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CHAPTER 2

DUELING CONSCIOUSNESS

ASSIMILATIONIST: One who is expressing the racist idea that a racial group is culturally or behaviorally inferior and is supporting cultural or behavioral enrichment programs to develop that racial group.

SEGREGATIONIST: One who is expressing the racist idea that a permanently inferior racial group can never be developed and is supporting policy that segregates away that racial group.

ANTIRACIST: One who is expressing the idea that racial groups are equals and none needs developing, and is supporting policy that reduces racial inequity.

MY PARENTS HAD not seen each other since the bus ride to Urbana '70. Christmas approached in 1973. Soul Liberation held a concert at the iconic Broadway Presbyterian Church in Harlem that turned into a reunion of sorts for the New York attendees of Urbana '70. Dad and Ma showed up. Old friends beckoned, and something new. After the chords of Soul Liberation fell silent, my parents finally spoke again and a spark finally lit.

Days later, Dad called. He asked Ma out. "I've been called to the mission field," Ma responded. "Leaving in March."

Ma and Dad persevered, even after Ma left to teach in a rural Liberian village outside Monrovia for nine months. Eight years later they were married, daring to name me, their second son, "exalted father" when I arrived in a world not in the practice of exalting Black bodies. Just before that arrival, as my pregnant mother celebrated her thirty-first birthday on June 24, 1982, President Reagan declared war on her unborn baby. "We must

put drug abuse on the run through stronger law enforcement,” Reagan said in the Rose Garden.

It wasn't drug abuse that was put on the run, of course, but people like me, born into this regime of “stronger law enforcement.” The stiffer sentencing policies for drug crimes—not a net increase in crime—caused the American prison population to quadruple between 1980 and 2000. While violent criminals typically account for about half of the prison population at any given time, more people were incarcerated for drug crimes than violent crimes every year from 1993 to 2009. White people are more likely than Black and Latinx people to sell drugs, and the races consume drugs at similar rates. Yet African Americans are far more likely than Whites to be jailed for drug offenses. Nonviolent Black drug offenders remain in prisons for about the same length of time (58.7 months) as violent White criminals (61.7 months). In 2016, Black and Latinx people were still grossly overrepresented in the prison population at 56 percent, double their percentage of the U.S. adult population. White people were still grossly underrepresented in the prison population at 30 percent, about half their percentage of the U.S. adult population.

Reagan didn't start this so-called war, as historian Elizabeth Hinton recounts. President Lyndon B. Johnson first put us on the run when he named 1965 “the year when this country began a thorough, intelligent, and effective war on crime.” My parents were in high school when Johnson's war on crime mocked his undersupported war on poverty, like a heavily armed shooter mocking the underresourced trauma surgeon. President Richard Nixon announced his war on drugs in 1971 to devastate his harshest critics—Black and antiwar activists. “We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news,” Nixon's domestic-policy chief, John Ehrlichman, told a *Harper's* reporter years later. “Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.”

Black people joined in the vilification, convinced that homicidal drug dealers, gun toters, and thieving heroin addicts were

flushing “down the drain” all “the hard won gains of the civil rights movement,” to quote an editorial in *The Washington Afro-American* in 1981. Some, if not most, Black leaders, in an effort to appear as saviors of the people against this menace, turned around and set the Black criminal alongside the White racist as the enemies of the people.

Seemingly contradictory calls to lock up and to save Black people dueled in legislatures around the country but also in the minds of Americans. Black leaders joined with Republicans from Nixon to Reagan, and with Democrats from Johnson to Bill Clinton, in calling for and largely receiving more police officers, tougher and mandatory sentencing, and more jails. But they also called for the end of police brutality, more jobs, better schools, and drug-treatment programs. These calls were less enthusiastically received.

By the time I came along in 1982, the shame about “Black on Black crime” was on the verge of overwhelming a generation’s pride about “Black is beautiful.” Many non-Black Americans looked down on Black addicts in revulsion—but too many Black folk looked down on the same addicts in shame.

