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The Divide

Upwardly Mobile Black America and the Urban Poor

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Too white for Bed-Stuy, too black for Harvard, Chanequa Campbell struggled between two worlds.

—*New York Post*, July 26, 2009[1]

The acting white phenomenon has now come full circle early in the twenty-first century. Gone are the days when blacks fought tirelessly and at great peril for their personal safety to secure the right for their children to receive an education that would allow them a true shot at achieving the American dream. The dark days of the civil rights era are now behind us—the dogs have been leashed, the water hoses cut off, and the guns and batons have been holstered.

And yet, more than fifty years following the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that outlawed separate but equal accommodations as offensive to the equal protection of law under the Constitution, a new form of segregation now sweeps across America. In a disturbing trend, many blacks mock members of their own race who seek academic excellence in the classroom and speak and dress well as being nothing more than Uncle Toms and acting white.

A slur nearly expunged by two separate political and social movements led by Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X has resurfaced under the institutionalization of affirmative action programs brought about by the Great Society. In a previous generation, when Booker T. Washington recommended blacks cede higher learning to whites, a wave of black leaders rose to defend the access to ballot box, civil rights, and the power of the humanities through education for all U.S. citizens. Today, a large segment of the black community is voluntarily ceding intellectual development without conscience.

Is this new paradigm nothing more than a return to the days of Jim Crow, when being black in America meant being uneducated, inferior, and subservient to whites? Why do many blacks castigate fellow members of their race who seek to improve their social and economic standing for doing nothing more than acting white?

The contemporary criticism of acting white has arrived and flourished in our schools and communities, and we must take steps to quell this poisonous stain, which rewards inferiority at the cost of upward academic, social, and political mobility. I should know: I've been tarred with the acting white slur my entire professional and academic life, placing me in a unique perspective to debunk those who assert that the acting white phenomena is nothing more than an urban legend.

Until fairly recently, the acting white myth was depicted to be just that—a myth unsubstantiated by sociological, economic, or scholastic review. In 1986, Professors Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu published their findings on what is considered the leading initial empirical study regarding the impact of allegations of acting white in academic settings. Fordham and Ogbu conducted a survey of several high school students in the District of Columbia, at a school they later dubbed "Capital High" to protect the identity of the program participants. In their review, they found that African-American students failed to live up to their academic potential for fear of the social and cultural stigma of being accused by their peers of acting white.[2] A few years later, Ogbu further solidified these conclusions in his 2003 book, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement.*

It should be noted that early scholarship on the effect of acting white in the classroom was far from conclusive, however. In 2003, the

University of North Carolina professors Karolyn Tyson and William Darity Jr. conducted an eighteen-month study of eleven North Carolina schools to ascertain the perception of acting white among black students. Unlike the conclusions reached by Fordham and Ogbu, the North Carolina study found that black and white students had essentially the same motivation and attitude regarding academic achievement. In their view, acting white did not have a negative effect on African-American student achievement. Perhaps, the authors led their audience to believe, the acting white myth would remain just that. Despite the conflicting results of two major studies on the impact of acting white in academic settings, the notion that blacks act white by speaking, dressing, and behaving differently than other blacks was quite real at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

The year 2004 would prove instrumental in elevating the prominence of acting white as a stigma and deterrent for the many African-Americans who sought to break the binds of poverty and blue-collar occupations through self-reliance and the power of education. That year, just one year after the release of Tyson and Darity's study on the effects of acting white, two unlikely figures would push acting white to the forefront of American social and political consciousness. The first figure was eminently well known to the American people, and the second, while relatively unknown at that point in time, would become president of the United States a mere four years later.

Interestingly, the assessment of the success or failure of the opportunities presented to black children across America in the fifty years since the landmark *Brown* decision and whether a black child who was succeeding in the classroom was now merely acting white would come from a most unlikely source, one that would roil the country in controversy for months to come: William Henry "Bill" Cosby, Ed.D.

