



THE CULT OF VICTIMOLOGY

The fact of slavery refuses to fade, along with the deeply embedded personal attitudes and public policy assumptions that supported it for so long. Indeed, the racism that made slavery feasible is far from dead in the last decade of twentieth-century America; and the civil rights gains, so hard won, are being steadily eroded.

—DERRICK BELL, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, 1992

Tyson is in the pen now. Strange fruit hanging from a different tree. Yet the strangest of all walk among us—as long as they're free, white, male, and twenty-one. The greatest of these qualities is the freedom. I wonder how it feels? I am trapped and can only say "Nooo" and hope my scream is loud enough to discourage the monsters and keep them back until I am strong enough, powerful enough to fight my way free. Powerful enough to slip the noose from my neck and put out the fire on my flesh.

—RALPH WILEY, *What Black People Should Do Now*, 1993

What more do they want? Why in God's name won't they accept me as a full human being? Why am I pigeonholed in a black job? Why am I constantly treated as if I were a drug addict, a thief, or a thug? Why am I still not allowed to aspire to the same things every white person in America takes as a birthright? Why, when I most want to be seen, am I suddenly rendered invisible?

—ELLIS COSE, *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, 1993

These quotes are from books written in the 1990s by successful black men. The conception of black American life they represent is considered accurate, or at least a respectable point of view, by a great many people black and white of all levels of class, education, and income, one indication of which is that all three books were published by major mainstream houses, all were soon released in paperback, and none was even the author's first book.

Yet most of us would be hard pressed to match these portraits with the lives of most of the black people we know. Are we really afraid that, as

"civil rights gains, so hard won, are steadily eroded," Macy's is on the verge of refusing black patronage? Do all the black people we see at the movies, on planes, copping sports trophies, graduating from college, and eating in restaurants appear, even metaphorically, to have fire on their skin? Do we ruefully consider a home, a car, or a college degree—"things every white person in America takes as a birthright"—all but out of reach for the middle-class black people we know, who are the subject of Cose's book? How "invisible" is an author who manages to have books of his opinions regularly published by top presses? How many of us can truly agree with these authors that the Civil Rights revolution has had no notable effect upon black Americans' lives?

Without falling for the line that racism is completely dead, we can admit that these quotes reveal a certain cognitive dissonance with reality. Yet they are anything but rare, and are one of myriad demonstrations that there is, lying at the heart of modern black American thought, a transformation of victimhood from a *problem to be solved* into an *identity in itself*. Because black Americans have obviously made so very much progress since the Civil Rights Act, to adopt victimhood as an identity, a black person, unlike, for example, a Hutu refugee in Central Africa, must exaggerate the extent of his victimhood. The result is a Cult of Victimology, under which remnants of discrimination hold an obsessive, indignant fascination that allows only passing acknowledgment of any signs of progress.

What Is Victimology?

The charge that blacks engage in "peddling victimhood" is not new, but many might wonder how one could possibly criticize a group for calling attention to its victimhood. In this light, we must make a careful distinction. Approaching victimhood constructively will naturally include calling attention to it, and is healthy. However, much more often in modern black American life, victimhood is simply called attention to where it barely exists if at all. Most importantly, all too often this is done not with a view toward forging solutions, but to foster and nurture an unfocused brand of resentment and sense of alienation from the mainstream. This is Victimology.

Two contrasting examples will demonstrate. Marva Collins saw that inner city black students in Chicago were posting the worst grades in the city year after year. She founded a school combining high standards with rich feedback, celebration of progress, and a focus on self-esteem and

upward mobility. Its successful techniques have been adopted by schools elsewhere in the nation. This is addressing victimhood as a problem.

On the other hand, Susan Ferecchio, a reporter for the *Washington Times*, visited the Afrocentric Marcus Garvey School to report on its progress in 1996. Asked to show her notes before she left, she refused according to journalistic protocol. For this, the principal Mary Anigbo told her to "get your white ass out of this school" and led a group of students in taking her notebook and then pushing, smacking, and kicking her from the premises. Anigbo first accused Ferecchio of pulling a knife on a student, then denied the episode ever happened, and then claimed that Ferecchio had deserved it. This was Victimology. What Anigbo did was meant not to allay victimhood but simply to express unfocused hostility: The physical violence Anigbo incited will do nothing to enhance the upward mobility of her students.

