"Nobody gives a Shit What Color You Are": Post-Racial Liberalism and Its Discontents
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To all the Dereks in the world,

In my English Composition class we were assigned a reading entitled, The Transformation of Silence into Language and Actions by Audre Lorde. We were asked to publicly post a response on our class online forum and a kid named Derek, wrote something that inspired the next several pages you are about to read. He wrote:

"Another thing that came to my mind that actually got me really angry was the fact that a lot of black people always have the need to make sure the reader or just people in general know their black. I take my example from the second reading again were numerous amount of times she lets the reader know she is a black, lesbian women. Nobody really gives a shit what color you are, how tall you are, your relationship status or any of that. If you’re trying to inform a reader about a topic I feel you shouldn’t throw any of that extra nonsense out there. Not to be racist because I am far from it, I feel that if a white person was to address and African American with the term “Black Person” like I just did there would be a problem. But if a black person writes, “The white man” or “the white country”or things similar to that it goes unmentioned."

Derek wrote a lot of things in this response that caused me to pause, gasp and question, but what I found most striking was his notion that “nobody gives a shit what color you are”. I wish I could agree with Dereks sentiments and confidently argue the same. I mean, nobody should give a shit what color you are. I profoundly wish the color of my (or anyone’s) skin was something trivial and arbitrary, but the truth of the matter is that it’s not. Unfortunately, the truth is, people give a shit what color you are.

Like Audre Lorde, “I stand here” as a woman of color. So, as you might imagine, after reading his response, I pissed off. I wanted to throw a glass of water in his face, to shake or startle him, to wake him (and anyone who thought like him) up, but instead I did nothing. I let his words ring in my head like a silent alarm. I hoped that soon they’d slip away into oblivion and that I’d forever forget the stench of his ignorance.

But, that didn’t happen, who could have known ignorance could be so inspiring? It has a way of riling up someone like me and propelling them to seek answers to questions people are afraid of asking. You see, with the presidential race in full swing, learning about Standard American English and it’s racial implications in my English class. Walking around my college campus and noticing that the majority of my professors are white, while the majority of people cleaning the toilets are of color. Knowing that our prisons are filled with Blacks and Hispanics . Witnessing the blatant segregation in neighborhoods and school systems. Recognizing that nearly every time I see a homeless person in the city they’re of color. Being awake to the reality, that the majority of people still tend to hang out, date and marry people of their same race. That silent alarm, began to sound like a full blown siren going off in my head. I couldn’t let it rest. Racial stratification is everywhere! The notion that nobody gives a shit what color you are is not only false, but ludicrous to think.

Derek does not stand alone on his view. This ideology is actually quite popular, scholars call it post-racial liberalism . “Post racial liberalism is the belief that race no longer matters. It argues that the inequality between whites and people of color today, are no longer cause by racism or race-based discrimination, but rather due to other variables such as economic or ingrained cultural habits.” (Wise)

Socrates, once said, “ The unexamined life is not worth living”. To me this means, without using our God-given ability to reason, test and question our perceptions, without making space to learn and seek truth, we’re living a worthless existence.

The purpose of this essay is to seek truth, to shine a light on the areas and institutions in America, that clearly practice race-based discrimination towards people of color and to illuminate the tendency for racial bias towards white’s. Perhaps after reading what follows, this gripping information will catapult you to reexamine your belief that “no one gives a shit what color you are.”

Mass Incarceration

"It ain’t a secret don’t conceal the fact, the penitentiary’s packed and it’s filled with Blacks” ~ Tupac
Have you ever heard of a caste system? Perhaps, you’ve heard of the “untouchables” in India. The untouchables are called the untouchables because no one from an upper class wants touch them or associate themselves with them. The untouchables can’t get a good education, or get good jobs, or vote, they are basically second-class citizens, similar to the way African Americans were during slavery or the Jim Crow days. Well, what if I told you a racial caste system similar to that of the Jim Crow days, still exists in our country today? Well, it does... in the form of our criminal justice system. I’ve been reading this widely acclaimed book called the New Jim Crow, by Michelle Alexander. In it she argues:

In the era of colorblindness (post-racial liberalism), it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, or social contempt. So we don't. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color as “criminals” and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you’re labeled a felon. The old forms of discrimination - employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of education opportunities, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service - are suddenly legal... We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.

