

Critical Race Theory

Debra Dickerson argues it's time blacks stop worrying about what whites think of them.

By Ta-Nehisi Coates

In the run-up to the war with Iraq, Harry Belafonte, entertainer and potentate of the old black left, criticized Colin Powell for his role in the Bush administration war effort. Belafonte implied that Powell was a house slave, President Bush the master, and 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., the big house. "In the days of slavery, there were those slaves who lived on the plantation and [there] were those slaves that lived in the house," said Belafonte. "You got the privilege of living in the house if you served the master ... exactly the way the master intended to have you serve him. Colin Powell's committed to come into the house of the master."

The critique was a restatement of an old black-power notion, popularized by Malcolm X. Roughly, it asserts that docile house slaves were foolishly loyal to their masters, while cantankerous field slaves were the real rebels. The analysis is historically specious. Some of slavery's most violent dissidents—Nat Turner, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser—weren't exactly intractable field hands. Vesey was free, in fact. The house slave/field slave dichotomy

THE END OF BLACK- NESS

DEBRA J. DICKERSON

The End of Blackness

By Debra J. Dickerson

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makes for great mythology but always fell down under the weight of historical analysis.

Belafonte was roundly panned, even by his fellow black leftists, for effectively calling Powell a sellout. But beyond being just a vicious ad hominem attack, Belafonte's critique was woefully simplistic and outdated. Exactly who was Powell selling out and who are the slaves? Black people? Poor people? All

Americans? Calling Powell a sellout, tells us nothing about the complexity of an African American, who is popular among other African Americans, and yet is charged with carrying out the foreign policy of a president most African Americans hate.

Belafonte's analysis suffered from a problem of vocabulary, one that has struck many black thinkers over the past few decades. African Americans have entered into an epoch of history where, for the first time, Bull Conner racism is the least of our problems. And yet "the problem of the color-line" still lingers. A gaggle of brilliant scholars from Robin Kelley to Cornel West to William Julius Wilson have sought to articulate this new world where race intermingles with all manner of societal problems to wreak havoc on black communities.

But no one has yet coined a language that describes this new reality in the way W.E.B. Du Bois did in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois essentially defined black America in the 20th century with his notion of "double consciousness"—the idea that African Americans experience everything in this world both as Americans and as black people. Scholars have come up shaky in their efforts to update Du Bois's simple, but ingenious formula.

In her new book, *The End of Blackness*, Debra Dickerson has a solution for our lexiconal conundrum—throw the entire damn dictionary of race out the window. Dickerson lays out her thesis in the book's introduction: "This book will both prove and promote the idea that the concept of 'blackness,' as it has come to be understood, is rapidly losing its ability to describe, let alone predict or manipulate, the political and social behavior of African Americans."

The idea that race has little social or political meaning is not a new line of reasoning in the debate around black America. But it's usually employed by conservatives—of all races—attempting to down-

play the impact of racism, or black people cynically seeking to absolve themselves of social responsibility (read: Bob Johnson). Dickerson, to her credit, believes in discarding many of the pillars of black identity, not because it would further her individually, but because she honestly thinks that it's the only path of survival.

White people, according to Dickerson, are victims of "aversion therapy," in that they refuse to see their own complicity in racism. Furthermore, whites "assume their perfection" and exhibit "a continued refusal to see America as inherently, organically multiracial and multicultural." White narcissism, for Dickerson, is only one leg in a historical conspiracy. "Simply put," she writes. "Whites held hands across generations to hold blacks down long enough to ensure that their own heirs would ascend to as much privilege as possible while simultaneously keeping their hands clean."

But—as her very next sentence makes clear—Dickerson does not absolve the black community of responsibility in all this: "Blacks need to accept this and then get over it—and get even...The know-nothingness required to keep blacks tilting at the windmill of white approval is no less odious than whites' determination to remain first among purported equals." For Dickerson, white racism is one giant head trip, and thus can only be as effective as black people's gusto for white approval allows it to be. Black people, she writes, are "complicit in maintaining white supremacy" because they hunger for "white approval or white apology rather than their own autonomy."

While Dickerson's rhetoric exhibits echoes of black nationalism, she turns an unforgiving eye to that philosophy's more recent manifestations. "Carpetbagging Afrocentrists," as she terms them, are at least as much to blame for the predicament of black America as approval-seeking blacks. "Instead

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of carrying out substantive studies of African history," writes Dickerson. "These charlatans imagine glorious achievements, such as the Bronze Age of African development, airplanes or routinized surgery." Dickerson dismisses today's nationalist community roughly as "Afrocentric hustlers" who are invoking "mytho-ancestors, so far outside the past, as to be in fables."

At some points in her treatise, Dickerson journeys into interesting, and gutsy, terrain. Her critique of the Condoleezza Rice predicament is illuminating and saddening. I've written about my crush on the National Security Advisor and her counter-intuitive allure. But I suspect that Dickerson's opinion, even in its overstated form, is closer to the truth. "To white men, [Rice] is not a woman. To black men, she's not a fuckable woman; even the vaunted black penis cannot bridge the chasm between them...Her having thrived is somehow an affront to the black man. What black masculinity does to white men, black female competence does to black men."

