Negro Served Here

Race Relations Revisited

By Joseph Alaeddine
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“Prejudice is an engulfing smog; it obscures one’s view and impairs one’s moral health, but it is so diffused that one cannot easily take hold of it and pluck it out… There is no such thing as ‘instant creation’ of a man of ability and character or a community spirit of mutual destruction of these precious things. It’s done with violence. Let us avoid it by every means at our command.”

-Robert D. Clark-

Introduction

Flipping through the pages of history books used to teach our youngest generations, there are pictures of Christopher Columbus, assorted US Presidents, and the occasional archaic sketch of the slave ships used to bring Africans to work for Europeans in America. America was named for Amerigo Vespucci, who was among the first to subjugate the non-whites of the western hemisphere upon arrival. Had it not been he who arrived, what would race relations be like in the US today?

Much more specifically, I seek to trace our efforts at improving race relations in the United States, drawing primarily on culture in the 1960s. Though often seen as an unusually progressive decade, what with the sex, drugs, and rock and roll, I am writing to shed an unfortunate but necessary light on the racism which I feel pervaded that time. In order to demonstrate this, I will discuss the racism in California higher education in the ‘60s. I will include a description of common problems in organizations on campus. I will go in depth about the 1964 Freedom Summer and explain the role of race in these efforts. I will continue to show the role of the media in both bettering and prolonging strained race relations. In clarification, I will discuss the role of fear and separation in these relations, as well as explaining sociological theory on the implications of Whiteness as a quality vs. Blackness. In conclusion, I will show that the 1960s didn’t effectively take
care of the racism and the alienation of one race from another, leaving us today to bear the burden of removing the stigma ourselves.

There are many versions of history, this is for certain. All too often people get the idea that we are free from racism, that we have achieved our cultural goals collectively. If that were so, why haven’t we had a black president? Why is Affirmative Action still such a hot issue politically? Why is the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission still necessary in maintaining ethical hiring standards in the companies which provide the infrastructural back bone to our country? I suppose this is one of the versions I take issue with. Sit back and relax with a muffin and a cup of tea, because this is how I teach history.

**California in the ‘60s (a racial profile)**

In order to maintain focus on the University system within this exploration, let me begin with the racist institution of higher education in California in the 1960s. 17 percent of California was comprised of minorities in 1968. However, minorities represented only 2 percent of the UC college system. Most of those minorities fortunate enough to be in college at the time were recruited as athletes (UC Entrance Rules Challenged) rather than on the academic merit that many surely had. Rather than coming to the schools as students, they were welcomed as performers, something the colleges could sell tickets for.

Furthermore, though blacks constituted 11 percent of the United States population, they represented only 2 percent of upper-tier employment and 4 percent of middle-tier employment (Black Power and the American University). A part-time
sociology professor at San Jose State, Harry Edwards, was tired of blacks not getting a fair shake. In response to some of the racism, he listed four grievances he had with the University. The response was immediate from the administration, and black students used this as a model for later endeavors. President Robert D. Clark was torn between his students, his beliefs, and his duties when he contended that “The simple bald fact is that we tolerated discriminatory behavior against the blacks that as a civilized, democratic, intellectual community we should not have tolerated” (Black Power and the American University).

For these reasons, when sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, San Jose State students and prominent advocates of the Olympics boycott, gave the Black Panther salute on the podium at the Olympics, President Clark was not mad at them. Instead, he was saddened by the state of the nation.

I regret that our treatment of our Black athletes has been such to prompt them to feel they must use the Olympics Games to communicate their real concern for the conditions of Blacks in America. Our minority peoples should be able to be heard here at home, rather than needing an international setting to gain attention for their cause. (Wrath and Rapture in the Cult of Athletics)

Though levels of discrimination varied from school to school in the 1960s, the California Colleges were among the most problematic. They were, among the white communities, thought to be in as much need as the Mississippi schools. Some sympathetic whites of this time “[could] simply no longer justify the pursuit of a Ph. D … [they felt] almost ashamed of [their] college diploma[s]” (Martinez 267). The inequality would drip from the wrung out corners of the universities, and some students’ conscience overcame their scholarship.
Group Dynamic in Eugene

