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Colin Powell's Life Story as a 'Good Black' Narrative

Mari Boor Tonn
University of Richmond, mtonn@richmond.edu

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$\mathcal{C}$olin Powell's Life Story and the Display of a "Good" Black Persona

In the late summer of 1995, retired four-star general Colin Powell divulged to reporters that his approaching twenty-six-city publicity tour for his forthcoming six-million-dollar autobiography, *My American Journey*, would serve as a "coming-out party" for a possible presidential bid.[1] Launched via excerpts in *Time* and *Reader's Digest*, televised interviews with Barbara Walters, Larry King, Tom Brokaw, David Frost, Jay Leno, and Katie Couric, and print interviews with *People, Parade,* and the *New Yorker,* the memoir leaped to the best-seller list and further fueled media frenzy about Powell's speculative candidacy.[2] By early fall, several polls placed the still-unannounced "candidate" as leading the field of several declared contenders.[3]

Few clues, however, emerged in the 613–page tome about the likely policy direction or even political party orientation of a Powell administration. In fact, in the memoir's final pages, the potential candidate rationalized omitting engaging with "abortion, gun control, welfare, [and] affirmative action" by contending that such "headline issues" held far less significance for the voting American public than did their "yearning" and "searching for a guiding star" to remedy a disintegrating social order.[4] Powell's policy-opaque approach to testing the presidential waters extended to his lucrative "stump" speeches,[5] the heart of which chronicled his climb from Harlem and the South Bronx as a child of Jamaican immigrants to become the first black appointed both as national security advisor and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.[6] Such striking emphasis on Powell the person led both *Newsweek* and *Time* to conclude that this prospective presidential hopeful believed his "life" was sufficient platform.[7]

Yet the potent symbolic allure of Powell's life story had long generated considerable ink. In 1989, *Parade* magazine had seized upon the symbolic patriotic themes implicit within the black national security advisor's "great American [life] story" for its July 4 cover story.[8] In the months surrounding the first Persian Gulf War, features in *National Review, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report,* and elsewhere pulled heavily from Powell's humble beginnings in floating him as a potential "black Eisenhower,"[9] with *Newsweek* drawing the analogy even before a shot had been fired in the conflict. By 1993, two biographies of Powell had devoted entire chapters speculating on whether the inspiring life odyssey of this

politically enigmatic black Horatio Alger would reach full fruition in the Oval Office.[10] As speculation mounted over Powell's possible announcement, observers such as *Newsweek's* Joe Klein championed Powell with the headline "Character, Not Ideology," and *U.S. News and World Report's* Morton Zuckerman concluded his editorial endorsement, "If he declares, Powell, the candidate of biography and not ideology, has a chance to be a breakthrough president of the United States."[11]

As a Vietnam veteran who presided over what was then perceived to be the nation's swift Persian Gulf "victory,"[12] Powell undoubtedly functioned for many Americans as the perfect symbolic tonic for the nation's polarizing military failure in Southeast Asia. But his disciplined, soldierly ethos merely compounded his more salient appeal as symbolic medicine man for racial discord and disorder. Biographer Howard Means, for example, contended the black Powell's widespread popularity had performed a kind of racial "exorcism" for a country where, since its inception, "race has been [its] abiding schism, its inner continental divide."[13] Likewise, broadsheets of at least one Draft Powell for President committee heralded its hand-picked nominee as singularly able to "heal" racial divisions by fostering "racial harmony."[14] Most noticeably, Powell as "racial healer" became a leitmotif in literally dozens of media features on Powell. For example, months prior to his exploratory "campaign," *Time* framed the potential of a Powell presidency in metaphors of racial disease and cure: "A black President could become a major healer of the racial divisions that plague this country."[15] Following Powell's abrupt, late-November 1995 withdrawal from presidential consideration, the weekly pointed to the dashed hopes of Americans who had looked to this "black man on a white horse" as a chance to "reinvent race relations" or "to heal . . . 200 years of racial divide."[16]

The overt exploitation of Powell's personal biography by the prospective candidate and the mainstream media[17] invite critical evaluation of the ways in which such widely distributed renderings of Powell's life story contributed to his appeal as a symbol of racial "redemption" among certain audiences, especially given his far higher favorable ratings among whites than minorities—a reversal of conventional racial trends.[18] Others have emphasized that biographies and autobiographies are textured rhetorically.[19] Likewise, I contend that Powell's memoir, biographies, and various other interpretations of his life in widely circulated media venues produced prior to and coincident with his dalliance with a presidential run *argue* by enabling Americans outside of the nation's lowest racial caste— descendants of America's slaves—to view racial matters through what social critic Shelby Steele termed "seeing for innocence."[20] These accounts selectively absolve and indict on matters of race by enacting what I describe as a "good" black narrative, which both reflects and perpetuates what ethnographers claim is a prevalent mythos used to distinguish "superior" blacks holding *immigrant* credentials, such as Powell, from "inferior" blacks whose forebears were American slaves.[21] Because "immigration" status is the most salient defining feature of the "good" black narrative, this mythos vividly illustrates Kenneth Burke's contention that "terministic screens" or discursive filters accommodate a particular selection and deflection—a preferred reading—of a social order even as these same screens may reflect certain social "realities" they have aided in constructing.[22]

The versions of Powell's life examined in this chapter contain two overarching features ethnographers claim are means by which immigrant blacks work to accrue "good" black status. First, their emphasis on Powell as *the son of industrious Jamaican immigrants comports*

with the common practice ethnographers locate among second-generation black immigrants of consciously telegraphing their ethnic heritage as a means of "filtering" themselves for the dominant culture so that they can ward off downward social mobility still linked to a black racial identity in the United States.[23] The inclusion of ancestry in life stories by political hopefuls is not in itself remarkable, but the Powell stories so conspicuously emphasize his distinctive black heritage that they suggest a peculiarly potent symbiotic relationship between its utility both for Powell the "candidate" and for the dominant culture. Second, Powell's "superior" black narrative endorsed and enacted the strategy of racial "exiting" rather than of "voice" to effect social entry[24] or, to use Steele's terms, the strategies of "bargaining" for white racial innocence rather than "challenging" it.[25] Many American blacks have long gravitated toward collective political "voice" to redress racial inequities, but some immigrant blacks—particularly those with strong ethnic identities—have favored individual strategies for mobility designed to elude the stigma of stereotypical "inferior" blackness. Steele contends that because whites yearn for a clear racial conscience, the most accepted and, therefore, successful blacks are not racial "challengers" but racial "bargainers," those blacks willing to grant "white society its innocence in exchange for entry into the mainstream" by saying, in effect, "I already believe you are innocent (good, fair-minded) and have faith that you will prove it"; black challengers, by contrast, annoy by confronting white society with the goad, "If you are innocent, then prove it," thereby holding white innocence captive until some ransom is paid.[26] Thus, racial bargaining accommodates "exit" symbiotically: individual blacks escape the taints of blackness while members of the dominant culture escape the taints of racism.

This chapter illuminates how this racial bargain was sealed through Powell's self-portrayals and others' portrayals of him. I first discuss the social constructions of "good" immigrant blacks versus "bad" native blacks and then explore how these constructs engage with the complex issue of blacks' personal agency in a dominant society enamored with racial bargaining. I next analyze how various tactics for displaying "good" black immigrant ethnicity function to bargain for white racial innocence, using Powell as exemplar. Powell's unprecedented appeal as a black "candidate" to the public at large is illuminated by the "good" black narrative that, I argue, invites a less heartening reading of racial healing, racial progress, and racial harmony than a cursory glance at his remarkable white following initially permits.

"Good" versus "Bad" Blacks

Since the turn of the twentieth century, black migration, predominantly from the West Indies, has dramatically altered the racial terrain in certain major American urban areas, such as New York City, where black immigrants currently comprise roughly a quarter of the black population.[27] Entering primarily in two waves, the preponderance of these black islanders has arrived on the heels of revised 1965 immigration laws.[28]

Combined with their industriousness, these immigrant blacks' devotion to education, family, church, the American-dream mythos, and "racelessness" rapidly earned them cultural capital among whites as "good" blacks purportedly "superior" to American-born or indigenous blacks, roughly a third of whom still remained mired in poverty at the time of Powell's speculative candidacy.[29] By the late 1960s, blacks of West Indian extraction reportedly earned 52 percent more than native blacks and by the 1980s controlled approximately

half of all black-owned businesses in New York City, although then numbering but 10 percent of the black population. In fact, second-generation black Jamaicans who came of age during the dismantling of legal segregation in the United States, such as Powell, earn a median income even higher than their white counterparts.[30] Given such impressive records of achievement, some black West Indians—particularly first-generation and ethnically identified descendants—tend to believe that "while racism still exists in the United States, it can be effectively overcome through hard work, perseverance, and the right values and attitudes."[31] Folklore has it, for example, that black Caribbean women first integrated the garment trades in New York City in the 1920s by simply ignoring the "no blacks need apply" signs and walking in and demanding employment.[32]

The sharp disparity in upward mobility between these two black groups not only has strengthened stereotypes of "bad" or "inferior" native blacks as indolent, criminal, illiterate, government-dependent, unduly obsessed with racism, and morally remiss toward family but also has lubricated the transfer of racial guilt over the nation's record of institutionalized racism from its white architects to native blacks themselves. To observers such as Ira Reid, Thomas Sowell, Mona Charen, and others, the successes of black immigrants strongly imply that white racism no longer seriously compromises the nation's fabled meritocracy, an argument often advanced[33] and critiqued about accomplished individual blacks more generally.[34] Dana L. Cloud, for example, maintains that the construction of Oprah Winfrey's successful black persona in popular biographies services dominant readings of race by "implying the accessibility of [the American] dream to black Americans despite the structural economic and political obstacles to achievement and survival posed in a racist society."[35] But the extraordinary *group* success of black immigrants even more powerfully enables attributing the onus for disproportional black poverty, prisoner rates, and other grave inner-city conditions chiefly to the conduct of a native-black underclass itself.

