Segregation: an insult to human dignity

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"SEGREGATION: AN INSULT TO HUMAN DIGNITY"

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God gave man the physical and mental stature to overcome his environment. No greater crime exists than when one steals this status from another. When hopes, dreams, and aspirations lay broken and shattered, then despair, hopelessness, and a conviction of inferiority are spawned in their place. Society’s indifference to real social injustice has earmarked every age.

Segregation has long been an insult to human dignity. Descended from slavery, and today encompassing a nation from coast to coast, segregation, unlike slavery, has not found its answer in an "Emancipation Proclamation", but rather frustration in education, religion, and employment. Firmly established through generations of subtle indoctrination, the path has followed from cradle to grave. Every American must share the burden of guilt since it has been inaction - apathy - unconcern - that have strengthened its foundation. Today we, like Pilate, have found the stain of our silence difficult to remove.

The purpose of this analysis is to trace the historical growth and implications of Negro segregation in this country and to examine the conditions and effects of this segregation upon a people. The work of this thesis might
be considered a "call to arms" for Americans white, black, or yellow, to unite in a common cause, to search for self-respect, and to tolerate his fellow man.

Included in this research and study will be nine contributions of art which, in varying degrees of emphasis and style, will attempt to reflect the mood and sensitivity of the areas discussed within.
Historical Implications

In his book Crisis in Black and White, Charles Silberman says,

It will take more than an appeal to the American conscience, therefore, to solve "the Negro problem," though such an appeal is long overdue. Nothing less than a radical reconstruction of American society is required if the Negro is to take his rightful place in American life.1

If Mr. Silberman is correct in his statement, then it must follow that white America is in for a complete metamorphosis in its patterns of sociological behavior. Silberman's reason and appeal is universal to those who bear witness to human worth. But to those in our country who have been long exposed to the corrosive ideas of difference, superiority, segregation, and the mental image of the Negro as simian, indolent, and immoral, the vision of a "new society" causes fear and alarm. Silberman reminds us:

When Negro slavery began in Spain and Portugal in about the mid-fifteenth century, therefore - a century before it was introduced into North America - the slaves found not just a tradition of slavery but an incredibly elaborate body of law and custom designed to protect the slave's status as a human being.2

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1 Silberman, Charles, Crisis in Black and White, Random House, New York, 1964, p. 10
2 Ibid., p. 86
Now considered chattel property, the Negro soon found himself entangled in a system which allowed him no escape, no personal initiative, no recognition as an individual, or any pursuit of learning beyond the skills necessary for mundane existence. Changes in economy or uses of slaves brought little or no change in their character. As they were born, matured, worked and died, their lives took on no sign of "being". From tobacco, rice, and indigo, to the nineteenth century cotton, the Negro continued to "exist" only, unable to indentify himself with his essential worth.

The classic description of an early to middle nineteenth century slave would find him living in the South, housed in "shanties", controlled by plantation owners, obscured by poverty and ignorance, prey to the auction block, and racked by sicknesses typical of any area of squallor. At no other time in recorded history had there been such complete domination of the human spirit. The Jews had their religion; South American rule allowed custom; Greeks and Romans allowed personal identity. But if followed that American white domination stripped the Negro of every shred of status. Much of this was reflective of the 1662 statutes which were enacted with no
precedent for slavery. As a result, it was during this time that the American Negro "legally" became property - a thing - a possession - with no rights of any kind. Thus, it followed that Americans hurried toward that fateful conflict which was to be the first sweeping change in the life of the Negro.

Marriages were not legal; they were meaningless to the master. Members of a slave family could be, and often were, separated by hundreds and sometimes even thousands of miles by the auction block. When he was purchased by a new owner, his name was often changed, and this, in itself, led to a definite break with the reality of self. His rewards for following orders were food and shelter; his punishment for rebelling were beatings and sometimes death.

Interesting to note during this period was the condition of the "free" Negro, or those not actually owned by someone. He was required to have a "Certificate of Freedom" which had to renewed each year at considerable expense. He was usually denied the right to vote and had little or no legal standing. Generally viewed as a breeder of revolt, he was "unpopular" in most areas. Always on the alert for capture and sale, his life did not beggar description.

The economic importance for additional slaves caused wide-spread breaking of the Anti-Slave Trade Laws. Such
states as Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina were transformed into vast breeding grounds to replenish the supply of slaves. These states, impoverished by soil "exhaustion", and climatically too cold for cotton production, turned to the slave as its new crop. Abolitionists were incensed over these practices and steady inroads of pressure began to tell in some of the states. These internal pressures combined with adverse criticism from the continent and dissension among the states regarding federal power, transformed our nation into a seething cauldron of emotions which pitted neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend.

