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EPILOGUE

The Future of the African Diaspora

Three principal narratives have unfolded within these pages: the rise and fall of slavery, the social struggles of black communities, and the cultural representations of life and life's hardships produced in those communities. These braided stories convey the African diaspora's growth and change, especially during the past six centuries. Here, I pose and attempt to answer some very important interpretive questions prompted by this chronicle, three about the past and four about the future, as a way of stepping back for a broader closing perspective and to encourage further study and discussion.

The historian can rarely, if ever, answer such broad and deep questions precisely, yet the ongoing study of the past is of great use in refuting mistaken interpretations and narrowing the range of debate about the human condition. Interpretive summaries like the one I provide here can answer numerous small questions and more sharply define some of the bigger queries.

Why Did World Slavery Grow to Such an Extent in the Modern Era?

The practice of slavery has long existed. As far back as the time of Assyria, pharaonic Egypt, and Minoan Crete, slavery existed and grew in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. For the institution to expand, cultures eventually had to break their own laws and then make new ones, because enslave-

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ment required the theft or seizure of human beings and then the creation of a subordinate legal status for those enslaved. Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and early Islamic societies inherited laws recognizing slavery from earlier times and so slavery continued as a central institution. Wars produced a cheap supply of captives who were set to work in agriculture, mining, transportation, and domestic service. In medieval times, slavery expanded and contracted in the Mediterranean and Middle East as the power of empires and profitability of commerce waxed and waned.

The economic boom of the newly opened Atlantic basin dramatically expanded slavery westward in the sixteenth and especially the seventeenth century. The boom only benefited some, however. In the same era, the indigenous population and the old economy of the Americas collapsed. European adventurers, who controlled Atlantic warfare and commerce, sought cheap labor to perform the heavy agricultural and mining tasks necessary for their profiteering. African laborers, relatively inexpensive when they could be obtained as captives, were preferred because they were available, hardy, and able to survive disease better than other populations. Racial discrimination by color, identifying Africans as likely slaves, emerged as a way of sustaining and expanding slavery.

Yet why did Atlantic-centered enslavement spread its influence so far, causing slavery in Africa and Asia to expand? Africa did not undergo an economic boom like the American colonies, though in Africa too a class of wealthy merchants and rulers emerged in a climate of overall economic decline. In the centuries of exposure to enslavement, many African legal systems changed to allow the practice and officially recognize slave status. Systems of seizure and delivery improved with time, perfected by raiders and merchants. In addition, enslavement spread by contagion: too often, people who had lost family to enslavement in turn enslaved their own enemies. Slavery became a global system of labor, expanding in many Old World regions as a key element of a steadily transforming economy.

The nineteenth century witnessed the peak and near collapse of slavery, its greatest expansion and most rapid contraction. The moral and political campaign against the institution was one main reason for its decline. The other was the rise of the industrial age, which saw the creation of steamships that enabled cheap, safe, transoceanic travel. As free people started migrating in large numbers, it became possible for labor-hungry business owners to abandon slavery.

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What Have Been the Social Contributions of Black Communities?

Throughout the era of slavery and in postemancipation years, black communities have produced, contributed, and innovated in ways that maintained and advanced their own societies as well as benefited human welfare more generally. In their home societies, the labors and investments of people of African descent enabled their communities to move forward step by step. As enslaved migrants and as wage workers, these individuals also provided valuable labor for other communities. At home and abroad, they developed techniques for resisting slavery and other forms of oppression. They created a broad, pan-African identity, providing local black communities with a sense of participation in a larger society. Black people developed flexible family structures to adapt to their complex social situations, structures that relied heavily on a time-tested vision of motherhood. They learned skills and created traditions appropriate for urban life. They also established governing philosophies and practices to administer their own communities, even though hegemonic powers could interfere at will. These kinds of social contributions all evolved in unique ways.

