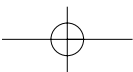
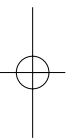
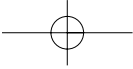


PART ONE

Essays

“I wrote these words for
everyone/Who struggles in
their youth/Who won’t accept
deception/Instead of what
is truth.”

—Lauryn Hill,
“Everything Is
Everything” (1998)



Donnell Alexander

Are Black People Cooler than White People?

I'M COOL LIKE THIS:

I read fashion magazines like they're warning labels telling me what not to do.

When I was a kid, Arthur Fonzarelli seemed a garden-variety dork.

I got my own speed limit.

I come when I want to.

I maintain like an ice cube in the remote part of the freezer.

Cooler than a polar bear's toenails.

Cooler than the other side of the pillow.

Cool like me.

Know this while understanding that I am in essence a humble guy.

I'm the kinda nigga who's so cool that my neighbor bursts into hysterical tears whenever I ring her doorbell after dark. She is a new immigrant who has chosen to live with her two roommates in our majority-black Los Angeles neighborhood so that, I'm told, she can "learn about all American cultures." But her real experience of us is limited to the space between her Honda and her front gate; thus, much of what she has to go on is the vibe of the surroundings and the images emanating from the television set that gives her living room a minty cathode glow. As such, I'm a cop-show menace and a shoe commercial demi-god—one of the rough boys from our 'hood and the living, breathing embodiment of hip hop flava. And if I can't fulfill the prevailing stereotype, the kids en route to the nearby high school can. The woman is scared in a cool world. She smiles as I pass her way in the light of day, unloading my groceries or shlepping my infant son up the stairs. But at night, when my face is visible through the window of her door lit only by the bulb that brightens the vestibule, I, at once familiar and threatening, am just too much.

Thus being cool has its drawbacks. With cool come assumptions and fears, expectations and intrigue. My neighbor wants to live near cool, but she's not sure about cool walking past her door after dark. During the day, she sees a black man; at night what she sees in the shadow gliding across her patio is a nigga.

Once upon a time, little need existed for making the distinction between a nigga and a black—at least not in this country, the place where niggas were invented. We were just about all slaves, so we were all niggas. Then we became free on paper yet oppressed still. Today, with as many as a third of us a generation of two removed from living poor (depending on who's counting), niggadom isn't innate to every black child born. But with the poverty rate still hovering at around 30 percent, black people still got niggas in the family, even when they themselves aren't niggas. Folks who don't know niggas can watch them on TV, existing in worlds almost always removed from blacks. Grant Hill is black, Allen Iverson is a nigga. Oprah interviewing the celebrity du jour is a black woman; the woman being handcuffed on that reality TV show is a nigga.

The question of whether black people are cooler than white people is a dumb one, and one that I imagine a lot of people will find offensive. But we know what we're talking about, right? We're talking about style and spirit and the innovations that those things spawn. It's on TV; it's in the movies, sports and clothes and language and gestures and music.

See, black cool is cool as we know it. I could name names—Michael Jordan and Chris Rock and Me'shell Ndegeocello and Will Smith and bell hooks and Li'l Kim—but cool goes way back, much further than today's superstars. Their antecedents go back past blaxploitation cinema, past Ike Turner to Muddy Waters, beyond even the old jazz players and blues singers whose names you'll never know. Cool has a history and cool has a meaning. We all know cool when we see it, and now more than at any other time in this country's history, when mainstream America looks for cool we look to black culture. Countless new developments can be called great, nifty, even keen. But, cool? That's a black thang, baby.

And I should know. My being cool is not a matter of subjectivity or season. Having lived as a nigga has made me cool. Let me explain. Cool was born when the first plantation nigga figured out how to make animal innards—massa's garbage, hog maws and chitlins—taste good enough to eat. That inclination to make something out of nothing and then to make that something special articulated itself first in the work chants that slaves sang in the field and then in the hymns that rose out of their churches. It would later reveal itself in the music made from cast-off Civil War marching-band instruments (jazz); physical exercise turned to public spectacle (sports); and street life styling, from pimps' silky handshakes to the corner crack dealer's baggy pants.