Yet other evidence paints a more complex portrait, insisting upon a more reflective reading. If and when black West Indians begin to assimilate, becoming less distinguishable from American blacks in language, accent, dress, and other customs, they jeopardize and sometimes lose the economic and social edges black islanders themselves openly concede they enjoy.[36] Most particularly, the marked preferences expressed by white employers in recent studies for hiring West Indians over native blacks[37] mirrors what Jack Miles terms as "the comfort factor" whites feel towards immigrants of color. As illustration, he points to the "unofficial but widespread preferential hiring of Latinos [over blacks]—the largest affirmative-action program in the nation, and one paid for, in effect, by [native] blacks."[38] So, too, the significantly lower social and economic status of black West Indians in countries without the buffer of large indigenous black populations confounds theories that the remarkable mobility of black islanders in the United States results solely from behavioral attributes accrued in West Indian culture rather than from structural features of a dominant white culture. In Toronto, as illustration, black Jamaicans inhabit the popular imagination as "welfare queens and gun-toting gangsters and dissolute youth"—roles typically reserved for native blacks in the United States—and are nearly thirty times more likely to face incarceration for crimes than are similarly charged whites.[39] Similarly, in her comparative analysis of black immigrant experiences in the United States and Britain, ethnographer Nancy Foner writes that West Indians reign as "good" in "the context of black America"— law abiding and entrepreneurial, for example—but they are stigmatized in predominantly

white London as "inferior" and "dangerous," bear the blame for an array of social ills, and are skittish about investing personal savings in small businesses largely dependent upon patronage by hostile English whites.[40]

Contributing to this sorting of "good" blacks from "bad" in the United States are the rival national narratives each group respectively embodies: on the one hand, the proud tale of bold immigrants *voluntarily* fleeing tyranny or poverty to pursue the promises of the American dream; and, on the other, the shameful countertale of *forced* black immigration —slavery—the greatest rebuke to the egalitarian mythos of the American dream. While native blacks irritate the dominant culture as constant physical and psychological reminders of a guilty racial past, immigrant blacks soothe as living testaments to America's political and economic allure, its essential "goodness," even for persons of color. As ethnographer Mary C. Waters reports, the narrative of black "immigration tends to erase the slave narrative"[41] for both whites and blacks of island extraction. Cornel West argues that the mere presence of black bodies makes even whites of good will uncomfortable,[42] but black "West Indians," Waters writes, "provide a black face for whites to look into without seeing the sorry history of American race relations mirrored back," thereby putting whites "at ease."[43] Thus, the "good" and "bad" racial histories associated with members of these different black groups enhances the allure of "bargaining" for white racial innocence. Indeed, a unique consequence of Powell as a black immigrant Horatio Alger is that some segments of the public invoked the force of this hallowed rags-to-riches mythos to court the candidate rather than the customary reverse, as evident both in numerous draft-Powell campaigns and in explicit or thinly veiled media endorsements. These themes of mythologized immigration and institutionalized racism converge in one white employer's comments that, in describing hiring preferences, transfer the nation's centuries-long racial obsession—intimated simply as "this"—to bigotry's traditional victims: native blacks purportedly fixated unduly on race:

> Island blacks who come over, they're immigrant. They may not have such a good life here they are so they gonna try to strive to better themselves and I think there's a lot of American blacks out there who feel we owe them. And enough is enough already. You know, this is something that happened to their ancestors, not now. I mean, we've done so much for the black people in America now that it's time that they got off their butts.[44]

Such sharp criticisms are not peculiar to whites. Rather, such critiques are echoed by those ethnically identified black immigrants who claim native blacks carry racial "chips on their shoulders," "sulk and cry about [race] without doing much to help themselves," and use racism as an "excuse" for their own various shortcomings or "lack of success."[45] These black immigrants and their children do not completely discount or ignore racism, but instead tend to protest racial injustices selectively and individually and with an eye toward the incident's bearing upon their individual fortunes.[46] Ironically, some black immigrants cast the white engineers of the racial caste system more charitably than they do native blacks consigned to its lowest rung who resent, directly challenge, or internalize their "inferior" grade. Even black West Indians openly sympathetic to the peculiar native-black predicament, according to both Foner and Waters, nonetheless generally describe themselves as "different" blacks in terms translatable as "superior": more ambitious, hardworking, confident, comfortable, and dignified in dealing with whites than indigenous blacks who

purportedly are more cynical about effort reaping rewards and, thus, adopt a self-defeating "adversarial stance" towards the dominant culture.[47] Powell likewise draws numerous explicit and implicit comparisons between immigrant and other blacks throughout his memoir. For example, in writing of his admiration for southern black military officers struggling with their first exposure to integration, he inserts his "difference" from them this way: "I had never felt uncomfortable around whites; I had never considered myself less valuable."[48] And often these "differences" are easily readable through the filters of "good" black versus "bad" black mythology. "My parents came to this country looking not for government support," he writes in the memoir's final pages, "but for job opportunities."[49]

Such black ethnic stereotyping is often mutual. For their part, some American blacks frame West Indian blacks as arrogant, selfish, unfriendly to native blacks, oblivious to racial politics, and willing to endure workplace exploitation,[50] early on derisively dubbing these industrious newcomers as "Jewmaicans."[51] Such sweeping characterizations, of course, ignore an unmistakable history of militancy by blacks with islander heritage,[52] not least of which is Malcolm X, an icon for many young, native, inner-city blacks.[53] Nonetheless, black immigrants still reign among the favored targets for common epithets hurled by native blacks at other blacks whose personal enterprise, commitment to education, achievements, social networks, or even modes of dress or talk incur charges of acting "white"—"Uncle Tom," "Oreo," "Afro-Saxon," or "incognegro."[54] Powell himself writes that his courtship and marriage to a native black engendered initial concern and suspicion by both families, particularly his future father-in-law, who had tried to avoid "'damn West Indians'" all his life.[55] Given such experiences, many immigrant blacks perceive racial tensions in black-black rather than black-white terms.[56]

In no small contradiction, even as some blacks of island ancestry adamantly discount the significance racism bears on individual fortunes, they candidly concede that their own "better treatment" by whites—advantages in hiring, promotion, and other social venues—depends upon whites' awareness of their island ethnicity.[57] In fact, ethnographers report "reactive ethnicity" emerging among some new black arrivals who live in close proximity to native blacks facing severe racial discrimination.[58] Reaping the rewards bestowed upon "good" blacks, then, requires that such blacks differentiate themselves from those indigenous blacks whom they otherwise physically resemble. Consequently, despite publicly disdaining "racialism"—which they define as exaggerated racial pride, identity, and sensitivity to racism—these blacks of immigrant descent consciously broadcast their *ethnic* heritage through language patterns, accents, dress and hairstyles, or, most commonly, by creating strategies to work immigrant ancestry routinely into conversations. Illustrative is the report by one adolescent black islander of carrying a key chain emblazoned with an island map so as to provoke interrogation by curious whites.[59] So widely recognized are the social and economic advantages conferred on black immigrants relative to native blacks that some lower-class indigenous blacks have begun to poach ethnic markers such as speaking patois or sporting Caribbean fashion, in part, to accrue cultural benefits concomitant with foreign status,[60] a type of "passing" some native blacks employed during segregation to access the relative freedoms available to black immigrants and black foreigners.[61] Beyond advertising their distinctive immigrant credentials, many black newcomers and their progeny emphasize the kinds of "exiting" approaches to survival and advancement long associated with "exceptional" blacks in general: hard work and higher education, personal diplomacy and

networking, and a scrupulous aversion to racial politics. Some black immigrants further disassociate from "blackness" by denying the applicability of the designator to themselves,[62] by confining their social networks to other black immigrants or to influential whites holding tickets to social mobility, and by parroting the dominant culture's negative stereotypes of native blacks.[63]

Racial "Bargaining" and Agent Status

The strategy of racial bargaining predicated on the distinction between "superior" and "inferior" blacks requires consideration of the complex issue of personal agency. In a society rife with hierarchy, agency necessarily is an ambiguous, fluid, and complicated concept, particularly for members of groups continually forced to negotiate that hierarchy. Much of the liberal-versus-conservative debate surrounding contemporary native-black conditions is couched in the stark polarities of *environmental* and *behavioral* theses, what Burke would term "scene" and "agent," respectively. But West and Henry Louis Gates Jr. contend that both scenic factors and individual choices and actions must be considered in assessing black conditions, because, in West's words, "structures and behavior are inseparable. . . . How people act and live are shaped—but in no way dictated or determined—by the larger circumstances in which they find themselves."[64] Only in "confronting the twin realities of white racism, on the one hand," they write, "and [black] failures to seize initiative on the other" can perplexing problems such as disproportionate black poverty be honestly and effectively addressed.[65]

Steele's emphasis on racial bargaining as the correct means to achieve black mobility reveals a variation of the behavioral or agent-centered thesis that is more akin to a Burkean sense of "agency": a pragmatic means by which to negotiate a dominant racial scene for purposes of advancement or survival.[66] In Steele's arguments, individual agency oscillates between black agents and the dominant racial scene, even as free will and choice are used to account for the circumstances (favorable or unfavorable) in which blacks find themselves. For example, Steele argues that decades after the razing of legal apartheid, blacks still continue to display themselves primarily as injured victims of white oppression both as leverage for collective entitlement and as an alibi for neglecting individual initiative, a victimization mentality that renders blacks perpetually infantile. Yet despite his withering critique of black preoccupation with white racism and power, he tacitly concedes white culture's enduring dominance as an arbiter of black mobility, a gate-keeping authority that positions blacks as not-fully-constituted agents per se, but what Burke might term "agent-minus[es]."[67] Because whites covet racial innocence, Steele writes, pragmatic "bargaining is now—today—a way for the black individual to *join* the larger society, to make a place for himself or herself."[68] In fact, he maintains that because black bargainers wield the power to grant whites their holy grail of racial absolution, the most gifted racial bargainers often doubly profit; beyond gaining access and acceptance, masterful bargainers may benefit from "the gratitude factor," finding themselves "cherished beyond the measure of [their] achievements."[69]

Steele situates racial bargaining in a post–civil rights era where racial challenging purportedly has been rendered obsolete, but his recipe for black mobility bears striking resemblance to the conciliatory demeanor long expected of severely oppressed blacks in exchange for white largesse. Toni Morrison, for example, argues that slave narratives generally featured supplicant black protagonists who strategically "veiled" the anguish of their racial

injuries and their attendant anger for purposes of appealing to white change agents capable of altering black circumstance. Aiming for a sympathetic rather than alienated reading, slave writers "were silent about many things, and they 'forgot' many other things," revealing little or none of the pain and outrage of an "interior life" that might offend. Rather than challenging the evils of white supremacy, such stories, she writes, strategically complimented the "nobility of heart" and "finer high-mindedness" of whites, so as to encourage them to exercise it.[70] This discursive veiling reflects the "performance tradition in African-American culture" described by D. Soyini Madison where "the 'mask,' or presentation of self, constructed for white people" is displayed as "a matter of survival,"[71] a motif that still emerges in numerous analyses of black/white relations, Steele's among them. His pointing to Louis Armstrong's "exaggerated smile" as emblematic of the racial bargaining he advocates, for example, echoes Thomas Kochman's contention that blacks "still *front* in the presence of whites . . . even suppressing anger where expressing it would involve social risk."[72]

Even as Steele incessantly couches personal agency for blacks in the traditional "agent" terms of unfettered free will, his actual privileging of *pragmatic* black agency is perhaps nowhere more salient than in his prescient profile of the type of black presidential candidate he predicted could elicit widespread popular support. Years before Powell's name appeared on the public's presidential radar screen cloaked in metaphors of innocence, guilt, and redemption, Steele wrote of this hypothetical black leader:

> Whether it is right or wrong, fair or unfair . . . no black candidate will have a serious chance at his party's nomination, much less the presidency, unless he can convince white Americans that he can be trusted to preserve their sense of racial innocence . . . Such a candidate will have to use his power of absolution; he will have to flatly forgive and forget . . . [and] offer a vision that is passionately raceless, a vision that strongly condemns any form of racial politics.[73]

The remainder of this chapter treats Powell's biographies, autobiography, and other versions of his life as primers for and endorsements of this type of racial bargaining. In Powell's case, such tactics, I argue, grounded the frequent framing of him as racially redemptive presidential material by locating persistent social problems implicated by race primarily in the alleged shortcomings of native blacks. Although history provides various examples of black politicians who have proven themselves adept at negotiating and even alleviating white racial guilt,[74] Powell, I argue, benefitted from and exploited the "terministic screen" of black immigrant ancestry, a filter by which American culture, whites and some blacks alike, traditionally has sorted "good" blacks from "bad." In the Powell tales, the pronounced display of his immigrant credentials, coupled with themes typifying the talk both of ethnically identified black immigrants and many whites reported in ethnographic studies, coalesce to form what I term a "good" or "superior" black narrative.

