

# Talking Black Series

# READING

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Saturday, November 6, 2010 | 5:30-8:30pm

*Minds & Self-Images Part 2-*

*Socialization and Deprogramming After Believing America's Myth*

- *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (excerpt), Joy Degruy Leary, Ph.D.
- *The United Independent Compensatory Code/Sytem/Concept* (excerpt), Neely Fuller, Jr.
- *The White Problem*, James Baldwin
- *Brainwashed: Challenging the Myth of Black Inferiority* (excerpt), Tom Burrell

## Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome:

### America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing

Joy Degruy Leary, Ph.D.

#### *Brought Up To Be Brought Down*

*When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his "proper place" and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His Education makes it necessary.*<sup>68</sup>

Carter G. Woodson

Since he was 12 years old my son attended predominantly white schools and had predominantly white friends. In 2004, at the age of 19, my son went to live with his grandmother in Detroit for six months. This would mark the first time in his life that he would live in a predominately black environment. Here he would gain first hand knowledge about what life is like for black people living in a large urban area. Our frequent phone conversations would reveal how deeply indoctrinated my son was with the images of black people that he had acquired from growing up in Portland.

I remember one conversation in particular that was unsettling to

me. It was winter in Detroit and quite cold. My son was attending a nearby college and was working part-time at a grocery store. He met lots of black co-workers, male and female, young and old who helped him on the job and also gave him rides to and from work. He hated the actual work itself, but grew to enjoy being with the people with whom he worked.

From the moment he said hello I knew something was on his mind that troubled him. He was planning to leave Detroit in a few weeks and I thought maybe he was concerned about his finances. I was wrong. He told me he was calling because he was concerned for the people with whom he worked. He told me about a young woman in her twenties who was pregnant, working two jobs and having difficulty lifting the boxes the job required her to lift. He told me about the old black man who had been working at the grocery store for fifteen years who had never gotten a promotion. My son told me how he would often stand up for the old man when the gentleman was being ordered around by a twenty-year-old white manager who humiliated him by speaking to him as though he were a child. Then there was the woman in her sixties, one of many co-workers that would give him a ride to work each day. He described how she never listened to the radio but instead played religious tapes and sang gospel music. She also refused to take any money from him in return for driving him to work.

My son shared with me that he hated leaving them. They were kind and hard working people who encouraged and helped him. They never asked for anything other than friendship and rarely had a complaint or unkind word to say about anyone. He spoke as if shocked by how deeply spiritual and caring these individuals were, and how diligently they performed their work.

"These were good people," he said, sounding surprised. "Most everyone I met was friendly and fun to be around." I inquired as to why he seemed so surprised. He said, "At first I was confused about

why I expected something less of them. Then he told me he felt shame and outrage about what he had learned growing up in Portland.

He was becoming aware that he had bought into the headlines, the hype and the images the white community sells about black people. He was angry that he had been misled. In a word, he, like so many others like him, was unwittingly indoctrinated into racist socialization. Too many of us still are affected by the lies this society has attempted to foist upon us since its inception, lies that people in this society still spread to perhaps assuage their guilt and justify their crimes.

I recently asked a group of African American youth to join my class of graduate social work students at Portland State University in a discussion about two recent police shooting deaths in Portland, one involving an African American man and the other an African American woman, both of whom were unarmed.

The 15 young men and women, ranging from 14 to 20 years old, were reticent at first to speak openly and honestly. One of them found it difficult to mention the term 'white' because all but about three of the college students in the room were white.

Before the discussion everyone viewed a video of a taped interview with the young spoken word hip hop artist Malik Yusef. Malik talked about his life growing up on the South-side of Chicago and his experience being poor, angry and frustrated. He related how his poetry provided him with a vehicle for transcending the family and community troubles which surrounded him. Malik spoke openly and honestly about growing up in a tough neighborhood. He spoke about why he engaged in criminal behavior and his experience with police officers. The video was a great icebreaker. It opened up the youth to talk about their experiences and feelings regarding their own encounters with police. Much of what was shared involved the typical harassment of being stopped and searched for no reason, or being questioned about why they were in a park or walking home at night. Perhaps the most significant words

they shared were their sentiments concerning the media's coverage of the events that occurred in their communities, communities which are largely Black, Hispanic and poor.

One of the youth, a young 19 year-old woman, reminded the class of the shooting months earlier of a young child. She told the class that she was one of the first people to arrive on the scene and that she had held the head of the wounded child for 45 minutes before paramedics arrived.

"Nobody shared that story on the news, how I held that kid's head until help came. They report every drive-by or robbery or assault that someone young and black commits, but they never show the good things that we do. Why is that?"

The last to share was a young woman who had remained silent throughout the entire discussion. When she finally raised her hand to speak, the rest of the youth immediately became quiet, as if anticipating something weighty. Her t-shirt sleeves were rolled up over her shoulders and several elaborate tattoos were visible. She spoke clearly and deliberately giving full eye contact to my class of graduate students. She shared how she had been watching the news, watching various people being interviewed about the fatal shooting death of James Jahar Perez, the unarmed black man I spoke of in chapter three. She recounted hearing a black woman, who, while being interviewed said, "It was wrong the way the police shot and killed Mr. Perez. The man didn't have a weapon."

"Next," the student went on, "a white woman was interviewed." The student slowly dropped her head and began to sob loudly. "The white woman . . . the white woman said that the police were right."

There was an uncomfortable silence as she wept. The director that had accompanied these youth gently placed his arm on her shoulder. Quite unexpectedly the young woman tearfully raised up her head, turned to my students and asked, "When are you going to get it? Black

people are struggling everyday to just barely live, how long do we have to go through this? What will it take for you all to just let us live?"