In leading black American thought today, Victimology, adopting victimhood as an identity and necessarily exaggerating it, dominates treating victimhood as a problem to be solved. Most black public statements are filtered through it, almost all race-related policy is founded upon it, almost all evaluations by blacks of one another are colored by it. Derrick Bell prefers couching his therapy disguised as reportage as allegorical "stories." Here are some of my stories, only they are real.

Stories of Victimology

The Story of the Party Shelby Steele Is At

A black academic at a predominantly black conference in 1998 once recounted how typical it is at parties thrown by people affiliated with universities to meet "white racists" who say "Oh, there are black people I like, but . . ." Needless to say, the audience ate it up with a spoon, amidst which she added, "Shelby Steele is at those parties. . . ."—"Shelby Steele" having become synonymous with "unthinkable sell-out" in black discourse. Yet the audience empathy came at the cost of plausibility. Her scenario so strains reality that we can only take her on faith via condescension. As a black academic, I myself have now spent twelve years attending these very same parties, and I can attest that I have never found myself peering over my glass of Chablis realizing that my evening will entail negotiating a minefield spiked with "white racists." Can we really accept this professor's contention that white Ph.D.s and professionals in the year 2000 regularly say things remotely like this? How many white people has this professor met in the academic/professional world

Brown quickly answered. But this was a *joke*: how could racism have possibly vanished the morning after the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964? Because we are at a point of transition, nasty episodes, although occurring more often, are nothing less than inevitable, such as the dragging death in Jasper, Texas, of James Byrd in 1998. These things must be identified, condemned, and stamped out. That is what we are doing: For example, Byrd's killer was swiftly apprehended and convicted, with whites from Jasper, traditionally thought to be a bigoted backwater, joining the Byrds and the Jasper black community in mourning Byrd's death. One would die searching newspapers before roughly 1970 describing any such scene.

There are no logical grounds whatsoever for reading any of these increasingly occasional glitches as a slide backwards, as so many seem so inclined, even eager, to do. After an hour in the freezer, a glass of water will still contain some unfrozen pockets, but we do not decide on this basis that it will never freeze, and certainly do not watch it get harder by the hour and yet complain that it is on its way back to water. If someone puts down mothballs in a closet swarming with moths, if he encounters a couple of stray moths in the closet three days later, he does not claim that mothballs do not work. Yellow passes through green to become blue, but if someone held up a blue-green Crayola crayon and told us it was "yellow" despite its appearances, we would suspect some perceptual disorder. In the same way, the professional pessimism maintained by so many African Americans in the face of a miraculous social revolution has fallen so starkly out of sync with reality that it reveals itself to have become a self-perpetuating cancer. As cancer eats away healthy tissue, this Victimology cult, obsessed with what the Man did last week, expends energy that would be better devoted to moving ahead and figuring out what we are going to do next week.

The Roots of the Plague

Why has this mode of thought become common coin in black America? Contrary to appearances, the cause is not simply a sorry case of arrant self-righteousness. Much of it is traceable, ironically, to something miraculous, the forced desegregation of the United States in the 1960s. It is historically unprecedented that a disenfranchised group effected an overhaul of its nation's legal system to rapidly abolish centuries of legalized discrimination. The country as a whole can congratulate itself on this.

One result was that a context was set up in which black Americans

were free to confront whites with their indignation and frustration on a regular basis and be listened to—Jews, the Irish, turn-of-the-century Asian immigrants, and other formerly disenfranchised groups never experienced such a stage in their journey to equality. White Americans have surely learned some long-needed lessons from the endless harangues they have had to suffer at our hands over the past forty years. I grew up watching my mother, who had participated in sit-ins in segregated Atlanta, taking active part in this throughout the 1970s and 1980s as a professor of social work at Temple University in Philadelphia, and I'm glad she did it. Time and again I recall her abruptly wrenching conversations in a direction that revealed to a forty-something pants-suit-clad white woman or sideburned white man the racist feelings underlying their seemingly innocent ideas. Sometimes she overdid it, I thought, but life isn't perfect; even if some of these people privately got a little tired of Mom, they also learned.

