Deconstructing and Reconstructing Racial Identity—Get Involved!

The strange history of the concept of race (generally thought to have originated in the 15th or 16th century and codified into a system of social classification in North America in the 17th and 18th century) took a new turn just recently as an individual classified (by himself and others) as a member of a theretofore excluded and marginalized race ascended to the most powerful position in the world. What are the implications of this turn of events? If racial identity has been largely about essentializing and aligning phenotypic and ancestral characteristics with belonging, position, and power, what does race mean now? What should it mean? Should it have ever have meant anything at all? Can it ever/should it ever become meaningless?

With this as the guiding rationale and these as the questions, nine Andover students gathered to participate in a workshop titled “Deconstructing and Reconstructing Racial Identity” Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the day before a world-reshaping inauguration.

With a collection of readings on the outer limits of the concept of racial identity, the intrepid nine journeyed into the uncharted frontier of what might yet be the significance or lack thereof of the concept and construct of racial identity. What follows are the ruminations, questions, insights, confusions, observations, and wisdom of these adventurers who, by blazing beyond the familiar territory of the dominant discourse on identity, began a dialogue which was great, but which can be greater if you, dear reader, care to get involved.

- Dr. King’s legacy has a lot to do with race, of course, but also about awareness and the importance of realizing the effect of one’s actions. Our discussion today got into choice and personal decisions—how these influence how we see ourselves and how we see others, and whether our internal musings affect (and/or should affect) our interactions with others.

- The roots of racism (among other -isms) might be generated by human habits and instincts to categorize, but it is an issue that can be addressed, and it’s up to our judgment and morals to work toward fixing this.

- The question of race and identity is getting bigger and more complicated as we become hyper-aware of it.… How can we reconcile this reality with the increasingly urgent need to actually do something about race before we get too carried away.… Can we make a conscious, generation-wide effort to get ourselves over the hump and transcend race, etc.?

- Can we/should we move past race? How do we reconcile genuine cultural differences (which I believe are healthy) with superficial phenotypic ones?

- How do we keep our cultural traditions while preventing ourselves from getting obsessed by classification?

- NPR—Day after the election, a man put on a suit, looked into the mirror, and saw the president. Before he never saw success, or aspiration when he looked into the mirror.

- Insistence on choiceless singularity of human identity. We insist on tagging others with attributes so that we can categorize them without going through the trouble of getting to know them.

- **What does Racism do?**

  Diminishes us all

  Makes the world more flammable

  Causes us to neglect/deny reasoning and choice
Momentously impoverishes the power/reach of social/political reasoning

Causes us to see the worst in others

Belief in race spurs inequity, and in trying to deal with inequity, we further reinforce the concept of race. When College Board publishes the results of their testing based on ethnicity, there are clear strengths and weaknesses in each category. How should an African-American feel when he sees that the large majority of “his type” consistently scores below so-called “Caucasians” and “Asians”? And more importantly, how should we feel when we know that most Hispanics that take the SAT score lower than Caucasians? They have poisoned the well, and in doing so continue draw the same racist and disgusting sludge. These kinds of reports build the racism and stereotyping we see today.

**How did Racism come to be?**

Racism is irrational. Humans naturally categorize our environments—friend from foe, poison from food, etc.—but society builds the categories in which we put environmental stimuli. The idea of an uneducated black male was built as a tool of oppression, and because of its persistence, the stereotypes actually forced their way into the “African-American” ethnicity. If we are consistently told that we are a stupid and lesser people, chances are we will live up to these expectations.

A race-obsessed society makes decisions for us.

People form cohesive groups based on culture, heritage, likes, and dislikes. These groups are then characterized by, among other things, phenotypes.

Groups are formed by “sharing of struggle.”

The natural process in categorizing our environment proceeds as follows:

1. Selection of characteristics through which we can categorize
2. Creating groups and sorting people into them based on the selected characteristics
3. Attribution of personality traits to others based on their newly categorized groups
4. Acting and treating those differently based on the groups you’ve created

**What it takes to eliminate Racism:**

Legislation, litigation, demonstration, the vote, and the consumer dollar

Accepting the pride in culture and community that others hold. Treat other cultures carefully because they are of great value to others.
We need to create visible and vocal support.

**Alternatives to Racism:**

An Unreal Claim—we are all the same

Harmony: plurality of identities (cannot be resisted), but more importantly recognition of plural identities

Fulfill our dreams and wishes

Reach beyond race, region, gender, and religion

We do not need to eliminate race—we should take pride in our culture and heritage. Rather, we need to eliminate misinformed attribution of character based on race.

• Amartya Sen addresses this issue of “powerful categorization” by explaining that the categorization only happens in denial of “plural identities.” In other words, the categorization of race, gender, region, and religion may just be out of laziness of society to deal with these “plural identities.”