A hush fell over the class and the young woman gathered herself and sat back in her chair. Later many of my students shared that they were fighting back tears themselves, not because they felt any responsibility or guilt, but because of the desperation, rawness and truth of her words. She spoke to them almost as if she had hopes that it would somehow make a difference, that only they, as white students, could possibly change things. From my perspective this was testimony to a greater truth: that she and her peers still held the belief that real power only rests in 'whiteness' and that in this acknowledgment these youths see themselves as powerless.

When African Americans accept the deprecating accounts and images portrayed by the media, literature, music and the arts as a true mirror of themselves, we are actually allowing ourselves to be socialized by a racist society. Evidence of racist socialization can be readily seen when African American children limit their aspirations, seeking out careers as nurses and paralegals rather than as doctors and lawyers. It can be seen when we use the accumulation of material things as the measure of self-worth and success. Racist socialization is evident in our failure to support our communities economically; in believing that the ice in the white man's store is somehow colder; in deifying whiteness and denouncing everything that is black. The ultimate result of this socialization is that all that is white becomes synonymous with power and that which is black is equated with impotence.

Society, its laws, educational systems, and propaganda are powerful forces, forces that can, and often do, have much greater impact than parents, extended family, peers, and even community. So, in spite of all our forebears who worked to survive and gain their freedom; in spite of our ancestors' efforts to build lives for themselves and their heirs; in

spite of the efforts of all those who fought for our civil rights; in spite of all our parents did to support, educate and encourage us; in spite of all we do and have done to grow ourselves and raise our children, far, far too many of our people are still believing the lies. We are continually being socialized by this society to undervalue ourselves, to undermine our own efforts and ultimately to hate ourselves. We are raising our children only to watch America tear them down. And for some of us it's worse yet. It is as if we are still doing the work of those that enslaved us, for in believing and propagating their lies we keep ourselves and our children chained to the dominant culture's vision.

Today the legacy of slavery and oppression remains etched in our souls. The impacts of our history can be witnessed daily in our struggle to understand who and what we are, and in our jaundiced vision of who and what we can become. The impacts of our history can be witnessed in our continual fight for respect, respect that we seek and demand from without, but that can only be built from within. These impacts can be witnessed in the war between affirmative racial socialization in our homes and destructive racist socialization everywhere else, a war that I'm sorry to say, we seem to be losing.

While many of us have overcome, raised healthy families and achieved success, many of us still struggle with issues of esteem, anger and respect. Many of us are continually working to define who and what we are in relation to each other. Not enough of us are truly at peace with ourselves and our place in the world. Not enough of us have truly happy, thriving families. And what about those who have not achieved even the outward trappings of success? Many more African Americans live towards the bottom of the socio-economic ladder than live at the middle, and fewer still live towards the top. The great majority of us are struggling to provide for our families, keep them safe and growing in positive directions. In this respect we seem to be no

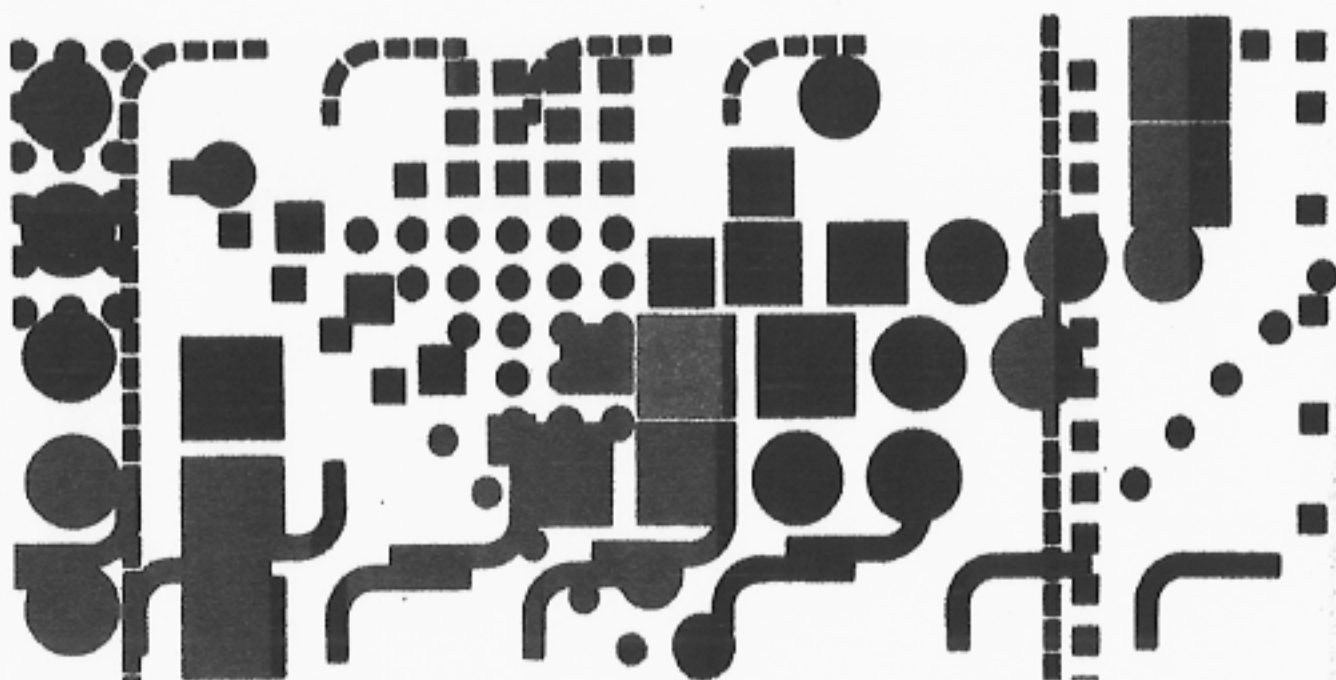
different from the vast majority of Americans. Yet we are different. The difference is that we are working to do all this under the added weight of vacant esteem, ever present anger and racist socialization, the legacies of our past.

