

psalms begin by urging "O sing unto the Lord a new song",¹³ as does Isaiah, who admonishes: "Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the end of the earth!"¹⁴

"No, Geneva," I went on, "we do not expect praise for our legal scholarship that departs from the traditional. We simply seek understanding and that tolerance without which no new songs will ever be heard."

C H A P T E R 8

Racism's Secret Bonding

And Moses stretched forth his rod toward heaven: and the LORD sent thunder and hail, . . . And the hail smote throughout all the land of Egypt all that was in the field, . . . Only in the land of Goshen, where the children of Israel were, was there no hail. . . . And when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunders were ceased, . . . the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, neither would he let the children of Israel go. —Exodus 9:23–35

THE FIRST OF what came to be known as the Racial Data Storms fell on the Fourth of July. Setting the pattern for the storms that followed, it broke exactly at noon and lasted for precisely a half hour. Over the vast expanse of fifty states, including Alaska and Hawaii, skies darkened quickly, turning bright day into eerie twilight. Lightning bolts pierced the gloom and were particularly frightening because they slithered almost vertically from sky to earth. Each lightning flash was followed by a cannonlike crack of thunder. No rain fell. Instead, there was a precipitation of visible, though quite thin slivers of hitherto-unknown energy rays. These rays did not soak people's clothing and skin but—easily penetrating umbrellas, raincoats, even the stoutest structures—entered their consciousness and flooded them with data.

Then the real fear set in. There was no need to read about the Data Storm or watch it on television. Every U.S. citizen could report from personal experience that the July Fourth storm rained down statistical data about the number of Africans who had been captured, brought to these shores, and

enslaved during the years of the slave trade. Those newly soaked not only knew the statistics but experienced the horrified feelings of the subjects of those statistics. As a kind of rhetorical counterpoint to the statistical bombardment, there rang in the ears of the white Americans undergoing the data deluge the famous antislavery speech Frederick Douglass presented on the Fourth of July, 1852.

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty, all heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.¹

Recovering that evening, government officials promised their shaken constituents to leave no stone unturned in getting to the bottom of the phenomenon. In the meantime, they tried to dismiss it as a Fourth of July prank that was neither funny nor patriotic. “It will not happen again,” scientists assured citizens, but this prediction could not support any explanation of how the data deluge occurred in the first place. There was one major clue to its cause. African Americans had not been deluged, had not even noticed the storm. When they learned what had happened, blacks spontaneously reached a single conclusion. “Guess,” they asked one another, “who is going to get the blame for this?”

The next day, the Racial Data Storm returned. Amidst awesome thunder and lightning, the deluge rained down statistics on black unemployment and the consistently large disparities (averaging two and one half times) between jobless figures for blacks and whites. The figures, while astonishing, were not new. The data contained as well, though, the feelings of frustration, despair, and rage that blacks experience when discrimination bars them from jobs they would otherwise obtain. These data-related feelings were unnerving even to unemployed whites. The more predictable feeling so evident after the first storm—outrage—was wholly absent. In part, the deluge itself seemed less invasive, as though the waves had been fine-tuned to convey their messages with a minimum of disruption.

In the days that followed, the storms and their accompanying background lectures continued. The data continued to convey information and evoke feelings about disparities—in comparison with whites—in infant death rates, educational attainment, income based on education, life expectancies, prison terms for the same crime, the death sentence, and housing and health care costs and availability.

After a few weeks, complaints that government “do something” about the daily deluges diminished—as ever more people demanded that government at every level act to address the nation’s social ills, including racial injustice, and the heavy financial, political, and moral burden racism imposed on all races. Prompted by business groups who were satisfied with the status quo, elected officials tried to justify delay by saying the primary job was to catch whomever was causing the Racial Data Storms, but the citizens paid no attention. Finally, massive, day-long sitdown strikes, conducted at the workplace and in the middle of busy thoroughfares, persuaded both official and behind-the-scenes powers to act.

There was further impetus for reform after the first few states to initiate broad social reforms reported that the Data

Storms had stopped and been replaced by moderate rains that fell each night from 2:00 to 4:00 A.M. The reforms included new legislative efforts to protect against discrimination based on race, sex, religion, sexual orientation, and physical challenge, along with the means to enforce them vigorously. But it turned out that far less enforcement was required. The daily doses of feeling what discrimination is really like had made many white people eager to comply with the new laws.

Finally, government intelligence agents located the source of the Racial Data Storms. On the morning when they planned to enter the secluded scientific site high in the Rocky Mountains, the chief suspects—three black scientists—managed to stow away on a space shuttle and, after take-off, hijacked it. At a point high in the shuttle's orbit, they exited through the shuttle's cargo doors and disappeared into the black of space—whether to attempt a re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere or to head for another planet no one ever learned. There was no doubt, however, that they had left behind them the greatest social reform movement America had ever known.

