“Beware the Day They Change Their Minds”: Race, Culture, and Crime

White man goes to college,
Nigger to the field;
White man learns to read and write;
Poor Nigger learns to steal . . .

—BLACK AMERICAN FOLK SONG

I can hear you say, “What a horrible, irresponsible bastard!” And you’re right. I leap to agree with you. . . . But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me? And wait until I reveal how truly irresponsible I am.

—RALPH ELLISON, Invisible Man

Looks like what drives me crazy
Don’t have no effect on you—
But I’m gonna keep on at it
Till it drives you crazy, too.

—LANGSTON HUGHES, “Evil”

In the end, there is no escaping the question of race and crime. To say this is to risk, almost to guarantee,
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arrested for the three property crimes (burglary, larceny-theft, and auto theft) in the FBI’s Crime Index.

It is violent crime, however, that evokes the most fear—and blacks commit more violent crimes than one would expect from the income statistics alone. As we have seen, robbery is the prototypical street crime, involving both violence (or the threat of violence) and theft. Injury is frequent—one robbery victim in three is injured nowadays—and robbery always has been a crime committed predominantly by strangers. It is also preeminently a black offense: in 1976, 59 percent of those arrested for robbery were black, and black offenders account for nearly three-quarters of the increase in robbery arrests since 1960. Black offenders are disproportionately involved in other violent crimes as well; in 1976, more than half those arrested for murder, nearly half those arrested for rape, and two-fifths of those arrested for aggravated assault were black.*

It is essential that we understand why black offenders are responsible for so much violent crime. The explanation does not lie in the genes; as Mark Twain once observed, “there is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress,” which has few black members. Black crime is rooted in the nature of the black experience in this country—an experience that differs from that of other ethnic groups. To be poor and black is different from being poor and Puerto Rican, or poor and Chicano, or poor and a member of any other ethnic group.

* It is quite possible, even probable, that because of race prejudice police are more likely to arrest blacks than whites for minor offenses such as drunkenness, shoplifting, or disturbing the peace. It is highly unlikely, however, that discriminatory behavior on the part of police can account for much of the disparity between black and white arrest rates for homicide and robbery. (For a more detailed discussion, see Appendix.)

giving offense; it is impossible to talk honestly about the role of race in American life without offending and angering both whites and blacks—and Hispanic browns and native American reds as well. The truth is too terrible, on all sides; and we are all too accustomed to the soothing euphemisms and inflammatory rhetoric with which the subject is cloaked.

But race and racism continue to shape American life, as they have for three and a half centuries. At its core, the urban problem is a problem of race; so is the welfare problem, the migrant and farm labor problem, the school busing problem—and, to a degree that few have been willing to acknowledge openly, the crime problem. The uncomfortable fact is that black offenders account for a disproportionate number of the crimes that evoke the most fear. Whites of good will have shied away from acknowledging this fact for fear of hurting black sensibilities, and both they and blacks have avoided talking about the problem lest they provide ammunition to bigots.

To the extent to which they do talk about black crime, liberals of both races generally attribute it to the wrenching poverty in which so many black Americans live. In 1976, blacks comprised 11.5 percent of the American population, but 31.1 percent of those officially classified as poor.* Since most street criminals are drawn from the ranks of the poor, it would be surprising if blacks did not turn to theft more often than do whites. In fact, the rate of property crime is just about what one would expect from the poverty statistics: in 1976, blacks comprised 31 percent of the people

* Each year, the U.S. Bureau of the Census estimates the cash income needed to provide a minimally decent standard of living for unattached individuals and for families of various sizes; all those with incomes below this level are classified as poor. In 1976, the poverty threshold for a non-farm family of four people was $5,815.
Not the least of these differences involves ethnically distinctive patterns of crime. New York City, with its large numbers of poor black and Hispanic residents, provides an interesting case in point. The two minority groups are roughly comparable in size: blacks comprise a little more than 20 percent of the city's population; Hispanics (mostly Puerto Ricans, but with a growing number of immigrants from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Ecuador, and other Latin-American countries), between 15 and 20 percent. (Since no one knows how many illegal immigrants from Latin America there are in New York, the exact size of the city's Hispanic population is a matter of considerable dispute; some estimates run as high as 30 percent.)

As a group, New York's Puerto Ricans are poorer than its blacks. The median family income among Puerto Ricans is 20 percent below the black median, and the proportion of families officially classified as poor is half again as high. Puerto Rican New Yorkers have less education than blacks, and a larger proportion hold menial jobs. To the degree to which it exists as a distinctive entity, lower-class culture encompasses Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics, as well as blacks; the anthropologist Oscar Lewis coined the term "culture of poverty" to describe the lower-class Mexican and Puerto Rican families he had studied.

If violence were a simple function of poverty and social class, therefore, one would expect as much violent crime among Puerto Rican and other Hispanic residents of New York as among black residents. In fact, the rates are strikingly different. According to an analysis of police statistics by David Burnham of The New York Times, 63 percent of the people arrested for violent crimes in the period 1970–72 were black, and only 15.3 percent were Hispanic. Relative to population, blacks were arrested for a violent crime more than three times as often as were Hispanics, and for robbery nearly four and one half times as often. Although the disparities vary from crime to crime, they remain consistently large:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crime</th>
<th>% Black</th>
<th>% Hispanic</th>
<th>Disparity Between Black and Hispanic Crime, Relative to Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homicide</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1.8 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.4 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felonious assault</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcible rape</td>
<td>58.5</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>2.7 to 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The same picture emerges from a profile of the New York State prison population. Of a random sample of felons sentenced to state prison in 1973, two-thirds of them for a violent crime, 58.3 percent were black and 15.3 percent Puerto Rican; relative to population, three times as many blacks are incarcerated.

There are similar, and equally striking, differences between the criminal activity of blacks and of Mexican-Americans, the second-largest minority group in the country. In 1976, according to Census Bureau estimates, there were 6,590,000 people of Mexican origin.

* Most of the usual objections to the use of arrest statistics as an index of criminal activity disappear when we compare black and Hispanic arrest rates, since members of both groups are the objects of prejudice and discrimination. It would be hard to convince a Puerto Rican New Yorker that the police treat Puerto Ricans more deferentially than they treat blacks. It would be even harder to persuade Mexican-Americans in the Southwest that they receive preferential treatment from the police; as a bitter joke among Chicanos in southern Texas has it, members of the feared and hated Texas Rangers all have Mexican blood—"on their boots."
in the United States, nearly 85 percent of them living in the five Southwestern states of Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas; the Census estimate almost certainly is on the low side.* As a group, Mexican-Americans are only marginally better off than black Americans; nationwide, 28.6 percent of the former were living below the official poverty threshold in 1975, compared to 31.1 percent of the latter.

In Texas, Mexican-Americans (18.4 percent of the population) are about as poor as blacks (12.5 percent of the population); yet 40 percent of the felons committed to state prison in 1973 were black, and 14.2 percent were Chicano. Relative to population, four times as many blacks as Chicanos were committed to prison for a felony. In San Antonio, a south Texas

* There is uncertainty, and heated controversy, over just how many Mexican-Americans and other Hispanic Americans there are in the United States; it is only in the last several years, in response to pressure from Mexican-American organizations, that the Census Bureau and other federal agencies began to view Hispanic Americans as ethnic groups worth studying with care. Illegal immigration makes it difficult to get a precise count of the number of Mexican-Americans. The enumeration problem has been compounded by the fact that there is no single term to describe Americans of Mexican ancestry that is acceptable to all segments of that community—no term that does not evoke pride in some and anger in others. The divisions are partly (but not wholly) generational: younger people tend to prefer “Chicano,” which older people often consider demeaning. There are regional differences as well. In New Mexico and Colorado, and to a lesser degree in Arizona, many Hispanic Americans dislike “Mexican-American” almost as much as “Chicano”; they consider themselves descendants of the Conquistadors and call themselves “Hispanic,” “Hispanos,” or “Spanish-American”—a practice that those who call themselves Chicanos consider an affectation at best, evidence of self-hatred at worst. (To confuse the matter still more, some people prefer “Mexican” or “Mexicano.”) Because there is no universally accepted term, I will alternate among Mexican-American, Chicano, and Hispanic, where possible using the term that is most appropriate for the particular subgroup being described.

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city that is 52.1 percent Mexican-American and 7.6 percent black, blacks account for 44 percent of the robbery convictions, Mexican-Americans for 40 percent; blacks account for 20 percent and Chicanos for 62 percent of the burglary convictions. Relative to population, blacks are convicted 7.5 times as often as Chicanos for robbery, and more than twice as often for burglary.

More detailed information is available for San Diego, a large city that is 7.6 percent black and 12.7 percent Mexican-American. (San Diego was one of the few cities whose police departments willingly supplied arrest data broken down by ethnicity, as well as by race. The FBI does not ask for such data, and most departments pretended that they do not collect it—hence I had to supplement arrest statistics with data on prison admissions.) Below are the arrest rates for the years 1971 to 1973; the last column shows the disparity between black and Chicano arrest rates, relative to population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offense</th>
<th>% Black</th>
<th>% Mexican-American</th>
<th>Disparity, Relative to Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homicide</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>7 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcible rape</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>2.7 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>4.6 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felonious assault</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>2.5 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>2.2 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft (grand and petty)</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>1.5 to 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The same pattern shows up in statewide data on first admissions to the California Youth Authority, to which offenders under the age of twenty-one are committed for incarceration. The table below shows the propor-
tions of Mexican-Americans and blacks committed to the Youth Authority for various crimes in the fiscal year 1973–74; as in the San Diego table, the last column shows the ratio of black to Mexican-American offenses, relative to population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offense</th>
<th>% Black</th>
<th>% Mexican-American</th>
<th>Disparity, Relative to Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homicide</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>4.9 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex offenses</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>6.6 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>1.9 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>4.1 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auto theft</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>1.7 to 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcotics</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>.3 to 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Much the same picture obtains for commitments to the Department of Corrections, which receives offenders twenty-one years of age and older; relative to population, three times as many black felons as Mexican-Americans were committed to the Department in 1973.

The pattern cuts across states as well as age groups.

