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Racial stereotypes: history and consequences

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An American Journey:
Historical stereotypes and Today's Consequences

A long ago December 1st in 1955 my 6th grade classmates and I were sitting up straight, enthralled as Mrs. Lundine read to us about Sir Edmond Hillary conquering Mount Everest just two years earlier. I was a Northern Minnesota boy who once went searching for his dog in a 50-below, 12-inch snowfall, and I thought I could identify with Hillary's challenges in the snow and cold. But, climbing at 26,000 feet in the Himalayans is not life at 700 feet in Minnesota. The awe I felt was palpable---for his intelligence, his courage, and his resolve to overcome apprehension about the 100-mph winds and the thin-air altitude threatening this never-before-achieved challenge. Tents could literally fly off the mountain, and unlike later climbers, Hillary was climbing without oxygen tanks. I was mesmerized and made straight for the school library, and over the next weeks read every book we had on mountain climbing. For me, this was the most extraordinary event of 1955.

Two decades later, however, I learned that on that same 1955 December 1st in Montgomery, Alabama, a 42-year-old Rosa Parks chose to climb a different mountain. As a sixth grader in my white-only Minnesota village, I had known nothing about the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in schools, and I had only a vague sense of racial discrimination. However, this sense was persistent. Just outside our one-stop-sign-town an entire tribe of Ojibwa (or Chippewa) Indians lived in birch-bark or tar-paper huts, earned money in the autumn months gathering wild-rice from the local lakes, sold crafts displayed on racks made from branches tied together with twine, and were thought to be lazy, stupid, and dirty, and---the town's people said---staggered home drunk most every night. None of us really ***knew*** any of them, so this was the widespread perception, the common opinion. This was the Mille Lacs Lake Indian Reservation, just about 80 miles north of Minneapolis.

Their Roman Catholic Church, the five-room school with an indoor basketball gym, a grocery store selling hamburger, milk, and Wonder Bread, and a saloon just on the edge of the reservation pretty much confined them all to their roughly eight square miles. Confined, that is, until the children reached the 9th grade and then came into town to our high school. (Note that we called it "our" high school). These teen-agers dressed like we dressed, carried the same books, entered through the same doors at 7:50 AM five days a

week, but they lived on “the reservation” and were bussed in and out every day. One would have to wear blinders not to notice that they were often absent, never spoke up in class, and that while many of the boys were the best athletes in the physical education classes, they never went out for any sport. Neither did they participate in any other co-curricular activities. One, maybe two, Native American kids graduated each year, and despite Marcus Weyus enrolling in the St. Cloud art school, Maggie Red Cloud’s steady work for years in the biggest grocery store in town, and Valerie Skinaway’s graduation from the University of Minnesota, the inevitable perceptions persisted. Something was wrong. Something didn’t add up, but what? How did we, even in the face of those exceptions, decide to stick with those stereotyped views? They were lazy, dirty, stupid, and alcoholic.

Several years later, this college English major now working on a Master’s degree read a black author for the first time. Richard Wright, most famous for his novel ***Native Son*** first wrote a collection of short stories called ***Uncle Tom’s Children***. There I began to encounter the incalculable consequences and complexities of the perceptions and historical stereotyping which in childhood I had sensed but was incapable of understanding. In the very first story, after a white man has just shot and killed two of the four young black boys trespassing on his land, his gun somehow ends up in the hands of one of the other boys who now holds it, trembling, aimed at the murderer of his friends. The white man’s reaction is unflinching**:** he simply holds out his hand and orders, “give me that gun, boy.” I wrote in the page’s margin, “To think that he would!” This white man simply assumed that the stupid and submissive black child would of course obey. We have, today, a term for that perception**:** “white superiority.”

In the next story a husband desperately rows a stolen boat against a raging current to get his 9-months pregnant wife to the nearest hospital. He knows the hospital is segregated but hopes in this emergency they will accept blacks. This story then presents “institutional racism,” something different from the “attitudinal racism” and bigotry of the first character. Readers of these stories experience this white power, these perceptions, not in theory or social analysis, but in the flesh and blood of men and women struggling to make sense and meaning out of absurd situations. And, readers also begin to realize the power of a dominant race to shape perception, or as one scholar puts it, to “invent” an entire race (*Isaacman lecture)*. I read non-stop through five stories, laid the book on my lap, literally

stunned, not moving for minutes. The "black experience" in America ***is*** different, and that legacy shapes the perceptions and behavior of all of us, whether child in Minnesota, professor in Rock Island, or a cop in Ferguson, Missouri.