Cosby has long been regarded as America's dad from his prolific work as a pitchman for Jell-O pudding and Coca-Cola and as the star in early television programs such as *I Spy* and *The Electric Company.* Cosby is perhaps best known for two television programs he created: the cartoon series *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* as well as *The Cosby Show,* which ran from 1984 to 1992 and remains in syndication today.

Unlike previous depictions of blacks on television, *The Cosby Show* portrayed an affluent upper-middle-class black nuclear family where the parents (a doctor and a lawyer) served as proper role models to their well-spoken and educated children. The premium placed on education by the fictitious Huxtable family was high: learning, dressing well, and holding oneself with dignity was not considered acting white, it was deemed acting properly to succeed in America. More than anything, *The Cosby Show* proved that the depiction of a successful African-American family could draw vast audiences at either end of the racial spectrum.

At the height of its popularity in the 1980s, *The Cosby Show* drew as many as 50 million viewers per episode. By contrast, Fox's *American Idol* program has been the most-watched show over the past several years. In 2007–08, for example, the show drew 28.8 million viewers per week.[3] The *Cosby Show* numbers proved that Americans, regardless of their race, were comfortable with welcoming an upwardly mobile middle-class black family into their homes each week, one for whom hard work, proper speech, and education and upward mobility was the norm rather than the exception.

While many Americans are aware of Cosby's comedic brilliance, fewer are aware of his work in the field of education. Cosby received an Ed.D degree in 1976 from the University of Massachusetts, where he wrote a dissertation entitled "An Integration of the Visual Media via 'Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids' into the Elementary School Curriculum as a Teaching Aid and Vehicle to Achieve Increased Learning." Long a proponent of African-Americans opening the locked doors and shattering the ceilings of advancement that existed before *Brown v. Board of Education,* Cosby was a strong believer in the power of education to lift blacks from the ghetto into the middle class of America.

Recognizing his work and vast achievements, the NAACP invited Dr. Cosby to deliver the keynote remarks at their gala to commemorate and celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, on May 14, 2004. Fifty years following this landmark decision, separate but equal school facilities had been outlawed in America, but had her black schoolchildren fully used their opportunities to perform as equals to whites? Separate but equal had been the barrier to black children's having the opportunity to succeed for more than fifty years from 1896 to 1954: how had the children of subsequent generations responded in the fifty years following *Brown?* Finally, were the scars of racial inferiority exposed by the doll test so far removed fifty years since the passage of *Brown* that blacks now viewed themselves in a positive manner and as coequals with whites, or did they still view being white as positive and being black as negative now that they had arrived in a newly integrated society?

Accepting the invitation to speak and reflect on the transformative nature of the *Brown* decision, Cosby surprised many in the audience and across the country for using his remarks to castigate the leadership of black parents, teachers, and politicians for their tolerance and failure to capitalize on the doors that had been opened by *Brown*, instead allowing successive generations of black children to shun the value of education as the key to unlock the doors to the American dream. Previous generations of black children had yearned merely for the opportunity to attend school without fear of castigation, violence, and strict adherence to racial segregation; many of today's black children viewed studying and performing well in school as acting white instead of as acting right among their peers.

Before a stunned audience, who perhaps believed it was set to be regaled rather than reprimanded by America's dad, Cosby condemned the lack of economic and social progress in many urban neighborhoods across America since previous generations had fought at great personal risk to their personal safety to ensure future black children had opportunities to act as equal rather than subservient to whites. Rather than take a bow or a lap in victory following fifty years of remarkable and demonstrable progress, Cosby instead famously told the audience composed of such luminaries as Dorothy Height and the Reverend Jesse

Jackson Sr. to stop blaming white people for injustice in their lives and accept personal responsibility for the missed opportunities for blacks to achieve financial, academic, and personal success.