Africans, over a long history of travails and adventures, sustained, advanced, and, when necessary, rebuilt their societies. The travel and social interaction that were a part of their life fostered a web of connectivity within the continent and with the peoples of Asia and Europe. The pattern of expanding communication and investment, established long before the slavery boom, continued through the centuries of large-scale enslavement and still goes on today. Outside their own communities, black people built much of the modern world economy—perhaps more than their share. Especially in the era of slavery but also more recently through industrial labor, black workers have contributed substantially to global construction, production, and trade. The work has ranged from building colonial cities in the Americas to constructing railways on four continents; from harvesting sugar and cloves to extracting silver, gold, coal, diamonds, and petroleum; from operating hand looms to running textile mills; from hoisting sails and loading steamships to repairing aircraft; from carving the Suez and Panama canals to tunneling subways and bomb shelters; from blacksmithing and assembling automobiles to computer programming; and, always, cleaning house.

The oppression experienced by workers fostered individual resistance and larger social movements. Enslaved black people developed traditions of opposition to slave raiders, buyers, and owners that stand as major accom-

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plishments in their own right. Individual resistance included escape, sabotage, the purchase of freedom for one's self or loved ones, and debate with slave owners and defenders of slavery. Group resistance included elaborate defenses against raiders, rebellions aboard ship or on plantations, and the formation of maroon escapee communities. Over time, black communities developed a balance of individual and group resistance and rebellion that significantly weakened slave systems and built a proud tradition of social struggle. In a word, slavery caused antislavery. Similar movements came about in response to forced labor under colonial rule and to work in prison gangs. Subsequent and broader campaigns for national liberation and civil rights were inspired and instructed by the earlier tactics of resistance to slavery.

Yet black people also became slave owners and exploiters, and in later times some became dictators and corrupt business moguls. From the fifteenth century, African warlords and merchants sold captives to purchasers along the Atlantic coast. Then in the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth centuries, black people of wealth and power, encouraged by global trends, bought expanded numbers of captives and put them to work. They did so in the Americas—especially in St.-Domingue and Brazil—and in Africa. Then from the 1960s, as black people began to regain political power, democracy turned to dictatorship in many countries, and expanded wealth somehow ended up concentrated in the hands of a few families. Black people have always faced the problem of how to handle such conflicts within their own communities.

Black people created themselves as a group: they developed and sustained a diaspora-wide identity, partly in response to the logic of "race." Far from an instinctive recognition of black unity, and equally far from a straightforward acceptance of racial categorization by whites, this common identity could only be a product of gradual, complex discussions. Black people thus found themselves struggling not only against enslavement but also against racial categorization. While rejecting racial hierarchy, black leaders developed a pan-African racial identity and with it launched some of the earliest efforts to build modern nations, most notably in Haiti and Sierra Leone. The recognition of multiethnic nations in Africa and of multiracial nations in the Americas led to new questions regarding how to sustain and best use black identity. With time, as improved media technology and political independence enabled greater flexibility, a transnational identity extended to much larger portions of black communities (see figure 7.1).

Black families developed new traditions, on the continent and in the diaspora, as economic and political conditions changed. The centrality of moth-

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FIGURE 7.1 Oprah Winfrey and South African Youth

Oprah Winfrey, wealthy and prominent from her U.S. television show, invested time and money in care for South African youth, especially those whose parents had died of AIDS.

Source: Courtesy of Harpo Productions.

erhood in the family, deeply honored in Africa's ancestral times, gained new importance under the influence of slavery, colonization, emancipation, and industrialization. As the slave trade ripped African families apart and as slave owners exploited women who had no family to protect them, the individual strength of mothers grew in centrality. Legal systems discouraging slaves from marrying, in the diaspora and in Africa, loaded further child-rearing responsibility on women. Even after emancipation, migrant-labor systems split up family units and left women as the center of family life; today's prison systems do the same in some countries. This same set of pressures left black fathers frustrated and often marginalized in family life. One should not go too far with this generalization, since it is surely the case that most black children of recent centuries, in Africa and the diaspora, have grown up in the company of both mother and father. On the other hand, since contemporary discourse often presents female-headed black households as a defect and a

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failure of family life, it is worth emphasizing that the effectiveness of black mothers in raising their children stands as a major social accomplishment of the African diaspora.

Another significant contribution of black people has been in the physical and cultural construction of urban spaces. From the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, Africans built capital cities such as Gao and Mbanza Kongo, port cities such as Elmina and Luanda, and American cities such as Havana, Lima, and Salvador. In the nineteenth century, African and Latin American cities languished, but Africans contributed to the expansion of Mecca, New York, and New Orleans. In the twentieth century, black people led in forming the popular culture of rapidly expanding metropolises in Latin America, North America, and Africa, as well as adding new character to the cities of Europe.