Or . . . an athlete in Iowa. A long time ago, when I was a 400-meter track runner in college, I wrote a poem about an encounter with my own flawed perceptions and assumptions about race. Here's that poem**:**

I kicked the cinders from my spikes,
Stretched my legs into the starting blocks
Looked to my left at my teammate.
He was the reason I had lots of runner-up finishes:
Thirtieth in the whole world he was.
So I always ran for second
Against the other mortals.

Once, when he wasn't in the race, I ran to win.
I did too.
And the usual taste of blood,
The staggering legs
And the hammering heart beat were small prices to pay.

And today he was there again, on my left, sure to lead at the first turn.
I hadn't looked to the right—he was the only force.

But then . . . a glance right changed everything.
Stretching into the blocks in lane five were the
Longest, blackest legs I had ever seen.
"Oh God," slipped from my lips,
and I reviewed every Olympic sprint I knew:
Jesse Owens' legs were skinny and his jersey hung loose, but
He showed Hitler how to sprint.
Bob's nine-point-nine was the world's fastest
And the Dallas Cowboys bought him up even faster.
John Carlos and his fullback torso, legs like oak
Tom Turner and Ray Sadler, skinny seventh-grade small,
wisps like grass
Tommy Smith, sleek, defined, NBA tall.
Such different bodies, such common skin. (don't read)

Black beat white, absolutely, always.

My pale-skin leg stretched hard, slamming my foot into the blocks,
Fearing third.
Third was OK; I'd done it before.
But always at the finish line—never before the gun fired.

I won the race for second.
Forty-nine seconds it took.
A hundred years erased by a cinder track and the taste of blood.
To undo the done is a bloody thing.

These thoughts about perceptions come to me out of the recent hysteria over the Ferguson, New York, and Cleveland episodes with police and the black communities. From the White House to the streets of many American cities, the New York chokehold and death of Eric Garner converged with the Ferguson shooting of Michael Brown to create protest marches and to stir a national conversation about racial justice. Other cases were added to the mix when a white former police chief was charged with murder in the shooting of an unarmed black man in 2011. In Cleveland, the U.S. Justice Department found that officers too often use excessive force. And just a couple weeks ago in Madison, Wisconsin, another white cop killed an unarmed black teen named Tony Robinson.

Everyone following the news took sides. At Ferguson some said the cop was a racist, gun-toting, reactionary murderer, and the kid was an unarmed teenager trying to surrender. Others argued the cop was doing what he was assigned to do, protect the public, and the kid was a dirt-bag punk who shouldn't have ignored or challenged a police officer's orders. In New York the cops were threatened by a big man resisting arrest. The man was unarmed and just trying to breathe. Others said, "If he could say 'I can't breathe,' he could breathe." The reactions among many of the local black residents were angry, vulgar, destructive, and violent. The reactions of the police force brought out tear gas, rubber bullets, armored vehicles. Hysteria indeed.

This was no small go-away-soon news clip. This incident brought the US attorney general to town, prompted speeches by the governor, motivated outside activists to deliver speeches and sermons, moved the president of the United States to speak directly to the entire country and then form a task force to develop new training techniques for police officers and ask congress for 250 million

dollars to supply body cameras on cops everywhere. With only rare interruptions, CNN covered it for hours---and days---including reporters, politicians, forensic experts, doctors, sociologists, and historians all analyzing and trying to explain the hows and the whys. One video of a citizen measuring the distance between the police car and the dead Michael Brown went viral. Across the country college classes discussed the historical and social forces at work, while churches from New York to L.A---and in the Quad Cities---held candlelight memorial services. One cop. One teen-ager. Yet this story pushed the deaths of thousands in the Ebola crises to the back pages. Consciousness is raised, but how does America make sense out of this?