Dubbed the "pound cake" speech, Cosby's remarks did not just electrify the audience at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. He sparked a powerful debate that served as a catalyst for his directly wading into the acting white controversy head-on just days later. The following excerpts offer a colorful yet powerful illustration of Cosby's passion for black self-empowerment and his disdain for pulling down others for acting white and for seeking an escape from adverse socioeconomic surroundings in favor of a better life. Of the brave pioneers who championed the *Brown* decision, Cosby thundered:

> Ladies and gentlemen, these people set—they opened the doors, they gave us the right and today, ladies and gentlemen, in our cities and public schools we have 50% drop out. . . . Ladies and gentlemen, the lower economic and lower middle economic people are not holding their end in this deal.[4]

Cosby took his fiery remarks one step further by seeking to extinguish the excuse that somehow whites were to blame for the predicament of blacks:

> We cannot blame white people. White people—white people don't live over there. . . . What part of Africa did this come from? We are not Africans. Those people are not Africans; they don't know a damned thing about Africa. With names like Shaniqua, Shaligua, Mohamed and all that crap and all of them are in jail. . . . Brown versus the Board of Education is no longer the white person's problem. We've got to take the neighborhood back. . . . Everybody knows it's important to speak English except these knuckleheads. You can't land a plane with "Why you ain't . . ." You can't be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth.[5]

And perhaps most dramatically, Cosby chose the following words near the end of his address to lament the lack of progress and educational development of blacks since *Brown v. Board of Education*, since many African-Americans equated success in the classroom as acting white rather than as advancing up the rungs to higher socioeconomic success:

> Brown v. Board of Education, these people who marched and were hit in the face with rocks and punched in the face to get an education and we got these knuckleheads walking around who don't want to learn English. I know you all know it. I just want to get you as angry that you ought to be. . . . These people are not funny any more. And that's not my brother. And that's not my sister. They're faking and they're dragging me way down because the state, the city and all these people have to pick up the tab on them because they don't want to accept that they have to study to get an education. . . . Well, Brown v. Board of Education, where are we today? It's there. They paved the way. What did we do with it? The white man, he's laughing, got to be laughing. 50 percent drop out, rest of them in prison.[6]

Drawing scant praise and significant condemnation for his remarks before the NAACP event that evening, Dr. Cosby was merely at the beginning rather than the end of his journey to shine a bright light on many of the predicaments that ailed far too many African-Americans across the country—including the pejorative that a young black child with a book was acting white.

Both in speeches and in an appearance on TV, Cosby not only refused to back down in his critiques of those who sought to put the failure for black advancement at the feet of others but also refused to accept a scenario where blacks who sought to elevate their socioeconomic standing were doing nothing more than acting white.

Cosby took to the airwaves to defend himself against those who criticized his call for black empowerment and self-reliance by appearing on PBS's *Tavis Smiley Show* on May 26, 2004. Note the following

exchange, where Smiley engaged Cosby on his less than politically correct comments holding blacks to account for their actions:

> **Smiley:** But you kicked up a conversation here. You got America talking. That's what a presidential candidate ought to do.
>
> **Cosby**: Ladies and gentlemen, do me a favor. Talk to each other. Talk to each other. I have too many positive stories also. When I said, 'take your neighborhoods back,' this can happen. You have to get out and talk to each other. And you have to realize what is good and what is not good and who's tweaking your children to buy things.
>
> I mean, when girls are beating up other girls because the other girls were virgins, when boys are attacking other boys because the boys are studying and they say, '*You're acting white.*' Well, I got news for y[ou] . . . it's a disease all around.[7] (emphasis added)

Suddenly, the acting white discussion had left local schools, playgrounds, and barbershops and found its way to the national stage. A slur that had been murmured under one's breath in the school yard regarding another student was now being broadcast into millions of homes across America.

What had roused Bill Cosby to such ire and consternation? Hadn't *Brown,* affirmative action, and the rise of black power and pride unshackled the chains that had held blacks back from academic and cultural success? Perhaps the sad reality that led Cosby to his call to arms within the black community was the fact that many blacks intentionally spurned success as acting white rather than as honoring the sacrifice of previous generations who had given them the opportunity to prevail through hard work and discipline. As we shall soon discover, victimization and the desire to become socially acceptable to other blacks would inhibit the perseverance and dedication to succeed of blacks who feared being accused of acting white.