Faced with an ever-changing world, students looked to organizations to provide direction. The groups many encountered were not without direction. Many groups just had too many of them. For example, many dismayed and unsettled youth commented on a lack of common vision among Students for a Democratic Society:

It has been said that our liberal and socialist predecessors were plagued by vision without program, while our own generation is plagued by program without vision. All around us there is astute grasp of method, technique…but, if pressed critically, such expertise is incompetent to explain its implicit ideals. (Port Huron 3)

This continues to be a reason for conflict among college campuses. If someone is providing too much direction they may seem like they have their own agenda. However, if the group can not collaborate effectively, then nothing is accomplished.

A recurring theme mentioned with regard to the minority groups in the UO community is that they were organized, much more so than the predominantly-white groups. This was in part due to their size, and also a result of their urgency to change their community. Malcolm X said, when faced with the question of whether or not the Black Power Movement would be successful, that there are too few supporters to be able to divide them. In this one instance, the smaller size became pivotal to the easy and rapid organization of the groups.

Eugene was, and is, in need of some desperate help according to former Black Panther leaders William Smith and William Green. “Eugene and Springfield are no different than cities all over this nation. There are poor people here, oppressed people
who are constantly exploited by the ruling class of capitalists. The only thing unique about Eugene is that it has no large collection of black people living in one neighborhood” (Sellard 6).

**Freedom Summer: Ruth Koenig’s Mississippi**

“Well guys- finally- we've gone- we've arrived- we're at our destination” (Koenig 2002). With this first sentence, she wrote to her parents upon arriving at her station in Holly Springs, Mississippi, Ruth Koenig had become part of something greater. She and the other volunteers had come to register voters in an effort to acquire adequate representation for the relatively large African American population in the south. This Mississippi Project would later be remembered as Freedom Summer. Though Mississippi had a vast majority of black residents, they had little to no say in government as all of the officials and police officers were white. This was something that these small groups of no more than thirty-five predominately white northern students planned to change.

The training sessions took place in Miami, Ohio and were a great place for the volunteers to share fears and take a final deep breath before being sent to their stations. They were schooled intensely on the essentials, the things that would keep them alive and make them successful in their endeavors. There were a few core concepts that were drilled in repeatedly. First, there were the laws of Mississippi, a sort of due process that the volunteers were required to learn in case they had to face local law enforcement. If arrested, they were told to ask what the charge was, and to do what the officers said to do, within the scope of the law. Sometimes this due process did not play out so well. Ms.
Koenig recalls one of her leaders being pulled over by a police officer. When he asked what he has done wrong, the officer was quiet a moment, then replied “I am not sure, as of yet” (Koenig 2005). As it turned out, he found a broken bulb in the rear of the vehicle.

Rev. James Lawson did the second focus of the training, in part. His efforts focused on nonviolence, like many in the religious community of this time. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. studied Jesus and Gandhi when organizing his nonviolent no cooperation. The students were invaluable to the cause, so the leaders knew that they could not afford to lose any of them to a fistfight over a few racial slurs and disrespect. The volunteers were also discouraged from violent rallying or demonstrating. Their trainers reminded them continuously of how important each of them were individually to the Mississippi Project, and how severely it would affect the progress of the group as a whole if one of them was arrested. The following portion of a letter represents the dedication of the volunteers to compromise themselves before the movement.

In the morning, we heard Jim Lawson of Nashville, who gave us the word on non-violence as a way of life. Lawson speaks of a moral confrontation with one’s enemies, catching the other guy's eye, speaking to him with love, if possible, and so on... “Violence always brings more harm to people who use it”... I feel very strongly that he does not represent the movement... My feelings and I think these are common, is that non-violence is a perverted way of life, but a necessary tactic and technique. The only reason that I will not hit back is because then I will be in the hospital two weeks
instead of one, and will be useless to the movement during that extra week.

