

Don't Forget the Violence in Racist Violations

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Although W.E.B. DuBois predicted that the single biggest problem of the 20th century would be the color line it is clear that the single most significant issue of the 21st century is that of identity. No matter whether it is cultural, racial, sexual, gendered, or class particularity identities are called into question on a cyclical basis. The “Racist Violations” essay here recognizes the sheer force of impact that race-based micro and macro-aggressions have on racial identities.

Racist violations happen in subtle and not so subtle ways. As a young inquisitive college student, for example, I realized that I needed to supplement my classroom curricula by reading countless books with more relevance to my culture, and me since I wasn't getting that in the classroom. So I read works by scholars like Cheik Anta Diop, Amos Wilson, bell hooks, Jawanza Kunjufu, Stuart Hall, Audre Lorde, Haki Madhubuti, Cornel West, Marcel Griaule, Francis Cress Welsing, Cornel West, George James, Chancellor Williams, Angela Davis, Maulana Karenga, Patricia Hill Collins, and Molefi Asante. I had a varied diet, and I have to admit that what I learned quite frankly shocked me. I recall being introduced to a range of seemingly radical discourses related to racial discrimination. I attended a Black Man Think Tank that was announced with themes such as “Hope for the World” and “Black Men: Endangered Species.” Then I began to realize that what I was reading was true.

The prison industrial complex or what Michelle Alexander calls “The New Jim Crow” is not a myth. As a vehicle for continued racial subjugation it uses the machinery of racism to advance its aims much like the perpetrators of “racist violations.”

Even today in the so-called post-racial period in which we supposedly live in this first quarter of the 21st century; and in the age of America’s first Black president, racial profiling of Black males (a much more violent form of racist violations) is extremely real. We have learned, as we did with the cases of 18 year-old Black males Jordan Davis and Trayvon Martin in 2012, as well as the fatal shooting cases involving Ezell Ford and Michael Brown in August 2014, that the victims who were identified as suspects were unarmed, yet dangerous. Racism is alive and remains vibrant and volatile. It seems every month we are hearing about some incident in which a usually young Black male has either been verbally assaulted, physically accosted, or gunned down by some racially xenophobic White male (often the police) because in that moment the person felt threatened by dark skin. To be clear it is not the dark skin they are really afraid of. It is what the dark skin has come to mean as a preverbal signifier of criminality, anti-intellectualism, and a whole host of other stereotypes.

Imagine having a lifelong social experience so explicitly anxiety producing, horrid and violent that you have no term or phrase in your language to describe it. That is essentially the feeling that young Black males have when citizens of this country systematically reject them again and again. It is almost as if you hear there is a horrific hunting game and then you not only discover that it’s true but that you’re the primary target. What do you do with that information? How do you

adjust your life to stay on guard? How do you grapple with the fact that you didn't do anything to deserve this? The authors of the essay "Racist Violations and Racializing Apologia in a Post-Racism Era" not only explore the epistemic and very real social violence in what they call "racist violations" but also examine its place in what some believe is a post-racist period. They also go further to unravel the double violence of the racist act and attendant public racial apologies. The harm is not that the apology takes place, but that the denial entrenched in the apology exacerbates the violence. We have seen this with everyone from Senator Harry Reid and shock jock Don Imus to comedian/actor Michael Richards and Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling. In this essay, the array of 24 racist violations examined here is plenty to unravel and the authors do so with adroit skill.

Perhaps the most critical question is what are the cues we can take from this essay to help us continue to move progressively well into the future? This investigation raises critical questions that force us to grapple with where apologia falls short. Although I am not sure the essay really deconstructs the nature and intent of public racial apologia. Of course public relations experts pride themselves on being able to execute apologies in a way that feels genuine and that achieves certain face-saving strategic outcomes. Whether public audiences buy it or not is a totally different matter altogether. Perhaps the intent is never to get people to buy it or to imagine the regard as authentic or genuine, but rather to redirect attention away from the matter by putting in its place a reasonably direct public apology. In that way, citizens can walk away with the recognition that the violator at least tried to make amends. The danger in accepting this approach is that it does not always

address the violence inherent in the racist act. That violence needs to be named and the perpetrator needs to take responsibility for it in order for it to be genuine. In other words, the word “offense” frequently used in the essay does not capture the injury present in racism. The strength of this essay however is in providing a conceptual label for what we know happens frequently even as we speak affirmatively about a society we imagine being colorblind. The hidden contours of meaning inherent in racist violation indeed reveal the psychic and institutional investitures in race and racism. If we are ever to move beyond the social construction of race we will have to figure out how to dismantle this machinery. That means “popping the hood” and really being honest in our diagnoses.