

BLACK

POWERLESS DEFENSE: The illusory, concealing, disempowering, and racist idea that Black people can't be racist because Black people don't have power.

WALKED INTO HIS office. Every time I looked at Mizell Stewart, the *Tallahassee Democrat* editor, in the autumn of 2003, I saw the tall, slim, light-skinned actor Christopher Duncan. His tense energy reminded me of Braxton, Duncan's character on *The Jamie Foxx Show*.

I sat down. He swiveled back in his chair. "Let's talk about this piece," he said.

He darted from critique to critique, surprised at my defenses. I could debate without getting upset. So could he. Black people were problematic to me, but he realized White evil ached in the forefront of my mind.

He became quiet, clearly mulling something over. I was not going to confront him, just defend myself as respectfully as I could. He held my graduation in his hands.

"You know, I have a nice car," he said slowly, "and I hate it when I get pulled over and I'm treated like I am one of them niggers."

I took a deep inaudible breath, turned my lips inside, licked them, and mentally ordered my silence. "Them niggers" hung in

the air between our probing eye contact. He waited for my response. I stayed silent.

I wanted to stand up and point and yell, "Who the fuck do you think you are?" I would have cut off his answer: "Clearly you don't think you are a nigger! What makes them niggers and you not a nigger? Am I one of 'them niggers'?" My air quotes struck the air over his head.

He separated himself from "them niggers," racialized them, looked down on them. He directed his disdain not toward the police officers who racially profiled him, who mistreated him, but to "them niggers."

NO ONE POPULARIZED this racial construct of "them niggers" quite like comedian Chris Rock in his 1996 HBO special, *Bring the Pain*. Rock began the show on an antiracist note, mocking reactions among White people to the O. J. Simpson verdict. He then turned to talk about Black people and "our own personal civil war." He picked a side: "I love Black people, but I hate niggers." It was a familiar refrain for me—my own dueling consciousness had often settled on the same formula, adding after the 2000 election: "I love Black people, but I hate niggers and White people."

While hip-hop artists recast "nigga" as an endearing term, "nigger" remained a derisive term outside and inside Black mouths. Rock helped Black people remake the racial group "niggers" and assigned qualities to this group, as all race makers have done. "Niggers" always stop Black people from having a good time, Rock said. Niggers are too loud. Niggers are always talking, demanding credit for taking care of their kids and staying out of prison. "The worst thing about niggers is that they love to not know," Rock teased. "Books are like Kryptonite to a nigger." He rejected the antiracist claim that "the media has distorted our image to make us look bad." Forget that! It was niggers' fault. When he'd go to get money, he wasn't "looking over my shoulders for the media. I'm looking for niggers."

We were laughing as Chris Rock shared the great truth that the nigger is not equal to the Black man (a remix of “the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man,” expressed by Confederate vice president Alexander Stephens in 1861). Racist Whites had schooled us well in generalizing the individual characteristics we see in a particular Black person. We were not seeing and treating Black people as individuals, some of whom do bad things: We created a group identity, niggers, that in turn created a hierarchy, as all race making does. We added the hypocritical audacity of raging when White people called all of us niggers (Chris Rock stopped performing this routine when he saw White people laughing too hard).

We did not place loud people who happened to be Black into an interracial group of loud people—as antiracists. We racialized the negative behavior and attached loudness to niggers, like White racists, as Black racists. We did not place negligent Black parents into an interracial group of negligent parents—as antiracists. We racialized the negative behavior and attached negligent parenting to niggers, like White racists, as Black racists. We did not place Black criminals into an interracial group of criminals—as antiracists. We racialized the negative behavior and attached criminality to niggers, like White racists, as Black racists. We did not place lazy Blacks into an interracial group of lazy people—as antiracists. We racialized the negative behavior and attached laziness to niggers, like White racists, as Black racists.

And after all that, we self-identified as “not-racist,” like White racists, as Black racists.