The effects of the slavery problem, alone, had been impressive in the South. "The South was inert"\(^3\), a description by an early twentieth century historian, seemed to be as apt a picture as any.

Her development was arrested; she was fifty years behind the free states - politically, socially, and economically. (That same historian reflected in a most discerning manner;) Slavery held the South in a bondage more absolute than that endured by the slaves themselves.\(^4\)

\(^3\) K. L. Pray and W. F. Rocheleau, *United States History*, Bellows Brothers Company, Kansas City, Kansas, 1906, p. 91, vol 1

\(^4\) Ibid
Four million slaves were "freed" by the Civil War. Their former masters insisted that if the financial and social affairs of former slaves could be supervised, their "freedoms" could be better protected. With such supervision the Negro could be given time to learn to cope with his new place in life. The Federal government, anxious to restore peace and tranquility, allowed former slave owners to adopt new forms of government.

Vindictive and punitive in their thinking, these same men established the Black Codes, which immediately curtailed the rights of the freed. Curfew, rental, ownership restrictions on property, unemployment fines, possession of alcoholic beverages or fire arms, special permits to carry on trade and industry, all seemed rather "strange" as techniques designed for the protection of rights.

In 1867, the Reconstruction Program was taken over by Northern radicals who acted swiftly because they feared they were losing the peace, although they had won the war. Federal troops were dispatched into the South. The Black Codes were broken, but they were to linger in the memory of those who would later use them as effective methods for the perpetuation of white domination.
The Negro was now able to exercise his franchise, hold more positions in state and federal governments, and experience less segregation in the usual areas of daily contact than ever before.

In 1875, a year before Reconstruction was to end, Congress passed the Public Accomodations Act, forbidding exclusion or segregation in public accommodations. If this law had been enacted a decade earlier, it might have been partially effective in delaying segregation in the South. But the clamor over reputed decay in Reconstruction governments (Southern liberals made full use of this in effective propaganda to get elected) and the North's weariness of championing the Negro and his cause, made the legislation practically useless except as a prophecy of what was to come in our generation.

Reconstruction collapsed when troops were withdrawn from the South as a result of commitments made in the hotly contested election of 1876. Except for a general taste of what freedom was, Reconstruction meant little improvement in the economic position of the Negro. Then, as now, his problem remained one of poverty, for upon it rests his dilemma. Slavery bred him to be a field hand, domestic
servant, or practitioner of the most primitive trades—
and there he remained.

From Reconstruction to the turning years of a new century
there were several very significant changes in the life of
the Negro. The Industrial Revolution brought about a major
shift in Negro population. For the first time the Negroes ex-
ercised a mass exodus from their rural confinement, only
to find themselves once again trapped—this time in a rapidly
growing urban society complete with its environs of slum and
depredation. It was also during this era that the Negro
communities evidenced their first signs of leadership which
were manifested in the forms of Booker T. Washington, George
Washington Carver, and W.E.B. DuBois. With their contributions
white America became cognizant of the Negro as an intellectual,
sensitive, and educated contributor to mankind. This role had
never found expression in the minds of most Americans. In
these leaders the Negro society, was for the first time,
faced with the challenge of two varying philosophies con-
cerning their status, role, and behavior in a white nation,
As recorded:

Booker T. Washington emerged as an eloquent spokesman
for a new approach to the problem of Negro-white re-
lations....he counseled his own people to work hard,
engage in constructive activities, and cultivate friendly
relations with Southern white men. He assured the whites
that social intercourse was not necessary for peaceful
relations between the races.... As Washington's prestige grew and as his influence became so great as to be decisive in many aspects of the problem of the Negro, opposition among his own people increased.... Foremost among these was W.E.B. DuBois, who, in 1903, published his Souls of Black Folk, which contained several critical essays on Washington. He was distressed over Washington's failure to press for political and civil rights for Negroes and he condemned Washington's gospel of work and money which overshadowed the higher aims of life.5

 Basically, these two men opened, decisively, the two divergent "roads" which the American Negro faces in the 1960's. - that of "peaceful evolution" or that of "peaceful revolution".

 The periods following each of the major wars, World War I and II, witnessed intense involvement between the Negro and white America. Each of these wars saw servicemen thrown together in a common bond or relationship - that of winning a war. Each of these conflicts also resulted in a shifting of peoples, white, black, and yellow, in order to meet wartime production conditions and needs in an expanding economy. Housing integration, however resisted, became in evidence across the country. As the Negro began to "move" he found himself living "with" the white community, but only that segment which had ostracized itself through poverty

and degradation. But the seeds were sown and the Negro found the outer barriers broken for the first time.

