The Barbershop Bias

Preference and Distorting Black Humanity

I park my car in Lot L, the parking structure nestled alongside the School of Law at the University of Denver. Closing the car door, first thoughts concern whether to purchase coffee and a scone from the law school café, or the one managed by Sister Kim and Brother Donald in the student center. The coffee is the same; however, Donald bathes the air with jazz and an occasional hip-hop tune, and the combination of their brown faces and smooth jazz turns the taste of regular medium roast into something special. The walk between Lot L and the entrance to the Morgridge College of Education is periodically interrupted by my new friend and her mother, as they walk toward the Ricks Center for Gifted Children, where she is a student. Margaret, a white preschooler, shares the first name of my late mother—Margaret Carter Cross. Little Margaret has found a special place in my heart by stirring up memories of play time with Binta, my daughter, when my wife, Dawn, Binta, and I lived in Ithaca, New York, and I was a faculty member at the Cornell University African Studies and Research Center, then headed by the cultural visionary James Turner.
Turner and I met in the summer of 1969, while he was a graduate student and leader of the black student uprising at Northwestern University. At the time, I was the director of a local community center—Evanston West Side Service Center—for which I designed and instituted projects and activities meant to inject blackness into the consciousness of key leaders of Evanston’s black community. In many ways, I was only a few steps ahead of the people I was trying to convert. The weekends found me admiring the *Wall of Respect* mural on the South Side of Chicago (Alkalimat, Crawford, & Zorach, 2017) and attending open meetings sponsored by the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), during which Phil Cochran played an African thumb piano, while various speakers mesmerized those in attendance with messages of consciousness and commitment. It was like an advanced seminar in blackness taught by the OBAC leadership, which included the poet Don L. Lee (Haki R. Madhubuti); the editor of the monthly periodical *Black World*, Hoyt Fuller; and Jeff Donaldson, the future head of the Department of Art at Howard University; to mention a few (Alkalimat, Crawford, & Zorach, 2017). With inspiration garnered from the images of black heroes enshrined in the *Wall of Respect* mural and my notes taken at the OBAC meeting, the following Monday found me formulating activities and programs to be carried out by the center staff. The OBAC leadership stressed love and patience, as those who have yet to commit themselves to blackness will be afraid and extremely hesitant. Subsequently, our strategy was to start small and nurture consciousness here and there, with the hope that unity would follow soon thereafter. Included was the short-lived House of Blackness, which sold black books, African statues, and trinkets—all “imported” from the South Side of Chicago.

When James Turner and his crew from Northwestern got wind of my activities, they made it a point to visit the center and check out what was going on. By the time Turner took over the directorship of the Africana Center at Cornell, my article “The Negro-to-Black-Conversion Experience” had appeared in the July 1971 issue of *Black World* (formerly *Negro Digest*). When I hit the job market, Turner forever changed my intellectual future by granting me an academic appointment in black studies rather than my other choice of joining
a white-dominated mainstream psychology department. My years at Africana made the imagination and production of *Shades of Black* possible (Cross, 1991), a work synthesizing material from Africana studies and mainstream psychology.