While the national dialogue and debate on acting white had been elevated with Cosby's "pound cake" speech and his subsequent discussion of the topic on the *Tavis Smiley Show,* just two months following Cosby's remarks a little-known state senator from Illinois would deliver the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in Boston, Massachusetts, and denounce the demonization of black students for seeking educational advancement and for this "acting white"—providing further validation of a term many had dismissed as an urban myth.[8] Acting white had now entered the realm of national politics, where it has remained ever since.

Senator Barack Obama (D-IL), a charismatic candidate running for the United States Senate, had been asked by the party standard-bearer, Senator John Kerry (D-MA), to deliver the keynote remarks during his presidential nominating convention in Boston. In electrifying remarks heard around the world that would catapult Obama's political trajectory from Springfield, Illinois, to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in just four years, Obama touched on the racially sensitive pejorative of "acting white," used to refer to blacks in academic settings. While Cosby was widely criticized for his denunciation of the allegation that blacks were acting white by seeking to advance themselves through education and self-empowerment, the silence surrounding the senator's remarks was deafening in the days following his prime-time address:

> Go into any inner-city neighborhood, and folks will tell you that government alone can't teach kids to learn. They know that parents have to teach, that children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white. They know those things.[9]

One speech. One searing indictment of black attitudes that equate academic success and proper speech with acting white in American society—Obama's remarks on the heels of Cosby's denunciations of the slur drew swift reaction from black intellectuals and social commentators. Ironically, Cosby would be repeatedly castigated and denounced for his criticism of the acting white pejorative, while Obama escaped such vitriolic commentary.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., director of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University, came to the defense of Cosby in a column published in *The New York Times* on August 1, 2004, just days following Obama's address to the Democratic National Convention.

In an op-ed entitled "Breaking the Silence," Gates offered the following commentary regarding the uproar Cosby had created by denouncing the acting white slur, which Obama had similarly done just days before:

> In a speech filled with rousing applause lines, it [Obama's denunciation of the acting white slander] was a line that many black Democratic delegates found especially galvanizing. Not just because they agreed, but because it was a home truth they'd seldom heard a politician say out loud.
>
> Why has it been so difficult for black leaders to say such things in public without being pilloried for "blaming the victim"? Why the huge flap over Bill Cosby's insistence that black teenagers do their homework, stay in school, master Standard English and stop having babies? Any black person knows that Mr. Cosby was only echoing sentiments widely shared in the black community.[10]

Beyond Professor Gates, Cosby also received a spirited defense of his remarks by the African-American essayist Clarence Page during an appearance on *PBS NewsHour* on September 27, 2004. In his televised remarks, Page attacked the notion of the acting white slur as well as Cosby's detractors when he commented:

> In African American folklore, the sea crab ranks among the dumbest of creatures who also offers a valuable lesson. When you catch a bucket or a basketful, you never have to put a lid

on because when one of the creatures tries to get out, the others will just pull it back in. Some of our fellow human beings aren't much smarter than that. When they see you working hard to achieve your dreams, they'll make fun of you just for trying. . . . Yes, today's hip-hop generation has basket crabs of its own, eager to put you down for somehow acting white when you try to get ahead as if blackness means you have to fail.[11]

In speaking of Senator Obama and Bill Cosby's remarks, Page would touch on a paradox that has followed many in the black community for generations: if one is somehow acting white to get ahead, being black and acting black means that one must be a failure in order to be deemed successful. Page further noted that prominent black professors such as Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Lani Guinier had observed that more black undergraduates at Harvard had hailed from immigrant families than from families descended from African-American slaves. According to Page: "Black immigrants from Africa, the West Indies, and elsewhere seem too busy pursuing American opportunities to waste time worrying about whether or not they are 'acting black.' "[12]

For their part, leaders such as Bill Cosby and the then senator Obama sought to change both the image and the perception of blacks and of being black to something more positive: academic and socioeconomic success is not something limited to whites or acting white, they asserted. Instead, these pioneers sought to instill in blacks, young and old, that success is color-blind. The choice is not to act white and be successful or act black and be a failure.