Today the historical legacy of migration, struggle, frustration, and involvement seems quite unchanged. Yet today, more than at any other time in history, the Negro has harnessed the support of legislation, religion, education, politics, and new spirit for the final assault on the pinnacle of prejudice.
Personal Involvement

My interest in problems, basic to the Negro's place in society, has always been limited. He is usually a stranger to the Northern regions of New England, and because he was not in our immediate environment he remained practically a stranger to me until leaving it.

After graduating from highschool and before entering the service, I spent a few months in Boston Massachusetts attending an art school. I lived only a short distance from Columbus Circle, the Negro ghetto in Boston, and took walks through this section of Boston. I was struck by the sharp contrasts in these neighborhoods, which were the poorest, most squallid and unhealthy physically and morally that I had ever experienced. This situation did make an impression on me.

While in the Service I had the opportunity to come in contact with many colored personell. I noticed they, generally kept apart and by themselves, and had little personal contact with white people.

I was assigned to the Far Eastern Theater during the Korean War and my room chief was colored. We were to become the best of friends. At first I thought him to be rather aloof and strangely removed from the friendly bantering that existed among his roomates. But as time went on I came to
realize his way of living was not so different from mine, we discussed many current problems of the Negro's way of life. Through our talks, I became quite sympathetic to the problems the Negro faces today, in such areas as housing, education, employment, etc.

He had an extremely well developed knowledge of art and I was greatly impressed with his grasp of history, literature of ancient Greek history. He was quite surprised when I told him he was one of the few Negroes I had ever known personally.

In my position as Art Consultant a first grade teacher and myself once discussed segregation. She was aware of their needs in education, housing, voting etc. In the course of our discussion I happened to remark about the presence of a Negro child in her class and if any problems had been created because of it. She denied that this ever happened because she was constantly on guard not to let such bigotry creep into her classroom.

On another occasion I brought up the problems of Segregation with a Jewish friend of mine. She was quite verbal about the "Negro's making it on his own". She talked heatedly about all that the Jewish people had to overcome throughout the pages of history. She complained about the current viewpoint
playing "Apartment for Rent" signs, and each time I was turned away. My color was never directly mentioned. I explained at each door that I was a student at R.I.T. and was having difficulty finding a place to stay. When I asked them to recommend a place, it was always to a location definitely out of the segregated section, to one bi-racial. Since I was already in such an environment in Rochester it was senseless for me to move.

In each case I was shown a high degree of courtesy. I could almost read their thoughts, why would a white person, one who should be able to afford something much better, desire to rent in this section. I feel they were highly concerned about what the reaction of the neighborhood would be. Some, I think, didn't want to be involved in the possible physical harm that could have resulted. And those that gave me a flat, firm "no" to my question, probably didn't want to have anything to do with me.

I had the opportunity to go home a few weekends this summer and stopped at two or three motels used mostly by colored migrant fruit workers to inquire for lodging. The response was exactly the same. At one, just out side Dorcus N.Y., the colored manger of the motel was in a back room, and didn't see me when I entered. She asked what I wanted in a cheerful
voice. I informed her, and she answered she had a room available. When she entered, her attitude quickly changed from one of informal friendliness, to extreme politeness and cordiality. She thought it best to check with her husband. Upon returning she apologetically refused me the room. Her husband had already rented it.

At all times I was met with politeness, cordiality, and then denial. The experience of being prejudiced against was no stranger to them. They denied me with regret and perhaps a little "twinge" in their conscience. The true tragedy of our time is that the typical white person feels no pang of regret, or twinge of conscience. Smugly satisfied of his racial superiority: he coldly slams the door on the "black stranger at his door".
This is the finished "first attempt" to interpret the Negro family as it is sold into slavery. It was too "figurine" like, as my advisor termed it.

I experimented with clay around a block of wood in a hopeless search for a more interesting interpretation.

A slender rod permitted greater variety of form.

An African influence appears quite evident now, in the finished model. My technique of hollow casting is restricted by size, so I cast it solid.

Inexperience in solid casting, lead to an interesting effect. By spooning the molten metal into the mold at varying temperatures - unusual color and a stratified appearance was the result.
"THE YOKE"

View of the sculpture from the rear. The first section of the cast has been applied and the clay "dikes" have been removed. The gloss to the plasticene is caused by the heavy application of green soap, for without it the mold would be extremely difficult to remove.

The casting has been completed. A few gentle taps with a hammer should free the mold.

I re-worked a portion of the chest and stomach areas emphasize a pronounced bent and hunched position.
"WE SHALL OVERCOME"

A large section of this sculpture, around the waist and hips, had to be re-worked because it was unnatural and out of proportion. Figures 1 - 2, show area to be re-worked. 2 - has this section outlined in white.

Figures 3 - 4. The disturbing area has been cut away and corrections completed in clay.