Turner, along with A. Wade Boykin—at the time a member of the Cornell Psychology Department—helped paint my consciousness black. Before moving on to Howard University, Boykin, Anderson Franklin, and Frank Yates—all black psychologists—organized a series of conferences on empirical research in black psychology (Boykin, Franklin, & Yates, 1980). The empirical conferences represented a counternarrative, of sorts, to the clinical-praxis emphasis of the newly organized Association of Black Psychologists, which was dominated by practitioners, many of whom held clinical positions that made it difficult to impossible to conduct research, given the time required of practice and interventions. Persons attending the empirical conferences left with a highly technical appreciation of the benefits of taking the black experience seriously; we saw ourselves fusing mainstream methodologies with theories grounded in a black perspective. Unlike the evolving Afrocentric movement, which rejected conclusions about the black experience derived from studies based on mainstream psychological approaches, our “empirical” clan saw ourselves not unlike jazz artists. Just as jazz is premised on the basic melodic chord structure of European music theory—this being true for even the most dissonant of jazz artists such as Thelonious Monk or Cecil Taylor—likewise black scholars could discover truths about blackness using methodologies commonplace to Western psychology. Compared to Miles, Monk, Ella, or Coltrane, we had faith in our ability—through imaginative research designs and culture-infused interpretation of results—to confirm and validate psychological truths about the black experience. One could say we were applying what today is called a critical race perspective in our application of mainstream methodologies to research about black people. As an aside, this tradition of empirical black psychology continues through the advocacy of Kevin Cokley and Germine Awad (2013), despite their association with African Psychology, many advocates for which argue against the value of empiricism.
Returning to Little Margaret, she was on my mind as I strolled through the arts and crafts kiosks set up during the holiday season at Grand Central Station in New York City. In one, the craftsperson displayed small cloth dolls and accompanying dresses that could be wrapped in a knapsack configuration, enveloping both the doll and the dresses. When I returned to Denver, I placed one of the dolls as a gift in the mailbox, addressed to Margaret’s mom, with a note indicating that the doll’s name was Binta, because her brown facial color and beautiful dresses reminded me of my daughter. A few days later, Margaret’s mom reported back that, in preparing for sleep, Margaret now arranged her two favorite friends so that her doll Claire was on the far left of the bed, the Binta doll was in the middle, and Margaret slept right of center. A few weeks passed, and Margaret’s mom—now several months pregnant and showing—popped into my office to relate a wonderful story—the kind Art Linkletter used to pull from the untarnished minds of little ones on his television show. Tests showed that cooking in her mom’s tummy was a little boy, and, the night before, Margaret approached her mom to ask an incredible question: “Can we have a black baby? Can my brother be a black baby?”

Little Margaret’s situation reminds one of the choices children grappled with while participating in racial preference doll studies conducted in the 1930s by the famous husband-and-wife psychologist team, Kenneth B. and Mamie Clark (Clark & Clark, 1939). The Clarks were among those who believed racial segregation resulted in psychological damage, such as a tendency for Negro children—Margaret’s age—to evidence a preference for white in addition to using pejorative language (“ugly”) to describe brown dolls meant to represent black infants—that is, meant to represent themselves! Going further and within the same historical period (circa the late 1940s to early 1960s), two psychiatrists conducted in-depth psychoanalytic interviews with a cluster of working-class and middle-class black adults and concluded that what begins in youth as racial preference ends in adulthood as low self-esteem and damage to one’s self-concept (see Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951). In their book *The Mark of Oppression*, Kardiner and Ovesey presented this state as the point of departure for understanding the average black person, with low self-esteem being
the norm for Negroes living anywhere in the United States, regardless of social class. Negro psychopathology as the “norm” was recently revisited and defended in an exhaustive and erudite summary by Joe L. Rempson (2016).

Critique of the Clarks’ racial preference study, which had been conducted in 1939, was delayed in large measure because findings from the study became part of the legal rationale used by the Supreme Court in the construction of its 1954 decision declaring school segregation unconstitutional. To scrutinize the racial preference research was therefore considered the same as challenging the Court’s decision. While the scientific method depends on the interrogation of ongoing research, where findings from study X are then challenged or given added credence by follow-up research and so on and so on, linkage of the Clark studies to the elimination of legal segregation resulted in their work becoming untouchable and thus sacrosanct. “Recognizing that the eyes of history were on them, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) trial team explored innovative ways to prove their case. . . . Robert Carter devoted considerable personal time developing the testimony of a young unheralded psychology professor at the City College of New York, Dr. Kenneth Clark, who had conducted cutting-edge psychological studies on the impact of racial segregation on black children” (Gergel, 2019, p. 225).