Chris Rock met Black Americans where all too many of us were at the turn of the millennium, stationed within the dueling consciousness of assimilationist and antiracist ideas, distinguishing ourselves from them niggers as White racists were distinguishing themselves from us niggers. We felt a tremendous antiracist pride in Black excellence and a tremendously racist shame in being connected to them niggers. We recognized the racist policy we were facing and were ignorant of the racist policy them niggers were facing. We looked at them niggers as felons of the race

when our anti-Black racist ideas were the real Black on Black crime.

In 2003, as I sat in the Black editor's office, 53 percent of Black people were surveyed as saying that something other than racism mostly explained why Black people had worse jobs, income, and housing than Whites, up from 48 percent a decade earlier. Only 40 percent of Black respondents described racism as the source of these inequities in 2003. By 2013, in the middle of Obama's presidency, only 37 percent of Black people were pointing to "mostly racism" as the cause of racial inequities. A whopping 60 percent of Black people had joined with the 83 percent of White people that year who found explanations other than racism to explain persisting racial inequities. The internalizing of racist ideas was likely the reason.

Black minds were awakened to the ongoing reality of racism by the series of televised police killings and flimsy exonerations that followed the Obama election, the movement for Black Lives, and the eventual racist ascendancy of Donald Trump. By 2017, 59 percent of Black people expressed the antiracist position that racism is the main reason Blacks can't get ahead (compared to 35 percent of Whites and 45 percent of Latinx). But even then, about a third of Black people still expressed the racist position that struggling Blacks are mostly responsible for their own condition, compared to 54 percent of Whites, 48 percent of Latinx, and 75 percent of Republicans.

Clearly, a large percentage of Black people hold anti-Black racist ideas. But I still wanted to believe Stewart's "them niggers" comment was abnormal. The truth is, though, Stewart had put up a mirror. I had to face it. I hated what I saw. He was saying what I had been thinking for years. He had the courage to say it. I hated him for that.

How was his criticism of Black people different than my criticism of Black people when we blamed them for their own votes being stolen or accused them of lethargy and self-sabotage? How was our criticism of Black people any different from the anti-Black criticism of White racists? I learned in that office that day

that every time I say something is wrong with Black people, I am simultaneously separating myself from them, essentially saying "them niggers." When I do this, I am being a racist.

I THOUGHT ONLY White people could be racist and that Black people could not be racist, because Black people did not have power. I thought Latinx, Asians, Middle Easterners, and Natives could not be racist, because they did not have power. I had no sense of the reactionary history of this construction, of its racist bearing.

This powerless defense, as I call it, emerged in the wake of racist Whites dismissing antiracist policies and ideas as racist in the late 1960s. In subsequent decades, Black voices critical of White racism defended themselves from these charges by saying, "Black people can't be racist, because Black people don't have power."

Quietly, though, this defense shields people of color in positions of power from doing the work of antiracism, since they are apparently powerless, since White people have all the power. This means that people of color are powerless to roll back racist policies and close racial inequities even in their own spheres of influence, the places where they actually do have some power to effect change. The powerless defense shields people of color from charges of racism even when they are reproducing racist policies and justifying them with the same racist ideas as the White people they call racist. The powerless defense shields its believers from the history of White people empowering people of color to oppress people of color and of people of color using their limited power to oppress people of color for their own personal gain.

Like every other racist idea, the powerless defense underestimates Black people and overestimates White people. It erases the small amount of Black power and expands the already expansive reach of White power.

The powerless defense does not consider people at all levels of power, from policymakers like politicians and executives who have the power to institute and eliminate racist and antiracist pol-

icies, to policy managers like officers and middle managers empowered to execute or withhold racist and antiracist policies. Every single person actually has the power to protest racist and antiracist policies, to advance them, or, in some small way, to stall them. Nation-states, sectors, communities, institutions are run by policymakers and policies and policy managers. "Institutional power" or "systemic power" or "structural power" is the policymaking and managing power of people, in groups or individually. When someone says Black people can't be racist because Black people don't have "institutional power," they are flouting reality.