Black traditions in government also reflect substantial achievements. Through strong debate among themselves, black communities and their leaders developed solid notions of proper government. One great task was learning how to govern a community while under the thumb of hegemonic or imperial forces. Holding on to the idea of the beneficent African king—a person who was powerful, just, and deeply focused on the community's welfare—was one way to maintain political principles. A second tradition involved the messianic leader brought suddenly to prominence in times of crisis. A third and quite contradictory political tradition grew out of the long centuries of slavery and imperial subjugation. In this version, the king reigned with absolute power, demanding and receiving complete submission and frequent protestations of loyalty from his subjects.

In another vein, the many contributions of black people to the knowledge and technology of the modern world appear among the accomplishments of individual inventors who, among other things, improved transportation, medicine, agriculture, day-to-day domestic life, and manufacturing techniques, as well as developed new techniques in the arts and communication. While individual discoveries and inventions mark big changes in knowledge, the real driving force behind steady technological advance is the many small improvements made by anonymous thinkers that have been implemented and then passed on to succeeding generations. While many of the small breakthroughs came from untutored artisans who used good sense to solve the problems before them, formal education has become essential during the past century to advance innovative thinking in an increasingly complex world. For the peoples of Africa and the African diaspora, such education has made great strides, especially in the Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish languages.

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During the past four centuries, black people worldwide, in carrying out their social struggles, have played a significant role in colonization, industrialization, urbanization, and the advance of formal education, science, and technology. The global changes they participated in made life increasingly complex rather than simpler. Of the struggles carried out in earlier ages, none were complete at the end of the periods I identified: survival of black communities was not assured by 1800, emancipation had yet to reach many people in Africa or Afro-Eurasia by 1900, and all black peoples had by no means achieved citizenship in 1960. Similarly, blacks had not achieved equality by 2000. Indeed, this last objective seems in some ways the most elusive. The peoples of Africa and the diaspora have achieved big steps toward equality in a number of cultural areas but have fallen behind systematically in overall economic well being.

How Did Black Communities Create Their Cultural Advances?

African-diaspora communities turned local expressive cultures into a cosmopolitan cultural outpouring, taking advantage of newly forming audiences. In the nineteenth century, these audiences developed through social changes that expanded theatrical and musical venues for the general populace. In the twentieth century, technological change made it possible to reach greater numbers of people through print, sound recordings, film, radio, television, and many other forms of media.

The long oppression of slavery and racism led ironically to the flowering of black popular culture. The deprivation brought by slavery, racism, and colonialism denied Africans the opportunity to sustain powerful elites—on the continent and especially in the diaspora. As a result, the most talented artists, rather than be summoned by monarchs to palaces to create music and art aimed at praising great leaders, were left to entertain members of their own communities. As a result, throughout Africa and the diaspora, the work of individual artists and the broad traditions of popular culture gained prominence over the celebration of nobles and monarchs in elite courts. For individual artists, their specific accomplishments in storytelling, music, and dress developed in different directions because their audience was the community rather than the ruling class. For the art forms as a whole, the broad techniques of communicating with popular audiences were able to grow—emphasizing the basic issues of life and death with sensuality and mystery—

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free from interference by royal authorities focused on their own interests and agendas. In an interesting twist, the *griots*, who sang praises for kings of the savanna and who were particular innovations of African royal art, now took on the task of sustaining the memory of the whole community; that is, they became an element of popular culture.

Black popular culture renewed itself repeatedly through new technology, new audiences, improvisation, and continued borrowing. Jazz music provides an outstanding metaphor in this regard, in that it formally treats improvisation as essential to the genre. In fact, improvisation and attention to new audiences or new techniques have characterized most genres within black popular culture.