Cool is all about trying to make a dollar out of 15 cents. It's about living on the cusp, on the periphery, diving for scraps. Essential to cool is being outside looking in. Others—Indians, immigrants, women, gays—have been "othered," but until the past 15 percent of America's history, niggas in real terms have been treated by the country's majority as, at best, subhuman and, at worst, an abomination. So in the days when they were still literally on the plantation they devised a coping strategy called cool, an elusive mellowing strategy designed to master time and space. Cool, the basic reason blacks remain in the American cultural mix, is an industry of style that everyone in the world can use. It's finding the essential soul while being essentially lost. It's the nigga metaphor. And the nigga metaphor is the genius of America.

Gradually over the course of this century, as there came to be a growing chasm of privilege between black people and niggas, the nature of cool began to shift. The romantic and now-popular image of the pasty Caucasian who hung out in a jazz club was one small subplot. Cool became a promise—the reward to any soul hardy enough to pierce the inner sanctum of black life and not only live to tell about it but also live to live for it. Slowly, watered-down versions of this very specific strain of cool became the primary means of defining American cool. But it wasn't until Elvis that cool was brought down from Olympus (or Memphis) to majority-white culture. Mass media did the rest. Next stop: high fives, chest bumps, and "Go girl!"; Air Jordans, Tupac, and low-riding pants.

White folks began to try to make the primary point of cool—recognition of the need to go with the flow—a part of their lives. But cool was only an avocational interest for them. It could never be the necessity it was for their colored co-occupants. Some

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worked harder at it than others. And as they came to understand coolness as being of almost elemental importance, they began obsessing on it, asking themselves, in a variety of clumsy, indirect ways: Are black people cooler than white people and, if so, why?

The answer is, of course, yes. And if you, the reader, had to ask some stupid shit like that, you're probably white. It's hard to imagine a black person even asking the question, and a nigga might not even know what you mean. Any nigga who'd ask that question certainly isn't much of one; niggas invented the shit.

Humans put cool on a pedestal because life at large is a challenge, and in that challenge we're trying to cram in as much as we can—as much fine loving, fat eating, dope sleeping, mellow walking, and substantive working as possible. We need spiritual assistance in the matter. That's where cool comes in. At its core, cool is useful. Cool gave bass to 20th-century American culture, but I think that if the culture had needed more on the high end, cool would have given that, because cool closely resembles the human spirit. It's about completing the task of living with enough spontaneity to splurge some of it on bystanders, to share with others working through their own travails a little of your bonus life. Cool is about turning desire into deed with a surplus of ease.

Some white people are cool in their own varied ways. I married a white girl who was cooler than she ever knew. And you can't tell me Jim Jarmusch and Ron Athey and Delbert McClinton ain't smooth.

There's a gang of cool white folks, all of whom exist that way because they've found their essential selves amid the abundant and ultimately numbing media replications of the coolness vibe and the richness of real life. And there's a whole slew more of them ready to sign up if you tell 'em where. But your average wigger in the rap section of Sam Goody ain't gone nowhere; she or he hasn't necessarily learned shit about the depth and breadth of cool about making a dollar out of 15 cents. The problem with mainstream American culture, the reason why iron's been elevated to *raison d'être* status and neurosis increasingly gets fetishized, is its twisted approach to cool. Most think cool is something you can put on and take off at will (like a strap-on goatee). They think it's some shit you go shopping for. And that taints cool, giving the mutant thing it becomes a deservedly bad name. Such strains aren't even cool anymore, but an evil ersatz-cool, one that fights real cool at every turn. Advertising agencies, record company artist-development departments, and over-art-directed bars are where ersatz-cool dwells. What passes for cool to the white-guy passerby might be—is probably—just rote duplication without an ounce of inspiration.