Both of my parents emerged from poor families, one from Northern urban projects, one from Southern rural fields. Both framed their rise from poverty into the middle class in the 1980s as a climb up the ladder of education and hard work. As they climbed, they were inundated with racist talking points about Black people refusing to climb, the ones who were irresponsibly strung out on heroin or crack, who enjoyed stealing and being criminally dependent on the hard-earned money of climbing Americans like them.

In 1985, adored civil-rights lawyer Eleanor Holmes Norton took to *The New York Times* to claim the “remedy . . . is not as simple as providing necessities and opportunities,” as antiracists argued. She urged the “overthrow of the complicated, predatory ghetto subculture.” She called on people like my parents with “ghetto origins” to save “ghetto males” and women by impressing on them the values of “hard work, education, respect for family”

and “achieving a better life for one’s children.” Norton provided no empirical evidence to substantiate her position that certain “ghetto” Blacks were deficient in any of these values.

But my parents, along with many others in the new Black middle class, consumed these ideas. The class that challenged racist policies from the 1950s through the 1970s now began challenging other Black people in the 1980s and 1990s. Antiracism seemed like an indulgence in the face of the self-destructive behavior they were witnessing all around them. My parents followed Norton’s directive: They fed me the mantra that education and hard work would uplift me, just as it had uplifted them, and would, in the end, uplift all Black people. My parents—even from within their racial consciousness—were susceptible to the racist idea that it was laziness that kept Black people down, so they paid more attention to chastising Black people than to Reagan’s policies, which were chopping the ladder they climbed up and then punishing people for falling.

The Reagan Revolution was just that: a radical revolution for the benefit of the already powerful. It further enriched high-income Americans by cutting their taxes and government regulations, installing a Christmas-tree military budget, and arresting the power of unions. Seventy percent of middle-income Blacks said they saw “a great deal of racial discrimination” in 1979, before Reagan revolutionaries rolled back enforcement of civil-rights laws and affirmative-action regulations, before they rolled back funding to state and local governments whose contracts and jobs had become safe avenues into the single-family urban home of the Black middle class. In the same month that Reagan announced his war on drugs on Ma’s birthday in 1982, he cut the safety net of federal welfare programs and Medicaid, sending more low-income Blacks into poverty. His “stronger law enforcement” sent more Black people into the clutches of violent cops, who killed twenty-two Black people for every White person in the early 1980s. Black youth were four times more likely to be unemployed in 1985 than in 1954. But few connected the increase in unemployment to the increase in violent crime.

Americans have long been trained to see the deficiencies of people rather than policy. It's a pretty easy mistake to make: People are in our faces. Policies are distant. We are particularly poor at seeing the policies lurking behind the struggles of people. And so my parents turned away from the problems of policy to look at the problems of people—and reverted to striving to save and civilize Black people rather than liberate them. Civilizer theology became more attractive to my parents, in the face of the rise of crack and the damage it did to Black people, as it did to so many children of civil rights and Black power. But in many ways, liberation theology remained their philosophical home, the home they raised me in.

DEEP DOWN, MY parents were still the people who were set on fire by liberation theology back in Urbana. Ma still dreamed of globetrotting the Black world as a liberating missionary, a dream her Liberian friends encouraged in 1974. Dad dreamed of writing liberating poetry, a dream Professor Addison Gayle encouraged in 1971.

I always wonder what would have been if my parents had not let their reasonable fears stop them from pursuing their dreams. Traveling Ma helping to free the Black world. Dad accompanying her and finding inspiration for his freedom poetry. Instead, Ma settled for a corporate career in healthcare technology. Dad settled for an accounting career. They entered the American middle class—a space then as now defined by its disproportionate White majority—and began to look at themselves and their people not only through their own eyes but also “through the eyes of others.” They joined other Black people trying to fit into that White space while still trying to be themselves and save their people. They were not wearing a mask as much as splitting into two minds.