The emergence of black artists who have gained wide recognition in elite cultures can also be understood in terms of popular culture and broad audiences. Leading writers, philosophers, singers, playwrights, composers, and actors have each had to develop technical and artistic proficiency meeting the highest standards of their field, but they have also relied on their ethnic links to black communities to reaffirm the social conscience of their cultural work. For example, tenor Roland Hayes's practice of including spirituals in his classical recitals made this point in one way. Among artists, the term "giving back" was sometimes used to describe such an act of recognizing their community. Many years later, another form of giving back involved a budding black academic who sought to contribute through his studies to a recognition of the African diaspora as including the Siddi community in South India (see figure 7.2).

How will changes in society and in patterns of culture influence the future of black popular culture? The very success of black artists in music, dance, literature, and other fields has altered the cultural landscape. New genres that began in black communities are now shared by many ethnic and racial groups. Hip-hop, for instance, has gained not only large cross-cultural audiences but major artists from beyond the black community across several continents. The steady crossover of black cultural innovations into broader audiences is ongoing, while the cultural creativity within black communities continues unabated.

Will Social Equality Ever Be Possible?

The ideal of achieving social equality has now gained wide support. In the last three centuries, slavery has been repudiated, ideas of democracy and

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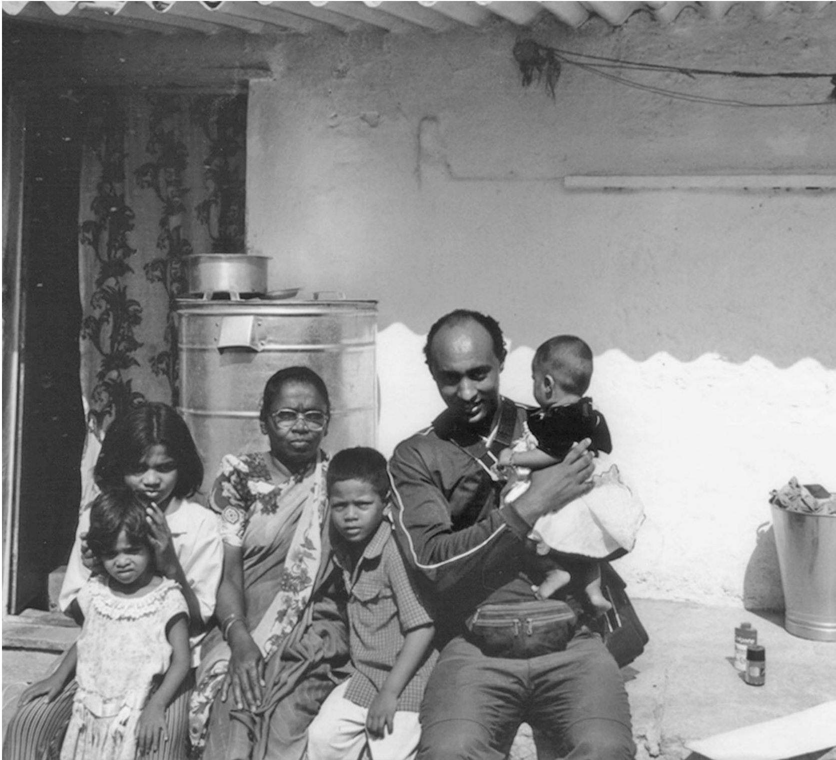

FIGURE 7.2 Researcher with Family of the Informant, Karnataka, India

In this multifaceted image of the Indian Ocean diaspora, members of an African-descended family of Hyderabad (Karnataka state) pose with a visiting anthropologist. The visitor, Ababu Minda Yimene of Ethiopia, was completing his doctoral studies at the University of Goettingen in Germany.

Source: Courtesy of Ababu Minda Yimene.

citizenship have challenged earlier notions of social hierarchy, racial and religious discrimination are now widely decried, and the United Nations has formally adopted the ideal of universal human rights. The twentieth-century expansion of literacy has given poor people a greater voice. In these senses, society has become more egalitarian. However, the struggle for the realistic achievement of social equality continues to occupy the people of Africa and the African diaspora.

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Black individuals and communities have contributed much to the advance of egalitarian ideas. Their participation in campaigns against slavery and imperialism and their continuing criticism of other forms of oppression have done much to articulate the concerns of the poor and the underprivileged. In particular, the history of the African diaspora provides ample evidence of acts of individual strength and imagination that brought significant advances in the struggle for and attainment of social equality. The names Toussaint Louverture, Harriet Tubman, and Nelson Mandela are sufficient to illustrate this dimension of black achievement.