The acceptance of clone cool by so many is what makes hip hop necessary. It's what negates the hopelessness of the postmodern sensibility at its most cynical. The hard road of getting by on metaphorical chitlins kept the sons and daughters of Africa in touch with life's essential physicality, more in touch with the world and what it takes to get over in it: People are moved, not convinced; things get done, they don't just happen. Real life doesn't allow for much fronting, as it were. And neither does hip hop. Hip hop allows for little deviation between who one is and what one can ultimately represent.

Rap—the most familiar, and therefore the most emblematic, example of hip hop expression—is about the power of conveying through speech the world beyond words.

Language is placed on a par with sound and, ultimately, vibes. Huston Smith, a dope white guy, wrote: “Speech is alive—literally alive because speaking is the speaker. It’s not the whole of the speaker, but it is the speaker in one of his or her living modes. This shows speech to be alive by definition . . . It possesses in principle life’s qualities, for its very nature is to change, adapt, and invent. Indissolubly contextual, speaking adapts itself to speaker, listener, and situation alike. This gives it an immediacy, range, and versatility that is, well, miraculous.”

Which is why hip hop has become the most insidiously influential music of our time. Like rock, hip hop in its later years will have a legacy of renegade youth to look back upon fondly. But hip hop will insist that its early marginalization be recognized as an integral part of what it comes to be. When the day comes that grandmothers are rapping and beatboxing as they might aerobicize now, and samplers and turntables are as much an accepted part of leisure time as channel surfing, niggas will be glad. Their expression will have proven ascendant.

But that day’s not here yet. If white people were really cool with black cool, they’d put their stuff with our stuff more often to work shit out. I don’t mean shooting hoops together in the schoolyard as much as white cultural institutions like college radio, indie film, and must-see TV. Black cool is banished to music videos, sports channels, and UPN so whites can visit us whenever they want without having us live right next door in the media mix. Most of the time, white folks really don’t want to be part of black cool. They just like to see the boys do a jig every once in a while.

At the same time, everyday life in black America is not all Duke Ellington and Rakim Allah. Only a few black folks are responsible for cool. The rest copy and recycle. At the historical core of black lives in this country is a clear understanding that deviation from society’s assigned limitations results in punitive sanctions: lynching, hunger, homelessness. The fear of departing from the familiar is where the inclination to make chitlins becomes a downside. It’s where the shoeshine-boy reflex to grin and bear it was born. Black rebellion in America from slave days onward was never based on abstract, existentialist grounds. A bird in the hand, no matter how small, was damn near everything.

Today, when deviation from normalcy not only goes unpunished but is also damn near demanded to guarantee visibility in our fast-moving world, blacks remain woe-fully wedded to the bowed head and blinders. Instead of bowing to massa, they slavishly bow to trend and marketplace. And this creates a hemming-in of cool, an inability to control the cool one makes. By virtue of their status as undereducated bottom feeders, man niggas will never overcome this way of being. But, paradoxically, black people—who exist at a greater distance from cool than niggas—can and will. That’s the perplexity of the cool impulse. As long as some black people have to live like niggas, cool, as contemporarily defined, will live on. As long as white people know what niggas are up to, cool will continue to exist, with all of its baggage passed on like, uh, luggage. The question “Are black people cooler than white people?” is not the important one. “How do I gain proximity to cool, and do I want it?” is much better. The real secret weapon of cool is that it’s about synthesis. Just about every important black cultural invention of this century has been about synthesizing elements previously considered antithetical. MLK merged Eastern thought and cottonfield religious faith into the civil rights movement. Chuck Berry merged blues and country music into rock ’n’

roll. Michael Jordan incorporated the old school ball of Jerry West into his black game. Talk about making a dollar out of 15 cents.

Out in the netherworld of advertising, they tell us we're all Tiger Woods. He plays the emblematic white man's game as good as anyone. Well, only one nigga on this planet gets to be that motherfucker, but we all swing the same cool, to whatever distant ends. The coolness construct might tell us otherwise, but we're all handed the same basic tools at birth; it's up to us as individuals to work on our game. Some of us have sweet strokes, and some of us press too hard, but everybody who drops outta their mama has the same capacity to take a shot.