Where this mindset has become a problem is in combination with something else: Centuries of abasement and marginalization led African Americans to internalize the way they were perceived by the larger society, resulting in a postcolonial inferiority complex. After centuries of degradation, it would have been astounding if African Americans had *not* inherited one, and thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Kenneth Clark, and Gordon Allport have eloquently testified to its tragic potency.

We do not want to think about this, or at least, I certainly don't. But one of countless ways it reveals itself immediately is in the battle cry "You're still black!" often hurled at African Americans who appear to question their membership in the group for one reason or another. The implausibility of a Jew telling an assimilated child or acquaintance "You're still Jewish!" points up the heart of "You're still black!" The statement implies that being black is in some fundamental way a stain, incommensurate with the hubris perceived in the addressee, and the fury in the delivery makes this even clearer. The black person who, for one reason or another, sheds cultural blackness is viewed with ire in the black community because it is automatically assumed that the person considers herself not simply different from, but *better than*, black people. The Jewish person who sheds cultural Jewishness, on the other hand, is not looked upon fondly by many more conservative Jews, but more out of fear of the disappearance of the race via intermarriage than out of a sense that the strayer might consider herself *better than* Jews.

Another indication that black America suffers a deep-reaching inferiority complex is the oft-heard defense of affirmative action in universi-

ties on the basis that children of alumni and white top-ranking athletes have always been let in under the bar. Five o'clock scholar legacy students and thick-tongued athletes like Moose in *Archie* comic books have always been held in distinctly bad odor. The comfort with which black administrators, professors, and students compare all-black student bodies to people who have always been a campus joke reveals a fundamentally low sense of self-esteem. Once again, note how difficult it is to imagine a rabbi defending affirmative action for Jewish students by drawing such a parallel, even seventy years ago when Jews were still an overtly persecuted group in this country.

Victimology stems from a lethal combination of this inherited inferiority complex with the privilege of dressing down the former oppressor. Encouraged to voice umbrage on one hand, and on the other hand haunted by the former oppressor's lie that black is bad, many African Americans have fallen into a holding pattern of wielding self-righteous indignation less as a spur to action than as a self-standing action in itself because it detracts attention from the inadequacies we perceive in ourselves by highlighting those of the other. An analogy, partial but useful, is the classroom tattle-tale. We all remember this kid, ostensibly committed to keeping everything on the straight and narrow, just as Victimologist blacks are ostensibly committed to rooting out injustice. However, we all knew that the tattle-tale was ultimately motivated less by a desire to improve student conduct than by personal insecurities, especially since the ills he pointed out were almost always minor ones that weren't hurting anybody ("Mrs. Montgomery, Jeffrey is licking the eraser again!"). The analogy with our Derrick Bells, depicting black American life as an apocalyptic nightmare when except for the quarter who are poor, it would, warts and all, be the envy of most people on the planet, is plain. What motivates people like this to keep screaming "Nooo" amidst such a glorious revolution is, at heart, insecurity.

My debt here to Shelby Steele's *The Content of Our Character* is obvious. Because Steele's ideas question the Victimologist mantra that racism is a significant barrier to black achievement, few blacks of any stripe have ever given them any serious thought. Yet they are absolutely key to understanding and getting beyond an America in which views like Derrick Bell's are accepted as a respectable point of view and taught to bright young African Americans as truth.

Steele tends to mostly "preach to the choir" partly because he seems to assume that the falsity of the Articles of Faith is too obvious to merit discussion, and perhaps also because of a sense one gets from his writ-

ings that blacks have nothing at all left to complain about. I in no way mean to imply that we need not sound the alarm, and loudly, at remaining strands of racism. However, when the whistle is frozen at a shrieking level while the conditions that set it off recede ever more each year, it becomes clear that what began as a response has become more of a tic, endlessly retracing the same cycle like a tripped-off car alarm. This cycle is driven not by the mythical America writers like Bell, Wiley, and Cose have created, but by a culturally based insecurity. Only insecurity could make a race downplay and detract attention from its victories, carefully shielding its children from the good in favor of the bad. Black America today is analogous to a wonderful person prevented by insecurity from seeing the good in themselves. Insecurity has sad, masochistic effects—the talented actor who abuses drugs and dies early; the bright, beautiful woman who finds herself only able to develop romantic attraction to heartless men; the brilliant first-time novelist who never manages a second novel out of fear of failure; the race driven by self-hate and fear to spend more time inventing reasons to cry "racism" than working to be the best that it can be. Victimology, in a word, is a disease.

