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"An unusually sensitive work about the racial barriers that still divide us in so many areas of life." —Jonathan Kozol

WHY ARE ALL THE
BLACK KIDS
SITTING TOGETHER
IN THE CAFETERIA?

And Other
Conversations
About Race

Revised and Updated

TWENTIETH
ANNIVERSARY
EDITION

Beverly Daniel Tatum, PhD

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SITTING TOGETHER
IN THE CAFETERIA?**

*And Other Conversations
About Race*

Beverly Daniel Tatum

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*In remembrance of my parents,
Robert and Catherine Daniel,
whose love and encouragement lives on*

When I dare to be powerful,
to use my strength in the service of my vision,
then it becomes less important whether or not I am afraid.

—AUDRE LORDE

PROLOGUE

“Why Are All the Black Kids Still Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” and Other Conversations About Race in the Twenty-First Century

WHEN I TOLD PEOPLE THAT I WAS WORKING ON A TWENTIETH-ANNIVERSARY edition of my 1997 book, *“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” and Other Conversations About Race*, the typical response came in the form of a question, or sometimes two: “Is that still happening? Are things getting better?” A quick glance across the cafeteria in the average racially mixed US high school or college will tell you that the answer to the first question is usually yes. What, if anything, does that tell us about the answer to the second question, “Are things getting better?” What does “better” look like? That is a more complicated question. What has changed, for better or worse, in the last twenty years? What is the implication for how we understand ourselves and each other in reference to our racial identities? And, if we are dissatisfied with the way things are, what can we do to change it?

I wrote the first version of this book in 1996, in the closing years of the twentieth century. Now, almost two decades into the twenty-first, it seems we are still struggling with what W. E. B. Du Bois identified in 1906 as the “problem of the color line,” even though the demographic composition of that color line has changed quite a bit since then. In his provocatively titled 2016 book, *Brown Is the New White: How the Demographic Revolution Has Created a New American Majority*, author Steve Phillips highlights the speed with which the American population is shifting. He writes, “Each day, the size of the U.S. population increases by more than 8,000 people, and nearly 90 percent of that growth consists of people of color [emphasis in original],” a consequence of differential rates of birth, death,

and patterns of immigration. The numbers are pretty remarkable when you consider that in 1950 the total US population was nearly 90 percent White. But many members of that 1950s population are now elderly, and as the older White population is passing away, the White birth rate is not sufficient to replace them at the same population percentage. Add to this the fact of immigration. The majority of people immigrating legally to the US are people of color, coming from places like Asia, Africa, and Latin America, reflecting the fact that the majority of the world's population is of color. When immigration numbers are added to the net increase from births, "the bottom line is that each and every day, 7,261 people of color are added to the U.S. population, in contrast to the White growth of 1,053 people."¹ Indeed, the 2014 school year marked the first time in US history that the majority of elementary and secondary schoolchildren were children of color—Black, Latinx,² Asian, or American Indian.³

New Faces, Same Places

Though much of what has historically been written about race relations in the United States describes the traditional Black-White racial binary—a function of the legacy of slavery, the African American struggle for civil rights, and the fact that in the twentieth century Blacks represented the largest minority group—it is important to note that in the twenty-first century, people of Latin American descent (referred to by the US Census Bureau as Hispanics) are the largest population of color in the nation. According to the Census Bureau, while Blacks compose 13 percent of the US population, Hispanics are now 17.6 percent.⁴ Growing faster than the Hispanic population is the Asian American community. Less than 1 percent of the population in 1965, by 2011 the Asian population had grown to approximately 6 percent of the US population, now the fastest-growing racial group in the country. Within the broad umbrella category of Asian Americans, the six largest groups by country of origin are Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Indian Americans, Vietnamese Americans, Korean Americans, and Japanese Americans, together representing 83 percent of the total Asian population in the US.⁵

While Muslims cannot be accurately defined in terms of one racial or ethnic group, because Muslims come from many countries of origin and not just the Middle East, it seems fitting to include current statistics about

the Muslim population because some of the dynamics we see regarding racial difference during the last two decades apply here as well. Certainly since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, there has been an increase in anti-Muslim sentiment in the US that should not be ignored. The Pew Research Center estimates that there were approximately 3.3 million Muslims of all ages living in the United States in 2015, representing about 1 percent of the total US population. The Muslim population is expected to double by 2050, half of that projected growth the result of immigration.⁶