GWTW

Hilton Als

SO WHAT CAN I TELL YOU ABOUT A BUNCH OF UNFORTUNATE NIGGERS stupid enough to get caught and hanged in America, or am I supposed to say lynched? I'm assuming this aggressive tone to establish a little distance from these images of the despised and dead, the better to determine the usefulness of this project, which escapes me, but doesn't preclude my writing about it. Too often we refuse information, refuse to look or even think about something, simply because it's unpleasant or poses a problem, or raises "issues"—emotional and intellectual friction that rubs our heavily therapeuticized selves the wrong way. I didn't like looking at these pictures, but once I looked, the events documented in them occurred in my mind over and over again, as did the realization that these pictures are documents of America's obsession with niggers, both black and white. I looked at these pictures, and what I saw in them, in addition to the obvious, was the way in which I'm regarded, by any number of people: as a nigger. And it is as one that I felt my neck snap and my heart break, while looking at these pictures.

In any case, America's interest in niggers—and people more than willing to treat other people as niggers—is of passing interest since America's propensity to define race and the underclass through hateful language, and hateful acts is well-known, and discussed. What isn't talked about that the largely white editors (who constitute what we call Publishing), have in hiring a colored person to describe a nigger's life. For them, a black writer is someone who can simplify what is endemic to him or her as a human being—race—and blow it up, to cartoon proportions, thereby making the coon situation "clear" to a white audience. To be fair, no such offensive non-ideas were put to me when this present collaboration was suggested, but would my inclusion in this book, as the nearly ahistorical, "lyrical" voice have been suggested if I were not a Negro? Or am I "lyrical" and ahistorical because I am a Negro? I am not going to adopt a mea culpa tone here, since I agreed to supply what I have always thought of as a soundtrack to these pictures, which, viewed together, make up America's first disaster movie.

But before I can talk about these pictures, such as the picture of the beautiful black guy with the incredibly relaxed shoulders who has been whipped—front and back—and who does not reveal anything to us (certainly not with his eyes) except his obvious pain: his flesh-eating scars, and the many pictures of people with their necks snapped,

bowels loosened, feet no longer arched—before I can talk about any of the “feelings” they engender in me, I want to get back to the first question I posed: What is the relationship of the white people in these pictures to the white people who ask me and sometimes pay me to be Negro, on the page?

Of course, one big difference between the people documented in these pictures and me is that I am not dead, have not been lynched or scalded or burned or whipped or stoned. But I have been looked at, watched, and it’s the experience of being watched, and seeing the harm in people’s eyes—that is the prelude to becoming a dead nigger like those seen here, that has made me understand, finally, what the word “nigger” means, and why people have used it, and the way I use it here, now: as a metaphorical lynching before the real one. “Nigger” is a slow death. And that’s the slow death I feel all the time now, as a colored man.

And according to these pictures, I shouldn’t be talking to you right now: I’m a little on the nigger side, meant to be seen and not heard, my tongue hanged and with it, my mind. But before that happens, let me tell you what I see in these photographs: I see a lot of crazy looking white people, as crazy and empty-looking in the face as the white people who stare at me. Who wants to look at these pictures? Who are they all? When they look at these pictures, who do they identify with? The maimed, the tortured, the dead or the white people who maybe told some dumb nigger before they hanged him, You are all wrong, niggerish, outrageous, violent, disruptive, uncooperative, lazy, stinking, loud, difficult, obnoxious, stupid, angry. Prejudiced, unreasonable, shiftless, no good, a liar, fucked up—the very words and criticism a colored writer is apt to come up against if he doesn’t do that woe-is-me Negro crap and has the temerity to ask not only why collect these pictures, but why does a colored point of view authenticate them, no matter what that colored person has to say?

