

BURIED ALIVE: A LETTER FROM IRAN'S DUNGEON

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OUR MACHINES, OURSELVES

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TOWARD AN END OF BLACKNESS

An argument for the
surrender of race consciousness

By Jim Sleeper

Last January, not long after the national furor over the decision by an Oakland school board to recognize "Ebonics," I happened upon a C-SPAN telecast of the awarding of seven Congressional Medals of Honor to black World War II veterans, each of whose "gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life" had been ignored for more than fifty years. President Clinton strode across the East Room of the White House to present the medals to Vernon Joseph Baker, seventy-seven, the only recipient still living, and to the others' families. "History has been made whole today," the President told the assembly. The honorees, he said, had "helped us find a way to become a more just, more free nation . . . more worthy of them and more true to its ideals."

History has not been made whole for American blacks, of course, and yet something almost archaic in the recipients' bearing and in the ceremony itself reminded me that none of us in the younger generations can say with certainty what an American wholeness might be or, within any such presumed wholeness, what blackness and whiteness might mean. If we have trouble thinking about race, possibly it's because we no longer know how to think about America itself.

At least Second Lieutenant Baker seemed to have less trouble fifty-two years ago than we do now. In April 1945, he single-handedly wiped out two German machine-gun nests in Viareggio, Italy, drew fire on himself to permit the evacuation of wounded comrades, and led his segregated battalion's advance through enemy minefields. Asked by reporters after

Jim Sleeper, a former political columnist for the New York Daily News, is the author of The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York. This essay has been adapted from his new book, Liberal Racism, which will be published by Viking this summer.

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the East Room ceremony whether he had ever given up hope of winning the medal, he "sounded surprised . . . as if the question presumed arrogance," said one report. "I never thought about getting it," Baker said. Asked why he had joined the army in the first place, Baker responded, "I was a young black man without a job." Ah, yes, *that*. Prodded to comment on having risked his life for his country while in a segregated unit, he answered, "I was an angry young man. We were all angry. But we had a job to do, and we did it. . . . My personal thoughts were that I knew things would get better, and I'm happy I'm here to see it."

Asked what the ceremony meant to her, Arlene Fox, widow of First Lieutenant John Fox, who died in Italy in 1944, said, "I think it's more

than just what it means to this family. I think it sends a message . . . that when a man does his duty, his color isn't important."

Even in the prime of their anger, Baker and Fox, as well as the black leaders and writers of their generation, such as A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, did not urge the importance of color as much as they found color imposed on them in ways that affronted something in them that wasn't "of color" at all. Proud though they were of what blacks had endured and would overcome (as Baker "knew" they would), they believed, before most of



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the rest of us, that after a long dalliance with a white manifest destiny the American republic would recognize no black or white sanction from God. In Baker's black 92nd Infantry Division, in Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and in countless churches, blacks found it within themselves to treat a society torn by racism not as inherently, eternally damned but as nevertheless worth joining and redeeming. Blacks who thought and acted that way shared with whites an important belief: not, alas, a consensus that racism was wrong but a deep certainty that, despite it, they were all bound passionately to the promise of the nation.

But what was that promise? It seems a long time now since the Smothers Brothers crooned "The Lord is colorblind" to what CBS must have assumed was a reasonably receptive national audience in the late 1960s. Today many of us would think such an audience naive or hypocritical, if not racist; it is almost as if any assertion that color isn't important insults what has come to be known as black pride. It is almost as if we fear that if race lost all weight in our social equations or disappeared entirely through interracial marriages and offspring, we would have nothing of value to say or give to one another. The problem is not that racism has grown stronger; it is that American civic life has become weaker—and not primarily because of racism. If we find it difficult to say that a black person's color isn't important, that is because we no longer know how to say that being an "American" is important—important enough to transcend racial identity in a classroom, in a jury room, or at the polls.

Photographs by Eli Reed/Magnum Photo, from Black in America, published by W. W. Norton. The photos were on display this winter at the Leica Gallery in New York City.

