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BOOK WORLD

36 Jim Sleeper reviews three books on race relations in America

The Content of Our Character

COMING THROUGH THE FIRE

Surviving Race and Place in America

By *C. Eric Lincoln*

Duke University Press. 157 pp. \$17.95

THE TROUBLE WITH FRIENDSHIP

Why Americans Can't Think Straight About Race

By *Benjamin DeMott*

Atlantic Monthly Press. 214 pp. \$22

THE FUTURE OF THE RACE

By *Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cornel West*

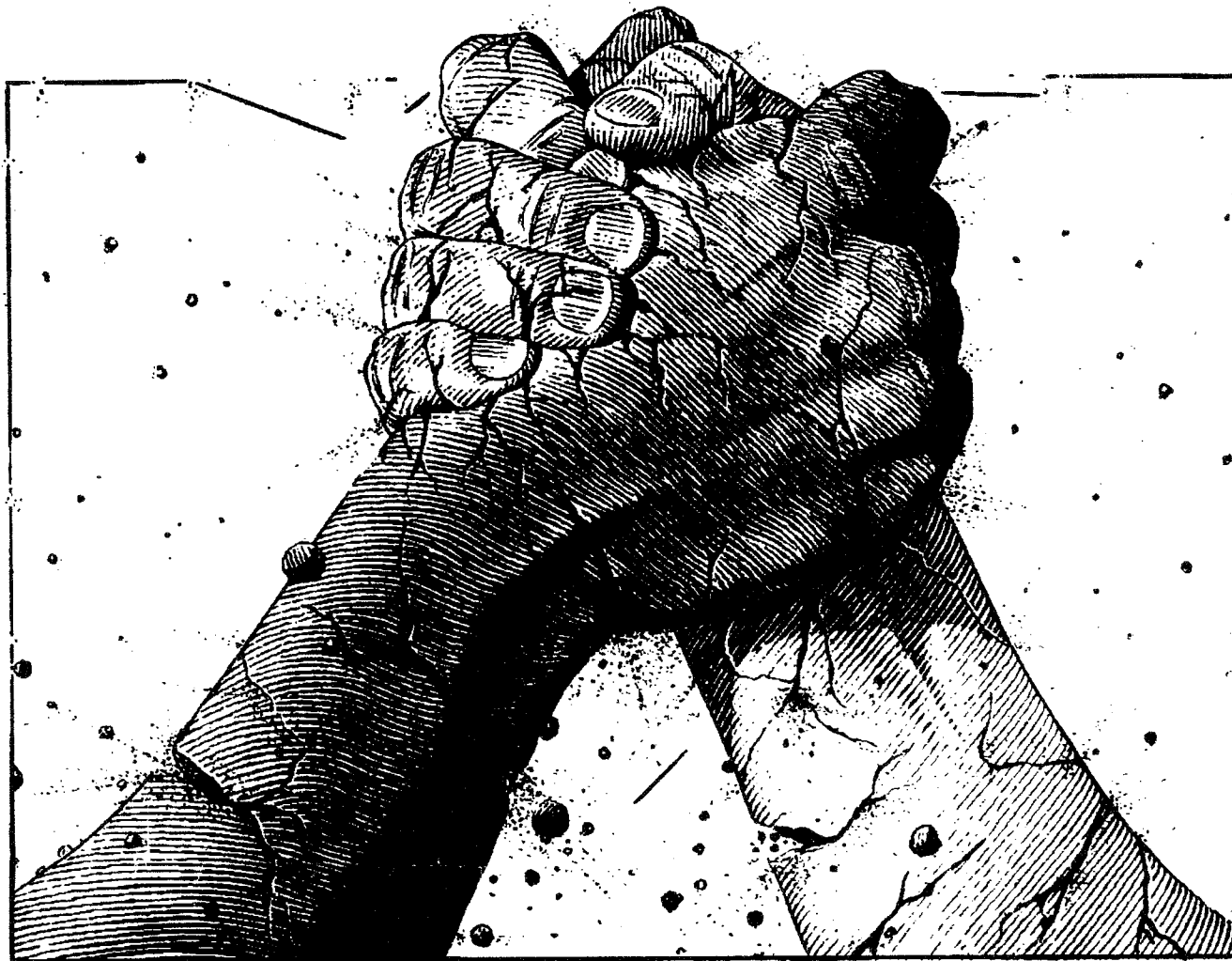
Knopf. 196 pp. \$21

Reviewed by **Jim Sleeper**

Ever since Frederick Douglass stunned a white Fourth of July audience in 1852 by asking "What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence?", many blacks have felt torn between asserting an unbridled, American personal freedom and maintaining a distinctive racial solidarity. That struggle proceeds in terms barely intelligible to most whites, who came here by personal choice, not through wholesale abduction, cultural dispossession, and confinement to a caste.

Lately, however, the tension between transracial dignity and racial loyalty, elucidated so vividly by Douglass and, later, W.E.B. Du Bois, has taken a new twist. The mainstreaming of black celebrities, artists, politicians and professionals—not to mention the "multiculturalizing" of the old, Anglo-conformist society by other nonwhites—has prompted new, complicated reflections such as those by the four writers under review. So has the loss, noted often in these books, of a coherent America, racist or otherwise. Once, blacks knew what they were up against, and thus a racist society's cohesion offered firm moral footholds, even as it threw up barriers.