- In Arizona, the number of blacks in prison at the end of 1973 was five times as large, relative to population, as the number of Mexican-Americans.
- Relative to population, 3.4 times as many blacks as Chicanos were in the Utah state prison for the first time in 1972, and more than five times as many were in prison for the second time.
- In Colorado, in 1972, nearly five times as many blacks as Mexican-Americans were committed to prison for robbery; for burglary, the disparity was 1.25 to 1.
- In New Mexico, in 1973, the number of black prison inmates was nearly three times as large as the number of Mexican-American inmates, relative to population.

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The pattern has also been stable over time; analysis of data assembled by the 1931 Wickersham Commission suggests that there were large disparities between black and Mexican-American arrest and conviction rates for violent crimes in the 1920s as well.3

II

A propensity to violence was not part of the cultural baggage black Americans carried with them from Africa; the homicide rate in black Africa is about the same as in western Europe, and well below the rate in either white or black America. Indeed, the black American homicide rate is three to five times the black African rate. Violence is something black Americans learned in this country.4

They had many teachers; violence has been an intrinsic part of the black American experience from the start. Every other immigrant group came here voluntarily, often illegally; Africans came in chains, having been uprooted from their homes and transported across the sea, at a ghastly cost in human life. (Two Africans in three died en route.) Moreover, slavery was maintained by violence; so was the racial caste system that was erected after Emancipation and that still endures, in diminished form, in parts of the rural South.

For most of their history in this country, in fact, blacks were victims, not initiators, of violence. In the Old South, violence against blacks was omnipresent—sanctioned both by custom and by law. Whites were free to use any methods, up to and including murder, to control "their Negroes." As Raymond Fosdick learned when he studied American police methods shortly before the country's entry into World War I, Southern police departments had three classes of homicide. "If a nigger kills a white man, that's murder," one official
told Fosdick. "If a white man kills a nigger, that's justifiable homicide. If a nigger kills another nigger, that's one less nigger." A quarter of a century later, Gunnar Myrdal found little change: "Any white man can strike or beat a Negro, steal or destroy his property, cheat him in a transaction and even take his life without fear of legal reprisal."

There was little blacks could do to protect themselves. To strike back at whites, or merely to display anger or insufficient deference, was not just to risk one's own neck, but to place the whole community in danger. It was equally dangerous, or at best pointless, to appeal to the law; two lines from an old blues song describe the "justice" blacks received in court:

White folks and nigger in great Co't house
Like Cat down Celler wit' no-hole mouse.

Or, as Nate Shaw, the extraordinary black farmer and farm-union organizer, whose life story has been recorded by Theodore Rosengarten, remarked; "Nigger had anything a white man wanted, the white man took it. . . ." It was, Shaw observed, "a time of brutish acts, brutish acts."

Life has been brutish for other minority groups. During the nineteenth century, Irish immigrants were objects of scorn and derision, as well as intense discrimination; a generation weaned on "Polish jokes" may be surprised to learn that "Irish jokes" were a staple of American humor until the 1930s or '40s. Prejudice against Jews, Italians, and Poles became intense in the late nineteenth century and reached a peak in the 1920s, when nativist sentiment led Congress to cut immigration from southern and eastern Europe to a trickle; for those in their fifties, or older, the prejudice of those days remains a vivid memory.

And the treatment accorded Chinese, Japanese, Mex-
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...to function effectively in contemporary urban, industrial life. Because black migration is of such recent origin, the argument continues, the problems that always have been associated with migration and urbanization have not had time to run their course, as they inevitably will. Patience is required. Just as European ethnics ultimately "made it" into the mainstream of American life, so too will blacks—given enough time.8

It would be hard to imagine a more profound misreading of American history. Rural black migrants to metropolitan areas face all the problems of acculturation that other rural migrants have faced, but they carry two additional burdens: their color and their heritage of slavery. Prejudice against black people is more virulent and intractable than is prejudice against Orientals, Chicanos, Native Americans, Catholics, or Jews. Negative symbolism about blackness is built into our language: "black" connotes death, mourning, evil, corruption, and sin, while "white" implies purity, goodness, and rebirth. The white lie is the permissible misstatement; the black lie, the inexcusable falsehood. The black sheep is the one who goes astray; and when he does, he receives a black mark on his record: And so it goes; the symbolism began long before Englishmen encountered Africans. As early as the fourteenth century, according to The Oxford English Dictionary, black meant "soiled, dirty, foul"; by the fifteenth century, it meant "malignant" and "sinister" as well.9

This deep-rooted distaste for blackness helped make it possible for white men to turn Africans into slaves without any qualms; once they had done so, prejudice and slavery served to reinforce one another in an unending spiral. The distinguishing characteristic of slavery in the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, was the fact that "the abstract and transient fact of slavery is fatally united with the physical and perman-
substantial numbers of unskilled laborers—on average, more than one in three—moved to jobs on a higher occupational level; and over the longer interval between men's first and last jobs, the proportion moving up was roughly one in two. Much of this movement, to be sure, was mobility within the blue-collar world, from low-status, badly paying casual labor to higher-status, more regular and better-paying jobs. But roughly one unskilled laborer in four managed to move into white-collar occupations.

Mobility was far greater between generations. Sixty percent of the children whose fathers were unskilled or semiskilled laborers moved into skilled or white-collar jobs—a staggering proportion, given the widespread view that poverty tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation. This is not to deny that there were pockets of poverty, instances in which poverty was transmitted from father to son. The point is, they were precisely that—pockets. And Boston seems to be typical of the United States; for nearly a century, upward mobility has been more common than perpetuation of poverty.\(^{12}\)

With one exception: black Bostonians remained mired in poverty from 1860 until 1940. The contrast between the black and Irish experience makes it clear that it was white prejudice and discrimination, not black people's unfamiliarity with urban life or lack of preparation for industrial jobs, that was responsible. To isolate the effects of unfamiliarity with urban and individual's lifetime, and from generation to generation as well. The result is the most comprehensive measurement of mobility ever made in an American city. (Because the popular image of Boston has been that of a stagnant, caste-ridden city with a large and immobile Irish and Italian lower class and an entrenched and self-perpetuating WASP upper class, Thernstrom's findings are particularly important.)
has demonstrated in his monumental study of the black family, the much discussed and debated deterioration of the black family is a recent phenomenon. In slavery and freedom, in cities as well as in the rural South, black family life showed remarkable strength and stability. From the middle of the eighteenth century until the fourth decade of the twentieth, the majority of black children lived with both parents, and most adults lived together in long-lasting marriages.¹⁴

That discrimination, not their own lack of qualifications, kept blacks at the bottom is evident from the fact that blacks were hired for unskilled jobs in manufacturing and transportation, but were almost totally excluded from semiskilled jobs in those same industries. Semiskilled jobs paid a lot more than unskilled "Negro jobs," but they did not require any higher level of education, discipline, or skill. As Thernstrom writes, "It is hard to believe that it was anything but their race that prevented Negroes from entering [these jobs] in large numbers."

From time to time, blacks did fill, and sometimes even dominated, skilled and semiskilled occupations— as railroad locomotive firemen, brakemen, switchmen, and mechanics; carpenters, bricklayers, painters, and masons; barbers; waiters and caterers; and a host of other jobs. But blacks were forced out of these occupations with monotonous regularity—not because they filled them badly, but because white workers wanted the jobs instead. With each wave of immigration from Europe, black workers were displaced by whites.* And

* A major theme of Booker T. Washington’s famous speech at the opening of the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta in 1895 was his appeal to white employers to "cast down your bucket where you are"—to continue to employ “those people who have, without strikes or labor wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builted your railroads and
when jobs were scarce enough, native whites were only too happy to take over Negro jobs, in the process redefining them into white jobs. The growth of trade unions solidified the process; for many whites, the opportunity to monopolize desirable jobs for members of their own race was a major attraction of union membership.

- In 1865, blacks dominated the construction industry in the South, filling 80 percent of the skilled jobs. By 1890, only 25 percent of the carpenters and painters were black; by 1930, the black proportion was down to 17 percent. And blacks were completely excluded from the new, and growing, occupations of electrician and plumber.

- Until the turn of the century, the job of locomotive fireman was considered too dirty for a white man to fill. Technological change, combined with an end to the expansion of railroad employment, made the occupation attractive to whites. During the early 1930s, members of the all-white Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Engineers used physical intimidation and even murder—there were twenty-one documented shootings, some of them fatal—to drive the few remaining black firemen and brakemen out of their jobs.16

The explosive growth of Jim Crow legislation during the 1890s and early 1900s played an equally large role in blocking upward mobility for blacks on anything but a piecemeal scale. In the post-Civil War era, Southern whites were far from united on the virtues of or necessity for segregation; on the contrary, the caste system was a relatively late mutation.16 Until the 1890s, blacks voted in large numbers, and white Southern conservatives and radicals competed for their vote. Given the franchise and the protection of the law for the first time, blacks showed a remarkable zeal for self-improvement, believing, as noted by the publisher of the monthly literary magazine *Anglo-African*, that "No one thing is beyond the aim of the colored man in this country." Thus the motto of the Class of 1886 at Tuskegee Institute was "There Is Always Room at the Top."

By the end of the nineteenth century, it had become apparent that there was room only at the bottom. In the South, blacks were rapidly and totally disfranchised; in Louisiana, the number of registered black voters plummeted from 130,334 in 1896 to a mere 1,342 in 1904. disfranchisement was accompanied by an intensive campaign of race hatred and anti-black violence and harassment, as well as by the adoption of Jim Crow legislation affecting every aspect of life. (In some states, black court witnesses were even required to take their oaths on separate Jim Crow Bibles.) The rest of the country quickly followed the Southern lead, barring blacks from previously integrated theaters, churches, restaurants, YMCAs, and the like. The process was completed when Woodrow Wilson was elected president on a platform pledging the "New Freedom" and guaranteeing "fair and just treatment" for all. A white Southerner by outlook as well as birth, Wilson was shocked to discover that white and black federal employees used the same lunchrooms and toilets and ordered the latter to use separate facilities. Wilson also dismissed all but two of the black officials who had been appointed by his predecessor, William Howard Taft.
And so it went, until the desperate shortage of labor during World War II left employers no alternative but to hire and train black employees. The speed and ease with which blacks took over semiskilled factory jobs made it all the more evident that it had been discrimination, not any lack of qualifications, that had kept them out of those jobs before the war broke out. As Thernstrom concludes, the barriers to black advancement have been external, not internal—"the result not of peculiarities in black culture but of peculiarities in white culture."