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"WELL," GENEVA ASKED, "do you think sweeping reforms are possible in the wake of such brilliant manipulation of meteorology, statistics, and psychology?"

"I am far less certain than I was twenty, even ten, years ago," I replied, "that our long-held belief in education is the key to the race problem. You know," and I explained the old formula, "education leads to enlightenment. Enlightenment opens the way to empathy. Empathy foreshadows reform. In other words, that whites—once given a true understanding of the evils of racial discrimination, once able to *feel* how it harms blacks—would find it easy, or easier, to give up racism."

"Yes, that is certainly what we have hoped for," Geneva agreed, "but now you have doubts? Doubts based on——"

"Experience, Geneva, experience. Even older and wiser, it's hard for me to admit, but we fool ourselves when we argue that whites do not know what racial subordination does to its victims. Oh, they may not know the details of the harm, or its scope, but they *know*. Knowing is the key to racism's greatest value to individual whites and to their interest in maintaining the racial status quo."

"Watch it, friend!" Geneva cautioned. "Your civil rights colleagues who consider your giving up on integration to be an abject surrender to racism, will deem blasphemy your loss of faith in the value of educating whites to racism's evils."

"Don't I know it?" I replied sadly, thinking of some of the motivations for racist behavior that we understand, and trying to connect them with other factors, possibly hidden ones we haven't yet considered. We've long known, as I told Geneva, that poor whites prefer to identify with what Professor Kimberlè Crenshaw calls the "dominant circle" of well-to-do whites,^{2*} particularly those who attribute social problems to blacks rather than to the policies that they, the upper-class policymakers, have designed and implemented. No less accurate, if more earthy, than Crenshaw's is the novelist Toni Morrison's assessment of how the presence of blacks enables a bonding by whites across a vast socioeconomic divide. When asked why blacks and whites can't bridge the abyss in race relations, Morrison replied:

[B]ecause black people have always been used as a buffer in this country between powers to prevent class war, to prevent other kinds of real conflagrations.

If there were no black people here in this country, it would have been Balkanized. The immigrants would have torn each other's throats out, as they have done everywhere else. But

*See introduction, page 8.

in becoming an American, from Europe, what one has in common with that other immigrant is contempt for *me*—it's nothing else but color. Wherever they were from, they would stand together. They could all say, "I am not *that*." So in that sense, becoming an American is based on an attitude: an exclusion of me.

It wasn't negative to them—it was unifying. When they got off the boat, the second word they learned was "nigger." Ask them—I grew up with them. I remember in the fifth grade a smart little boy who had just arrived and didn't speak any English. He sat next to me. I read well, and I taught him to read just by doing it. I remember the moment he found out that I was black—a nigger. It took him six months; he was told. And that's the moment when he belonged, that was his entrance. Every immigrant knew he would not come at the very bottom. He had to come above at least one group—and that was us.³

"You know, Geneva," I mused, "Morrison's observation gains in validity as the Eastern Europeans—freed of the authoritarian domination of Communist control—engage in fierce and bloody ethnic conflicts. Those conflicts, and their violent counterparts in other parts of the world, reveal the role of blacks that enables Americans to boast that this nation is a melting pot of people from many origins."

"I understand," Geneva interrupted. "Americans achieve a measure of social stability through their unspoken pact to keep blacks on the bottom—an aspect of social functioning that more than any other has retained its viability and its value to general stability from the very beginning of the American experience down to the present day. Indeed, as Professor Jennifer Hochschild has recognized, racism is in a state of symbiosis with liberal democracy in this country.^{4*} And, if all this is true, does that not mean that we need a truly extraordinary educational campaign, something like a data deluge?"

*See introduction, page 10.

"So, I would think, but I have the sense that it's an open secret everyone has agreed on, however much individuals may deplore it from time to time. Indeed, I wonder whether the plight of black people in this country isn't caused by factors more fundamental even than white racism, more essential than good government to a civilized society? While some racial reform can be pressured by financial considerations, disaster, threat, guilt, love, and, yes, even education, there may be a primary barrier to the racial reformation which nullifies all these. I wonder, that is, whether—in the melding of millions of individuals into a nation—some within it *must* be sacrificed, killed, or kept in misery so that the rest who share the guilt for this monstrous wrong, can bring out of their guilt those qualities of forbearance and tolerance essential to group survival and growth? And, if so, then who in the legal system plays the more important role—the prosecutors who are the instruments of the sacrifices mandated by a social physics we do not understand, or the defendants whose efforts are destined to fail but who, by those efforts, serve to camouflage the bitter reality of those sacrifices from the society and—alas—from themselves as well?"

As I wound up, Geneva just looked at me blankly, her face reflecting my own stark frame of mind.

"A grim outlook, I know," I said, "and one that has taken on confirming, metaphorical muscle for me in Ursula Le Guin's haunting short story 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.'"

I went on to give a brief account of the idyllic community in the story, of a prosperous and sophisticated people, much given to carnivals, parades, and festivals of all kinds; their leaders, wise and free of corruption.

