

Race: Why Skin Color isn't Culture or Politics

"Constraining us to define our citizenship and even our personhood more and more by race and ethnicity in classrooms, workrooms, courtrooms, newsrooms, and boardrooms, today's liberalism no longer curbs discrimination; it invites it. It does not expose racism; it recapitulates and, sometimes, reinvents it. Its tortured racial etiquette begets racial epithets, as surely as hypocrisy begets hostility. And it dishonors liberals' own heroic past efforts to focus America's race lens in the 1950s and '60s, when conservative pieties about color blindness concealed monstrous injustices." -- Introduction to [Liberal Racism](#), 1997

Almost every white person in America has a “first time” encounter with blackness. I’m not talking about the very first time a white person actually meets a black person, or about a first encounter with non-whiteness of some other kind. I’m thinking of the first time that a white American (or an American who passes for white or identifies with being white) encounters racial blackness as the emblem of a monstrous evil and its repercussions -- the African-American slavery that was “lathered into the foundations” of the American republic, as Roger Wilkins put it.

The first, unnerving encounter with that kind of blackness – and some whites' flight from such encounters – skews every American's understanding of race and certainly complicates its place in our collective imagination.

One reason why other societies treat race more fluidly and ecumenically than ours is that, for three centuries, our national identity has used race to color-code a deeper contradiction -- the one between our proclaimed civic-republican, Tocquevillian values and our actual practices.

The more the American republic has prided itself on vindicating universal ideals against mythic, ethno-racialist loyalties to blood and soil, the more the republic's failures at this have driven some Americans to seek succor and self-justification in loyalties to racial and tribal camps -- as well as in religious consolations that sometimes excuse or sanctify the failures instead of challenging them.

Such loyalties and false consolations slide up to and into a person with seductive warmth. The colder and thinner the larger civic culture, the more redemptive they seem. And the more un-American they are.

Here's my account of my own first encounter with blackness and these bittersweet truths. It came in 1976, when I was a graduate student with a night job teaching mostly white, working-class veterans at a junior college in Cambridge, Massachusetts. One evening I took my class to hear James Baldwin speak at Harvard. You can imagine the painful intersections of class and race and culture in that room or maybe you can't, in which case [this Harvard Crimson account](#) will help.

In 1977, I carried the revelations of that night into a decade-long immersion in black inner-city Brooklyn. Or maybe it was those revelations that carried me, a young New England civic-republican moralist, into a New York approximation of Orwell's “down and out in Paris and London” odyssey. For a decade I lost and found myself in black, Hispanic, and white-ethnic neighborhood life, politics and journalism.

Many of my assumptions and sentiments about race dropped away or were wrenched away as I lived through links and conflicts across race lines. (Some of this is recounted in the introduction and other passages of [The Closest of Strangers](#), and more of it in the second half of an essay linked elsewhere on this site, "[Orwell's Smelly Little Orthodoxies, and Ours.](#)")

Some of my left-leaning assumptions about racial identity survived my years in Brooklyn and citywide journalism. But older civic-republican dispositions and principles survived better. I learned -- and, in some pieces linked here, I argue -- that only a civic culture that's thick enough to live in on its own race-transcendent terms can carry Americans past our dangerous tendency (and, often, temptation) to make race the arbiter of personal identity, cultural belonging, and national destiny.

There's nothing deep or immutable about race, but white and black Americans tend to escape into it when the republican experiment seems rootless and drifting. Alone among nations such as France and the Soviet Union that have made globe girdling, universal claims, the United States abducted and plunged into its midst millions of blacks whom it stripped of ancient cultural moorings and kept eerily apart, giving them the highest stakes imaginable in the republic's redeeming its luminous but broken promises.

Trapped in what the black writer Harold Cruse called a "sleepless nightmare of non-recognition," with nothing to fall back on, African-Americans had to create new identities *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. The constant, maddeningly intimate exposure to alluring promises cruelly broken made some blacks the American creed's most eloquent champions, others its most nihilist assailants: Blacks' struggle to belong to wholly to the American republic is the most powerful epic of unrequited love in the history of the world.