In writing this, I have become a cliché, another colored person writing about a nigger’s life. So doing, I’m feeding, somewhat, into what the essayist George W. S. Trow has called “white euphoria,” which is defined by white people exercising their largesse in my face as they say, Tell me how you’ve suffered. Isn’t that what you people do? Suffer nobly, poetically sometimes even? Doesn’t suffering define you? I hate seeing this, and yet it is what I am meant to write, since I accepted the assignment, am “of the good,” and want to know why these pictures, let alone events, have caused me pain. I don’t know many people who wouldn’t feel like a nigger looking at these pictures, all fucked up and hurt, killed by eyes and hands that can’t stand yours. I want to bow out of this nigger feeling. I resent these pictures for making me feel anything at all. For a long time, I avoided being the black guy, that is, being black-identified. Back then, I felt that adopting black nationalism limited my world, my world view. Now I know from experience that the world has been limited for me by people who see me as a nigger, very much in the way the dead eyes and flashbulb smiles in these photographs say: See what we do to the niggers! They are the fear and hatred in ourselves, murdered! Killed! All of this is painful and American. Language makes it trite, somehow. I will never write from this niggerish point of view again. This is my farewell. I mean to be courtly and grand. No gold watch is necessary, as I bow out of the nigger business.

In my life as a city dweller, I have crossed dark nighttime streets so as not to make the white woman walking in front of me feel fear. I have not deliberately come up behind a neighbor opening the door to our apartment building, so as not to make him

feel what colored people make him feel: robbed, violated, somehow, I have been arrested on my way to school, accused of truancy. Once, when I was coming out of a restaurant with a friend, four or five cops pinned me to a wall, pointing guns at my head, I looked just like someone else. This is not to be confused with the time I sat with the same friend in his car, chatting, me in the back seat leaning over my friend's shoulder, and suddenly the car was flooded with white lights, police lights, and the lights on the hoods of their cars were turned on, and five or six cops, guns out of their holsters and pointed at me, were ordering me to get out of the car. We thought you were a car-jacker, they said, as I stood in that white light which always reminds me of movie premiere lights, you know, where people look like all dressed-up shadows as those lights hit them, getting out of their cars?

This is what makes me feel nigger-ish, I'm afraid: being watched. I go to parties with white people. Invariably, one of them will make a comment about my size. They say, We'd know you anywhere, you're so big! I mean, you're so distinctive!, when they mean something else altogether, perhaps this: we have been watching you become what our collective imagination says you are: big and black—niggerish—and so therefore what? Whatever. As long as it can be lynched, eventually.

Once or twice I thought I might actually get killed in my New York of cops and very little safety—a nigger casualty, not unlike the brilliant Negro short story writer and poet Henry Dumas, who was shot and killed in a subway station in Harlem, another case of “mistaken identity” in a colored village? He was thirty-three years old when he was killed in 1968 and had written at least one short story that I consider a masterpiece, “Ark of Bones,” a story made distinct by the number of lynchings that fill the air without being explicitly referred to. All those colored tragedies, even before you've had a chance to grow up, Dumas seems to say in this tale of two boys who are ignorant of their history, and then not. That is their rite of colored male passage: having to drag all those lynchings around with them, around their necks: those are their ancestors. Too bad when violent deaths define who you are. Here's a little of the narrator, Fish, and his voice, which is all he has: “Headeye, he was followin' me,” Fish begins. “I knowed he was followin' me. But I just kept goin', like I wasn't payin' him no mind.” What Headeye and Fish eventually see, walking through a wood where maybe a cousin was lynched, maybe not, is an ark floating on a river. The ark is filled with the bones of their black ancestors. The ark carrying those bruised bones is “consecrated” ground, but it is divine ground that can never settle, since its home is a stream. Those bones keep moving, like the dead niggers on these pages. Every time you turn a page, they move.

But back to the idea of being watched by (primarily) white editors and being lynched by eyes. What I mean is that so much care, so much care is taken not to scare white people simply with my existence, and it's as if they don't want to deal with the care, too: it makes their seeing me as a nigger even more complicated. I know many, many colored people who exercise a similar sensitivity where white people are concerned, anything to avoid being lynched by their tongues or eyes. Certain colored people want to lynch you, too. They are competitive, usually, and stupid people who believe that if they work hard and sell out they can be just like most white people and hate niggers even more than they do since they “know” them. Those colored people are, in some ways, worse than white people, since they imagine that they are the sometimes-lynched class, as opposed to the always-lynched. Fact is, if you are even half-way

