

Derrick Bell

The Racism Is Permanent Thesis: Courageous Revelation or Unconscious Denial of Racial Genocide

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Page 1 of 14

For the last four months since the publication of my new book of allegorical stories, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*,¹ I have been defending the book's major message contained in its sub-title: "The Permanence of Racism." In this article, I want to offer a summary of my arguments for the proposition that American racism is not, as Gunnar Myrdal concluded in his massive study, *An American Dilemma*,² an anomaly on our democratic landscape, a holdover from slavery that the nation both wants to cure and is capable of curing. Rather, it is a critically important stabilizing force that enables whites to bind across a wide socio-economic chasm. Without the deflecting power of racism, masses of whites would likely wake up to and revolt against the severe disadvantage they suffer in income and opportunity when compared with those whites at the top of our socio-economic heap.

Making the "racism is permanent" case has proven relatively easy for most black people who have heard it. Most though far from all whites are more resistive, running the gamut from those who are deeply troubled but unable to refute the basis of my thesis to those who angrily reject the idea, charging that I am racist for even suggesting it. This debate has been vigorous and, I hope, has moved the focus from either the four decades long struggle to eliminate racism by outlawing it, or the victim-blaming rationale for its continuance: black people need to prove themselves worthy.

Recently, though, I received a long letter from Professor Sidney Willhelm, a social scientist who for years has been warning both that the racial equality effort had failed, and that all black people were at risk in a hostile society that no longer needed either their labor or their *572 presence.³ In his letter, Professor Willhelm chides me for failing to recognize in the success of my book, along with two other books suggesting the immutable nature of racism,⁴ there is a clear illustration of a theme that advances for blacks--individually and as a group--almost always are made when those advances serve white interests. He suggests, moreover, that publishers are comfortable with writings on racism that deflect attention away from what he views as the ever-growing danger of genocide for all African-Americans. In response to Professor Willhelm's implicit challenge, I want to use this platform as the occasion for an initial look at whether his thesis has merit and whether books like mine about racism are serving to deflect attention from what could be the ultimate risk of life in a racist society.

Finally, I want to contend strongly that neither my assessment that racism is permanent, nor even Professor Willhelm's prediction that African American lives are at risk because of their color, is cause for either despair or surrender. Rather, these dire prognostications pose a challenge and a basis for lifetime commitment to fight against the racism that diminishes the lives of its supporters as well as its victims.

At the outset, I want to acknowledge my recognition that only a few days before the date of the lecture from which this article is derived, we celebrated as a national holiday, the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As an almost obligatory part of that celebration, we sang once again the theme song of the civil rights movement: "We Shall Overcome." Arms linked in symbolic struggle, swaying to the mesmerizing harmonies, we fervently sang, "Deep in my heart, I do believe, that we shall overcome someday."

Some still believe, but the contrary teachings of racial history, combined with the ever-more troubling realities of the present, now intrude ever more rudely and insistently on the dream. The gains that some blacks have made, including the astronomical incomes of some black entertainers and athletes, as well as the increases in the black middle-class, should not obscure the reality of unemployment, which is serious for many segments of our society, but catastrophic for blacks, particularly black men.

*573 Based on a review of three hundred years of American history, I found a pattern of racial subordination that led me to conclude in *Faces*, that racism is not going to go away. Rather, racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society. Because this is true, not only will we not overcome in the sense that all of us believed so fervently in the 1960's, but it also means that,

Derrick Bell

The Racism Is Permanent Thesis: Courageous Revelation or Unconscious Denial of Racial Genocide

22 Capital University Law Review 571 (Summer, 1993)

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Page 2 of 14

Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those Herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary “peaks of progress,” short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance.

Only our most staunch white friends will even be able to comprehend, much less accept this statement. But then, few whites are able to identify with blacks as a group, the essential prerequisite for feeling empathy rather than aversion to blacks' suffering. Unable or unwilling to perceive that “there, but for the grace of God, go I,” few whites are ready to move beyond the abstractions of equality and actively promote civil rights for blacks where they work, or where they live.

Because of an irrational but easily roused fear that any social reforms will unjustly benefit blacks, whites fail to support social reforms that are needed in this country to address the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, both black and white. Lulled by comforting racial stereotypes, and fearful that blacks will unfairly get ahead of them, all too many whites respond to even the most dire reports of race-based disadvantage with either a sympathetic head shake or victim-blaming rationalizations. Both responses lead easily to the conclusion that contemporary complaints of racial discrimination are simply put forward as excuses by people who are unable or unwilling to compete on an equal basis in a competitive society.

For white people who both deny racism and see a heavy dose of the Horatio Alger myth as the answer to blacks' problems, how sweet it must be when a black person stands in a public place and condemns as slothful and unambitious those blacks who are not making it. Whites eagerly embrace black conservatives' homilies to self-help, however grossly such messages are unrealistic in an economy where millions, white as well as black, are unemployed and, more important, in one where racial discrimination in the workplace is as vicious (if less obvious) than it was when employers posted signs “no negras need apply.”