Also of note is the growth in the population described as multiracial. In the year 2000, the United States Census Bureau began allowing people to choose more than one racial category to describe themselves. Since then, the nation's multiracial population has grown significantly. The number of White and Black biracial Americans more than doubled, while the population of adults with a White and Asian background increased by 87 percent. According to a report of the Pew Research Center, "multiracial Americans are at the cutting edge of social and demographic change in the U.S.—young, proud, tolerant and growing at a rate three times as fast as the population as a whole." Indeed, the percentage of multiracial babies has risen from 1 percent in 1970 to 10 percent in 2013.⁷

Clearly our national diversity is growing rapidly, yet old patterns of segregation persist, most notably in schools and neighborhoods. More than sixty years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, in every region of the country except the West, our public schools are more segregated today than they were in 1980, as measured by the percentage of all Black students who are attending schools that are "90–100% non-White," with the highest rates of school segregation in the Northeast. Though the South made rapid progress toward school desegregation in the late 1960s and 1970s, typically in response to court orders and other federal pressure, the Northeast did not budge much, and patterns of de facto segregation in the Northeast continue to rise slowly but steadily, such that today more than 50 percent of Black students in the Northeast attend schools that are classified as "90–100% non-White."⁸ Nationwide, nearly 75 percent of Black students today attend so-called majority-minority schools, and 38 percent attend schools with student bodies that are 10 percent or less White. Similarly large numbers of Latinx students, approximately 80 percent, attend schools where students of color are in the majority, and more than 40 percent attend schools where the White population is less than 10 percent of the student body. Both Black

and Latinx students are much more likely than White students to attend a school where 60 percent or more of their classmates are living in poverty, as measured by the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch programs. Separate remains unequal as schools with concentrated poverty and racial segregation are still likely to have less-experienced teachers, high levels of teacher turnover, inadequate facilities, and fewer classroom resources.⁹

A series of key Supreme Court decisions during the three decades between 1974 and 2007 dramatically reduced the number of implementation methods available to communities engaged in school desegregation by eliminating strategies such as cross-district busing, dismantling local court supervision of desegregation plans, and limiting use of race-based admissions to ensure diversity in magnet school programs.¹⁰ As these options for desegregation have been curtailed by court rulings, the number of intensely segregated schools with zero to 10 percent White enrollment has more than tripled.¹¹ Students are, once again, predominantly assigned to schools based on where they live, and to the extent that neighborhoods are segregated, the schools remain so.

When we talk about residential segregation, we inevitably find that we are talking about not only race but also class. Certainly income matters when you are looking for housing. But we can't overlook the way housing patterns have been shaped historically by race-based policies and practices, such as racially restrictive real estate covenants, racial steering by real estate agents, redlining, and other discriminatory practices by mortgage lenders. That history includes the use by many White homeowners' associations of physical threats and violence to keep unwanted people of color out of their neighborhoods.

In her 2014 book *Reproducing Racism: How Everyday Choices Lock In White Advantage*, legal scholar Daria Roithmayr succinctly reminds us of that exclusionary history. Describing practices that originated in Chicago in the first quarter of the twentieth century, she details how regional practices became national law and federal policy:

In a crucial historical moment that would pave the way for the rest of the country, the [Chicago Real Estate Board] put in place an ethics code provision that prohibited brokers from selling to buyers who threatened to disrupt the racial composition of the neighborhood. The move was so effective that the National

Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB) adopted an identical provision. Now brokers would have to risk their careers to sell across racial lines—state commissions were authorized by state law to revoke the state licenses of those brokers who violated this provision.¹²

NAREB not only adopted the ethics code provision but also copied the Chicago use of the racially restrictive covenant, a legal instrument that served to prevent individual White homeowners from selling or leasing their property to Black residents, and spread the practice nationwide. For nearly three decades, these practices were not only legal but undergirded by federal policy.

The policies of the Federal Housing Authority (FHA), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the federal Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) all converged to establish redlining as a national practice. "The most important factor encouraging white suburbanization and reinforcing the segregation of blacks was the FHA requirement for an 'unbiased,' professional appraisal of insured properties, which naturally included a rating of the neighborhood."¹³ Using a coding system originally created by the HOLC, Black neighborhoods received a score of four, the lowest rating, and were coded as red. Those areas deemed at risk of becoming Black neighborhoods received a rating of three and were labeled "hazardous." As a matter of policy, the FHA loans went toward the purchase of homes in the top two neighborhood rating categories, "new and homogeneous" and "expected to remain stable." In effect, the federal loans were issued to White families to buy homes in new suburban neighborhoods that were all White and in older White neighborhoods that were expected to remain homogeneous. Private lenders took on the same redlining practices of the federal government, making it very difficult for Black families to obtain loans for property in the neighborhoods to which they were being confined. "The lack of loan capital flowing into minority areas made it impossible for owners to sell their homes, leading to steep declines in property values and a pattern of disrepair, deterioration, vacancy and abandonment."¹⁴ The racially restrictive covenants that served to keep Black people from moving into White residential neighborhoods were officially endorsed by the FHA in the late 1940s and maintained until 1950, even though the Supreme Court declared such covenants unconstitutional in 1948.¹⁵