Bargaining for White Racial Innocence: Displaying a "Good" Black Persona

Efforts by immigrant blacks to "exit" the category of pejorative blackness entail a variety of strategies, but my focus here is on *rhetorical* tactics embedded within narratives both by and about "good" blacks. Various renderings of Powell's life story present him, dominant society, and other blacks in terms of "bargaining for white racial innocence." Involved within the bargain are tactics of portrayal used by both Powell and the media that construct a "superior" black ethnic identity that is set against qualities attributed to an "inferior" native

black identity. In this section, I inventory some of those tactics as they are exemplified in renderings of Powell's life story.

The Jamaican Horatio Alger

On its face, Powell's conspicuous appropriation of American-dream ideology to launch his presidential book-tour "campaign" was not exceptional. Among the most enduring and appealing American myths, the Horatio Alger tale has become a rhetorical staple for political aspirants of humble origins who use their rise from rags to riches both to certify their personal mettle and to confirm the nation's allegiance to unbridled opportunity.[75] This myth so attracts the public imagination that political hopefuls or their champions might embellish the actual distance of a candidate's climb. Powell's sister, for example, dryly noted that each published account of the Powell family progressively rendered the middle-class clan "poorer and poorer,"[76] a discursive embroidery Cloud notes in the "Oprah" tales.[77]

When the hero is both black and of recent immigrant stock, this hallowed American myth acquires exponential allure to a dominant culture seeking racial absolution. Impressive achievements of blacks in general can be touted as triumphs not only for the individual but for society as concrete exemplars of its belated repudiation of an undeniable racist past. But highly successful blacks with immigrant lineage are particularly enticing, because they enable more complete voiding or e-racing of that racist history. As Burke observes, "[A] thorough job of symbolic rebirth . . . require[s] the revision of one's ancestral past itself. . . . [I]n becoming wholly transformed one not only can alter the course of the future but can even remake the past."[78] The force black immigration can play in historical racial revisionism is intimated in Jim Cullen's extensive treatment of the American-dream mythos. The United States, he writes, "is a nation that has been *re-created* as a deliberate act of conscious *choice* every time a person has landed on these shores. Explicit allegiance, *not involuntary inheritance,* is the theoretical basis of American identity [emphasis added]."[79] Powell's symbolic power to license racial amnesia in recasting that American identity is vividly illustrated in broadsheets of one Draft Powell for President committee, which asserted in boldfaced copy: "The American Dream—as it was in *the beginning*—and as it remains today—is about freedom and opportunity. . . . Powell personifies that Dream [italics added]."[80]

The intense appeal to the dominant culture of appropriating the immigrant dimension of Powell so as to refashion America's racial identity as egalitarian is manifest in the longstanding and continuing play given his immigrant ancestry in various venues. As early as 1987, an installment of *Biography* trumpeted the then black national security advisor as "the embodiment of the American Dream" by featuring a tribe of Powell's Jamaican relatives witnessing to his "can-do" attitude and immigrant "work ethic";[81] tellingly, former secretary of defense Robert McNamara's review of the segment on amazon.com begins not with Powell's extensive military or professional record, but by immediately filtering this black man as "the son of Jamaican immigrants."[82] Likewise, several media cover stories and features coincident with the first Gulf War grounded the four-star general's promise as a "black Eisenhower" as much in his Jamaican family history and culture as in his military prowess, with *U.S. News and World Report,* as illustration, committing roughly a third of its feature story to his immigrant pedigree and upbringing.[83] With the 1996 election on the horizon, the displaying of Powell as the "son of Jamaican immigrants" had literally become

a media mantra, nearly appearing to be an extension of the general's name. So routinized has the parading of Powell's black lineage become that CNN's Bill Schneider inserted the then secretary of state's immigrant heritage into commentary on Powell's February 2003 speech to the U.N. Security Council detailing Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons capabilities.[84]

Powell's two biographies by white authors, on which he closely cooperated, also prominently advertised his distinctive black genealogy in dangling him both as a presidential prospect and a symbol of racial reconciliation. The dust jackets on the Means and David Roth biographies respectively read, "General Powell emerges as the embodiment of the American Dream: the son of Jamaican immigrants, he rose from the hard life of the South Bronx to become the most talked about military leader since World War II" and "The son of Jamaican immigrants, Colin Powell grew up in the tenements of New York. . . . Colin Powell is . . . the embodiment of all that is good about America." On its back cover, testimonials to the Roth biography include the following praise: "*Sacred Honor* is a classic American drama . . . General Colin Powell's greatness is understood in the light of his very special family background." For his part, Means devoted an entire chapter to explicating the history and social lessons of the black Powell's Jamaican roots.

Powell's autobiography followed these leads with striking congruity, conspicuously telegraphing his "good" black ethnicity when testing the presidential waters. As Waters notes, whereas ethnicity declines among white immigrants as they strive for advancement by absorbing themselves into the larger culture, "the more socially mobile [immigrant blacks] cling to *ethnic* identity as a hedge against a *racial* identity [emphasis added]," which they recognize spells downward social mobility.[85] Thus, not surprisingly, the terministic screen of immigration emerges immediately, both in the first sentences of the inside dust jacket of *My American Journey*—"Colin Powell is the embodiment of the American Dream. He was born in Harlem to *immigrant parents from Jamaica* [emphasis added]"—and the book's frontispiece via a "My Roots" gallery of captioned photographs of Powell's Jamaican relatives and the island cottage in which his father, Luther, was born. In the preface to the book, Powell reiterates, "Mine is the story of a *black kid* of no early promise from an *immigrant family* of limited means [emphasis added]."[86] The first paragraph of the book's official first chapter follows suit, trailing Powell during his adult pilgrimage to his parents' Jamaican homeland. In the book's opening pages and throughout, Powell fused his "American Dream" odyssey, marketed explicitly on the dust jacket's exterior, with his parents' separate, elective passages to the states, "act[s] of courage and hope," he wrote, that "would help shape the destiny of their son."[87] So, too, embedded within his early, quite-extensive talk of Jamaican homeland, customs, and a legion of islander kin, is Powell's claim he had no "sense of [racial] identity" during his formative years. "Most of the black families I knew had their roots in Jamaica, Trinidad, or Barbados, or other islands of the West Indies," he writes, a point he shares in multiple articulations.[88] Yet the attention Powell lavishes on his island heritage throughout the memoir is strikingly at odds with his own admission in the opening pages that he could only speculate upon his parents' motivations for emigrating, given he had never discussed with his father, even as an adult, either the details of his father's early life in Jamaica or his parent's motivations for emigrating to a strange land.[89] Despite this seemingly longstanding disinterest in his ancestral homeland and his parents' psyche, Powell nonetheless chose to launch his book-tour presidential "campaign" via a Barbara Walters

special containing recently filmed footage of him duplicating his parents' passage to America from Jamaica.[90]

Scapegoating Blackness

The redemptive tactic of the "Jamaican Horatio Alger" appealed to the dominant culture's desire for racial innocence, but symbolic purification rituals attending quests for escaping social taint rarely are benign. Rather, they traffic in division, hierarchy, power, mortification, and victimage, a cathartic process wherein guilt or social pollution is transferred to vessels "outside."[91] Since terministic screens simultaneously unite and divide, they unavoidably "set up the conditions for [a] particular kind of scapegoat."[92] Steele concurs, arguing that the search for "innocence imposes—*demands*—division and conflict."[93] Not surprisingly, native blacks in the Powell narrative bore the cost incurred for Powell's restoration of white racial innocence in myriad ways.

Many of the accounts, for example, engaged implicitly or explicitly in a black immigrant variation of what Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek and others have described as discourse that collapses whiteness and nationality, thereby intimating that being "black" and "American" are mutually exclusive. "To conflate nationality and 'race,'" they write, "is an expression of power since it relegates those of other racial groups to an [*sic*] marginal role in national life."[94] West concurs, arguing that discussions of race frequently contain the "implication . . . that only certain Americans can define what it means to be an American, and the rest must simply 'fit in.'"[95] Powell's immigration status, however, greatly eased the move to consigning native blacks to "alien" or "un-American," as suggested in Cullen's thesis that the "theoretical basis for American identity" is not "involuntary inheritance" but "conscious choice." Beyond the constant drumbeat of Powell as the incarnation of American-dream mythology, a 1994 *Newsweek* cover story, for example, asking "Can Colin Powell Save America?" baldly resorted to italics to cast this "son of Jamaican immigrants" as "an African-American who . . . seems a distinctly *American* character [emphasis in original]."[96] The following year, coverage in *U.S. News and World Report,* notably christened "An American Tale," claimed that "Colin Powell's vast extended family has lived a classic immigrant story, a classic American story"; the feature was almost entirely devoted to expounding upon the exceptional qualities of black Jamaican transplants whom it liberally quotes. "This sprawling clan," it argued, "has prospered for the same reasons many other immigrants have: strong families, discipline, hard work, high standards."[97]