"An individual's moral character is formed by narrative and culture," writes the sociologist Alan Wolfe. "Contracts between us are not enforced by laws or economic incentives; people adhere to social contracts when they feel that behind the contract lies a credible story of who they are and why their fates are linked to those of others." But what is America's story, when Vernon Baker's and Arlene Fox's descendants can climb to the very summit of the American Mt. Parnassus only to find there Dick Morris, *Vanity Fair*, Dennis Rodman, Time Warner Inc., and a retinue of dancing pollsters? The old American story of white manifest destiny, thankfully gone, was coherent enough to give blacks enough moral footing and traction to undo its moral affronts. By comparison, our new stories (the space shuttle *Challenger*? *Forrest Gump*? curricular gardens of multicultural delirium?) are incoherent—much like Bill Clinton, truly a man of our time. In 1963, James Baldwin wondered aloud why any black American would want "to be integrated into a burning house." Obviously, he was not proposing resegregation. What, then? How were black Americans to think about themselves? Baldwin's emigration to France left the question open. And so have we all.

For a short while twenty years ago, Alex Haley's *Roots* seemed to offer an answer. Turning on an intrepid black American's report of an astonishing encounter with his African past, it promised to weave a recovered, emblematic black story into the American national narrative, whose promise, whatever it was, would become more coherent for resolving the contradictions in its black story line. The story of Haley's story is worth retracing, because *Roots* wound up demonstrating both that blackness has no reliable myth of its own and that the summit of the American Parnassus is bare.

Published late in 1976, *Roots* became the next year's top nonfiction bestseller (selling some 1.5 million copies in one year) after a record 130 million Americans saw the twelve-hour ABC miniseries it inspired. At least 250 colleges began offering credit courses based significantly on *Roots*. Travel agencies packaged back-to-Africa "Roots" tours. Even before TV had anointed Haley, I watched him tell a rapt audience of Harvard undergraduates, many of them black, of his meeting with the *griot*, or oral historian, of a village in Gambia from which, Haley said, his ancestor Kunta Kinte had been abducted to America in 1767. When he noted, as he had in the book, that the *griot* "had no way in the world to know that [his story's particulars] had just echoed what I had heard all through my boyhood years on my grandma's front porch in Henning, Tennessee," there were gasps, and then the packed Quincy House dining hall was awash in tears.

With this unprecedented return by a black American to the scene of the primal crime against his West African forebears—"an astonishing feat of genealogical detective work," Doubleday's original dust jacket had called it—the long, tortuous arc of black dispossession and yearning for a historic reckoning seemed, at last, to come home. *Roots* wasn't just Haley's own story; it was "a symbolic history of a people," he told a British reporter who raised doubts about its accuracy. "I, we, need a place called Eden. My people need a Pilgrim's Rock."

Indeed they did. The sudden lurch toward integration in the 1960s had disrupted old black coping strategies, scrambling the coordinates of an uneasy racial coexistence and confounding pious hopes for a smooth transition to the integration envisioned by so many of Baker and Fox's generation. Some white-ethnic Roman Catholics and Jews, who had resisted

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LINDA BROWN (BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION), 1955

ALEX HALEY'S TV-FRIENDLY
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their own assimilation into Anglo-Saxon norms, now intensified the sub-cultural revivals of "unmeltable ethnics." Responding to these assertions and, at the same time, to the equally unsettling prospect of black dissolution into whiteness through integration, a retaliatory black parochialism surfaced in public life for the first time in decades, assailing blacks whom it deemed too accommodating and forcing even assimilationist whites to acknowledge their own hyphenated Americanism.

Appearing amid the confusion, *Roots* at first startled, then relieved, pessimists on both sides of the color line. By the grace of Haley's pilgrimage, it seemed, blacks could recover and share the true story of their dispossession. His mythopoetic triumph tugged at people's hearts, strengthening hopes for a decorous pluralism of peoples and a decent integration of persons. Americans of all colors were transfixed, even as charges emerged that Haley had taken too many folkloric and fictional liberties with material he'd claimed was historically true. (He settled out of court for \$650,000 with author Harold Courlander, passages of whose novel *The African* Haley had pretty much copied.) Yet while *Roots* was denounced as a scholarly "fraud" by the historian Oscar Handlin, it was defended as an irresistible historical novel and pedagogical tool by other historians, including David Brion Davis, who told the *New York Times*, "We all need certain myths about the past, and one must remember how much in the myths about the Pilgrims or the immigrants coming here has been reversed." Haley received a "special" Pulitzer Prize and a rare "Citation of Merit" from a National Book Awards panel. ABC produced a second miniseries, *Roots: The Next Generations*, based on his new book *Search*, which chronicled his family's later tribulations and triumphs, including Haley's own work on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. "Now, as before," wrote Frank Rich in *Time*, "*Roots* occupies a special place in the history of our mass culture: it has the singular power to reunite all Americans, black and white, with their separate and collective pasts."

