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Toward a Unified Theory of Black America

By STEPHEN J. DUBNER

Roland G. Fryer Jr. is 27 years old and he is an assistant professor of economics at Harvard and he is black. Yes, 27 is young to be any kind of professor anywhere. But after what might charitably be called a slow start in the scholarly life, Fryer has been in a big hurry to catch up. He was in fact only 25 when he went on the job market, gaining offers from -- well, just about everywhere. He abruptly ended his job search by accepting an invitation to join the Society of Fellows at Harvard, one of academia's most prestigious research posts. This meant he wouldn't be teaching anywhere for three years. The Harvard economics department told Fryer to take its offer anyway; he could have an office and defer his teaching obligation until the fellowship was done.

Now that he is halfway through his fellowship, the quality and breadth of Fryer's research have surprised even his champions. "As a pure technical economic theorist, he's of the first rate," says Lawrence Katz, a prominent labor economist at Harvard. "But what's really incredible is that he's also much more of a broad social theorist -- talking to psychologists, sociologists, behavioral geneticists -- and the ideas he comes up with aren't the 'let's take the standard economic model and push a little harder' ideas. He makes you think of Nathan Glazer or William Julius Wilson, but with economic rigor." Henry Louis Gates Jr., the Harvard humanities scholar, says that Fryer is "destined to be a star. I mean, he's a star already, just a baby star. I think he'll raise the analysis of the African-American experience to new levels of rigor and bring economics into the mainstream area of inquiry within the broader field of African-American studies."

When he presents a paper, Fryer is earnest and genial and excitable, sometimes carrying on like a Southern preacher. While he denies that his work is united by a grand thesis -- he is a scientist, he explains, devoted to squeezing truths from the data, wherever that may lead -- he does admit to having a mission: "I basically want to figure out where blacks went wrong. One could rattle off all the statistics about blacks not doing so well. You can look at the black-white differential in out-of-wedlock births or infant mortality or life expectancy. Blacks are the worst-performing ethnic group on SAT's. Blacks earn less than whites. They are still just not doing well, period."

To Fryer, the language of economics, a field proud of its coldblooded rationalism, is ideally suited for otherwise volatile conversations. "I want to have an honest discussion about race in a time and a place where I don't think we can," he says. "Blacks and whites are both to blame. As soon as you say something like, 'Well, could the black-white test-score gap be genetics?' everybody gets tensed up. But why shouldn't that be on the table?"

Fryer said this several months ago, which was well before Lawrence H. Summers, the president of Harvard, wondered aloud if genetics might help explain why women are so underrepresented in the sciences. Summers -- who is also an economist and a fan of Fryer's work -- is still being punished for his musings. There is a key difference, of course: Summers is not a woman; Fryer is black.

Fryer well appreciates that he can raise questions that most white scholars wouldn't dare. His collaborators, most of whom are white, appreciate this, too. "Absolutely, there's an insulation effect," says the Harvard economist Edward L. Glaeser. "There's no question that working with Roland is somewhat liberating."

Glaeser and Fryer, along with David M. Cutler, another Harvard economist, are the authors of a paper that traffics in one form of genetic theorizing. It addresses the six-year disparity in life expectancy for blacks versus whites, arguing that much of the gap is due to a single factor: a higher rate of salt sensitivity among African-Americans, which leads to higher rates of cardiovascular disease, stroke and kidney disease.

Fryer's notion that there might be a genetic predisposition at work was heightened when he came across a period illustration that seemed to show a slave trader in Africa licking the face of a prospective slave. The ocean voyage from Africa to America was so gruesome that as many as 15 percent of the Africans died en route, mainly from illnesses that led to dehydration. A person with a higher capacity for salt retention might also retain more water and thus increase his chance of surviving.

So it may have been that a slave trader would try to select, with a lick to the cheek, the "saltier" Africans. Whether selected by the slavers or by nature, the Africans who did manage to survive the voyage -- and who then formed the gene pool of modern African-Americans -- may have been disproportionately marked by hypertension. Cutler, a pre-eminent health economist, admits that he thought Fryer's idea was "absolutely crazy" at first. (Although the link between the slave trade and hypertension had been raised in medical literature, even Cutler wasn't aware of it.) But once they started looking at the data, the theory began to seem plausible.

