BOOKS

What if We Just Forgot about Race?

By **KYLE SMITH** | February 11, 2020 2:27 PM

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Opponents of a white nationalist-led rally hold a Black Lives Matter flag in downtown Washington, D.C., August 12, 2018. (Leah Millis/Reuters)

In his beautifully written new book, Thomas Chatterton Williams disputes the notion that his blackness should be central to his identity.

Picture a graph of American racial preoccupation over time. Over the last 50 years, the downward trend is unmistakable. After the civil-rights era, anger and frustration and dismay diminished in the Seventies. It diminished more in the Eighties and the Nineties and the Aughts. Then, after the election of Barack Obama, which was presented as the final victory of post-racial thinking, what? A steady increase in focus on race. Today everything is racialized. Race is inescapable. There is no sociopolitical subject that can be discussed without a prominent voice insisting "Actually, this is about race."

And it's exhausting. It's hard to see how we bend the curve of race anguish down again. But then again, it's a mistake to think that present trends must carry on indefinitely. Attitudes do evolve, adapt, grow. What if we dropped our fascination with race?

The author Thomas Chatterton Williams grew up in New Jersey, the son of a white mother and a black father. When he was a child, roughhousing in the grocery store one day with his brother, a lady said to his mother, "It must be so tough adopting those kids from the ghetto." What if white people learned to dial back the "ghetto" talk and worked on educating themselves away from considering black people inferior? What if they also didn't make the opposite error and fawn over blackness either? (A mother of three biracial kids tells me it grates when moms at the playground come up and make a point of telling her, "Your children are beautiful.") And what if black people decided to dismiss minor affronts instead of exaggerating their importance? What if Ta-Nehisi Coates admitted that a single instance of a white lady pushing his son near an escalator was not a rational foundation for a hate-infused worldview?

It was just a few years ago that we as a country were parting with our race obsession. It may never disappear completely, but it was a manageable vice that was visibly shrinking. In his thoughtful, poignant, and beautifully realized memoir/essay *Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race*, Williams makes a powerful plea for moving race to the back burner, where it belongs.

Williams frankly admits that he's in an unusual situation for a black person: He married a white French woman, Valentine, and the two have a daughter who is fair-skinned, blonde, and blue-eyed. Williams is not ashamed of being black, but why must blackness be central to his identity, much less his daughter's? Are we not individuals rather than members of a race? "I am rejecting the legitimacy of the entire racial construct in which blackness functions as one orienting pole," he writes. "It is a mistake for any of us to reify something that is as demonstrably harmful as it is fictitious." If this is naïve, "a certain degree of naïveté is what is needed *most* if we are ever to solve the tragedy of racism in the absence of human races. We already know where self-certain over-sophistication inevitably leads us."

The notion of distinct human races is relatively new, Williams says, dating back to Enlightenment Europe, and the idea that having "one drop" of sub-Saharan African blood makes you a black person is directly traceable to Southern slaveholders and to Nazi purity tests. A Nazi view of race "essentialism" persists today, only we dress up the notion with euphemisms such as "culture," "ancestry," or "ethnicity," as if your skin color binds, limits, or defines you. Why sign up for this? Williams notes that he is aware that "most so-called 'black' people do not feel themselves at liberty to simply turn off or ignore their allotted racial

designations. . . . But that doesn't mean they *shouldn't*." White people should cast off "whiteness" in much the same way. Whether you identify as white out of "vicious bigotry or well-meaning anti-racism is of secondary concern," Williams writes. "Essentialism . . . is always an evasion of life; the beautiful truth, in all its complexity, is that we all contain multitudes. Purity is always a lie."

Williams wasn't raised in a race-blind way; as a kid, he told his dad he wasn't interested in boxing, and the old man replied furiously: "I'll be damned if they make you white." In school, he made a point to perform and flaunt his blackness, he recalls, partly to convince himself. He and other black students would affectionately call each other "nigga," he recalls. He dated, with a strong sense that he was climbing the status ladder, a resolutely cool black girl. She wound up moving from her comfortable home to the projects, where the man who impregnated her supported them by selling crack. Williams went off to Georgetown. That what we think of as "blackness" is mostly a product of class hit home when, in 2008, the author went canvassing for Barack Obama in a black Baltimore neighborhood of felons and drug addicts. Were these, in any meaningful sense, his people? Later Williams did more door-to-door work for Obama in Fishtown, the white working-class neighborhood in Philadelphia famously chronicled by Charles Murray in *Coming Apart*, and the surly, menacing people he encountered there hardly lived up to any implied standard of privilege or ease. A working-class Italian guy he knew while growing up once said with evident envy that Williams's black dad was "whiter" than his own, by which he meant more educated, not even more financially secure. Another childhood friend, black, came over for a visit and said, "Man, you rich," basing the assessment, as far

as his young host could tell, entirely on the perception that Thomas's mom was cheerful.

Race is largely a lazy proxy for other attributes, some of them barely connected to skin tone. In Paris, where the light-complexioned Williams is frequently mistaken for an Arab and was once chastised by an Arab to speak Arabic, he notes that black Americans are received principally as Americans, and well liked for it, though the privilege doesn't extend to blacks from other countries. When Williams's father, the man who had once insisted that lacking interest in boxing was a kind of race betrayal, finally met the woman who would bear his white-looking grandchildren, there was no animosity whatsoever. He was "not about to start fetishizing skin categories now," Williams writes. "I think that what he saw between Valentine and me was a kind of freedom — a sovereign liberty to improvise and create the self." It's a beautiful aspiration, and one that resonates especially strongly in a nation founded in a spirit of breaking free of the limitations imposed by labels. As a onetime avatar of post-racialism famously put it: "There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America — there's the United States of America."

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