colored and male in America, the dead heads hanging from the trees in these pictures, and the dead eyes or grins surrounding them, it's not too hard to imagine how this is your life too, as it were. You can feel it every time you cross the street to avoid worrying a white woman to death or false accusations of rape, or every time your car breaks down anywhere in America, and you see signs about Jesus, and white people everywhere and your heart begins to race and your skin becomes clammy, and the perspiration sticks to your flesh, just like Brock Peters in the film version of "To Kill a Mockingbird," where he's on trial for maybe "interfering" with a white woman: it's her word against his but her word has weight, like the dead weight of a dead lynched body.

Once you're strung up, as they say in "The Ox-Bow Incident," or maybe the Maureen O'Hara version of "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," or maybe in "In Cold Blood," or once they've fixed a pain in the neck for you, as they say in "His Girl Friday" (all these movies have lynchings in them, or make reference to lynchings), once that's happened, what happens to your body? Did the families in these pictures stand at the periphery and wait for all to be over, when someone, maybe the youngest among them, could climb the tree and cut Cousin or Mother or Father down? It's hard to see if any of the lynched have anything but rope and eyes staring at them in these pictures. When they were lynched their humanity was taken from them so why not their families? They have no names in these pictures—maybe addresses, I don't know, since I couldn't look past the pictures, really. What difference would it have made to get the facts of any of these lives, white or colored, right? Don't we want this story to go away?

I'm ashamed that I couldn't get into the history of these people. I saw these pictures through a strong light that my mind put up, to obscure what I saw when I looked at all these dead niggers, their bodies reshaped by tragedy. I think the white light I saw was the white light those cops put on me. If you look at any number of old newsreel pictures taken at the big Hollywood premieres held at the Pantages, or Grauman's Chinese, in the nineteen thirties, forties, or fifties, some of the guests walking past the movie lights—klieg lights—look like shadowy half people trying to fill their suits or dresses. People as penumbræ. That's the light I saw when I looked at these pictures: it made the people in the pictures look less real. When I thought of that white light, I thought of my introduction to the South, where many of these niggers were killed: it was sitting in a darkened movie theatre with my mother and little brother, watching a revival of "Gone With the Wind," which some people called "GWTW." We ignored the pitiful colored people in the film because we wanted to enjoy ourselves, and in Margaret Mitchell's revisionist tale of the South, Vivien Leigh was so pretty. We couldn't think of those dumb niggers hanging from the trees in some field or another in Atlanta or outside of it, even though we knew about that by then. I'm sure we did though I don't think I'd heard Billie Holiday sing "Strange Fruit," about all those black bodies swinging in the Southern trees. At any rate, I didn't like Billie Holiday for a long time: her voice didn't make sense to me, nor did those black bodies, nothing so terrible was ever going to happen to me in Brooklyn, where I was considered cute and knew I would live forever. The world was going to love me forever. Whites and blacks.

I could make them love me, just as Vivien Leigh made so many men fall in love with her before the fall of Atlanta, in a movie that came out around the time Billie Holiday was singing "Strange Fruit," and perhaps that's an interesting thing to try now, watching GWTW to the sound of Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit." See her black bod-

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ies and weariness smeared all over Vivien Leigh’s beautiful face, and Hattie McDaniel’s ridiculous one.

Sitting in the movie theatre, watching GWTW for the first time, I was in love with Vivien Leigh and not all those niggers, the most hateful among them being a brown-faced, oily-skinned carpetbagger who looks at our Vivien Leigh with some kind of lust and disgust. I hated him then because he intruded on the beautiful pink world. Leigh’s girlishness could have smothered me; I would have made her forget that I was colored and that she could lynch me if she wanted to because I knew I could make her love me. But how do you get people to ignore their history? I never thought of those things when I had love on my mind.