For me, I think about that Minnesota Indian Reservation with its lazy "nichies" (that was the "N-word" racial slur for Indians) who might be good basketball players but would never submit to the work---or so we all thought---of daily practice. I think about the Jim Crow laws of the south with their "whites only" signs ***and*** *of* the Indians who were alienated and segregated without any posted physical "signs." Moreover, I have my entire professional life wondered about a literary canon that until only recently favored mainly white male writers. My perceptions are continually challenged. One personal example was my somewhat close relationship with William Styron, Pulitzer winning author of ***The Confessions of Nat Turner***, his historical novel about the leader of a famous slave revolt in 1832. Does the imagination of this white, southern, author manipulate---or invent---a reader's perception of a black slave? Questions continue to pop up. I still today ask myself, and often my students, "Who decided my perceptions for me?"

I was in college in the early 60s and was just then beginning to navigate my way through the subtle yet powerful assumptions about race that permeated my hometown and perplexed me even as a child, while simultaneously wrestling with my own---formerly unconscious, now conscious---participation in racial discrimination, injustice, and oppression. Today, in 2015, in universities and colleges across the country, in churches and law offices, police stations and court rooms, in the New York Times and NPR, in the Quad City times and in college students' dining halls, questions are asked, perceptions are examined. Explanations are coming from all directions.

Maybe Richard Wright, the author of those gripping short stories way back in 1937, told us why. In his essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing" he flatly states the obvious---that in our America **"**there is a Negro church, a Negro press, A Negro social world . . .. **"** And there is, he says, "a Negro way of life in America" that they **"**did not ask for [which is] forced upon them from without by lynch rope, bayonet, and mob rule.**"** 1937 . . . 2015? Wright argues that black ***and*** white America must get to know others and "accept the concept" of this segregated world. Even more, America must, "***understand***" the effects of this segregation, especially the erroneous perceptions *("Blueprint," 198-99*). *It's that "understanding," this "knowing" which gives this paper its title which I have taken from the last line of the civil war folksong "When Johnny Comes Marching Home"**:** "Johnny---------we hardly knew ye".* **OMIT**

My journey through all this might be America's journey today. So, I thought it might be helpful to go back to the beginning—or at least to the beginning in America with the enslavement of Africans. The African leaders who shipped slaves across the Atlantic seem to have given little thought to the long-range consequences of their acts. Leslie Fishel and Benjamin Quarles in their documentary history of ***The Black American*** tell us that in pre-European Africa, "slavery carried no stigma of innate inferiority, a slave often rising to a position of trust and honor," and this indigenous slavery was on a "relatively small scale"(*5*). However, on this side of the Atlantic in just 350 years West coast Africa lost an estimated 24 million of "its best physical specimens, the only kind the slave traders wanted." Subsequently the Europeans tried to invent racial theories to justify their business, theories suggesting that Africans were "natural" slaves and were inferior. Or they created theories based on phrenology, the pseudo-science that attempted to "prove" Africans were less intelligent based on the shape of the brain.

Also influential was the study entitled ***American Negro Slavery*** published in 1918 by Ulrich Phillips that enhanced these rationalizations. Phillips argued against slavery for economic reasons but ironically contributed to slavery's justification with his conclusions that African slaves had**:**

"eagerness for society, music, and merriment

"fondness for display . . . person, dress, vocabulary, or emotion

"a not flagrant sensuality

"a receptiveness toward any religion whose exercises were

exhilarating
"acceptance of subordination
"readiness for loyalty of a feudal sort
"healthy human repugnance toward overwork.

These perceptions of a contented slave, or the "Sambo" character, come from Phillips' sources that were mainly court records and white testimony with **no** sources from black people. One of his sources concluded that "slaves do not go about looking unhappy, and are with difficulty, I fancy, persuaded to feel so" (*Phillips, 288*), and another recalls meeting a slave who "seemed not to know he had a right to be anything but a slave"(*Edward Hooker in Phillips, 42*). The condescension suggests inferiority, and these erroneous perceptions clearly are, then, an example of "we hardly knew ye." Nevertheless, seriously flawed as it is, one scholar said Phillips' study "had the most profound influence upon the historical study of slavery"(*Yetman, 1*).