"There is in Omelas neither crime nor want. In a word, its people are extremely happy.

"But there is a problem, an open secret. It's a secret that forces some who learn of it—and some who have known it for

a long time—to conclude that they cannot remain, and they leave Omelas. They leave and never look back, never return.”

Reaching over to my bookshelf, I took down the book of Le Guin's short stories and opened it to the passage that had haunted me since I'd read it some days earlier.

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. . . . The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It might be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. . . . The door is always locked, and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes—the child has no understanding of time or interval—sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl and water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks. “I will be good,” it says. “Please let me out. I will be good!” They never answer.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of

their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.⁵

Geneva sat quietly for a time, absorbed in thought. “A fine story,” she said finally, “and an apt metaphor for the knowing but unspoken alliance whereby all whites are bonded—as bell hooks says—by racism.⁶ And,” she added, “as paradoxical as it seems, viewing racism as an amalgam of guilt, responsibility, and power—all of which are generally known but never acknowledged—may explain why educational programs are destined to fail. More important, the onus of this open but unmentionable secret about racism marks the critical difference between blacks and whites in this country, the unbreachable barrier, the essence of why blacks can never be deemed the orthodox, the standard, the conventional. Indeed, the fact that, as victims, we suffer racism's harm but, as a people, cannot share the responsibility for that harm, may be the crucial component in a definition of what it is to be black in America.”

“So,” I said, “you see why I was impressed but not completely convinced by your Data Storm allegory. For all the reasons we have been discussing, being black in America means we are ever the outsiders. As such, we are expendable and must live always at risk of some ultimate betrayal by those who will treat such treachery as a right.”

Geneva frowned. “I guess what you say is right, but now that we have expanded—exploded, really—the education-against-racism notion, there is something more. Toni Morrison, you know, is not the only witness to the fact that learning the term *nigger* made new immigrants from Europe ‘feel instantly American.’ Why, ‘every white immigrant who got off the boat was allowed,’ as Andrew Hacker writes, ‘to talk about “the niggers” within 10 minutes of landing in America.’⁷ Ralph Ellison, too, saw that ‘whites could look at the social position of blacks and feel that color formed an easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not an Ameri-

can.' But he saw this as 'tricky magic,' because despite the racial difference and social status, 'something indisputably American about Negroes not only raised doubts about the white man's value system but aroused the troubling suspicion that whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black.'⁸

In the essay of Ellison's from which Geneva was quoting, he reviews the long history—fantasy, he calls it—of an America free of blacks. He calls it an absurd fantasy, one that fascinates blacks no less than whites and that becomes operative whenever the nation grows weary of the struggle toward the ideal of American democratic equality. In arguing that blacks are a unique and essential part of American culture, Ellison contends that without blacks, the nation's economic, political, and cultural history would have been far different. And, because they are an essential component of this country's make-up, he warns that those who would use the removal of blacks as a radical therapy to achieve a national catharsis, would destroy rather than cure the patient.

"Do you think," I asked, "that recognition of our essential cultural role may protect us from the ultimate betrayal we both fear?"

"On the contrary," she said firmly, "I believe that the notion that we blacks, the immutable outsiders, might nevertheless be the bearers of the culture, increases our risk dramatically."

"Then, you differ with Ralph Ellison," and I took his book from the shelf. "He concludes his essay by acknowledging that blacks, of the many groups that compose this country, suffered the harsh realities of the human condition. Because of our past fate, 'for blacks, there are no hiding places down here, not in suburbia or in penthouse, neither in country nor in city. They are an American people who are geared to what *is* and who yet are driven by a sense of what is possible for human life to be in this society.' He predicts that the nation could not survive being deprived of blacks' presence because, 'by the irony implicit in the dynamics of American democracy, they symbolize

both its most stringent testing and the possibility of its greatest human freedom."⁹

"Ellison's optimism cannot conceal the additional dimension he provides to the scapegoat theme in Le Guin's story. He is telling—or, rather, reminding—us that black people are not innocent children chosen at random to perform the psychologically necessary role of social cohesion. Rather, they are the nation's conscience, but he says it better than I."

Taking the book from me, Geneva read the passage I pointed to:

Listen: it is the black American who puts pressure upon the nation to live up to its ideals. It is he who gives creative tension to our struggle for justice and for the elimination of those factors, social and psychological, which make for slums and shaky suburban communities. . . . Without the black American, something irrepressibly hopeful and creative would go out of the American spirit, and the nation might well succumb to the moral slobbism that has ever threatened its existence from within.¹⁰

"In other words," I suggested when she looked up, "we're a race of Jeremiahs, prophets calling for the nation to repent."

"Exactly!" Geneva said. "And you know what nations do to their prophets?"

"I do. About the least dire fate for a prophet is that one preaches, and no one listens; that one risks all to speak the truth, and nobody cares."