For all the poverty, prejudice, and discrimination from which Mexican-Americans have suffered, their lot has not been as hard as that of black Americans. Animosity against Mexican-Americans is not as deeply rooted in the consciousness of Americans of European descent as is prejudice against blacks. Blacks were excluded from white society, no matter what their accomplishments. But Anglos tended to distinguish between "high-type" and run-of-the-mill Mexican-Americans, accepting (and even marrying) the former, while discriminating against the latter. Perhaps the critical difference between the black and Mexican-American experiences is that Mexicans were not captured, transported thousands of miles, and forced into slavery. On the contrary, large numbers of Mexicans continue to cross the border into the United States; oppressed and impoverished as they are, they still are better off doing stooped labor in the fields of Texas, Florida, California, and other states than they would be in Mexico, where there often is no work at all. Others, particularly those who prefer to be called Hispanics or Spanish-Americans, settled the Southwest long before the Anglos arrived. In New Mexico, in particular, many Hispanic American families live on land their families have worked for two or even three centuries—land that had belonged to their ancestors before the Anglo conquerors took title by force or fraud.

Whether migrant workers or old settlers, whether rich or poor, Mexican-Americans share a common language and religion, as well as a common cultural heritage. It would be hard to exaggerate the succor that possession of their own language provides. Robert Coles points out that Spanish offers "a constant reminder that one is not hopelessly Anglo, that one has one's own words, one's way of putting things and regarding the world, and, not least, one's privacy and independence." Their profound Catholicism, which makes God and Church an intimate part of daily life, also protects them against destructive blows to their sense of self. "Chicano children grow up to regard themselves as members of a particular community of people, a community under the surveillance of Almighty God," Coles writes. Language and religion reinforce one another; since the Spanish language is a treasure handed down by God, being Mexican is a privilege—"a separate way of being alive," as Coles puts it. The result is that even the poorest Chicanos display a sense of self that confuses (and often angers) Anglos.  

Puerto Ricans, too, have escaped the stigmatizing experience of slavery. Equally important, most Puerto Ricans arrived in the mainland during the late 1940s, '50s, and '60s, when the United States was passing laws forbidding discrimination on the basis of race, religion, or national origin. In 1910, there were only 1,500 Puerto Ricans living in the mainland, and in 1940, only 70,000; in 1950, there were still only a little more than 300,000. The number nearly quintupled in the next twenty years; by 1976, 1,753,000 people of Puerto Rican origin were living in the mainland. Puerto Ricans have encountered prejudice, of course; but the experi-
ence is too recent to have insinuated itself into the Puerto Rican consciousness the way racism has affected black life and thought.

III

When one reflects on the history of black people in this country, what is remarkable is not how much, but how little black violence there has always been. Certainly, it would be hard to imagine an environment better calculated to evoke violence than the one in which black Americans have lived. As the late Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote, “There is a form of oppression which is more painful and more scathing than physical injury or economic privation. It is public humiliation.”

Black Americans have been given—and, to a degree most white Americans fail to understand, continue to be given—humiliation, insult, and embarrassment as a daily diet, without regard to individual merit. Under the Southern caste system, not only were most blacks confined to humble and servile jobs; they were expected to be humble and servile. On this, Southern whites were insistent; for it, they were willing to pay a heavy price. Black workers came to be paid as much for their servility and adeptness at flattering their employer as for their ability or performance. The one sure way for blacks, especially black men, to place themselves in jeopardy was to show signs of ambition—to be "uppity," to seek to rise above their "place." And if by chance black men and women did succeed in securing an education or bettering themselves economically, they were well-advised to conceal the fact and to continue to "play the fool" before middle- and upper-class whites.

The caste system is disappearing rapidly; white Americans are learning to avoid overtly racist remarks and behavior. But the racial attitudes the caste system engendered are a good bit more durable—in the North as well as the South. In matters of race, Northern whites always have been more Southern than they realized or acknowledged. It was less than fifteen years ago that the white housekeeper inspecting my wife's hospital room bestowed a gracious compliment on the black porter who had washed the floor. "The floor looks beautiful," she told him. "You're a good boy, Jimmy." Jimmy was forty-eight years old.

Whites continue to patronize blacks and, in the process, to deny their existence as full human beings. "Why, she hears everything we say!" a well-to-do acquaintance told me recently, with genuine astonishment in his voice. He was referring to the black housekeeper he and his wife had employed for the last ten years; the night before, the newly militant woman had commented on something her employer had said at dinner while she was removing the dishes. Until then, the couple had always talked to one another, and to their guests, as if she were not present.

This white assumption of black invisibility cuts to the marrow, for it denies black people's existence as full human beings. In time, it makes them wonder if they really do exist—if they really are full human beings. It also makes them angry. "It's when you feel like this, that out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And let me confess, you feel that way most of the time," Ralph Ellison's protagonist remarks in the opening scene of Invisible Man, one of the great American novels. "You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful."19

The frustration that invisibility generates has been a
central theme of black literature from the start, each writer using his own metaphor. To James Baldwin, it is a sense of being nameless and faceless; to W. E. B. DuBois, it was a feeling of never being heard. "It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, sees the world and speaks to it; speaks courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are kindred in their natural movements, expression and development; and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy and help to them, but aid to all the world." DuBois wrote, "One talks on evenly and logically in this way but notices that the passing throng does not even turn its head, or if it does, glances curiously and walks on."

It gradually penetrates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world. They get excited; they talk louder; they gesticulate. Some of the passing world stop in curiosity; these gesticulations seem to be pointless; they laugh and pass on... Then the people within may become hysterical. They may scream and hurt themselves against the barriers, hardly realizing in their bewilderment that they are screaming in a vacuum unheard and that their antics may actually seem funny to those outside looking in.

Over the last fifteen years, white Americans have discovered how deep is the store of anger and hatred that three and a half centuries of humiliation have built up in black Americans, and how quickly that anger can explode into violence. The potential for violence always has been present. "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious," James Baldwin has written, "is to be in a rage almost all the time." Black Americans had to invent ways of channeling their anger and controlling their hate; they had to create nonsuicidal forms of courage. Had they not done so, the United States would have gone up in smoke long ago. What has happened in the last fifteen years, in good measure, is that the cultural devices that kept black violence under control have broken down, and that new cultural controls have not yet emerged. To comprehend the reasons for the high level of black violence now, we need to understand what those controls were, how they worked, and why they have lost their effectiveness.

To do so—to arrive at the necessary understanding—we need to take a detour through black life and culture. That black Americans have a culture at all is something that had escaped white attention until quite recently. What was truly surprising about the extraordinary white reaction to Roots, a black friend commented to me, was that it was all such a surprise—that white Americans were so amazed to discover that black Americans have roots, indeed whole family trees, of their own. Yet the popular reaction was inevitable, given the scholarly view that has prevailed. "It is not possible for Negroes to view themselves as other ethnic groups viewed themselves," Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan wrote in Beyond the Melting Pot; "because—and this is the key to much in the Negro world—the Negro is only an American, and nothing else. He has no values and culture to guard and protect."

Glazer and Moynihan were reflecting the dominant—and incorrect—scholarly view: Black Americans are Americans, to be sure; no less than the members of any other ethnic group, they are heirs to all of American culture—to all of Western civilization. But they are not only Americans; blacks have fused American culture with the civilization they brought with them from Africa to create their own culture as well—their own music.
and dance, their own vocabulary and rhythm of speech, their own values and folklore, their own religious denominations, their own ethos and life style.

They have done so, moreover, out of the sight and hearing of white people. Until recently, their own survival required blacks to hide their thoughts and feelings; in the words of a black folk song popular for generations,

Got one mind for white folks to see,
Another for what I know is me;
He don't know, he don't know my mind.

Indeed, black people derived a certain wry amusement from the total ignorance about black life and thought on the part of whites who boasted that they "knew their Negro." "Negroes have always met this remark with a certain faint, knowing smile," Robert R. Moton, the second president of Tuskegee Institute, wrote in 1929. "Their common experience has taught them that as a matter of fact there are vast reaches of Negro life and thought of which white people know nothing whatever, even after long contact with them, sometimes on the most intimate terms."

There is considerable risk and not a little arrogance in any white writer's attempt to describe black life and culture. The difficulty any outsider has in penetrating another culture is magnified, in this instance, by white Americans' deep-rooted tendency to view black Americans through the distorted lenses of their own stereotypes. White foes have regarded blacks as objects; white friends have seen them as victims. Neither group has been willing to discard its own stereotypes and see black people as full human beings.* But the manifold truths of black life are no more barred to a white writer than the truths of white life—or of life in general—are barred to a black writer. If I have learned anything from Ralph Ellison's and Albert Murray's novels and essays, it is, in Ellison's phrase, "the basic unity of human experience," and the writer's capacity (and obligation) to express that unity, along with the rich diversity of life and thought in which it is concealed.

The effort must be made, in any case; for too long, serious students of race, both white and black, have concentrated exclusively on the nature of white oppression and the toll it has exacted in the lives of black people. But as Ralph Ellison has pointed out over and over again, a people "is more than the sum of its brutalization." This is not to deny the ruggedness of black life, "nor the hardship, the poverty, the sordidness, the filth." Ellison remarked in 1967, in the course of an attack on some recent portraits of life in Harlem. "But there is something else in Harlem, something subjective, willful, and compellingly and compellingly human. It is that 'something else' which makes for our strength, which makes for our endurance and our promise." To understand that "something else" does not mean igno-
ing the suffering. "I get damn tired of critics writing of me as though I don’t know how hard it is to be a Negro American," Ellison added. "My point is that it isn’t only hard, that there are many, many good things about it."24

A lesser people might not have survived at all. The black achievement has been not only to survive, but to do so with style—with grace and wit, irony and irreverence, and an exuberant vitality that demonstrates an extraordinary capacity to affirm, even celebrate, life under the most life-destroying conditions. Black humor, black music, and black folklore all reveal this ability to give life significance; in the language of black folklore, they are all means of “making a way out of no-way.”