I know what you may be thinking. Criminals are criminals right? Murderers or rapist shouldn’t get the right to vote or participate in society. Well, what if the majority of these men of color weren’t actually “criminals”. What if they never actually hurt anyone? Tupac is dead, but he said it best when he said "Instead of a war on poverty, they got a war on drugs so the police can bother me."

“In less than thirty years, the U.S. prison population exploded from around 300,000 inmates to more than 2 million with drug convictions accounting for the majority of the increase (Alexander). Think about that for a second. Thirty years ago was when the Jim Crow laws were being dismantled. People of color were just beginning to exercise their rights to vote and attend better schools. What scholars like Alexandra have discovered is that, the racial caste in America hasn’t changed- the Jim Crow laws aren’t totally dead, they’ve merely transformed. Today, instead of overtly treating minorities as second-class citizens they are now putting them in jails and labeling them as criminals. Since, the civil rights movement, the “United States has been putting 7 times more people in jail than any other Western country” on the planet -and the people they are putting in jail are of color. (Alexander)

Did you know that studies have shown that white people use drugs just as much if not more than people of color and that white youth, are more likely to engage in drug related crimes than people of color?(Alexander) Yet, cops aren’t hanging out in predominantly white neighborhoods and stopping and frisking white folks. The police explicitly target kids of color in poorer neighborhoods.

People of color are admitted to prison twenty to fifty times more than whites, due to drug charges and in most inner cities “80 percent of black men have criminal records and thus subject to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives” (alexander) Yet, there was an article posted by the Huffington Post just last year, that revealed that black and asian teens are the lowest users of alcohol and drugs.(Zhao)

This “war on drugs” isn’t even the worst of it. Have you heard about the School to Prison Pipeline? Well, the School to Prison Pipeline is a national trend where children (of color) are being pushed out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems because of an overreliance on punitive school discipline policies.” (Vagins, Humphery)

For example, in 2009 an 11 year old girl was handcuffed and taken to jail for doodling on her desk with a washable marker. (NYCLU)

Many have linked the growth of the pipeline to zero-tolerance policies that removed educators’ discretion over how to properly respond to student misbehavior. The unintended effects of severe school discipline, often for minor infractions, include further alienation from the school setting, decreased graduation rates, and increased interaction with the criminal justice system.

Take Edward Ward, a youth organizer at Blocks Together in Chicago, who will be testifying at tomorrow’s hearing. He has said that because of his school’s zero-tolerance policies, he saw kids being suspended for just cursing, talking on cellphones, and talking loud in the school hallways. He was afraid to simply speak in his school’s hallways for fear of being kicked out. Disruptive behavior warrants a response, but suspension, which takes kids away from learning
time and out of the classrooms, is not the answer. Ward now works to end these policies, which only perpetuate the criminalization of youth.

Data shows the burden of this trend falls disproportionately on students of color and students with disabilities, who are punished more harshly and more frequently for the same infractions other kids engage in. According to national data from the Department of Education, African American students are 3 1/2 times more likely than their white peers to be suspended— and while they represented just 18 percent of the students in the sample, they accounted for 39 percent of expulsions. Of the total students arrested or referred to law enforcement nationally, 70 percent were Latino or African American. A groundbreaking study in Texas also found racial disparities in disciplinary decision.

Now let me ask you, do you still think “Nobody gives a shit what color you are”?

If so, let’s continue....

