



Another Age of White Flight

By Dr. Lorne Foster

One of the most fascinating discoveries in the annals of sociology is the phenomenon known as “White Flight.” This social phenomenon originally referred to the migration of White people and families from the city to the suburbs, and was considered to be a primary measure of the degree of social distance and estrangement in race relations.

There is a theory that White Flight began in the United States with the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 which desegregated school districts nationwide. Proponents of this public-school explanation argue that following the *Brown* decision, schoolchildren who once attended classes only with the homogenous population of their urban neighborhood enclaves were suddenly placed in classrooms alongside children from less desirable urban areas. By locating outside the jurisdiction of the central city and its corresponding school district, White families were able to circumvent the *Brown* decision by placing their children in districts with a majority White population. Using the separate political institutions of the newly forming suburban communities, Whites were able to escape the rising tide of integration and establish their own schools, libraries, police, and parks.

What is fascinating about the phenomenon of White Flight, is that many people today would deny that it still exists. Whereas in 1958, 44 percent of Whites said they would move if a Black family moved next door; today the figure is down to 1 percent. Survey after survey of White and Black preferences for racial housing patterns indicate that both Whites and Blacks consistently claim to prefer some level of racial mixing and integrated neighbourhoods. However, quite apart from explicit claims to the contrary, sociologists have confirmed that whenever the Black population in an American neighbourhood reaches a critical mass of 7 percent, the White population moves out en masse regardless of the quality of neighbour to neighbour interaction.

Here we can see that White-Black relations in North America have stumbled and faltered in the distance between expressions of egalitarian and pluralistic values and their implementation. Both groups typically espouse integrated neighbourhoods and race commingling, but they typically live worlds apart.

So, instead of furthering an avowed commitment to a society of goodwill and equality, White-Black relations in many ways are becoming increasingly conducive to less sympathy, understanding, intimacy, and interaction between each other.

In this wider context, White Flight is a small indication of a very large social problem of “sharing space” on this vast continent, both physically and psychologically. It is not only a post-war, post-modern social fact of urbanization and development, it is a social phenomenon that actually reveals race as the subtext of all social life and North American values, regardless of continuous attempts to downplay it or change the subject. For Whites, the suburbs represent a refuge and reprise from the menacing forces of cosmic chaos. Here life is gauged at a higher

level of abstraction and introversion. For Blacks, the city has become a treacherous transition from Black youth to adulthood. Here life is gauged at a higher level of immediacy and extroversion.

In this wider sense, we are living in the age of White Flight - which not only involves a migration from the jumble of the city to the security of the suburbs; it also involves the migration of introverted and extroverted racial sensibilities regarding the definitions and concepts of equality, fairness, merit, achievement, and opportunity into areas of contention and alienation.

Take one for instance. Consider how diversity concepts such as “inclusiveness,” “tolerance,” “pluralism,” and “multiculturalism” are now coming to be publicly re-defined as suburban-envy, and *conjure words* (in the Shelby Steele-ish vernacular), to make White people feel guilty.

Guilt Theory

According to this guilt theory - which is now selling like “brain candy” and finding an eager audience among nervous and jittery and skittish and fidgety suburbanites with subliminal feelings of inadequacy - all of these conjure words surrounding diversity and racial equality are not about the self-actualization of the whole, and comprehensive strategies for social development and progress. They are now publicly portrayed as features of a fabricated authenticity and dogma foisted on White suburbanites as a political ploy by sniveling, whiny underachievers. In this view, the gap between the manicured White suburban world and the blighted Black urban-ghetto world is actually a matter of individual freedom and personal responsibility and not a social problem at all.

In this conceptual migration, or psychological White Flight, we have moved from the agonizing hopelessness induced by the social fact of extreme urban poverty and lack of access to opportunity to the suppositional difference between White and Black intellectual endowments (“The Bell Curve”); from the undisputed evidence of centuries of preferential treatment for White males through systems of exclusion and heredity to the idea that White males are the one’s now harmfully stigmatized by their race (“Reverse Discrimination”); from the urban adaptation of anti-racism measures and employment equity strategies for prudent race management in a highly diverse world to the suburban myth that colour-blindness means social equality (“The Job Quotas Repeal Act”).

There is another theory, however, to which I subscribe.

In its deepest sense, White Flight is about the migration away from our highest ideals and better nature. In this theory of contemporary race relations, we have all been inhibited by fears of our own immeasurable potential.