This conceptual duple reflected what W.E.B. Du Bois indelibly voiced in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking

at one's self through the eyes of others," Du Bois wrote. He would neither "Africanize America" nor "bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism." Du Bois wished "to be both a Negro and an American." Du Bois wished to inhabit opposing constructs. To be American is to be White. To be White is to not be a Negro.

What Du Bois termed double consciousness may be more precisely termed *dueling* consciousness. "One ever feels his twoness," Du Bois explained, "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." Du Bois also explained how this war was being waged within his own dark body, wanting to be a Negro and wanting to "escape into the mass of Americans in the same way that the Irish and Scandinavians" were doing.

These dueling ideas were there in 1903, and the same duel overtook my parents—and it remains today. The duel within Black consciousness seems to usually be between antiracist and assimilationist ideas. Du Bois believed in both the antiracist concept of racial relativity, of every racial group looking at itself with its own eyes, and the assimilationist concept of racial standards, of "looking at one's self through the eyes" of another racial group—in his case, White people. In other words, he wanted to liberate Black people from racism but he also wanted to change them, to save them from their "relic of barbarism." Du Bois argued in 1903 that racism and "the low social level of the mass of the race" were both "responsible" for the "Negro's degradation." Assimilation would be part of the solution to this problem.

Assimilationist ideas are racist ideas. Assimilationists can position any racial group as the superior standard that another racial group should be measuring themselves against, the benchmark they should be trying to reach. Assimilationists typically position White people as the superior standard. "Do Americans ever stop to reflect that there are in this land a million men of Negro blood . . . who, judged by any standard, have reached the full measure of the best type of modern European culture? Is it fair, is

it decent, is it Christian . . . to belittle such aspiration?" Du Bois asked in 1903.

THE DUELING CONSCIOUSNESS played out in a different way for my parents, who became all about Black self-reliance. In 1985, they were drawn to Floyd H. Flake's Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church in Southside Queens. Flake and his equally magnetic wife, Elaine, grew Allen into a megachurch and one of the area's largest private-sector employers through its liberated kingdom of commercial and social-service enterprises. From its school to its senior-citizen housing complex to its crisis center for victims of domestic abuse, there were no walls to Flake's church. It was exactly the type of ministry that would naturally fascinate those descendants of Urbana '70. My father joined Flake's ministerial staff in 1989.

My favorite church program happened every Thanksgiving. We would arrive as lines of people were hugging the church building, which smelled particularly good that day. Perfumes of gravy and cranberry sauce warmed the November air. The aromas multiplied in deliciousness as we entered the basement fellowship hall, where the ovens were. I usually found my spot in the endless assembly line of servers. I could barely see over the food. But I strained up on my toes to help feed every bit of five thousand people. I tried to be as kind to these hungry people as my mother's peach cobbler. This program of Black people feeding Black people embodied the gospel of Black self-reliance that the adults in my life were feeding me.

Black self-reliance was a double-edged sword. One side was an abhorrence of White supremacy and White paternalism, White rulers and White saviors. On the other, a love of Black rulers and Black saviors, of Black paternalism. On one side was the antiracist belief that Black people were entirely capable of ruling themselves, of relying on themselves. On the other, the assimilationist idea that Black people should focus on pulling themselves up by their baggy jeans and tight halter tops, getting

off crack, street corners, and government “handouts,” as if those were the things partially holding their incomes down. This dueling consciousness nourished Black pride by insisting that there was nothing wrong with Black people, but it also cultivated shame with its implication that there was something behaviorally wrong with Black people . . . well, at least those other Black people. If the problem was in our own behavior, then Reagan revolutionaries were not keeping Black people down—we were keeping ourselves down.

WHITE PEOPLE HAVE their own dueling consciousness, between the segregationist and the assimilationist: the slave trader and the missionary, the proslavery exploiter and the antislavery civilizer, the eugenicist and the melting pot-ter, the mass incarcerator and the mass developer, the Blue Lives Matter and the All Lives Matter, the not-racist nationalist and the not-racist American.