To be sure, the Powell narrative approached the nation's inescapable record of institutionalized racism in various purifying ways: completely ignoring it, deploying therapeutic euphemisms such as racial "healing" that summoned slavery or Jim Crow, or, most commonly, neutralizing structural racism's enduring significance through the purifying comparative lenses of "superior" versus "inferior" blacks. As Cloud contends, minority biographies that service hegemony generally "pry into and recognize oppression while at the same time disclaiming its salience with regard to an individual's success or failure."[98] But the Powell "good" black narrative is especially noteworthy in that it frequently moved well beyond merely discounting racial obstacles to upward mobility to enact a kind of scapegoating ritual that Burke argues is a common approach to removing guilt or perceived taint. "[S]ymbolic transformation," he writes, "involves a sloughing off [of impurities]. . . . So, we get to the 'scapegoat,' the 'representative' or 'vessel' of certain unwanted evils, the sacrificial

animal upon whose back the burden of these evils is ritualistically loaded."[99] For whites, such "impurities" entailed collective guilt over past racial sins, but for black immigrants and their descendants the "impurity" most needing "sloughing off" was the inferior mark of blackness. These dual purifying purposes were evident in the numerous media features on Powell that deployed the testimony of "good" blacks to locate native black circumstance primarily and sometimes exclusively in the attitudes of native blacks rather than the dominant culture. *U.S. News and World Report* wrote in 1991, "'An immigrant's son like Powell,' argues [Judge] Watson, [Powell's Jamaican-American] cousin, 'is not as burdened as other African-Americans by the legacy of slavery and racism,'" an assertion with some merit given the differing reception within dominant society of these respective black groups. But the next sentence clarified that the attitudinal "problem" of racism lay *only* with American blacks and not the receiving social order: "[Powell] has no sense of himself as a victim or a belief 'that somebody owes him something.'"[100] Four years later, the periodical rehashed the same three-part, racially redemptive formula of comparative U.S. and British slavery systems, relative black group psychology, and the invaluable corroborating testimony from Powell's Jamaican kin: "There were no limitations put in people's minds [in the West Indies] about what they could do," reported one Powell cousin in describing differing psychological profiles of Jamaican-Americans and native blacks. "As a result, we don't say, 'I can't.' We say, 'I'll try.'"[101] For its part, *Newsweek* described Powell's firsthand knowledge of the extreme violence greeting black demands for legal equality in the South during the 1960s, but then nonetheless unmistakably and unreflectively implied that racism as an obstacle—*even then*—was always and ever an individual *choice* made by blacks. "Powell seems never to have *allowed* his race to be a disadvantage [emphasis added]." Rather, "[h]e has approached the question [of race] in a distinctive West Indian way," an attitudinal "way" articulated by a Powell cousin: "'We tended to see it [race] differently from Southern blacks [at the time] . . . They saw the glass as mostly half empty. We saw it half full, and we were coming to fill up the rest.'"[102]

Powell's two biographies and memoir proceed in similar fashion, effectively canceling out their obligatory treatment of the nation's sordid racial record with generous discussions of black Jamaican-American accomplishments relative to other blacks. Means's entire Jamaican chapter, for example, expounded upon various behavioral and cultural theses to underscore marked disparities in achievements between transplanted black West Indians, including Powell's extended family, whom he liberally quotes, and their American black counterparts. There, however, the variable of a guilty slave history in influencing black mobility is not expunged but rather is emphasized as a potent *a fortiori* argument. Black West Indian immigrants, Means writes in a paraphrase of Sowell, have prospered impressively in the United States despite "the fact that the treatment of island slaves was generally even harsher than the treatment of slaves kept on plantations of the [American] South," who experienced a "paternalism" absent in a West Indian slave system demanding more self-sufficiency. (Powell likewise advances this "paternalistic" reading of U.S. versus West Indian slave systems in the opening pages of his autobiography, wherein he distinguishes himself from native blacks in numerous respects.) As a result, Means writes, the Powell family "story is not just another story of immigrants finding success in the New World. It is a far rarer tale: one of immigrants whose ancestors had once been chattel making that success," a tale he claims has a "moral."[103] The book's final paragraph revisited the immigrant theme displayed

on its cover, opening pages, and throughout, asserting, "The Colin Powell story is . . . the classic tale of the immigrants' child, pushed by his parents to exceed the[ir] accomplishments. . . . It is a West Indian story and a Bronx story, an Army one and an American one. Most of all perhaps, it is a story of . . . human exceptionalism . . . [of] ris[ing] above the norms."[104]

In this coda to the Powell parable, Means married in one stroke the themes of black immigration and exceptionalism that second generation black islanders commonly report about their experiences with whites who perceive them as not "really black" according to the "norms," to borrow Means's term. But whereas white society has always been captivated by individual black "exceptionalism" as corroboration of the dominant culture's fair-mindedness, the alleged *group* "exceptionalism" of blacks possessing immigrant ancestry is wrought with irony. "Whites tend to let those of the second generation [of black immigrants] know that they think of them as exceptions to the rule, the rule being that most blacks are not good people," ethnographer Waters reports. "However, these [of the second generation] also know that unless they *tell* people of their ethnicity, most whites have no idea that they are not black Americans [emphasis added]."[105] Such ironic experiences go to the heart of Burke's thesis that terministic screens are but interpretive "fictions," his central point that he himself underscores with typographical emphasis: "[M]any of the 'observations' are but implications of the particular terminology in . . . which the observations are made . . . Pick some particular nomenclature, some one terministic screen . . . [t]hat you may proceed to track down the kinds of observation implicit in the terminology you have chosen."[106]

This perception that blacks of immigrant extraction are not *really* "black" evidences West's claim that "race"—generally meaning "blackness"—in the United States is, at bottom, a social, political, and ethical construct comprised of white guilt rather than a biological category arbitrarily comprised of factors such as the proportions of ancestral blood.[107] Thus, Powell's distinctive "good" black immigrant status helps to explain the frequent billing of him in the popular media as a black man who "transcends race." Not surprisingly, many of these racially transcendent claims invoked invisible, normative standards of "whiteness" described by Nakayama and Krizek, among others.[108] Means, for example, applauded the public perception of Powell as "a man without race," both noting that he "has no trace of race . . . in his voice" and quoting a bevy of political and military figures who praised the black general as a man who has "totally transcended the issue of race . . . He's such a tremendous role model from the standpoint that his race is not his identity."[109]

Many observers pointed to Powell's unprecedented popularity among whites as tolling the waning power of oppressive racial stereotypes, but the talk often surrounding his alleged "racelessness" strongly suggested the reverse: freer license by the dominant culture to cast "race" or, more accurately, "blackness" in uniformly pejorative terms. As Malcolm Gladwell writes, rather than sounding the demise of racism, the valorization of the "good" immigrant black "makes the old blanket prejudice against American blacks all the easier to express . . . without fear of sounding . . . racist."[110] Hailing Powell as a black man who "transcends race," a 1994 *Newsweek* cover story under the subhead "Carib Advantages" intimated that the weekly equated "race" solely with whiny, idle native blacks: "Powell has refused to countenance the bitterness and pessimism—the overwhelming sense of aggrievement—that has paralyzed much of the African-American community," it claimed, also noting his counsel to young blacks to not use racism as an "excuse."[111] And frequently, commentary

couching Powell as a racially transcendent "healer" illustrated West's argument that the dominant culture places the burden on native blacks "to do *all* of the 'cultural' and 'moral' work necessary for healthy race relations [emphasis added]."[112] Emblematic of this trend is an editorial in *U.S. News and World Report,* which asserted that Powell "has proved by his life and work ethic that the American Dream is alive . . . and rendered the color of his skin irrelevant." In expanding further on Powell's alleged racelessness, however, the editorial located his promise as a racial medicine man primarily in this *black's* potential to discipline a dysfunctional, even degenerative, *black* culture, one framed as prone to playing the race card as an all-service alibi for various deficiencies:

> Powell . . . is not defined by his race . . . [T]here is no sense in him of the bitterness and cult of victimization that has skewed so much of the African-American dialogue. He boldly exhorts young men not to let racism be an excuse for shortcomings. . . . He can address race issues in a way no white person can . . . And he might well help to bind the racial wounds that still pain America.[113]

Silencing Black Voices and the Racial Excuse Trope

This latter story also typifies another element of the Powell narrative: native blacks function in the tale as *objects* of critique—"the 'problems' they pose for white people," as West puts it[114]—but nonetheless remain largely invisible in the narrative in at least two significant respects. A critical rhetoric, Raymie McKerrow argues, necessarily must interrogate *absence* as well as *presence* to illuminate discursive and nondiscursive mechanisms of power.[115] First, the "good" black Powell narrative is built almost exclusively from white voices (his biographers and autobiographical collaborator, "mainstream" journalists, and testimony from his military and political superiors) and from the voices of blacks of immigrant extraction (especially Powell himself and his Jamaican kin). To a remarkable extent, native black voices are confined to luminaries such as Jesse Jackson who are authorized to speak only on Powell's enchanting "racelessness" for the public at large rather than on common native-black experiences and culture. Second was the overwhelming absence amid the pervasive "hard work" theme in the Powell narrative of any of the millions of American blacks whose industriousness rivals or even eclipses Powell's immigrant parents' widely celebrated disciplined work ethic. This type of racial card-stacking epitomizes arguments by conservative behaviorists who, West claims, "rarely, if ever, examine the innumerable cases in which black people do act on the Protestant ethic and still remain at the bottom of the social ladder. Instead, they highlight the few instances in which blacks ascend to the top, as if such success were available to all blacks, regardless of circumstances."[116] Illustrative, but by no means uncommon, is commentary in *Life* magazine in 1993, which melds the common Powell narrative themes of immigration, industriousness, and the insignificance of racism on individual black success: "If the son of Jamaican immigrants has a message for black kids, it is that there is opportunity in America, that racism is the other guy's problem. There is no secret to his success, he says, 'I work hard.'"[117]

Ironically, the acknowledgment of racism in the Powell tales never constitutes a reason for individual circumstance but is rather couched as an excuse for personal failure. Consistent with its use by whites and many ethnically identified black immigrants, this racial excuse or "race card" trope in the Powell stories places responsibility for navigating racism on the shoulders of its recipients rather than pressing its perpetrators to reform. In 1991, *U.S.*

News and World Report heralded Powell's "singular ability to bridge racial divisions," schisms it implied are more the fruits of native-black indolence than white prejudice: Powell's message to young blacks, it contends, "dwell[s] more on discipline than discrimination."[118] In 1994, *Newsweek* compared attitudinal differences of American and island blacks, noting that Powell "counsels young blacks" that "'You can't change [racism]. Don't have a chip on your shoulder . . . Don't use [racism] as an excuse for your own shortcomings.'"[119] Similarly, in one oft-quoted passage in Powell's memoir, he writes of speaking to black Fisk University students while Los Angeles still smoked in the wake of the Rodney King verdict. "The problem [of racism] goes beyond Rodney King," he acknowledged, still exhorting them to "[n]ever hide behind it or use it as an excuse for not doing your best."[120] Mere pages before, Powell—in the type of talk Cloud argues is representative of hegemonic minority biographies—recognizes structural oppression while simultaneously denying its influence on individual mobility. "Others may use my *race against* me," Powell writes, while on the same page expressing confidence in a "nation of *unlimited* opportunity [emphasis added]."[121] Such contradictory claims parallel a motif of narratives by immigrant blacks celebrated by the dominant culture as "good": although racism undoubtedly exists, it has little, if any, bearing on individual achievement.[122]