**Black Studies and the Search for Something More**

Many of the scholars who were instrumental in founding black studies were the progeny of black working-class families, and we took it as a personal affront that the extant literature depicted black people in general and the black working class in particular as self-loathing and pathological. Our mindset was not to summarily dismiss previous findings; rather, we thought new research would show that the racial self-hatred, mark of oppression, and deficit tropes went too far, resulting in caricatures rather than three-dimensional depictions of black individuals and black families. Which is to say, our own family members and friends.
Personally, I was driven by my “barbershop bias.” After I was born at Provident Hospital, the first African American–owned-and-operated hospital in America, Mom and I were transported to the family’s apartment in a cab, as Dad never learned to drive and thus there was never a family car. Originally, the first male child was to be named Charles Frank Cross, but after three daughters—the third named Charlene as a replacement for Charles Frank—Dad took no chances, and I was named William E. Cross Jr. Our address was 6601 South St. Lawrence, part of the Englewood/Woodlawn neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side, and three blocks from Emmett Till’s home at 6427 South St. Lawrence. As I grew older, my sisters took me to a barbershop on Sixty-Seventh Street for my haircuts. In the following recollection, my image of the decor may be off, but the interactional issues are accurate. The shop was long and narrow, with rectangular black-and-white floor tiles connecting to five-sided parquet wall tiles of the same colors that extended halfway up the wall, ending at the base of panoramic mirrors. The mirrors and lights obviously helped the barbers monitor the progress of each customer’s haircut, and in addition somehow made the entrance of each customer a special event. At least one of the barbers knew the nickname of every entering customer, and, after its elocution, there followed banter full of rhymes and signifying centered on the customer’s identity and reputation. I sometimes fantasized my entrance when I became an adult, and with what nickname the shop would christen me.

Because of my small size, a child’s seat was set atop the adult chair, and this lift gave me a dramatic, unobtrusive view of everyone’s movement, customers and barbers alike. My experiences at the barbershop in the presence of ordinary black men caused me to develop a “barbershop bias,” and adding to this bias were the normal black men who showed up at our front door, calling out the names of my older sisters whom they sought to court and charm. When I was a sophomore and junior in high school, my black role models drove buses for the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), worked at the post office, rode the back of garbage trucks, and what few professionals there were seemed beyond my reach. Only years later, following blackenization of my
consciousness through Nigrescence, did I venture toward becoming an academic. Consequently, as an adolescent I had my sights on becoming a steady Eddie worker, like the working-class men who dated my older sisters, such as Sam Adams. My sister Dee married Sam, a bus driver for the CTA, and they had a small, clean, one-story house, and a cool car. It was Sam who taught me how to lovingly extract an LP record from its cover case by first inserting the index finger over the hole in the middle of the record while simultaneously gripping the outer edge with my thump, a maneuver keeping the natural oils from one’s skin from ever contacting and gumming-up the record grooves. I “blame” Sam for my very expensive audiophile hobby. When Sam and Dee ventured to see Ramsey Lewis at the SRO Club on Clark Street or arranged a barbecue outing for the black football players from the Chicago Cardinals professional football team, Sam would go into his bedroom still wearing his CTA uniform and then reappear, as a handsome brother, dressed to the nines. Of course, I could say the same about the many black women to whom I was exposed through my sisters and my mom. Two of my sisters were part of the army of women making up the support staff for a renowned black law firm based in downtown Chicago, who, like the other normal women of their day, spent an inordinate amount of time keeping the paws of the male bosses at bay. Truth be told, my mindset, as an adolescent, was highly gendered, so my recollections are slanted toward the world of males, with women in the background.

The Search for Something Missed or Overlooked

As a new faculty member at Cornell’s Africana Center, I was charged by Director James Turner with developing the outline for the Africana course on black families, and I planned to cover the established works of E. Franklin Frazier and the Clarks. However, as their analysis did not capture the men in the barbershop, the Cardinal football players, nor those who courted my sisters, in addition to the women at the law offices, I had to reach beyond the social scientific literature and embrace the voices of Zora Neale Hurston, Amos Wilson, and Lorraine Hansberry. In the process I also rediscovered W.E.B. Du
Bois. Truth be told, had Du Bois’s depiction of black people been adopted more so than Frazier’s problematic and distorting tropes, our current understanding of the actual legacy of slavery would be more advanced and accurate. Du Bois and black literary figures, more so than Frazier or the Clarks, depicted black men and women with integrity and wholesomeness. Such is the origin of my barbershop bias and the motivation it triggered for what I came to call “the search for something missed or overlooked.”