• Jesse Washington’s article discusses how the role of race is “imposed on us,” forcing us to live with the differential treatment that comes with the role of race in the United States. In a country where this is very true, where race frequently equals specific living conditions and treatment, it’s hard to move onto the “post-racial” America given our history. Self-identity is important and probably necessary to live healthily (or is it?)—but not necessary through specific means (such as race).

• There is great possibility for change, pressing need to overcome the boundaries, etc., that restrain us in the present

• We cannot consider ourselves all the same (all equal?) because the beauty of humanity lies in its diversity…

• Superficial characteristics mean something?

• Even if we imagine a better future, how will we get there? Already, we see conflicting points of view—do we each want our own identities or do we compromise, acknowledging that conflicting identities create intrigue. Dr. Seuss seems to suggest that the solution isn’t too complicated: once we are shaken up and out of the rut of categorization, we can forget (or, at least, forgive) and move beyond it all.

• Obama: a race transcender or not? He identifies himself as African-American, but he tries to speak of white mother and African father+Hawaiian upbringing, etc.—political maneuver? I haven’t heard him use the term “biracial,” maybe because he doesn’t want to
scare people with images of interracial marriage, but it seems a little strange-contradictory-limited to me…

- It all seems dramatized to me—maybe it’s that I grew up in San Francisco, maybe it’s that my mother is from India and my father, from America, but I JUST DON’T UNDERSTAND WHY WE CAN’T GET ALONG. SHEESH. Dialogue—what is “it”—toeing the line of political correctness such that I’m not sure we ever say anything meaningful.

- Most important: not to ACT on our assumptions. I think it’s inevitable, understandable for us to judge and classify based on physical appearance, but nothing needs to be so black-and-white (ha, ha) that we immediately cross the street when we see a hooded youth. (He is not necessarily hiding a gun in the pocket of his jeans!)

- Can we just do nothing? I don’t mean ignore, but I mean actively dissolve the concept of race, looking only at more tangible, pressing, solvable problems (again, poverty, educational gaps, etc.)

- History….Will we look back at racism and sigh? Probably, but that doesn’t mean that we have a solution readily available to us, in the present, faced with questions about race

- Race is a choiceless singularity, creates a boundary that inhibits our social and political reasoning. It stops us from seeing the best in each other.

- My first immediate reaction is that race is pointless, to an extent. I think that a sense of community and legacy, a sense of pride from where you were born and where your ancestors are from is healthy (to an extent.) But what should this be based on? Certainly not the color of your skin, which is what it seems to be the majority of the time. Geographical location? Possibly. What about affirmative action, checking the little box of what race you are? Should it be where you are geographically from, the color of your skin?

- To eliminate racism: acknowledge that it is a problem: it is still a problem. My relatives in Alabama talk about how the south it still essentially segregated, all the white kids go to boarding and private schools, all the blacks go to public schools.

- How do we determine race? Is it simply skin color and facial construct? Is it one drop of blood from an African enough to make us, too, African? Why is it that, (it seems to me) the majority of people who are half American/half another “race” with more definitive characteristics, tend in general to identify themselves more with that race? How much of your identity is your own, from you, and how much is simply what you have been told about yourself and internalized.
• We live in a society where we are hyper-focused on race, and especially now we are trying to determine whether we should be working towards racial equality or racial abolishment.

• If the concept of race is externally imposed, it’s going to be difficult to break the race cycle because where does our own choice play a role in our identities?

• Where did it start? Who was the first to impose? Just as Obama doesn’t come into the world self-identifying as African-American, I don’t come into the world identifying as white. Race is a two-way street, and we are all confined by the societal expectations imposed upon us by history. In that way, it’s not just our identities that our imposed, but also our relationships.

• The lesson transmitted is important because these things really do not impact the morals and values each individual has. The morals and values held are really what define an individual.

• I do not think that people should be judged by anything at all—not what has been mentioned above, not by their personalities or morals or beliefs. I think that each person should be approached with a clean slate mindset… each person is different and grouping into either one group or another (ex: either black or white… the “check only one box” mindset) is difficult.

• Racism resembles a gun. While mean racists use it to coerce or kill, kind racists help keep it loaded by supporting the underlying concepts…. (From a workshop reading)

• History and background counteract the progress that has been made by education to abolish racism. Older generations enforce/teach those that follow. Who really has had experiences that generate prejudices? How much of what you believe and what your viewpoints are actually generated by yourself and your experiences? It is impossible to know because nobody lives in an isolated environment that allows you to develop entirely your own opinions without others filtering what you think. If there are teachers… nobody’s opinion will be pure because nobody is given the opportunity to discover completely on one’s own.

—Carlos Hoyt

*Associate Dean of Students*