The mold has been applied. Notice the roll of plaster bandage in foreground. It provides an economical and effective material to cast with.
"DIXIE"

"DIXIE", mixed media involving gesso and cement combined with oils, attempts to depict the outdoor "concentration camps" that have sprung up throughout the South to contain demonstrators when local jails have been filled. I depended solely upon suggested "figure-like" forms that seemed to flicker across it. The photos, poor as they are, show that the se figure were silhouetted against the upper background.

"REBIRTH"

The is the final result taken twice with a "Polaroid" camera. Earlier stages of this painting were lost due an unfortunate experience with a camera. The top picture does resemble the last stage the painting went through before I called it finished. In it I darkened the outside portions of the painting to create greater contrast between it and the center. The painting represents the seething turmoil of the ghetto and symbolizes its effect on the entire community.
"THE STOOP"

The four stages represented here are only a few the painting went through. Composition proved to be the greatest problem. The centerally placed figure - in the process of being formed in the first photo - was so powerful that it dominated the entire painting.

Figure 4 is the solution. Attention is drawn away from the center of the painting by the introduction of a fourth figure in the foreground.

Color also proved to be a disturbing element as the painting developed. I encountered the usual problem of keeping tones from turning "muddy". Figures 2 - 3 present this quite vividly.
The painting "Harlem" was the only one of the six that wasn't completed. I tried to express the exhuberance and riot of emotion that exists there. Shadowy images were beginning to form in the right of the painting. The middle and left sides were weak and I would have tried to resolve them by establishing larger areas of color and form that would tie the painting together more effectively.
Human Worth - An Allegory

He knows exactly where he stands. He knows now that the key to his dilemma is his master. He knows the problem. There was a time when it didn't exist, but then, maybe, he didn't exist. When he stood on the block and realized, with every piece of flesh in his black body, that his life and the lives of all he loved, were but a few pieces of shiny metal in the grasp of a single hand - he knew its power.

Later on, when he was freed and driven from his home, he realized the power of it - for without it he could not live. He saw how easily it could become the master as he stooped in the fields in back breaking labour only to have a pittifully few pieces of it clenched in his hand at the end of the time fore work. He had been taken from his master. One that spoke to him - laughed at him and gave him no shiny metal, gave him a roof for his head, clothes for his back and food for his stomach. But now he was free. There was no master now.

In the agony of his life, the shiny metal was the real master and always had been.

As time passed tiny pieces of his black body began to rebel. They say how this new master gave more pieces of itself to those that could work with their mind rather than the body alone.
These tiny pieces of his flesh left him and learned how to use their heads. And when they had succeeded they made a strange and wondrous discovery, that the shiny master was a slave to what they had learned, this thing called knowledge. It gave up some of its shinyness to a kind of knowledge called science, to another called art, to another called medicine, to another called law, and to others.

The tiny pieces were changed by knowledge because it had made them masters. They ran back to their great black body with what they had learned. It laughed at them and called them fools. It had learned how to do better things with its body and each time it had received little more than it had before. The tiny black pieces tried to live with the black body and change it, but they had been changed by knowledge and had to use what it had given them. Some of them left, never or seldom to return, others tried to live within the black body showing the new things it had learned to other tiny pieces trying to give them knowledge, for the more they gave the more there was to give.

After a while the big black body, for it was beginning to feel some of the knowledge, now began to think that perhaps
the tiny pieces had been right. Perhaps this thing called knowledge was the real master. So it called all the little black pieces to it, and called for knowledge, the tiny pieces said that the black body was too big, and they were too small to give it more than a little, but they could give it some by answering five questions. The black body was disappointed, but thought for a minute, than asked who had made this thing called knowledge. The small pieces answered that they had been many different colors, but mostly were white. The third question asked, if any of these people had been their masters. The pieces answered yes.

The black body got angry and said that those who had been their masters must still be, because they had made knowledge. But it began to think, for the tiny pieces had told it that there had been many colors involved in making knowledge, so it asked its fourth question - who determines just who and what color shall make knowledge. The little pieces said people did, that color had nothing to do with a thing in it called the mind.

The big black body began to think. It wondered why some of the tiny black pieces had never came back to the flesh, it wondered why the ones that had knowledge had stayed.
It thought about the difference between a piece and a person, and if there were white people perhaps black pieces could be black people. For its fifth and final question it asked the simplest question of all: what did the black pieces called themselves. The black pieces said they were not pieces - they were people, and that they had been waiting all this time, since they had gotten knowledge, for the big black body to ask them that question. For without it there can be no knowledge.

The black body suddenly changed into millions upon millions of black people, free at last to receive knowledge, and become the masters of their souls.
Bibliography