The powerless defense strips Black policymakers and managers of all their power. The powerless defense says the more than 154 African Americans who have served in Congress from 1870 to 2018 had no legislative power. It says none of the thousands of state and local Black politicians have any lawmaking power. It says U.S. Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas never had the power to put his vote to antiracist purposes. The powerless defense says the more than seven hundred Black judges on state courts and more than two hundred Black judges on federal courts have had no power during the trials and sentencing processes that built our system of mass incarceration. It says the more than fifty-seven thousand Black police officers do not have the power to brutalize and kill the Black body. It says the three thousand Black police chiefs, assistant chiefs, and commanders have no power over the officers under their command. The powerless defense says the more than forty thousand full-time Black faculty at U.S. colleges and universities in 2016 did not have the power to pass and fail Black students, hire and tenure Black faculty, or shape the minds of Black people. It says the world's eleven Black billionaires and the 380,000 Black millionaire families in the United States have no economic power, to use in racist or antiracist ways. It says the sixteen Black CEOs who've run Fortune 500 companies since 1999 had no power to diversify their workforces. When a Black man stepped into the most powerful office in the world in 2009, his policies were often excused by apologists who said he didn't have executive power. As if none of his executive orders

were carried out, neither of his Black attorneys general had any power to roll back mass incarceration, or his Black national security adviser had no power. The truth is: Black people can be racist because Black people do have power, even if limited.

Note that I say *limited* Black power rather than no power. White power controls the United States. But not absolutely. Absolute power necessitates complete control over all levels of power. All policies. All policy managers. All minds. Ironically, the only way that White power can gain full control is by convincing us that White people already have all the power. If we accept the idea that we have no power, we are falling under the sort of mind control that will, in fact, rob us of any power to resist. As Black History Month father Carter G. Woodson once wrote: "When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it."

Racist ideas are constantly produced to cage the power of people to resist. Racist ideas make Black people believe White people have all the power, elevating them to gods. And so Black segregationists lash out at these all-powerful gods as fallen devils, as I did in college, while Black assimilationists worship their all-powerful White angels, strive to become them, to curry their favor, reproducing their racist ideas and defending their racist policies.

Aside from Justice Clarence Thomas's murderous gang of anti-Black judgments over the years, perhaps the most egregious Black on Black racist crime in recent American history decided the 2004 presidential election. George W. Bush narrowly won reelection by taking Ohio with the crucial help of Ohio's ambitious Black Secretary of State, Ken Blackwell, who operated simultaneously as Bush's Ohio campaign co-chair.

Blackwell directed county boards to limit voters' access to the provisional ballots that ensured that anyone improperly purged from voting rolls could cast their ballot. He ordered voter-registration forms accepted only on expensive eighty-pound stock paper, a sly technique to exclude newly registered voters

(who he almost certainly knew were more likely to be Black). Under Blackwell's supervision, county boards were falsely telling former prisoners they could not vote. County boards allocated fewer voting machines to heavily Democratic cities. Black Ohio voters on average waited fifty-two minutes to vote, thirty-four minutes longer than White voters, according to one post-election study. Long lines caused 3 percent of Ohio voters to leave before voting, meaning approximately 174,000 potential votes walked away, larger than Bush's 118,000 margin of victory. "Blackwell made Katherine Harris look like a cupcake," Representative John Conyers said after investigating Ohio's voter suppression, referring to the Florida secretary of state who certified Bush as winner of the election in 2000. But according to the theory that Black people can't be racist because they lack power, Blackwell didn't have the power to suppress Black votes. Remember, we are all either racists or antiracists. How can Florida's Katherine Harris be a racist in 2000 and Blackwell be an antiracist in 2004?