The Ironic Joys of Underdoggism

One thing showing that the apocalyptic vision of whites black Americans tend to maintain has lost its moorings in reality is its discrepancy with fact. Another indication is something so common that it is rarely remarked: the fact that many black people decrying their supposed victimhood do so with joy rather than the despair one would expect.

The Reverend Al Sharpton is a useful illustration. Here is an excerpt from *The New York Times* shortly after the murder of Amadou Diallo:

Just before the evening news the other night, the parents of Amadou Diallo, the West African street vendor shot dead by plainclothes police officers last week, walked up to microphones to offer their first extended public remarks about the death of their son. The setting was a second-floor auditorium up a scuffed flight of steps in Harlem. And the host, wearing a crisp, gray three-piece suit and clearly enjoying this latest bustle at his Harlem headquarters, was the Rev. Al Sharpton.

But wait a minute. A man has just been killed and his bereaved parents just stepped up to the microphones. Why is Sharpton enjoying himself? The reporter was not a racist subtly slurring Sharpton—all of us are fa-

The condescension in this approach is far more of an insult to black people than anything Jordan and others call insults. Some whites, consciously or unconsciously, classify black statements of this kind as being on some level "poetry," reminiscent of Derrick Bell couching his rantings as "stories." I recall this being one white undergraduate's entranced take on Jordan's contribution to a public forum on Ebonics, a truly brilliant fusion of Victimology, Separatism, and naked Anti-intellectualism in the name of educated insight. Jordan is in fact quite entertaining as a speaker, with an unerring instinct for trenchantly colorful illustrations and a ready chortle that somehow manages to be ingenuous and wise at the same time; much of this carries over into her writing. But blacks often complain that white America is only receptive to black people as entertainers and sports figures. There is an eerie parallel between this notion, obsolete Victimology though it is, and *The Progressive* printing Jordan's "understandable" temper tantrums in an otherwise serious journal.

Understandable indeed. There is a number in the musical *Chicago* when a woman who murdered her lover gives a transparently lame defense at a press conference. One of the reporters is an aunty, middle-aged female columnist known for sentimental defenses of the reviled, who like the rest of the press stands to profit from the notoriety of the sensational story. At one point the snappy, tightly choreographed number stops short for the reporter to glide stage center and sing "Understandable/Understandable/Yes, it's perfectly/Understandable, . . ." the song suddenly shifting to a parlor waltz tempo to underline the false sentiment at the heart of the message. Now joined by the murderess's cynical lawyer, she continues "Comprehensible/Comprehensible/Not a bit reprehensible/It's so defensible, . . ." the melody descending and the tempo slowing on the last line to evoke the "Poor babyyy! . . ." purse-lipped way we speak to a child or express mock sympathy. The depth of the reporter's insincerity is socked home when she turns out to be a female impersonator.

The way many whites today support black people in the fiction that persecution is their eternal fate always makes me think of this scene—even though most whites' patronization is neither as deliberate nor as bald as this reporter's. Every time a white person lifts her glass to a black person's Victimology, she is unwittingly contributing to the very interracial strife that she supposes herself to be against—because Victimology is not about change; it is all about nothing but itself.

Jordan, for instance, actually is a poet, and much of her work sets Victimology to verse. Her most recent collection, *Affirmative Acts*, includes

a poem urging Berkeley students to rebel against the ban on affirmative action in admissions instituted as of 1998. Typical of Victimology, Jordan has since dared no rebellious acts to put her tenured position at risk, nor given anyone concrete directives as to how to accomplish such rebellion in her stead. Jordan wrote her poem and went out to dinner: the poem alone, underinformed, aimless complaint, was the sum and total of her "Affirmative Act." The above-quoted "Nazi Germany's night skies" passage from one of her columns was published in January 1995; yet in a column at the end of that very year she exulted, "Just now, I am awfully glad to live nowhere else but here: right here." How seriously, then, were we to take her "perishing reasons for hope" just eleven months before?

Business as usual. Victimology is neither about Acts nor even reality; it is, like a virus, about nothing but keeping itself alive. Whites have neither injected black people with AIDS nor injected the inner cities with crack, but in indulging Victimology out of a combination of guilt and thrill-seeking, white America is helping to spread a virus of a different kind among blacks in America.