Fryer has published only a handful of papers so far, all of them written with senior colleagues. A bet on Fryer is, at this point, a bet on potential. But his voice is bold enough to have drawn critics already. Some black economists say he is simply too hard on blacks. "Part of his work tries to dismiss the influence of racism," says William Darity Jr., who teaches at Duke and the University of North Carolina. Darity points to "An Economic Analysis of 'Acting White,'" a paper in which Fryer explores the mechanism by which high-achieving black students may be antagonized, and held back, by their low-achieving peers. "The inclination to look for an explanation based on some sort of group-based dysfunctionality is an instinct I don't have," Darity says.

While most of Fryer's colleagues consider him blazingly smart, he constantly belittles his own intellect. "I have to think hard when somebody says, 'World War I,' because I don't know what years those were," he says. "But I work hard, harder than anyone. That's what I can control." Last summer, he told me he was vexed by the sight of a silver Volkswagen Jetta in the parking lot outside his office. It was there when he showed up every morning, and it was still there when he left at night. Weeks later, he sent me a relieved e-mail message: "The Jetta was not working harder than me -- rather, they were on vacation."

He works so hard because his career goal is so audacious. Fryer's heroes are not contemporary economists like Glenn Loury or James Heckman or Gary Becker, even though he admires their work on racial issues and has been mentored by all three of them. Nor are his models the estimable crowd of Afro-American scholars assembled at Harvard by Gates, who happens to be Fryer's next-door neighbor. There is only one forebear whom Fryer aspires to emulate: W.E.B. DuBois, the fiercely interdisciplinary black scholar and writer who helped to pioneer the field of ethnography. "The problem of the 20th century," DuBois said, presciently, in 1900, "is the problem of the color line."

In Fryer's view, DuBois alone had the appetite to rigorously round up the facts and concepts and emotions that constitute race and then crack them open one by one. Separated by a century, their missions are identical: to study -- and maybe even help fix -- the condition of being black in America.

I met Fryer just over a year ago through a collaborator we share, the economist Steven D. Levitt of the University of Chicago. One paper that Fryer and Levitt wrote suggested that the gap in early test scores between black and white schoolchildren is largely caused by the fact that most black children attend worse schools. The second paper, a sort of sequel to Fryer's work on "acting white," explored the rift between black

and white cultures, asking in particular whether black parents who give their children a name like DeShawn or Imani hinder their children's career prospects.

In person, Fryer gives the appearance of coming from a middle-class background, some kind of Cosby kid all grown up. But as I spent more time with him, it became obvious that that wasn't remotely the case. He began to tell me stories about his past that -- although I didn't know it then -- he didn't share with people in his "new life," as he called it. It was unclear why he had finally decided to talk, and to me. It may have been that the project that brought Fryer, Levitt and me together was the sort of grisly work -- a research project concerning the inner workings of the Ku Klux Klan -- that tends to produce a bond. It may have been that he was simply weary of holding the two chapters in his life so far apart. Regardless, I soon became as fascinated with Fryer's life as I was impressed with his work.

One morning, as we sat on a bench in Central Park in New York, he talked about his childhood in Daytona Beach, Fla. When he was a boy, he sometimes lived there with his grandmother Farrise, whom the family called Fat. She was a schoolteacher and a disciplinarian. But Fat's sister Ernestine, who lived nearby, ran a looser household, and Fryer preferred to hang out there. His older cousins had gold teeth and gold jewelry and, always, the latest Karl Kani track suits, in maroon or bright red, with matching suede Champion sneakers. On the weekends, Ernestine's husband, Lacey, cooked up a batch of pancakes. Lacey was a retired postal worker and a past president of the local N.A.A.C.P. chapter.

At the same time, Lacey and Ernestine and some of their children were running one of the biggest crack gangs in the area. They would drive down to Miami to buy cocaine and then turn it into crack in their kitchen. As a boy, Fryer used to watch. In a frying pan -- the same one Lacey used for pancakes -- they mixed the powdered cocaine with water and baking soda, then cooked off the liquid until all that remained were the little white rocks. The family processed and sold as much as two kilograms of cocaine a week.

One day when Fryer was planning to visit Lacey and Ernestine -- Ernestine told him she would be making pork chops -- he decided to stop by the dog track first. He wasn't old enough to bet, but he loved to watch the greyhounds run. When he got to his aunt's house, it was surrounded by federal agents. Almost everyone in the family was sent to prison. Lacey got a 30-year sentence and died in prison; Ernestine was sentenced to a little more than three years. Fryer's favorite cousin, Wendy, got a long term; his cousin Vaughn got a shorter sentence, but upon his release he went back to selling crack and was murdered.

