
Race: a deluding illusion

I ain't one to talk, so you ain't heard this from me.

I was coming from Humanities 18 class the other day. I met this student with a frightening scowl on her face. She stopped when I asked, "What the problem be Sista girl"? She said, "Do I look like your Sista and I sho ain't no girl. I turned around with a frown and said, "this ain't no circus and I don't need a clown." She said, "talking trash don't bring me no cash. So ain't no need in your hangin' 'round." Just to make a hit with that chick, I said, "let me holla at chu home girl right quick." She stopped in her tracks, turned, and looked at me real strange, said, "I need 900 bucks and some change so, buddy you're crawling way past your speed." I copped a plea, we both agreed. Money like that ain't no chicken feed.

The landlord rang her front doorbell
she let it ring for a long, long spell
she looked through the window
peeked through the blind
asked him to tell her what was on his mind.
He said, "money honey, if you don't wanna go live in that tree!"
She said, "But I got three babies and going to school at night
You trying to evict me, that just ain't right
I'm trying to feed my young ones the best way I can
All I can do now is hold out my hand
Mr. rent man, I dun paid enough rent for this pad to be mine
but you just want to cheat me 'cuz I ain't yo kind
Damn, can't you see the place is falling down
No, you can't dig it 'cuz you ain't never around!
Damn I'm so poor, I don't know what in the hell I'm gonna do anymore
not from this day to the next
'cuz this racial divide thing is so complex.

I sat down on the floor right next to my classroom door. I had forgotten what it was like to be really poor. She then began to question my sense of social enlightenment, by asking, why would her 'race' create such a burden on her social status and agency?

Yes. Why do you think race affects people's social status and agency? To answer that question, let us start with how race was created.

The concept "race," as we tend to use it currently, evolved with the founding and formation of America of the United States and was supported legally along with two other terms, socially constructed, "white" and "slave." The words "race," "white," and "slave" were all used by Immigrating Europeans in the 1500s, and they brought these words with them to America of the United States. However, the words did not mean the same thing they mean in today's society.

Initially “race” prior to the 1500s, was used to designate groups with geographical sameness, and kinship connections. Today the use of the term “race” serves to identify groups of people by physical traits (phenotype), appearance, or socially constructed characteristics. During the 17th century, the European Enlightenment philosophers’ constructed ideas using materialistic interpretations, judgment, and a system of explanations that is presented as science but lacked the rigor essential to the scientific method, as opposed to past methods that were faith-based religious beliefs of creation and its purpose. Philosophers and naturalists were compartmentalizing, categorizing, and shaping public belief in accordance with a new movement, Eugenics, and argued that there were natural laws that governed the world and human beings. “The term eugenics was first coined by Francis Galton in the late 1800’s (Norrgard 2008). Galton (1822-1911) was an English intellectual whose body of work spanned many fields, including statistics, psychology, meteorology, and genetics. Incidentally, he was also a half-cousin of Charles Darwin. Galton’s first academic foray into eugenics analyzed the characteristics, such as superior intelligence, of England’s upper classes and concluded they were hereditary; therefore, desirable traits could be passed down through generations (Norrgard 2008). Galton advocated a selective breeding program for humans in his book Hereditary Genius (1869): “Consequently, as it is easy, to obtain by careful selection a permanent breed of dogs or horses gifted with peculiar powers of running, or of doing anything else, so it would be quite practicable to produce a highly gifted race of men by judicious marriages during several consecutive generations.”

I was walkin' into town wearing my white Thom McAns
A white girl in a short skirt said, “stick’em up, Brotha man
Gimme all your stuff before I drop my hands
I said, “why you want to hold me up, Sista girl?
She said, Do I look like your Sista and I sho ain’t no girl.
If you don’t give me your wallet, gold chains them diamonds, pearls, and white Thom McAns
I’ll call the police and I’m sure they will understand.
I heard her shout
As she cut out
You ain't lost nothin'
What you cryin' about
Then she took my watch and I passed out

The word “white,” substitution for European, evolved into a new meaning. Post 1600s, it appears that the Europeans, lacking a noticeable amount of melanin and contrasting themselves against the East Indians through their colonial pursuits began referring to themselves as being “white people.” Even then, there was not a large body of people who considered themselves “white” as we know the term today. “White” was exclusively used to describe elite English women, because the deficiency of melanin in their skin coloration, signaling that they were persons of a high social class who did not go outside to labor. However, the term white did not refer to elite English men because the idea that men did not leave their homes to work could signal that they were lazy, sick, or unproductive. Initially, the racial identity of “white” referred only to Anglo-Saxon people and has changed due to time and geography. As the concept of being white evolved, the number of people considered white would grow as people wanted to push back against the increasing numbers of people melanin endowed. Activist Paul Kivel says, “Whiteness

is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white.”

European colonists’ use of the word “white” to refer to people who looked like themselves, grew to become entangled with the word “race” and “slave” in the America of the United States’ colonies in the mid-1660s. These elites created “races” of “savage” Indians, “subhuman” Africans, and “white” men. The social inventions succeeded in uniting the white colonists, dispossessing and marginalizing native people, and permanently enslaving most African-descended people for generations. Tragically, America of the United States’ culture, from the very beginning, developed around the ideas of race and racism.

I woke up in the arms of a big cop
Police station, next stop
Judge swung his fist down
Bump bump
\$20 fine cause you're drunk
Put up the dough
And you can go
All I had was a buffalo

Our lexicographical bibles’ definition of race is far from reflecting and misses the complexity of the impact the word “race” has on lived experiences. That is why it is important to acknowledge “race” as a social fabrication, created to classify people on an arbitrary basis using skin color and other physical features (phenotypical differences). Although the term “race” has no biogenetic basis for support, the concept is treated with importance and bears consequences. Societies use race to establish and justify systems of power, privilege, disenfranchisement, and oppression. The use of race as a social construct is designed to divide people into classes ranked as superior and inferior. Although the term “race”, in this sense, has no biogenetic basis -- we are all one race, the human race-- racial identity, however, is very real. And, in a racialized society like America of the United States, we are all hot iron branded with a racial identity whether it is painful or not.

But, like I said, I ain’t one to talk, so you ain’t heard this from me.

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