What's Wrong with Victimology?

In response to occasional "blacker-than-thou" charges that arise within the black community, it is often said that one need not display certain cultural traits to be "black"—one need not be a good dancer, wear dreadlocks, eat fried chicken, or even speak the dialect. Clearly, however, a black person culturally indistinguishable from a white person would indeed be considered "not black." What, then, is the essence of "black"? One sometime answer is "Being down with us," and that *down* is telling. A large part of being culturally black means operating under a fundamental assumption that all blacks are a persecuted race, still "down" at the bottom of Derrick Bell's well, forty years after the Civil Rights Act.

This is hardly to say that all black people are as strident and utterly impervious to reason as people like Bell, June Jordan, or leaders of the Nation of Islam. Victimology, like any virus, infects in degrees—it bypasses a few, leaves some bedridden, but leaves most with at least a persistent cough. The Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan, for instance, regularly plays to standing-room-only crowds when he speaks; in a Time/CNN poll, 70 percent of blacks said that Farrakhan has a message America should hear. But that message is the likes of "The God who taught me calls white men the skunks of the planet earth." Some say that most blacks only flock to Farrakhan as a sensationalist freak, rather like

white teenagers going to concerts of bloodcurdling music by sociopathic rock stars. But the hundreds of thousands of men at the Million Man March did not give the impression of attending a side show, and Farakhan's audiences regularly give full-throated ovations for his speeches, with no hint of the irony or heckling we would expect of people simply attracted to the fireworks. This man touches a chord even in very ordinary black people—the chord that encourages us to focus on and exaggerate victimhood.

Yet Victimology was not common coin among the black Americans who came before us, even experiencing an overt and omnipresent racism only the elderly remember today. Reading autobiographies and biographies of the Blacks in Wax, one is often struck by the lack of interest most of these people had in dwelling at any length upon their victimhood, despite being barred from hotels and restaurants, being called "boy" and "girl" by whites, and having most prestigious occupations all but closed to them outside of their own communities. Yet I doubt that anyone would accuse pioneer educator Mary MacLeod Bethune or inventor George Washington Carver of being oreos.

These people's low interest in airing grievance was partly because mainstream America was not yet interested in hearing it. It was also, however, because it was hopelessly clear that under conditions of true disenfranchisement and unclothed racism, to dwell upon victimhood rather than work against it would be defeatist, polluting spirits needed for concrete uplift. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. (yes, he is my hero) and Martin Luther King did not pave the way for Derrick Bell and June Jordan's lives by merely standing around trying to outdo each other in articulate indignation. There is no logical reason why conditions today, so obviously so very much better than they were for our forebears, somehow call for Victimology where conditions for people two steps past slavery did not. Victimology is, ironically, a *luxury of widened opportunities*; if things were really as bad as we are so often told, natural human resilience would ensure that black people could not afford to caress and exaggerate victimhood—because real suffering would keep it from feeling good. Only when the victimhood one rails against is all but a phantom does one have the luxury of sitting back and enjoying the sweet balm of moral absolution undisturbed.

But in the end, one might ask, even if Victimology isn't the only way to be black, isn't it a good way? Even if things aren't as bad as they were in 1960, you can never watch your back too much, can you? Wouldn't Mary McLeod Bethune have been better off claiming that black stu-

dents had been denied their due because they actually spoke an African language instead of English? Victimology is thought of as a kind of mental calisthenic in the black community, where "Know your history" is a mantra not directed at a quest for knowledge per se, but at knowing who did what to your ancestors and how badly, to make sure it doesn't happen again. In this light, isn't focusing on victimhood a matter of basic survival?

These are understandable questions, particularly from anyone under about forty-five. There is a theatrical rock concert thrill about Victimology that makes it addictive. However, all that glitters is not gold. The fact is that (1) Victimology would have *prevented* our forebears from turning the country upside down to make our lives possible, and (2) by nurturing Victimology today, Black America is shooting itself in the foot.

Victimology Condone Weakness and Failure

First, a racewide preoccupation with an ever-receding victimhood, which generally entails exaggerating it, gives failure, lack of effort, and criminality a tacit stamp of approval.