“Making a way out of no-way” is not an exclusively black American attribute; every group that has survived oppression has done so through a kind of spiritual or cultural alchemy. What distinguishes the black American way is its playfulness and expressiveness, its sense of the comic possibilities contained within tragedy. “He remembered once the melancholy-comic notes of a ‘Blues’ rising out of a Harlem basement before dawn,” the poet-novelist Claude McKay wrote a half-century ago in one of his novels. “He was going to catch an early train and all that trip he was sweetly, deliciously happy humming the refrain and imagining what the interior of the little dark den he heard it in was like. ‘Blues’ . . . melancholy-comic. That was the key to himself and his race. . . .”

No wonder the whites, after five centuries of contact, could not understand his race. . . . No wonder they hated them, when out of their melancholy environment the blacks could create mad, contagious music and high laughter.25

Thus the blues, used in the broadest sense to include the whole genre of jazz, spirituals, gospel and “soul music,” and other forms of black folk music and dance, are not simply an art form, although certainly they are that. The blues are the quintessential expression of the black American approach to life: “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism,” as Ralph Ellison defines it. “As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.”28

The bitter-sweet, tragic-comic character of the blues—the insistence on keeping the pain alive even while transcending it—reflects the dual life that black Americans have had to live, and the dual consciousness they have had to maintain. Forced to wear a mask of sweet docility, they became marvelously adept at forging that mask into a weapon that could be turned against the unsuspecting oppressor. “Our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy’s camp,” the protagonist’s grandfather, until then considered “the meekest of men,” tells the children and grandchildren assembled around his deathbed in an early scene in Invisible Man. “Live with your head in the lion’s mouth,” he continues. “I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.”

Indeed, black Americans have always taken pride in the fact that while whites boast that they “know their Negroes,” in reality it is the Negro who knows—and manipulates—his whites. If done adroitly enough, “playing the fool” could make the white man appear
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The fool, persuading him to accept shoddy workmanship and malingerer—for poor blacks, the only forms of sabotage available—or otherwise to accede to black desires. “The Negro uses his intimate knowledge of the white man to further his own advancement,” Robert Moton wrote, from long experience as Booker T. Washington’s disciple and successor.

Much of what is regarded as racially characteristic of the Negro is nothing more than his artful accommodation of his manners and methods to what he knows to be the weakness and foibles of his white neighbors. Knowing what is expected of him, and knowing too what he himself wants, the Negro craftily uses his knowledge to anticipate opposition and to eliminate friction in securing his desires.

Or as Dr. Bledsoe, the crafty Negro college president in Invisible Man, whom Ellison may have modeled after Dr. Moton, exclaims to the naïve young protagonist, “My God, boy! You’re black and living in the South—did you forget how to lie? . . . Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!"

He had to “play the nigger” to get where he is, Bledsoe goes on to explain, but now he has power; although white people support the college, he controls it—and unbeknownst to the white donors, he controls them as well.

“The big and black and I say ‘Yes, suh’ as loudly as any burr-head when it’s convenient, but I’m still the king down here. I don’t care how it appears otherwise. Power doesn’t have to show off. . . . You let the white folk worry about pride and dignity—you learn where you are and get yourself power, influence, contacts with powerful and influential people—then stay in the dark and use it.”

“Beware the Day They Change Their Minds”

The overwhelming majority of black Americans have had to stay in the dark without power and influence, and without contact with powerful and influential people. Hence they have had to find their own sources of dignity and pride—their own ways of investing their lives with meaning and significance, and their own outlets for their anger. One way has been through an elaborate fantasy life of heroism and triumph, a life in which the poor and oppressed triumph over the rich and powerful. Nowhere is this fantasy life revealed or celebrated more clearly than in black folklore and narrative poetry—“primary devices,” as the folklorist-ethnographer Roger D. Abrahams of the University of Texas observes, “by which the Negro self-image has been formulated, transmitted, and maintained.”

Because they are so familiar to white Americans, and so misunderstood by them, the “Uncle Remus” stories provide a useful starting point. Uncle Remus himself—“the venerable old darkey” with the “beaming countenance”—was the brainchild of Joel Chandler Harris, a white Southern journalist, but the stories he tells are the product of the black imagination, with only modest distortions in the retelling. The setting is always the same: the little white boy, son of “Miss Sally” and “Mars John,” comes into the old Negro’s cabin back of the “big house”; Uncle Remus’ face “breaks up into little eddies of smiles,” and he takes the admiring child on his lap, caresses him, and tells him innocent-sounding stories about Brer Rabbit and other members of the animal kingdom. The relationship appears to be one of unadulterated love and tenderness between white and black.

Appearances are deceptive; “if one looks more closely,” Bernard Wolfe writes in a now-classic essay, “within the magnanimous caress is an incredibly malevolent blow.” In the first and best-known collection
of Uncle Remus stories, Brer Rabbit bests the Fox nineteen times in twenty encounters, using guile and wit rather than brute force. Brer Rabbit also triumphs over the Wolf, the Bear and, on one occasion, the entire animal kindom. In all, there are twenty-eight victories of the Weak over the Strong; ultimately, all the predators die violent deaths at the hands of their ostensible prey. "Admittedly, folk symbols are seldom systematic, clean-cut, or specific," Wolfe writes; "they are cultural shadows thrown by the unconscious, and the unconscious is not governed by the sharp-edged neatness of the filing cabinet." But it hard to avoid the conclusion that Brer Rabbit is "a symbol—about as sharp as Southern sanctions would allow—of the Negro slave's festering hatred of the white man."

The stories involve far more than just a generalized expression of hatred; they offer a direct and sharply focused attack on white Southern racial etiquette in general, and the taboos about food and sex in particular. "The South, with its 'sanctions of fear and force,' forbids Negroes to eat at the same table with whites," Wolfe comments. "But Brer Rabbit, through an act of murder, forces Brer Fox and all his associates to share their food with him."

The South enjoins the Negro, under penalty of death, from coming near the white man's women—although the white man has free access to the Negro's women. But Brer Rabbit flauntingly demonstrates his sexual superiority over all the other animals and, as the undisputed victor in the sexual competition, gets his choice of all the women.

The real contest is over power and prestige, rather than food and sex; the latter are sought less for the immediate gratification they provide than for their symbolic value. From Brer Rabbit's perspective, life is an unending battle for power and prestige—a battle in which rules and codes are simply devices by which the powerful try to rig the outcome in their own favor. "The South is the most etiquette-ridden region of the country," Wolfe writes; "and the Rabbit sees all forms of etiquette as hypocritical and absurd. Creatures meet, address each other with inctuous politeness, inquire after each other's families, pass the time of day with oily cliches—and all the while they are plotting to humiliate, rob, and assassinate each other."

In short, the animal tales (the Brer Rabbit stories are part of a much larger genre) provided a biting parody of white society, as well as an outlet for black fantasies about the day when the weak would triumph over the strong. As the historian Lawrence Levine explains, the animals in the stories were replicas of whites as blacks saw them—people who "mouthed lofty platitudes and professed belief in noble ideals but spent much of their time manipulating, oppressing, enslaving one another." In these stories, moreover, it was not only the weak who functioned as tricksters; the strong were just as deceitful and indirect. The ultimate lesson was that the weak must always be on guard to avoid being victimized even more than they already are.29

And animal stories represent only a small part of the rich store of black folklore. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, contemporary folklorists believe, stories about a slave named John were even more prevalent, although generally unknown to whites. Like Brer Rabbit, John is a "trickster"—one who, despite his apparent weakness and impotence, gains control of his world through verbal agility and guile. In the "John tales," the hostility is both more guarded and more overt: John gets the better of "Old Marster," and usu-
ally makes him appear ridiculous, by turning the white man’s stereotypes of blacks (e.g., their laziness, stupidity, superstition, and thievery) against him.80

IV

The central task of any culture is to make life significant for its members. In some ways, Emancipation made the task more difficult, and certainly more complex. Under slavery, the barriers had been absolute; with freedom, they became more permeable but also more unpredictable. Blacks began to move up into the larger society only to be thrown back, increasing their anger and frustration. With freedom, too, it became harder for blacks to reconcile their situation with the rhetoric of American democracy. “One can understand slavery,” Tocqueville had predicted, “but how allow several millions of citizens to exist under a load of eternal infamy and hereditary wretchedness?”

Blacks had to develop new outlets for their anger and frustration—new mechanisms for controlling the violence to which they were being provoked—as well as new ways of nurturing a sense of self-worth in a world designed to persuade them of their worthlessness. Brer Rabbit and John tales continued to be told, but their cathartic role was taken over in good measure by the development of the blues and by the creation of a vast store of narrative poetry, or “toasts.” For lower-class black males, in particular, toasts played a central role from the late nineteenth century until quite recently.*

To understand the role of toasts, we need to start with the fact that they form part of an oral rather than

* I am indebted to Professor Bruce Jackson for his help in guiding me through the world of the toasts.

literary tradition. Oral cultures differ from literary cultures in a number of ways. The rhetoric is different: since stories, poems, and legends are passed down from one generation to another without recourse to the printed page, alliteration, repetition and rhyme, and other devices to aid memory play a central role. Any one toast or story is likely to have had a number of authors, for different audiences changed parts they did not like or thought could be improved. Folk audiences “are intolerant of what bores them and tend to discard boring things quickly and to reject boring performers immediately,” Bruce Jackson writes. “The process of oral narrative is such that any active participant can change parts he doesn’t like or understand or redesign parts not meaningful to his immediate audience.”81 As a result, folk poetry does not contain private meanings or private constructions; if it is to survive, it must be easily and immediately understood by its audience.