But these condescending perceptions weren't just the opinions of racist exploiters; they were long before couched in the laws of the land. In 1712 for instance, South Carolina passed "an act for the better ordering and governing of Negroes and Slaves." Part of this act meant Negro houses could be searched every 14 days, and "upon complaint made to **any** justice of the peace . . . the said justice shall issue out his warrant for apprehending the offender" (*Fischel & Qyarles, 21*). Is it fair to ask if these laws and their enforcement would have anything at all to do with the police officers who last year encountered a man with a rifle in Kalamazoo, Michigan who refused to identify himself, grabbed his crotch, and flipped them the bird. The man was white. Police took 40 minutes to talk him down before they took away his gun. He was not arrested, and the next day his gun was returned. Three months later in a different city, a 12-year old black boy was playing with a plastic (but realistic looking) toy gun when police arrived. One officer jumped out of his car and shot him. There was no attempt at "talking the boy down" (*Pitts*). We have a phrase that applies to these scenarios too**:** "white privilege." Can laws that shape perceptions that in turn shape behaviors create consequences three centuries later? Maybe. A character in a more modern fictional work argues that something that has been enacted over thousands of square miles and over three hundred years is not just perception or injustice; it is an accomplished fact of life (***Wright's Native Son****).*

These acts for "ordering Negroes and slaves" served as a model for slave "codes" that became predominant throughout the slave states. Every slave state had one. I own **The *Code of Tennessee***, and it contains thousands of laws inside its eight-by-ten-by-two inches thick contents! But even earlier, only 12 years after the founding of Jamestown and a year **before** the pilgrims arrived, John Rolfe recorded that a shipload of blacks arrived and the tobacco planter "sold us twenty Negars" who were indentured servants, not slaves. But distinction between servant and slave soon became based on race, and we have this incident recorded**:**

Whereas Hugh Gwyn hath brought back from Maryland three servants formerly run away . . .the court doth therefore order that the said three servants shall receive the punishment of whipping and to have thirty stripes apiece. . . one called Victor, a Dutchman, the other a Scotchman called James Gregory, shall first serve out their times with their master according to their Indentures, and one whole year apiece after the time of their service is Expired . . . and after that service, to serve the colony for three whole years apiece, and that the third being a negro named John Punch shall serve his said master or his assigns for the time of his natural Life here or elsewhere. (*Quarles and Fishel, 19).*

Arbitrary? Irrational? Soon to follow were more irrational laws like prohibiting white women from marrying slaves---if they did, they too would serve the slave's master.

So perceptions reinforced the law and laws reinforced the perceptions. For example, the **Tennessee Slave Code**, Article I Section 2619 reads, "All assemblages of slaves in unusual numbers, or at suspicious times or places, not expressly authorized by the owners are unlawful. They shall be dispersed by any patrol of the district . . . or by any person authorized by a Justice." Many of these laws categorized the slaves as suspicious and potentially dangerous, fearing that the "carrying of clubs and other mischievous weapons . . . may give them an ***opportunity of executing wicked designs and purposes***" (emphasis mine) (*Q & F, 24*). All of them established clear lines for white authority. And does law reinforce perception? One has to wonder today if that kind of history has anything to do with why white people roll up their car windows as they drive to a Bears' game or why joggers in Rock Island are told to stay away from 12th street. Or does this history have anything to do with a cop not even considering "talking down" a black kid with a toy gun?

And then there is the literature growing out of this historical setting and working its way through American culture. Even anti-slavery literature oftentimes idealized treatments of the "noble savage" theme by "imaginatively identifying themselves with persons they had never even seen." But, John Little, a fugitive slave who had escaped to Canada said long ago in 1855, "Tisn't he who has stood and looked on, that can tell you what slavery is—'tis he who has endured" (*Yetman).*

Enter autobiographical slave narratives. All these inaccurate perceptions so influential in shaping behavior toward black people had to be rewritten, first, to let America do more than "hardly know ye," and next, to tell the truth, not manipulate perceptions. A colleague of mine once explained good writing this way**:** "look closely**;** tell the truth." Slave narratives were a beginning of new perceptions because they did tell the truth and they were indeed written by people who "endured" and not by those who "looked on." Would this were true for the Minnesota people who perceived Indians as dirty, stupid, and lazy.