The legacy of these policies and practices lives on in the present as past housing options enhance or impede the accumulation of home equity and eventually the intergenerational transmission of wealth. And though such policies are now illegal at the federal, state, and local levels, evidence suggests they haven't been eliminated in practice. In 2006 the National Fair Housing Alliance (NFHA) released the results of a multiyear, multicity investigation of real estate practices using paired teams of testers (White and African American, or White and Latinx) that were matched in terms of housing needs, financial qualifications, and employment history. Eighty-seven percent of the time the testers were steered to neighborhoods on the basis of race and/or national origin. In most cases, Whites were shown homes in primarily White neighborhoods, African Americans were shown homes in primarily African American neighborhoods, and Latinx buyers were shown homes in primarily Latinx neighborhoods.¹⁶

To the extent there is progress toward Black-White racial integration, it is most apparent in communities where the total Black population is relatively small and of relatively high socioeconomic status and there is a military base or university in the region.¹⁷ My family and I lived in a place like that for twenty years—Northampton, Massachusetts. While these characteristics do not describe the communities where the majority of Black people live, it is worth noting that Black families have been moving out of the inner cities in large numbers. Demographer William Frey notes that by 2010, as the result of accelerated “Black flight,” more Blacks lived in the suburbs than in the cities of the biggest metropolitan regions.¹⁸

Contemporary surveys of racial attitudes among Whites indicate that the larger the hypothetical Black population in an area, the more likely White respondents are to express discomfort about living in the same neighborhood.¹⁹ The behavioral result of such attitudes is that in those cities that still have large urban Black populations—places like New York, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee—progress toward residential integration has been quite limited. According to the 2010 census tract data, roughly a third of all Black metropolitan residents live in extremely segregated, or what researchers call “hypersegregated,” neighborhoods.

A similar pattern is visible among Latinx families in the two largest Latinx communities—New York and Los Angeles—where nearly 20 percent are in hypersegregated neighborhoods. However, Latinx residential patterns do vary based on factors such as country of origin, recency of immigration, and skin color. New Latinx immigrants are likely

to live in highly segregated communities, and those who are darker-skinned (many Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, for example) also tend to live in segregated neighborhoods, often in or adjacent to African American neighborhoods.²⁰ Those who are lighter-skinned (many Cubans and South Americans, such as Argentineans, for example) may self-identify racially as White and are more likely to live in areas with non-Hispanic Whites.

Discussing the housing patterns of American Indians and Alaska Natives is difficult because of the group's relatively small population and the fact that many still live on rural American Indian reservations and in Alaska Native villages. It is estimated that 34 percent of the 4.1 million American Indians and Alaska Natives (1.5 percent of the total US population) live outside metropolitan areas.²¹ Of all groups of color, Asian Americans are the least segregated from Whites, though there is variation in that pattern as well. Recent immigrants are more likely to be concentrated in ethnic enclaves than those who have been in the US for several generations.²² Not surprisingly, of all racial groups, Whites are the most isolated. They are the most likely to live in racially homogeneous communities and the least likely to come into contact with people racially different from themselves.²³

What difference does it make now? For people of color, living in a hypersegregated community increases one's exposure to the disadvantages associated with concentrated poverty and reduces access to the benefits associated with affluent communities (e.g., higher rates of voting, more political influence, lower rates of crime and delinquency, greater involvement with cultural and educational institutions, healthier lifestyles), *regardless of your own socioeconomic status*. Sociologists Massey and Tannen conclude the following:

Our focused analysis of neighborhood trends in hypersegregated areas further demonstrated the power of segregation not only to compromise the neighborhood circumstances of poor African-Americans but also to limit the ability of affluent Black residents to improve their geographic position in urban society.... Not only was the quality of neighborhoods inhabited by affluent Blacks lower in absolute terms compared to their affluent counterparts across metropolitan areas generally, but also their neighborhood circumstances improved little relative to those experienced by the very poorest of Whites. These findings confirm what social

scientists have long known: *Residential segregation continues to be the structural linchpin in America's system of racial stratification.* [italics mine]²⁴

In everyday terms, Daria Roithmayr explains that racial segregation limits access to the helpful social networks needed for successful employment. Neighbors connect each other (or each other's children) to employment opportunities and other needed resources. Keeping groups separated means that community helpfulness is not shared across racial lines. Because of residential segregation, economic disadvantage and racial disadvantage are inextricably linked.²⁵

Acknowledging the now centuries-long persistence of residential segregation and its consequence, school segregation, goes a long way toward explaining why the answer to the first question posed to me is still "Yes, the Black kids are *still* sitting together." The social context in which students of color and White students enter academic environments together (in those few places where they do) is still a context in which their lived experiences are likely to have been quite different from each other, and in which racial stereotyping is still likely to be an inhibiting factor in their cross-group interactions.

