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'Thin' approach to fighting racism

BLACK HISTORY MONTH: Thesis calls for shift from identity to issues

05:03 PM CST on Sunday, February 5, 2006

By WALTON MUYUMBA / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Tommie Shelby is an astute historian of black political and sociological thought. And at the very least, his new book, *We Who Are Dark*, is a primer on modern black political and philosophical thought from Martin Delany and W.E.B. Du Bois to Adolph Reed and Kwame Anthony Appiah.

The Harvard professor tries to devise a way to establish black political solidarity without using race to draw black folks together. He suggests, instead, that black people band collectively under a thin blanket of racial identity to oppose racial injustice. This thinness allows individuals to maintain their personal social positions and identities while working for social change. Dr. Shelby believes that "thin" identification can overcome "thick" notions of blackness that characterize modern African-American relations.

Dr. Shelby is most profound when he writes that squashing racial injustice benefits all Americans.

He suggests that black solidarity can be fully realized by involving nonblacks in the political initiatives targeted toward social issues such as poverty, poor public education, unemployment, home ownership and voting rights.

This is a rather startling concept, given the prevalence of racial isolation advocated by most black nationalist philosophies. But Dr. Shelby wants to promote a pragmatic nationalism that relies on blacks (and nonblacks) to unite under a thin veil of identity to work for social equality and economic parity for African-Americans primarily and all Americans subsequently.

One openly acknowledged problem with Dr. Shelby's thesis is that the economic gaps between the educated black middle class and undereducated poor blacks impede many opportunities for solidarity. As the author notes, these gaps open other weaknesses, including suspicions held by both class groups about the other, the political ambivalence of the working poor, the superiority complexes of the intelligentsia and the inclination of both sectors to push for singular male figures to lead the political agenda.

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Also problematic to Dr. Shelby's concept is the American citizenry at large. While Dr. Shelby's ideas are solid theoretically, Americans have yet to learn how to have forthright discussions about how race works or about America's racial history. Though Jim Crow segregation and discrimination have been illegal for 40 years, de facto segregation still plagues the lives of many non-white Americans. Racial discrimination clearly still exists, thus framing adequate political solidarity remains urgent.

Because Dr. Shelby's audience is primarily academic, those unfamiliar with some of his sociological and philosophical terms might get bogged down. But his writing is compelling, and his ideas are intriguing enough to engage nonacademic readers through to the book's conclusion. Dr. Shelby is an insightful thinker, and *We Who Are Dark* forces us to openly question how successfully we are fulfilling the national ideals for all American citizens.

Walton Muyumba is a writer and professor living in Dallas.

We Who Are Dark

Tommie Shelby (Harvard University Press, \$27.95)

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