And now?



BY CHRISTOPHER BING FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



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C. Eric Lincoln



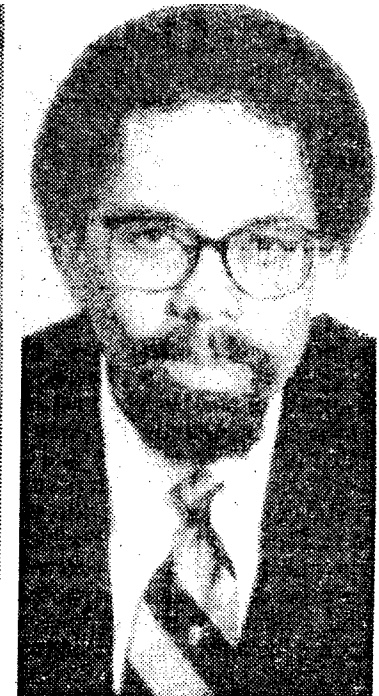
BY FRANK WARD

Benjamin DeMott



© BY JERRY BAUER

Henry Louis Gates Jr.



BY BENJAMIN GRUBMAN

Cornel West

pend judgment of this mother in deference to her “caste status” is to deny all black welfare mothers’ capacity to assume responsibility as parents. Perhaps DeMott thinks they also shouldn’t serve on juries or vote. The entertainment world shouldn’t laugh racism away, but neither should white social critics reinforce negative stereotypes while massaging their own guilt.

Like DeMott, C. Eric Lincoln, professor emeritus at Duke University and a noted scholar of black religion, argues that “few of the changes we hoped for have been truly accomplished, even though the cosmetics of progress are always being paraded before us with cynical reassurance.” Like West, Lincoln finds that “Du Bois’s search for identity was essentially a personal intellectual exercise,” divorced from ordinary blacks’ struggles. But Lincoln’s great, classic personal essay transcends race itself in ways the other authors claim they want to, and think we should, but don’t. Unlike them, he makes his deep personal experience of racism the wellspring of a transracial American vision.

In the 1920s, when his mother was a domestic for “quality” whites in his native Athens, Ala., the tiny Lincoln played with the family’s children and other white kids. He stepped forward with them in a health clinic line, only to be grabbed and told, “All you niggers have to wait!” As I stood against the wall rubbing my arm,” he recalls, “I soon came to realize that it was not my arm that was hurting, it was my soul. There was a sort of numbness, a *dead* feeling. The pain was inside me, and I would never be able to rub it away.”

Yet he recounts this to show that if one cannot rub it away, one may perhaps redeem its hurtful memory by keeping a penny sort of faith with former white classmates who were so

imprisoned by racism’s fraudulent consensus as he was. “*Race is a fantasy* [italics his]. A chimera,” he insists. “A stalking horse for power and privilege.” Doesn’t that make it indelible in those wounded in childhood? Yes, but Lincoln would oppose retreating into blackness as some of Gates’s classmates did at a Yale that was open to them; he would also oppose black wagon-circling even in the teeth of racism itself.

This position takes some explaining, and Lincoln does it with a grounded eloquence that reopens our racial dialogue. Because

The entertainment world shouldn’t laugh racism away, but neither should white social critics reinforce negative stereotypes while massaging their own guilt.

only whites have power to exclude others from resources in America, “black racism will never be more than a voice of defiant impotence screaming out its frustrations.” But not only is black racism “a notion with nowhere to go and no way to get there,” he continues, “that is as it should be. One kettle of putrefaction is enough . . .” The country’s complexion is changing

containment have broken down, and that the pavilions of privilege and the tenements of terror are one in the nostrils of the beast that walks among us.”

Lincoln would shed even a redemptive blackness to mix with whites who disown both their own putative supremacy and counterproductive guilt. He calls for a society that is beyond race: “The supreme disloyalty is not to a bell [of racial solidarity] that has tolled itself into silence, but to the bell that has yet to ring . . . If transracial marriage is here, and biracial children are here, can transracial adoptions be far behind?”

Lincoln is not ashamed to say this; he glories in it, defying the “risk in ignoring [racial] convention, in being out of step with the agents of panic and the gurus of political correctness. It is time now to reach for the hand that is reaching for tomorrow, whatever color that hand may be. The evening of today is already far spent.”

Lincoln’s own evening is breathtakingly beautiful. The Civil Rights movement has lost so much ground to agents of panic and gurus of correctness that Gates’s response to our situation is too elegaic and ironical, while West’s is too windy and ethereal. Unlike them, however, Lincoln, now approaching 80, doesn’t need a career, doesn’t need to position himself. Instead, he dips into his bag to share an elder’s evergreen wisdom, a candor and compassion beyond color. His answer to Du Bois’s question—black and/or American—is unequivocal: Whenever C. Eric Lincoln writes of our society, he says “we.” ■

Jim Sleeper, the author of *The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the*