Popular culture has had a surprisingly great influence in spreading the idea of social equality. Music and dance convey the impression of such equality even where economic differences are large. Songs, dances, and other musical creations have restated and magnified joy, sadness, hope, despair, and above all a sense of community. These forms recognize leadership yet also show a healthy skepticism for hierarchy. The traditions of cultural representation, invented in earlier millennia in Africa, have been tested and reformulated over four centuries of broader interaction across the continent and diaspora. They comment on and become part of life in a way that has continuing relevance for black people. Perhaps of equal importance is that these traditions have also instructed and inspired many beyond the black population.

In contrast, however, economic inequality has grown over the past two centuries to an unprecedented and even threatening level. It separates rich nations from poor and wealthy individuals from the destitute. In turn, those who are well off and highly educated have great power to make decisions affecting all humanity, and they have access to a far greater range of cultural achievements and to better health conditions than ordinary people.

Some crises of inequality have become particularly severe. In the contemporary world, there remains particular concern about problems of poverty, inequality, and racial discrimination within black communities and in their relations with other communities. I think especially of South Africa and Zimbabwe, where the heritage of racial hierarchy has left patterns of inequity that have only begun to heal and where governance is collapsing in the latter. I think also of New Orleans, where the natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath revealed the poverty and racial inequality remaining in the world's most powerful nation. These examples reflect the global divide between the haves and have-nots, in which the poor must fend for themselves and face manipulation by private corporations, powerful government institutions, and the international capitalist economic order.

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The question of social equality leaves us with a serious dilemma. While one can note many concrete steps toward defining and legislating basic equality for human societies, one dare not ignore the immense and growing gap in wealth and power that characterizes our age. To sort out this dilemma, we would be wise to draw deeply from the archive of experience our predecessors have stored over the last few centuries of history. That history can provide profound insights on which aspects of social change we can control and which we cannot.

Should Reparations Be Granted for Past Injustices?

Occasionally, victors in wars have forced losers to pay reparations for damages or evils done. After World War I, the Allies, especially Britain and France, required the German government to make payments, arguing that Germany was to blame for the conflict's destruction. British and French colonial authorities in Africa burned rebellious villages and then required the inhabitants to pay back taxes and the cost of the expeditions that subdued them. Following World War II and the Holocaust in Europe, East and West German governments agreed to compensate the state of Israel for Jewish loss of life. Sometimes the victors have been forced to pay. Decades after it won independence, Haiti paid France twenty-five million gold francs—a huge sum in the mid-nineteenth century—to compensate French planters for their losses. Parallel notions of reparations at an individual level accompanied the end of slavery. Former slave owners demanded recompense for their property loss and they received it from the British government in 1838 and in other cases. Freed slaves demanded payback for their loss of freedom and the theft of their labor. In the American South, victorious Union armies distributed land to thousands of black families, but in 1866, the federal government revoked these land titles and expelled the ex-slaves: their call for "forty acres and a mule" echoed for years thereafter. In recent decades, with the renunciation of the heritage of slavery and racism, black groups on all continents have called for reparations for the descendants of those enslaved and compensation for black societies that have suffered racial discrimination.[1]

While the hope for reparations is simple, implementing a workable plan is highly complex. Since it is impossible to grant payments to victims long dead, should support go to their descendants? Are the reparations due to descendants of slaves only in the diaspora or in Africa as well? To the degree

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that Africa as a whole was weakened by slavery, should general payments be made to the continent? Who should make the payments? Should compensation be demanded only from the descendants of slave owners? Should payments be made by all white people? Should everyone alive today make payment, given we have all benefited in some measure from the past exploitation of slaves? These and many more questions make clear why it has been difficult to proceed practically with the idea of reparations.

Despite its complexities, the notion opens the door to a more general concept: compensation for the past as a way of ensuring a better future. There is no way to undo previous inequities. Neither is there a way to compensate satisfactorily for past oppression, though some recompense may be better than none. Yet it seems worthwhile to think of more ways to respond in our own time to past discrimination, since any attempt to "forgive and forget" serves in practice to continue old divisions.