Change You Can Believe In?

That said, isn't *anything* better? In his commencement address at Howard University on May 7, 2016, President Barack Obama offered an answer to that question. Speaking to a largely Black audience, he highlighted the ways the world has improved since his own college graduation in 1983, including in the area of race relations. Here's an excerpt of that speech: "In my inaugural address, I remarked that just 60 years earlier, my father might not have been served in a D.C. restaurant—at least not certain of them. There were no black CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. Very few black judges.... We're no longer only entertainers, we're producers, studio executives. No longer small business owners—we're CEOs, we're mayors, representatives, Presidents of the United States."²⁶

Of course, President Obama was correct that there has been positive, meaningful social change in our lifetimes—certainly in the years since I was born in 1954—but if we focus specifically on the twenty-year period

from 1997 to 2017, we must acknowledge some setbacks beyond just the stubborn persistence of neighborhood and school segregation. There are three I want to highlight here: the anti-affirmative action backlash of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the economic collapse of 2008 known as the Great Recession, and the phenomenon known as mass incarceration.

The first of these setbacks—the anti-affirmative action backlash of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century—has had significant impact on Black, Latinx, and American Indian access to the best-resourced public colleges and universities. The case of higher education in California is a telling example. In 1996 California voters approved an initiative, known as Proposition 209, that prohibited “preferential treatment” based on “race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin” in employment, education, and contracting programs, effectively ending all state-run affirmative action programs. The California legislation inspired other states to place a ban on affirmative action in state-run programs. As of 2014, Washington, Florida, Michigan, Nebraska, Arizona, New Hampshire, and Oklahoma had done so.²⁷

In the case of California, the Proposition 209 initiative, which took effect in 1998, had a devastating effect on the enrollment of Black and Latinx students at the two leading public universities in California, UCLA and UC Berkeley. African American undergraduate enrollment dropped at UCLA by more than 37 percent, from 5.6 percent of the freshman class to 3.5 percent. Almost two decades later, the proportion of African American freshman students enrolling at UCLA remains below the pre-Proposition 209 levels. At UC Berkeley, African American undergraduate enrollment has fluctuated between approximately 3 percent and 4 percent between 1998 and 2014, far below the pre-Proposition 209 level, which was approximately 6.5 percent. Similarly Latinx undergraduate enrollment also fell sharply in the wake of Proposition 209 at both institutions. At UC Berkeley, Latinx enrollment dropped from 16.9 percent of the freshman class to 8.2 percent—a staggering 52 percent decline—in the years between 1995 and 1998. Enrollment of American Indian students also plummeted. As of 2014, American Indian undergraduate enrollment at UCLA and UC Berkeley is still 45 percent lower than it was when Proposition 209 went into effect.²⁸ The decrease in students of color has led to a greater sense of isolation among those who do enroll.²⁹

A similar impact was seen in Michigan following the passage of its

own version of Proposition 209. Known as Proposal 2, the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative (MCRI) became law in 2006. As in California, the proposal banned all affirmative action programs that gave “preferential treatment” to people of color in state contracting, employment, and higher education. Before Proposal 2 took effect, underrepresented students of color made up 13 percent of the University of Michigan’s total enrollment. By 2014, the overall percentage had dropped to 11.5 percent of total enrollment. The figures are even worse for African Americans, with undergraduate enrollment dropping more than a third, from 7 percent in 2006 to approximately 4.5 percent in 2014. Ironically, this decrease occurred even as the total percentage of college-aged Blacks in Michigan increased from 16 to 19 percent.³⁰

The California and Michigan flagship institutions have found that without taking race in consideration, it is very difficult to achieve representative levels of diversity across the higher education landscape, despite the demographic changes of the twenty-first century. Recognition of that difficulty seemed to play a role in the most recent Supreme Court decision regarding affirmative action programs in higher education. On June 23, 2016, the court ruled on the case of *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, which challenged UT Austin’s use of race as one factor among many in a holistic review of applicants. To the surprise of many court watchers, the Supreme Court ruled on the side of the university. Writing the majority opinion for the court, Justice Anthony Kennedy praised Texas for having offered a reasoned, principled explanation of its policy, but also warned that the court’s decision “does not necessarily mean the university may rely on that same policy without refinement” in the future, reminding us all of the still-unsteady ground on which current affirmative action programs stand.³¹