Whether or not we have overcome, most of us have been impacted by Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome in one way or another. Actually, many white people have been also, but that's the topic for another book. Understanding the role our past plays in our present attitudes, outlooks, mindsets and circumstances is important if we are to free ourselves from the spiritual, mental and emotional shackles that bind us today, shackles that limit what we believe we can be, do and have. Understanding the part Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome plays in our evolution may be the key that helps to set us on the path to well-being.

# THE UNITED INDEPENDENT COMPENSATORY CODE/SYSTEM/CONCEPT

textbook/workbook  
or thought, speech  
and/or action for  
victims of racism  
(white supremacy)

Neely Fuller, Jr.



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As long as White Supremacy (Racism) exists, do not speak and/or act as if any non-white person has "parental authority".

If you have off-spring, do not speak, and/or act, as if they are subject to your so-called "parental authority".

## POLITICS

Tell them everything that you know that is of constructive value. Do not tell them anything, or give them anything, that does not serve a constructive purpose. Tell them the things that you know that they should do — and should not do — but also tell them that you are not their "boss". Tell them that you have no "parental authority" over them, but that you do want them to try to cooperate with you in accomplishing those things that are of constructive value. When they develop the ability to understand what you mean, tell them that it is the Racists (White Supremacists) who are their "bosses". Tell them that it is the Racists who have "parental authority" over them, and, over you. Tell them that the Racists are their functional "mothers" and "fathers" — powerful, smart, unjust. Tell them that the Racists also have "parental authority" over all people of all ages who are classified as "non-white". Tell them that the Racists are also your illegitimate, but functional "mothers", and your illegitimate, but functional "fathers". Tell them that you, currently, have little power over anyone, or anything, other than the power to appear to have power, and that that power is "granted" and/or promoted by the Racists.

Tell them that in order for you to be a "parent", and to exercise "parental authority", you must be able to protect all of your off-spring from the dictates of Racists, and from the injustice that is the essence of that dictatorship.

Tell them that since you have, so far, failed to provide this protection, then, you have not, so far, earned the title of "parent", or the function of being regarded as a "parental authority". Tell them that you can try to work in "partnership" with them, to try to overcome the awesome and very real power that the Racists have over your existence and theirs.

Tell them that the best way of doing this is by doing all that you can, to develop the will, to seek, and find, truth, and to use truth in such manner as to produce justice and correctness, at all times, in all places, among all people and things. Tell them that the production of justice and correctness should be the only reason for the existence, at this time, of any and all people, white and non-white, male and female, "parents" and "children".

Tell them the truth, and tell it in such manner that they can understand it.

The White Problem

—James Baldwin

I SHOULD SAY TWO THINGS before I begin. One: I beg you to hold somewhere in the center of your mind the fact that this is a centennial year, that we are celebrating, this year, one hundred years of Negro freedom. Two: we are speaking in the context of the Birmingham crisis. And in this attempt to speak to you, I am going to have to play entirely, as they say, by ear. I want you to reconsider, or really to listen to, for the first time, the last two lines of an extremely celebrated song, as though you were an actor, and you were on the stage, under the necessity to deliver Hamlet's soliloquy "To be or not to be," etc., as though these lines had never been heard before. These two lines could be considered extremely corny, but I ask you to take them seriously. They are a question. The two lines I want you to pretend you are delivering on some stage, somewhere in the world, as though these lines had never been heard before, are these:

Oh, say, does that star-spangled banner still wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

And now please try to make a certain leap with me. I have one more quotation I want to give you, which comes from Nietzsche—it has been on my mind all week long. At some point, the man says:

I stand before my highest mountain, and before my longest journey, and, therefore, must I descend deeper than I have ever before descended.

There are several thousand things one must attempt to suggest, due to the context in which we are speaking. In the life of a woman, in the life of a man, in anybody's life, there are always many elements at work. The crucial element I wish to consider here is that element of a life which we consider to be an identity; the way in which one puts oneself together, what one imagines oneself to be; for one example, the invented reality standing before you now, who is arbitrarily known as Jimmy Baldwin. This invented reality contains a great number of elements, all of them extremely difficult, if not impossible, to name. The invented reality has struck a certain kind of bargain with the world: he has a name, we know what he does, and we think, therefore, that we know who he is. But it is not that simple. The truth, forever, for everybody, is that one is a stranger to oneself, and that one must deal with this stranger day in and day out—that one, in fact, is forced to create, as distinct from invent, oneself. Life demands of everyone a certain kind of humility, the humility to be able to make the descent that Nietzsche is talking about.

Life does not offer one as many choices as one would like to believe. In my life—and in your life, too, I am sure—when young, one supposes that there is some way to avoid disaster. Let me try to spell that out a little. When I was a little boy, for example, I used to tell my mother, "I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that, I'm going to go here and I'm going to go there, I'm going to be a writer—I'm going to *do, do, do, be* this." Mama would look at me and say, "It's more than a notion."