In the middle of the movie, Vivien Leigh as Scarlett suffers, and says she will never suffer again, and I loved her so much I didn’t want her to suffer. As I grew up, I retained that feeling toward women who looked like my first movie star love: I didn’t want them to suffer, even though they, like Vivien Leigh as Scarlett, could lynch a nigger to pay for all their hardship: God didn’t make people of her class and wealth and race to suffer. For sure, Scarlett, in real life, might have lynched a nigger in order to make that person pay for all the inexplicable pain she had gone through and eventually come out the other side of, a much better person.

After that, her world might have looked completely different.

Angela Ards

Race Natters—The Chattering Classes Convene on Martha’s Vineyard

“ONE-TWO-THREE! FARRAKHAN, FARRAKHAN,” CORNEL WEST CHANTED TO check the mikes. It was a curious moment during “A Conversation on Race,” the panel discussion featuring 10 of the country’s more prominent black scholars held Labor Day weekend on Martha’s Vineyard. Sponsored by the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute, self-described as the nation’s oldest research center on African and African American studies, the dialogue was ostensibly called in response to the national conversation on race President Clinton launched two months ago.

Toward the end of the three-hour seminar, a middle-aged white man in the 400-plus audience asserted that the one black leader able to articulate a national plan of action around race was Minister Louis Farrakhan, and would the esteemed professors behind the dais comment on that? West, after adjusting the mikes, sought to temper the questioner’s perception by downplaying Farrakhan’s support. “His national organization is roughly only the size of the two biggest Baptist churches in Brooklyn,” said the Harvard professor of Afro American studies and religion, who has no mass constituency. Farrakhan’s rise, West argued, is merely the result of the crisis of black leadership, which is itself a reflection of the crisis of American leadership—spineless—refusing to tell the truth, refusing to be honorable. . . . Look at the black leadership! Who is not already subsumed by the establishment, while Farrakhan says plainly, “You’re catching hell and you know it”?

Of course, these constituencyless panelists posing as African American spokespersons are thoroughly “subsumed by the establishment,” with few plainspeakers among them. Not only was Farrakhan absent, so were traditional but fading race leaders Jesse Jackson and the NAACP’s Kweisi Mfume. Rather, the Edgartown conversation, held in the sterile clapboard walls of the Old Whaling Church, was mild, modulated, borderline weary. “I for one am sick and tired of discussing the race problem,” declared Du Bois Institute director Henry Louis Gates Jr., who moderated the discussion. Would the institute be doomed to sponsor such an event same time next century? he wondered glumly.

But his own introductory comments departed little from the same old same old. Gates trotted out the oft-quoted Du Bois remark—“The problem of the 20th century will be the problem of the color line”—that was probing and poignant in 1903 but feels parochial today amid the browning of America. In fact, before the event, Gates said that “the president’s initiative must consider how the forces of economics and gender will fundamentally influence the matter of race even more in the 21st century.” Yet the issues confronting African Americans were framed only in terms of black men. Gates cited horrific statistics indicating that in 1990, 2,280,000 black men were ensnared in the in the criminal justice system, while only 23,000 received college degrees. That’s a ratio of 99 to 1; the ratio for white men is 6 to 1. But black women’s issues didn’t even get the perfunctory footnote treatment customary at race events sponsored by supposedly less progressive groups such as the Nation of Islam or the NAACP. And if, as Gates waxed prosaic on the Du Boisian prophecy, “ethnic difference [amid] economic differentials and economic scarcity” is the problem of the new millennium, the all-black panelists performing before a predominantly white, affluent Vineyard crowd did little to expand the black-versus-white paradigm that now frames race relations.

In fact, minstrelsy came to mind, with the performative tone set early on by Anna Deavere Smith. She presented three characters from *Twilight*, her play about the 1992 civil unrest that engulfed Los Angeles: a white former president of the police commission who refers to the black gang members attempting a truce as “these curious people,” a Korean liquor store owner who sympathized with the plight of African Americans until her business was looted and destroyed, and a black gang member who—in a truncated piece, with the least political insight—mused abstractly on the meaning of his tag.