The second setback—the economic collapse of 2008—shook the ground for Americans of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, but it had a disproportionately disastrous effect for many Black and Latinx families. In their sobering 2009 *Huffington Post* essay titled “The Destruction of the Black Middle Class,” Barbara Ehrenreich and Dedrick Muhammad wrote:

After decades of being denied mortgages on racial grounds, African Americans made a tempting market for bubble-crazed lenders like Countrywide, with the result that high income blacks were almost twice as likely as low income whites to receive high interest

subprime loans. According to the Center for Responsible Lending, Latinos will end up losing between \$75 billion and \$98 billion in home-value wealth from subprime loans, while blacks will lose between \$71 billion and \$92 billion. United for a Fair Economy has called this family net-worth catastrophe the “greatest loss of wealth for people of color in modern U.S. history.”³²

Not only did many families of color lose their homes in the Great Recession, they also lost their jobs. Disparate unemployment rates continue, despite the national economic recovery. At this writing, in the third quarter of 2016, the White unemployment rate is 4.4 percent, but for African Americans it is 8.5 percent (4 percent for Asians and 5.8 percent for Latinxs).³³ “The racial wealth gap between whites and people of color is the highest it has been in 25 years; 2014 estimates by the Pew Research Center put the gap in net worth between African Americans and Whites at 1,300 percent and that between Whites and Hispanics at 1,000 percent.”³⁴ The economic disparities translate into educational disparities as well. College access is much more difficult when families have had little opportunity to accumulate savings and have no real estate assets against which to borrow. According to data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, the percentage of Black students whose families had nothing to contribute to their college education (in financial aid terms, an “expected family contribution of zero”) went from 41.6 percent in 2008 to 60 percent in 2012.³⁵ For the Black elites that President Obama mentioned in his Howard University commencement speech, the last twenty years may have represented an improvement in their economic circumstance, but for the vast majority of Black and Latinx families it has been a downward slide.

It is worth noting that some White families have been sliding, too. The number of White families with “an expected family contribution of zero” went from 18.7 percent in 2008 to 29 percent in 2012.³⁶ The poverty rate among working-class Whites rose three percentage points, from 8 percent in 2000 to 11 percent in 2011, still less than half of the poverty rate of working-class communities of color (23 percent in 2011). Nevertheless, the gap between White and Black poverty is closing, due to the declining fortunes of Whites in that sector of the economy.³⁷ That fact is fueling both economic anxiety and anger among Whites, as evidenced among some of the White voters supporting Donald Trump’s candidacy in the

2016 presidential election.

The third setback of the late-twentieth century and nearly two decades of the twenty-first century that we must acknowledge is the impact of mass incarceration. Historian Carol Anderson puts the phenomenon of mass incarceration in a particular context in her well-documented book *White Rage* when she makes the case that since the end of slavery in 1865, the prevailing White reaction to Black social and political gains has been an effort to push back those advances and regain social control. For example, following the end of the Civil War, there was a period of reformation in the South that included the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau to help those newly released from bondage. Blacks were given the right to vote, and some were elected to Southern state governments. Many social reforms, including the establishment of public schools, were instituted during that period. However, there was also massive White resistance from the former Confederates, which became violent with the rise of the KKK. As Northern law enforcers eventually withdrew from the South (marking the end of Reconstruction), White supremacists reasserted control and "took back the South" through the institution of Jim Crow laws and the disenfranchisement of Black voters. Slavery was replaced with the system of exploitation known as sharecropping and the use of lynching as a means of social intimidation designed to enforce racial subordination.³⁸ More than four thousand racial-terror lynchings took place across twelve southern states between 1877 and 1950.³⁹ When, during the Great Migration (1915–1970), more than six million African Americans escaped the Jim Crow South, thereby threatening the southern economy so dependent on their cheap labor, White southerners used both legal and illegal means to try to stop their exodus.⁴⁰

Similarly, the Supreme Court's landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case was met with strenuous White opposition in cities across both the South and North until federal intervention in the 1970s brought change, most of which has now been undone by subsequent Supreme Court decisions. Likewise, the advances of the civil rights era, culminating in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, evoked White resistance, particularly in the South, and triggered what has been called the "southern strategy," an effort by national politicians like Richard Nixon to court White voters (in both the South and the North) unhappy about Black gains not by making specific reference to race but rather by promising things like "law and order," "welfare reform," and "school