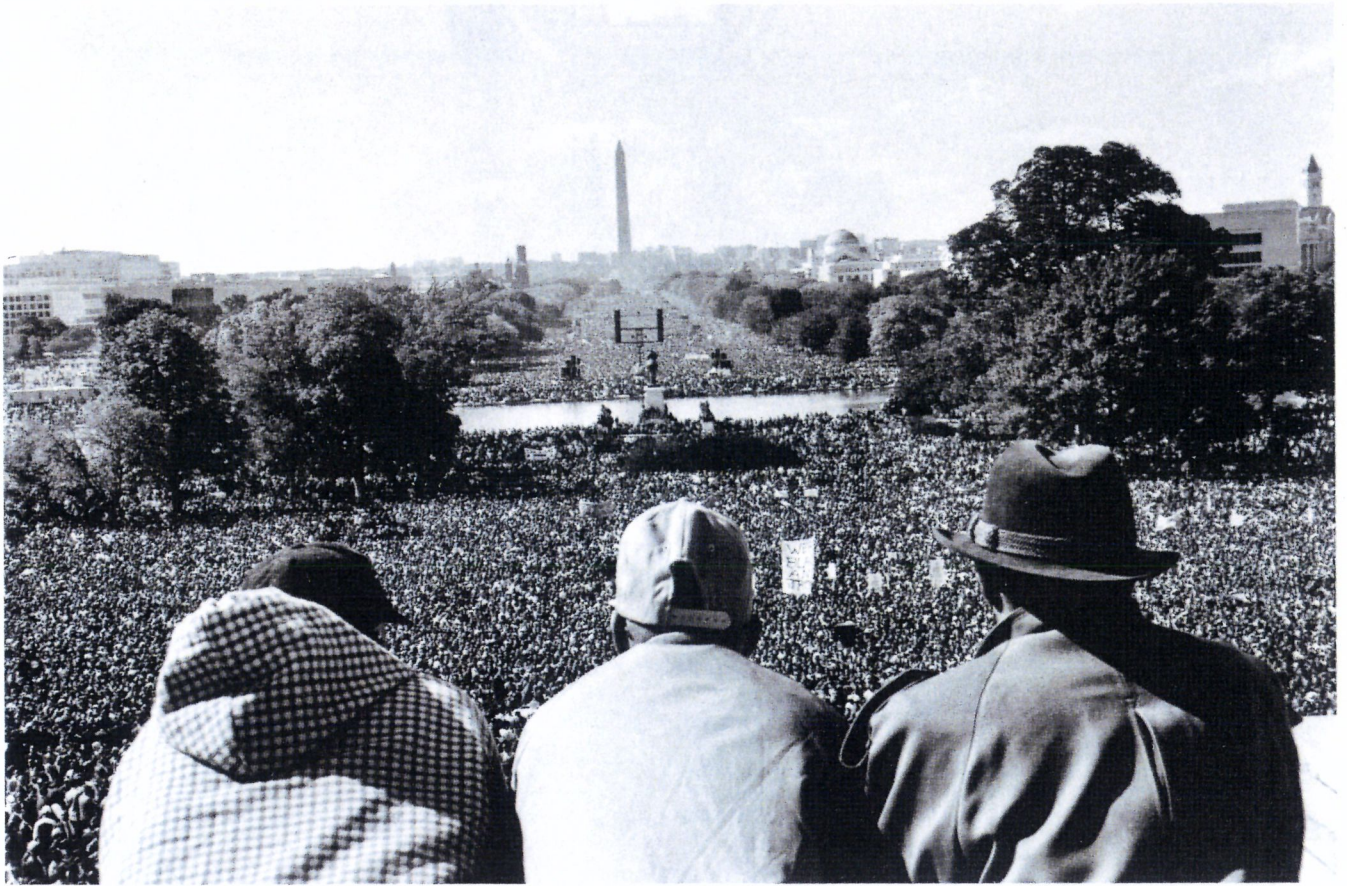
Today *Roots* is seldom mentioned. The History Channel's twentieth-anniversary broadcast in February was little remarked by viewers or print commentators. The book is still in stores—Doubleday calls it "an important title on the Dell backlist"—but it's not much read in college or high school courses. Few books on American racial matters mention Haley (who died in 1992). "*Roots*?" laughs the black religion scholar C. Eric Lincoln. "It's disappeared! Alex Haley was my friend, and I can tell you, he was a journeyman freelance writer, not a political writer or historian. He was given a status he didn't expect."