After unsuccessfully running for Ohio governor in 2006 and chairman of the Republican National Committee in 2009, Blackwell joined Trump's Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity in May 2017. The commission had clearly been set up, although Trump would never admit it, to find new ways to suppress the voting power of Trump's opponents, especially the Democratic Party's most loyal voters: Black people. Clearly, even thirteen years later, Trump officials had not forgotten Blackwell's state-of-the-art racist work suppressing Black votes for Bush's re-election.

With the popularity of the powerless defense, Black on Black criminals like Blackwell get away with their racism. Black people call them Uncle Toms, sellouts, Oreos, puppets—everything but the right thing: racist. Black people need to do more than revoke their "Black card," as we call it. We need to paste the racist card to their foreheads for all the world to see.

The saying "Black people can't be racist" reproduces the false duality of racist and not-racist promoted by White racists to deny their racism. It merges Black people with White Trump voters

who are angry about being called racist but who want to express racist views and support their racist policies while being identified as not-racist, no matter what they say or do. By this theory, Black people can hate them niggers, value Light people over Dark people, support anti-Latinx immigration policies, defend the anti-Native team mascots, back bans against Middle Eastern Muslims, and still escape charges of racism. By this theory, Latinx, Asians, and Natives can fear unknown Black bodies, support mass-incarcerating policies, and still escape charges of racism. By this theory, I can look upon White people as devils and aliens and still escape charges of racism.

When we stop denying the duality of racist and antiracist, we can take an accurate accounting of the racial ideas and policies we support. For the better part of my life I held both racist and antiracist ideas, supported both racist and antiracist policies; I've been antiracist one moment, racist in many more moments. To say Black people can't be racist is to say all Black people are being antiracist at all times. My own story tells me that is not true. History agrees.

THE RECORDED HISTORY of Black racists begins in 1526 in *Della descrittione dell' Africa* (*Description of Africa*), authored by a Moroccan Moor who was kidnapped after he visited sub-Saharan Africa. His enslavers presented him to Pope Leo X, who converted him to Christianity, freed him, and renamed him Leo Africanus. *Description of Africa* was translated into multiple European languages and emerged as the most influential book of anti-Black racist ideas in the sixteenth century, when the British, French, and Dutch were diving into slave trading. "Negroes . . . lead a beastly kind of life, being utterly destitute of the use of reason, of dexterities of wit, and of all arts," Africanus wrote. "They so behave themselves, as if they had continually lived in a Forrest among wild beasts." Africanus may have made up his travels to sub-Saharan Africa to secure favor from the Italian court. Englishman Richard Ligon may have made up the stories in *A*

True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes, published in 1657. Led by Sambo, a group of slaves disclose a plot for a slave revolt. They refuse their master's rewards. A confused master asks why, Ligon narrates. It was "but an act of Justice," Sambo says, according to Ligon. Their duty. They are "sufficiently" rewarded "in the Act."

Slavery was justified in Sambo's narrative, because some Black people believed they were supposed to be enslaved. The same was true of Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, who authored the first known slave narrative, in 1772. Born to Nigerian royalty, Gronniosaw was enslaved at fifteen by an ivory merchant, who sold him to a Dutch captain. "My master grew very fond of me, and I loved him exceedingly" and "endeavored to convince him, by every action, that my only pleasure was to serve him well." The ship reached Barbados. A New Yorker purchased Gronniosaw and brought him home, where he came to believe there was "a black man call'd the Devil that lived in hell." Gronniosaw was sold again to a minister, who transformed him from "a poor heathen" into an enslaved Christian. He was apparently happy to escape the Black Devil.

Slaveowners welcomed ministers preaching the gospel of eternal Black enslavement, derived from the reading of the Bible where all Black people were the cursed descendants of Ham. A fifty-one-year-old free Black carpenter had to first teach away these racist ideas in 1818 as he began recruiting thousands of enslaved Blacks to join his slave revolt around Charleston, South Carolina. Denmark Vesey set the date of the revolt for July 14, 1822, the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille during the French Revolution. The aim of the revolt was to take down slavery, as in the successful 1804 Haitian revolution that inspired Vesey.