The extreme to which Powell takes the view that racism is an excuse rather than an obstacle influencing black circumstance is powerfully captured in a passage early in *My American Journey,* wherein Powell recounts his response to Jim Crow:

> I had to find a way to cope psychologically . . . I wanted, above all, to succeed at my Army career. I did not intend to give way to self-destructive rage, no matter how provoked. If people in the South insisted on living by crazy rules, then I would play the hand dealt me for now. If I was to be confined to one end of the playing field, then I was going to be a star on that part of the field . . . I was not going to let myself be emotionally crippled because I could not play on the whole field . . . And until the country solved [the problem of institutionalized racism], I was not going to let bigotry make me a victim instead of a full human being.[123]

Beyond Powell's couching black anger occasioned by segregation as "self-destructive" rather than justifiable is his stunning intimation here that those blacks legally denied employment, voting, schooling, and so forth had the luxury of electing either to be bigotry's "victim," a Burkean "agent-minus,"[124] or a self-actualized agent, a "full human being." Noticeably unexplored in this passage is how "the country" mysteriously might have elected to dismantle entrenched racial apartheid absent a *collective* political resistance, a movement without which the prospect of a Powell presidential candidacy would have been unimaginable. Moreover, his proffering of the individual and attitudinal solution of cooperating with racial "rules" rather than challenging their legitimacy typifies the individualistic therapeutic and religious approach to continuing racism and discrimination against gays and lesbians that Janice Peck and Bonnie J. Dow respectively argue is a motif on popular programs such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Ellen*. There, tenable critiques of systematic discrimination, warranted anger, and collective efforts for remediation are discredited by black guests or lesbian characters testifying to the benefits of individual psychological coping mechanisms.[125]

The appeal of the above passage to some segments of the dominant culture is evident in its selection out of Powell's 613-page memoir for whole or partial duplication by both *Time* and the *National Review* in laudatory coverage of Powell.[126] In fact, the passage's potential as fodder for reactionary racial arguments becomes abundantly clear in the *Review*'s editorial, notably titled "The Great Black Hope." Treating the issue of the "symbolism" of "Powell's race, and what he makes of it," this racial jeremiad repeats verbatim his pledge to triumph within his assigned racial place, arguing that "[t]hat credo, formulated at the time of the Montgomery bus boycott, suggests an alternative to the civil-rights movement— *clearly a superior alternative* to the black-power pork barrel the movement quickly became [emphasis added]."[127]

Scenic Pardoning

These accounts illustrate the relationship among scene, act, and agent that Mari Boor Tonn, Valerie A. Endress, and John N. Diamond argue occurs in social conflicts wherein the use of scene to absolve or indict depends upon an agent's position in a social pecking order. In these renderings, racism, racial categorization, and white norms ultimately become the duty of blacks to maneuver or romantically "transcend" as fully realized "agents" accountable for their individual choices or actions "in interacting with the competing community around them, a scene in which they are alien" by racial consignment.[128] In contrast, more powerful whites in such accounts are noticeably not prodded into accountable agenthood to alter further any racial norms that they have instituted as part of the racial landscape or "scene." In fact, in some of the Powell narratives, a hostile racist scene emerges as a catalyst rather than impediment to individual black success, a framing reminiscent of Sowell's attributions of immigrant blacks' industriousness to the more draconian slave system Caribbeans purportedly endured. In his memoir, for example, Powell writes of his responses to structural racism, "I occasionally felt hurt; I felt anger; but most of all, I felt challenged. I'll show you!"[129]

Despite purportedly having transcended race, Powell, self-described in his early televised *Biography* feature as a black man who "knew the [race] rules" and did not intend "to make waves,"[130] exhibited sentiments that nourish impressions reported in ethnographic studies of many black West Indians as "less willing to challenge the rules of the game, easier to get along with [than native blacks]."[131] Among various race rules for "exit" in the Powell tales were a scrupulous aversion to native black "racialism," meaning racial pride, identity, or sensitivity to racism even as he valorized his immigrant ethnicity and a good-natured tolerance for white racism.

Indeed, in the Powell stories, black ethnicity, along with "whiteness," often served as the terministic screens used for evaluating similar behaviors, judgments commonly rendered at the expense of American blacks. Terministic screens, Burke explains, produce "*different* photographs of the same objects, the difference being that they are made with different color filters."[132] In the Powell biographies and memoir, for example, the "clannishness among West Indians" and their intense ethnic "pride" are raised repeatedly. "My family," he writes, "socialized and found friends almost entirely within the Jamaican community."[133] Biographer Means likewise points out that the "special sense [of their own selves] tended to keep West Indians in the United States apart from native American blacks even when they lived in the same neighborhoods," and biographer Roth notes the "distinctive identity"

and "strong . . . social cohesion" of West Indians who elected not to be "simply absorbed into the fabric of black American life."[134] As Waters notes, "the second generation [of immigrant blacks] reserves their ethnic status for use as an identity device to stress their distance from poor blacks and to stress their cultural values which are consistent with American middle-class values."[135] Hence, tellingly absent in the Powell celebrations of close-knit island ethnicity and pride are the repeated critiques by Powell of the self-sequestering of native blacks whom he worries reinscribe an "unhealthy" counterproductive resegregation and "isolation" by taking "black pride" to an "extreme." Moreover, black-black tensions exacerbated by West Indians' refusal to assimilate socially or professionally with native blacks is interpreted in the Powell biographies and autobiographies as native-black resentment, envy, or misunderstanding of immigrant blacks' hard-earned status as black elite. "American blacks," Powell himself writes, "sometimes regard Americans of West Indian origins as uppity and arrogant. The feeling, I imagine, grows out of an impressive record of accomplishments by West Indians."[136] Nor does Powell's concern with problematic black resegregation engage with the more salient phenomenon of white flight from schools and neighborhoods populated by blacks beyond a certain tipping point; currently, for example, 86 percent of white suburban Americans live in residential areas less than 1 percent black.[137] Again, the responsibility for racial integration and assimilation, as with other aspects of race relations, falls primarily upon native blacks.

As important, Powell brooks white racism but not black "racialism," as illustrated in his pardoning of racist incidents but not the black anger racism engenders. In his memoir, in fact, he explicitly acknowledges having "swallowed hard over racial provocations, determined to succeed,"[138] a philosophy echoing what W. E. B. DuBois described decades ago as the requirement for blacks to "endure petty insults with a smile" and "never fail to flatter" if they hoped to survive or advance.[139] A common theme emerging in media accounts of Powell is his lack of anger and his irreverent wit and good humor, including his willingness to "joke about ethnic differences in America in the face of tiresome political correctness," a quality a 1995 *Time* cover story illustrated in a lengthy account of one speech after which audience members solicited his candidacy.[140] And in *My American Journey*, references to routine injuries all blacks endured during segregation are rare, largely undeveloped, and noticeably clinical descriptions of an exterior rather than interior world, a quality resembling traits in slave narratives described by Morrison that strove "not to offend." More to the point, certain of the Powell tales reveal a black protagonist who responds to white racism with a conciliatory nod towards the high-ranking white offender. A 1990 *Newsweek* story, for example, points out "he forgave Reagan's sometimes insensitive remarks about race as a holdover from an earlier time."[141] In his autobiography, Powell himself writes that the infamous Willie Horton advertisement by the George H. W. Bush campaign was a "racist . . . political cheap shot," but in the very next stroke of his pen, he points to his own appointment in the Reagan and Bush administrations as tangible proof of their color-blind good faith. "I nevertheless tried to keep matters in perspective," he writes. "I took consolation . . . in the thought that their confidence in me represented a commitment to the American ideal of advancement by merit."[142] Similarly, Powell recounts a story in his autobiography of a white colonel advising him, as a young army officer, to play, in effect, what Powell rightly terms the "good Negro": resigning himself to a racist world. Powell reports, "I do not remember being upset by what he said. He meant well. Like all of us, [Colonel]

Brookhart was a product of his times and his environment . . . [H]e was a caring human being. I thanked him and left."[143]

But whereas Powell issues pardons for certain white racial infractions due to socialization, several of the Powell tales underscore his unwillingness to extend environmental reprieves to blacks angered by systematic racism, including soldiers under his command during the racially turbulent early Vietnam years. As Waters notes, ethnically identified black immigrants often view white purveyors of racism more charitably than they do those native blacks resentful over being forced to maneuver it. In his memoir, for example, Powell explicitly acknowledges the effects of rampant discrimination on the worldviews of some black recruits. "Less opportunity, less education, less money, fewer jobs for blacks," he writes, "equaled antisocial behavior in the United States, and those attitudes traveled." But in the same talk, he immediately professes harboring no "qualms" about disciplining black soldiers for such "antisocial behavior," which, the reader directly learns, includes organizing collectively over perceived civil rights grievances.[144] Here again, a dominant racial scene informs the respective excusing and affixing of individual liability for perceived transgressions. As Tonn, Endress, and Diamond argue, "Hierarchical status of an agent within a specific social scene may be central to determining when a scenic perspective can be employed to assign 'sin' as well as to remove it . . . In short, the agent's *relationship* to the scene may determine whether scene may be used successfully as alibi." In these cases, the white colonel, to use Tonn, Endress, and Diamond's words, "is defined by his intimate connection to the community in which he operates. He is at once controlled by scene and submerged in it." By contrast, disgruntled black soldiers experienced in facing racism are "set *against* scene" and therefore are "not allowed, as alien[s], to be controlled and therefore absolved by it."[145]

Simultaneous Distancing from / Capitalizing on "Blackness"

Finally, several accounts also illustrate Powell's pragmatic distancing from strategies of black collective "voice" unless and until such "voices" become authorized by the dominant culture. Numerous passages in Powell's memoir reassure readers that he took no part in nor then countenanced civil rights activities. He writes, for example, that he "heard the radical black voices—Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, and H. Rap Brown with his 'Burn, baby burn!'—with uneasiness" and was "not eager to see the country burned down," given he was "doing well in it."[146] But other passages suggest that Powell's distaste for civil rights agitation included even nonviolent resistance. For example, he proffers this immediate apologia over a spontaneous outburst triggered by an ordinary, personal, black experience with Jim Crow: "My emotional reaction, or at least revealing my emotions this way, was not my style. Ordinarily, I was not looking for trouble. I was not marching, demonstrating, or taking part in sit-ins." On the same page, he makes explicit his pragmatic preference for strategies of individually "exiting" the oppression borne of blackness over strategies of collective "voice" challenging that oppression: "My eye was on an Army career for myself and a good life for my family," a rationale he poses later as, "Had I been more militant, would I have been branded a troublemaker rather than a promotable black?"[147] Such overt privileging of self-interest over collective concern not only fits Cloud's framing of certain minority life narratives as "tokenist," where "group identity, politics, and resistance are traded for economic and cultural capital within . . . cultural spaces,"[148] but also West's critique

of the current crisis in black leadership: "most present-day black political leaders appear too hungry for status to be angry, too eager for acceptance to be bold, too self-invested in personal advancement to be defiant."[149]