Creating *memory* is one device that can help make up for past oppression. To establish and strengthen memory of past events and processes, one may rely on songs, images, and stories. The formation of memory is as contentious as any area of history: governments rely on monuments and official textbooks to create historical memory. But the monuments and textbooks are usually made by and devoted to the victors: the Arc de Triomphe in Paris was built to commemorate Napoleon's military victories. Nevertheless, some countries have designated holidays to celebrate the emancipation of slaves and as a reminder of past oppression, and memorials to slaves are being constructed and are opening for view all around the Atlantic.[2]

A much more specific compensating device is *affirmative action*. With this policy, a society attempts to adjust the appointment of individuals for employment, education, and other benefits in an attempt to ensure that previously disadvantaged groups do not suffer exclusion. Affirmative action exists today in quite different forms in such countries as India, Canada, the United States, South Africa, and Malaysia. Here too the complications are considerable. Deciding which groups need or no longer need extra help is a difficult, contentious issue for any society and more so for humanity as a whole.

Meanwhile, the old inequities continue. A policy of "benign neglect" might appear to some as a neutral approach that neither adds to past oppression nor interferes with the social order, but in fact it necessarily continues to facilitate inequality.[3] Those people today who live in part on wealth created from the proceeds of past oppression need bear no individual guilt for their ancestors' actions. They do, however, bear particular responsibility for

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ensuring that new inequities are not propagated. The narrow considerations of profit, in the hands of unrepresentative bodies of decision makers, continue to cause discrimination in educational access, inequitable wages and prices in international trade, and, sadly, inequitable health services to the groups hardest hit by the HIV epidemic.

While the ideal of social equality requires action from all, each community must ultimately heal itself. This is another contentious issue. In public debates about inequality, one often hears calls for black communities in Africa and the diaspora to take more responsibility for self-improvement. One often hears the proverb, “Physician, heal thyself.” The danger in such calls is they tend assume that black people have no record of successful self-improvement. The history of the African diaspora shows, in marked contrast, how black communities have healed and rebuilt time and again. The list of such campaigns is long: recreating African culture in the diaspora under slavery, gaining freedom from slavery as individuals and in groups, gaining land and building independent communities with emancipation, pursuing education relentlessly despite the consistent lack of governmental support, developing neighborhoods and community organizations for urban and industrial life, and creating cadres of highly skilled lawyers, bankers, and other professionals. Up to the twentieth century, the economic productivity of slaves generated growth in the Americas and helped sustain the economies of Africa. Nevertheless, the economic construction of Africa and of diaspora communities in the twentieth century, though substantial, failed to make up the ground lost to other communities. One cannot be sure, but it may be that complaints about economic inadequacies of blacks today are parallel to the complaints about cultural inadequacies of blacks a century ago. It may be that powerful responses to those critiques are well under way. The twenty-first century might bring surprises as big as those of the twentieth.

Regardless of these points about the past, there surely exists a widely shared responsibility to ensure that inequities are not propagated purposefully or unthinkingly into the future. Arguably, the world as a whole does owe something to black people of Africa and the diaspora—partly out of concern for equitable distribution of the benefits of human society and partly as recognition of the unfair price paid by black people in constructing the modern world. Today’s response to the inequalities of race and slavery provides one great test for humanity. How well we perform on this test is fundamentally relevant to the more general problem of protecting our species and the environment in which we live.

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Will Racism End?

There is hope that racism will end—or at least disappear in its present form. The campaign against racial discrimination has achieved remarkable successes. It will not do to deny the important changes that have taken place in what used to be called "race relations." A long list of social movements—campaigns against racism, anticolonial struggles, democratization movements, scholarly research, and protests in education, sport, politics, and on the job—have created a situation where public support for racial discrimination has become rare.

These warm campaigns of black struggle and of human solidarity have done something to melt the snows of social discrimination against people of African ancestry. But the melting snows reveal the enormous iceberg of prejudice and inequality that lies below the surface, an iceberg made solid by the compressed accretions of hierarchy and dispossession over the centuries. Sometimes the melting of one layer of prejudice reveals not the purity of equality but new forms of discrimination, as when color prejudice gives way to discrimination by religion or by language. One may hope and work for the ultimate disappearance of this iceberg, but no quick fix is likely to vaporize the lasting consequences of its existence.