But the revolt had to remain a secret, even from some slaves. Don't mention it "to those waiting men who receive presents of old coats from their masters," Vesey's chief lieutenants told recruiters. "They'll betray us." One recruiter did not listen and told house slave Peter Prioleau, who promptly told his master in May.

By late June 1822, South Carolina enslavers had destroyed Vesey's army, which one estimate placed as high as nine thousand strong. Vesey, hung on July 2, 1822, remained defiant to the very end.

The South Carolina legislature emancipated Peter Prioleau on Christmas Day, 1822, and bestowed on him a lifetime annual pension. By 1840, he'd acquired seven slaves of his own and lived comfortably in Charleston's free Light community. Even when he was a slave, this Black man had no desire to get rid of his master. He used his power to spoil one of the most well-organized slave revolts in American history. He used his power to fully take on the qualities of his master, to become him: slaves, racist ideas, and all.

PETER PRIOLEAU RESEMBLED William Hannibal Thomas, a nineteenth-century Black man who wanted to be accepted by White people as one of their own. But as Jim Crow spread in the 1890s, Thomas was shoved more deeply into Blackness. He finally deployed the tactic self-interested Black racists have been using from the beginning to secure White patronage: He attacked Black people as inferior. When Thomas's *The American Negro* appeared weeks before Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* in 1901, *The New York Times* placed Thomas "next to Mr. Booker T. Washington, the best American authority on the negro question."

Blacks are an "intrinsically inferior type of humanity," Thomas wrote. Black history is a "record of lawless existence." Blacks are mentally retarded, immoral savages, "unable practically to discern between right and wrong," Thomas wrote. Ninety percent of Black women are "in bondage to physical pleasure." The "social degradation of our freedwomen is without parallel in modern civilization." In the end, Thomas's "list of negative qualities of Negroes seemed limitless," as his biographer concluded.

Thomas believed himself to be among a minority of Light people who had overcome their inferior biological heritage. But this "saving remnant" was set "apart from their white fellow-

men." We show, Thomas pleaded to White people, that "the redemption of the negro is . . . possible and assured through a thorough assimilation of the thought and ideals of American civilization." To speed up this "national assimilation," Thomas advised restricting the voting rights of corrupt Blacks, intensely policing natural Black criminals, and placing all Black children with White guardians.

Black people stamped William Hannibal Thomas as the "Black Judas." Black critics ruined his credibility and soon White racists could no longer use him, so they tossed him away like a paper plate, as White racists have done to so many disposable Black racists over the years. Thomas found work as a janitor, before dying in obscurity in 1935.

Black people would be betrayed by Black on Black criminals again and again in the twentieth century. In the 1960s, the diversifying of America's police forces was supposed to alleviate the scourge of police brutality against Black victims. The fruit of decades of antiracist activism, a new crop of Black officers were expected to treat Black citizens better than their White counterparts did. But reports immediately surfaced in the 1960s that Black officers were as abusive as White officers. One report noted "in some places, low-income Negroes prefer white policemen because of the severe conduct of Negro officers." A 1966 study found Black officers were not as likely to be racist as Whites, but a significant minority expressed anti-Black racist ideas like, "I'm telling you these people are savages. And they're real dirty." Or the Black officer who said, "There have always been jobs for Negroes, but the f— people are too stupid to go out and get an education. They all want the easy way out."

To color police racism as White on the pretext that only White people can be racist is to ignore the non-White officer's history of profiling and killing "them niggers." It is to ignore that the police killer in 2012 of Brooklyn's Shantel Davis was Black, that three of the six officers involved in the 2015 death of Freddie Gray were Black, that the police killer in 2016 of Charlotte's Keith Lamont Scott was Black, and that one of the police killers

in 2018 of Sacramento's Stephon Clark was Black. How can the White officers involved in the deaths of Terence Crutcher, Sandra Bland, Walter L. Scott, Michael Brown, Laquan McDonald, and Decynthia Clements be racist but their Black counterparts be antiracist?