It took me a long time, a very long time, to begin to realize that she was right, and begin to realize what she meant. I, like all of us, thought I knew what I wanted, and I thought I knew who I was, and—like all of us—I thought that whatever it was I wanted and wherever I wanted to go, I could achieve without paying my dues. For one of the things that one cannot imagine, especially when one is young, is how to pay your dues. You don't even know that there are dues to be paid. Later on, one begins to discover, with great pain, and very much against one's will, that whatever it is you want, what you want, at bottom, must be to *become yourself*: there is nothing else to want. Whatever one's journey is, one's got to accept the fact that disaster is one of the conditions under which you will make it. (The journey, I mean, not "make it" in the American sense.) And you will learn a certain humility, because the terms that you have invented, which you think describe and define you, inevitably collide with the facts of life. When this

collision occurs—and, make no mistake, this is an absolutely inevitable collision—when this collision occurs, like two trains meeting head-on in a tunnel, life offers you the choice, and it's a very narrow choice, of holding on to your definition of yourself or saying, as the old folks used to say, and as everybody who wants to live has to say: *Yes, Lord.*

Which is to say yes to life. Until you can do that, you've not become a man or a woman. Now, in this country this inability to say yes to life is part of our dilemma, which could become a tragic one; it is part of the dilemma of being what is known as an American. The collective effort until this moment, and the collective delusion until this moment, has been precisely my delusion when I was a little boy: that you could get what you wanted, and become what you said you were going to be, painlessly. Furthermore, if one examines for a second, or if one tries to define, the proper noun "American," one will discover that the noun equates with a catalogue of virtues, and with something called, plaintively enough, "I Am an American" Day. To be an American means, I gather—check me out, you think about it—that, though Greeks, Armenians, Turks, Frenchmen, Englishmen, Scots, Italians, may be corrupt, sexual, unpredictable, lazy, evil, a little lower than the angels, Americans are not—quite overlooking the fact that the country was settled by Englishmen, Scots, Germans, Turks, Armenians, etc. Every nation under heaven is here, and not, after all, for a very long time.

I think that it might be useful, in order to survive our present crisis, to do what any individual does, is forced to do, to survive his crisis, which is to look back on his beginnings. The beginnings of this country (it seems to me a banality to say it, but, alas, it has to be said) have nothing whatever to do with the myth we have created about it. The country did not come about because a handful of people in various parts of Europe said, "I want to be free," and promptly built a boat or a raft and crossed the Atlantic Ocean. Not at all, not at all. In passing, let me remark that the words "liberty" and "freedom" are terribly misused words. Liberty is a genuine political possibility, in spite of the fact that the word is so often used as a slogan; and freedom—which, as I understand it, is beyond politics, though affecting politics and affected by it—may be the very last thing that people want. The very last thing. Anyway, the people who settled the country, the people who came here, came here for one reason, no matter how disguised. They came here because they thought it would be better here than wherever they were. That's why they came. And that's the only reason that they came. Anybody who was making it in England did not get on the

*Mayflower.* It is important that one begin to recognize this because part of the dilemma of this country is that it has managed to believe the myth it has created about its past, which is another way of saying that it has entirely denied its past. And we all know, I think, what happens to a person who is born where I was born, say, in Harlem, and goes into the world pretending that he was born in Sutton Place. And what happens to a person, however odd this may sound, also happens to a nation, a nation being, when it finally comes into existence, the achievement of the people who make it up; and the quality of the nation being absolutely at the mercy of, defined and dictated by, the nature and the quality of its people.

Let me point, if I may, to another thing, which is really the same thing. The Italian immigrant arriving from Italy, for example, or the son of parents who were born in Sicily, makes a great point of not speaking Italian, because he's going to become an American. And he can't bear his parents, because they are backward. This may seem a trivial matter. But it is of the utmost importance when a father is despised by his son, and this is one of the facts of American life, and is what we are really referring to, in oblique and terrible fashion, when we talk about upward mobility.

In this extraordinary endeavor to create the country called America, a great many crimes were committed. And I want to make it absolutely clear, or as clear as I can, that I understand perfectly well that crime is universal, and as old as mankind, and I trust, therefore, that no one will assume that I am indicting or accusing. I'm not any longer interested in the crime. People treat each other very badly and always have and very probably always will. I'm not talking about the crime; I'm talking about denying what one does. This is a much more sinister matter. We did several things in order to conquer the country. There existed, at the time we reached these shores, a group of people who had never heard of machines, or, as far as I know, of money—which we *had* heard about. We promptly eliminated them; we killed them. I'm talking about the Indians, in case you don't know what I'm talking about. Well, people have done that for centuries, but I'm willing to bet anything you like that not many American children being taught American history have any real sense of what that collision was like, or what we really did, how we really achieved the extermination of the Indians, or what that meant. And it is interesting to consider that very few social critics, very few, have begun even to analyze the hidden reasons for the tremendous popularity of the cowboy-Indian legend in American life, a legend so powerful that it still, in 1963, dominates the American television screen. I suspect that all those cowboy-Indian sto-



ries are designed to reassure us that no crime was committed. We've made a legend out of a massacre. In which connection, if I may digress for a moment, there used to be an old joke going around among Negroes. If you remember the Lone Ranger, he was white, of course, and he had a sidekick called Tonto, an Indian. There's always a good Indian. He rode around with the Lone Ranger, and according to my memory of the story, Tonto and the Lone Ranger ran into this ambush of nothing but Indians. And the Lone Ranger said, "What are we going to do, Tonto?" And Tonto said, "What do you mean, 'we'?"