As a black psychologist, I joined with others in trying to determine how the Clark doll racial preference studies (they conducted more than one) distorted and oversimplified, because we knew from personal experience that many black people were normal, thus our motivation to modify the deficit perspective. Ironically, the process was kicked off by a research publication appearing in one of the top mainstream academic journals sponsored by the American Psychological Association (APA). In 1976, W. Curtis Banks startled the research community with a reanalysis of a cluster of racial preference studies, showing that, statistically speaking, black children’s doll choices fit a pattern of randomness or “chance” behavior, as in an “Eeny, meeny, miny, moe” orientation (Banks, 1976). However, rather than random behavior, another interpretation for the “split” choice pattern is a performance of biculturalism, wherein the children are wanting to display favorable attitudes toward both preferences (Cross, 1983). That black children are socialized to become biculturally oriented and white children more monoculturally focused was explored in a study of black, white, and white ethnic families guided by the theoretical writings of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) on the ecology of human development. The study of black and white families incorporated an identity component designed to reveal the racial-cultural messaging embedded in the ecology of everyday mother-child interactions and activities. An identity interview recorded the TV shows watched with the child and/or programs playing in the background, types of music listened to, types of human figures found among the child’s playthings, the history of the child’s name or nickname, stories read to the child, the books the child was allowed to play with, and much more. The scoring categories were black culture, white culture,
and general American culture, and, all told, an identity score from 0 to as high as 22 was possible. The results showed white mothers presenting the world in *monoracial* terms, and, using this information to predict racial preference, white children would be expected to evidence a monoracial white doll preference pattern.

Turning to the results for black families, 21 percent of the activities described by the black mothers had, on average, a black culture emphasis, and 79 percent a white–general American undertone. This “split” cultural pattern was all the more evident with the doll–human figure count. Typically, 40 percent of the dolls found in black homes were black and 60 percent were white. Regardless of the activity in question, the *person or persons* participating in the activity with the child were black 90–95 percent of the time. Thus, some variant of a *black perspective* was operating in the ecological presentation of the “world” to the child, whether the cultural messaging concerned black, white, or general American activities, places, or things. *Black children raised in such a fashion can be expected to display an attraction to both black and white dolls in the context of a racial preference study.* The resulting “split” is better understood as an evolving bicultural frame rather than confused or random behavior, as suggested by Banks (1976). Long ago Du Bois spoke of the African American need to develop “double consciousness,” and, rather than pathology, racial preference findings may tap into a child’s evolving understanding that in being black in America, one must come to terms with the power and, yes, beauty of things white.

In addition, those “ugly” doll comments expressed during the doll study are transformed—over the course of a black child’s exposure to black culture—into a *capacity to play the dozens of elocutions of signifying monkey rhymes before an audience of one’s peers on the school playground.* Through play, humor, and intense communal jesting, black people prepare themselves for the hatred and disdain spewing from the white psyche. Signifying involves games—serious interactional games—where, on the one hand, an audience helps a person feel the type of intense, heated, stressful pressure linked to encounters with racism, and, on the other hand, the same audience offers criticism and feedback for the way the person *proposes* to act,
respond, and survive encounters with racism. Practice at staying cool when under pressure is a theme embedded in many hip-hop lyrics (Majors & Billson, 1993). Today, equating racial preference with deep structure personality constitutes a simplistic psychological model for explicating black behavior. The research reviewed above clearly shows that in the search for blackness, there is something beyond racial preference. Racial preference and psychoanalytic studies such as the The Mark of Oppression are pillars of the more comprehensive theory known as the deficit perspective on black culture, the origin of which can be traced to the 1939 publication of E. Franklin Frazier’s seminal work on the black family.