(Martinez 34-5)

The behavior of the volunteers was as crucial to the success of the project as their involvement was. They were taught not only to avoid demonstrations and to above all remain nonviolent; they also had to fit in with some of the societal norms in order to get a less negative response from the white communities. Ms. Koenig recalls with great pain that despite the age of the black men with whom she spoke, they would look at the ground when talking to her and speak with timid and respectful voices. When the volunteers were to walk down the street, they would always have to travel in groups of common skin tone to prevent agitating the white locals. If a white woman were to walk down the street with a black man, his life would be in danger, and the locals would harass her incessantly. These rules did not just hold true for white volunteers and black citizens. Two volunteers of different races could not walk together in town regardless of how they were brought up in the north.

However important that was at first, it was amplified after the mysterious death of three Mississippi Project volunteers. Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney were from the first group of volunteers who went to Mississippi. On the opening day of the project, they disappeared. Their station wagon was found two days later, burned-out, thirteen miles northeast of the Mt. Zion Philadelphia church they had visited. Schwerner was an incredibly politically active Jewish man, Goodman was white as well, and Chaney was black. Their friendship and collaboration was inspirational to many others who heard their story, and cause the spotlight to turn on Mississippi. Rev. Martin Luther King said, with regard to the three missing civil rights workers, that they
“probably have given their lives for your freedom and my freedom” (Tucker 47). The publicity that followed this tragedy was soured by the realization that these men were white, and that their affluent families were looking for them. The rivers were dredged later to find the remains of countless unidentifiable bodies. Historians can compare this to the publicity about the shootings at Kent State University versus Jackson State University. University of Oregon journalism professor Dan Miller believes that the key difference is that Goodman and Schwerner were white, as were the Kent State Students, while the murdered students at Jackson State were African American (Miller 2005). The students involved had to be politically motivated. They had to be able to afford spending a summer away from home. They had to be able to afford the trip to Miami, then Mississippi. Considering these things, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee targeted white students from Ivy League schools, and other students of affluent descent. As it turned out, there were more Jewish people than any other faction. Some attribute this to the history of the Jewish people, and their understanding of oppression because of enduring it for so long. The average age was twenty-three years old. Some were skeptical about how they would be received by the black people, as a group of motivated white students. Nevertheless, their fears were quelled by the occasional bag of potatoes or pie on the doorsteps of the Freedom House, left by a shy and appreciate Mississippi resident.

Some of the black volunteers faced racism, and the white students were subject to ridicule. However, their brothers and sisters who were from Holly Springs inspired them. These brave youths had everything to lose, and risked it anyway because their political freedom was that valuable, and ultimately their basic human rights as a whole.
This led most of the visiting volunteers to leave with different forms of withdrawal. Ms. Koenig said that she has tried to fill the hole in her that needs to serve, but nothing has seemed to compare to her experience in Holly Springs. There was a consciousness pricked by Freedom Summer that most of the volunteers were sheltered from at their affluent schools prior to their involvement in Mississippi. “Once you went to Freedom Summer, you had to live your life a certain way” (Ruth Koenig 2005). Koenig didn’t go to Mississippi to change the world because she knew she couldn’t, not as one person and certainly not in one month. But she knew there was something she could accomplish: “For me, I wanted to understand and if I did good then that would be nice too” (Koenig 2005).

**Role of TV on better race relations**

TV, which was a hot commodity in the ‘60s, was a key player in bettering the race relations in the States. Primarily, it was a very trusted medium for the news as well as popular music shows. “the news media has the most powerful effects on the people” (Sellard 6). The music programs, directed at the youth, followed in the footsteps of the Ed Sullivan Show, made famous by numerous groups and made infamous by the appearance of the popular group, the Beatles. The something-for-everyone philosophy led to a widespread audience which made television especially influential in the midst of the tumultuous 1960s. This was notably a “time of generation disequilibria” (Frohnmayer 1/10/05). Though there was an unusually large gap between the worlds of the youth and their parents, TV managed to satisfy all audiences. University of Oregon President Dave Frohnmayer said in an interview at the Clark Honors College on the UO campus, that
while it provided a vessel through which student protestors could “mobilize the media” (Frohmayer 1/10/05), it also “helped race relations and self expression” (Frohmayer 1/10/05) in many ways. It showed black and white students protesting together, or even just being friends on a sit-com. Having a vision like this popup on the TV screen, in the South in particular, was a very big deal. In part, it was so huge because people wouldn’t have done that there for fear of being reprimanded. This is one of the most quickly progressing forms of media, seeing as how nearly all channels have white and black people together on them. Shows for younger generations, on MTV for example, have young people of all races and religions dancing together at the beach on a spring break special, or dating on The Real World.