These slave narratives reveal the physical horrors of slavery as when Olaudah Equiano talks about "heavy iron hooks hung about their necks," or when Frederick Douglass tells readers about "the shrieks" of his aunt who was whipped until she was "covered with blood" while the "louder she screamed, the harder he whipped" (*Douglass*). And there were psychological horrors, especially the fear of being sold and separated from family. James Pennington tells of when "his mother, and older sister, and myself were given to a son of my master. . . and this occasioned a separation between my mother and the only two children she then had, and my father, to a distance of about two hundred miles. " He later says, "It is this that throws [one's] family history into utter confusion, and leaves him without a single record to which he may appeal in vindication of his character or honor." The slave William Craft says that his wife could not bear children because "the mere thought of her ever becoming the mother of a child, to linger out a miserable existence under the wretched system of American slavery, appeared to fill her very soul with horror." Linda Brent a slave living with a master who demanded her sexual favors, knew that her master was the "father of eleven slaves" and recounts what it is to be "entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you entirely subject to the will of another" (Brent 56).

Within these narratives, the perceptions
that a slave is content,
or that a black woman “does not know that she had a right
to be anything but a slave,”
or that a slave is a savage because he revolts against the
“miseries of slavery”---
these perceptions are turned upside down.
But many other perceptions remain, perceptions that too often lead to quick judgment, thoughtless reaction, and violence.

The slave narrative is of course not the only literature attempting to raise consciousness. African American fiction writers, playwrights, essayists, and poets all consider the history, the laws, and the social mores of American culture that define our perceptions and determine our actions. One poet recalls **. . .**

Once riding in old Baltimore
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me

Now I was eight and very small
And he was no whit bigger
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue and called me “Nigger.”

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December
Of all the things that happened there
That’s all that I remember.

One eight-year-old remembers only the “Nigger” slur; the other knows only that a black boy is someone detestable.

Our history is replete with countless lynchings and too many deaths similar to the 1955 murder of Emmett Till or the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012, or the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014. Indeed, the legacy of slavery and the acts triggered by perceptions “invented” over the centuries significantly contribute to how these events can happen, and how the actions of the individuals are directly influenced by their perceptions.

An early scene in Wright’s depression era novel ***Native Son*** illustrates how perceptions influence behavior. Bigger Thomas is the

chauffer for a family whose rebellious daughter, Mary, wants to be driven to a black restaurant so she can, as she says, “see how your people live.” Obediently he drives Mary and her boyfriend Jan to Ernie’s Kitchen Shack but stays in the car as they head inside. They ask him,

> “Aren’t you coming with us, Bigger?”
> “I—I---I don’t want to go in,” he whispered breathlessly.
> “Aren’t you hungry?’
> “Naw; I ain’t hungry.”
> “Come and sit with us anyhow.”
> “I . . . . I” Bigger Stammered.
> “It’ll be all right,” Mary said.

Reluctantly he joins them. Jan leads them to a corner table and says, “Sit down Bigger.” Jan then orders three dinners, and under the watchful, curious eyes of the entire restaurant, Mary exclaims, “This is simply grand.” Mary and Jan nonchalantly eat away, and the narration reads**:**

> “Bigger picked up a piece of chicken and bit it. When he tried to chew he found his mouth dry. It seemed that the very organic functions of his body had altered; and when he realized why, when he understood the cause, he could not chew the food. After two bites he stopped.
>
> “Eat your chicken,” Mary said. “It’s good.”

Then Jan and Mary pepper Bigger with questions about his life:

> “Where were you born?”
> “How far did you go in school?”
> “You like it [in Chicago]?”
> “You live with your people?”
> “Where’s your father?”

Through it all, Bigger is self-conscious and ashamed. They are wealthy white people, indifferent to and casual about ***their*** position in the world, curious about his. He lives in a one-room apartment with his mother and two siblings. A curtain divides the kitchen from the beds. The bathroom shared by other tenants is in the hallway. Mary lives in a million dollar mansion with a second-story servants’ quarters that includes a bathroom; a separate floor has a kitchen with a full-time maid and cook. Mary and Jan are free to leave Ernie’s Kitchen Shack any time and go home to their world of freedom and possibility. They are free to go anywhere, eat anything. They never

think of their whiteness; it doesn't even cross their minds. That Bigger is black is ***all*** that Bigger thinks of. The whole scene demonstrates the victim status of Bigger. But, more importantly, the questions they ask Bigger show that there is no uncertainty about their perceptions of black people on the south side of Chicago who quit school, abandon their kids, and want to live in the ghetto. No wonder Bigger can't even chew his chicken.