**Why Are Brown People So Poor?**

*We live in poorest neighborhoods, have the lowest paying jobs, and attend the lowest ranking schools in the country.*

Well, below lives a collection of reason why I think brown people are poorer than whites. Some are facts, that display the inequality in employment, housing and education and some are personal stories that reveal truths about what we and others expect from us.

There was a study done in 2004 by MIT and the University of Chicago that discovered, when applying for jobs with equivalent backgrounds, people with names that sound white, like Brad or Emily are 50 percent more likely to get called backed for an interview, then people with names that sound black, like Jamal or Lakisha.

Did you know that white people make up 68 percent of the population, but yet they hold more than 85 percent of the top paying jobs in the country. (Wise)

Did you know Chinese-American professionals, who have equal or greater educational backgrounds, only earn about 56 percent of what white professionals earn. (Wise)

Did you know that Devah Pager, a sociologist at Princeton did a study which revealed that a white male felon is more likely to get hired then a black guy with no criminal record.

Did you know that people of color are the first to get fired during an economic downturn. (Wise)

Did you know that “black male high school graduates are 70 percent more likely to experience involuntary unemployment than whites with similar characteristics.” (Wise)

Did you know that “blacks and Hispanics face higher rejection rates and less favorable terms in securing mortgages than do whites with similar credit characteristics” (Ross & Yanger 1999) (This means, it’s harder for people of color to buy homes, than it is for whites who have the same credit history.)

In 2008, in The Sociology of Discrimination, Devah Pager and Hana Shepherd reported:

Between 2000 and 2002 the Department of Housing and Urban Development conducted an extensive series of audits measuring housing discrimination against blacks, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans, including nearly 5500 paired tests in nearly 30 metropolitan areas .....The study results reveal bias across multiple dimensions, with blacks experiencing consistent adverse treatment in roughly one in five housing searches and Hispanics experiencing consistent adverse treatment in roughly one out of four housing searches (both rental and sales). Measured discrimination took the form of less information offered about units, fewer opportunities to view units, and, in the case of home buyers, less assistance with financing and steering into less wealthy communities and neighborhoods with a higher proportion of minority residents.

Did you know that “a 2005 New Jersey Citizens Action gave a report which revealed that when purchasing cars, minority customers were paying about $339 more than whites with similar credit histories. In another research done in Chicago, car dealers were charging people of color $446- $1132 more than they were charging whites.” (Pager-Shephard)

Did you know that a study in 2006, found that even “high-income blacks and latino borrowers were more likely than low-income whites to wind up with a high-cost loan.” (wise, 98)
Did you know that “it is often in the lower-income schools of color in which the least experienced teachers are placed. In California, schools where more than half the teachers lack credentials in the fields they teach have, on average, 98 percent students of color.” (wise, 103)

Did you know that children of color have more than a 50 percent chance of winding up with math or science teacher who’s not qualified to teach the subject. It’s not just a poor thing he states, because even “blacks with high income are less likely to attend high- quality schools and more likely to live in poorer neighborhoods.” (wise, 102)

I grew up in Arizona. When I was young, I went to school with other poor brown people. By the time I was in the third grade, my parent moved us up to Scottsdale, a predominantly white middle and upper class suburb because they had a better educational system and because my older brothers were getting into too much trouble.

At the time, in my Phoenix elementary school, the cool kids were fearless, violent and often in gangs. They listened to Tupac or Biggy Small and wore baggy jeans.

The standards in Scottsdale were totally different. Being cool in Scottsdale, meant being smart, getting good grades and being hyper-involved in after school clubs and sports. These kids listened bands like Blink 187, Sublime and wore Dr. Martins and Abercrombie and Fitch.

For high school, we moved back to the Phoenix Union High School District. Although I took all honors classes, the course load felt elementary in comparison to the courses I took at my all white junior high school. I noticed, not only did my fellow brown students care less and expect less of themselves, but so did the teachers.

If you still think “nobody gives a shit what color you”, how can I kindly say this.. I can’t.. you’re an idiot. But, I can give you a couple reason’s why you might think what you think.