E. Franklin Frazier and the Deficit Perspective

Between 1919 and 1930, the second wave of the Ku Klux Klan was successful in spreading the doctrine of residential and school segregation throughout the United States (Pegram, 2011). President Woodrow Wilson did his part by embracing the logic of the vile racist film The Birth of a Nation and instituting racial segregation within federal offices, modeling the policy eventually enacted across all facets of everyday American life—North and South (Wolgemuth, 1959). Writing in the late 1930s, E. Franklin Frazier documented what, at the time, appeared to be a dramatic rise in black juvenile delinquency to make two points: first, that blacks were adjusting poorly to life in northern urban centers; and, second, that “damaged” black family structures were churning out poorly socialized youth, and “ineffective” socialization processes were understood to be a negative legacy of slavery. Frazier completed his doctoral studies at the University of Chicago, and his adviser was considered the leading expert on experiences of white ethnic migrants—for example, Italians, Jews, and the Irish. At the time Frazier was conducting his research in Chicago, the city was literally under siege from the activities of Irish and Italian gangs, culminating in the horrific Saint Valentine’s Day Massacre on February 14, 1929. Despite the fact that white ethnic crime and white ethnic social disorganization was rampant, Frazier and the black community in general were up against the common-
place social perceptions that black people were biologically inferior. Anthony M. Platt notes that:

> When Frazier began his research on Afro-American families, most of the available studies presented a gloomy picture of widespread family disorganization and sexual immorality. The prevailing literature assumed that Afro-Americans were either inherently or culturally incapable of being assimilated into “Western civilization.” . . . Frazier explicitly set out to repudiate these racist interpretations and to demolish stereotypes about the monolithic nature of the black family. (A.M. Platt, 1971, p. 137)

In point of fact, Frazier’s analysis covers intact as well as broken families, families of the lumpenproletariat as well as the middle class; however, it was his description and analysis of black urban-based poor families for which he is remembered. Foundational to his interpretations was the role of socioeconomic factors and forces—not race and eugenics. However, even though he was a dedicated socialist who lost academic positions because he was considered too radical (T. Platt, 1991), he is “blamed” for having constructed an essentialist explanation of black “difference” that over time became as damning in its social implications as genetic suppositions.

The “Must Be” Hypothesis

Frazier constructed a deficit perspective based on the “must be” hypothesis. Frazier’s frame of reference about black people was heavily influenced by none other than Robert Ezra Park, who for nine years was secretary to Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute. Park thought Africans were biologically inferior and that whatever human capacity they possessed when in Africa was forever destroyed during capture, transport, and enslavement. Subsequently, exiting slavery, the ex-slaves were illiterate, destitute, and poor but also “damaged” in ways hard to define. This added factor was theorized by Park’s most famous graduate student, E. Franklin Frazier, as the
“legacy of slavery,” and its analogue was the *deficit perspective* on black culture and family life. In effect, he argued that “cultural distortions” *must be* accounted for in addition to any damage to blacks linked to social class. Thus, in studying black people, whether poor or middle class, one might be able to isolate socioeconomic dynamics; however, in the final analysis, the negative effects of slavery *must be* added to the equation. From this perspective, black poverty, as an example, can never be equated with white poverty, because black poverty incorporates not only behavior, social attitudes, and ideas shared with other poor people, but, in addition, dynamics above and beyond that are explained by socioeconomic status (SES). This added factor—unique to black people—this *legacy of slavery*, if you will, made black poverty different, intractable, and resistant to intervention. This presumed added factor helped to *essentialize the discourse on blackness* in ways that made it possible to put black inferiority back on the table, while, at the same time, allowing one to declare oneself not a racist when pointing out this legacy. Frazier would say as much about black elites in *The Black Bourgeoisie* (Frazier, 1957). Inevitably, such an emphasis eventually led to a distorted victim-blame analysis and a tendency to underplay, if not make invisible, the role of systemic racism that, in point of fact, made black poverty seem as though it was something self-inflicted. Blacks were seen as their own worst enemy.