Well, I tell that joke in order to point out something else. It's a Negro joke. One of the other things we did in order to conquer the country, physically speaking, was to enslave the Africans. Now slavery, like murder, is one of the oldest human institutions. So we cannot quarrel about the facts of slavery. That is to say, we could, but that's another story. We enslaved them because, in order to conquer the country, we had to have cheap labor. And the man who is now known as the American Negro, who is one of the oldest Americans, and the *only* one who never wanted to come here, did the dirty work, hoed the cotton—in fact, it is not too much to say that without his presence, without that strong back, the American economy, the American nation, would have had a vast amount of trouble creating that capital of which we are now so proud, and to which we claim Negroes have never contributed anything. If the Negro had not done all that totin' of barges and liftin' of bales, America would be a very different country, and it would certainly be a much poorer country.

The people who settled the country had a fatal flaw. They could recognize a man when they saw one. They knew he wasn't—I mean *you can tell*, they knew he wasn't—anything *else* but a man; but since they were Christian, and since they had already decided that they came here to establish a free country, the only way to justify the role this chattel was playing in one's life was to say that he *was not* a man. For if he wasn't a man, then no crime had been committed. That lie is the basis of our present trouble. It is an extremely complex lie. If, on the one hand, one man cannot avoid recognizing another man, it is also true then, obviously, that the black man in captivity, and treated like an animal, and told that he was, *knew* that *he* was, a man being oppressed by other men who did not even have the courage to admit what they were doing. When the African, in Africa, enslaved other men, he did not pretend that he was merely breaking in oxen.

Let me tell you a small anecdote. I was in Dakar about a year ago, in Senegal, and just off Dakar there is a very small island, which was once the

property of the Portuguese. It is simply a rock with a fortress; from Africa, it is the nearest point to America. My sister and I went to this island to visit something called the Slave House. The house was not terribly large. It looks a little like houses you see in New Orleans. That's the truth. It's got two stories and a courtyard and a staircase on each side, sweeping stone staircases. I assume that the captains and the slavers lived upstairs; downstairs were the slave quarters. You walked through a kind of archway, very dark, very low, made of stone, and on either side of you were a series of cells, with stone floors and rusted bits of iron still embedded in the walls. This may be my imagination, but it seemed to me that the odor was still there, that I could still smell it. What it must have smelled like, with all those human beings chained together, in such a place. I remember that they couldn't speak to each other, because they *didn't come from the same* tribe. In this corridor, as I say, there are the cells on either side of you, but straight ahead, as you enter the archway, or corridor, is a very much smaller doorway, cut out of the stone, which opens on the sea. You go to the edge of the door, and look down, and at your feet are some black stones and the foam of the Atlantic Ocean, bubbling up against you. The day that we were there, I tried, but it was impossible—the ocean is simply as vast as the horizon—I tried to imagine what it must have felt like to find yourself chained and speechless, speechless in the most total sense of that word, on your way *where?*

There were some French tourists around and I confess that for a moment I almost hit one of them on the head. They wouldn't have known why.

Anyway, it was the black man's necessity, once he got here, to accept the cross; he had to survive, to manage somehow to outwit his Christian master; what he was really facing when he got here was the Bible and the gun. But I'm not complaining about that now, either. What is most terrible is that American white men are not prepared to believe my version of the story, to believe that it happened. In order to avoid believing that, they have set up in themselves a fantastic system of evasions, denials, and justifications, which system is about to destroy their grasp of reality, which is another way of saying their moral sense.

What I am trying to say is that the crime is not the most important thing here. What makes our situation serious is that we have spent so many generations pretending that it did not happen. Ask yourself on what assumptions rest those extraordinary questions which white men ask, no matter how politely. On what assumption rests the question "Would you let your

sister marry one?" It's based on some preoccupation in the minds of white men. God knows I'm not interested in marrying your sister. I mean that. On what assumption, again, rests the extraordinary question "What does the Negro want?" The question betrays a flight from reality which is absolutely unimaginable: if we weren't dealing with what, in the public mind, is a Negro, the question could never be asked; we'd know damn well what he wanted. We know very well that we would not like to live the way we compel Negroes to live. Anyone who asks "What does the Negro want?" is saying, in another way, that he does not wish to be told, is saying that he is afraid to change, is afraid to pay his dues.

Let's go back, for a minute, to where I started. Let's go back to Nietzsche: "I stand before my highest mountain, and before my longest journey, and, therefore, must I descend deeper than I have ever before descended." And we spoke a little earlier about the necessity, when the collision between your terms and life's terms occurs, of saying yes to life. That's the descent. The difference between a boy and a man is that a boy imagines there is some way to get through life safely, and a man knows he's got to pay his dues. In this country, the entire nation has always assumed that I would pay their dues for them. What it means to be a Negro in this country is that you represent, you are the receptacle of and the vehicle of, all the pain, disaster, sorrow which white Americans think they can escape. This is what is really meant by keeping the Negro in his place. It is why white people, until today, are still astounded and offended if, by some miscalculation, they are forced to suspect that you are not happy where they have placed you. This is true; and I'm not talking about the Deep South. People finally say to you, in an attempt to dismiss the social reality, "But you're so bitter!" Well, I may or may not be bitter, but if I were, I would have good reasons for it: chief among them that American blindness, or cowardice, which allows us to pretend that life presents no reasons, to say nothing of opportunities, for being bitter.