Once we understand that racism is about color but *not only* about color, the difficulty of ending it becomes clearer. Color prejudice has been an outstanding form of social discrimination in recent centuries, but as long as other forms of prejudice remain significant, color prejudice can reappear at the height of some social controversy.

Sometimes it is suggested that society and government can become "colorblind." According to this view, we would take no account of racial differences, and by this act of will the heritage of past discrimination would soon fade away. To implement this view, governments, schools, private firms, and news media would cease to identify people by race or ethnicity. One great difficulty with this approach is that it cannot guarantee that everyone will act at once to halt the use of race or ethnicity as means of categorizing people. Another difficulty is that it asks people to cease recognizing the physical and social differences that our ancestors have noted for millennia.[4]

As a result, changes that are interpreted as the end of racial categorization may in fact be a revision of racial categorization. The early history of racial discrimination provides reminders on this point: "racial" differences were once seen to focus significantly on religious difference and on lineage,

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then the focus changed to emphasize phenotype and assumed genetic differences. These shifts moved individuals from one category to another but retained the idea of separate categories. One wants neither to deny the changes that have taken place nor to erect fantasies of a world devoid of conflict and prejudice. Perhaps it will be productive to ask what precise forms of social conflicts of the future will create new visions of "race."

Perhaps there is something to be learned by comparing racism with patriarchy. Patriarchy is the widespread—almost universal—practice and belief that places males as dominant in human society. For patriarchy as for race, the belief relies on the fundamental and erroneous assumption that the differences between groups (by race or by sex) are greater than the differences within groups. The phenotypical and biological differences between the sexes exceed those between the races: men and women have clear differences from each other. But the readiness of humans to categorize and then to exaggerate the validity of categories has created a sort of hierarchy and discrimination by gender that parallels discrimination by race. Scientists continue to test areas of similarity and difference between the sexes, and the social movement for women's equality has achieved many advances. Meanwhile, the category of biological racism has been more thoroughly tested and refuted than any other category, and this refutation will have its effects.

We can be sure that humans will continue to categorize and discriminate, using the logic of the "other" as a way to simplify complex social issues. Even when most individuals in a population emphasize human equality (meaning that the small differences among us are distributed almost randomly), a few people can make a difference. If they gain office or create disruptions, they may have the power to impose a program of social discrimination on the majority.

What Is the Future of Black Identity?

The heritage of slavery will count for less in the future than in the past. One may expect that the stigma but not the memory of slavery will pass away. But we also understand that slavery goes on even today, and in many societies, wherever some people are able to gain power over the bodies of others.

The differences we have labeled as "race" will also count for less in the future than they have in the past. The most recent discoveries in human biology show how tiny the variations between one "race" and another are, so that black identity cannot be seen as reflecting any deep and inherent dispar-

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ity. Phenotypical "race" is now known to consist of a set of superficial differences in an overwhelmingly similar human population. The genetic differences among African populations are greater than those separating Africans from other populations. By that logic, there is no such thing as racial purity. By the same logic, "mixes" can no longer be treated as intermediate in biological terms.

These biological realities remind us that race is socially constructed—its existence lies in the collective decisions of humans and not in nature. The growing understanding of the genetic unity of mankind has done a great deal to reduce actions and ideas of explicit racial discrimination. But people still see the differences among them, however superficial they may be, and are likely to act on them. Racial identity is not about to disappear.

By the same token, black identity is socially constructed—both by the members of black communities and by the opinions of persons outside the community. Black identity has only recently achieved widespread and positive recognition from those outside black communities. Black people have steadily built their range of self-concepts over recent centuries, so it is most unlikely that they will give up this identity even if racial discrimination ceases to put them on the defensive. In addition, the physical and phenotypical characteristics of black people reproduce themselves dependably every generation.

Chéri Samba, the imaginative and self-centered painter from Kinshasa, presents a truly thought-provoking assessment of black identity in his *J'aime la couleur* (see figure 7.3). He presents an optimistic outlook both on color in strictly chromatic terms and, not far below the surface, on the place of people of color (in all their variety) in the world.

The identities of "mixed" people are socially constructed in different ways by the same processes. It may be that the people who have been labeled as "mixed," and who have therefore been left between categories, will gain the most in security of identity out of the current biological advance and social rethinking.