In an oral culture, moreover, words have power—to comfort, wound, sexually arouse, destroy, exorcise, and so on. This is true in all societies; witness the importance everywhere attached to names. But in an oral culture, words have power far beyond that which they have in a literary world. And among a people denied access to any other form of power, words have been especially prized as a surrogate for power; verbal contests account for a large proportion of the conversation among adolescent boys and young men, and also, to a considerable degree, among women. “Proverbs, turn of phrases, jokes, almost any manner of discourse is used,” Roger Abrahams writes, “not for purposes of discursive communication but as weapons in verbal battle.”82

Almost any gathering may turn into a “sounding” (or “joning”) session—a verbal performance or con-
test, involving an escalating exchange of tall stories, boasts, jokes, or insults. (The adolescent version, “playing the dozens,” involves a highly ritualized exchange of obscene, rhymed insults directed at the contestants' mothers or other female relatives.) Since conversation is entertainment and contest, as well as communication, how one speaks may be as important as what one says; a given word may have multiple and even opposite meanings according to the tone, gestures, and style of discourse. “The Black man has been lied to so often that he has had to learn to ‘play past’ words very quickly in order to arrive at the truth of a situation,” the anthropologists Christina and Richard Milner write. And the truth resides in body language as much as, or more than, in words themselves. When lower-class black men gather at parties, in bars, or on street corners, they refer to the conversation as “talking shit”—as the Milners write, “a linguistic recognition that words are worthless excrement” compared to the messages exchanged through real, i.e., nonverbal, communication.

Verbal contests play an important role in a number of cultures besides that of black street-corner society, for they provide an alternative to actual fighting—a way of dissipating enmity without bloodshed. In the case of black youth, who had to learn to substitute verbal for physical aggression against whites, “playing the dozens” serves to develop verbal proficiency and speed. Equally important, as Lawrence Levine observes, verbal duels provide training in self-discipline. The participant who responds to the escalating insults through physical violence is considered the loser—someone who is unable to “take it.” And for blacks in the South, being able to exercise self-control under extreme provocation was essential to survival.

Toasting sessions, on the other hand, are more entertainment than contest, although competitive elements may enter as participants respond to a toast with another version or a different style of presentation. On the surface, toasts are told as a way of passing the time, of entertaining one’s friends, and, at the same time, of demonstrating one’s own ability at recitation. But as Bruce Jackson writes, there are many ways of passing time—many ways of evoking laughter or displaying verbal skill. How men choose to pass the time tells us a lot about who and what they are, about what they value and what they fear, and how they relate to one another and to the larger society—all the more so, as Jackson says, because “Toasts, like much folk literature, deal with problems of human relations . . . in a special, highly filtered and exaggerated way.”

As in the Brer Rabbit and John tales, the toasts deal with the struggle for power and the prequisites that go with it. The heroes gain power or control either through verbal ability and guile, through brute strength, or, in rare cases, through some of both—but always with a flagrant rejection of rules and contempt for authority. Indeed, the heroes flaunt their defiance of any kind of order and revel in their amorality.

But the heroes of the toast world are admired less for their defiance than for their style. What a man is is more important than what he does; in this essentially aristocratic approach to life, a man’s measure lies not in his achievement but in his character, and character is revealed by the style and grace with which he lives his life and with which he endures defeat. For the heroes of the toasts, after all, as for their lower-class black male audience, defeat seems inevitable and victory, if it does come, turns out to be either short-lived or Pyrrhic. In a line that captures the spirit of the toasts, a character in Lonne Elder III’s play Ceremonies in
"Beware the Day They Change Their Minds"

Here is a text that Roger Abrahams recorded in Philadelphia. The opening lines set the tone:

Deep down in the jungle, so they say,
There's a signifying motherfucker down the way.
There hadn't been no disturbing in the jungle for quite a bit.
For up jumped the monkey in the tree one day and laughed, "I guess I'll start some shit."

Without any apparent provocation, the signifying begins, and the Monkey persuades the Lion to attack the Elephant.

Now the Lion come through the jungle one peaceful day, when the signifying monkey stopped him and this is what he started to say:

He said, "Mr. Lion," he said, "a bad-assed motherfucker [elephant] down your way."
He said, "Yeah, the way he talks about your folks is a certain shame."
I even heard him curse when he mentioned your grandmother's name."
The lion's tail shot back like a forty-four
When he went down that jungle in all uproar.

The toast goes on to describe a battle of epic proportions in which the Lion is badly beaten ("I'll be damned if I can see how the lion got away"). When the fight is over, the Monkey, signifying again, taunts the Lion from the safety of his tree. But the Monkey gets so excited by his own gloating that he jumps up and down, loses his footing, and falls to the ground. Now he must use all his wit and guile to escape with his life—to get out of a danger of his own making. He succeeds by appealing first to the Lion's sympathy, and then to his pride:

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* Dark Old Men exclaims, "Think of all the life you had before they buried you!" A joke popular among black Americans reflects the same outlook:

A brother died and went to heaven. He was appropriately outfitted with white robe, halo, and wings. The wings fascinated him; he fluttered them, stretched them, and began tentatively to fly. As he gained experience he tried long swooping glides, he flew high, he flew low, he flew backward, he flew upside down, and finally he made dive-bombing attacks on the peaceful citizenry below. Swoosh—within inches of the golden streets. Down over their heads he came, scaring the hell out of cherubim and seraphim. Finally his antics were too much for the management to bear and he was grounded, his wings removed and locked up. As he sat forlornly on the curb a black brother came up.

"Now ain't you a bitch—the way you were performing and carrying on. I told you you were going to lose your wings. If you'd listened to me you'd still have them. No, you had to perform—and now here you sit grounded with no wings!"

The miscreant looked up. "But I was a flying son of a bitch while I had 'em, wasn't I"?

This is the world view of the toasts as well. Consider the "Signifying Monkey" toasts—one of the three most popular groups, the others being the "Stackolee" and "Shine" (or "Titanic") toasts. Like Brer Rabbit, the Monkey is a trickster; through clever word play and guile ("signifying"), he persuades his archenemy, the Lion, to pick a fight with the Elephant in which the former is badly beaten. For the brawn he lacks, the Monkey substitutes a kind of verbal jujitsu, using the Lion's ego to bring about his undoing.

* Although the humor is characteristically black, the underlying theme is universal—a black retelling of the ancient Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus.
volting against woman’s potential domination. As a poor man he is reacting against his perpetual poverty. . . ."

He is the “hard man,” able to accept the challenge of the world because of his strength. Anything that threatens his domain threatens his ego and must be removed. Where guile and banter are the weapons of the trickster, arrogance and disdain serve the badman. . . . He is the epitome of virility, of manliness on display.

But manliness and virility are defined as random violence and joyless, indeed affectless sexuality. Stackolee is “a mean man, a purveyor of violence” who “does not hesitate to hurt, taunt, kill if someone offers him the slightest hint of challenge.” In Jackson’s appraisal, Stackolee is “the archetypal bully blindly striking out, articulating or discharging his rage on any passing object or person.” His violence seems to be an end in itself, for it solves nothing and is aimed at nothing; the badman is all style—more precisely, perhaps, all pose and bluster. Like so many young criminals, the badman is more concerned with demonstrating his “badness” than with achieving any goal or accomplishing any purpose.

Here is the text of one of the versions Jackson has recorded. The opening scene sets a somber but low-key mood: frustrated and dissatisfied (his woman has left him and his cards are bad), Stackolee picks up stakes and moves on to the main setting of the toast, a town—or bar—known as the Bucket of Blood. But the mood changes rapidly: because the bartender expresses contempt for his name and reputation, Stackolee kills him. “Reputation on the streets is important,” Jackson explains, “but in the toast the demand for recognition of what one’s name means seems at times to go beyond.
the merely important; the questions become critical and ontological."

And I asked the bartender for something to eat, he give me a dirty glass of water and a tough-assed piece of meat.
I said, "Bartender, bartender, don't you know who I am?"
He said, "Frankly, my man, I don't give a goddam."
I said, "My name is Stackolee." He said, "Oh, yes, I heard about you up this way, but I feed you hungry motherfuckers each and every day."
'Bout this time the poor bartender had gone to rest—
I pumped six a my rockets [bullets] in his motherfucken chest.

Stackolee then insults the dead man's mother and ignores her warning that another badman—Billy Lions (or Benny Long), in some versions the dead bartender's brother—will take revenge. While waiting for the challenger to appear, Stackolee demonstrates his sexual prowess.

A woman run out the back screamin' real loud, said, "I know my son ain't dead!"
I said, "You just check that hole in the ugly motherfucker's head."
She say, "You may be bad, your name may be Stack, but you better not be here when Billy Lions get back."
So I walked around the room and I see this trick, and we went upstairs and we started real soon.
Now me and this broad we started to tussle and I drove twelve inches a dick through her ass before she could move a muscle.
We went downstairs where we were before, we fuc ked on the table and all over the floor.

The stage is set for the great confrontation as Billy Lions enters. To show his own virility and to demonstrate that he, too, is a badman, Billy taunts Stack and shoots a bystander (in some versions, he kills several onlookers). But all to no avail; Billy, too, is killed.

'Bout that time you could hear the drop of a pin—that bad motherfucker Billy Lions had just walked in. He walked behind the counter, he seen the bartender dead, he say, "Who put this hole in this ugly motherfucker's head."
Say, "Who can this man's murderer be?"
One motherfucker say, "You better speak soft, his name is Stackolee."
He say, "Stack, I'm gonna give you a chance to run before I draw my gun."
Bitch jumped up and said, "Billy, please."
He shot that whore through both her knees.
A pimp eased up and turned out the lights and I had him dead in both my sights.
When the lights came back on poor Billy had gone to rest,
I had pumped nine a my rockets in his motherfucken chest.

The toast ends with a confrontation—usually flippant—with the judge.

The next day about half-past ten
I was standin' before the judge and twelve other good men.
They say, "What can this man's charges be?"
One sonofabitch say, "Murder in the first degree."
Another say, "What can this man's penalty be?"
One say, "Hang him," another say, "Give him gas."
A snagle-tooth bitch jumped up and say, "Run that twister through his jivin' ass."
My woman jumped up and said, "Let him go free, cause there ain't nobody in the world can fuck like Stackolee."

