

Preface

I had thought to subtitle this book *A Guide to Self-Discovery and Understanding for White Americans Who Live and Work in Multiracial Settings*, but that was much too long and so I mention it here. This book is a labor of love and concern about a topic many hardly know exists. Therein lies the concern. White people form part of the equation of our multiracial nation, yet we've given little serious thought to our role as simply that—white people. Furthermore, it seems everybody but white people has been telling us we need to do some of that thinking. Taking a critical and concerned look at white people, our culture, our history, our ways of perceiving the world, is a timely and important task as we enter the 21st century.

Yet many white people already feel battered and bruised, suffering from compassion fatigue brought on by the constant moral, psychological, and less often, economic wear and tear that race places upon us. We've been told untold times of our sins, alleged or true. Most of us wish only that it would go away, yet deep down we realize we have a lot of hard work to do to make our community, our nation, our world a better place for people of all colors.

It is knowing the goodwill of white people that makes my task a loving one. To me, as a white American, this knowledge comes from within. I could document the failure of that goodwill to produce change on a thousand different occasions, and admit the external evidence of its existence is sometimes poor, yet I know it's there.

Nearly 100 years ago, sociologist W. E. B. DuBois spoke of the veil separating white and black Americans. He spoke of the double-consciousness of African-Americans, who witness both their internal experiences, and the imagery of the dominant white culture that thrusts its own images of blackness back at them. Many sociologists today believe this dual consciousness has become more widespread in our society. White Americans, as always, witness images of ourselves of our own making. But increasingly, images of ourselves produced by other racial and cultural groups penetrate our social

world and impose themselves on our awareness. As our nation and our world continue shrinking, white Americans can no longer ignore the larger racial and cultural context in which we live.

Though I have had acquaintances and friends from every racial group, my richest experiences of intimacy and mutual trust with people outside my racial group have most commonly been with African-Americans. Hence, though I touch on the experiences of many groups in the book, there is a decided “black/white” flavor as well. This is not intended to simplify the growing complexity of race relations in our country. I simply draw upon what I have lived.

Chapters 1 through 4 explore reasons why white Americans who care about creating a multiracial society should look to understanding our own culture as part of that process. Chapters 5 through 7 provide details of the history, cultural components, and psychology of white American culture. Chapters 8 and 9 review various perspectives in academic and nonacademic settings that examine and act upon white American culture in an intentional way. Finally, Chapter 10 offers a model for decentering white American culture in our society and centering multiracial values in its place.

Throughout the book, within each chapter are several sidebars. Each may be read and understood independently of the surrounding chapter narrative. In order to not disrupt the flow of the main narrative some readers may wish to read the sidebars either before or after the narrative. This is a matter of personal choice, and I do not recommend one approach above another.

The book, I hope, is readable, personal and autobiographical, opinioned, and informative. Those are my goals, each equally important. It is not a scholarly work per se. That would conflict too readily with the other goals I set. Yet I have taken pains to identify my sources with detailed notes. I do this so that the reader who wants to delve into the topic at depth will have the means to do so. But to those less inclined, the book reads perfectly well on its own and you can simply ignore all those little numbers at the end of various sentences and paragraphs if you like. Just go with the flow.