

## Preface

**THIS BOOK BEGAN** as a file folder on my desk in which I kept clippings of news stories about race. The idea was to keep on hand some current examples of how race matters today, which I could use to update my lectures or my writing. It quickly filled and then gave way to a series of similar folders, each labeled with a proliferation of titles—“race and health,” “workplace discrimination,” the “race gap” in education, and many more. I also subdivided these into “liberal” and “conservative” lines of argument and debate.

These articles ranged from reports of particular incidents to coverage of new poll results on racial opinions and to recent findings from studies on discrimination. They also included excellent journalistic essays and critical commentaries that sharpened my thinking about race. Eventually, too, there were stories about coverage of race in events like senate races or other political campaigns. As the files grew, I began to see a broad stream of public discourse unfolding, a meandering current of commentary, reflections, and reporting. Then I started to think about the larger question of how we settle on which examples have the greatest bearing in telling us something substantive about how race matters today. Sometimes these thoughts were sparked by the glass-is-half-full-or-half-empty debates over whether racial disparities in this country are diminishing or remaining fairly constant. But also, I wondered about the representativeness of any one example or incident as they just kept occurring, sometimes in novel forms, sometimes as maddening repetitions of the same old stories. Which ones were most exemplary of the enduring significance of race?

Eventually, I realized this question itself warranted a book. I set-

tled on a framework as much out of practicality as based on an analytical rationale. I would take a year's worth of stories and examine how they reflect the interpretive process by which Americans make sense of race. In terms of the rationale, I thought the value of this approach lay in trying to understand something about how we as Americans consume these stories, apart from their status as examples in arguments that race no longer matters or that it remains the bedrock problem in this country. But really, this decision was a practical one as well—the stories just never stopped coming. I settled on a year's framework, in part, because there was no other way to get this project off my desk and into the light of day.

As I write this preface, President Obama just reworked his criticism of the actions of the Cambridge police in “stupidly” arresting Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates in his own home. Gates figures prominently in the final chapter on this book, appropriately enough on the dynamics of apologies for racial incidents. This “new” story perfectly melds the elements of obviousness, ambiguity, and utter discrepancies that “racial” often entails. As well, it features remarkably well-cast characters—Gates, certainly, as a preeminent scholar who has incisively grappled with race; Sergeant James Crowley, a police expert on racial profiling; and, of course, our nation's first African American president. Yet, in resisting the urge to add still another chapter, I hope I have settled on something else of value instead.

This book is about our “national conversation on race,” the sprawling, unwieldy, often maddening means we have developed in the United States for discussing and evaluating what counts as “racial.” I focus on the underlying dynamics of American culture that shape this conversation more than on the particular topics that variously surface and then recede. That is, I attend to the rituals and taboos, the selective vision, and the stylized reactions that culture generates. We humans are culture-bound creatures, and as Americans we share an underlying culture that is far more powerful than our various crucial, poignant, and devastating divisions. This common culture is on display in this particularly curious cultural artifact—our “national conversation on race.” I hope that in having this underlying culture drawn to your attention you will

find a way to think differently about race. Whether or not you do, I remain certain that this conversation is a long way from over.

Inevitably perhaps, most writing on race is polemical. This stems from the fact that it is nearly impossible to have an entirely neutral stance about whether or how race matters. Race is clearly a political and polarizing issue; as well, the urgency and importance of racial matters compel us to take emphatic positions. At the same time, the polemics around race make it devilishly difficult to settle important questions, such as, when and how does race matter? My aim here is to present a view onto our racial polemics, via that oft-referenced “national conversation on race.” What I ask of the reader, then, is a bit of patience as you encounter on these pages voices and positions that are antithetical to your own views on race. The clash of liberal and conservative stances on race may be too powerful and passionate for you to suspend your own well-honed reactions, but my hope is that this book provides a means of stepping back from the fray to consider what might underlie all this turmoil.