*574 Whatever the relief from responsibility such thinking provides those who embrace it, more than a decade of civil rights setbacks in the White House, in the courts, and in the critical realm of media-nurtured public opinion has forced retrenchment in the tattered civil rights ranks. We must reassess our cause and our approach to it. The simplistic repetition of time-worn slogans simply will not do. As a popular colloquialism puts it, it is time to “get real” about race and the persistence of racism in America.

To make such an assessment--to plan for the future by reviewing the experiences of the past--we must ask whether the formidable hurdles we now face in the elusive quest for racial equality are simply challenges to our commitment, whether they are the latest variation of the old hymn “One More River to Cross”? Or, as we once again gear up to meet the challenges posed by these unexpected new setbacks, are we ignoring a current message with implications for the future which history has already taught us about the past?

Such assessment is hard to make. On the one hand, contemporary color barriers are certainly less visible as a result of our successful effort to strip the law's endorsement from the hated Jim Crow signs. Today one can travel for thousands of miles across this country and never see a public facility designated as “Colored” or “White.” Indeed, the very absence of visible signs of discrimination creates an atmosphere of racial neutrality and encourages whites to believe that racism is a thing of the past. On the other hand, the general use of so-called neutral standards to continue exclusionary practices reduces the effectiveness of traditional civil rights laws, while rendering discriminatory actions more oppressive than ever. Racial bias in the pre-*Brown*⁶ era was stark, open, unalloyed with hypocrisy and blank-faced lies. We blacks, when rejected, knew who our enemies were. They were not us! Today, because bias is masked in unofficial practices and “neutral” standards, we must wrestle with questions whether race or some individual failing has cost us the job, denied us the promotion, or prompted our being rejected as tenants for an apartment. Either conclusion breeds frustration and alienation and a rage we dare not show to others or admit

Derrick Bell

The Racism Is Permanent Thesis: Courageous Revelation or Unconscious Denial of Racial Genocide

22 Capital University Law Review 571 (Summer, 1993)

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Page 3 of 14

to ourselves.

Modern discrimination is, moreover, not practiced indiscriminately. Whites, ready and willing to applaud, even idolize black athletes and entertainers, refuse to hire or balk at working with blacks. Whites who number individual blacks among their closest friends approve, or do not oppose, practices that bar selling or renting homes or apartments in their neighborhoods to blacks they don't know. Employers, not wanting "too many of them," are willing to hire one or two black people, but will reject those who apply later. Most hotels and restaurants who offer black *575 patrons courteous--even deferential-- treatment, uniformly reject black job applicants, except perhaps for the most menial jobs. When did you last see a black waiter in a really good restaurant?

Racial schizophrenia is not limited to hotels and restaurants. As a result, neither professional status nor relatively high income protects even accomplished blacks from capricious acts of discrimination that may reflect either individual "preference" or an institutions bias. The motivations for bias vary; the disadvantage to black victims is the same.

Careful examination reveals a pattern to these seemingly arbitrary racial actions. When whites perceive that it will be profitable or at least cost-free to serve, hire, admit, or otherwise deal with blacks on a nondiscriminatory basis, they do so. When they fear--accurately or not--that there may be a loss, inconvenience, or upset to themselves or other whites, discriminatory conduct usually follows. Selections and rejections reflect preference as much as prejudice. A preference for whites makes it harder to prove the discrimination outlawed by civil rights laws. This difficulty, when combined with lack-luster enforcement, explains why discrimination in employment and in the housing market continues to prevail more than two decades after enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1965⁷ and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.⁸

Racial policy is the culmination of thousands of these individual practices. Black people, then, are caught in a double bind. We are, as I have said, disadvantaged unless whites perceive that nondiscriminatory treatment for us will be a benefit for them. In addition, even when nonracist practices might bring a benefit, whites may rely on discrimination against blacks as a unifying factor and a safety valve for frustrations during economic hard times.

Almost always, the injustices that dramatically diminish the rights of blacks are linked to the serious economic disadvantage suffered by many whites who lack money and power. Whites, rather than acknowledge the similarity of their disadvantages, particularly when compared with that of better-off whites, are easily detoured into protecting their sense of entitlement vis-a-vis blacks for all things of value. Evidently, this racial preference expectation is hypnotic. It is this compulsive fascination that seems to prevent most whites from even seeing--much less resenting--the far more sizable gap between their status and those who occupy the lofty levels at the top of our society.