Over time, this added feature came to be known as the *deficit perspective on black life*. This assumption that slavery left an indelible mark on the soul of black people is a pillar of Frazier’s work on the black poor, as well as foundational to the Moynihan Report on black families; clearly embedded in *The Mark of Oppression* by Kardiner and Ovesey (1951) as well as the logic behind racial preference studies; reinvigorated in Joe L. Rempson’s narrative on problems facing black urban youth in 2019; and the cornerstone of Joy DeGruy’s narrative on post traumatic slave syndrome (DeGruy Leary, 2005). I have lost track of the number of times black graduate students have formulated research proposals where the point of departure was presumed psychological damage traceable to slavery. That is, there “must be” something wrong with black people.
A major objective of black studies was and remains the disruption and contestation of the deficit model, in some cases by constructing counternarratives—an example being the earlier discussion of racial preference as biculturalism. Searching for counternarratives, one is immediately confronted with the 100 percent evil trope. It is generally assumed slavery was 100 percent evil to the point that even a slight adjustment to this trope puts one at risk of being accused of romanticism. Yet, none other than W.E.B. Du Bois put the spotlight on ex-slaves who, while born and raised in slavery, recorded personal achievements as ex-slaves that defy the logic of the 100 percent evil trope. Human beings who, as adults, recorded uplift within a modest time period after exiting slavery force us to consider that in the midst of an otherwise evil system, the slave community fashioned a positive ecology of human development that made it possible for mothers and infants to accomplish the fundamental foundation for humanization—infant-mother attachment followed by a protracted period of positive child development resulting in slave youth and young adults who exhibited positive personality traits and high levels of interpersonal competence. While these psychological strengths were first put to use in completing/fulfilling the demands/instructions made by their owners, such strengths were portable in the sense that, once emancipated, the ex-slaves were free to employ these same psychological assets in the enactment of their wishes and dreams after exiting slavery. Such a figure is part of my family tree—Hamilton Hatter (Caldwell, 1923). He spent his first nine years as a child in slavery, and the only way one can explain the magnitude of his accomplishments in his adult life as an educator and community leader is to backtrack and pinpoint his early socialization as a slave child by his mother, male and female fictive kin, and the slave community.

We take for granted that Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington exhibited any number of positive psychological assets, but they are generally viewed as exceptional cases, with limited generalizability to the experiences of most ex-slaves. Hamilton Hatter and others like him call into question the exceptionalism thesis. The deficit perspective distorts our ability to comprehend that an unknown percentage of ex-slaves walked out of slavery with psychological as-
sets. The slave community fashioned child socialization practices, despite the otherwise horrific dynamics of the slave enterprise, and the effectiveness of these practices is revealed in the many positive and accomplished ex-slaves who burst on the scene during the first twelve years of Reconstruction (Gates, 2019). Furthermore, ex-slaves who were themselves illiterate, poor, with communication skills centered on Ebonics rather than standard English, nevertheless raised children who became highly successful within mainstream society (Du Bois, 1924/2007). This volume deconstructs the deficit perspective and ends by offering a counternarrative showing that the slaves and slave community did more to forge and then protect black humanity than it is generally given credit for. A summary of the chapters follows.

