

Coming to Terms With Race in America

Naturally, it is hard for me to connect with extreme, traumatic events in other people's lives, to grasp them and genuinely empathize with those affected as I have never experienced anything comparable. This is not to say I'm uninterested, indifferent, or lack compassion. This difficulty does not stem from rudeness or apathy but rather from inability. I can smile, congratulate, sympathize, and offer only the kindest and most welcoming hand, but to truly understand what another person is experiencing is a skill that I have not yet mastered.

Therefore, particularly in the past few years, while individuals around the world were afflicted with violence, terrorism, discrimination, and prejudice due to race, I had difficulty connecting to those affected. Not only was I at least hundreds of miles away from these major events, I was viewing the aftermath all from the comfort of my own home, through my state of the art computer, phone, or TV, unable to even begin to understand. I could not have felt more disconnected from the events that were transpiring.

The truth of the matter is that I am white and in addition to the previous reasons, my being white adds a whole other dimension to my disconnect. I am living in an affluent town, sheltered from the harsh realities of race tensions. I am living in "White America", naturally privileged due to race. It is a concept that George Yancy thoroughly discusses in his op-ed, "Dear White America", published in the New York Times. As I reflect on race relations in America, I feel that Yancy defines and addresses our problem quite well.

While viewing the live coverage of the Charleston church shooting, listening on the radio to the court decision in the Ferguson case, even seeing in Grand Central, right in front of me, protests from the Eric Garner case, I couldn't help feeling hopeless and slightly outraged. I cannot relate to the personal attack that African Americans must have felt from these instances; I can only begin to feel disgust with a society that would allow them. Hearing the decision not to indict white police officer, Darren Wilson, who shot and killed 18 year-old Michael Brown was a disappointment unable to be put into words. Here

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faced with an opportunity to overcome racial tensions, the jury decided instead to reverse our progress, keeping us in a state of decreasing faith and trust in authority. In this case and others like it, there was no question in my mind which party to support.

However, regardless of my support and that of thousands of others like me, racial tensions have failed to subside. Why is that?

“You may have never used the N-word in your life, you may hate the K.K.K., but that does not mean that you don’t harbor racism and benefit from racism” (Yancy), states George Yancy in his letter to white America. As I read his op-ed I was confused at first. How could it be that all white individuals are innately racist? I thought of Bill and Hillary Clinton, white individuals who walked to fight for African American rights, who stood by in support. How could devoted supporters of equal rights still be considered racist?

Despite my greatest hopes and attempts, I felt attacked. Yancy does not blame religion, beliefs, politics, wealth, personality, or character, all of which are relatively able to be changed. Rather, he blames a physical characteristic I am unable to change, something I was born into: my own skin color. I was filled with conflicting feelings. I wanted to join him in a fight against racism, towards equality, but I couldn’t move past the fact that he was labeling me as a racist purely because I am white. However, as I continue to ruminate about Yancy’s concept, I am starting to understand.

I am not purposefully racist. I am not actively discriminating, but I am *passively*. By standing by, by allowing myself to benefit from a system rigged in my favor without objection, by not addressing racial matters in my own scope, however small that may be, I was and still am contributing to racism. I can’t say this was a quick realization nor can I say I have even nearly come to terms with it.

I can only hope that Yancy’s message can reach as many young white Americans as possible. It is an odd feeling to be called out, labeled, and categorized by my race. It is a feeling that I have never experienced.

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I can't help but feel that Yancy's article was aiming to do more than just clarify the issue of racism. It is simulating a feeling, a feeling of accusation and confrontation, a feeling that many African Americans experience on the daily.

To me, Yancy's purpose reached farther than just to highlight an issue. His secondary purpose spoke even stronger. He demonstrated what it feels like to be on the receiving end, to come face to face with an allegation, regardless of its truth. While Yancy's "allegations" were all highly accurate in assessing the root of the issue of racism, given *my* reaction of initial discomfort and denial, what does that say about the allegations that African Americans face every day, allegations that could not be *farther* from the truth?

Although I can only speak for myself in the smallest of scopes, I feel as though in the last few months, I have come closer to *my* contribution to the problem than many other white Americans ever will. I may never be able to shed my inherent racism, but by acknowledging and accepting it, I can start to combat it.

Works Cited

"Dear White America." *Opinionator Dear White America Comments*. Web. 25 Feb. 2016.