



The Monstrous Elegance of White Supremacy

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“Meanwhile, racism, elegant, lovely, monstrous, carries on.” So concludes *The Atlantic* essayist Ta-Nehisi Coates in his incisive analysis of overt racism by the rancher Cliven Bundy and the owner of the Los Angeles Clippers basketball team, Donald Sterling.¹

The deeper problem concerns what the heralded Canadian Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan describes as cultural bias. Lonergan asks: “How, indeed, is the mind to become conscious of its own bias when that bias springs from a communal flight from understanding and is supported by the whole texture of civilization?”

Drawing upon Lonergan’s work, the Roman Catholic moral theologian Bryan Massingale addresses the American “flight from understanding.” Given that American society remains steeped in white racial bias, explains Massingale, there is only so much that white Americans “can ‘see.’”

Massingale recommends that “since one cannot struggle against what one is unaware of, moral suasion is of little use in combating racial injustice. An alternate strategy of fostering liberating awareness or ‘consciousness raising,’ through moments of interruption needs to be seriously explored and developed.”²

Coates attempts to raise consciousness by interrupting the cultural bias that enables white Americans to point the finger at overt racists as we ignore our own participation in creating racial inequity.

The problem is deeper. Not only are white Americans unable to see our own racial bias, but we also tend to live by the myth that we are racially innocent. The assumption of white racial innocence is a way white Americans inoculate ourselves from racial moral responsibility.

The philosopher Barbara Applebaum unpacks the problem of how whites presume racial innocence in her study *Being White, Being Good: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy*. She contends that complicity ought to be the starting point for ethics.³

Complicity, argues Applebaum, is a necessary step (although not sufficient) in beginning to challenge systemic racial oppression. Her point is not only that systemic racism is often perpetuated by well-intended white people but also that being morally good may actually frustrate the recognition of moral responsibility.

Laurie Cassidy, Margaret Pfeil and I titled our book *The Scandal of White Complicity in US Hyper-Incarceration* for this very reason. Extending Applebaum’s point theologically, all people are good by the theological fact of being made in the image of God. Every person is a gift of God’s creation. Inherent in that gift is moral responsibility.

It is for this theological and practical reason that I contend that white people who may be morally upright may miss how “elegant, lovely, monstrous racism” addresses us.

Coates contends with the conundrum of bias by employing a strategy that many people of color have utilized throughout American history; not unlike the king’s jester who speaks truth to power, he mocks white supremacy in a way that exposes the myth of white American innocence.

Far more than *benefiting from* racism, as the term “privilege” connotes, *good* white Americans shape a society that disproportionately burdens people of color in every dimension of life, including health, education, wealth, income, criminal justice, and jobs.

As James Baldwin once explained, white people “have been married to the lie of white supremacy too long; the effect on their personalities, their lives, their grasp of reality, has been as devastating as the lava which so memorably immobilized the citizens of Pompeii.” Baldwin continued: “They are unable to conceive that their version of reality, which they want me to accept, is an insult to my history and a parody of theirs and an intolerable violation of myself.”⁴

Coates describes a brand of systemic racism more sophisticated than that demonstrated by overt racists. He notices how “elegant racism is invisible, supple, and enduring. It disguises itself in the national vocabulary, avoids epithets and didacticism.



In April 2014, Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling was banned from the NBA for life and fined \$2.5 million by the league after private recordings of him making racist comments were made public.

On March 27, 2014, legal dispute between the United States Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and cattle rancher Cliven Bundy in southeastern Nevada over unpaid grazing fees that developed into an armed confrontation between protesters and law enforcement. After making remarks discussing whether black people would be better off as slaves than under government subsidies, Bundy was widely condemned in the media.

Grace is the singular marker of elegant racism.”

The “grace” of this racism is how it employs lobbyists dressed in the finest suits; lives in lovely neighborhoods or suburbs with manicured lawns; and includes the most active citizens who vote for the judges, legislators, district attorneys, and policies that maintain white innocence as they criminalize blacks and blackness.⁵

Systemic racism endures when white Americans create separate gated housing districts with predominantly white schools whether public or private. The attractive goods of school and neighborhood choice often hide, very subtly, the ways white Americans withdraw funding and resources from cities and communities of color for schools, housing, health care, transportation, and jobs.

The elegant form of racism does not require that a white Realtor tell a black person that they cannot buy a specific property nor does it require that white people consciously seek out a white Realtor to help them find a home in a predominantly white neighborhood.

The discriminatory operations of the law, economy, and real estate render such explicit, overtly racist personal interactions unnecessary. The law places the onus on proving intentional racist intent to exclude a person from renting or buying a property, a legal measure that is extremely difficult if not impossible to demonstrate.

People need not state that “location, location, location” means “white location, white location, white location.” This supple evasion ignores the linkage between homeownership and relative valuing of whiteness over blackness when whites own a home earlier in life and gain more home equity over a lifetime than do people of color. Sophisticated racism ignores how African-American and Latino borrowers are more likely to receive sub-prime loans than white borrowers, even when studies are controlled for legitimate risk factors.⁶ Predatory payday lenders, without any hint of racism, frequently locate their shops in the most economically vulnerable communities of color.⁷

Both conservatives and liberals underestimate the enduring achievements of white supremacy, explains Coates. Until good white people take shared moral responsibility for the world we create, systemic racism endures. Yet whites can take moral responsibility by praying for God’s grace and the humility to collaborate daily with other white people to unlearn our bias as we open ourselves to the wisdom of our brothers and sisters of color.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ta-Nehisi Coates, “This Town Needs a Better Class of Racist,” *The Atlantic* (May 1, 2014) available online at www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/05/this-town-needs-a-better-class-of-racist/361443
- 2 Bryan N. Massingale, “James Cone and Recent Catholic Episcopal Teaching on Racism,” *Theological Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (December 2000): p. 729.
- 3 See “White Complicity as a Way Toward Racial Solidarity,” *JustSouth Quarterly* (Winter 2013), pp. 6-7.
- 4 James Baldwin, “The Price May Be Too High,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, Randall Kenan, ed., Pantheon Books, 2010, p. 106.
- 5 Alex Mikulich, Laurie Cassidy, and Margaret Pfeil, *The Scandal of White Complicity in US Hyper-Incarceration: A Nonviolent Spirituality of White Resistance*. (Palgrave, 2013). Chapters 1 and 2 develop the historical patterns of the relationship between white supremacy and criminalization of blackness, and chapters 3 and 4 explore the cultural roots of the criminalization of blackness.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 7 In Texas, 75 percent of payday stores are located in communities where median income is under \$50,000 per year. See www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/report/2013/08/20/72591/predatory-payday-lending Interactive maps of Louisiana demonstrate payday stores located in African-American and economically vulnerable communities: www.labudget.org/lbp/paydaylending/