Fryer loved Vaughn and Wendy. "They seemed like pretty decent people," he said. "If you had put them in the schools that a lot of these people came up in" -- here he gestured toward the apartment buildings that border Central Park -- "they probably would have been fine."

How many of his close family members, I asked him, had either died young or spent time in prison? He did a quick count: 8 of 10. "Suppose you can separate people into two camps: geneticists and environmentalists," he said. "Coming up where I came up, it's hard not to be an environmentalist."

As a graduate student, Fryer was enamored with the most theoretical realm of economics, studying arcane mathematical questions that kept him a safe distance from his past. But he has since crossed over to the empirical side of his science, which emphasizes real-world information. Most of his current projects involve huge troves of data that he is able to dissect with a particularly knowing eye. While this work may play more to his strengths, it also requires him to revisit his background in a manner that is anything but theoretical.

He is writing one paper about mixed-race children (trying to tease out the influence of environment versus genes), another about historically black colleges (he suspects that graduates might pay for their racial loyalty in the form of lower career earnings, but are in general happier) and another tentatively titled "Bling-Bling"

(which, he says, "explores the consumption patterns of blacks versus whites"). There are also papers on colorblind affirmative action and the devastating impact of crack cocaine on black Americans. In addition to his economics-department office, he maintains another office at the Society of Fellows and a third at the National Bureau of Economic Research; he keeps at least seven research assistants busy. Claudia Goldin, an economist colleague at Harvard, is among those who marvel at Fryer's creativity and his energy. "You're running a factory," she told him.

His most ambitious project, which grew out of his belief in the power of environment, is an experiment designed to see if incentives can inspire minority students to improve their grades. For all the talk about education reform, Fryer says, he feels that one party is being overlooked: the students themselves. "I'm troubled by the fact we're treating kids as inanimate objects," he says. "They have behavior, too. They respond to incentives, too."

Fryer recently ran a pilot experiment with third graders at P.S. 70 in the Bronx. If a child achieved a certain score on her reading test or improved by a certain percentage, she got a small prize. In some classrooms, every student competed for herself; in others, each kid was assigned to a group of five. Fryer is trying to find out whether the individual or group incentives work better. He suspects the latter -- "because no stigma of being the smartest kid applies." But the P.S. 70 data was inconclusive.

At a dinner party held by Larry Summers, Fryer met Joel Klein, the chancellor of New York's public schools, and explained his project to him. Klein asked Fryer if he might be interested in expanding his incentive experiment into 15 or so low-achieving schools. At P.S. 70, the rewards had been pizza parties or field trips. This time around, Fryer planned to give cash -- $10 per good test for third graders and $20 for seventh graders. Now it was time to sell the idea to the principals of those 15 schools.

On a Tuesday afternoon in October, Fryer met the principals in the library of an elementary school in Harlem. All but one of them were black. Fryer usually wears Polo jeans, a button-down shirt and chunky black shoes. Today he was dressed for church, maybe even the pulpit: charcoal Brooks Brothers suit, crisp white shirt, black Cole Haans and a dazzling tie of white and mauve checks. He began by reciting a list of statistics that illuminate the gulf between blacks and whites. "These facts bother me," he said. "The achievement gap is not only disturbing; it's alarming. I'm here to try to understand and close the achievement gap."

The principals began to grill him. Even if the kids do respond to the cash incentives, one principal asked, what happens next year, when they aren't getting paid? Won't students in other grades be resentful? What will parents think when their kids start receiving cash in the mail every few weeks?

Fryer addressed each issue as best he could. But one question kept coming back at him: if we start paying students to test well, aren't we sending the message that learning is not its own reward? Although the exchange flustered him, Fryer had by meeting's end persuaded the principals to take part. Afterward, though, he took no joy in his success. He knew there were still plenty of bureaucratic hurdles ahead. What's more, he is not given to bragging. Typically, the first words out of his mouth after any presentation are "they hated it."

Long ago, Fryer made a vow that he would always be so hard on himself that it wouldn't hurt when others were hard on him. He told me this one night at his house in Cambridge. He and wife, Lisa, a graduate student in elementary education, were showing me his childhood photo album. It was one of the saddest photo albums you will ever see. A few baby pictures, then a picture from Pee Wee football and then . . . nothing until high-school graduation. Where was Roland Fryer during all those years? Or, really, where were the people who should have been snapping pictures of him?