Powell's repeated and explicit privileging of the welfare of self and literal kin, however, contravenes the more expansive familial metaphor for race relations he repeatedly invokes in his memoir and media interviews, a perspective widely heralded to promote him as a symbol of racial "healing." "We have to start thinking of America as a family," he professes in his autobiography. "We have to stop . . . hurting each other, and instead start caring for [and], sacrificing for . . . each other."[150] *Time* magazine, in apprizing his lucrative, standing-room-only "campaign" speeches, notes, "His most powerful theme has been the importance of family, of America as a big national family and of reconciliation among warring forces" and extensively quotes Powell's familial philosophy: "We've got to start remembering that no member of our family should be satisfied if any member of our American family is suffering or in need and we can do something about it."[151] On its face, Powell's metaphor of color-blind kinship resembles West's argument that black nihilism is best tamed by a universal ethic of love.[152] Yet whereas West views the racial ethic of care through the wide lens of both spiritual and material nurturing, Powell's biographies and memoir make clear that concern for afflicted members of the "American family" would never entail shared "sacrifice" of the economic stripe: "I am put off by patronizing liberals who claim to know what is best for society but devote little thought to who will eventually pay the bills," he writes in *My American Journey.* "I question the priorities of those liberals who lavish so much attention on . . . entitlements that little concern is left for the good of the community at large."[153] Elsewhere, he tells young black audiences that the worst kind of poverty is not economic, but the "poverty of love." In such contradictory talk, "family," "community," and "love" emerge as mere therapeutic and psychological bromides rather than tangible material reforms and obligations, mirroring what both Peck and Dow variously describe as the discourse of relational love work and personal "liking" that entices the dominant culture because it espouses a commitment to harmony and equality without imposing political or institutional demands.[154]

In light of impressive civil rights victories across the globe, Powell concedes belated admiration for civil rights agitators who "[woke] up defenders of the status quo,"[155] most particularly the now iconic Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr., whose image bearing the words "Freedom has always been an expensive thing" ironically hangs in the White House conference room of the self-confessed career-cautious Powell.[156] In his memoir, Powell navigates between estranging himself from the "challenging" tactics of civil rights politics and simultaneously sharing in the credit for their hard-won victories by pointing to his tactic of "exit." "The crusade for equal rights requires diverse roles," he writes, not merely political activists but people such as himself who "serve by making an *example* of their lives," explaining, "I hoped then and now that my rise might cause prejudiced whites to question their prejudices, and help to purge the poison of racism from their systems [emphasis added]." But as elsewhere in the memoir, Powell concurrently blunts this critique of systematic racism with an encomium to the nation's proven commitment to unbridled egalitarianism. "My career," he writes, "should serve as a model to fellow blacks . . . in demonstrating the possibilities of American life."[157] In such talk, Powell succinctly captures the distinction West draws between movement icons and many contemporary black

leaders: "Malcolm and Martin called for the realization that black people are somebodies with which America has to reckon, whereas black politicians tend to turn our attention to *their* somebodiness owing to *their* 'making it' in America."[158]

Conclusion

The sharp disparity in interpreting *similar* behaviors, attitudes, and experiences in markedly *differing* ways is a hallmark of the Powell tales, one Burke argues is endemic in terministic screens. Whereas native blacks whose self-respecting willingness to challenge unjust existing structural racial barriers are framed as blacks "looking for trouble" rather than justice, the "can-do" attitude of proud black immigrants refusing to bow to some "inferior" marker is continually celebrated. After all, nonviolent sit-ins at southern lunch counters in the 1960s that defied "whites only" signs differed little in kind from the legendary refusal of West Indian women during the 1920s to honor identical racial restrictions in the needle trades. So, too, Powell's affirming translation of the "clannishness" of ethnically proud West Indians contrasts sharply with his generally negative assessment of self-defeating "isolation" purportedly resulting from native blacks' extreme racial pride. As both feminists and blacks have long noted, qualities such as assertiveness, for example, are frequently assessed by the dominant culture negatively or positively depending upon whether such traits are exhibited by males or females, whites or blacks; while assertiveness in white males, as illustration, is commonly translated by the larger culture as "self-confidence," assertive females and blacks, in contrast, are often perceived by social power brokers respectively as "bitchy" and "uppity."[159] In Powell's case, the terministic screen accommodating such differing interpretations was not gender or even race, broadly speaking; rather, the "screening process" involved racial *immigrant ethnicity* as the cultural filter used by both whites and some blacks to sort and rank "good" or "superior" from "bad" or "inferior" blacks.

The elevation of the "good" black does not signal the death rattle of racism, but rather, as Burke argues often occurs in symbolic action, is merely the throwing out of something by one name—in this case, racism—and bringing it back by another.[160] At the same time that the Powell narratives valorized a man purportedly averse to racialism, the tales themselves engaged in their own brand of racial politics in various ways. Most obvious, of course, was the championing of Powell's successes through the lens of his immigrant ancestry as "proof" of the nation's color-blind meritocracy, even as his racial immigrant ethnicity was hoisted routinely to differentiate this *group* of "good" blacks from the *group* of "bad." Beyond telegraphing Powell's distinctive black ancestry were various other tactics that differentiated this particular black from native blacks: the scapegoating of native blacks in various ways, the use of the "race card" or racial "excuse" trope as the single explanation for dire black circumstance, a scenic pardoning of whites that placed the onus on blacks for negotiating racism, and his simultaneously distancing himself from blackness and black political resistance and "voice" while simultaneously associating himself with civil rights heroes and triumphs. All functioned to allow Powell to "exit" the pejorative category of blackness and, in the words of many observers, to "transcend" his race. Thus, Powell's appeal as the widely heralded "embodiment of the American Dream" lies not just in his impressive personal successes but also in a national racial history inescapably implicated in that myth, a history that was often constructed in ways that not only reified but furthered the view of American blacks as ultimate outsiders. As Gladwell writes, the embrace and elevation of the

"good" or "superior" black becomes a protective front by which "discrimination against American blacks is given one last vicious twist: I am not so shallow to despise you for the color of your skin, because I have found people of your color I like. Now I can despise you for what you are."[161] Essayist Clarence Page argues the same point, specific to Powell, contending that the former general's engaging life story and his seemingly raceless comportment finally and more easily enabled "white Americans to say confidently, *No I am not opposed to all black candidates; I am only opposed to those black candidates who are not like Colin Powell.*"[162] For native blacks, then, immigration status simply adds another unattainable qualification beyond whiteness for eligibility into unrestricted social mobility. *U.S. News and World Report,* for example, applauds Powell as "not a Jesse Jackson" who "challeng[es]" white "values" and "power." "[Powell's] . . . humble origins validate their belief in their country." Instead of "mak[ing] whites feel guilty, he makes them feel good."[163] But noticeably unacknowledged in this passage is that Jackson is a black Horatio Alger of even more lowly beginnings than the second-generation immigrant Powell. Thus, the distinction lies not so much in the extent of a black rags-to-riches climb, but rather *the point of origin* of the respective "American journey." After all, one need only consider the probable public outcry occasioned by Jackson's choice to film a duplication of his ancestor's coerced passage to this country in the belly of a slave ship and display it for presidential campaign purposes.

Additionally, the incessant privileging of Powell's biography, including his unique black genealogy, over his policy positions or proven record of expertise replicates persistent habits by the dominant culture of evaluating or promoting blacks more on body or personal history than on mind.[164] This pattern of advertising Powell as more the black "exception" rather than political "expert" continued years beyond his aborted presidential "campaign." In a speech at Tufts University as late as November 2, 2000, reference to Powell's "birth to immigrant Jamaican parents in Harlem" preceded mention of his role as national and foreign policy advisor to three presidents both in promotional literature and introductions by local luminaries, a privileging of the personal that seems unimaginable for previous presenters such as former senator George Mitchell and former secretary of state Madeline Albright. To his own disservice, the capable, retired, four-star general himself resorted to the formula that had long entranced white audiences yearning for racial innocence, committing all but five minutes of a thirty-five-minute lecture advertised as "Management of Crisis and Change: The Middle East" to jokes, humorous yarns and impersonations, and personal anecdotes and biography, including lengthy accounts of his father's journey from Jamaica on a banana boat and his childhood in the South Bronx. Moreover, in those final moments of the speech specific to the Middle East conflict, he couched the tensions in the vague familial metaphors of caring he had commonly employed in approaches to race. But in a serious context of renewed and escalating strife in the Middle East and expectations for thoughtful political analysis, Powell's feel-good biography, comic demeanor, and familial abstractions lost their cachet. Widely panned as, for example, "little work" and "ad lib remarks on his upbringing" that strayed from the appointed topic, the speech and his controversial sizable honorarium clouded his nomination as secretary of state,[165] critiques that signal the possible costs as well as benefits of strategies of bargaining for racial innocence.

Moreover, this cultural ranking of "good" and "bad" blacks portends to further the long-standing estrangement, animosity, and scapegoating among members of these respective

black groups, a consequence Burke argues, as I have said, is endemic in terministic screens. Whereas the celebration of Powell's "good" black life narrative may assuage white racial guilt, the interracial caste system from which it draws inspiration mitigates against racial harmony and progress, replicating, in fact, a kind of black status system that whites historically have nourished in various ways to diffuse the threatening power of black solidarity. Albeit in differing measures, the ranking of "good" and "bad" blacks mirrors not only the hierarchy of "color" gradations and other presumed European qualities long used to assign social standing in the Caribbean, but also what Gates describes as the longstanding "story of class tensions within the [American] black community."[166] In the islands where the light-skinned Powell would not be considered "black" but the more valued "colored,"[167] non-whites believe that black or colored complexion and non-Caucasian features sometimes can be offset by securing characteristics associated with white European culture—professional occupation, advanced education, manners, and relative wealth—enabling nonwhites to be perceived by some, Foner writes, "'as if' they were white."[168] So, too, Gates argues that plantation pecking orders among American slaves prefigured black class jockeying that troubled even the abolitionist movement. And by the Harlem Renaissance, he writes, explicit or implicit distancing from poorly educated, lower-class blacks by an aspiring black elite had become somewhat the norm.[169] And included in the complex tapestry of tensions and guilt that "superior" versus "inferior" black sorting produces are intergenerational clashes between some immigrant blacks and their children who reject their elders' negative stereotypes of native blacks and yearn to identify and assimilate as "American," as white immigrants have always had the promise of doing. Thus, ironically, the pragmatic perils of black immigrant assimilation as Americans turn the fabled American-dream mythos inside out.

