A tangled tale of race

by Peter Kerry Powers in the March 7, 2001 issue

One Drop of Blood: The American Misadventure of Race by Scott L. Malcomson

When Bill Clinton announced that he would lead the nation in an unprecedented "conversation on race," the nation seemed to heave an exasperated sigh. Americans, after all, talk without ceasing about race. Welfare reform, affirmative action, the Murrah Federal Building, West Palm Beach--all these subjects have their racial dimension. Many white Americans, their racial concern worn to a smooth indifference, believe that race would go away if we talked about it less.

Scott Malcomson's ambitious fourth book analyzes the history of this obsessive conversation. Examining the development of racial separatism among white, black and Native Americans, Malcolmson contends that racial extremists such as Timothy McVeigh and Louis Farrakhan diverge from American ideals of freedom in degree rather than in essence. Indeed, separatism has been a constitutive feature of the American experiment, especially the peculiar effort to begin each life as if it had no racial past:

> [Our] American drive for newness has also led us into new forms of unfreedom. From the beginning, the people living out these racial roles of Indian, black and white often felt them to be constricting. . . . So they sought to escape race by escaping--or controlling, separating off, eliminating, sometimes absorbing--that which alone made them racial, namely the existence of other races. One sought to go beyond race by escaping the reminders of ones own racialness, to "separate" in order to become fully oneself and free, to solve this problem of race by starting afresh.

One means of starting afresh has been to light out for the territories with Huckleberry Finn. The idea of "The West" figures large in Malcomson's story because it symbolizes an ahistorical individualism. "The West" is a dream of racelessness. Ironically, this individualism is also a persistent feature of white separatism, which sees the white individual standing in splendid isolation above the featureless masses

of the colored world. Thus, Malcomson suggests, our very efforts to escape race reinforce racial thinking at every turn.

Besides geography, Americans have most often sought (and failed) to relieve themselves of race through religion. To some degree, Malcolmson's reflections on religion register his disappointment with his Baptist heritage. He left the church because he "could not embrace the role of race continuer that seemed, in a quiet way, also part of the church mission." Given Malcolmson's analysis of racial separatism, this harsh assessment of the church makes troubling sense. No group seeks more fervently to transcend history than do American evangelicals, whose doctrine of conversion is resolutely individualistic. Hardly better, liberals emphasize the reasoning mind that releases us from the dark mistakes of the past. To the degree that the individual without historical connection characteristically has been white, Malcomson suggests, Christian racism is more than an accident. It is tangled at the American root. Our anguished effort to incarnate a raceless body of Christ merely pulls the knot tighter, if only in its refusal to face our shared racial history.

Though Malcomson combines historical sweep with astute insight, he seems curiously unable to grapple with the personal implications of his story. He invites us to read his life as a metaphor. His concluding autobiographical section begins with a quote from James Baldwin, who also wrote of his own life as a metaphor for America: "History," Baldwin says, ". . . does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all we do."

Unfortunately, the press of history finally muddles Malcomson's vision of himself. He slogs through seemingly disconnected interviews and meandering reflections on his childhood. He seems to believe that he can choose to be nonwhite as easily as he chose to be non-Baptist. Ironically, this confusion may spring from his otherwise powerful deconstruction of race as an insubstantial, if still horrific, rhetorical myth.

Perhaps in this context Clinton's call for a national conversation makes sense. Unable to take hold of the deadly phantasm of race, Americans of all races are left feeling like partners in a loveless marriage who never really speak at all, their many words notwithstanding. Malcomson helps us see our shared history more clearly. If he speaks confusingly about himself, he at least enables us to talk more honestly with one another.