Because it has been loving, it has driven much of our music and the civic culture's richest appeals, by Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., Barack Obama, and many others along the way. But because the struggle has been unrequited for so long, those whom it has embittered have often chosen hurt over hope, revivifying the racist coordinates within which they've oriented themselves to survive.

Therefore whites have expected blacks to come to the public arena bringing not just rip-offs and rebellion but also the searing moral uplift of a King or an Obama. Yet to watch more and more blacks rise now (and settle down) to the business of running of municipalities, military machines (Colin Powell) and multinationals (Time-Warner's Richard Parsons) is to watch the angels of blackness withdraw along with the demons. It is to surrender white condescension along with contempt.

Some white leftists and liberals keep ideologizing or exoticizing blackness for their own social purposes. Once it was conservatives who said, in effect, "Every group in its place, with a label on its face," while leftists and liberals worked for the color-transcendent liberation of workers everywhere. But more recently conservatives have claimed, however hypocritically, that in the liberating dynamism of free markets the only color that matters is dollar-green, while liberals and leftists have bowed to every nationalism or community "of color" that announces itself, even when such identities are concocted to exploit political incentives or are merely confected for niche marketing.

Part of the reason for this great cross-over is that elite liberals who've done well in the corporate consumer-marketing dispensation show little serious intention of redressing its inequities and injustices. But they can't defend them very wholeheartedly, either, and that moral disequilibrium is what makes some liberals grasp at a politics of moral posturing, including anti-racist revival meetings (especially frequent at factories of elite privilege like Harvard) that make participants feel better about themselves. These rituals help some non-whites but don't reduce the deepening inequalities that now divide blacks from blacks as much as blacks from whites, (and women from women as much as women from men.

That harsh reality leaves liberals open to charges of hypocrisy, as I explained in essays such as this review, in [Commonweal](#), of William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*, a book I admire. In other essays I explained why efforts to mobilize blacks' legitimate grievances to expose liberalism's flaws failed, because both leftists and liberals became trapped in a politics of racial grievance whose only traction is negative.

Telling that truth as I'd lived it in Brooklyn became my burden in [The Closest of Strangers](#). It made me many enemies and some false friends: Liberals and leftists resented my warnings that they were misappropriating the

cachet of “civil rights” crusades to camouflage their agendas -- liberal compromise with "the system," leftist rage at it.

Conservatives, eager to score points against leftists and liberals, touted my civic-republican assessment of the pitfalls of racial identity and accused liberals, as I had, of resorting to moral tokenism to avoid facing their own responsibility for the deeper sources of inequality and of racism itself.

I stuck to my claims, including an insistence that more than a few whites are readier to let go of the old racist coordinates than are some blacks, who have sought a perverse kind of comfort in guilt-tripping whites by finding racism in every leaf that falls.

It is a hard argument to make fairly, but its truth has become clearer since the mid-1990s. Back then, civic-republican insights like mine were difficult for the black leaders and writers who shared them to express very strongly in public, and things had been that way since the late 1960s.

Even as late as the mid-1990s, brave black truth-tellers in daily journalism, such as N. Don Wycliff and Clarence Page at the *Chicago Tribune* and William Raspberry at the *Washington Post*, were sometimes eclipsed by hipper, angrier columnists or by retaliatory black conservatives who were in effect being subsidized by think tanks to put down the hip poseurs.

Yet Wycliff, Page, Raspberry, and a few others remained grounded in the best of the civil-rights movement's civic-republican black tradition of struggle. And they were ahead of their time, not behind it, because they understood something too painful for champions of "identity politics" to acknowledge: We are all lurching into the uncharted waters of what the historian David Hollinger calls “Post-ethnic America” in his book by that name. Whether by historical accident or an irrepressible logic in the founders’ intent, America’s destiny is to diminish the power of racial differences as determinants or arbiters of human worth and belonging.

That doesn't mean that black communities of memory and endurance should disappear, as an unfortunate headline given to a manifesto of mine suggested. But I acknowledged that I do envision an American identity beyond blackness or whiteness in that manifesto, in [Harper's in 1996](#) and in [Liberal Racism](#), published a year later.

