When I began teaching at Tennessee State University, the institution still billed itself as HBCU—Historically Black College or University. But TSU was under orders to diversify: a state entity is supposed to be absent of ethnic preferences. That's how I found myself hired there, my first full-time job that listed me as "professor."

The first day I stepped on its Nashville campus I felt woozy, as if the ground was shifting in an earthquake, its shock waves pulsing through my body. The reason? Mine was the only white face in a sea of African American.

"This is what it's like to be minority," I thought.

This is what it's like. So that's how it is.

Yet my rank was a notch above that of the students around me, albeit a notch below that of the African-American university administrators. I could take comfort in my standing. I could return the stares with head held high.

In those days it was still permissible for a student to bring the occasional preschooler into the classroom. Always the student was profoundly apologetic; always the toddler was restless. More than once I'd take the child and prop it on my hip as a strolled up and down, lecturing and asking questions. (The strolling discouraged students in back from working on assignments for other classes.)

That 1997 mandate to diversify student body and faculty that got me hired at TSU also awarded a number of scholarships to white students, to the chagrin of tuition-paying blacks.

Simultaneously, TSU's long-standing practice of finagling "honors" status for many of its recruits from Detroit, Chicago, and other Northern had come under state and federal scrutiny. Henceforth, honors status was to be conferred only to students who met the appropriate grade-point criteria. Consequently, students who had arrived at TSU with high expectations found themselves saddled with out-of-state tuition. To add insult to injury, they had to contend with white instructors like me—very much against the reasons they chose an HBCU to begin with.

My teaching was fraught with problems. Not to mention, I watched the scholarship white students, who were just as poor and just as desperate for an education as their black counterparts, hazed off one by one.

I left TSU to accept a tenure-track position as Dakota Wesleyan University, a private institution in Mitchell, South Dakota. There I encountered black students whose fate was just as unenviable as that of their TSU counterparts. These students had been recruited with promises of high-profile positions in the team sport in which they excelled. Typically, the students were found wanting academically and participation in sports was denied them until their grades would improve. They, too, found

themselves paying out-of-state tuition—in a whitebread institution they disdained and had chosen solely on the basis of recruiter promises. The American way of providing college training, I saw, had become mercenary, even predatory. Out-of-state tuition didn't exist when my husband went to college.

DWU being a Christian university, its Christmas pageant required attendance by students and faculty. There, a lilywhite choir presented "Negro spirituals," Caucasian-style, as African-American students lolled in their seats, seething (I was certain) with red-hot rage. No wonder black students were hostile when dealing with me: by virtue of skin color, I was part of a system of exploitation..

I returned to Nashville to teach at Fisk University, a private HBCU. Once considered a prestigious institution, Fisk had descended into chaos, financial and otherwise. Though my stint was short-lived, the knowledge of interracial relations strained to bursting would be with me always.

Malcolm Gladwell is a staff writer for the New Yorker who describes himself as "half black—my mother is Jamaican." In the Harvard Implicit Associations Test (IAT), "of the fifty thousand African Americans who have taken the Race IAT so far, about half of them, like me, have stronger associations with whites than with blacks," he writes. This, in spite of the hatred of whites I know to be ubiquitous.

The test results disturb him, for they rated him as having "a moderate automatic preference for whites." In his bestselling book "Blink" he asks himself: "Does this mean I'm a racist, a self-hating back person?" Not exactly, he concludes.

He explains that for all of us, "our attitudes towards things like race or gender operate on two levels." First we have our conscious attitudes, the stated values we use to direct our behavior deliberately. But the IAT measures our "second level of attitudes." We may be unaware that we hold these, and that they may contradict our stated values. We don't deliberately choose these implicit attitudes; they arrive after the giant computer of our brain has "crunched all the data it can from the experiences we've had, the people we've met, the lessons we've learned, and so on." From all this data, the brain-computer forms an opinion. "That's what is coming out in the IAT."

In North America, our thinking is shaped by cultural messages linking "white" with "good," from newspaper reports to popular films. See for yourself, he suggests. Go to www.implicit.harvard.edu and try out its tests on gender or race or disability. "I've taken the Race IAT on many occasions," he says of himself, "and the results always leave me feeling a bit creepy." He thinks of the races as equal. He thinks of the genders as equal. "But then comes the test." It turns out, more than 80 percent of testees hold pro-white and pro-male associations. They hesitate a few more milliseconds before associating "Black" with "Glorious"— and so will you. Unless, that is, you primed yourself beforehand with images of Martin Luther King, Jr. or

Nelson Mandela or Colin Powell. Suddenly the association of “Black” with “Excellent” is no longer farfetched.