Assimilationist ideas and segregationist ideas are the two types of racist ideas, the duel within racist thought. White assimilationist ideas challenge segregationist ideas that claim people of color are incapable of development, incapable of reaching the superior standard, incapable of becoming White and therefore fully human. Assimilationists believe that people of color can, in fact, be developed, become fully human, just like White people. Assimilationist ideas reduce people of color to the level of children needing instruction on how to act. Segregationist ideas cast people of color as “animals,” to use Trump’s descriptor for Latinx immigrants—unteachable after a point. The history of the racialized world is a three-way fight between assimilationists, segregationists, and antiracists. Antiracist ideas are based in the truth that racial groups are equals in all the ways they are different, assimilationist ideas are rooted in the notion that certain racial groups are culturally or behaviorally inferior, and segregationist ideas spring from a belief in genetic racial distinction and fixed hierarchy. “I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally

inferior to the whites,” Enlightenment philosopher David Hume wrote in 1753. “There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white. . . . Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men.”

David Hume declared that all races are created unequal, but Thomas Jefferson seemed to disagree in 1776 when he declared “all men are created equal.” But Thomas Jefferson never made the antiracist declaration: All racial groups are equals. While segregationist ideas suggest a racial group is permanently inferior, assimilationist ideas suggest a racial group is temporarily inferior. “It would be hazardous to affirm that, equally cultivated for a few generations,” the Negro “would not become” equal, Jefferson once wrote, in assimilationist fashion.

The dueling White consciousness fashioned two types of racist policies, reflecting the duel of racist ideas. Since assimilationists posit cultural and behavioral hierarchy, assimilationist policies and programs are geared toward developing, civilizing, and integrating a racial group (to distinguish from programs that uplift individuals). Since segregationists posit the incapability of a racial group to be civilized and developed, segregationist policies are geared toward segregating, enslaving, incarcerating, deporting, and killing. Since antiracists posit that the racial groups are already civilized, antiracist policies are geared toward reducing racial inequities and creating equal opportunity.

White people have generally advocated for both assimilationist and segregationist policies. People of color have generally advocated for both antiracist and assimilationist policies. The “history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,” to quote Du Bois—the strife between the assimilationist and the antiracist, between mass civilizing and mass equalizing. In Du Bois’s *Black body, in my parents’ Black bodies, in my young Black body*, this double desire, this dueling consciousness, yielded an inner strife between Black pride and a yearning to be White. My

own assimilationist ideas stopped me from noticing the racist policies really getting high during Reagan's drug war.

THE DUELING WHITE consciousness has, from its position of relative power, shaped the struggle within Black consciousness. Despite the cold truth that America was founded "by white men for white men," as segregationist Jefferson Davis said on the floor of the U.S. Senate in 1860, Black people have often expressed a desire to be American and have been encouraged in this by America's undeniable history of antiracist progress, away from chattel slavery and Jim Crow. Despite the cold instructions from the likes of Nobel laureate Gunnar Myrdal to "become assimilated into American culture," Black people have also, as Du Bois said, desired to remain Negro, discouraged by America's undeniable history of racist progress, from advancing police violence and voter suppression, to widening racial inequities in areas ranging from health to wealth.

History duels: the undeniable history of antiracist progress, the undeniable history of racist progress. Before and after the Civil War, before and after civil rights, before and after the first Black presidency, the White consciousness duels. The White body defines the American body. The White body segregates the Black body from the American body. The White body instructs the Black body to assimilate into the American body. The White body rejects the Black body assimilating into the American body—and history and consciousness duel anew.

The Black body in turn experiences the same duel. The Black body is instructed to become an American body. The American body is the White body. The Black body strives to assimilate into the American body. The American body rejects the Black body. The Black body separates from the American body. The Black body is instructed to assimilate into the American body—and history and consciousness duel anew.

But there is a way to get free. To be antiracist is to emancipate

oneself from the dueling consciousness. To be antiracist is to conquer the assimilationist consciousness and the segregationist consciousness. The White body no longer presents itself as the American body; the Black body no longer strives to be the American body, knowing there is no such thing as the American body, only American bodies, racialized by power.