

The Psychology of Segregation

A few months back I put up a post about the Great Migration called “White Flight, the Inner City, the Burbs.” In it, I discussed the creation of the suburbs. Many scholars have argued that the creation of suburban housing developments reinforced in suburban children the notion of white supremacy, due to the fact that the suburbs got more police protection, better roads, greater access to social services, and better schools than urban areas. It’s not that these kids saw *themselves* as better than black children, but since everything around them was of so much higher quality, it is said that white children naturally internalized the notion that they must be . . . “better,” somehow. This usually never became an issue for most of them until those kids grew up, left the suburbs, and had to compete with blacks for jobs, or romantic attachments, or social position. That is usually when the internalized feelings of superiority would come out, mostly in the form of indignation at losing, or a sense of entitlement to victory. Many suburban white kids made sure to abandon the way they were socially conditioned as children when they became adults because they did not want it to hamper relationships with people of other races. Others, however, chose to incorporate this conditioning into their personal belief system and interpret anything that happened in the world through that prism.

This was the argument against segregation. Because, as I’m sure you’ve already figured out, the notion of white supremacy among white children was inversely balanced by the notion of inferiority amongst black children. This was most evident in Kenneth Clark’s [“white doll/black doll”](#) test that Thurgood Marshall used to prove the negative psychological effects of segregation. Urban black kids in America grew up thinking “whiteness” was normal and “blackness” was some sort of handicap they had to overcome. It did not help that the nickname for the places they lived —the ghetto—had become racialized to mean a “nonwhite” space. This despite the fact that word “ghetto” comes from the Italian for “foundry waste”—the first ghetto being part of an Italian city near a foundry that was sectioned off for Jews. And there were no black people around there then. But when European immigrants brought the term to America, the Polish, Jewish, Italian, and Irish peoples that populated most ghettos were not considered “white,” in fact, until after they had left the “ghetto.”

When I was in fourth grade I wrote a book about inner city gang life for a class project. Only years later did I see the irony in the fact that I had made the protagonist who rejected gang life white, and the gang leader who antagonized him black. I guess it just seemed like that’s what was normal back then. But it wasn’t normal. It was fucking brainwashing. It is due to the psychological effect that segregation has on our children that it was outlawed in 1954. When the Supreme Court ruled in favor of “separate but equal” accommodations in 1896, they did not consider this possibility. As Dr. King later argued, segregation does not just poison the mind of the black person by making them feel inferior, it poisons the mind of the white person by making them feel superior to their brothers and sisters. Today, many people stress over sending their kids to private schools because they are afraid that their kids are only going to be exposed to other kids that look like them, and they don’t want it to make their children feel like they’re better. And there are also some people who don’t stress about that at all.