And yet while Professor Gates and a distinct minority spoke out in favor of Cosby's articulation of the corrosive social factors inhibiting progress in many black households across the country, they were drowned out by the caustic and vitriolic commentary of his detractors.

For one, many social commentators took exception with Cosby's belief that the acting white syndrome even existed. The *New York Times Magazine* editor Paul Tough debunked Cosby's commentary with a stinging op-ed on December 12, 2004, entitled "The Acting White Myth." While noting that Cosby brought the concept of acting white to the national consciousness by invoking the phrase to describe black boys who attacked other black children who studied for acting white, Tough denied the existence of such a practice in reality. Citing the study conducted by the University of North Carolina professors Karolyn Tyson and William Darity Jr., referred to above, Tough noted that while Cosby invoked the notion of acting white to explain certain social behavior among black children that led to low academic achievement, "for the most part, it isn't true."[13] Tough continued by observing that use of the acting white rationale to explain poor academic results among black children provides

> an excuse by administrators to conceal or justify discrimination in the public-education system. The one school where the researchers did find anxiety about "acting white" was the one in which black students were drastically underrepresented in the gifted-and-talented classes. And significantly, at this particular school, the notion of the burden of "acting white" was most pervasive not among the black students interviewed by the researchers, but among their teachers and administrators, who told researchers that blacks are "averse to success" and "don't place a high value on education."[14]

Tough's analysis entirely missed the context drawn by Cosby, Professor Gates, and the then senator Obama and the point they sought to make: the stigma associated with acting white is not limited to academic performance in the classroom. Early scholars of the subject limited the parameters of the debate to whether the charge of acting white led to poor academic achievement by black children. Instead, what these and other critics were trying to eliminate was the perception, the stigma, that doing well in school, speaking proper English, and treating others with respect and common courtesy was, according to many black households, acting white. Academic performance was merely one component of a far larger social stigma in many segments of black society, where breaking the societal and generational chains of low socioeconomic ties to advance toward the middle class was denigrated as acting white.

Of *The New York Times* op-ed ostensibly debunking the existence of acting white, the prominent linguist John McWhorter argues in his book *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America* that the study conducted by Professors Tyson and Darity confirms rather than denies the existence of the acting white phenomena. He writes:

> Then there has been a study by Karolyn Tyson, William Darity Jr., and Domini Castellino that the *New York Times* glibly featured as disproving the "acting white" thesis. But, in fact, the study soundly confirms that the phenomenon exists—it simply nuances the issue of what schools it is most likely to play a part in. . . . In a different ideological climate, the paper could easily have been published as *proving* the 'acting white' thesis.[15] (emphasis added)

As the acting white slur gained prominence in discussions on national television and within the pages of *The New York Times,* I found it somewhat ironic that depending on the messenger, the mainstream-media reaction to it was dissimilar. Why was there widespread criticism surrounding Cosby's outrage of black children picking fights with others for acting white while Senator Obama received thunderous applause for similar utterances? Shouldn't the message rather than the messenger on a subject this important be the critical issue for the media and others to focus on?

In a vivid example of the discordant analysis given the "acting white" slur that had ignited a national conversation on what it meant to be black and successful in America, the Georgetown University professor Michael Eric Dyson wrote a *New York Times* bestseller entitled *Is Bill Cosby Right? (Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?)* in 2005, where he waded in directly to confront the issue of acting white. Rather than acknowledge the prevalence of the slur or its negative ramifications on many African-Americans seeking to change their academic and socioeconomic standing, Dyson instead takes Cosby to task (but not Senator Obama) for identifying the slur of acting white as a negative influence on intellectual development.