Race consciousness of this character, as Professor Kimberle Crenshaw suggested in 1988 in a pathbreaking article from the *Harvard Law Review*, makes it difficult for whites "to imagine the world differently. It also creates the desire for identification with privileged elites. By *576 focusing on a distinct, subordinate 'other,' whites include themselves in the dominant circle--an arena in which most hold no real power, but only their privileged racial identity."⁹

The critically important stabilizing role that blacks play in this society constitutes a major barrier in the way of achieving racial equality. Throughout history, politicians have used blacks as scapegoats for failed economic or political policies. Before the Civil War, rich slave owners persuaded the white working class to stand with them against the danger of slave revolts--even though the existence of slavery condemned white workers to a life of economic deprivation.¹⁰ After the Civil War, poor whites fought social reforms and settled for segregation rather than see formerly enslaved blacks get ahead.¹¹ Most labor unions preferred to allow plant owners to break strikes

Derrick Bell

The Racism Is Permanent Thesis: Courageous Revelation or Unconscious Denial of Racial Genocide

22 Capital University Law Review 571 (Summer, 1993)

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Page 4 of 14

with black scab labor than allow blacks to join their ranks.¹² The “them against us” racial ploy--always a potent force in economic bad times--is working again today. Whites, as disadvantaged by high status entrance requirements as blacks, fight to end affirmative action policies that, by eliminating class-based entrance requirements and requiring widespread advertising of jobs, have likely helped far more whites than blacks. And, in the 1990's as through much of the 1980's, millions of Americans--white as well as black--face steadily worsening conditions: unemployment, inaccessible health care, inadequate housing, mediocre education, and pollution of the environment. The gap in national incomes is approaching a crisis as those in the top fifth now earn more than their counterparts in the bottom four fifths combined. Kevin Phillips used a different but no less disturbing comparison: the top two million income earners in this country earn more than the next one hundred million.¹³

Shocking. And yet conservative white politicians are able to gain and hold even the highest office despite their failure to address seriously any of these issues. They rely instead on the time-tested formula of getting needy whites to identify on the basis of their shared skin color, and suggest with little or no subtlety that white people must stand together against the Willie Hortins, or against racial quotas, or against affirmative action. The code words differ. The message is the same. Whites are rallied on the basis of racial pride and patriotism to *577 accept their often lowly lot in life, and encouraged to vent their frustration by opposing any serious advancement by blacks. Crucial to this situation is the unstated understanding by the mass of whites that they will accept large disparities in economic opportunity in respect to other whites as long as they have a priority over blacks and other people of color for access to the few opportunities available.

This “racial bonding” by whites¹⁴ means that black rights and interests are always vulnerable to diminishment if not to outright destruction. The willingness of whites over time to respond to this racial rallying cry explains--far more than does the failure of liberal democratic practices (i.e., black rights) to coincide with liberal democratic theory--blacks' continuing subordinate status. This, of course, is contrary to the philosophy of Gunnar Myrdal's massive mid-century study *The American Dilemma*.¹⁵ Myrdal and two generations of civil rights advocates accepted the idea of racism as merely an odious holdover from slavery, “a terrible and inexplicable anomaly stuck in the middle of our liberal democratic ethos.”¹⁶ No one doubted that the standard American policy making was adequate to the task of abolishing racism. White America, it was assumed, *wanted* to abolish racism.

Forty years later, in *The New American Dilemma*,¹⁷ Professor Jennifer Hochschild examined what she called Myrdal's “anomaly thesis,” and concluded that it simply cannot explain the persistence of racial discrimination.¹⁸ Rather, the continued viability of racism demonstrates “that racism is not simply an excrescence on a fundamentally healthy liberal democratic body, but is part of what shapes and energizes the body.”¹⁹ Under this view, “liberal democracy and racism in the United States are historically, even inherently, reinforcing; American society as we know it exists only because of its foundation in racially based slavery, and it thrives only because racial *578 discrimination continues. The apparent anomaly is an actual symbiosis.”²⁰

The permanence of this “symbiosis” ensures that civil rights gains will be temporary and setbacks inevitable. Consider: in this last decade of the twentieth century, color determines the social and economic status of all African Americans, both those who have been highly successful and their poverty-bound brethren whose lives are grounded in misery and despair. We rise and fall less as a result of our efforts than in response to the needs of a white society that condemns all blacks to quasi citizenship as surely as it segregated our parents and enslaved their forebears. The fact is that, despite what we designate as progress wrought through struggle over many generations, we remain what we were in the beginning: a dark and foreign presence, always the designated “other.” Tolerated in good times, despised when things go wrong, as a people, we are scapegoated and sacrificed as distraction or catalyst for compromise to facilitate resolution of political differences or relieve economic adversity.