These arguments were a few steps ahead of the societal “learning curve” on race then. But they got some respectful attention, as in this interview with Robert Siegel for [National Public Radio's “All Things Considered;”](#) another with [The Atlantic Monthly](#), and an online “reading” with [questions and answers at Barnes & Noble](#). I debated my analysis with Al Sharpton and others in appearances on [The Charlie Rose Show](#).

I've never doubted that Americans should be able to grow up in or join distinctive ethno-racial communities that tap wellsprings of tradition and aspiration which the larger civic culture may not be matching. The black community that begot such masters of American literary and political expression as Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, A. Philip Randolph, and so many more, was distinctive yet outward facing. So was the young Barack Obama even when he decided, just out of college, to join an African-American community of memory and endurance that was only inferentially his own.

But I've also never doubted that Americans must be free to *leave* such affinity groups without censure or stereotyping. Over time, too, these disparate communal wellsprings do commingle and, yes, some do disappear. America’s survival, and its genius, depends ultimately on its finding and digging new wellsprings and changing the old. When New York’s first African-American mayor, David Dinkins, called the city a “gorgeous mosaic” of racial and other groups, I respected the sentiment but demurred at the metaphor: A mosaic’s tiles remain fixed in color and place but human communities change places and even colors amid cultural interaction and interracial marriage.

Besides, if everyone were a mosaic's tile, who would be its glue? The answer is that each of us has to be the glue whenever we act as citizens – as voters or as jurors who assess evidence by trans-racial standards and refuse to broker a defendant's guilt or innocence as delegates of our races. (See “Daily Life and the Jury System,” [Dissent, Winter, 2008.](#))

It's one thing to make such arguments abstractly. It's something else to develop them in decades of “advocacy journalism” as a neighborhood newspaper editor and publisher, a muckraker for the *Village Voice*, a New York *Daily News* columnist, and a frequent contributor to *The New Republic* and editorial-board member of *Dissent*. What follows is a sample of such grounded reckonings with race. Contact jimsleeper@aol.com for more.

RACIAL IDENTITY vs. AMERICAN CIVIC CULTURE

[The Perils of Identity Politics: A Warning to the Left](#), *Tikkun*, 1991

[Civic Liberals and Race](#), *Boston Globe*, 1992. Written just after John Kerry had generated a storm by questioning some aspects of affirmative action.

[The Limits of Indignation](#), *The American Prospect*, 1998. Books by Alex Kotlowitz, Nicholas Lemann, and Thomas and Mary Edsall.

[The Content of “Black” Character](#), *Washington Post*, 1996. Books by Henry Louis Gates & Cornel West, Benjamin DeMott, and C. Eric Lincoln

[Racial Atonement](#), *The New Leader*, 1997. Books by David Shipler and Orlando Patterson)

[Toward an End of Blackness](#), *Harper's*, 1996. An evocation of America's racial destiny after controversy about Alex Haley's *Roots*.

[He Is Somebody](#), *Washington Post*, 1992. Biography of Jesse Jackson, by Marshall Frady

RACIAL STREET THEATER AND DEMAGOGUERY

[Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and the Cambridge, MA, police](#). Both were wrong, but one was wronger. TPMCafe, July 24, 2009

[Al Sharpton Tries to Rope-a-Dope Rudy Giuliani](#), *Daily News*, 1994

[Who Is Al Sharpton?](#) *The New Republic*, 1996

[Black Activism and Misogyny](#), *The New Republic*, 1990

[Al Sharpton vs. Daniel Patrick Moynihan](#), *The New Republic*, 1994

[Race Doctors \(Prof. Leonard Jeffries\)](#) *Daily News*, 1993

[The OJ Simpson Verdict](#), *The New Republic*, 1995

[Massacres on Long Island and in Israel expose similar evils](#); two *Daily News* columns, 1994 and 1995

[Rise and Fall of a Brooklyn Povertyocrat](#), *The Village Voice*, 1982

[Blacks, Jews, and Good Faith Gone Wrong](#) *The Nation*, 1991

RACE AND ELECTORAL POLITICS

[End of the Rainbow?](#), *The New Republic*, 1993

[New York's Fateful Mayoral Election of 1993, Giuliani v. Dinkins](#); three *Daily News* columns.