Here, Dyson dismisses out of hand the belief that African-Americans are any more or less inclined to be intellectual and seemingly rejects the notion of acting white without significant or reflective analysis:

> Cosby's insistence, in his infamous May 2004 speech and on National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation* in July 2004, that black youth are anti-intellectual because they chide high achievement as "acting white," repeats what is the academic equivalent of an urban legend. . . . The notion that black youth who are smart and who study hard are accused by their black peers of "acting white" is rooted in a single 1986 study of a Washington, D.C., high school conducted by Signithia Fordham, a black anthropologist at Rutgers University, and John Ogbu, the late Nigerian professor of anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley.[16]

Signithia Fordham, coauthor of the original study on the notion of acting white, followed up on her original piece in the aftermath of the Bill Cosby controversy, some twenty years after her study and one year following the publication of Professor Dyson's book, by warning that by limiting our view of the acting white phenomenon and suggesting it exists only in academic circles rather than seeing it as a broader social stigma in the black community is mistaken in fact. In a far-ranging interview by *City* newspaper in Rochester, New York, conducted on February 8, 2006, Fordham took exception with those such as Dyson who sought to argue that the impact of the slur of acting white is minimal in black society:

It's misunderstood far more than it's understood. First, people limit it to the school context. Then they create a false dichotomy, kids who are seeking academic achievement and kids who are not. That is a component of "acting white," but "acting white" is much larger than that. It's part of the larger African American community. That's why I wrote about Rosa Parks. "Acting white" not only means conformity, it is also resisting prevailing norms and expectations. It's not just school.[17]

Instead, Fordham and McWhorter point to more broad and deeper issues that had penetrated the black consciousness to limit educational as well as socioeconomic advancement. First, in a searing essay entitled "Was Rosa Parks 'Acting White'?" printed as part of her interview with the *City* newspaper, Fordham examined whether the civil rights pioneer could well have been accused of acting white for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on December 1, 1955, on that fateful bus trip in Montgomery, Alabama. Fordham points to the real impact of acting white on blacks, both in 1955 and in the current day:

When the other black passengers did not initially support [Parks] because she was upsetting the imposed and customary order of race relations and they feared white reprisals against the whole black community, were they responsible for the insult to her dignity?[18]

After posing the poignant question about what the imposed and customary order of race relations as perceived by blacks should be, Fordham further comments that

Because black identity is the core of the response to the accusation of "acting white," I cannot embrace the idea supported by recent researchers . . . that all high-achieving students—regardless of race or class—are stigmatized and subject to ridicule and exclusion by their lower-achieving peers. I resoundingly reject their conclusion that the problem of "acting white" is "not a black thing."[19]

Continuing to peel away the layers of the onion that Fordham had exposed to get to the real crux of the issue of acting white as being far more broad and entrenched in the cultural identity of blacks in society, McWhorter describes the notion of therapeutic alienation as being at the heart of the racial slight.

In the provocative book *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America,* McWhorter reveals a scenario where blacks assail those who act in or react to a particular instance in a manner that differs from expected cultural norms:

But treating the act of doing well in school as disloyal became attractive under the new way of thinking that was settling into the black community. An open-ended wariness of whites became a bedrock of black identity, among a people deprived by history of a more positive, individual source of security and purpose. If this had not led black kids to start turning away from school as "white," it would have been surprising.[20]

This sense of betrayal to the greater good of the black community by those blacks who dared step out of the cultural norms and narratives that had been expected of them is a poison to which I have sought the cure for my entire academic, professional, and social life. In the following passage, McWhorter describes the cultural alienation and castigation I have experienced for electing to follow a path not taken by many, if not most, other blacks in my cultural, political, and academic views. Here he notes:

For blacks, the idea that one's value as a black American was one's difference from whites, including a mission to teach them about racial injustice, fit right in with a new black identity based too often on being in opposition to The Man. To value oneself as "diverse" from whites is, actually, to avoid being an

> individual actor, in favor of joining a herd of people united in cherishing *not* being something, rather than *being* something—attractive when one is not sure whether one is good enough to *be* something.[21]

McWhorter's analysis provides an excellent opportunity to depart from the ivory-tower interpretations of those who deny or minimize the existence of acting white in academic and cultural settings by using my own life experiences as a poignant illustration that the slight is very real and very much an issue in the United States today.