I summarize our mutual dependence and the refusal of most whites to even recognize much less respond to this need in the epigraph to *Faces* where I suggest that,

Derrick Bell

The Racism Is Permanent Thesis: Courageous Revelation or Unconscious Denial of Racial Genocide

22 Capital University Law Review 571 (Summer, 1993)

Copyright (c) 1993 by Derrick Bell

Page 5 of 14

Black people are the magical faces at the bottom of society's well. Even the poorest whites, those who must live their lives only a few levels above, gain their self-esteem by gazing down on us. Surely, they must know that their deliverance depends on letting down their ropes. Only by working together is escape possible. Over time, many reach out, but most simply watch, mesmerized into maintaining their unspoken commitment to keeping us where we are, at whatever cost to them or to us.²¹

While I use the metaphorical symbol of an imprisoning well, the whole of American history stretching back to the beginnings of slavery in the mid-seventeenth century,²² provides almost too much support for my position. But contending that racism is permanent is one thing. Professor Willhelm's conclusion that African-Americans are headed for intentional extermination is a far more serious claim.²³ Appropriately, the key to his dire prediction is the disappearance of work, the reason for forcing the African ancestors of contemporary blacks to this country as *579 slaves in the first place. It is beyond controversy that in this country, a job provides not only the money to pay one's bills it is also the basis for status and the source of self-worth.

Professor Willhelm cites the steady decline of blacks in the work force, concluding that, "[t]he combination of *non*employment and *un*employment means nothing less than an economic calamity crashing down upon blacks."²⁴ He explains his position:

What is taking place with regard to black people is the empirical fact that black labor is no longer necessary to economic needs of capitalism or for the state economy; black people are increasingly becoming superfluous within the private and public economies. Without economic salvation there can be no possibility of black survival in this country; the socio-economic deterioration of blacks will continue and will do so to the point of extermination. Any effort to reverse this *inevitable* outcome will have to take the form of violent confrontation; to respond violently in a nation so dedicated to white supremacy over a black minority is an open invitation to extermination.²⁵

The unemployment rate for blacks is 2.5 times the rate for whites and, as a result, black per-capita income is not even two-thirds of the income for whites.²⁶ Blacks are three times more likely to have income below the poverty level than whites.²⁷ Estimates indicate that the real unemployment rate among blacks, including those no longer looking for work, exceeds fifty percent in some urban black communities.²⁸

This is not a temporary phenomenon. In his book, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*, Andrew Hacker traces the two-times, black-white unemployment gap and finds that,

[B]lack Americans get jobs only after white applicants have been accommodated. In periods of prosperity, when the economy requires more workers, blacks who had been unemployed are offered vacant positions. But as last hired, they can expect to be the first fired. In bleak times, the jobless rate among blacks can approach 20 percent, as it did in 1983. Since 1974, unemployment rates for blacks have remained at double-digit levels, and they *580 have not fallen below twice the white rate since 1976. Even more depressing, the gap between the black and white figures grew during the 1980s, suggesting that the economy has little interest in enlisting black contributors.²⁹

Statistics, cannot, however, begin to express the havoc caused by joblessness and poverty: broken homes, anarchy in communities, futility in the public schools. All are the bitter harvest of race-determined unemployment in a society where work provides sustenance, status, and the all-important sense of self-worth. What we now call the

Derrick Bell

The Racism Is Permanent Thesis: Courageous Revelation or Unconscious Denial of Racial Genocide

22 Capital University Law Review 571 (Summer, 1993)

Copyright (c) 1993 by Derrick Bell

Page 6 of 14

“inner city” is, in fact, the American equivalent of the South African homelands. Poverty is less the source than the status of men and women who, despised because of their race, seek refuge in self-rejection. Drug-related crime, teen-aged parenthood, and disrupted and disrupting family life all are manifestations of a despair that feeds on itself. That despair is bred anew each day by the images on ever-playing television sets, images confirming that theirs is the disgraceful form of living, not the only way people live.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that close to thirty percent of the nation's “discouraged workers,” are black.³⁰ That is, those who would like to work, but have ceased looking, are convinced that they will never find a job.³¹ Hacker reports that many “nonworkers” support themselves on the streets providing products and services in the underground economy.³² Others resort to theft and other crimes that lead inevitably to the growing number of blacks languishing in the nation's prisons.

The result was apparent. On an average day in America, one of every four African-American men, ages twenty through twenty-nine was either in prison, jail, on probation, or on parole. But, as Jerome Miller points out in a recent paper,³³ this study did not concentrate on inner-city males where arrest records are substantially higher. Other studies show that in the country's largest fifty-six cities, fifty-one percent of non-white males will be arrested and charged with a felony and acquire a criminal *581 record. This figure does not include misdemeanor arrests, which make up the largest share of arrests and booking into jails nationally.

Last year, a study in Washington D.C. estimated that, minimally, seventy percent of the young black men living in D.C. would be arrested and jailed at least once before reaching age thirty-five. The lifetime risk was between eighty percent and ninety percent.³⁴ What these figures mean for employment opportunities is too obvious and painful to spell out in detail.