Inner-city blacks resent Koreans for opening businesses in their neighborhoods—but what precisely has made it so impossible for inner-city blacks to open these businesses themselves? If they do not have the funds to do so, what—precisely—has prevented their representatives from formulating plans to pool their resources and provide start-up loans? After all, the government bends over backward to give small-business loans and contracts to minorities. Our tendency is to consider inner-city blacks somehow cosmically "beyond" this, but how clearly could anyone articulate a reason why, beyond appealing to unspecified "racism"? When is the last time Maxine Waters convened a group of thinkers and activists to work out a plan to spark entrepreneurship in South Central, or Charles Rangel in Harlem? If they have, why didn't they follow up on it? Part of the reason is a guiding sense among the legislators and their constituents alike that an undefined but mighty "racism" would hinder any such effort, such that only whites ever propose concrete solutions, such as the misbegotten but at least proactive enterprise zones. Instead, Waters chases a mythical CIA crack conspiracy like Ahab pursued Moby Dick while Rangel gradually warms to Al Sharpton. I do not intend to castigate inner-city residents with this point, but to argue that Victimology hinders black *leaders* from lending

significant and creative energy to breaking cultural patterns that those born into them are largely powerless to change. Victimology, focusing attention on pointing fingers at whiteness, blinds us to the potential for inner-city residents to take part in changing their lives, thus making failure look much more inevitable than it is.

Tupac Shakur grew up middle class in Brooklyn and Baltimore. No butler, no pool—but a child who had the advantage of attending not one but two performing arts schools cannot be said to have grown up “on the street.” Yet Shakur lived a willfully violent life and died young in gang violence of his own instigation, having adopted a Victimologist “gangsta” attitude in both art and life. Shakur was by all accounts a uniquely charismatic soul with great potential, but he also lacked the instinctive recoil from criminality that, say, the child of a Korean shopkeeper in South Central would have. The reason we cannot imagine a Korean teenager choosing this path is that in black culture, Victimology subtly makes criminality seem excusable—and even “cool” as a fight against the onslaught supposedly endured daily by all black Americans.

It’s one thing for inner-city teenagers who suffered the slings and arrows of the old-time LAPD to come out feeling this way. But for Shakur, growing up receiving formal training in performance in fine schools, “gangsta” was a choice, not a destiny; Victimology pulled a promising artist “down” indeed. Predictably he went out as an icon within the black community, while Victimology continues to process Shakur as on some level having been “another brother done in by The Man.” “He was a thug, but that’s what being a black man in America does to you,” a rap journalist told us. That’s good music, but being a thug is only virtually preordained for the sliver of black people who live in ghettos. Being a black man in an even humbler America than Shakur grew up in did not leave Will Smith a thug. Smith’s wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, attended the New York High School of Performing Arts with Shakur, but she neither became nor married a thug; she grew up to be a successful, electrifying—and thoroughly black-identified—actress. It is Victimology that leads Shakur’s fans to turn away from these simple contrasts and emulate his style.

Victimology has a way of deflecting inconvenient facts, like the fact that Shakur’s death was self-imposed, with “There’s some of that.” But when it comes to the celebration of the “gangsta,” the fact that there is *any* of that is more problematic than is often perceived. For example, rapper Lichelle Laws, who grew up in the “black Beverly Hills” Baldwin

Hills, has sung “trying to get to Watts, but I’m stuck in Baldwin Hills.” A culture in which a message like that is at all valid, let alone heartily accepted and encouraged, is one that glorifies despair and stagnation. Successful Jews in New York in the first half of the twentieth century only sang paeans to the Lower East Side tenements they had escaped from in irony and not too often; there was no such thing as a Jewish man or woman standing on stage and singing seriously of how he was “trying to get down to Delancey and Essex but stuck in Murray Hill”; if one tried, he would have been booed, and no record company would have offered a contract.

In the 1980s, some of the most unpleasant experiences of New York City life were encounters with the “squeegee men” who would crowd the ends of exit ramps and wash your windshield with scummy water without your consent, and then require payment on the pain of damaging your car. Mayor Giuliani’s crackdown cleared these men away. It turned out that most of them had homes. No matter how low a Chinatown immigrant sank, we all know we would never have seen one bopping up to our cars with a squeegee in one hand and a crowbar in the other. Yet the squeegee men were innocents in their way: The pall of Victimology over black culture made these men feel that this behavior was on some level pardonable for a black man.