First, from my earliest days as an undergraduate at Haverford College, I was constantly challenged by my fellow black students about why I was not "sufficiently black" or whether I was embarrassed to be associated with other blacks. The transgression at issue? I had refused to participate in the social events sponsored and held at the Black Cultural Center (or BCC, as it was known when I was there). The idea that I was not sufficiently black or was acting white by choosing friends based on the content of their character rather than the color of their skin was a foreign concept to many of my fellow students of color during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

I sought to surround myself with friends with academic and social interests that I enjoyed—I never believed the diversity of the college experience meant that I should self-segregate to associate only with persons of color because somehow the color of our skin bound us together more than mutually shared interests and pursuits. As Fordham notes, the notion of black identity is tied into the use of the slur "acting white"—a truism I would discover repeatedly throughout my time at Haverford. Since I was not "sufficiently black" to associate with blacks at the exclusion of whites at a predominately white college and given the friends and social settings I sought to associate myself with, I was repeatedly told to my face in class and in the dining hall and around campus that I was doing nothing more than acting white.

And, though it was unbeknownst to me at the time, McWhorter's discussion of therapeutic alienation rang true in many encounters I had with fellow black classmates. There *was* a certain wariness of white classmates held by several of my black contemporaries that formed an unbreakable bond and identity for them at my expense and exclusion. In many instances while at Haverford I was made to feel that there was something wrong with me for breaking away from the African-American community. And yet nothing could be further from the truth. The ostracism I faced by some was due to a sense that somehow I was acting white while being not sufficiently black. Why?

I didn't want to live in a dormitory composed only of blacks, self-segregate in the dining center to sit primarily with blacks, and engage in social activities where only African-Americans were involved. I thought that the entire purpose of a liberal arts education was to interact with those from differing backgrounds—self-segregation seemed counterproductive. Allegedly open-minded black classmates of mine had no problem whatsoever of accusing me of being insufficiently black and acting white when my political, social, and cultural norms differed from theirs.

This trend and sense of cultural alienation continued as I graduated from Haverford College and obtained a job working as a legislative assistant to a junior member of the House of Representatives. From my earliest days in the Longworth House Office Building, I would discover that the richness of diversity on Capitol Hill did not exist within the ranks of the Republican Party: I was one of a handful of black legislative aides who served alongside a Republican member of Congress.

There certainly wasn't strength in numbers for me at the elected level in the Republican House membership. When I arrived in September 1991, there was only one black member of Congress who was serving in the House of Representatives. Representative Gary Franks (R-CT) was the first black Republican elected to the House since Oscar Stanton De Priest represented Chicago's South Side from 1929 to 1935.

Beyond the slights previously described at the hands of Representative Maxine Waters (D-CA), I would soon encounter open hostility from fellow black staff members working for Democratic members of Congress who were appalled that I would dare register as, let alone work for, a Republican.

As described by McWhorter, time and time again I would be attacked for being an individual actor, an individual exercising independent political thought rather than joining the herd of most blacks on Capitol Hill who cherished group identification and acceptance as members of the Democratic Party above all else. For my transgression and decision to join the ranks of a political party where I felt comfortable both on ideology and public-policy positions, I was castigated repeatedly for acting white, being inauthentically black and an Uncle Tom—all at the hands of blacks who would profess to their deep commitment to diversity and equal opportunity for all.

The sense of cultural alienation and exclusion for daring to express opinions that differed from what most other blacks subscribed to followed me from Capitol Hill to K Street and to the White House, where I served as an advisor to President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney. I had apparently turned my back on the black community by acting white for electing to serve our country in a Republican administration, I was repeatedly told. More recently, the intensity and level of vitriolic commentary toward me for ostensibly acting white has increased with the election and inauguration of President Barack Obama.