In this country, for a dangerously long time, there have been two levels of experience. One—to put it cruelly, but, I think, quite truthfully—can be summed up in the images of Doris Day and Gary Cooper: two of the most grotesque appeals to innocence the world has ever seen. And the other, subterranean, indispensable, and denied, can be summed up, let us say, in the tone and in the face of Ray Charles. And there has never been in this country any genuine confrontation between these two levels of experience. Let me force you, or try to force you, to observe a paradox. Though almost all white Americans come from Europe, Europe understands the

American Negro better than they understand the white American. White Americans find it extremely difficult to establish any dialogue between themselves and Europeans for the very good reason, no doubt, that they have yet to break into communion with themselves; but black Americans and Europeans know what it is to suffer, and are far beyond any hope of innocence. A bill for the American endeavor to get from the cradle to the grave looking like Eisenhower has now come in.

White people are astounded by Birmingham. Black people aren't. White people are endlessly demanding to be reassured that Birmingham is really on Mars. They don't want to believe, still less to act on the belief, that what is happening in Birmingham (and I mean this, and I'm not exaggerating; there are several thousand ways to kill or castrate a man) is happening all over the country, and has been for countless generations; they don't want to realize that there is not one step, one inch, no distance, morally or actually, between Birmingham and Los Angeles.

Now, it is entirely possible that we may all go under. But until that happens, I prefer to believe that since a society is created by men, it can be remade by men. The price for this transformation is high. White people will have to ask themselves precisely why they found it necessary to invent the nigger; for the nigger is a white invention, and white people invented him out of terrible necessities of their own. And every white citizen of this country will have to accept the fact that he is not innocent, because those dogs and those hoses are being turned on American children, on American soil, with the tacit consent of the American Republic; those crimes are being committed in your name. Black people will have to do something very hard, too, which is to allow the white citizen his first awkward steps toward maturity. We have, indeed, functioned in this country in precisely that way for a very long time—we were the first psychiatrists here. If we can hang on just a little bit longer, all of us, we may make it. We've got to try. But I've tried to outline what I take to be some of the conditions for our survival.

(1964)

# BRAINWASHED

Challenging the Myth of Black Inferiority

Tom Burrell



SMILEYBOOKS

Distributed by Hay House, Inc.

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## Chapter 1

# The Scorch at the Bottom of the Melting Pot

*But in the propaganda against  
the Negro since emancipation in this land,  
we face one of the most stupendous efforts  
the world ever saw to discredit human beings,  
an effort involving universities, history, science,  
social life and religion.*

— W. E. B. DU BOIS

The marketing of black inferiority and white superiority as building blocks for the founding of America is a chicken that has finally come home to roost. Now we must ask ourselves: Did the world's greatest brainwashing campaign work?

Fast-forward 233 years. "Yes, it worked brilliantly."

That response, however, is incomplete. To discover the real answer, we must strip away multiple layers of complex conditioning. Part of the black inferiority marketing campaign is to convince us that we can't handle the truth... that we're better off not knowing. It's an extremely patronizing message. We are capable enough and strong enough to handle the truth. More importantly, if we are to reverse the mindless perpetuation of the "black inferiority" or BI campaign we must go to that painful place so that we may claim our peace.

Let's examine the effects of the brainwashing campaign from a visual perspective. Imagine a video collage of contemporary black

images, delivered in a flashing, rapid, 60-second sequence. Try not to think in terms of good and bad or right and wrong but rather how familiar these scenes are.

- A syncopated, heart-thumping hip-hop beat pulsates while music video-style images explode on the screen with increasing tempo.
- A ghetto corner cordoned off with yellow police tape.
- On the six o'clock news, a mother wails over the body of a black boy felled by another black boy with a gun.
- Ivy League African Americans from Princeton, Harvard, and Yale running Fortune 500 companies.
- Prisons engorged with mostly dark-skinned inmates under twenty.
- Forlorn teenage girls with swollen, pregnant bellies and scowling, pubescent boys sporting saggin' pants zooming in and out of the picture.
- The 21st-century American Dream in black: Oprah Winfrey, Maya Angelou, Will Smith, Whoopi Goldberg, Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, and other role models.
- Tattooed rappers, half-naked, booty-shaking women; and hilariously funny but race-debasing comedians.
- Halle Berry seducing.
- Tiger Woods swinging.
- Michael Jordan flying.

- Beyoncé singing.
- Flava Flav bling blinging.
- Stressed-out, hard-working, underpaid workers walking through an economically depressed neighborhood.
- Empty faces of neglected and abandoned elders, emaciated adults, and obese children, malnourished in the land of plenty—all disproportionately suffering from junk food diets, diabetes, heart disease, HIV/AIDS, and other long-ignored, untreated yet preventable diseases.
- An urban school resembling an outdated factory with armed guards.
- A teacher/warden in an overcrowded classroom attempts to instruct children, who run the gamut from hyperactive to comatose.
- Photo gallery: Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other Black History Month politicians and dignitaries.
- The montage slows to its finale with "Hail to the Chief" soaring in the background. Dominating the screen is a glorious photo of Barack Obama with First Lady Michelle by his side. Images fade to black with the voice of the nation's 44th president repeating the now familiar phrase: "It's our time."



## Exceptional Exceptions

Of all the faces in my video collage, which ones were most likely influenced by the inferior black/superior white brainwashing campaign?

All of them.

I can just hear the critics: "Whoa, whoa! Hold up, Burrell. Sure, there's black negativity on a grand scale, but how can you say *all* blacks are brainwashed to feel inferior when you just noted inspiring examples of prideful, positive, and progressive African Americans excelling and accomplishing historic feats?"

As an African American who has made his living understanding and utilizing the power of propaganda, I have unapologetically used the principles of psychology and emotional persuasion to promote products and agendas. I recognize marketing brilliance and am cognizant of the country's addiction to feeding its illusion of being a free and equal society, where anyone and everyone can succeed despite cultural and economic obstacles. Training the spotlight on well-deserving African American achievers clouds the realities that they grapple with daily.