For almost anyone identified with any sort of political ideology, Dickerson's analysis is a bitter pill to swallow. Unfortunately, the book tops out at just that. For all her flame-throwing, caustic denunciations and grenade lobbing, Dickerson does almost nothing to realize

her essential thesis—the assertion that "black" is somehow a woefully inadequate way of describing African-Americans. That's because, for all its bluster and vitriol, *Blackness* never emerges as much more than a directionless rant.

And not even a credible rant. Its targets are often strawmen conveniently substituted for less vulnerable objects. In the section of *Blackness* that attacks Afrocentricity, Dickerson ignores the legion of authors who've written on the subject, instead electing to attack Iyanla Vanzant. But Vanzant, a self-help guru, is only vaguely informed by Afrocentricity and certainly has never presented herself as any sort of intellectual. Furthermore, at this point, Vanzant's franchise has extended beyond black people—she had a talk show produced by Barbara Walters. Afrocentricity, is surely responsible for producing its share of crackpots. But Dickerson at once ducks the jokers (Leonard Jeffries) and the more serious scholars (Temple University professor Molefi Asante, for instance, who basically invented Afrocentricity). Instead she picks on Vanzant, thus substituting a bait and switch for a valid critique.

When a strawman slides beyond her grip, Dickerson just makes a generalization and states it as an unassailable truth. "Blacks often ask what their country can do for them, but never the converse," writes Dickerson. This would come as news to the thousands of African Americans in the armed services (puzzlingly, Dickerson once numbered among them) and African Americans who've died in every major American war, even without the basic guarantees of citizenship.

Even when veering into the realm of history, Dickerson can't resist the temptation to take extremely complex problems and reduce them to two dimensions. She claims that Africa was the source of the slave trade because it was "the least urbanized continent" and was

"defenseless." There are reams of scholarship dedicated to discerning why one of Africa's chief exports turned out to be slaves. Dickerson has, evidently, consulted none of it. That's because she has no need of scholars or scholarship, and the lion's share of her sources are authors (Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Carter G. Woodson, James Baldwin) who are dead. The result is that *Blackness* feels extremely dated.

Certainly it's admirable that Dickerson is not beholden to any particular ideology. But in her efforts to not be pinned down, Dickerson mounts an intellectual scorched earth campaign and never settles down to stake out any ground of her own.

This is the book's ultimate failure—it broaches no new theories for how African Americans should consider themselves. Despite arguing for the uselessness of "blackness," Dickerson presents very little evidence of why black people should change their names. Instead she relies on generalizations, at best, and stereotypes, at worst, to prove her case. But ultimately she proves the opposite of her thesis—the book has convinced me, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that there are definitely a group of people in this country who are black.

Blackness is the wrong book to convince anyone otherwise. Ethnic monikers (Jewish, Irish, Japanese, whatever), like virtually anything else in the English language, never succeed as complete definitions of anything. They are abstractions applied to realities, and thus bear all the shortcomings of that transition. When the abstract no longer works well enough, people generally jettison it: the Italians are not the Lombards, the French are not the Franks, black people are not Negroes. People know when to change their names—unsubstantiated intellectual hackery doesn't make the process go any faster.

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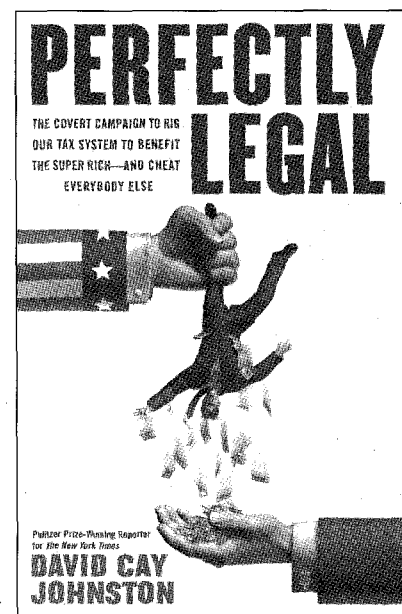
Tax Laxity

How a kinder, gentler IRS breeds cheats.

By Nicholas Thompson

David Cay Johnston is one of this country's most important journalists. A nine-year veteran of the tax beat for *The New York Times*, Johnston combines the best of Eliot Spitzer and Seymour Hersh. He's an old-fashioned crusading reporter who mines the internal revenue bureaucracy and comes up with potent, pertinent reports on tax fraud and other financial shenanigans. Whether reporting on the latest shelter scam or the Bush administration's decision to boost its economic numbers by counting fast food work as manufacturing, Johnston's stories always have steam coming off them. Now, he's poured that decade's worth of hard-won expertise into book form, arguing the tax system itself deserves much of the blame for America's growing economic inequality.

The book's title—*Perfectly Legal: The covert campaign to rig our tax system to benefit the super rich—and cheat everybody else*—isn't subtle. But it does capture the first half of the book, in which Johnston describes how the "political donor class" has manipulated tax policy. Here, *Perfectly Legal* floods the reader with telling statistics and stories. For example, Johnston notes that the share of national income held by the richest 13,360 households grew by



Perfectly Legal

By David Cay Johnston

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more than 400 percent during the past 30 years—while dropping by 22.5 percent for the bottom nine-tenths of taxpayers. Later, he describes how a minor tweak to the tax code in 1985 allows an executive who flies in a corporate jet for personal reasons to value the perk at half the price of a first-class ticket on his income taxes. Because the company also gets a deduction based on the real cost of sending the executive in the plane, Johnston notes, "it would be cheaper for taxpayers to give away first-class tickets to executives rather than subsidize their per-