The profanity and obscenity of the toasts are of a piece with their intent; together with the manner in
which they are recited, they establish the performer as the same kind of strong man as Stackolee himself. “The poems are created to excite the emotions, by their sound, by their diction, by their breath-taking, and by their subject matter,” Abrahams observes. “The subject treated is freedom of the body through superhuman feats and [freedom] of the spirit through acts that are free of restrictive social mores (or in direct violation of them), especially in respect to crime and violence.” [emphasis added]

The heroes of most of these stories are hard men, criminals, men capable of prodigious sexual feats, bad men, and very clever men (or animals) who have the amorality of the trickster.40

The amorality is deliberate; toasts, like so much black folklore, are built around inverted stereotypes. Because black Americans, and especially black men, have been imprisoned by white stereotypes of them—because they have found it so difficult, if not impossible, to escape those stereotypes—they have fought back, in part, by accepting the stereotypes and turning them upside down. Through the medium of folklore, black men have converted their supposed exaggerated sexuality, physical prowess, and animal-like (or child-like) inability to control their impulses from negative to positive attributes.

They have also turned white morality upside down. “If being Black means one is the ‘bad guy’ according to white majority culture,” Christina and Richard Milner write, “the question becomes how one can turn ‘badness’ into ‘goodness’ without either ‘acting White’ or destroying oneself. That is the personal problem of every Black kid who grows up in America.”

Since being “good” by white standards has usually meant “knowing your place,” “doing what you’re told,” and being subservient, Black people have developed a counter-standard. The white man’s definition of “goodness” is seen to be emasculating and stultifying, which is bad for Blacks; the man who asserts his masculinity and refuses to bow before authority is therefore “good.” Thus, a “bad nigger” is one who is so “bad” he is “good”; he is admirable in his defiance.41

The inversion is a mixed blessing; a really bad “bad nigger”—in slave folklore, the docile fieldhand who suddenly goes berserk—can pose a threat to blacks, as well as to whites. “It seems that every community had one or was afraid of having one,” the psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs write. The preoccupation remains. “Today black boys are admonished not to be a ‘bad nigger,’ ” Grier and Cobbs continue. “No description need be offered; every black child knows what is meant. They are angry and hostile. They strike fear into everyone with their uncompromising rejection of restraint or inhibition. They may seem at one moment meek and compromised—and in the next a terrifying killer.”42

For all the danger he poses to his own community, the badman serves an important function. “Got a tombstone disposition and a graveyard mind, I’m a mean motherfucker and I don’t mind dying,” The Great MacDaddy, another badman, likes to exclaim. Because he does not mind dying, the badman cannot be threatened by the system of white controls, or by the self-controls that blacks have had to erect in order to survive; and because he cannot be threatened, the badman prevents those controls from becoming total. In doing so, he creates and maintains a measure of psychic freedom for all black men, for somewhere inside himself every black American harbors a potential bad nigger.

The same can be said for members of every oppressed
and persecuted group; as the sociologist Hylan Lewis remarks, there is a little Stackolee in everyone who has had that experience. I recall the secret glee that many Jews the world over felt right after World War II, when Jewish terrorists in Palestine blew up a British installation or penetrated the British blockade to land a shipload of refugees. Even those who condemned acts of terror stood a little straighter because their coreligionists were fighting back. Many Irish-Americans have much the same schizophrenic reaction to the IRA's campaign of terror against British soldiers in Northern Ireland, applauding and condemning the acts at the same time.

This was the basis of the enormous impact on black consciousness exerted by the late Malcolm X. Until the last year or two of his life, when he was struggling to develop a more goal-oriented approach, Malcolm X deliberately cultivated a "bad nigger" image, and black Americans in every walk of life loved him for it. "If Malcolm ain't afraid to tell Mr. Charlie, the FBI, or the cops or nobody where to get off," a New York cab-driver observed, "you don't see him pussyfootin' 'round the whites like he's scared of them." "Malcolm says things you or I would not say," a civil-rights leader remarked. "When he says those things, when he talks about the white man, even those of us who are repelled by his philosophy secretly cheer a little outside ourselves, because Malcolm X really does tell 'em, and we know he frightens the white man. We clap." It is also why Jack Johnson has been a black folk hero ever since he defeated "the Great White Hope," Jim Jeffries, on July 4, 1910. Johnson was not merely the heavyweight champion of the world; he was a "bad nigger" as well, reveling in his display of wealth and virility and defying white taboos about interracial sex. Visitors to his Chicago night club were greeted by a larger-than-life portrait of Johnson embracing his white wife, and he conspicuously paraded his entourage of white women.43

The badman's role in black folklore is analogous to the role of the madman in the modern novel and play: to force the audience to ask who is really mad and who is really sane—to question whether sanity resides in conformity to an irrational world or in rebellion against it. In a world that refuses to see or hear them as individuals, black people often have felt that only madness (and certainly Stackolee is mad) can force white people to take note of them. "Don't nobody pay no attention to no nigger that's not crazy!" a character in Ceremonies in Dark Old Men remarks.

But the badman toasts also grew out of the nihilistic impulse that black Americans have always felt. In moments of despair, as Negro spirituals reflect, slaves turned to Sampson as well as—or instead of—to Moses: "If I had my way, I'd tear this building down," a popular spiritual declared. James Forman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee expressed the same sentiment in 1965: "If we can't sit at the table," he told an angry SNCC audience, "let's knock the fucking legs off." A quarter-century earlier, in one of the unpublished monographs he wrote for Gunnar Myrdal's study, Ralph Bunche spoke of "Negroes . . . who, fed up with frustration of their life here, see no hope and express an angry desire to 'shoot their way out of it.'"

I have on many occasions heard Negroes exclaim: "Just give us machine guns and we'll blow the lid off the whole damn business." Sterling Brown's "Ballad for Joe Meek" is no mere fantasy and the humble Negro turned "bad" is not confined to the pages of fiction, granted that he is the exception. The worm does turn and a cornered rat will fight.44
elements of an almost magical taboo that kept black people down even in the absence of overt repression. "In the main we are different from other folks," Richard Wright wrote in 1941, "in that, when an impulse moves us, when we are caught in the throes of inspiration, when we are moved to better our lot, we do not ask ourselves, 'Can we do it?' but 'Will they let us do it?'"

Before we black folks can move, we must first look into the white man's mind to see what is there, to see what he is thinking.

Nate Shaw described the phenomenon with equal eloquence:

Here's the rule of our colored people in this country, that I grew up in the knowledge of: they'll dote on a thing, they'll like it, still a heap stays shy of it. They knewed that their heads was liable to be cracked, if nothin' else, about belongin' to something that the white man didn't allow 'em to belong to. All of 'em was willin' to it in their minds, but they was shy in their acts. [emphasis added]

Blacks are no longer "shy in their acts." The poet Langston Hughes foresaw the change some thirty-five years ago, in a bitterly sardonic poem he wrote when the great tenor Roland Hayes was beaten by a white mob in Georgia:

Negroes,
Sweet and docile,
Meek, humble, and kind;
Beware the day
They change their mind.

Wind
In the cotton fields,
Gentle breeze:
Beware the hour
It uproots trees!
The change has come; blacks have changed their minds, and more than trees are being uprooted. After 350 years of fearing whites, black Americans have discovered that the fear runs the other way, that whites are intimidated by their very presence; it would be hard to underestimate what an extraordinarily liberating force this discovery is. The taboo against expression of anti-white anger is breaking down, and 350 years of festering hatred has come spilling out.

The expression of anger is turning out to be cumulative rather than cathartic. Instead of being dissipated, the anger appears to be feeding on itself; the more anger is expressed, the more there is to be expressed. Understandably so, for “with rebellion,” as Albert Camus wrote, “awareness is born.” Until an individual rebels, Camus explained, he tends to accept indignities as inevitable—indignities far more terrible than the ones at which the rebel now balks.

He accepted them patiently, though he may have protested inwardly. . . . But with the loss of patience—with impatience—a reaction begins which can extend to everything that he previously accepted, and which is almost always retroactive.

This retroactive rage has overwhelmed the devices for its containment. In black as in white America, what Walter Lippmann called the “dissolution of the ancestral order” has been proceeding at an accelerated pace. The lowering of racial barriers has dissolved some of the social glue that held black communities together. Because housing had been denied them elsewhere, for example, black lawyers, doctors, teachers, owners of businesses, skilled craftsmen, and others with stable, well-paying jobs were forced to live in the same neighborhoods as poor blacks. Although successful black people bitterly resented the fact that discrimination denied them a choice of where to live, their presence exerted a powerful stabilizing influence on black neighborhoods.45

The result was that black neighborhoods were communities, with all the informal norms and values that distinguish a community from a mere neighborhood. “God knows I tried to act out when I was an adolescent,” a middle-aged black friend remembers, “but I didn’t have a chance. Somebody always stopped me before I could get very far.” Wherever he went in the medium-sized Midwestern city where he grew up, there were people who knew him—more to the point, people who knew his parents, grandparents, and aunts and uncles. They either took him in hand directly or got in touch with a member of his family; either way, the informal controls kept him in check.

The sense of community was enhanced by segregated education. Black children attended schools that were separate and grossly unequal; they used texts and materials that had been discarded by white schools, and were taught by underpaid teachers in run-down buildings that often lacked heat and light. But black children began the school day by singing “The Negro National Anthem,” they studied black American history, and they celebrated the birth dates of black American heroes and heroines. As respected leaders of the black community, teachers and principals were part of the system of social control. The best of them also conveyed a clear set of expectations to their students, selecting those who had promise and giving them extra encouragement and help. “They thought I was going to be special,” recalls Dr. Benjamin Mays, the eighty-three-year-old chairman of the Atlanta School Board, speaking of the adults of the community in which he grew up. “I thought I’d have to live up to their expectations.” Dr. Mays tried to convey the same expecta-
tions to the students at Morehouse College in Atlanta, exhorting them every Tuesday morning, at compulsory chapel services, during his twenty-seven years as president of the school.  

To avoid any misunderstanding, let me emphasize that segregation was immoral and indefensible; the Jim Crow system had to be abolished for the sake of white as well as black Americans. But precisely because segregation was so patently and totally evil, it helped blacks maintain a sense of community. And the dismantling of legal segregation has swept away some of its unintended and unrecognized benefits. To be sure, most black students still attend segregated schools, but the schools are under white, rather than black, control. The school day no longer starts with the singing of “The Negro National Anthem,” whose words—and even existence—are unknown to most contemporary black students. Far from being part of the system of social control, black schools have become arenas where youngsters act out the “bad nigger” myth.