To be sure, immigrant credentials may enable certain blacks to "exit" more easily a maligned black category in various ways, including the not-insignificant, self-fulfilling prophecy nourished by the "superior" versus "inferior" black designator. As one young black immigrant poignantly put it, "The West Indians tend to go that extra step because they, whites, don't usually consider them really black. . . . They see them as a *person* [emphasis added]."[170] Such comments implicitly acknowledge what Gates and West refer to as the unmistakable interplay between *behavioral* and *structural* features that inform conditions such as disproportional black poverty.[171] As Burke writes in his discussion of the concept of "entelechy," the import of social environment cannot be divorced from properties inhering in an individual in the process of growth and development. Entelechy, he writes, refers to a process of perfection, meaning that

> the seed "implicitly contains" a future conforming to its nature, if the external conditions necessary to such unfolding and fulfillment occur in the right order . . . [But] to think of the circumstances and the seed as composing a single process, then the locus of the entelechy could be thought of as residing not just in the nature of the seed, but *in the ground of the process as a whole.*[172]

Although a dominant white culture may find the coveted temporary solace in the racial forgetting that "inferior" versus "superior" black mythology affords, genuine and enduring racial reconciliation requires collective memory as well as collective moving forward. In his careful analysis of recent efforts for racial reconciliation in South Africa, Erik Doxtader

writes that the respective parties astutely recognized "[r]econciliation could not mean amnesia. Without devolving to victimization or persecution, it needed to be the hope of voices long silenced, the assurance that perpetrators of violence would confront the human costs of their actions, and a means of reconstruction." Thus the challenge of reconciliation entails a paradox. "The past," he explains, "is a referent for action even as that past must be abandoned. History must be preserved and buried . . . The path from past to future must be forged through acts of reconciliation that remember and transcend the past simultaneously."[173]

Notes

1. John F. Stacks and Michael Kramer, "I've Got to Make Some Choices," *Time,* September 18, 1995, 72. Different media accounts give differing numbers of the cities Powell visited during his book tour.

2. James Kelly, "Powell on Powell," *Time,* September 18, 1995, 57; Howard Fineman and Evan Thomas, "Powell on the March," *Newsweek,* September 11, 1995, 26–31.

3. Janis L. Edwards, "The Very Role Model of a Modern Major (Media) Candidate: Colin Powell and the Rhetoric of Public Opinion," *Communication Quarterly* 46 (1998): 167; Clarence Page, *Showing My Color: Impolite Essays on Race and Identity* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996), 249.

4. Colin Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 610–11.

5. Powell reportedly often received sixty thousand dollars for each speech, although some accounts reported that he received as much as two hundred thousand dollars for certain speaking engagements.

6. John Walcott et al., "The Man to Watch," *U.S. News and World Report,* August 21, 1995, 22.

7. Fineman and Thomas, "Powell on the March," 28; Michael Kramer, "Just Like Ike," *Time,* September 18, 1995, 74.

8. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey,* 406, 409. Powell explains that the periodical delayed the story originally planned for its July 4 issue to coincide with his appointment as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

9. See, for example, Steven V. Roberts with Bruce B. Auster and Gary Cohen, "What's Next, General Powell?" *U.S. News and World Report,* March 18, 1991, 50–53; John Ranelagh, "America's Black Eisenhower," *National Review,* April 1, 1991, 26–28; Eleanor Clift and Thomas DeFrank, "Bush's General: Maximum Force," *Newsweek,* September 3, 1990, 36–37.

10. Howard Means, *Colin Powell* (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1992); David Roth, *Sacred Honor: Colin Powell; The Inside Account of His Life and Triumphs* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993).

11. Joe Klein, "Character, Not Ideology," *Newsweek,* November 13, 1995, 36; Morton Zuckerman, "Behind the Powell Phenomenon," *U.S. News and World Report,* August 21, 1995, 64.

12. In light of the second Gulf War against Iraq, the framing of the first Gulf War as a quick and decisive "victory" has been challenged by numerous observers.

13. Means, *Colin Powell,* 324, 328.

14. Webster B. Brooks III, "Colin Powell Calculus: The General's Road to the White House," promotional materials (18 Lebanon Street, Hartford, Conn., July 15, 1995), n.p.

15. John F. Stacks, "The Powell Factor," *Time,* July 10, 1995, 29.

16. Nancy Gibbs, "General Letdown," *Time,* November 20, 1995, 50, 56.

17. Since the issuance of his autobiography in the early fall of 1995, Powell publicly has staked out positions on contentious social issues such as affirmative action and abortion. The "good" black narrative posited and examined here, however, was promulgated most extensively when

Powell was widely and appropriately described as a "political enigma," an ideological "Rorschach inkblot test," a "classic blank canvass," an "empty ideological vessel," and "a riddle wrapped in a mystery" (Edwards, "The Very Role Model," 166; Page, *Showing My Color*, 254; Stacks, "The Powell Factor," 25; and Joe Klein, "Can Colin Powell Save America?" *Newsweek*, October 10, 1994, 20).

18. Walcott and others, "The Man to Watch," 44.

19. Various scholars have discussed the rhetorical nature of biographies and autobiographies, including Dana L. Cloud, "Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in 'Oprah' Winfrey's Rags-to-Riches Biography," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13 (1996): 115–37; Thomas W. Benson, "Rhetoric and Autobiography: The Case of Malcolm X," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 60 (1974): 1–13; Herbert Leibowitz, *Fabricating Lives* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989); Wayne J. McMullen and Martha Solomon, "The Politics of Adaptation: Steven Spielberg's Appropriation of *The Color Purple*," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 14 (1994): 158–74; Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser, 101–24 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); Martha Solomon, "Autobiographies as Rhetorical Narratives: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Anna Howard Shaw as 'New Women,'" *Communication Studies* 42 (1991): 354–70.

20. Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 8.

21. Nancy Foner, "Race and Color: Jamaican Migrants in London and New York City," *International Migration Review* 29 (1985): 708–27; David Mittelberg and Mary C. Waters, "The Process of Ethnogenesis among Haitian and Israeli Immigrants in the United States," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 15 (1992): 412–35; Mary C. Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities of Second-Generation Black Immigrants in New York City," *International Migration Review* 28 (1994): 795–820; and Mary C. Waters, "Explaining the Comfort Factor: West Indian Immigrants Confront American Race Relations," in *The Cultural Territories of Race: Black and White Boundaries*, ed. Michele Lamont, 63–69 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). For a popular and more personal account, see Malcolm Gladwell, "Black Like Them," *New Yorker*, April 29 and May 6, 1996, 74–81. Gladwell is a second-generation Jamaican-American. For purposes of clarification in this essay, I follow the practices employed by various ethnographers and others in referring to blacks descended from slaves in the United States as "American," "native," or "indigenous" blacks to differentiate them from first- and second-generation blacks with roots in the Caribbean who also hold slave ancestry.

22. For a discussion of "terministic screens," see Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 44–62. Walter Lippman also articulates such cultural designators this way: "For the most part we do not first see, and define, we define first and then see . . . [W]e pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture" (*Public Opinion* [New York Free Press, 1922], 54–55).

23. Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 817.

24. Steele, *Content of Our Character*, 75–76.

25. Ibid., 10–20.

26. Ibid., 10–11.

27. Gladwell, "Black Like Them," 75; Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 797.

28. Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 696–97. Whereas Jamaicans migrating to the United States always have been more skilled than the average Jamaican, the most recent influx has been marked by a higher percentage of professional, technical, and other nonmanual laborers. See Foner, "Race and Color," 710–11.

29. Jervis Anderson, "Black and Blue," *New Yorker*, April 29 and May 6, 1996, 62.

30. Roth, *Sacred Honor*, 35; Page, *Showing My Color*, 181.

31. Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 813.

32. Gladwell, "Black Like Them," 78.

33. See, as examples of such arguments, Ira De Augustine Reid, *The Negro Immigrant* (1939; repr., New York: Arno Press and New York Times, 1969); Thomas Sowell, *Essays and Data on American Ethnic Groups* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 1978); Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1963); Mona Charen, "Will Anyone Listen?" Columnists, January 12, 2001, TownHall.com, http://www.townhall.com/columnists/monacharen/mc200010112.shtml (last accessed November 25, 2002).

34. Means quotes Roger Wilkins, *Colin Powell*, 97; Page, *Showing My Color*, 248–55; Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 13.

35. Cloud, "Hegemony or Concordance?," 116.

36. Gladwell, "Black Like Them," 79; Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 800–801.

37. Waters, "Explaining the Comfort Factor," 67.

38. Jack Miles, "Blacks vs. Browns," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1992, 54, 60.

39. Gladwell, "Black Like Them," 80–81.

40. Foner, "Race and Color," 715, 722. Foner concludes, "Structural features of British and American societies play a large role" in influencing black immigrants' self-perceptions, their own behaviors, and their social mobility within their respective dominant cultures (ibid., 724). Indeed, even as both Powell's biographer, Means, and the *National Review* point up the personal qualities and island culture of black Jamaicans as primary indexes of their successes, in their zeal to witness to America's unbridled opportunity, both share a letter to the editor of a British newspaper ironically testifying to structural influences on these black immigrant's mobility. Responding to a profile on Powell, the British reader wrote, "So General Colin Powell was born in Harlem, to . . . Jamaican, working-class immigrant parents. His good fortune is that they took the New York rather than Southhampton boat. If they had, he might have made sergeant" (Means, *Colin Powell*, 89).

41. Waters, "Explaining the Comfort Factor," 71.

42. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cornel West, *The Future of the Race* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 85.

43. Waters, "Explaining the Comfort Factor," 71, 85.

44. Quoted in Waters, "Explaining the Comfort Factor," 87.

45. Foner, "Race and Color," 717; Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 805, 813.

46. Waters, "Explaining the Comfort Factor," 76.

47. Foner, "Race and Color," 717; Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 805.

48. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey*, 114.

49. Ibid., 606–7.

50. Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 797.

51. Gladwell, "Black Like Them," 77; Roth, *Sacred Honor*, 34.

52. Among politically militant blacks with immigrant ancestry are Marcus Garvey, James Farmer, Stokely Carmichael, and Louis Farrakhan.

53. Numerous ethnographic studies reveal contradictory impressions of West Indians in the United States as both sophisticated racial "challengers" who unabashedly exert political "voice" and, conversely, conciliatory racial "bargainers" who elect to "exit" stigmatized blackness. Waters, for example, notes that black immigrants are couched, on the one hand, as "militant race leaders, with more advanced and confrontational racial ideologies and programs than American blacks. Yet they have also been seen as more conservative, less willing to challenge the rules of the game, easier to get along with [than native blacks]." See Waters, "Explaining the Comfort Factor," 89.

54. David K. Shipler, *A Country of Strangers: Blacks and Whites in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 46, 309; Waters, "Explaining the Comfort Factor," 67.

55. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey,* 70.

56. A comfort level with whites that surpasses comfort with blacks is a motif throughout ethnographic studies. See Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities" and "Explaining the Comfort Factor," and Foner, "Race and Color," as examples.