Film

Film, as a reflection of an era, does a thorough job of showing subtleties in culture that may otherwise go overlooked. For example, at first glance, a viewer may watch Animal House, a hilarious movie about debauchery and revenge in the Greek community on a college campus, and think that it is little more than a movie for teenagers looking for poor role models. However, when taken in context, the viewer may realize that fraternities on the UO campus in the 1960’s were filled with class and race barriers. The neighboring community as represented by the University, and in part by the Greek system, is segregated in ideology and history, as well as ethnicity. Film does what many other forms of media can not: It can build on powerful imagery, subtle suggestion, speech patterns and inflection, as well as gestures.
In one particular scene in Animal House, a popular band comprised of all African American musicians, Otis Day and the Knights, plays at the Dexter Lake Club, a few minutes outside of Eugene, Oregon. The main characters, all young white fraternity boys escorting white dates are about to enter the club and discover something they did not expect to encounter.

“It feels so good to be back here at the Dexter Lake Club. We’re gonna play tune for you now called Shamalama-Ding-Dong. So hit it” says Otis Day to the all black audience. The music is playing as the boys get out of their car with their dates and walk them inside. The music stops abruptly and everyone turns to stare at the newcomers.

“We are gonna die” says Otter, the social ring leader of the frat boys.

Actor Thomas Hulce’s innocent freshman character whispers from the back of the group, “Boone, we’re the only White people in here” (Animal House). The students hurry to take a seat in a booth in the back where they will be less conspicuous. “You sure it’s…”

“Don’t worry about a thing, man” replies Boone. Boone, the older and more experienced Delta walks to the bar and, after ordering some drinks, turns around, leans back against the bar, and shouts toward the stage.

“Otis! My man” he says, and receives little more than an inquisitive look in return from the performer. A little concerned, and clearly confused himself, Boone brushes it off and tries to make friends at the bar. When he looks at the woman on his right with a smile, she turns away. Next he looks to the man on his left who, without even looking back at Boone, pulls out a switchblade from his sleeve and opens it. What once was blurry becomes unavoidably clear for Boone. They are black and he is white.
Fear and separation of the races

I suppose the first separation of whites and blacks was geographic. During the slave trade the whites were on the upper decks of the ships and the blacks were below. This trend of whites above and blacks below remained for hundreds of years. After the Civil War, some black Americans dealt with indentured servitude, and others just had to try to build their own legacies and play catch up with what riches were left after the whites had collected. For brevity’s sake, let us fast-forward to the segregation written into law and forced upon blacks in the southern states under the Jim Crow laws. Major league baseball was segregated, leaving out players like Jackie Robinson for years. Musicians like Louie Armstrong, a renowned jazz trumpet-player, had to use the “colored only” facilities at their own concerts!

From there, the vast majority of government jobs were held by whites. The media was mostly white, leaving a society governed by whites with a white perspective on the history of the struggle of minorities in the USA. We can thank Howard Zinn in part for making a valiant effort at dispelling the milky complexion of US history, with his “People’s History.” I have further thanks for the EEOC as well as anyone involved in carrying out Affirmative Action, more recently.

This one-sided perspective is a major problem for several reasons. It is such not only because it is harmful and nauseatingly disrespectful to the African Americans, but because it is unfair to the Caucasians. Many white citizens with little to no idea about what the intentions of black student groups are, or even basic things like knowing that the stereotypes associated with being black are false, were left in the fear that people always
discuss when discussing race. They were afraid of the unknown, and they separated and segregated.