The erosion of authority has been encouraged by a change in the nature of black communities themselves. Most black Americans, like most whites, still live in segregated neighborhoods. But the number of middle-income blacks has increased dramatically in recent years; so has the supply of housing available to them. As housing barriers have come down, both middle-class and stable working-class families have moved away, turning the old multi-class black neighborhoods into almost exclusively lower-class enclaves. As a result, the distinctive aspects of lower-class black culture have taken on a significance and power they never had before.

At the same time, black folklore was losing its power to exorcise black rage. For one thing, transistor radios, portable phonographs, and tape recorders have had a stultifying effect on performance; street-corner performers of the toasts cannot match the appeal of B.B. King, James Brown, or other folk heroes. But listening to a recorded version of the blues or other black music—not to mention watching the omnipresent TV—is passive behavior, in sharp contrast to the active role that spectators to a toasting session used to play. One consequence, Bruce Jackson reports, is that new toasts no longer are being written; it is only in jail that the tradition retains its strength.

Equally important, black men have new and more effective ways of deadening the pain; as narcotics, toasts and the dozens cannot compete with heroin, cocaine, or the increasingly popular (and potent) combination of methadone and wine. Drugs not only kill the pain, they provide a euphoric high as well. Nor can toasts or the dozens provide as much (or as satisfying) “action” as a mugging, robbery, or burglary, or as much evidence of an individual’s manhood. “Spectacle is not good enough when one cannot hide the real world,” Jackson writes, “nor when the real world offers more attractive options.”

But toasts and the other elements of black folk culture continue to shape behavior; they provide the role models that black adolescents and young men are emulating, and the ambience within which those roles are enacted. Large numbers of black males were given their first opportunity to play the “bad nigger,” in fact as well as fantasy, during the riots of the mid- and late 1960s, and they enjoyed themselves to the hilt. In a sense, the riots were the Stackolee and Signifying Monkey toasts writ large; for the participants, they were as much entertainment as social protest. Or as one scholarly study puts it, the riots were “affective rather than instrumental in character.” Even sympathetic white observers were puzzled by the apparent pointlessness, and
at times self-destructiveness, of the rioting—the failure to relate the means being used to any coherent set of aims or goals. From the perspective of lower-class black culture, the means were the end.

Although the toast tradition itself is weakening, the "bad nigger" myth has grown in popularity and importance. In the only Brer Rabbit tale that Roger Abrahams collected from a younger man, the story had been turned around to suggest that "the old ways of Rabbit no longer work; only the assertion of power with devices like a gun will answer the problems of conflict." And technological change—the invention of the "Saturday night special" and other inexpensive handguns—has made that peculiarly American metaphor of equality, the gun, available to virtually everyone in black urban neighborhoods. Young black males, in particular, have made it clear that they agree with Frederick Douglass' suggestion that "The practice of carrying guns would be a good one for the colored people to adopt, as it would give them a sense of their own manhood."

The association of manhood with violence has been strengthened by the popularity of Shaft, Super Fly, and a host of lesser-known "black films" that retell the Stackolee myth in modern dress. These films have had a profound impact on the consciousness of black adolescents and young men, in part because of the power of the medium itself, and in good measure because the films make it easier for young blacks to identify with movie heroes. The psychiatrist Roland Jefferson argues that black adolescents "are profoundly vulnerable to strong identification with Black characters on the movie screen. The identification is so intense that acting out, more often than not, is the end result."

Black novelists and playwrights have drawn on toasts and other folklore in more inventive ways. Paul Carter Harrison's musical play The Great MacDaddy takes its title from an old and popular badman toast; the characters in the play include Shine, Signifyin' Baby, and Stagoolee. Joseph A. Walker's prizewinning The River Niger begins by subjecting Stackolee-type posturing to withering contempt. But the play concludes with an orgy of bloodshed in which the determinedly middle-class father kills as many white policemen as possible before being killed by them—evidence that the most conforming black man harbors a "bad nigger" within himself. At the performance I attended, the predominantly black audience came to its feet cheering as the curtain fell.

Thus Stackolee continues to cast a long shadow. "Like man, when black people get their shit together, they're going to be bad. They're going to be bad!" a Harlem resident remarks. Indeed, the current level of black violence can be partly understood as the internalization and acting out of the "bad nigger" myth. "I was growing up now, and people were going to expect things from me," Claude Brown writes of his childhood in Harlem. "I knew that I was going to have to get a gun sooner or later and that I was going to have to make my new rep and take my place along with the bad niggers of the community. . . ."

The bad nigger thing really had me going. I remember Johnny saying that the only thing in life a bad nigger was scared of was living too long. This just meant that if you were going to be respected in Harlem, you had to be a bad nigger; and if you were going to be a bad nigger, you had to be ready to die. I wasn't ready to do any of that stuff. But I had to. I had to act crazy.

It is not only young criminals who "act crazy." The Black Panthers deliberately and self-consciously chose
to act as “bad niggers,” as a way of emboldening, and therefore mobilizing, the mass of lower-class blacks. They first gained national attention by their massed entry into the California legislature, wearing paramilitary uniforms and carrying rifles, and they maintained attention through their exaggerated rhetoric about violence and revolution, i.e., through “signifying.”

That the Panthers were drawing on the imagery of toasting can hardly be doubted; Bobby Seale gave his son the name Stagolee “because Stagolee was a bad nigger off the block who didn’t take shit from nobody,” and he dedicated his history of the Black Panther Party to “Huey P. Newton ... the baddest motherfucker ever to set foot in history.” But as so often happens in the toasts, the Panthers fell victim to their own signifying; because the FBI and local police departments were unfamiliar with the role of exaggeration and insult in black folk culture and unaware of the toast tradition of substituting rhetoric for action, they took the Panther threat to “off the pigs” literally, and “offed” the Panthers instead.*

The politicalization of the “bad nigger” myth has further weakened the constraints on black anger and violence. For more than a decade, militant black writers and political activists, cheered on by white fellow travelers, have portrayed murder, robbery, and rape as political acts, and murderers, robbers, and rapists as “political prisoners.” “Rape was an insurrectionary act,” the young Eldridge Cleaver wrote in one of the early essays collected in Soul on Ice—an essay that the white critic Maxwell Geismar hailed as demonstrating “the innocence of genius.” “It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man’s law, upon his system of values, and I was defiling his women.” But Cleaver was defiling black women as well. “To refine my technique and modus operandi,” he explains, “I started out by practicing on black girls in the ghetto—in the black ghetto where dark and vicious deeds appear not as aberrations or deviations from the norm, but as part of the sufficiency of the Evil of the day. . . .”

Through his writing and, later on, his exile, Cleaver came to view his criminal career as a manifestation of pathology, and to believe that “The price of hating other human beings is loving oneself less.” But while he was raping and robbing, Cleaver was, unknowingly, carrying out the message urged upon young blacks in the poetry of Imamu Baraka, then known as LeRoi Jones: “Come up, black dada nihilismus. Rape the white girls. Rape their fathers. Cut the mothers’ throats.”51 Although Cleaver changed his view of crime, Baraka continued to glorify it. “You know how to get it,” he wrote in his prose poem “Black People!”, “you can’t steal nothin from a white man, he’s already stole it he owes you anything you want, even his life. All the stores will open if you will say the magic words. The magic words are: Up against the wall mother fucker this is a stick up!”

. . . Run up and down Broad Street niggers, take the shit you want. Take their lives if need be, but get what you want what you need. . . . We must make our own World, man, our own world, and we can not do this unless the white man is dead. Let’s get together and kill him, my man, let’s get to gather the fruit of the sun, let’s make a world we want black children to grow and learn in. . . .52

But a small number of violent black adolescents and young men have made a world in which black children
cannot grow and learn—a world in which they cannot even live. In Chicago, whose homicide statistics have been analyzed more carefully than those of any other city, the number of fifteen- to twenty-four-year-old black males arrested for homicide more than tripled between 1965 and 1973; the number of fifteen- to twenty-four-year-old black male murder victims quadrupled. For blacks in that age group, the death rate from murder is twenty times the comparable white rate.\(^5^3\)

To have expected any other outcome was to have ignored one of the lessons the toasts drove home—that oppression brutalizes as well as ennobles people. To look only at the toll that white oppression has extracted from black lives is to distort the nature of the black experience; but it is equally misleading to ignore the toll altogether. Black folklore did not make that mistake; an absence of pretense and illusion is one of its distinguishing characteristics. The badman toasts developed at the same time that legends about the James brothers and other “social bandits” became popular among whites. In the white bandit legends, Jesse James, Wild Bill Hickok, Billy the Kid, and other killers were portrayed as Robin Hoods. The black bandits, on the other hand, were never depicted as innocent or good. “Black legend did not portray good bad men or noble outlaws,” Lawrence Levine points out. “The brutality of Negro bad men was allowed to speak for itself without extenuation.” The bad men “preyed upon the weak as well as the strong, women as well as men. They killed not merely in self-defense but from sadistic need and sheer joy. . . .”

They were not given any socially redeeming characteristics simply because in them there was no hope of social redemption. Black singers, storytellers, and audi-

ences might temporarily and vicariously live through the exploits of the bandit heroes, but they were not beguiled into looking to these asocial, self-centered, and futile figures for any permanent remedies.\(^5^4\)

Thus white Americans are not the only ones concerned about black crime. Although whites account for a larger proportion of homicide victims now than they did in 1960, black people are still murdered eight times as often as whites, relative to population. The black victimization rate for rape is two and one half times the white rate and four times the rate for persons of Spanish origin. For robbery, the black victimization rate is nearly three times the white rate and twice the rate among Hispanic Americans; and blacks are victims of aggravated assault about half again as often as whites. It is only for crimes of theft that the white and Hispanic victimization rates equal or exceed the rates among black Americans.\(^5^5\)

More to the point, black-on-black violence has changed character. In the past, it tended to be contained within the “nonrespectable” portion of the community; street-corner men may have attacked one another with some frequency, but they rarely preyed on “respectable” blacks. As a young woman in Harlem in the 1930s, Dr. Pauli Murray recalls, she and her friends used to sleep on the rooftops of their apartment houses on hot summer nights—something no sane man or woman would do today. (A distinguished lawyer, poet, feminist, and civil rights leader, Dr. Murray is now an Episcopal priest.) During the 1930s, too, young black people camped out at night in Morningside and Mount Morris parks, areas that now are off-limits to anyone but addicts and muggers during daylight, as well as at night. Still another index of the change in the character of black crime and criminals
is the fact that A. Philip Randolph, one of the great civil-rights leaders of the last half-century, was forced to move from his Harlem apartment several years ago after he had been mugged repeatedly.