The illusion that anyone can succeed—what I call the "paradox of progress"—solidifies the myth of a "post-racial society." It weakens the impulse to understand or help those still scorched at the bottom of America's melting pot. It fuels the perception that all is well and "racism is dead," and suggests that those still wallowing in poverty made conscious choices to live in that stratum. If not, many reason, they'd simply follow Halle, Tiger, Oprah, or even Tom Burrell's lead. They'd quit bellyaching, grab those bootstraps, and go to work!

Hold on. It's even more convoluted. Blacks, who've been conditioned to expect less from people who look like themselves, automatically insert these high-profile black achievers into the "exceptional exceptions" file. Many are positioned on pedestals, with no demands of accountability toward those they left behind.

After all, these people have achieved so much. They're different! They're exceptional! Some prominent black achievers have actually

opened their own Kool-Aid stands. They, too, consider themselves the "exception" and, in many instances—consciously or unconsciously—have begun to regard blacks of lesser social status or achievement as inferior. Ironically, in many ways, the progress paradox is an impediment to substantive collective progress.

Consider recent FBI crime statistics, census figures associated with poverty, or the conclusions found in the book put out annually by the National Urban League, *The State of Black America*. They reveal the same ongoing, depressing themes: social chaos, irresponsible spending, economic stagnation, and disproportionate death and incarceration rates. No matter what the category, blacks statistically trail behind whites and other ethnicities, and in some areas, such as educational achievement and overall life expectancy, our numbers are actually getting worse.

Regardless of our individual social, economic, or media success, it has not affected the black bottom line. Therefore, though black progress is more visible today than ever before, I maintain that the unwritten, audacious promotion of white superiority and black inferiority was (and still is) the most effective and successful marketing/propaganda campaign in the history of the world. African Americans, no matter how savvy, educated, or financially privileged, could not completely avoid the conditioning that resulted from increasingly sophisticated bombardment of subtle and not-so-subtle messages created to reinforce how different and inherently inferior blacks are when compared to whites.

In this perpetual state of "otherness" there's no disputing our unequal status. Like Coca-Cola, the black inferiority product has been modernized and updated with time. But don't be mistaken, the intent is to keep the original message firmly embedded in our psyches: white superiority was, is, and (unless we block the negativity) will always be "The Real Thing."

Early indoctrination into my own inferiority fueled a determination to succeed. I remember coming to a conscious decision when I reached adulthood that, rather than continue internalizing the hurt and humiliation, "I'd just show them."

## BRAINWASHED

I tried to deal with it in a variety of ways, starting with the idea of fooling “the man,” making all believe that I was something other than what “they” said. Some days I tried my best. Other days, I’d just want to give in, accept the lesser status and engage in cynical behavior. Ultimately, I chose the “fake it till you make it” approach, spoofing the public until I was financially secure enough to retire into a category of my own design. This line of thinking continued until I was more than 40 years old, well after I’d established my marketing firm.

Burrell Communications was touted for mastering the skills of positive commercial propaganda. Perhaps it was because of our commitment to understanding, mastering, and utilizing savvy techniques required to sell products and influence behavior that certain realities finally clarified and eventually inspired this journey. All I know for sure is, at some point it dawned on me that I was not faking. I was, indeed, just as smart, just as brave, just as disciplined, and just as beautiful as what I thought I was pretending to be. The more I learned about the origin of my own issues, which had been festering from the legacy of chattel slavery, the more I was able to see the same wounds in others.

It was then I realized that I, like most Americans, had been brainwashed.

## Propaganda Campaigns

Maybe I’m expressing a sense of atonement or maybe it’s just that I don’t want to leave this planet without putting my life’s skills to the ultimate test. I’ve decided to adopt a strategy similar to that of Edward Bernays, the nephew of the famous psychiatrist Sigmund Freud.

Bernays was considered by many experts to be the first public-relations professional. In fact, he takes credit for inventing the term. Bernays adapted some of Uncle Sigmund’s revolutionary psychological studies to aid the government’s World War II media offensive and helped manipulate the American masses for fun and profit.

Bernays didn’t call himself a propagandist. Back then the Germans had already given the word the negative taint it still carries today.

Instead, Bernays called himself a public-relations expert. In a very real way, his first propaganda triumph was to change the image of propaganda itself. In a way, this book follows Bernays’s lead. The intent is to thoroughly dissect this white superiority/black inferiority phenomenon, demonstrate how it still retards our social, personal, and economic advancement, and then help Americans flip the script—to neutralize the techniques.

Unlike Bernays, I have no intention of shying away from the term *propaganda*. I say we use it—take what was thrown at us, shuck it off, and replace it with “positive” propaganda. Propaganda is the outer layer of this brainwashing onion. After all, in the marketing world, propaganda is the first tool utilized to achieve a desired outcome. Brainwashing is the outcome, but propaganda got us here, and its continued use keeps the inferior/superior mind game in play. Instead of using torture and other coercive techniques, the stealthy, media-savvy propagandist uses mass media and other forms of communication to change minds and mold ways of thinking.

In the United States, the first society in theory governed by popular opinion, propaganda became a critical tool of the wealthy, governing elite. For instance, the powerful words *freedom and justice for all* overshadowed the reality that both were denied to black slaves. Yet those words, as propaganda tools, helped solidify the image of a burgeoning nation.

There are many propaganda principles. But here are a few that I believe were of prime importance in the 18th-century black inferiority marketing strategy. These principles were employed throughout the colonial period of the late 1700s, Reconstruction in the late 1800s, the 20th-century civil rights movement, and still survive in modern times.

