suffered occasional estrangement from other black kids, who often seemed to me to share a secret world that I yearned to enter, could I but find the key. Adolescent silliness, of course—all I had to do was try—but a springboard, in later years, for my delirious dive into a form of nationalism and, later, into a stronger circle of friendships and common needs, culminating, at least for me, in the glory of the black table. I will never lose touch with this circle, or these needs, because without them I would drown in a sea of whiteness.

Assimilation

So one claims. In America, with all the constriction that its swirling racial consciousness implies, claiming is a kind of freedom. Every ethnic group suffers its crisis as members of a fresh generation reject the claim as the last generation understood it, although, to the new generation, the claim is not rejected but transformed. The word that describes the process is *assimilation*. Among those who cherish solidarity, the word *assimilation* often carries a mildly pejorative content, and no wonder, for its many guises include alienation, intermarriage, the possibility of a turning away. And as each face turns, a culture creeps nearer to absorption, a transformation that also means demise. What does not change, they say, cannot survive; unfortunately, what changes cannot

survive either. Thus does the image of America as a melting pot become an image for many to fear.

The professional ethic can cause the same dislocation, the same sense of rootlessness. Despite the overheated rhetoric of many otherwise thoughtful critics, the professional ethic—hard work in accord with the disciplining rules that define the profession itself—is not white, male, and Eurocentric. It is not even, in any comprehensible sense, ideological. It reflects, rather, a relentless pragmatism, the American tradition of solving problems rather than envisioning the world. Theorists of the left once imagined that America's brash style of capitalism would fail precisely because it lacked a pure vision which a variety of more disciplined ideologies across the world possessed. Better ideas would beat out better products.

But they didn't. In the struggle for hearts and minds, to the general astonishment of even its most passionate defenders, capitalism has triumphed. The question that professionalism raises is whether solidarity can beat better products: more to the point, as one rises in one's profession, is there a real risk that one will be trapped in the problem-solving methodology of one's training, and therefore lose the purer vision of group love that solidarity at once entails and requires? Some fear that the answer is yes; but the answer, surely, is the claim.

Again, one claims. One claims one's people. The claim is not of a politics or a culture or an aesthetic, or not purely of any of these. The claim, rather, is a love.

But what is the form that it takes? Even if we proudly proclaim that we are black people who happen to be lawyers, not the other way around, what, concretely, is the difference that this proclamation makes? Does it imply a habit of mind? An aesthetic sensibility? A political program? Many people would argue that it means some or all of these things, that to vary or reject is to grow estranged from one's roots. This is when the ugly battles begin over which black perspective is the authentic one—and those battles, for the sake of our people, are best avoided.

Perhaps what the claim of one's people implies is something rather different, something personal, a choice within a choice. The decision to claim solidarity is something internal, a joining of neurons rather than of hands. To claim solidarity, to claim to love one's people, is to accept a responsibility of living and working and helping—that is, to love one's people is to crave a kind of familyhood with them. But one may live a very long way from one's family and love it no less. For some people, love of family demands constant contact; for others, a card every other Christmas is sufficient. The great majority of people must surely fall somewhere between these extremes. The choice within a choice that the claimant must make is what love demands.

This means, of course, that every one of us who is black and a professional becomes insulated from the cruel suggestions that we have left our people behind, because only *we* know that. Many will not feel comfortable unless they are actively involved in assisting the worst-off members of their communities. Others will make choices about where to live, whom to love, how to vacation. Some will reach down the ladder to pull others along. Some will spend their days redesigning the ladder itself. But even one who spends her career simply being the best she can be at what she does can, if fired by love, insist that she, too, has made a claim—and so I would say she has. Moreover, she has even carried her burden of working and helping, for each of us who shatters the stereotypes advances the cause.

Why must solidarity ever demand more than this? To love and to choose—to choose to love—isn't this enough? There, at the black table, the answer was so difficult to see. We wanted greater complexity, wanted obligations to impose on one another, as though choosing for others what constitutes love would prove our own commitments. We thought that we were proving something of value if only we could show that the duality of our selected futures, our blackness and our professionalness, should be irreconcilable, or at least should pose us a challenge. In a racist world especially, we were sure there must be something more. Putting on the tie—it *had* to make us less. We were not prepared for the possibility that it merely made us different.

And now, more than a decade after my classmates and I left the black table, now when I am well along in my professional career, solidarity continues to tug, deep inside me, gently, insistently, lovingly, and a little desperately, like something afraid of being left behind. But I cannot leave it behind, and would not if I could. I carry it. I cherish it. More important, I try to nurture it—for the light of solidarity, like the light of love, will go out if not carefully tended.

Race is a claim. A choice. A decision. Oh, it is imposed, too. The society tells us: "You are black because we say so." Skin color is selected as one of many possible characteristics of morphology used for sorting. Never mind the reasons. It is simply *so*. It is not, however, logically entailed. Many years ago—in high school, I think—I happened upon an interview with the leader of one of what used to be called the emergent Caribbean nations. The interviewer asked the president how it felt to be the leader of a newly independent black nation. The president (or prime minister or whatever his title was) replied that he was the leader of a newly independent *white* nation. When pressed by the incredulous interviewer, the president explained (with a twinkle in his eye, I like to think) that he had read somewhere that in the United States anybody with more than one thirty-second black blood was considered black. "Well, here in my country," he concluded, "we define white in exactly the same way."

The president was not, I think, rejecting the interviewer's imposition of blackness upon him and his people; he was lampooning it, and with some force. "You are black because we say so" is oppressive. The liberating answer to such cruel nonsense, the answer that solidarity suggests, is: "No, I am black because *I* say so."

That answers the tug and paints an identity for me, or the start of one. But to make race a claim, to say that I am black because I say so, proposes that it is also up to me to decide what that state of blackness entails. For me as a professional, as a scholar, as a person who is black and has made that claim from love, this is an autonomy that matters.