And Harlem is no exception. “This street here, it is almost worse than Vietnam,” a black Marine veteran says about the Atlanta street on which he, his wife, and two children live—a street on which there are few families that do not own a gun. “On Friday night they are all out on the streets trying to kill each other.”

The turn toward random violence and vicious brutality is evident everywhere—in shiny new public housing projects, no less than in run-down old tenements. “I would like to say I’m black and I’m proud,” says a fifty-nine-year-old female resident of Tyler House, a five-year-old Washington, D.C., apartment complex that had been built for middle-income families and then converted to low-income family occupancy, “but I can’t say that so easily because I’m not proud of what black people are doing to each other in this building. When we first moved in,” she adds, “I would go down the hall and wash off things that had been written on the walls. Now I’m even afraid to go out into the halls.”

I’m like most of the other elderly people here. I’m afraid of my own people—not only in Tyler House, but everywhere I go. The men will come up to you and say, “How you doing, sister?” Then they’ll snatch your pocketbook.

More and more black people are talking openly and candidly about the dimensions of the crime problem and the need for black communities themselves to try to bring it under control. The Woodlawn Organization (TWO), a black community group on Chicago’s South Side, has put crime at the top of its agenda because, as Joe Gardner, a TWO officer, explains, “the complaint that it was not safe to walk the streets has dominated every community meeting we’ve had since 1971.” Although TWO had been concerned about crime for some time, its public posture had been to emphasize poverty and racism as the real cause. That posture has changed, Gardner says, because “we couldn’t tell a welfare mother who just got her check and was then bopped on the head that we were looking at the underlying causes.”

Other black Americans are speaking out in similar terms. According to M. Carl Holman, the poet, teacher, and former Atlanta civil-rights leader who is now president of the National Urban Coalition, black Americans no longer are willing to be “tricked by the hardened criminal who beats up a seventy-eight-year-old woman and whom someone wants to regard as a political prisoner.” He was making that point at a meeting, Dr. Holman recounts; as he got to the words, “We are no longer going to be tricked by”—he was interrupted by a young man who called out, “—by these jive brothers who are ripping off the community.” And A. Reginald Eaves, Atlanta’s Commissioner of Public Safety, was applauded when he told a 1976 National Urban League conference, “I am tired of some of the alibis we hear in our communities about the reasons we commit crimes.”

To understand black crime, in short, is not to condone it. Understanding is essential; unless we comprehend the reasons why black adolescents and young men commit so many acts of criminal violence, we are not likely to find effective remedies. But to excuse violence because black offenders are the victims of poverty and discrimination is racism of the most virulent sort; it is to continue to treat black people as if they were children incapable of making moral decisions or of assuming responsibility for their own actions and choices.
“There is no surer expression of superiority than to treat people primarily as victims,” the Washington Post columnist William Raspberry has written. “There is no more crippling an attitude than to think of yourself primarily as a victim.” For “victimism,” as Raspberry calls it, teaches black children “to see themselves not as intelligent beings with the capacity to shape their own destinies but as victims of a racism they can’t do anything about. . . .”

To attack victimism is not to deny that people get dumped on, horribly, illogically, repeatedly. Nor is it to suggest that victims of discrimination and disadvantage should be left to their own devices, with no proffer of assistance from the rest of society.

The distinction is between being concerned about people and feeling pity for them. Concern can lead to joint undertakings, based on mutual respect, to undo the effects of victimization. Pity defines its object as weak, inferior, and ineffectual.63

But, if black history teaches any lesson, it is about strength, not weakness. Referring to that strength, and to the need to bring it to bear on the problem of black violence, Reverend Jesse Jackson, the Chicago-based civil-rights leader, has put the matter simply: “Nobody will save us from us—but us.”

VI

The genie is out of the bottle; it will not be easy to get it back. With his usual prescience, Tocqueville foresaw the cause of our present dilemma. “If ever America undergoes great revolutions,” he warned, “. . . they will owe their origin not to the equality, but to the inequality of condition” between black and white.

The converse is equally true: if the United States is to secure the domestic tranquillity for which the Union was established, white Americans will have to give up some of the inequality we have, until now, enjoyed. The framers of the Constitution decreed that for purposes of representation, a black slave would count as only three-fifths of a man. Nearly two centuries later—110 years after Emancipation—per capita income of blacks is barely three-fifths that of whites. To be sure, contemporary census takers give blacks the same weight as whites. But Americans tend to judge a person’s worth by the size of his income; in that sense, blacks still count as only three-fifths of a white.64 We are not likely to secure any substantial and lasting reduction in black violence until that gap is closed—until black Americans become full, participating members of American society.

It has become fashionable to argue otherwise. Few scholars have had so profound an influence on contemporary thought about crime as James Q. Wilson of Harvard. Wilson derides the notion that there is any relationship between reductions in poverty and reductions in crime—at least, any relationship that intelligent citizens or policy-makers ought to be concerned about. During the 1960s, Wilson points out, the United States saw the longest period of uninterrupted prosperity in this century, and the federal government mounted what he calls “a great array of programs aimed at the young, the poor, and the deprived.” Yet crime soared—to the highest levels since crime statistics have been collected.65

The lesson Wilson draws is that if our aim is to reduce street crime, we should forget about measures designed to eliminate its underlying causes. “I have yet to see a ‘root cause’ or to encounter a government program that has successfully attacked it,” Wilson writes. More important, “the demand for causal solutions is,
whether intended or not, a way of deferring any action and criticizing any policy. It is a cast of mind that inevitably detracts attention from those few things that governments can do reasonably well and draws attention toward those many things it cannot do at all.” In Wilson’s view, what government can do is reduce crime by sending more convicted felons to jail; I will examine the strengths and weaknesses of that argument in the chapters that follow. What government cannot do at all, according to Wilson, is turn lower-class criminals into law-abiding citizens through measures to reduce poverty and discrimination.*

But the experience of the 1960s does not prove the irrelevance of social reform; it merely demonstrates the complexity of the crime problem and the naïveté of those who thought that every reduction in poverty or discrimination would have a direct and immediate payoff in reduced street crime. The President’s Crime Commission meant well, but it raised false expectations when it promised, in its 1967 report, that “Warring on poverty, inadequate housing, and unemployment is warring on crime. A civil rights law is a law against crime. Money for schools is money against crime.”

In the long run, yes; the history of ethnic groups in the United States demonstrates that upward mobility is the most effective cure for criminal violence. In the second half of the nineteenth century, most of the people responsible for street crime were Irish- and German-Americans; in the first half of the twentieth century, they were mostly Italian-, Jewish-, Polish-, and Greek-Americans. The James Q. Wilsons of both periods were certain that reducing poverty would have little effect on crime, since (in their view) the “new immigrants,” unlike their predecessors, really preferred their dissolve and crime-ridden way of life.

But each of these groups moved out of crime as it moved into the middle class. The same will be true—the same is true—of black Americans; involvement in street crime drops sharply as blacks move into the middle class.10 And as we have seen, it has been white discrimination, not blacks’ attachment to their own culture, that prevented them from moving into the middle class until quite recently.*

The short run is something else again. The connection between poverty and criminal violence is far too complex to expect a drop in violence to follow automatically, and without delay, from every reduction in poverty. In periods as short as a decade, the relationship may run the other way; this is what happened during the 1960s. The “Great Society” programs, a strong civil-rights movement, and a booming economy combined to produce dramatic improvements in the condition of poor people in general, and blacks in particular. The crime rate skyrocketed—not because of perversity on the part of those who benefited, but because of in-

* Wilson does not deny government’s ability to eliminate poverty as such; his thesis is that eliminating poverty would have no noticeable effect on crime, because lower-class criminals prefer to retain their lower-class lifestyle, of which crime is an intrinsic part. “One could supply the lower class with more money, of course,” he writes, “but if a class exists because of its values rather than its income, it is hard to see how . . . increasing the latter would improve the former.” Thus Wilson is part of a long tradition of distinguishing between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor.

* Because upward mobility is so recent, blacks with incomes high enough to be called middle-class are far more likely to hold semiskilled factory or service jobs than whites in the same income bracket; similarly, middle-class blacks are far less likely than whites to hold managerial, professional, or other white-collar or skilled blue-collar jobs. For the same reason, blacks who are “making it” have been in the middle class for a much shorter period of time than have middle-class whites; hence middle-class values have had less time to affect behavior. It is not surprising, therefore, that arrest rates are higher among middle-class blacks than among middle-class whites.
creased anger and alienation on the part of those who did not share in the gains.

They still are not sharing in the gains. As a group, black Americans have not improved their position during the 1970s; they have barely held on to the gains they made during the preceding decade. After dropping 28 percent between 1959 and 1969, the number of blacks officially classified as poor has not changed; on some measures, such as youth unemployment, poor blacks are worse off now than they were a decade ago.

It will take more effort and commitment than the Carter administration has displayed so far to bring about changes of the magnitude that are required. Three and a half centuries of racial oppression have left a heritage that cannot be overcome in just a few years. If black Americans were to improve their status at the rate achieved during the 1960s, it would take two generations before they achieved economic parity with whites.

We cannot afford to wait that long. If we are to reduce the level of criminal violence, we will have to pay the price. It would be disingenuous to contend that an end to racial inequality will guarantee domestic tranquility. "That the problems of social reform present dilemmas of their own, I do not pretend to deny," Professor Herbert Wechsler, a distinguished authority on the criminal law, told a conference on crime control some forty years ago. "I argue only that one can say for social reform as a means to the end of improved crime control what ... cannot be said for drastic tightening of the process of the criminal law—that even if the end should not be achieved, the means is desirable for its own sake."