I often get the feeling Smith worries that a mostly white audience might think she’s privileging the African American perspective, so she goes out of her way to short-change it. But a purpose is served. The president’s proposed conversation, as well as the event at Edgartown, helps white people learn the vocabulary of race, which they have not had to speak until now, as the melting pot gets murky. At one point, Anita Hill described—without translation—her hometown of Norman, Oklahoma, as a “sundown town” to explain why there is no sizable minority presence there today. Many whites in the audience were visibly lost, and those without a black friend handy to translate had to deduce meaning from context.

If the conversation is ever to be clear, Americans must discard the vague terms *race* and *racism*, said former Black Panther Kathleen Cleaver, and start discussing white supremacy. Otherwise, “how can you have a conversation about race that does not suc-

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cumb to the dictates of the subtext of white supremacy,” asked this now visiting professor at Cardozo Law School, “especially now, when we have Republican goon squads working like hell to restore not only the symbols but the substance of white supremacy?” Such as chain gangs, church burnings, and the revocation of affirmative action.

There was a lot of talk about how there had been enough talk already, but few concrete ideas were offered on how to improve race relations. Christopher Edley, former special counsel to the White House’s committee on affirmative action and current consultant to the president’s recently appointed seven-member race advisory board, naturally supported Clinton’s race initiative, arguing that “conversation sets the stage for an engagement that can be transforming.” Harvard law professor Randall Kennedy suggested that blacks be treated as individuals under the law, and his colleague Charles Ogletree offered a broad 25-year plan for social transformation.

Mainly, however, there were observations. Sociologist Orlando Patterson said that despite the deluge of literature decrying black middle class success as “volunteer slavery”—a clear shot at Vineyarder and author Jill Nelson’s memoir—more than 70 percent of African Americans are “pretty content” with their lot, according to some obscure Gallup Poll only he seemed to have seen.

Patricia Williams was the only panelist to register unease about participating on an all-black, all-academic panel. “The structure,” she said, “is one that repeats some island—and I don’t mean Martha’s Vineyard—an islanding of the conversation.” Hill echoed that sentiment when she noted that the Vineyard conversation was very different from one that would occur in her hometown, a place, she says, “where the civil rights movement happened—almost.” Indeed, it was only very late in the evening that the discussion reached beyond panelists’ statistics and anecdotes to the outside world, as West mentioned the march against police brutality that occurred in New York the morning of the seminar.

Savvily timed to coincide with the president’s Vineyard vacation for maximum media coverage, “A Conversation on Race,” at \$50 per ticket, was a lucrative fundraiser for a worthy cause, the Du Bois Institute. Gate’s Harvard Dream Team of black scholars is bringing to the field of African American studies—inside and outside—a level of legitimacy and outside of academia—a level of legitimacy and respect that it has never before enjoyed. Yet just what recommendations the president and his advisory council could glean from this event is dubious, since none of them was present.

Still, Gates was clearly satisfied. “Just getting people this smart together, and an audience this smart, that was my goal. This was like a seminar at a university. Someone says, ‘Why are we here?’ Someone says, ‘I’m glad we’re here.’ Someone says, ‘I disagree with you.’ Someone says, ‘You’re full of shit.’ And that’s great! We took three hours tonight, and these people would have sat for two more.”

Panelists were mobbed by fawning audience members seeking autographs after the event, and then ushered into vans waiting to spirit them to a posh party hosted by Diane Sawyer and Mike Nichols, where Carly Simon and Jessye Norman performed spontaneous duets. Also on hand was software magnate and budding patron of black cultural causes Peter Norton, who underwrote the 1995 “Black Male Show” at the Whitney Museum, and recently purchased a rambling oceanside house on the Vineyard that is to serve as a retreat for Harvard professors.

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It's a long way from hardscrabble Piedmont, West Virginia, to the exclusive enclaves of Martha's Vineyard, and Gates couldn't seem more pleased to have arrived. "I happen to love this island," he enthused. "This is the most thoroughly integrated place in the United States in August—by race, ethnicity, religion, and gender, no doubt." And what of the "economic differences" he'd urged Clinton to consider as integral to improved race relations? Is the island integrated by class? "No," Gates acknowledged, without apology. This is a very middle-class place." No doubt.