As in earlier times, the nature of black identity is linked to the nature of human identity and human community. The problem of community is now posed in a different fashion. There is no way to go back to the past. But just as black people have worked to create larger communities—national communities and pan-African communities—so does humanity in general face the need to define a human community. This need for community faces its greatest contradiction in the expanding economic inequality among humans.

In contrast to the unity and linkage of black communities, there are growing divisions within black communities. The recent rise of more black people

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FIGURE 7.3 *J'aime la couleur*, by Cheri Samba, 2003

Cheri Samba, the prolific and argumentative painter of Kinshasa, usually paints himself at the center of his visual social commentaries. This 2003 painting, whose title translates as "I Like Color," is composed of acrylic and glitter on campus. Details of the text at the bottom left and right of the painting: *Left*: "La tête doit tourner un peu comme dans le sens d'une spirale afin de reconnaître ce qui nous entoure. J'AIME LA COULEUR." *Right*: "Tout ce qui nous entoure n'est autre que la couleur. On est soi-même couleur. La couleur c'est la vie. VIVE LA COULEUR Pour ne pas dire la peinture!!"

Source: Courtesy of Jean Pigozzi.

to positions of influence and wealth means that black communities will necessarily become more heterogeneous. The ideal of maintaining black unity and social cohesion will require, therefore, the creation of new means for establishing common identity across an increasingly wide social and economic range. It may be that the experience and process of sustaining and recreating a common identity across the African diaspora will provide some pointers on how to strengthen a sense of community among humans generally. Or it may be that conflicts within black communities will become more severe.

The previous experiments in defining black identity have run into their limits. The North American approach was to label the hierarchy of society with race at every turn, thereby formally denying black people the oppor-

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tunity for social advancement. One "drop of black blood" was sufficient to deprive a person of the benefits of being white. The Latin American technique was to avoid labeling the hierarchy with race and thereby ignore the fact that unspoken discrimination was denying black people the opportunity for social progress. An intermediate experiment, particularly in the Caribbean, was to identify the range of colors and to rank the social hierarchy by shades of color. (All of these experiments have been applied, in varying ways, in Africa and in the Old World diaspora as well.)

In this fascinating mix of genetic similarities, cultural overlaps, and arbitrary social distinctions, some South American trends in black identity appear to be of particular interest. There are moves to abandon the region's old experiment—the ideology of "racial democracy," which meant ignoring or denying the inequality. The national cultures of Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, and other countries are now recognizing formally both their African ancestry and the heritage of discrimination that goes with it. They are beginning to adjust their history and institutions to acknowledge this new thinking. Or perhaps one should say they are thinking up new ways of stating the relationships among black, brown, and white, since these were the previous Latin American categories. Of course, these changes come not out of the blue but in response to the steady demands and incremental advances of the people of African descent in those countries. The prospect is interesting: perhaps it will be possible to sustain a strong black identity even when differences in race or color are not set in a hierarchy. In addition, perhaps it will be possible to recognize all the "mixes" by which people choose to identify themselves. One need not expect to end social conflict or to eliminate racial difference as a factor in human life, but the next experiments in defining black identity may lead to a substantially new stage.

The Journey Continues

Linkages and interactions throughout the African diaspora have determined the path of history of black people for centuries. The expanded African Web has brought remarkable parallels to various parts of the black world. The links were guaranteed by long habits of migration and exchange, then by slavery, then by responses to racism, then by voluntary association. The connections among regions are probably now deeper than ever.

The experience of the African diaspora provides insights into the continuity of human history. The ideology of the nineteenth and early twentieth century taught people to think in terms of isolated nations as the contain-

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ers within which history was made. The ideology of the early twenty-first century teaches us that global forces are now breaking down those earlier boundaries. In contrast to these simplifications of the past, the history of the African diaspora shows that interconnections and global patterns have been central to history for centuries, not just in the past decade. Even for those who were mostly subjects of empires rather than rulers, or subjects of nations rather than the chosen people, the connections of the African diaspora provide a deep heritage and a steady source of innovations. While every black community values its local traditions, it has the opportunity of drawing on shared experience over a wide area and a long time.