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'The End of Blackness': American Skin

By GERALD EARLY

THE END OF BLACKNESS

Returning the Souls of Black Folk to Their Rightful Owners.

With the publication of "The End of Blackness," a book not only about white racism but about black people's response to it, Debra J. Dickerson joins a growing and varied class of black public intellectuals that includes people like John McWhorter, Bell Hooks, Michael Eric Dyson, Patricia Williams, Henry Louis Gates, Shelby Steele, Thulani Davis, Stanley Crouch, Greg Tate, Ellis Cose and Brent Staples. Their views are sufficiently different that they might be said to represent distinct factions among African-Americans and, no less relevant, speak to distinct factions of educated whites.

By Debra J. Dickerson.

306 pp. New York: Pantheon Books. \$24.

But "The End of Blackness" has another layer of significance. It is, in the end, despite its notes, index and historical consideration of its subject, largely an advice book. "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," Dickerson begins. " 'Blackness' must be updated so that blacks can free themselves from the past and lead America into the future."

The American reading public, black and white, loves advice books, whether from C.E.O.'s or retired athletic coaches offering bromides and thought-cliches about success, love gurus telling how to find a mate or psychologists and teachers offering tips on how to make your children smarter or better adjusted. One of the biggest business ventures in the United States, the diet industry, is nothing more than a huge advice mill. Americans, black and white, are suckers for advice because they are so inspired by the efficacy of self-improvement. Most black polemical writers of Dickerson's sort, from David Walker in his 1829 "Appeal" to W. E. B. Du Bois in his 1897 "Conservation of the Races" to Carter G. Woodson, E. Franklin Frazier, Amiri Baraka and Shelby Steele, whatever their politics, offer racial advice to blacks, because they have felt and continue to feel that black people, or some significant segment of them, need improvement for their own good, that black people need instruction in how to be black people of the kind the author thinks they should be. Although most black polemicists bristle at the suggestion that blacks are pathological, these books are driven by the view that the behavior and thinking that need correcting are so self-defeating as to require public censure. I find the prescriptive nature of this book and the others like it, including my own when they have been guilty of it, presumptuous and off-putting.

"The End of Blackness" opens by criticizing blacks for saying that they don't feel American, for marginalizing themselves, for the imprisoning conformity of group racial consciousness. "Only by daring to live as autonomous individuals with voluntary group identification, only by charting a course unconcerned with the existence of white people, only by taking responsibility for their comportment and decisions -- only then will blacks be able to achieve collective goals, assess collective penalties, award collective benefits and jockey for sociopolitical positions like fully entitled citizens." And the real enemy are middle-class blacks, bourgeois blacks, as Dickerson calls them, because these are the blacks who feel "least at home." These are the blacks who try to court the white attention they crave through cries of racism, who are the most afflicted by self-hatred and most deeply feel the inadequacy of being black when compared to whites, who are the norm.

The prologue gives a brief account of the origins of racism and the long history of white oppression that was finally broken by the civil rights movement. "Thanks to the civil rights movement," Dickerson writes, "black Americans are free and thriving." But, she continues, many blacks do not know how to live in this brave new world "where you have no one to blame for your failures but you." The body of the book then proceeds as a series of head fakes. One chapter excoriates whites, their narcissism, their refusal to relinquish their privilege, their inability to see blacks as fully human: "There is scarcely an area of American life in which blacks are not the worst off of all groups. More to the point, they are worse off for reasons that have nothing to do with either accident or simple black failure." Racism and structural inequity are the cause, although many blacks seem to revel in their low status because it gives them something with which to whip whites. This is followed by a chapter about blacks' inability to see themselves except as they are reflected in whites, the way they "simply do not know who and how to be absent oppression." Blacks, by book's end, crave "leadership that believes in the unlimited

capacity of black talent, not the unlimited capacity of white evil. Blacks need leaders looking to the limitless future, not to the hunched-over past; leaders who are excited and hopeful, not bitter and defeated."

The problems with this book are several and severe. It lacks nuance and balance. Politically, Dickerson wants to have her cake and eat it too, so she nods to conservatives in saying blacks need to "do for self" and quit worrying about what whites think of them, and nods to liberals in saying how horrible whites are and how persistent and unrelenting racism is. Her conclusion that "blacks must look inside themselves" is hardly novel, something that most black people hear all the time from a variety of sources within the race; it is an almost time-honored form of conservatism for blacks. The black middle class is harshly criticized as a neurotic, philistine bunch (a typical complaint of the educated, both black and white, about the middle class). But the middle class includes such a great range of people, from schoolteachers to accountants, from doctors to librarians to professional politicians. Since Dickerson shares Albert Murray's disdain for sociology and the sociological interpretation of black experience, why does she try to sound like a sociologist with sweeping, superficial generalizations about large numbers of people? About whites. About blacks. About the middle class.

How is it that whites can be so racist that whenever blacks appear on the covers of magazines the sales go down 40 to 60 percent, yet financially support and rabidly attend professional and college football and basketball, which are completely dominated by blacks? How can it be that "many more Africanisms than blacks are aware of reside within them still, from language to comportment to musical forms," yet blacks "lost their family structure, their histories, their knowledge, their religions, their customs, their cultures, their countries, their continent"? How can you be stripped, yet not stripped?

Superficialities abound. Though there is a rich history of black American travel writing about encounters with Africa, from Martin R. Delany in the 19th century to Richard Wright to Marita Golden to Eddy L. Harris in the 20th, Dickerson's section on blacks' discomfort with modern-day Africa is based on one book, Keith B. Richburg's "Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa," easy enough to condemn because the author's negative views of Africa are so unreflective and overwrought. Nor is the complexity of how blacks have seen and depicted Africa imaginatively in their literature weighed -- take Lorraine Hansberry's "Raisin in the Sun" or Langston Hughes's "Big Sea" -- or in their music, from Art Blakey to Sun Ra to John Coltrane.

No blacks are depicted in Steven Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan," she notes, adding that no blacks were part of the D-Day invasion as infantry soldiers, then asking "why no symbolism"? But blacks did participate, in the quartermaster corps or as the truck drivers who made up the Red Ball Express. (Spielberg hardly needed to be symbolic. Blacks were there.) Nearly 50 years before "Saving Private Ryan" Sidney Poitier starred in "Red Ball Express." And the last dozen years have given us Spielberg's own "Amistad" and Edward Zwick's film about black soldiers in the Civil War, "Glory." Why would Hollywood make a film about black soldiers and D-Day a half-century ago and not now is the question. Dickerson's discussion of Hollywood's depiction of the African-American soldier or blacks generally lacks context.

The problem is that the author does not know enough, has not researched enough, to write an incisive book on African-American life or American racism. If one listens to a lot of black talk radio or has some bull sessions with other blacks, nearly every gripe and observation in "The End of Blackness" will be familiar. One does not write a book like this. One gets over it. That is why good writers keep journals.

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