Roots's virtual disappearance can't be explained with the observation that it accomplished its mission by transforming the consciousness of a generation. Nor is it enough to say that *Roots* shortchanged women by portraying them as passive helpmates; Haley's misconstruals have been redressed by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and others. What drained *Roots* of its power with blacks as well as whites was a disillusionment in at least three dimensions. First, Haley idealized an Africa and a blackness that had been so overwhelmed (indeed, defined) by European invasion that they flourished only as negations of whiteness. Second, so complete was this submergence that Haley himself idealized American blacks' white abductors, if only implicitly, by telling blacks' own story in Western terms. In doing so he met his third pitfall: he tried to skirt Western mythology's tragic sense of life by telling an upbeat story for the mass market. *Roots* became the next "myth for a day," turning immense historical pain into immense profit. That was what slavery had done, and it was what *Roots* was meant to counter. But Haley's TV-friendly, docudramatic tale of black dispossession subtly reinforced the moral neutrality of classical liberalism, where markets are stronger than myths and history is not so much falsified as tamed.

In Africa, Haley depicted a precolonial Eden that hadn't existed, created his account of Kunta Kinte's youth there more out of current anthro-

pology than history, paired all of this with the tale of his own communion with village elders in *postcolonial* Gambia, and inflated black Americans' expectations of sub-Saharan Africa, past and present. For American blacks, there was no there there: "Whatever Africans share," writes the Ghanaian intellectual Kwame Anthony Appiah, "we do not have a common traditional culture, common languages, a common religious or conceptual vocabulary. . . . [W]e do not even belong to a common race . . ." When Americans making visits inspired by Haley's epiphanies got past their African hosts, they found strangers as indifferent or hostile to them as "fellow whites" in my grandparents' native Lithuania might be to me were I to visit there now—strangers who may resemble me racially but

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MILLION MAN MARCH, WASHINGTON, 1995

whose religion, myths, and current interests have little in common with those of my Jewish "tribe," which they drove out or exterminated in the 1940s. American Afrocentrists (and liberal whites) seeking a romantic, Pan-African foil to a racist America found the same "ethnic cleansing" furiously under way in Nigeria, Rwanda, Zaire, and the Sudan. The very designation "black" was no more useful a moral, political, or cultural identification than is "white" in Lithuania or the Balkans.

"Blackness" did have one use: as a foil to whiteness. It is hard to exaggerate—yet hard for some blacks to acknowledge—how overwhelming was the European presence in Africa. Even the work of such celebrated Pan-African writers as Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe presupposes what Appiah calls "the recognition that a specifically African identity began as the product of a European gaze." They write and are read almost exclusively in English and French. Some apparently indigenous African traditions were concocted in response to, and sometimes with the tactical support of, white colonizers, and in order to construct so-called national-

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liberation movements. Africans had to devise "national" identities with European military, economic, philosophical, and linguistic tools.

For Americans, especially, the tie to Africa proved, in the words of the black economist and social critic Glenn Loury, "an empty hope, all remnants and echoes." American black luminaries who pursued those echoes only to fall for African dictators' charms might do well to heed the black writer Albert Murray's comment last year on C-SPAN that the Jeffersonian idea that all are equal didn't come from Africa, where others were also enslaved. The blacks on the Underground Railroad "weren't trying to get back to the tribal life in Africa . . . they have no birthrights anywhere in the world except in America." Black Americans' only coherent memories and myths begin in the holds of the slave ships to which other Africans had consigned them—a point that haunted Maya Angelou on a visit to Ghana, as she wondered whether some of her hosts' ancestors had arranged to sell her own.