57. Waters, "Explaining the Comfort Factor," 67.

58. Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 801.

59. See Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 806; Foner, "Race and Color," 717; Mittelberg and Waters, "The Process of Ethnogenesis."

60. Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 808.

61. In his memoir, Powell writes of being interrogated by a waitress during segregation as to whether he was a foreign black before deciding if she could serve him (*My American Journey,* 108).

62. Gladwell, "Black Like Them," 74; Shipler, *A Country of Strangers,* 308.

63. Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 800.

64. West, *Race Matters,* 12.

65. Gates and West, *Future of the Race,* xv.

66. For a brief overview of the key terms of Burke's pentad, see Bernard L. Brock, "Rhetorical Criticism: A Burkeian Approach Revisited," in *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth Century Perspective,* ed. Bernard L. Brock, Robert L. Scott, and James W. Chesebro, 3rd ed. rev. , 187–90 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

67. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1969), 157.

68. Steele, *Content of Our Character,* 16.

69. Ibid., 12. Essayist Clarence Page makes a similar point in his analysis of black political hopefuls, Powell among them, arguing white Americans occasionally "award bonus points to a likable black candidate whose race can help them feel good about how open-minded they have always imagined themselves" (*Showing My Color,* 254).

70. Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 106, 110.

71. D. Soyini Madison, "'That Was My Occupation': Oral Narrative, Performance, and Black Feminist Thought," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 13 (1993): 223.

72. Thomas Kochman, *Black and White Styles in Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 61.

73. Steele, *Content of Our Character,* 13–14.

74. Shipler, *A Country of Strangers,* 429–32.

75. Mary E. Stuckey and Frederick J. Antczak argue, for example, that Bill Clinton's widely publicized struggle in surmounting adversity "represented a claim to competence potentially far more powerful than, say, experience in foreign policy, or personal friendships with foreign leaders." As important perhaps, "[a]s one who had lived the American Dream, Clinton was able to present his life as a parable for the nation, and to implicitly argue that by electing him, Americans would be able to restore the American Dream that they were in danger of losing [for themselves]" (Mary E. Stuckey and Frederick J. Antczak, "The Battle of Issues and Images: Establishing Interpretive Dominance," *Communication Quarterly* 42 [1994]: 125–26).

76. Roberts with Auster and Cohen, "What's Next, General Powell?," 52.

77. Cloud, "Hegemony or Concordance?," 122.

78. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form,* 41.

79. Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6.

80. Charles J. Kelly Jr., "Citizens for Colin Powell for President," promotional materials (3018 N Street NW, Washington, D.C., 1996), 10.

81. "Colin Powell: A Soldier's Campaign," on *Biography* (Arts and Entertainment Channel, 1987).

82. Robert J. McNamara, "Editorial Reviews," *Biography,* "Colin Powell: A Soldier's Campaign." http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/search-handle-form/104–1350858–8454313?v=glance&s= video (last accessed November 21, 2002).

83. Roberts with Auster and Cohen, "What's Next, General Powell?"

84. Bill Schneider, "Play of the Week," CNN, February 7, 2003.

85. Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 817.

86. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey,* viii.

87. Ibid., 7.

88. Ibid., 23.

89. Ibid., 7–8.

90. Stacks, "The Powell Factor," 29. Powell's strategic marketing of his past is suggested further by the discrepancies between his early raceless sense of self and relatively tolerant childhood environment portrayed in his memoir's framing and his description in the earlier Means biography of the South Bronx as "not that much of a melting pot" where "you never lost your cultural identity" (Means, *Colin Powell,* 46).

91. Symbolic purification, particularly scapegoating, figures prominently in Burke's various works. For some discussions, see Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 190–91, and Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form,* 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 38–41, 202–3.

92. Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action,* 51.

93. Steele, *Content of Our Character,* 10.

94. Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995): 301.

95. West, *Race Matters,* 3.

96. Klein, "Can Colin Powell Save America?," 20.

97. Steven V. Roberts, "An American Tale," *U.S. News and World Report,* August 21, 1995, 27.

98. Cloud, "Hegemony or Concordance?," 122.

99. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form,* 39–40.

100. Roberts with Auster and Cohen, "What's Next, General Powell?," 52.

101. Quoted in Roberts, "An American Tale," 28.

102. Klein, "Can Colin Powell Save America?," 26.

103. Means, *Colin Powell,* 64, 66–67.

104. Ibid., 332.

105. Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 806.

106. Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action,* 46–47.

107. West, *Race Matters,* 26.

108. Nakayama and Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," 293.

109. Means, *Colin Powell,* 19.

110. Gladwell, "Black Like Them," 79.

111. Klein, "Can Colin Powell Save America?," 26.

112. West, *Race Matters,* 3.

113. Zuckerman, "Behind the Powell Phenomenon," 64.

114. West, *Race Matters,* 2.

115. Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989): 107.

116. West, *Race Matters,* 13.

117. David Hume Kennerly and Sue Allison Massimiano, "The Demobilization of Colin Powell," *Life,* July 1993, 36.

118. Roberts, with Auster and Cohen, "What's Next General Powell?," 51.

119. Klein, "Can Colin Powell Save America?," 26.

120. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey,* 553.

121. Ibid., 534.

122. Such claims mirror premises that both Cloud and Bonnie J. Dow argue characterize popular culture artifacts treating individuals forced to confront various types of discrimination. The message, Dow writes, is that such persons "are, in fact, political subjects only when [they] allow [themselves] to be such" (Bonnie J. Dow, "*Ellen,* Television, and the Politics of Gay and Lesbian Visibility," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18 [2001]: 135).

123. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey,* 43.

124. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives,* 157.

125. Janice Peck, "Talk about Racism: Framing a Popular Discourse of Race on *Oprah Winfrey,*" *Cultural Critique* (Spring 1994): 91; Dow, "*Ellen,* Television, and the Politics of Gay and Lesbian Visibility," passim.

126. Excerpts from *My American Journey* in *Time,* September 18, 1995, 62; "The Great Black Hope," *National Review,* September 9, 1995, 10.

127. "The Great Black Hope," 10.

128. Mari Boor Tonn, Valerie A. Endress, and John N. Diamond, "Hunting and Heritage on Trial in Maine: A Dramatistic Debate over Tragedy, Tradition, and Territory," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993): 166–67.

129. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey,* 45.

130. "Colin Powell: A Soldier's Campaign."

131. Waters, "Explaining the Comfort Factor," 89.

132. Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action,* 45.

133. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey,* 23.

134. Means, *Colin Powell,* 68; Roth, *Sacred Honor,* 21.

135. Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 816.

136. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey,* 22.

137. West, *Race Matters,* 4.

138. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey,* 401.

139. Quoted by West in Gates and West, *Future of the Race,* 86–87.

140. Although dutifully noting the prospective presidential candidate's paucity of detailed policy positions, the weekly nonetheless applauded his performance in public as "superb," pointing to his skill in amusing audiences and soliciting pleas for his candidacy. The account reads in part: "[H]e parodied a pompous white military officer speaking in empty and orotund phrases. Then he mimicked a black sergeant talking about the coming war in the Persian Gulf: 'We gonna kick butt and go home.' Describing an encounter with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin at the White House treaty signing with Yasser Arafat, Powell put on a New York Jewish accent. And he even worked around the edges of gay sensibilities. 'Arafat . . . is so taken by the moment that he starts to pull me toward him and hug me and give me a two-cheek kiss. But I can only take so much new world order. . . . ' The audience laughed with him" (Stacks, "The Powell Factor," 25).

141. Clift and DeFrank, "Bush's General: Maximum Force," 37.

142. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey,* 400.

143. Ibid., 38.

144. Ibid., 190–92.

145. Tonn, Endress, and Diamond, "Hunting and Heritage," 178–79.

146. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey*, 124.

147. Ibid., 108, 401.

148. Cloud, "Hegemony or Concordance?," 122.

149. West, *Race Matters*, 38.

150. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey*, 611; see also 553.

151. Stacks, "The Powell Factor," 25–26.

152. West, *Race Matters*, 19.

153. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey*, 608.

154. Peck, "Talk about Racism," especially 117–18; Dow, "*Ellen*, Television, and the Politics of Gay and Lesbian Visibility," 131–37.

155. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey*, 124.

156. Roth, *Sacred Honor*, 159.

157. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey*, 400–401.

158. West, *Race Matters*, 38.

159. Shipler, *A Country of Strangers*, 296, 417.

160. Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 174.

161. Gladwell, "Black Like Them," 79.

162. Page, *Showing My Color*, 251–54.

163. Roberts, with Auster and Cohen, "What's Next General Powell?," 50.

164. See Shipler, *A Country of Strangers*, 276–316.

165. The author attended Powell's lecture at Tufts University on November 2, 2000, and took extensive notes, including timing his speech. Beyond the anecdotes described in the text, Powell also discussed the GI Joe action figure marketed in his likeness and his sponsorship of programs designed to encourage young people to excel, and he humorously rendered encounters with various dignitaries during his entire career. Only when pressed by frustrated audience members during the question-and-answer period following did this former high-ranking military commander during the Persian Gulf War discuss any specifics of Middle East relations, despite the title and purported purpose of his talk ("Management of Crisis and Change: The Middle East," the 2000 Issam Fares Lecture, Tufts University, November 2, 2000). Although most accounts in the news media and on the Internet reported that Powell had been paid two hundred thousand dollars for the speech, other reports ranged from sixty thousand to eighty thousand dollars. Powell defended the controversial speech by claiming it was "the kind I give all the time." Associated Press, "Colin Powell Defends Speaking Fee," January 9, 2001. (http://quest.com/stories/0109017670.shtml [last accessed August 13, 2005]). And much of the speech had strong affinities with a San Diego speech described in a *Time* cover story and earlier endnote.

166. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Not Gone with the Wind: Voices of Slavery," *New York Times*, February 9, 2003, sec. 2.

167. Gladwell, "Black Like Them," 80.

168. Foner, "Race and Color," 713. Powell himself remarks in the Means biography, "[T]here's a great deal of status consciousness within West Indian families and Jamaican families especially between those who have a little bit of education and those who don't, between those who are light-skinned and those who are dark-skinned, between those who had British and Scottish relatives and those who didn't" (Means, *Colin Powell*, 72). As a result, the "serious handicaps" he describes his native black fiancée initially encountered both with his immediate and extended Jamaican family may have been neutralized by her fair skin, green eyes, and background from a "privileged," highly educated, professional Alabama family. See Powell with Persico, *My American Journey*, 64–70.

169. Gates, "Not Gone with the Wind."

170. Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities," 806.

171. Gates and West, *Future of the Race,* xiii–xv.

172. Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion,* 246–47.

173. Erik Doxtader, "Making Rhetorical History in a Time of Transition: The Occasion, Constitution, and Representation of South African Reconciliation," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 4 (2001): 247.