[Chicago's Larger-than-Life Mayor Harold Washington](#), *Washington Post*, 1992

[The Ironic Returns of Racial Districting](#), *The New Republic*, 1996

OBAMA CHRONICLES, *TPMCafe*, 2008

[What Biden Brings](#), *TPMCafe*, August 23, 2008. This was written just before Obama's introduction of Biden and the latter's speech in Springfield, which fulfilled my anticipations here. Now the other shoe will drop, and Biden will put his foot in his mouth a few times this fall. But he's a great choice, all things considered, even if he's not the answer to the fundamental challenges I raised in the column before this one.

[It's Not the Veep Who Matters Now. It's Us](#), *TPMCafe*, August 22, 2008. The day before Obama's announcement of his running mate, a meditation on what, alone, can save his presidential bid.

[Has Obama the courage of black voters' convictions?](#) *TPMCafe*, August 8, 2008. A congressional election in Memphis was a win-win-win opportunity for Obama to endorse the *white* incumbent, against a black challenger -- and in a majority-black district! But he didn't do it. This is also a case study of where 1982 amendments to the Voting Rights Act went wrong.

[Obama: Neoliberal or Civic Republican?](#) *TPMCafe*, June 13, 2008. He's really a bit of both, I argue, and he has the capacity to vindicate the Republic against the worst of global capitalism. Whether he will depends on whether our national economic and social crises deepen -- and on what people seem ready to hear.

[Obama in the Straits](#), *TPMCafe*, June 5, 2008. As Obama claimed the Democratic nomination after the last primaries, a meditation from abroad on the racial dimension of the challenge and the opportunity his candidacy has put before the country and the world.

[Obama in the Wilderness](#), *TPMCafe*, April 29, 2008, As Obama staggered under reactions to the Rev. Wright's public preening shortly before the Indiana and North Carolina primaries, some black historical and religious context was badly needed.

[Obama's Way Out of the Race Trap](#), *TPMCafe*, April 23, 2008. After losing the Pennsylvania primary, Obama had to re-connect with working-class whites. I suggested that calling for class-based affirmative action would turn a lot of heads and gain a lot of ground electorally and for social justice.

[How Republicans Gamed the Pennsylvania Primary](#), *TPMCafe*, April 22, 2008

[The Ur-Story Behind Obama's 'Cling' Gaffe](#) in PA, *TPMCafe*, April 16, 2008. His problem with working-class whites is deep, though not his fault.

[Why Obama's Leftist Critics Are Sputtering](#), *TPMCafe*, April 3, 2008.

[Obama's racial wisdom vs. holdouts left and right](#), *TPMCafe*, April 1, 2008

[In Philadelphia, Obama's Historic Challenge](#), *TPMCafe*, March 18, 2008

[Has History Cancelled Farrakhan's Endorsement of Obama?](#) March 5, 2008 (the day of the Texas, Ohio, and other primaries).

[Hillary Clinton's Arthur Schlesinger – Or Worse](#), February 27, 2008.

(Commentary on this column in [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)) [Obama, Crowds, and Power](#), Feb. 13, 2008 (just after he'd won the "Potomac Primaries")

[Obama's Biggest Weakness](#), February 6, 2008

[If I Vote For Obama, It'll Be Because....](#) January 8, 2008. (Posted the morning after he lost the New Hampshire primary to Clinton; additional comments in *The Washington Post*, January 15, on "[The racial row that's dividing the Democrats](#)".)

RACE, EDUCATION, AND SOCIAL POLICY

[Federal diversity police on campus](#), *Washington Post*, 1991

[Diversity as it should be in public school](#), *Daily News*, 1995

[Diversity as it should be on campus](#), *The New Republic*, 1991

[Ward Connerly Gets Pinched by the New York Times](#), *The Weekly Standard*, 1997. Was I angered by what the *Times* had done here, or what?

[The Failure of 'Money Liberalism'](#), *Newsday*, 1992; a review of Mickey Kaus' *The End of Equality*.

[Journalistic Color Coding](#), *The Los Angeles Times*, 2002; a review of William McGowan's *Coloring the News*.

[Is Affirmative Action Doomed? Should It Be?](#) A symposium in *Commentary* magazine, March, 1998

[Not All White Men Are Racists](#), *Chicago Tribune*, 1995