By assigning two white men to kidnap Kunta Kinte, Haley wasn't just distorting African history (in which the majority of slaves were captured and sold to whites by blacks); he was juggling European archetypes, borrowing Western literary themes meant to appeal to whites as well as blacks. He formulated sub-Saharan Africa's diffuse cultural attitudes into a Western myth of "exile" or "pilgrimage" for a black American audience that had internalized such notions from the Old Testament and for other Americans who needed to understand, in both Christian and Enlightenment terms, what their own forebears had perpetrated or suborned. But the African slaves had no signs that an African god was punishing them for their sins with an exile like that of the Jews, or blessing their "errand into the wilderness" like that of the Puritans. *Roots* wasn't a product of its protagonists' own mother culture; it was the work of a thoroughly Western, Christian, American writer who took as much from Hebrews and Puritans as from Africans. The novel is a Western account of a monstrous Western crime—a crime only according to Western religious and political standards that triumphed later to abolish slavery, as no African authority had done and as the Sudan hasn't done yet.

The irony, of course, is that the Western Enlightenment principles that supported African colonial liberation failed to prevent colonialism in the first place. And the ghastly, bloody misadventures in Europe since 1914 remind us that Western "values" often only ratchet up the human struggle with evil into unprecedented levels of barbarity. Even the notion that skin color is destiny derives from the ignorant scientific and cultural prejudices that draped nineteenth-century European imperialist states in all their clanking, blundering glory.

If there is any glory for the West in all this, it lies not in Western power but in Western thought, which projects triumphs out of tragedies and which, for all its misuses, nourishes the capacity for rational self-contradiction that alone has put such words as "democracy," "liberation," and "human rights" into the minds and hearts of peoples on all five continents. The West's true Eden is not Haley's bucolic African village but the garden in which a serpent corrupted two human beings with the apple of knowledge. Haley's distortions—like those of countless Western writers before him—misrepresented the West as much as they did Africa. When people of any color imagine their origins as racially pure and their heroes as morally infallible, they shrink from the tragic Western truth rooted in the story of The Fall.

They also misunderstand that if the West has any hope of improving on its work, that hope is in America. *Roots* showed, yet could not quite proclaim, that blacks brought as slaves into the American national experiment were so thoroughly uprooted from African sources that they were obliged to accept—for lack of anything else—the transcending liberal and Christian promises of their newfound land. Blacks internalized those promises and re-

heard their implementation long before Vernon Baker joined the 92nd Infantry Division in Italy. Precisely because they had not chosen to join this society, could not dominate it, and could not leave it, they had the highest possible stakes in redeeming its oft-stated, oft-violated ideal.

In that sense, surely, blacks became, for better or worse, the most "American" of us all. In a nation born of fraught departures, clean breaks, and fresh starts on new frontiers, they had to construct their moral universe, again in the words of Glenn Loury, "almost out of nothing, almost heroically, in the cauldron of slavery. Or, as my friend Nathan Huggins puts it, 'We're not an alien population, we're the alienated population. We're after getting our birthright. We're the son who hasn't been acknowledged.' See, *that binds you*. You can't turn back from it. Part of what I want is an acknowledgment of my place, my legitimacy, my belonging." The special depth of this need is what makes blacks "America's metaphor," as Richard Wright called them—moral witnesses to a self-creating America, as well as the country's harshest, sometimes most nihilist, assailants.

No wonder whites at first felt relieved by the *Roots* story: it had an ending happy enough to make whites as well as blacks feel better about themselves. Although Haley didn't make much of the point in the book, white Americans had responded to black fortitude and resistance not only with cross burnings and guns but with the Abolitionist crusade, the great pedagogical project that sent W.E.B. Du Bois and hundreds of New England schoolteachers South during and after Reconstruction to "uplift" freed slaves. Despite all of their cruelties, condescensions, and overweening moral self-regard, white Americans participated in a civil-rights movement that combined black Baptist communalism with a race-transcendent, New England Calvinist theology of personal responsibility and justification by a faith beyond color.