His full name is Roland Gehrard Fryer Jr. Two years ago, as he was entering the job market, the name suddenly

led him to panic. He worried that some university dean might Google it and see that Roland Gerard Fryer was convicted of a 1993 sexual assault in Lewisville, Tex. But that wasn't Roland; that was his father.

The more Fryer told me about himself, the more it became clear that his research is directly, even painfully, inspired by his own past. Here were the bare facts of his early life, as he related them. He was born in Florida. His mother left when he was very young, so he lived with his father, who sold copy machines for Xerox, and when Roland was 4, they moved to Texas. He spent summers in Florida with his grandmother Fat and begged her to let him stay permanently. But always he was returned to his father in Texas.

I was curious to know more. Fryer, who sometimes seemed torn between wanting to explain himself and wanting to obliterate his childhood entirely, agreed to accompany me on a tour of his past. On one level he seemed to be dreading the trip, but on another, I think he was eager to show an outsider the distance he had traveled -- and perhaps to square things off for himself as well.

Roland Fryer Sr., now 54, had recently moved back in with his own mother -- Roland's grandmother Fat -- after being released from prison. So our trip began with a visit to Daytona Beach. The houses in Fat's neighborhood were grim, brick and cement block with ragged yards and bars on the windows. Her living room was dark and cluttered. Roland, Fat and I sat on plastic slipcovers and talked. I asked how on earth Roland had become a Harvard professor.

Fat looked at him before she answered. "I think I did a little bit," she said. "Did I help you, JuJu?"

That was his nickname here, JuJu. He gave an uneasy smile. Soon his father came in. The two men said hello. Fat went into the kitchen, and Roland Sr. sat down.

He said that he had grown up in this very house. He studied business at Bethune-Cookman, a nearby black college, and then held a series of jobs, none for very long. He met his future wife when she sang backup for Roy Clark, the country musician, at the high school where he taught math.

"You were a math teacher?" his son asked.

"Mm-hmm. Tenth grade."

I asked Roland Sr. how he and not his wife wound up with Roland when they split.

"I loved my son so much that I wanted to make sure he lived a certain type of lifestyle," he said. "I didn't want him to be in an environment that was not conducive to be the person he is right now."

At this, his son turned away.

And what kind of teenager, I asked, was Roland?

"Not a bad kid," his father replied. "Matter of fact, he and I used to be so close when we lived together that we would remind each other when we didn't spend enough time together."

Now his son stomped out of the room. Roland Sr. talked for a while longer and then said he had to leave. Roland Jr. came back in, looking grim. After dinner, driving toward our hotel, he vacillated between anger and bitter silence. His father's version of their life together, he said, was "total bull."

The next morning we flew to Dallas. Twenty minutes north of the airport lay Lewisville, an unremarkable city of about 80,000. Fryer drove us past the home where he had lived with his father, a tidy, tan brick ranch on a wide pleasant street.

When he was in third grade, he said, his father started to deteriorate: he drank heavily and beat a girlfriend so badly, in front of Roland, that she ended up in the hospital. Once, when his father left town and returned to find the house a mess, he beat Roland with a length of garden hose. By the time he was 13, Roland was bigger than his father. Though his father denies it, Roland says that one night they had a brutal fight. "I told him if he ever touched me again, I'd kill him," Roland said.

When Roland was in the ninth grade, his father was fired from Xerox for sexual harassment. He passed his days gambling and drinking. Roland made sure to be asleep by the time his father came home from the bar and to be out of the house before he awoke in the morning. Roland was a star athlete, in football and basketball, which made things a little easier. But he was angry at everybody, all the time, and was essentially left to raise himself.

At 13, he forged his birth certificate to get a job at McDonald's. When he could, he told me, he stole from the cash register. He sold counterfeit Dooney & Burke purses out of the trunk of his car -- a tricked-out 1984 Monte Carlo that he wasn't nearly old enough to drive legally. With a friend, he recounted, he would go into Dallas, buy a pound of marijuana for $700 and sell it back in Lewisville for $1,400. He carried a .357 Magnum and one night, in a fight outside a Citgo station, almost used it on a white man. "I didn't care if I lived or died," he said now as we idled in the parking lot of that same Citgo station. "I always think I'm supposed to be dead, not alive, much less at Harvard."

