

THE LONG WAY HOME

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Suppose you are tasked with describing your physical features without the aid of a mirror or reflective surface. In this task, you proceed with ease, relating the peculiar shade of brown in your eyes, or perhaps the gentle slope of your nose; you effortlessly depict the hue of your skin, the unique tinge in your tresses, all through the medium of words: small, synthetic units imbued with meaning. The chances are good that you will provide an accurate portrayal of your physical peculiarities, constructing a model based wholly on recollection. Now, suppose your task is slightly altered. You are now obliged to illustrate your innermost self, your “essence,” in more metaphysical terms. You ask yourself: have I acted in accordance with my moral beliefs? Have I ever spewed words of hatred at undeserving others? Excluded others because of a biased preconception? Am I a *racist*? Abruptly, your mind is plagued with momentary uncertainty. Your conscious defenses are triggered, however, prompting you to react with indignation before such distasteful insinuations. You deny vehemently what is implied by such questions, assuring yourself, instead, that you are a devout Christian, a pious volunteer for charitable endeavors, a law-abiding citizen who takes her stand under the flag of equality.

Few in our world appear blessed with the gift of true self-awareness, namely the ability to candidly evaluate our inner mindset and unfiltered ideology. Rather, we often opt to place a veil on our eyes, an opaque fabric that prohibits our gaze from falling onto our own consciousness. We justify our blunders, blaming society, the government, our neighbors, anything but ourselves. We grow enraged at any mention that we may be guilty, lashing out in anger, despite the deeply repressed knowledge that we may, indeed, be guilty. This force that propels us into denial is a basic instinct, a primordial form of self-preservation that, according to some psychologists, originates from the concept of “ego death” (or the fear of humiliation, shame, or any other mechanism of profound, self-threatening self-disapproval). Yet, the

human mind is no impenetrable fortress. Instead, it boasts a striking tendency to reveal its musings in subtle ways, and it is often simply a matter of time before we betray ourselves, exposing our deep-seated biases (Albrecht 1).

As Ta-Nehisi Coates asserts in “The Good, Racist People,” “[i]n modern America we believe racism to be the property of the uniquely villainous and morally deformed, the ideology of trolls, gorgons and orcs. We believe this even when we are actually being racist.” Coates, an African-American author who is renowned for his provocative works, reflects in this essay on the ways in which “good” Americans often unknowingly shield themselves from their own racist beliefs. The human fear of self-evaluation serves as a pivotal notion in Coates’ essay. Coates illuminates this notion through his narration of an incident involving famed African-American actor Forest Whitaker. A story of the Academy-Award winning actor being forcibly accused of shoplifting and frisked by a deli employee comes to serve as a prime example for Coates of the ingrained prejudice of (white) American culture, despite its democratic facade.

We often fail to understand the extent to which our actions and self-perceptions are governed by our definition and use of words. Coates is particularly interested in how our misunderstanding of the term “racist” has warped our judgment over time. Indeed, the simple mention of this seemingly-taboo term conjures up heinous images of white-hooded figures, grotesque lynch mobs, and segregated stalls and busses. All of these things, however, are signs of an ideology trapped in the dusty history textbooks of our youths. Because of our historical understanding of racism, to be deemed a “racist” today is to be condemned to the past; it is to be grouped with the derelicts, with the criminals and public enemies of old, and to be isolated from the hardworking, honest people of today. Yet as explicit, heinous racism came to be demonized, a new category of individual also arose, referred to by Coates as “the good, racist people.” Born from an attempt to shield their own consciousness from self-judgment, these upright citizens possess a singular, archaic idea of what it means to be racist, one that allows them to claim a moral piousness and that blinds them to their own racist behavior. Coates provides an example from Levittown, Pennsylvania in 1957 to get readers to think about themselves today. Attempting to bar African Americans from establishing residency in the area, the white, suburban residents in Levittown staged protests, claim-

ing, albeit absurdly, that “as moral, religious, and law-abiding citizens, we feel that we are unprejudiced and undiscriminating in our wish to keep our community a closed community.”

In the contemporary case of Whitaker’s incident, Coates describes the owner of the deli establishment as “apologetic to a fault and sincerely mortified,” explaining that his employee’s actions were a “sincere mistake” made by a “decent man” who was “just doing his job.” Nevertheless, does the employee’s decency make up for the fact that he accused a blameless man of committing a crime simply on the basis of stereotypes associated with his race? Is the discriminatory mindset exhibited by the man different from the one revealed in the pages of historical texts? The answer is plainly no.

The animosity often directed in America toward the black community manifests itself in varying ways, ranging from the seemingly benign (accusations of theft, suspicion) to the downright malignant (corporal violence, discriminatory slurs, and so on). Fear permeates this spectrum of behaviors. In particular, the irrational anxiety often inspired by the presence of black men in public serves as the central premise of Brent Staples’ “Just Walk on By.” Staples’ essay commences with a jarring remark: “My first victim was a white woman, well-dressed, probably in her twenties . . . As I swung onto the avenue behind her, there seemed to be a discreet, un-inflammatory distance between us. Not so. She cast back a worried glance. To her, the youngish black man . . . seemed menacingly close” (153). Staples initially misleads the reader into thinking that he has inflicted violence upon the victim, yet subsequently the text reveals otherwise. The actual victim was Staples, an innocent, upright citizen, who enjoys an occasional nighttime stroll, yet finds himself turned into an object of fear simply because of preconceived notions regarding his race. Much like the perceived guilt of Whitaker in the deli incident, Staples’ presence often elicits discriminatory responses.

Staples, however, demonstrates an almost overly generous understanding of his victims’ circumstances. He nobly comprehends why white women act apprehensively around him. They have reason to be afraid, he tells us, because “young black males are drastically overrepresented as perpetrators of [street] violence” (154). Staples learned this growing up with fellow African-American men, many of whom wound up in jail or deceased (some were family or close acquaintances of his) (154). Like Coates, Staples expresses a

somber comprehension of the dynamics of his environment and his place within it. He understands the motives of the “good” people surrounding him, yet he does not condone them.

What remains most compelling is the manner in which Staples reacts to his predicament. Rather than adopting a radical standpoint or aggressively confronting the injustices he navigates on a daily basis, Staples goes out of his way to alleviate the tension. He recounts his attempts to seem less menacing in detail, telling us: “I now take precautions to make myself less threatening. I move about with care, particularly late in the evening. I give a wide berth to nervous people on subway platforms during the wee hours,” and lastly, “I whistle melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi and the more popular classical composers . . . It is my equivalent to the cowbell that hikers wear when they know they are in bear country” (155). Staples’ writing here lacks the exasperation one might expect him to feel in the face of this kind of stereotyping. Instead, his tone seems almost resigned. We might think that a strong advocate of racial equality couldn’t possibly react this way to the needs of an irrational and prejudiced other. However, while Staples has altered his conduct, he does not tamp down his thought process; rather, his pacifism undermines the stereotype of violence inflicted upon him, and his essay becomes a powerful conduit for reflection, prompting the reader to reassess her own behavior in comparison to both Staples and the people he discusses.

No term is more fundamental to American ideology than “liberty.” It is foundational in the nation’s political texts, emerging as a glorified cultural dogma. Even so, it is thrown around carelessly in contemporary politics, in hopes of garnering support from an increasingly diverse and divided populace. The question remains whether the fabled “land of the free” is indeed what it claims to be, or is simply a mirage in a desert of racial animosity. As James Baldwin declared in an open letter to his nephew published on the hundredth anniversary of emancipation in 1962, “You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon” (10).

It is difficult to deny that America has progressed politically and legally considerably since the days of Jim Crow laws and slavery. In days gone by, racism prevailed as the violent social norm supporting an orderly society governed by a rigid hierarchy. As cultural perceptions shifted, however, explicit

racial prejudice also came to be seen as a misdeed, committed by crude, antiquated people. Yet both Coates and Staples show us that prejudice still looms over our country, gaining momentum with each passing day. Even so, it would be incorrect to regard the United States as the cradle of all racial iniquity, especially since such absolute thinking may blind those of us from other countries from our own racist beliefs.

With bizarre clarity, I recall a particular event from my childhood—one that I did not understand at the time. I grew up in a placid town a few hours south of the sprawling metropolis of Sao Paulo, Brazil. Every day, over the course of a decade, I took the long way home from school. In fact, “long” is a colossal understatement. The route my mother and I took routinely was a whopping four miles longer than the more direct main road. It was four miles of unpaved, merciless terrain, scorched by the blazing heat of the Brazilian sun. I was perplexed, yet my mother and father seemed certain that we must travel this route. Even when going this way, my mother still displayed an agitation on our walks home that I could not grasp. Fear powered her legs, propelling her at lightning speed along that path, dragging me along like a reluctant sack of grain.

Years later, I finally gained some insight into my parents’ odd behavior. My grandmother revealed to me that the main road leading to my town was intersected by a large settlement of black people. I recall her saying, “There was talk around town that the younger negroes were stealing and wreaking havoc in the region. Rumors spread like wildfire, my dear, especially in this wretched town.” Once, the neighborhood drunk, Mr. Gonzalez, went missing and wound up in a ditch on Main Street; this event resulted in a true witch-hunt. There were beatings, hateful signs, and accusations. My grandmother said, “It was horrible to behold. Things have been tense ever since. Perhaps that is why I don’t blame your mother entirely for avoiding that place. The people in our community have built a relationship with that town upon a foundation of prejudice. We all knew he died of a heart attack, and yet . . .” She trailed off, too deeply immersed in her own phantoms to notice me.

I admired my grandmother deeply, for she did not succumb to the poisonous prejudice of that time. She mostly believed in the goodness of all people, regardless of the color of their skin. She usually trudged down our main

street with her head held high, greeting those who crossed her path with a smile.

Afterward, despite being flooded by emotions about the cause of my parents' actions, I did not resent them. Were they moved by a form of racism-fueled dread? Yes, they were. However, they were good, hard-working individuals. Rather, I blamed the world that we had allowed ourselves to make. Perhaps I was wrong in doing so; I will never know. We continued to walk home down that long, indirect, winding path, until I was old enough to make the journey on my own.

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