

# QUIET RACISM

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She swings out, aiming for the neon green ball, and suddenly, her motion is cut short. The court grows silent, the umpire makes her call, and hand on hip, Serena Williams lets out a slow sigh. The match, the quarterfinal of the 2004 U.S. Open, would continue to go on in that fashion. Call after call, coming down from the perch of tennis chair umpire Mariana Alves, would be against Williams. She continued to play, slowly becoming more agitated as her win over fellow American player Jennifer Capriati slipped further away. With no Hawk-Eye replay technology at the time, onlookers, commentators, and other judges were left puzzled by Alves' calls, not seeing whatever she saw. What Alves was seeing, though, was in plain sight and stood out to all; as the poet Claudia Rankine suggests, Williams stood out "Like Graphite Against a Sharp White Background." Williams is a black woman in a field dominated by whiteness, and in her book of lyrical prose, *Citizen*, Rankine explores the difficulties Williams has faced.

"I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background," said author Zora Neale Hurston. This line works as if it were, as Rankine puts it, "ad copy for some aspect of life for all black bodies" (2). Williams is the graphite in a world of whiteness. She is treated as an oddball in the world she dominates. Rankine explores the challenges Williams faces in her career, as she describes racist game officials, insensitive teammates or friends, and members of the media who use Williams's race as a news story itself. Rankine clarifies that, even with her incredible athleticism and dedication to tennis, Williams is still treated differently than other players in the sport. This treatment never takes the form of blatant racism, but rather more subtle discrimination. Alves, a notable tennis umpire, never referenced Williams's skin color as she made the five bad calls against the only black woman on the court, but it was not hard to see why Williams was treated differently.

Williams has had to work harder than her opponents on the court in every match to shake off the quiet yet impactful biases that some may have toward her. But what is particularly difficult, I imagine, is the type of racism Williams experiences. No game official or teammate or reporter has cited her race directly in

describing the different treatment she has received. Had an official or journalist pointed to the color of her skin and linked it directly to the biases they have toward her, they would have been out of a job. Companies or individuals are quick to condemn blatant acts of racism because they are easy to detect and no longer considered culturally appropriate in this country. Yet, with more subtle acts of racism, where the discriminator does not directly fit into the concept of a racist (hateful, stubborn, intolerant, and unacceptable), it is harder to pinpoint such a bias. Racism today often takes the form of small microaggressions, fueled by fixed concepts that have the potential to cause harmful psychological consequences. Author and psychologist Derald Sue defines microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (3). These acts seem to be small, but they may result in large impacts, hampering the opportunities of minorities in numerous fields. We have moved past an era where blatant racism is socially acceptable, yet how is it still so prevalent in the form of more underlying biases?

Latent biases transcend the national spotlight on the tennis court and move into our most everyday activities. In 2013, the shopkeeper of a New York deli approached a black man shopping there. The employee accused the customer of stealing and promptly frisked him. The customer had no intention of stealing, and his dignity was of no importance to the deli employee. This incident, unlike far too many acts in which dangerous bias overcomes our actions, would later cause much embarrassment to the employee working the counter. The customer wrongly stopped in the store that day was distinguished actor Forest Whitaker. Whitaker, an Oscar winner, often appears in blockbuster movies and red carpets and glamorous magazine covers. But in that New York deli, he appeared only as a black man. A black man, as presumed by the employee, who was ready and willing to steal because of the color of his skin. A black man who like Williams on her own court, was the graphite against the stark white of that deli.

This seemingly harmless event had effects and motivations far deeper and dirtier, and was written about by *New York Times* contributor Ta-Nehisi Coates. In his essay, “The Good, Racist People,” Coates explores our most implicit biases, biases that the deli worker certainly employed that day. Coates describes our concept of racism, one that rarely aligns with how it truly operates in our society today. “In modern America,” he says, “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” (2). That shopkeeper, who later apologized profusely for the “sincere mistake,” fits none of those qualities. Yet his actions were rooted in a harmful bias. He chose to frisk Whitaker because he saw a black man, and with that, he reacted to negative stereotypes that permeate our culture. At no point did the shopkeeper reference Whitaker’s skin color as his motive for the pat-down because such evidence is not a socially (or legally) acceptable form of evidence. Coates understands that the deli employee was most likely a good person, trying to do his job well. It is fair to think that the employee would never have said something that fit Coates’s description of the overt racist. Instead, in a moment of panic for the well-being of the store and his job, the employee profiled Whitaker. He removed the intricacies of the black man walking through the store, ignoring the unique features or even the necessity of evidence, and his unconscious, implicit, societally-driven biases toward black men overtook him. This makes racially biased actions no more righteous, but does make a racist harder to find. A racist today, like umpire Mariana Alves, does not point to the color of skin, but we can see that the mind is fixed on that feature. And that feature leads to judgments, pat-downs, and bad calls; judgments about black men never paying for what they take and judgments about black athletes never fully belonging in a sport of whiteness. These judgments, as Coates puts it, “[say] to black kids: ‘Don’t leave home. They don’t want you around.’ It is messaging propagated by moral people” (2).

Even in stories of empowerment, these biases seep in. In the movie *The Help*, set in the 1960s South, black maids band together to share stories from their jobs with a white woman writing a “tell-all” book. The movie was directed by Tate Taylor, a white man from Mississippi. While the movie received praise and several awards, it met criticism as well. The Association of Black Women Historians criticized the film, stating that “[d]espite efforts to market the book and the film as a progressive story of triumph over racial injustice, *The Help* distorts, ignores, and trivializes the experiences of black domestic workers” (1). Offscreen, the movie was made largely by white individuals, representative of most of Hollywood’s productions. The movie features scenes of black maids making fried chicken and becoming reliant on the white author writing their stories. The movie, by some accounts, weaves in racial stereotypes. It seems most ironic

that a movie discussing such explicit racism of the time period is infused with the implicit racial biases of today.

Racial biases, in their quietest form, are present from Hollywood to professional sports to everyday interactions. Although some may say they see no problem with black people, some still clutch their bags tighter passing a black man on the street. It is this sort of mindset—one that rejects our (thought-of) typical racism, instead replacing it with the quiet, subtle racism—that has the power to lessen the success of discriminated persons in this country. Mariana Alves will never tell you that she dislikes black people, and perhaps that is the case. But her biases still seep into her occupation as an impartial figure on the court. That New York deli employee may tell you that he loves black actors and enjoys *The Butler* very much, but his biases about who is a safe customer in a store creep into his time at the counter. The successful, white screen writer who told a story that he will never experience, one drenched with the racial stereotypes and common biases of today, will tell you that he made a movie of empowerment and unity. The effects of these biases have lasting impacts, not only on those discriminated against in a particular instance, but for future generations and targets of such subtle discrimination. I cannot propose how to erase all underlying biases. This paper is not a cure for racism, but an examination of how its most quiet form still has the damaging effects of even the loudest, most hateful kind. That most hateful kind still thrives, even as social norms have changed to create a more equitable society in our laws, our language, and our media. But below the surface of good-intentioned people lies a deep-seated racism. A racism that spurts up into the biases used to discriminate others today.

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