We stopped to eat lunch at a dimly lighted sports bar called the Point After North. "Right over there, against that wall," Fryer told me, "is where my father's rape case began." Roland Fryer Sr. was 43 at the time. After a night of drinking, he went home with two women who were sisters. One of them would later say that she went to sleep and woke up to find Fryer having sex with her. Roland Jr. was horrified and ashamed when the arrest made the local newspaper. He had to bail his own father out of jail.

He was 15 years old and couldn't see how his life could get much worse. Then one day while driving his Monte Carlo, he was pulled over by the police. They drew their guns and made him lie on the pavement. He was less humiliated than petrified; he wasn't half the thug he had imagined himself. The one thought he could muster was this: what will my grandmother think if I'm thrown in jail? The police, all of whom were white, questioned him for a few hours -- they thought he was a crack dealer -- and then sent him home. Later that day, some friends called. They had planned a burglary for that night, and told Fryer they were on their way to pick him up. He begged off. His friends did the burglary anyway and wound up in jail.

Fryer points to that day as his road-to-Damascus moment. He can't quite explain what provoked the change -- the fear of jail, perhaps, or of death or of his grandmother's wrath. Or it may be that everyone, at some point, has to choose the kind of person he hopes to be. But after that terrible day of two near-misses, Fryer stopped doing the bad things he had been doing.

At 18, he entered the University of Texas at Arlington on an athletic scholarship. For the first time in his life, Fryer started to study. He liked it; more important, he discovered he had a good brain and a God-given capacity to outwork his peers. He once tried to share his enthusiasm with his father, but he didn't get the response he was looking for. "I don't care how much education you get or how successful you become, because you'll always be a nigger," he says his father replied.

While carrying a full course load at Arlington, Fryer held down a job (he owed his father's bail bondsman) and took extra credits at a local community college. He also managed to meet Lisa during this period. He was efficiency incarnate, earning an economics degree in two and a half years.

He entered graduate school at Penn State University, and it was there, early on, that he realized the power of economics to study race. "We learned all these powerful math tools that were very deep, very insightful, and

were being used to solve -- you know, silly problems, frankly," he says. "At the same time, you'd look on TV and see people literally yelling at each other about affirmative action, bringing up anecdotal stories of one white guy who lost his house and his wife and his kids. The whole debate could be turned by bringing in some horrible travesty. And I thought, here's the exact way that these tools should be used."

He attended a conference at which Glenn Loury, the prominent black economist, presented a paper on antidiscrimination laws. "He came up afterwards and said: 'Gee, that's an interesting idea. I'd like to work with you on that,'" Loury recalls. "I said: 'A lot of people would like to work with me. Who are you?' But it was enough to make me want to get to know this kid."

Fryer had acquired his first big-time mentor. In similar fashion, he soon found a second, James Heckman, who invited Fryer to the University of Chicago to continue his graduate research. Heckman is a Nobel laureate whose research suggests that if disadvantaged kids don't acquire life skills at an early age, it is quite difficult for them to catch up. In Fryer, he had found a glaring anomaly. After barely three years in graduate school, Fryer completed his dissertation, "Mathematical Models of Discrimination and Inequality." And so it was that at 25 he was fielding calls from Larry Summers and Skip Gates, imploring him to choose Harvard.

The final stop on our tour of Fryer's past was Tulsa, Okla. His mother, Rita, lives there with her second husband, Harold, in a black working-class neighborhood.

During his first year of college, Fryer had a brief but intense fling with religiosity. It was then that he first tracked down his mother. He had been working on forgiveness, and he wanted to forgive his mother for abandoning him. But he couldn't get past the old hurt. "I kept asking, 'Why didn't you come find me?'" he said. "And then it just turned to complete anger on my part. I said: 'Do you understand what I went through? I went through all this [expletive], and you didn't come rescue me.'"

On this day, however, Roland's mother explained that things weren't as simple as Roland had assumed. She didn't "abandon" him, she said. In fact, when she and Roland Sr. split, she moved back to Tulsa with her son -- Fryer looked confused; he never knew he had lived in Tulsa -- but then, Rita said, Roland Sr. came and, against her wishes, took the boy. "We searched and searched, spent money and spent money, but we finally gave up."

Fryer seemed to believe his mother, at least partly. As she spoke, his manner shifted; he let down the wall that generally restrains his emotions; the conversation turned tender. When he mentioned that he used to play the saxophone, his mother brightened. "My whole family was musical, you know," she said. Her mother, it turned out, attended Juilliard and played eight instruments. An uncle was a saxophonist with Duke Ellington. Her family, she said, had been a real force in Tulsa, running restaurants and a variety of other businesses.