The new president has promised to create more jobs, but how do you create laboring and semi-skilled jobs at decent wages in an economy where such jobs are disappearing because of technology, export to foreign countries, or are occupied by the hundreds of thousands of legal and illegal immigrants, willing to work for sub-standard wages? Taken together, these factors, magnified by a harder to prove but no less pernicious racism, provide a formula for a not so gentle genocide of a great many African-Americans.

But, you may ask, what of the thousands of black professionals and others able to work, earn, and who generally live middle-class lives? Surely, they are beyond the dangers of ghetto life. Talent and hard work surely have taken them beyond the snares of discrimination? This widely held assumption, though, is punctured by talking to seemingly successful blacks as they speak of the barriers they had to survive in order to achieve a success that, all too often, is far more fragile than even they like to think.

The fact is that despite their undeniable progress, no African-Americans are insulated from incidents of racial discrimination. Our careers, even our lives, are threatened because of our color. Whatever our status, we are feared because we might be one of “them.” And, there are few of us who do not have family, former school mates, or neighbors, who are “them.” Success, then, neither insulates us from mis-identification by wary whites, nor does it ease our pain when we consider the plight of our less fortunate brethren who struggle for existence in what some social scientists call the “underclass.”

But there is more. I fear that those “fortunate few” blacks, like the author of this article, are unintentionally but no less critical components in the structure of racial subordination that is not only resistant to civil rights laws but is actually strengthened by them.

For the charade of colored complicity in their conquered condition is made more believable because there are those blacks who through enterprise, good fortune, and yes, sometimes the support of white progressives, have achieved

Derrick Bell

The Racism Is Permanent Thesis: Courageous Revelation or Unconscious Denial of Racial Genocide

22 Capital University Law Review 571 (Summer, 1993)

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Page 7 of 14

a success that many in the society believe could be attained by all blacks--if they just worked hard, were lucky, or *582 both. "You made it despite being black and subject to discrimination," the question goes, "so why can't the rest of 'them' do the same?" For those who pose it, the question, "why can't the rest of 'them' make it" carries its own conclusion. It is a conclusion that justifies affirmation of the racial status quo, and opposition to affirmative action as well as, for that matter, all civil rights protections that offer remedies which might disadvantage or inconvenience any white less guilty of overt racism than Bull Connor or the head of the Ku Klux Klan.

But providing conservatives with the fodder for their anti-civil rights arguments is not the only and is far from the most dangerous threat that the success of some blacks poses for real racial progress or even bare racial survival. Robert L. Allen in his 1969 book, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*,³⁵ reminds us of the growing gap in income and status between those blacks who are making it and those who are not. In his discussion, Allen tracks developments in colonial nations where the colonizing countries maintained their control by establishing class divisions within the ranks of the colonized.³⁶

Allen views black America as a domestic colony of white America. "[C]olonial rule," Allen claims, "is predicated upon an alliance between the occupying power and indigenous forces of conservatism and tradition."³⁷ Allen finds aspects of this policy in American slavery where divisions were created between field hands and house hands.³⁸ The term "Uncle Tom" describes the collaborator, torn with conflicting loyalties between his people and the foreign rulers.³⁹

In the modern era, Allen views the gains made by some blacks and the lessening of discrimination that led to those gains as a support for, rather than a response to, his domestic colonialism thesis.⁴⁰ He points out an analogy to the transformation of once-colonized nations into neocolonial nations after gaining their "independence." Allen explains, "Under neocolonialism an emerging country is granted formal political independence but in fact it remains a victim of an indirect and subtle form of domination by political, economic, social, or military means."⁴¹

While his book was written prior to the affirmative action era, Allen would argue that such policies serve to co-opt a portion of the black middle-class⁴² who, without their privileged positions, might provide leadership to rebellious activity by the black masses, now locked in *583 poverty-stricken areas from which their potential leaders have been permitted to escape. Separated from their benighted brethren by social class and economic status, members of the black middle-class are often objects of deep suspicion rather than role models for those locked in poverty-based despair.

Are African Americans locked into a permanently racist society and can developments in that society be leading toward their extermination? I cannot answer either question with proof that would satisfy you. Nor can I convince you that past experience leads me, without more, to know that I am right about racism and right to fear that Professor Willhelm is right as well.