**The Big Lie**—the repeated and consistent articulation of a partial, distorted, or manufactured “truth.”

- **Colonial era:** Black slaves are subhuman beasts.
- **Reconstruction era:** Emancipated blacks are still inferior to whites.

- **Civil Rights era:** Blacks are angry, dangerous, unemployable, and addicted to welfare.
- **Modern era:** Low-income blacks are innate failures, responsible for their own moral and economic decline.

**Appeal to Fear**—the purposeful effort to instill apprehension and panic.

- **Colonial era:** Changing the status of black slaves will threaten our livelihood and destroy our way of life.
- **Reconstruction era:** Emancipated blacks will seek revenge and rape white women.
- **Civil Rights era:** Blacks are revolutionary communists. They're moving too fast and want too much at once. "Black power" really means "race war."
- **Modern era:** Low-income blacks are violent and prone to crime. They threaten property values and must be contained or incarcerated.

**Appeal to Prejudice**—attaching a value or moral label to flawed but well-established perceptions.

- **Colonial era:** Whites are physically, mentally, and morally superior to blacks.
- **Reconstruction era:** Blacks want and need to be subjugated. They cannot function in free society.
- **Civil Rights era:** Whites have earned economic and social privilege through hard work, discipline, high morals, and family values.

- **Modern era:** Social and economic woes are attributed solely to irresponsible black parenting, crime-coddling communities, and a sense of perceived "victimization."

**Stereotyping**—exaggerating established perceptions of physical or cultural traits, attaching negative attributes to an entire group.

- **Colonial era:** Black slaves are uncivilized, childlike, and content with bondage.
- **Reconstruction era:** Emancipated blacks are buffoons, lazy, illiterate, and rapists.
- **Civil Rights era:** Blacks are angry, impatient, and murderers.
- **Modern era:** Low-income blacks are drug-addicted, criminal, oversexed, dependent on government assistance, and irresponsible.

## Anti-Jewish Propaganda

Perhaps the only other group subjected to such an extensive, calculated, and government-funded propaganda campaign were the Jews under the reign of Germany's leader, Adolf Hitler, in the '30s and '40s. The Führer found propaganda a handy tool in spreading the dogma of Aryan superiority, achieving his military goals, and justifying the mass eradication of Jews. The "Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda," headed by Hitler's propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, churned out posters, films, and books that spread Hitler's bile.

Although Jews, like blacks, suffered under a deadly campaign of propaganda and brainwashing, the effort doesn't seem to have hampered their long-term cultural evolution or caused stifling psychological impairment. Jews don't rank with blacks in social and economic dysfunction.

It's not that Jewish people are better or stronger than black people. The Holocaust under Hitler—as deadly and horrific as it was—lasted about 12 years. Even by conservative standards, the black holocaust had a solid 250-year run.

When examining Jewish culture, we understand that their physical and mental survival was attributed to their foundations in culture, family, and rituals. Among Jews in Egypt, Persia, Germany, America, and elsewhere, there is common ritual, common belief, common values, and a common religious thread.

As later chapters will illustrate, such cultural riches were stolen from blacks. Slaves and their descendents had no assumed permanent structures to maintain their cultural roots. They continuously cobbled together culture based on white dictates. Slavery, Jim Crow, and segregated society were not solid foundations. Blacks were programmatically stripped of their cultural identity and brainwashed into a mindset of black inferiority—a double whammy that's tough to overcome.

### Propaganda in the Modern Era: Branding and Marketing

The principles of propaganda withstood the test of time. But propaganda by itself is just angry, vile, vicious sentiment. Just as a car's engine works best with additional, intricate parts, propaganda, coupled with other promotional tools, such as marketing and branding, made the black inferiority crusade a long-lasting success.

Take *marketing*, for example. Think of it as the commercial, for-profit, businessend of brainwashing and propaganda. It's what all major companies use to sell products and services. Although marketing encompasses many endeavors, advertising is its most familiar form.

*Branding* is another word with diverse meanings and nuances. Several of these apply to this book's premise, including branding a product with a trademark or branding of skin as an identifying mark. Branding also helps the consumer associate products with a widely accepted name, distinguishing it from similar products.

In today's world, companies spend hundreds of millions, if not billions, to establish, promote, and protect their brands—Nike shoes, McDonald's hamburgers, Apple computers, Starbucks coffee, United Airlines, Ivory soap. However, one of the first high-value brands in America was not an inanimate product. It was humans. African Americans were turned into *animate* products: slaves. And the brand that the early ruling class literally and figuratively burned onto black Americans, as they did with livestock, was the permanent identifier of "subhuman inferiority."

While some might argue that racist media practices died with the Jim Crow era, a few thousand folks stranded for days on sweltering rooftops or in neck-deep, toxic floodwater in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 might disagree. We now know that many of the 24/7 news accounts of black-on-black sniper attacks, mass murders, and the rape of women and babies were largely unfounded.

What influenced seasoned journalists, policemen, and emergency workers to initially sidestep humanity and propagate exaggerated accounts of black crime?

Again, media propaganda.

Norman Coombs, author of *The Black Experience in America: The Immigrant Heritage of America*, wrote about the genesis and ultimate result of this grand scheme:

Not only did white America become convinced of white superiority and black inferiority, but it strove to impose these racial beliefs on the Africans themselves. Slavemasters gave a great deal of attention to the education and training of the ideal slave...At every point this education was built on the belief in white superiority and black inferiority. Besides teaching the slave to despise his own history and culture, the master strove to inculcate his own value system into the African's outlook. The white man's belief in the African's inferiority paralleled African self-hate.

In short, we were brainwashed.