So, if there was any real nobility in Haley's effort to weave blacks more vividly into the American tapestry—to make Kunta Kinte a mythic American like Paul Revere—it consisted of the tragic but potentially redemptive fact that the author had to use the abductors' language and metaphysical looms. If *Roots* hasn't helped a new generation of American blacks to fit itself into the national tapestry, we must find something else that can, for separating the black thread would harm all of us even more than hiding it deep in the weave, as we've done in the past. Even Louis Farrakhan knows this, no matter how strenuously he insists on the separatist claims of the Nation of Islam. Not for nothing did he hold his march on the Washington Mall, amid all those white monuments, rather than in the part of the Mississippi Delta that the enthusiasts of his predecessor, Elijah Muhammad, once designated as the provisional seat of the Republic of New Africa. Had Farrakhan gone there, many fewer black men would have followed.

Yet *Roots* failed to forestall the ascendancy of Farrakhan not only because Haley dissembled about Africa and juggled tragic Western myths to tell a black story but also because those myths are losing their traction against the forces of a global market that employs the techniques of mass marketing to guarantee the liquidity of collective amnesia. The relentless logic of the market overwhelms not only the worst racist pretensions, white as well as black, but also the best American civic cultural traditions. Commitments to reason, individual rights, and freedom of contract aren't "Eurocentric" ruses meant to co-opt and subordinate nonwhites; they embody historic human gains, and it would be folly to abandon them for fantasies of racial destiny.

When Vernon Baker said, "I knew things would get better," surely he did not think they would get "blacker" in the sense that blacks would become so protective of blackness that whites' enthusiasm at the prospect of Colin Powell's running for president would engender marked black am-

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DAY CARE CENTER, TEXAS, 1990

bivalence about it. Nor, surely, did Baker's "better" characterize extenuated rationalizations of Ebonics, gangsta-rap celebrations of black self-immolation, or widespread black support for O. J. Simpson's acquittal and the "black" jurisprudence and epistemology invoked to excuse it.

Similarly, when Arlene Fox said, "When a man does his duty, his color isn't important," she was not applauding some recent efforts to redefine "duty" in ways that make one's skin color one's destiny all over again. Three years ago, while defending race-norming in college admissions and a dizzying array of campus "diversity" programs that transform everyone with a dark skin into a walking placard for disadvantage, Rutgers University president Francis Lawrence slid, infamously, into lingo about blacks' "genetic hereditary background." It was an all too emblematically liberal Freudian slip, born of believing that the best way to overcome racism's legacies is to create separate, remedial tracks for blacks while denying that one is doing anything of the sort by enshrining and embellishing disparities as cultural "differences."

On the other hand: Colin Powell could yet become president, and Oprah Winfrey could own a movie studio; black candidates keep winning in white-majority districts, and more blacks and nonblacks are marrying, which explains why many of the novels in black bookstores are about multiracial relationships. Many blacks, in fact, have anticipated and met a challenge now facing everyone else in the country; we are all being "abducted" from our ancient ethnic moorings by powerful currents we no longer control or fully comprehend. Thanks significantly to blacks, who started from "nothingness" here, other Americans have a better start on what now has become a more general problem. Europeans sometimes say that white Americans walk and talk "black."

The observation fits neatly with the feeling among some Africans that black Americans are not "black" at all. America needs blacks not because it needs blackness but because it needs what they've learned on their long way out of blackness—what others of us have yet to learn on the journeys we need to take out of whiteness.

For all its wrong turns and dead ends, the quest by black Americans for acknowledgment and belonging in our national life is the most powerful epic of unrequited love in the history of the world. "Afrocentrism," Gerald Early has written, "is a historiography of decline, like the mythic epic of the [lost, antebellum] South. The tragedy is that black people fail to see their 'Americanization' as one of the greatest human triumphs of the past 500 years." Even if every broken heart could be mended and every theft of opportunity be redressed, there would remain a black community of memory, loss, and endurance. Yet the country's special debt to blacks cannot be paid by anything less than an inclusion that brings the implosion of the identity of blackness—and, with it, of whiteness. The most that blacks can expect of the rest of us (and the most that Vernon Baker and Arlene Fox have expected) is that we will embrace and judge blacks—and let ourselves in turn be embraced and judged by them—as individual fellow participants in our common national experiment. As brothers, some used to say. ■