**Propaganda and The Media**

“There’s not a liberal America and a conservative America; there’s the United States of America. There’s not a black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America” ~Barack Obama

Have you ever read 1984 by George Orwell? Well, in this books there’s totalitarian government that uses many techniques to control the minds (and bodies) of it’s citizens. In everyone’s home, lives an enormous ‘telescreen’ (aka TV) that’s continuously spewing out propaganda, created to make the failures and lies of the government look like honest and triumphant successes. This ‘Party’ does everything in it’s power to flood citizens minds with crap, in order to destroy people’s ability to think independently. George Orwell wrote 1984 in 1949 in hopes of warning Westerners of what maybe to come. Well, it’s 2012 and if you ask me, his prediction is not far off from where we are today.

President Obama’s post-racial statements, may have inspired millions..the entire world even, but however moving they may have been, they are simply untrue. As my white girlfriend said, “The truth is, there is a white America and a black America and a Latino America and a Asian America and there is a United States of America” The election itself was proof of that, with the majority of whites voting for their white contender and the majority of people of color voting for President Obama.

President Obama is widely known as a president of vision. If you ask me, his vision may be playing a vital role, in paving the way for us to continue to have the audacity to hope to someday live in a post-racial society, but please don’t be fooled, because that day is not today. The reality is that our country is intensely racially divided and we still have a loads of work to do.

More on propaganda and the media;

The University of Illinois found that the more news one watches the more likely one is to negatively stereotype blacks when it comes to aggressiveness and impoverishment... In fact, one fourth of all stereotypical beliefs about blacks can solely be explained by levels of news viewing (wise,80)

It’s no doubt media exposure can help explain why 95% of whites say they picture a black person when asked to envision a typical drug user, even though that data indicates that blacks are only about 13 or 14 percent of users, while whites are over 70% of all drug users (wise,81)
During Hurricane Katrina, everyone knows about the stark contrast between what the media reported when seeing a white person salvaging food and when witnessing a black person doing the same. The black person was a looting, while the white person was simply finding food.

**A Call for Color-consciousness (wise)**

"Consciousness is the potential for all creation. The more consciousness you have, the more potential you have to create." ~Spiritual leader and thinker Deepak Chopra

So, what does it mean to be color-conscious? It's simple, it means to be awake and aware that race (still) matters. That an Asian American, Hispanic, White or Black person may have a different life experience simply because of their race and that that experience is important.

You see, people like Derek refuse to admit that people of color may have a different, often more difficult life experience than him. Scholars call this white denial, but, I'd go as far as to say it's not only whites who are in denial, the majority of people are in denial that racism is still a major problem in our society today. We are in denial because we do not want race to matter anymore. So we don't really think about it or talk about it and we hope the by denying it's existence, it will magically disappear, but it won't... it's still here.

The color-conscious person recognizes this and isn't afraid to talk about it.

**Final Words**

Dearest Derek(s),

When a woman like Audre Lorde, starts a sentence with "I stand here as a Black Lesbian Poet". She expects you, the reader, to be awake and aware of the harsh realities that exist for people of color (and gay's) today. She expects you to know that in America, it has always been more difficult for a person of color to stand... To rise...but we do, despite the crippling forces of discrimination.

There was a time in class when you said you hate homeless people... followed by, "I could go anywhere in the world and get a job" Well, Derek, the truth is you can go anywhere in the world and get a job. Even if you were a felon, you could go anywhere in the world and get a job. P.S. It's called white privilege.

When you go to a restaurant you don't have to worry about a waitress giving you bad service, because she assumes you don't tip well. When you go buy your first car, you won't have to worry about prices being marked up. When you get ready to buy a house or rent an apartment, you can expect that the realtors to show you the best spaces on the market. You don't have to worry about cops harassing you. You may hate to swallow this, but you have it easier than people of color simply because you're white.
Works Cited