To be fair, one survey of nearly eight thousand sworn officers in 2017 makes strikingly clear that White officers are far and away more likely to be racist than Black officers these days. Nearly all (92 percent) of White officers surveyed agreed with the post-racial idea that "our country has made the changes needed to give Blacks equal rights with Whites." Only 6 percent of White officers co-signed the antiracist idea that "our country needs to continue making changes to give Blacks equal rights with Whites," compared to 69 percent of Black officers. But the disparity shrinks concerning deadly police encounters. Black officers (57 percent) are only twice as likely as White officers (27 percent) to say "the deaths of Blacks during encounters with police in recent years are signs of a broader problem."

The new crop of Black politicians, judges, police chiefs, and officers in the 1960s and subsequent decades helped to create a new problem. Rising levels of violent crime engulfed impoverished neighborhoods. Black residents bombarbed their politicians and crime fighters with their racist fears of *Black* criminals as opposed to criminals. Neither the residents nor the politicians nor the crime fighters wholly saw the heroin and crack problem as a public-health crisis or the violent-crime problem in poor neighborhoods where Black people lived as a poverty problem. Black people seemed to be more worried about other Black people killing them in drug wars or robberies by the thousands each year than about the cancers, heart diseases, and respiratory diseases killing them by the hundreds of thousands each year. Those illnesses were not mentioned, but "Black on Black crime has reached a critical level that threatens our existence as a people," wrote *Ebony* publisher John H. Johnson, in a 1979 special issue on the topic. The Black on Black crime of internalized racism had indeed reached a critical level—this new Black-abetted focus on

the crisis of "Black crime" helped feed the growth of the movement toward mass incarceration that would wreck a generation.

The rise of mass incarceration was partially fueled by Black people who, even as they adopted racist ideas, did so ostensibly out of trying to save the Black community in the 1970s. But the 1980s brought a more premeditated form of racism, as channeled through the Black administrators Ronald Reagan appointed to his cabinet. Under Clarence Thomas's directorship from 1980 to 1986, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission doubled the number of discrimination cases it dismissed as "no cause." Samuel Pierce, Reagan's secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), redirected billions of dollars in federal funds allotted for low-income housing to corporate interests and Republican donors. Under Pierce's watch in the first half of the 1980s, the number of public-housing units in non-White neighborhoods dropped severely. Poor Black people faced a housing crisis in the 1980s that Pierce made worse, even though he had the power to alleviate it, setting the stage for future secretaries of HUD like Trump's appointee, Ben Carson. These were men who used the power they'd been given—no matter how limited and conditional—in inarguably racist ways.

AS THE EDITOR and I stared each other down, I had a heated conversation—and conversion—in my mind. Eventually, the silence broke and the editor excused me from his office. I received an ultimatum before the end of the workday: Terminate my race column for *The Famuan* or be terminated from my internship at the *Tallahassee Democrat*. I terminated my column in absolute bitterness, feeling as if I terminated a part of myself.

And I did begin to terminate a part of myself—for the better. I began to silence one half of the war within me, the duel between antiracism and assimilation that W.E.B. Du Bois gave voice to, and started embracing the struggle toward a single consciousness of antiracism. I picked up a second major, African American studies.

I took my first Black history course that fall of 2003, the first of four African and African American history courses I would take over three semesters with FAMU professor David Jackson. His precise, detailed, engaging, but somehow funny lectures systematically walked me back through history for the first time. I had imagined history as a battle: on one side Black folks, on the other a team of “them niggers” and White folks. I started to see for the first time that it was a battle between racists and antiracists.

Ending one confusion started another: what to do with my life. As a senior in the fall of 2004, I found that sports journalism no longer moved me. At least not like this thrilling new history I was discovering. I ended up abandoning the press box for what Americans were saying was the most “dangerous” box.