What is clear is that black Americans are now, as were our forebears when they were brought to the New World, objects of barter for those who, while profiting from our existence, deny our humanity. My basis for continued struggle lies in the knowledge that my slave ancestors did not surrender to their despair. Though they lived and died as captives within a system of slave labor,

they produced worlds of music, poetry, and art. They reshaped a Christian cosmology to fit their spirits and their needs, transforming Protestantism along the way. They produced a single people out of what had been many. . . . Their ordeal, and their dignity throughout it, speaks to the world of the indomitable human spirit.⁴³

In similar fashion, African-Americans today, and those of other groups who would join with us, must confront and

Derrick Bell

The Racism Is Permanent Thesis: Courageous Revelation or Unconscious Denial of Racial Genocide

22 Capital University Law Review 571 (Summer, 1993)

Copyright (c) 1993 by Derrick Bell

Page 8 of 14

conquer the otherwise deadening reality of our permanent subordinate status. Only in this way can we prevent ourselves from being dragged down by society's racial hostility. Beyond survival lies the potential to perceive more clearly both a reason and the means for further struggle.

I have worked for thirty-five years, my whole professional life, in the struggle against racism. My challenge is now to tell what I view as the truth about racism without causing disabling despair. For some of us who bear the burdens of racial subordination, any truth--no matter how dire--is uplifting. For others, it may be reassuring to remember Paulo Freire's words: "Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of . . . [the individual]; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion."⁴⁴

*584 Albert Camus, too, saw the need for struggle even in the face of certain defeat: "Man is mortal. That may be; but let us die resisting; and if our lot is complete annihilation, let us not behave in such a way that it seems justice!"⁴⁵ In a similar vein, Franz Fanon conceded that,

I as a man of color do not have the right to hope that in the white man there will be a crystallization of guilt toward the past of my race. . . My life [as a Negro] is caught in the last of existence. . . I find myself suddenly in the world and I recognize that I have one right alone: that of demanding human behavior from the other. One duty alone: that of not renouncing my freedom through my choices.⁴⁶

Fanon argued two seemingly irreconcilable points, and insisted on both. On the one hand, he believed racist structures to be permanently embedded in the psychology, economy, society, and culture of the modern world--so much so that he expressed the belief that a true culture cannot come to life under present conditions.⁴⁷ But, on the other hand, he urged people of color to resist psychologically the inheritance into which they had come. He insisted, despite pages of evidence suggesting the inviolability of the racial order, that "I should constantly *remind myself* that the real *leap* consists in introducing invention into existence. For the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself."⁴⁸ Fanon's book was enormously pessimistic in a *victory* sense. He did not believe that modern structures, deeply poisoned with racism, could be overthrown. And yet he urged resistance. He wrote a book--perhaps to remind himself that material or cultural fate is only part of the story.

While Martin Luther King spoke much about racial justice in integrationist terms, in an essay, *A Testament of Hope*,⁴⁹ published after his death, he wrote of his setbacks, the time he spent in jails, his frustrations and sorrows, and the dangerous character of his adversaries. He said those adversaries expected him to harden into a grim and desperate man. But, "They fail, however, to perceive the sense of affirmation generated by the challenge of embracing struggle and surmounting obstacles."⁵⁰ So, while Dr. King led a struggle toward a goal--racial equality--that seemed possible, if not quite feasible, in the 1960's, there was a deeper message of commitment to courageous struggle *585 whatever the circumstances or the odds. A part of that struggle was the need to speak the truth as he viewed it even when that truth alienated rather than unified, upset minds rather than calmed hearts, and subjected the speaker to general censor rather than acclaim.

Statements of faith by men who had thought deeply about the problems of human life whether white or black, have reassured me in my writing and lecturing. I have been moved and motivated as well by the courageous example of many black people with whom I worked in the South during my years as a civil rights lawyer. Judge Robert L. Carter, one of the leading attorneys in the NAACP's school desegregation litigation, has spoken of this courage when, back in the early 1950's, whites exerted economic pressures to curb new militancy among blacks who were joining lawsuits challenging segregation. In that climate, Carter and the other lawyers urged parents to consider carefully the risks before making a final commitment to join in the litigation. "That so few stepped back still astounds me," says Carter.

Derrick Bell

The Racism Is Permanent Thesis: Courageous Revelation or Unconscious Denial of Racial Genocide

22 Capital University Law Review 571 (Summer, 1993)

Copyright (c) 1993 by Derrick Bell

Page 9 of 14

Carter's observation takes me back to the summer of 1964. It is a quiet, heat-hushed evening in Harmony, a small black community near the Mississippi Delta. Some Harmony residents, in the face of increasing white hostility, were organizing to ensure implementation of a court order mandating desegregation of their schools the next September. Walking with her up a dusty, unpaved road toward her modest home, I asked one of the organizers, Mrs. Biona MacDonald, where she and the other black families found the courage to continue working for civil rights in the face of intimidation that included blacks losing their jobs, the local banks trying to foreclose on the mortgages of those active in the civil rights movement, and shots fired through their windows late at night.

Mrs. MacDonald looked at me and said slowly, seriously, "I can't speak for everyone, but as for me, I am an old woman. I lives to harass white folks."