"They really were the Talented Tenth," Harold said.

Fryer smiled. The concept of the Talented Tenth was promoted by none other than W.E.B. DuBois. It referred to the need for an educated black elite -- the top 10 percent -- that would serve as example and inspiration to their brethren.

Later that night, over Scotch and soda at an airport hotel in Tulsa, Fryer sifted through the discoveries of his trip. He hadn't known that his father was a math teacher. He hadn't known that so much accomplishment ran in his mother's family. "I used to consider myself a genetic aberration or maybe an impostor," he said. "But I actually have some pretty good genes."

He had come up with one more factor, however slight, to plug into the increasingly complicated calculus whose answer is Roland G. Fryer Jr.

Fryer has never wanted to be white or to even act it. He loves black culture, high and low, and says that the worst thing about Cambridge is that it offers no psychic connection to his roots.

In DuBois's book "The Souls of Black Folk," there is a heartbreaking passage in which he describes how white men look at him and ask, with their eyes only, "How does it feel to be a problem?" In the rarefied world that Fryer inhabits, he sometimes feels a similar question land upon him, a question that is subtler but even more troubling: how does it feel to be an exception?

Last summer in Cambridge, he was driving across town to present a paper. One of his research assistants, Alex, rode along; 50 Cent was on the stereo. The paper -- about the slave trade/salt-sensitivity theory -- was potentially controversial, and Fryer now mentioned that one of his co-authors, Ed Glaeser, would be sitting up front while Fryer presented.

"It'll be good to have an ally," Alex said casually.

Fryer glowered. "You doubt me? You doubt me? What are you trying to say? You're saying I'm only here because of affirmative action?"

Alex, who is white, looked stricken. Then Fryer broke out in a big boom of a laugh. Alex looked at least partly relieved.

A few days earlier, I asked Fryer how it felt to be one of a very, very few blacks in his field. It stinks, he said. "I'd rather be on an absolute standard, where being black doesn't matter." He is convinced that Harvard did not hire him because of affirmative action -- and if he found out otherwise, he said, he would quit tomorrow. He is neither opposed nor in favor of affirmative action in the absolute; to him, the more relevant factors are the timing and degree of its implementation. But like DuBois, he can always feel an accusation hovering.

That may be why he has talked so little about his past. Most people I spoke to about Fryer had only a shadowy sense of his upbringing. He never wanted to score any sympathy points, nor did he want to give his colleagues the opportunity to dismiss him as a freak accident, an exception to the standard rules of academic success -- which might imply that Harvard is not a normative goal for a young black man in the first place. There is also the fact that Fryer's particular science places a high premium on avoiding the personal, the anecdotal. The data are what matter in economics, and the more ruthlessness that an economist can summon to make sense of the data, the more useful his findings will be.

Fryer seems to have successfully internalized this creed. He once told me, without a hint of irony or self-pity, that his upbringing, while generally awful, actually provides an advantage. I asked why.

"My father screwed me over so bad that he made my emotions like a lever," he said. "I learned how to turn them off and on. And that's what's needed when you study race."

So here is Fryer's final anomaly: he is a man who revels in his blackness and yet also says he believes, as DuBois believed, that black underachievement cannot entirely be laid at the feet of discrimination. Fryer has a huge appetite for advocacy but a far larger appetite for science, and as a scientist he won't exclude any possibilities, including black behaviors, from the menu of factors that contribute to the black condition. His school-incentive project in New York would call upon this entire menu: it seeks to provide an empirical means to measure the theoretical effect of "acting white"; it engages the economist's belief in the power of incentives to change an environment; and it allows for the overlooked abilities of any given child to flourish. The project might do the most good for the kind of child Fryer himself once was: a kid who belongs to the Talented Tenth but just doesn't know it yet.

The very issue of black-white inequality has, in recent years, been practically driven from public view. But according to the data that Fryer lives with, the inequality itself hasn't gone away. There have been countless distractions -- wars, economic gyrations, political turmoil -- and, perhaps just as significantly, fatigue. The proven voices and standard ideologies have lost much of their power. So there is an opportunity, and probably a need, for a new set of voices, and Roland Fryer, though he would never say it aloud, wants desperately for his to be among them.

Stephen J. Dubner is the author, with Steven D. Levitt, of the forthcoming "Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything."