

THE FAULT IN OUR NORMS

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Thomas Jefferson tells us in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” and “are endowed . . . with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” (76). But has American society evolved enough in the last 240 years to achieve the vision inscribed in this founding document? Are different races being treated as though they were “created” equal? Do different individuals all enjoy the same “unalienable rights”?

The typical assumption the American public holds is that the severity of racism in the country has significantly diminished over the years. With the Emancipation Proclamation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and countless efforts by the United Nations and other organizations in raising awareness regarding racial discrimination in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, most would think that prejudice based on race has decreased by a notable margin. However, Ta-Nehisi Coates suggests otherwise in “The Good, Racist People.”

As Coates writes, “In 1957, neighbors in Levittown, Pa., uniting under the flag of segregation, wrote: ‘As moral, religious and law-abiding citizens, we feel that we are unprejudiced and undiscriminating in our wish to keep our community a closed one.’” Coates adds that “[a] half-century later little had changed.” His claim is that, despite the passage of time, racism persists in all its severity for African Americans. To go from slaves to secondary citizens after the Jim Crow laws were passed was hardly a large improvement; to end de jure segregation through the Civil Rights Act of 1964 only increased the impact and scale of de facto segregation. Indeed, some might argue that the conflicts between the races have worsened since the Civil Rights movement. Coates provides evidence for this regression, pointing out that the wealth gap has increased between blacks and whites over the last twenty years. The fact that police brutality and racial hate crimes have been

prevalent in recent years only adds to the validity of Coates' sense that racial equality remains a dream more than a reality.

To further expand on the idea that racism is as entrenched as ever in our society, Coates explores an incident of racial prejudice against Forest Whitaker, the famous, Oscar-winning black actor. A deli employee accused Whitaker of shoplifting, a crime that Whitaker had not committed, and insisted on searching him. Though the deli owner apologized afterwards for his employee's actions, he also defended the employee's character, claiming that "it was a 'sincere mistake' made by a 'decent man' who was 'just doing his job.'" Through this incident, Coates draws out several implications regarding the nature of racism. First, racism does not change based on class. A black person is not exempt from vicious racial discrimination simply because he is middle class, dresses well, and acts in accordance to social norms. And second, and more importantly, both "moral" and "evil" citizens may be racists. Whether one is regarded as a "good" citizen does not prevent that person from behaving as a racist. The idea that racism only applies to immoral citizens is so reinforced that we too often accept it as a social norm. And that has allowed "good" citizens to escape blame for racism, placing the blame elsewhere, on those judged to be criminals. In truth, no individual in society should be exempted from the implications of the environment and the norms that we have created. We shape society, we shape culture, we shape norms, and thus, we should all be held responsible for the consequences that these norms have led to.

Unfortunately, collective denial and the refusal of many people to recognize themselves as potential racists have led many who pride themselves as "moral citizens" to racially discriminate against others, unconsciously. These "good people," whom Coates has had enough of, have slowed or even reversed the trend of reducing the impact of racism in the world that we have made.

You'd think that I, born and raised in Taiwan, would not face any of these troubles of race as they manifest in America in my home country. However, my ability to speak English fluently, along with the fact that I studied in Beijing for a few years and wasn't used to my local school environment after spending three years in an international school setting, turned many of the "good people" in my school against me.

In grade eight, the year I transferred from an international school in Beijing to a local one in Taipei, I slept in the dormitory of my school. To my roommates, I was a person who did not exist. Never once did their conversation involve me. Never did they respond to anything I said. Not once. To them, the room was occupied by five people, not six. To them, having studied in China meant that I was not a pure Taiwanese anymore, and, consequently, I did not deserve to be treated as one. I was to be treated as an uneducated, loud Chinese person. Someone to be ignored.

In my classes, the situation did not get any better. There, whenever I wanted to contribute an answer to a question, it seemed that I was bragging about my intelligence to all of my classmates. Whenever I spoke, they would think: “Brian is at it again. Look at him. I just can’t stand the smug look on his face whenever he tries to solve a question. Who does he think he is? Albert Einstein? Please. He is just a worthless Chinese who does not deserve to be in our class.”

Or, they might hear me speaking English and think: “Look at Brian. He thinks speaking English will make him popular? Jeez. He’s just a loser. Don’t even talk to him. Don’t even look at him. Or, better yet, pretend he’s not there. Not that he deserves to be here, anyway.” The worst of it was when classmates would actually say such things to me as if their words were completely justified. There was no joking or sarcasm involved: it was what they truly believed.

I know that many Taiwanese people, particularly the younger generation, have a strong hatred for people from mainland China. I realized that from day one of the semester. But I did not expect such wrath to be unleashed on me. All I wanted in school was to fit in and to learn as much as possible. The second goal I achieved by earning straight As, but the first was an utter failure for me. I was inferior. I was not their equal. I wasn’t even a human being, but something that they could talk trash to and inflict physical damage upon. They punched me and kicked me. The punches and the kicks were painful, but they were nothing compared to the unfair treatment, prejudice, and discrimination I received.

Discrimination, contrary to conventional wisdom, extends beyond class, morality, and racial differences, as Coates helps us to see. As much as our

society might hate to admit it, discrimination had been, has been, and will continue to be a part of our social structures as long as it remains inside us.

Brent Staples offers us some further insights into the question of whether racial discrimination can be altered in his essay “Just Walk on By.” Unlike Coates, who focuses on explicit displays of racism, Staples targets implicit, subconscious racist behaviors. He takes note of passersby on the street at night and their reactions to him as a young, black male who walks alone. Through describing how pedestrians, misguided by the public consensus that black men are potential criminals, avoid him during potential sidewalk encounters, Staples reveals that racial discrimination is still deeply rooted in our society.

One example Staples provides is of a white woman who ran away from him in Hyde Park, Chicago, thinking that he, a “youngish black man—a broad six feet two inches with a beard and billowing hair,” might be “a mugger, a rapist, or worse” (153). The woman’s spontaneous reaction—to run away—conforms to our social norms. Yet Staples reveals to us that he was simply a newly arrived graduate student at the University of Chicago, craving sleep and on his way home. Moreover, as “a softy who is scarcely able to take a knife to raw chicken—let alone hold it to a person’s throat,” Staples is the opposite of a threat (153). This incident exposes how many people associate black people with urban violence and danger. Drawing on years of media depictions and stereotypes, people make judgments according to just one glimpse of an eye, rendering injustice to the victims they discriminate against.

We could blame the white woman for being misled into thinking that Staples is, potentially, a mugger. We could blame the students in my school for being childish and narrow-minded. We could blame the deli employee for prejudging Forest Whitaker based on his race. But blaming them will not help us to decrease racism in our culture; the real root of racist conduct cannot be discovered simply by blaming others. Rather, the problem lies deeply within us: in our tendency to see different races, and different personalities, as symbols. Our textbooks present Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. as symbols of progress, fighting against racial discrimination and inequality, and, similar to the Levittown citizens in 1957, we tend to regard ourselves as good, moral people. We think we are different from the evil ones, those who are reported about on the news and portrayed on social media; we think

we are different from those racist people of fifty or a hundred years ago who insisted on segregation. However, we are also afraid of the changes that we, ourselves, could be making. We often want things to stay the same, and we have often stayed the same, continuing the racist trend, letting it prosper freely, successfully implanting it in the next generation in our culture. Racism is an almost immovable fault in our norms, seemingly impossible to erase or modify.

However, symbols are man-made, not natural occurrences, and they can be changed. Staples attempts to reverse the symbolic way he is perceived by humming melodies from Vivaldi and Beethoven to soothe the pedestrians around him, convincing people that, though their skin colors may be different, they are not violently and frightfully different from one another. I also eventually earned some trust from my classmates by convincing them that though I may have a different background, we share many interests and still can be friends, despite the friction between us. Maybe the individuals who make up any society can do, or try to do, the same. They could choose not to recognize the fault in our norms and thus allow the racial hate crimes we have witnessed and been part of to repeat themselves, over and over again. Or they could choose to recognize these faults and to accept our differences, therein beginning to see that we belong to one species, sharing the same world, all in the pursuit of the happiness that can seem so hard to reach.

As John Bradshaw asserts in a 2010 interview, “I define a ‘good person’ as somebody who is fully conscious of their own limitations. They know their strengths, but they also know their ‘shadow[s]’—their weaknesses.” It will be up to us to take the next step, to look into our own shadows and accept our faults, recognizing our weaknesses and rebuilding our interactions with one another from these recognitions. If a whole society could achieve this, that would be a moment when our eyes would no longer be clouded by differences, a moment when we might share, finally, in the vision of our founding document, modified by time and reshaped for the world we live in.

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