Summary of Chapters 2–5

Although the Internet had yet to be invented, radio and television reportage of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. was received by black people with amazing simultaneity, regardless of where they lived. Chapter 2 opens with a review of four identity-change models crafted by four different observers positioned at four different cities across the United States. I present material showing that black consciousness, triggered by King’s murder, unfolded in stages, and the four authors, without collaboration, described the same process, despite the fact that their observations were made in four different corners of the nation: Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. In addition, although the four observers received their doctorates in psychology at different institutions, the curriculum at each included comprehensive exposure to transpersonal psychology, stressing how higher consciousness unfolds in multiple stages. I argue that Nigrescence models are, in effect, extensions of existential psychology, albeit an important extension. Chapter 2 compares and contrasts each of the four models. The models were written by males, and Chapter 3 adds a feminist dimension to show how female observers inserted corrections for the gender bias endemic to the original models. I
also examine in Chapter 3 a counternarrative presented by Afro-centric psychologists as well as a discussion of the way the effects of deindustrialization have slowed the spread of black consciousness. Initially, black consciousness, black power, and affirmative action advocated and energized black social mobility, as evidenced by the fact that black studies programs were created and staffed by scholars, most of whom were born to working-class families. I point out that deindustrialization practically brought to a halt programs promoting large-scale uplift for members of the working class. Although Nigrescence incorporated a strong commitment to the folk, it would take the evolution of hip-hop culture to complete an imperfect and spotty dissemination of blackness across class lines. I take up all of these issues in Chapter 3.

Social identity, more crudely referenced as group identity, turns on the unique human capacity for self-consciousness, self-reflection, and meaning making. Erik Erikson (1968) has achieved international recognition for this theory that maps the unfolding of self-consciousness, meaning making, and one’s attachment to a particular social group. Chapter 4 closes the gap revealed in Erikson’s inability to account for the phenomenon called double-consciousness that is paramount to social identity development and general adjustment for human beings stigmatized by mainstream society. The focus here is on the way twoness is foundational to black identity. I present a handful of theories offered as “addendums” to Erikson that (1) describe the environments triggering one sense of self versus another, (2) describe the performance features of twoness, and (3) highlight the human feature too often overlooked in discourses on social identity: individuality. I level a critique at the depiction of racial identity within a binary framework, as if the only healthy social identity to be found among black people gives high salience to race and black culture. I point out the capacity for “some” black people to construct a social sense of self on factors other than race as a bridge for the better understanding of a range of social identity stances found in a large sample of black people, and this is probably true for any stigmatized group.
Chapter 5 presents research captured by the phrase “The Barbershop Bias” in that my evolving understanding of black people being more “normal” than described in the research literature has its origin in the men encountered at my barbershop. I expand upon my discussion in this introductory chapter and trace the origins of the deficit perspective on black life to scholarship produced in the 1930s by the faculty and students at the University of Chicago Department of Sociology. It was based primarily on black family research conducted by the department’s heralded first black doctoral student, E. Franklin Frazier. I provide a close reading of Frazier’s work, along with a critique based solely on information readily available to Frazier when he conducted his research and wrote his results. Many will be surprised that such important information readily available to Frazier was nonetheless not incorporated into his analysis. I assert that Frazier’s influence should have been short-lived, as it failed to predict black family trends, reflected in census reports following publication of his text. Had he studied the experiences of black sharecroppers who migrated to California rather than cities in the North and Midwest, he would have been forced to write a different book altogether. Overlooked data and the California track are discussed in Chapter 5. This chapter ends with an analysis of the effects of deindustrialization on black and white communities and how the spatial separation between the two communities led observers to interpret the economic crisis in the black community with racial rather than economic tropes, while applying an SES analysis to explain the negative social effects of deindustrialization on white communities. Although white people were never slaves, research is presented showing that in the face of deindustrialization, whites began to evidence the type of individual and family dysfunctionality Moynihan and others once thought unique to blacks because of the legacy of slavery. I cover material showing that, in effect, deindustrialization revealed the way SES factors and not “race” provide a better platform upon which to explicate the twists and turns in the history of the black community, from slavery to the present. Revealed in the chapter is the way Frazier’s racial tropes and myths
helped to blind observers to the power of racism and SES factors in understanding impediments to black progress, despite the fact that he was a sociologist. In showing that the deficit perspective was a deeply flawed analysis to begin with, the door is open for scholars to apply our imagination in interpreting the psychology, motivation, and behavior of slaves as they exited slavery, and this new perspective is the focus of the final chapter—Chapter 6. This book sets out to annoy, disrupt, and agitate, because we can do better in capturing the humanity of black people.