Victimology means Maxine Waters on camera dancing joyously with South Central gang members—a federal official telling professional murderers and drug peddlers that they are okay. This is not the dream Martin Luther King had.

Victimology Hampers Performance

Victimology also hampers any performance from the outset by focusing attention upon obstacles. There is nothing obscure about performance anxiety, a pan-human phenomenon. Asians suffer occasional discrimination on various levels, and yet no one would suggest that they would be better off thinking about these remnants of discrimination constantly, because it would do nothing to eradicate the discrimination, and would hamper the only thing that can, performance. The middle-class black person in the year 2000 is no different. Many blacks suppose that one must know what one is going to “face,” but this feeling is couched in the Articles of Faith. What most black people “face” today is not decisive enough in their life trajectories to merit this kind of obsession.

Victimology Keeps Racism Alive

Many white college students have told me that they left college with warier and more negative feelings about black people than when they arrived. This is because even as people who revile racism and sincerely want to get to know people of other races and learn from them, for four years black professors and students delight in telling them what racist pigs they are without even feeling the need to specify why. When I was an undergraduate at Rutgers in 1983, most of the students demonstrating and sleeping in front of the student center several nights a week in protest of the university's investments in South African companies were white. Yet at the same time the consensus among black students and administrators was that Rutgers was a "racist campus," despite an affirmative action policy that was soon revealed to be among the least nuanced, most bluntly quantitative in the country; the expected battery of minority-oriented services, workshops, counseling; and a social atmosphere in which any overt racism was tantamount to asserting that women should go back to the kitchen.

This was one more demonstration of how yelling "racism" has now much too often lost its connection to reality and become a kind of sport. This ultimately traces to understandable insecurity. But as black Americans get ever closer to the mountaintop, the lack of fit between Victimologist rhetoric and reality is ever widening, and increasing numbers of white people are becoming impatient with suspending their disbelief, and even pitching in to help, only to get kicked in the teeth for their efforts.

The late black performance artist and filmmaker Marlon Riggs was invited to give a presentation at a Queer Studies forum at Stanford in the early 1990s. One of the organizers told me that Riggs casually fired a number of potshots at the audience implying quite directly that they were racists, despite the fact that they had invited, lodged, and paid him, were all politically leftist sorts deeply committed to identity group causes, and were even mostly gay.

It was one thing for a black activist to pull this sort of thing in 1971, the year *All in the Family* premiered, in front of a group of whites most of whom had barely ever conversed with a black person, would have been uneasy to have him in their home, and would have been horrified if one of their daughters had married him. That is "understandable."

But the group Riggs was dissing were those white people's children, many with black intimates and lovers, many active in race-related causes, none who would even have a bigot in their homes. Surely one

does not invite a performance artist to be soothing: None of these people would have had any problem with Riggs exploring the nature of white racism; indeed, this was most likely what he had been invited to do, and most of the audience would have welcomed being made aware of residual racism in themselves. But in the 1990s, did this particular audience deserve to be designated outright as bigots after spending hundreds of dollars from their tiny budget to sit at Riggs's feet, and did this designation serve any purpose? If we consider it unreasonable for young black people to resist feeling deep, inconsolable offense at the slightest hint of racial bias, then how reasonably can we expect young white people not to take offense at being called racists despite their most earnest efforts to transcend their ancestors' mistakes? If some of the people who had paid this man to come enlighten them only to be treated this way started to wonder whether reaching out to black people was worth it, Victimology will say that it is proof that racism never went away. But in the meantime, the bottom of the well will remain that much closer to our feet.

Victimology Is an Affront to Civil Rights Heroes

I have saved this point for last because it is less practical than simply moral. Insisting that black Americans still lead lives of tragedy forty years after the Civil Rights Movement is a desecration of brave and noble black Americans who gave their lives for us. Martin Luther King did not sit in those jail cells so that black professors could make speeches about the hell they live in and then drive to their \$200,000 homes in Lexuses and plan their summer vacations to Antigua. "Why won't they accept me as a human being?" Ellis Cose asks—but it would be interesting to see how disinclined from American society such people would feel after spending about three days in the America our Civil Rights leaders fought to pull down.