On the University of Oregon campus in the 1960s, this fear was evident. The UO is an extremely white campus, with African American students adding up to around 500 out of the more than 20 thousand student campus. These numbers were even more shameful forty years ago, and pushed the black students into tight-knit, well organized groups. Vice president of Student Affairs in the ‘60s, Gerry Bogen felt this fear first hand. As he put it, the “Negroes on campus” were a source of constant stress among the administration. He mentioned several times in an interview that the “Negro problem” on campus was escalating, and at times very difficult to control. “They got together, and we didn’t know what they were going to do. I was scared about what would happen if they congregated. ” (Bogen 2/22/05). He mentioned later that he realizes now what they meant to do, and the fear has left over the years. It should not have taken years. It would have taken a conversation, a common effort to understand each other without a conscious separation of goals.

**Implications of Blackness versus Whiteness (discussion of sociological theory):**

In sociology or ethnic studies courses across America, professors lecture on an important concept to the understanding of creating racial boundaries and stereotypes. In my ethnic studies course, the discussion began when a girl brought up an incident that happened earlier that week. She recalled when talking to a new friend, she was asked “what she was.” She did not have an immediate answer for her white male friend. She paused and answered, “I am a writer.”
The class laughed, but this is a very real problem for many minorities in America. If they do not know for sure what their particular ethnicity is, people are sometimes not sure how to treat them, inadvertently. She looked at her friend and replied, “What are you?” He just said that he was white. Again, we face this unfortunate dichotomy. The white man is a blank slate, without ethnicity and without sex. An Indian woman is judged, unintentionally, as a woman, an Indian, a Hindu, a foreigner or immigrant, not to mention other labels. Therefore the concept of Blackness describes the degrees of difference a person is from white and male. Whiteness, inversely, is a demonized blank page imposed on Caucasians. I have the misfortune of sharing both stigmas, as do many multiracial Americans, stuck as both the demon and the victim. These stereotypes and labels pull apart society through the division of its people. Their intentions are, in fact, to allow for the creation and continuation of a social hierarchy in which the roles are determined by long-standing pre-conceived notions of socially-Darwinist worth.

**Counter argument**

Someone disagreeing with my version of this history would probably be fairly enraged after fifteen or so pages of it. They might want to scream at me: There wasn’t any racism in the ‘60s and there aren’t any racial problems now! If you still believe that racism was dead when the Civil War ended, think again and reread the former seven sections, and maybe try to have a conversation with any minority you know. Odds are, if you really disagree with me, you don’t take any time to get to know minorities, so bribe one and throw your pointy cap back in the closet next to the shotgun and Charlton Heston autographed ammunition.
As far as today is concerned, there are many things in motion that are affecting the racial climate greatly. In browsing local Eugene periodicals, it is hard to find an issue without an article about new diversity reforms in business, or a celebration of Cinco de Mayo under the Jefferson St. Bridge. “Eleven agencies pledged to continue promoting diversity throughout Lane County” (Maben 1). Among them, the UO was listed first as an institution devoted to the nurturing of diverse ideas, lifestyles, and individuals. “Race, gender, and ethnicity are often the center of controversy on campus” (Bolsinger 1). A speaker at a UO sponsored forum on race and gender in higher education this winter, Yolanda Moses, the special assistant to the chancellor for excellence and diversity at the UC, Riverside, said critically that “There are changing models of institutions. Current models are a thousand years old, and we are in the 21st century” (Bolsinger 1).

Conclusion

Learning from a former Clark Honors College student, Ival McMains, I am now starting to wonder why everyone is so afraid of a turbulent change. “Change can be loud and violent, and it was” (McMains 1/19/05). Did that make it happen quicker? Did that make allow for more frequent protest and more open exchange or ideas? I would say both are true, and this is what we lack in our youth today. There is plenty of fire, but it is directed toward survival within the current system rather than tearing it down and reforming it. This complacency is in part a result of the stronger connection between the baby-boomers and their kids, in that there is less need for rebellion. Also, things are getting much better than they were in the 1960s. However, the main reason I believe the political climate among young people is so bland, and why I fear these racial issues will
be prolonged far past they need to be, is that many students just don’t realize what is going on around them and that they could make a difference if they tried.