Since then, I have thought a lot about Mrs. MacDonald and those other courageous black folk in Leake County, Mississippi, particularly Dovie and Winson Hudson. Remembering again that long-ago conversation, I realize that Mrs. MacDonald didn't say she risked everything because she hoped or expected to win out over the whites who, as she well knew, held all the economic and political power, and the guns as well. Rather, she recognized that--powerless as she was--she had and intended to use courage and determination as a weapon to, in her words, "harass white folks."

Mrs. MacDonald assumed that I knew that not all whites are racist, but that the oppression she was committed to resist, was racial and emanated from whites. She did not even hint that her harassment would topple whites' well-entrenched power. Rather, her goal was defiance and its harassing effect was likely more potent precisely because she did *586 what she did without expecting to topple her oppressors. Mrs. MacDonald avoided discouragement and defeat because at the point that she determined to resist her oppression, she was triumphant. Her answer to my question reflected the value of that triumph, and explained the source of courage that fueled her dangerous challenge to the white power structure of that rural Mississippi county. Nothing the all-powerful whites could do to her would diminish her triumph.

I realize that even with the challenge to rethinking I present today, many will find it difficult to embrace my assumption that racism is a permanent component of American life. Mesmerized by the racial equality syndrome, you are too easily reassured by simple admonitions to "stay on course," which come far too easily from those--black and white--who are not on the deprived end of the economic chasm between blacks and whites.

While comforting to many whites, the goal of racial equality is more illusory than real for blacks. For too long, we have worked for substantive reform, then settled for weakly worded and poorly enforced legislation, indeterminate judicial decisions, token government positions, and even holidays. If we are to seek new goals for our struggles, we must first reassess the worth of the racial assumptions on which, without careful thought, we have presumed too much and on which we have relied too long.

Perhaps those of us who can admit we are imprisoned by the history of racial subordination in America can accept--as slaves had no choice but to accept--our fate. Not that we legitimate the racism of the oppressor. On the contrary, we can only *delegitimize* it if we can accurately pinpoint it. And racism lies at the center, not the periphery; in the permanent, not in the fleeting; in the real lives of black and white people, not in the sentimental caverns of the mind.

Armed with this knowledge, and with the enlightened, humility-based commitment that it engenders, we can accept the dilemmas of committed confrontation with evils we cannot end. We can go forth to serve knowing that our failure to act will not change conditions and may very well worsen them. We can listen carefully to those who have been most subordinated. In listening, we must not do them the injustice of failing to recognize that somehow they survived as complete, defiant, though horribly scarred beings. We must learn from their example, learn from those

Derrick Bell

The Racism Is Permanent Thesis: Courageous Revelation or Unconscious Denial of Racial Genocide

22 Capital University Law Review 571 (Summer, 1993)

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Page 10 of 14

whom we teach.

If we are to extract solutions from the lessons of the slaves' survival, and our own, we must first face squarely the unbearable landscape and climate of that survival. We yearn that our civil rights work will be crowned with success, but what we really want--want even more than success--is meaning. "Meaningfulness," as Stanford psychiatrist Dr. *587 Irvin Yalom tells us, "is a by-product of engagement and commitment."⁵¹ This engagement and commitment is what black people have had to do since slavery: making something out of nothing. Carving out a humanity for oneself with absolutely nothing to help--save imagination, will, and unbelievable strength and courage. Beating the odds while firmly believing in, *knowing* as only they could know, the fact that all those odds are stacked against them.

Both engagement and commitment connote service. And genuine service requires humility. We must first recognize and acknowledge (at least to ourselves) that our actions are not likely to lead to transcendent change and, may indeed, despite our best efforts, be of more help to the system we despise than to the victims of that system whom we are trying to help. Then, and only then, can that realization and the dedication based on it lead to policy positions and campaigns that are less likely to worsen conditions for those we are trying to help and more likely to remind the powers that be that out there are persons like us who are not only on their side but determined to stand in their way.

Now there is more here than confrontation with our oppressors. Continued struggle can bring about unexpected benefits and gains that in themselves justify continued endeavor. We can recognize miracles we did not plan and value them for what they are rather than always measure their worth by their likely contribution to our traditional goals. As a former student, Erin Edmunds, concludes, it is not a matter of choosing between the pragmatic recognition that racism is permanent no matter what we do, or an idealism based on the long-held dream of attaining a society free of racism. Rather, it is a question of *both*, the recognition of the futility of action--where action is more civil rights strategies destined to fail--*and* the unalterable conviction that something must be done, that action must be taken.⁵²

As I hope is clear, the imperative of action is neither dependent on a certainty of eventual victory, nor is it diluted by those who see in the future--perhaps accurately--only death and destruction. The facts determine victory and defeat, success and failure. The evil of racism is ours to define. Its challenge awaits our commitment. Our triumph is assured at the moment we rise to that challenge.