Since leaving the Bush administration in 2004, I have been sought out by many cable news networks for my political insights on their television programs. While I occasionally received a less than flattering letter or phone call for expressing my views on air, the tenor and frequency of such unsolicited feedback would intensify as Obama began his quest for the presidency.

Following Obama's historic election to the Oval Office, I remained vigilant in my review of the president's policies; in areas where I agreed with his approach, I said so on television and on National Public Radio,

where I offer frequent political commentary. Rather than celebrate the opportunities that were afforded me by pioneers of the civil rights movement to think and act freely as an American, I was and remain a constant target of those who either accuse me of being an African-American acting white or of turning my back on the black race for my criticism of the new president's policies. Don't take my word for it: consider the following samples of vitriolic commentary found in a series of blogs and Web sites, found by doing a quick search of "Ron Christie" on the Internet:

> I am so ashamed that a black man would get on television in front of millions and show how ignorant he is about what he really is (a Black Man). All of your education and exposure should have allowed you to deliver comments that did not cut to the soul and disregard the efforts and sacrifice of those who came before us to make it possible to even be where you are today . . . This only proves that the republicans are fiscal conservatives but mutually exclusive to whites and Uncle Toms! (February 19, 2009)

> You will never be white, Ronnie. (February 27, 2009)

> Does everybody know that Ron Christie is . . . the whitest black man in America? (March 17, 2009)

> Ron, I am so sick of your . . . uncle tom statements! You make me sick!!! (March 23, 2009)

Or consider an e-mail I received after a recent appearance on television, where my black authenticity was put into question:

> Perhaps you can tell us why you and other like you, Clarence Thomas for one, do not like being black. I understand the making of money and the need to support yourself, but to sell out on

> those that opposed civil rights since the beginning is quite sad as you are. . . . You will take positions opposed to your own interests—a paid uncle Tom.

Rather than provide satisfaction to those who posted the comments about me above by listing their names, I have elected to delete their identification. Nonetheless, these posts represent only some of hundreds of similar remarks that populate the Internet. Their message and intent is clear: if one strays from the conventional political, social, and cultural norms exercised by a majority of African-Americans, one will be immediately labeled an Uncle Tom or one who acts white. Such views are hardly a laudable sign of progress as America turns the corner from the twentieth century, which was marked by more than fifty years of Jim Crow, segregation, and inadequate educational opportunities for blacks, to the dawn of the twenty-first century, when this form of racial hatred should be well behind us.

Accordingly, Shelby Steele offers the following analysis in his examination of those blacks who refused to follow the group-think, herd mentality of racial apologists and those who thought of blacks as perpetual victims rather than as equal participants in society. Acting white according to these two views is equated with a strong educational footing, hard work, and ultimate success in one's endeavors, while acting black fulfills a stereotype of inferiority, of lack of intellectual curiosity, and of dependence on others to achieve success rather than self-reliance. Steele reveals:

> From the abolitionist era to the present, the terms of racial reform in America have always been set by a coalition of white liberals and black leaders. And since the sixties, interventionism that would engineer blacks to equality has been the virtuous idea of this coalition. But, in supporting interventionism, I think the black leadership has forsaken the black mandate to achieve true and full equality with all others for the perquisites of interventionism—the preferential patronage of jobs, careers, grant money, set asides, diversity consulting businesses, black political districts and so on. . . . This bargain has transformed the civil rights establishment into something of a grievance elite, largely concerned with turning the exceptionalism practiced by institutions in regard to blacks into the patronage of racial preferences.[22]

As we shall see in the chapter to follow, many in black communities across the country desire to marginalize those who would dare support the patronage of jobs, academic admissions, and government set-asides in the name of affirmative action and diversity and are not only labeled as acting white but also castigated for "selling-out" for doing so. It is here that we turn our attention to the slur of not only acting white but selling out that dilutes rather than enhances the ability of many blacks to act as true equals with whites in society.

10. THE DIVIDE: UPWARDLY MOBILE BLACK AMERICA AND THE URBAN POOR

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