As Ralph Ellison put it, "For us to remain in one narrow groove while ranting about 'freedom' strikes me as an affront to those who endured and sacrificed to enable us to become better prepared for our continuing role in the struggle for freedom." Every time a black person outside of a ghetto calls herself oppressed because of scattered inconveniences, as opposed to the brute horrors that our ancestors lived with daily, she is saying that Thurgood Marshall and Martin Luther King didn't accomplish anything but get some signs taken off some water fountains and allow us to sit where we want to on the bus. That, if you ask me, is sacrilege.

There is a flutter of awareness in the black community that crying about victimhood is not exactly the best way to go about solving it. On the late, great comedy variety show *In Living Color*, Damon Wayans's Homey the Clown was a Victimologist *par excellence*, endlessly blaming his lowly job as a clown on a hopelessly exaggerated conception of racist oppression, and in one classic sketch grudgingly taking a job as a busboy at a restaurant called Chez Whitey.

Yet Homey addressed only Victimology this naked; few blacks were aware that these sketches were touching upon a disease that permeates the entire community. For example, I once heard a black stand-up comedian joking that white people try to slip the word *nigger* into conversation without black people hearing, as in saying the name of Arnold Schwarzenegger. The audience was screaming, but then look what happened to David Howard in Washington a few years later. The comedy routine quite literally came to life.

For the record, the *niggardly* episode was no flash in the pan. Soon afterward, an English professor at the University of Wisconsin used the word when discussing *The Canterbury Tales*. A black student approached the teacher about it after class and he explained what the word meant, informing the student that it had no racist connotation. In the next class, he explained its meaning to the class and asked if any students had comments. This time the black student bolted from the class crying because the teacher had repeated the word, and reported him to the faculty senate. She was not just an isolated hothead; just as black talk radio in D.C. supported Anthony Williams in firing David Howard, when this student made her case at a faculty senate meeting on the campus speech code, she was heartily applauded by the black students in the audience. On top of all this, the Wisconsin episode was not part of a "rising tide" after the D.C. episode—*this student had not even heard about what had happened in Washington*.

This student will surely take away from this incident that she encountered racism during her college years, despite the professor having gone as far as to address the class about the issue and try to foster a discussion. But this student could not be satisfied, because the Victimology virus cursed her to seek the cheap thrills of moral indignation regardless of actual circumstances. Importantly, this woman was neither a disaffected inner-city casualty nor a politician seeking power. She was a modern middle-class black woman, and her actions demonstrated that one need neither grow up in South Central nor attend Nation of Islam rallies to fall under the sway of Victimology. One need only grow up with black

parents and black friends. Victimology today pulses through the very bloodstream of African-American identity.

Ralph Wiley will smugly shake his head and sneer that this is merely the armchair musings of an "intellectual" who would change his tune if he spent some time "out there" seeing "what's really goin' down". But what people like this consider themselves to "know" that people like me do not is (1) the first six Articles of Faith, which are all myths, and (2) what can be summed up as "Rodney King," the idea that police brutality means that white America still hates black people. That is one possible interpretation, but it is not supported by facts. Police departments continually improve, and the obvious gains blacks have made throughout society show that police brutality is a final hurdle, not business as usual.

Along those lines, I can guarantee that if I spent a year living in a housing project, teaching in a hopeless school down the street, and was beaten senseless by the police for asking a question during a stop-and-frisk, I would think of myself as having lived with and taught representatives of one-fifth of the black population rather than "black America" in general, and as I fingered my head bandages would think of myself as having caught the vicious tail end of a racism on the wane, not on the march. I would maintain that the black American community as a whole, especially the four-fifths I had spent that year away from, is mentally hobbled by celebrating victimhood instead of addressing it.

The Civil Rights leaders' rabble-rousing, then, is a by-product of a culture-wide disease. They are not posing: They are simply manifesting an inherited black cultural trait in one of many possible ways. In short, today, black is Victimology, and this is a grave detour from the path to the mountaintop. Condemned by Victimology to wink and let failure pass, to choke in performance, and recreate racism where it was receding, we will never savor the freedom Ralph Wiley finds so elusive. In the name of the paradoxical high of underdogism, we have replaced the shackles whites hobbled us with for centuries with new ones of our own.

The direst news is that, like AIDS constantly spawns new strains of itself, Victimology births new viruses. We will meet the next one in Chapter 2.