The Racism Is Permanent Thesis: Courageous Revelation or Unconscious Denial of Racial Genocide

Footnotes

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- Visiting Professor of Law, New York University School of Law, A.B. 1952, Duquesne; LL.B. 1957, University of Pittsburgh. The material in this article is based substantially on my book, Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (1992). Portions of the book reprinted with permission of the author and HarperCollins Publishers, Copyright (c) 1992.
- This lecture, originally presented in January 1993 at Capital University Law and Graduate Center as part of the Ethics Institute's series, *Essays in Justice*, has been revised and edited for publication.
- Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (1992).
- Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (1944).
- Professor Willhelm has long espoused these views. Sidney Willhelm, *Black in White America* (1983); Sidney Willhelm, *Who Needs the Negro?* (1970). For an overview of Professor Willhelm's views, see Sidney Willhelm, *The Supreme Court: A Citadel for White Supremacy*, 79 Mich. L. Rev. 847 (1981) (book review); Derrick Bell, *A Hurdle Too High: Class-based Roadblocks to Racial Remediation*, 33 Buffalo L. Rev. 1, 10-12, 22-34 (1984).
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- Bell, *supra* note 1, at 12.
-  [Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 \(1954\).](#)
-  [42 U.S.C. §§ 2000e-2000e-17 \(1964\).](#)
-  [42 U.S.C. §§ 3601-3619 \(1970\).](#)
- Kimberle Crenshaw, [Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law](#), 101 Harv. L. Rev. 1331, 1380-81 (1988).
- Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975).
- Derrick Bell, *The Racial Imperative in American Law, in The Age of Segregation: Race Relations in the South 1890-1945*, at 3-28 (1978).
- Herbert Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System* (1977); William Gould, *Black Workers and White Unions* (1977).
- Kevin Phillips, *Politics of Rich and Poor* (1990).
- Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory From Margin to Center* 54 (1984).
- Myrdal, *supra* note 2.

Derrick Bell

The Racism Is Permanent Thesis: Courageous Revelation or Unconscious Denial of Racial Genocide

22 Capital University Law Review 571 (Summer, 1993)

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Page 12 of 14

1 *Id.* Myrdal also concludes: The Negro problem in America represents a moral lag in the development of
6 the nation and a study of it must record nearly everything which is bad and wrong in America
However, . . . not since Reconstruction has there been more reason to anticipate fundamental changes in
American race relations, changes which will involve a development toward the American ideals. *Id.* at xix.

1 Jennifer Hochschild, *The New American Dilemma* (1984).
7

1 *Id.* at 203.
8

1 *Id.* at 5.
9

2 *Id.*
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2 Bell, *supra* note 1, at epigraph.
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2 *See, e.g.,* Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975).
2

2 *See* sources cited *supra* note 3 and accompanying text.
3

2 Sidney Willhelm, *Who's Blocking the Roadways?*, 33 *Buffalo L. Rev.* 22, 22 (1984).
4

2 *Id.* (citations omitted).
5

2 Bell, *supra* note 1, at 3.
6

2 *Id.*
7

2 *Id.* at 3-4.
8

2 Hacker, *supra* note 4, at 102 (citing to Statistical Abstract of the United States (1960-1988); Bureau of
9 Labor Statistics, *Employment and Earnings* (1991)).

3 *Id.* at 105 (citing to Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Earnings* (1991)).
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Derrick Bell

The Racism Is Permanent Thesis: Courageous Revelation or Unconscious Denial of Racial Genocide

22 Capital University Law Review 571 (Summer, 1993)

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Page 13 of 14

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[3](#) Jerome G. Miller, National Center on Institutions & Alternatives, Search and Destroy: The Plight of African American Males in the Criminal Justice System (1992).

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[4](#) *Id.* at 105.

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[5](#) Robert L. Allen, Black Awakening in Capitalist America (1969).

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[6](#) *Id.* at 10.

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[3](#) Nathan Huggins, Black Odyssey xxiv (1990).

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[5](#) Albert Camus, Resistance, Rebellion, and Death 26 (1960).

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[6](#) Franz Fanon, Black Skins, White Masks 228-29 (1967).

Derrick Bell

The Racism Is Permanent Thesis: Courageous Revelation or Unconscious Denial of Racial Genocide

22 Capital University Law Review 571 (Summer, 1993)

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Page 14 of 14

4 *Id.* at 187.
7

4 *Id.* at 229 (first emphasis added).
8

4 A Testament of Hope: The Essential Speeches & Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. 313-314 (James M.
9 Washington ed., 1986).

5 *Id.* at 314.
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5 Irvin Yalom, *Love's Executioner & Other Tales of Psychotherapy* 12 (1989).
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5 Erin Edmunds, Harvard Law School, *Civil Rights According to Derrick Bell* (1991) (unpublished
2 manuscript).

22 CAPULR 571