The complexity of social oppression is the focus of a radio play written when radio was an essential source of dramatic entertainment. The play is a dark comedy about Carl Owens, a young black man desperate for a job so he can save the mortgage on their home. His last resort is to dress in his wife's clothes and respond to a newspaper ad for a black maid. He knows he will get away with his disguise because, he argues, "who looks that close at us [black] people anyhow?" (***Eight Men***, 100). We again might think of "we hardly knew ye" because the whole play exposes perceptions that force a man to masquerade his very manhood. Disguised as "Lucy," Carl gets the job but does not count on the amorous advances of the chronically half-drunk husband of the household, Mr. Fairchild, nor does he count on being asked to wash the back of his mistress as she bathes. Carl's initial response to his mistress's request is a poignant "Huh?" Lucy (who of course is really Carl) is well acquainted with the assumptions made about black men and white women. He would know why Emmett Till was murdered. He would know all about the castrations and lynchings that killed too many black men accused of (as the language implies) "messing with a white woman." However, except for his stuttering and profuse sweating, nothing unusual occurs as he scrubs her back, and his masquerade remains intact.

The disguise is, in fact, so effective that Mr.Fairchild (who assumes all black women are promiscuous) tries to fondle Lucy-Carl. Mrs. Fairchild enters the scene and in disgust and jealousy shoots Carl, wounding him in the groin. They call a doctor who subsequently examines Carl's wound and of course exposes Lucy as Carl. The Fairchilds are at first disturbed that Carl washed the back of a naked white woman, but they are even more distressed that Carl made no sexual advances toward her. That challenges all their assumptions. Carl of course has been unmasked, but exposing the idiocy of white assumptions about black sexuality is the unmasking that most

troubles them. So, they not only ignore Carl's imposture but also pay him hundreds of dollars to keep the entire sham quiet. Carl returns home able to pay off the mortgage, but when he tells his wife the whole story, they cry [as the narration reads] "with bitter shame at their degradation." To what moral consideration can they appeal? They have $200 but the old perceptions remain.

For the Fairchilds, racial certainty is their fixed star: black men want white women and black women are promiscuous, and these assumptions are certainties. "Biases have slipped into all of our brains," says a science journalist at the Washington Post, and "we all have a responsibility to recognize those biases---and work to change them." But even in the face of America's recent racial incidents we avoid any change. Listen to a couple of the more popular arguments to preserve the present reality and prevent our society from achieving "social consciousness"**:**

Patrick Buchanan said (referring to the demonstrations following the killing of Trayvon Martin) a "republic will not survive if a precedent is set that masses of people can organize and attempt to shut it down when what happens with in that system displeases them..."

Bill O'Reilly says there is no such thing as "White privilege."

Rush Limbaugh says "there's a mindset out there . . . that only people of color can be victims. A white person can never be a victim."

New York's medical examiner officially called Eric Garner's death a "homicide," but the grand jury said no charges.

Agree or disagree, these responses avoid even thinking about (let alone questioning) the complex perceptions that contribute to these recent events.

This leads me to the conclusion of my paper.

John Keats, the 19th century British poet suggests that the journey to truth leads through "uncertainty, mystery, and doubt." Therefore it seems that historical, cultural, or philosophical dogmas that have long shaped perceptions about a world that for too many is impossible to live in must be questioned. But questioning these perceptions, or even acknowledging their existence, requires intelligence, imagination, and courage.

Mille Lacs Indians continue to live on the reservation but are still confined, now by a multi-million dollar casino that is reinforcing old, and shaping new, perceptions, most of them false and ugly.

This might be our Everest. But---to stretch a metaphor---in 2017 we have experience with the storms, our gear is better, and we have oxygen tanks. Do we have the will?

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