

**MOVEMENT OR MOMENT? THE AFTERMATHS OF FERGUSON, STATEN ISLAND, AND RACISM** (Opinion, *Works in Progress*, Olympia, WA, January 5, 2015, 1 & 10)

As we all know, there have been (and still are) intense responses to the verdicts regarding the deaths of two Black men, Michael Brown of Ferguson, MO and Eric Garner of Staten Island, NY. More specifically, the fact that the police officers responsible, who are White males, were never indicted. Based on that reality, protests continue to take place across the country. These demonstrations range from persons holding picket signs, chanting the phrase "Hands Up, Don't Shoot!", conducting shouting matches with police and other people who approach them, destroying numerous properties, wearing "I Can't Breathe" T-shirts to staging "die-ins" on city streets and pavements. In addition, journalists, scholars and experts continue to participate in never-ending debates on television regarding these events. Furthermore, my days remain filled with hearing and engaging thought-provoking dialogue on the status of racism in our society. Therefore, I must ask the question, which I coin from the Rev. Al Sharpton: will the aftermaths of Ferguson and Staten Island become a movement or a moment in our quest toward racial justice in our country? I will argue that a movement is needed, not a moment, in order to educate, equip, and empower ourselves to rid our land from the dangers of racism.

To further understand what racism is and its effects, Dr. Frances Cress Welsing, a Black psychiatrist and a critical race theorist, defines it best below:

Racism is the local and global power system and dynamic, structured and maintained by persons who classify themselves as white, whether consciously or subconsciously determined; which consists of patterns of perception, logic, symbol formation, thought, speech, action, and emotional response, as conducted simultaneously in all areas of people activity (economics, education, entertainment, labor, law, politics, religion, sex and war); for the ultimate purpose of white genetic survival and to prevent white genetic annihilation on planet Earth – a planet upon which the vast and overwhelming majority of people are classified as nonwhite (black, brown, red and yellow) by white skinned people, and all of the nonwhite people are genetically dominant (in terms of skin coloration) compared to the genetic recessive white skin people. (Welsing, 1991)

In other words, Welsing asserts that racism has made a permanent residence in our world. It permeates our every sense of being in every sect of life. It controls the way we behave, the way we live, the way we think, and the way we work. Furthermore, racism was birthed out of the global white minority's anxiety to control everything, especially at the expense of people of color. So are Welsing's points significant? Yes, because our world is dominated by this type of racist thinking, which has influenced the whitewashing of ancient African histories, slavery, the implementation of Jim Crow laws, and even a deadly version of what we know as religion. Hence, regardless of where we stand on the issue of racism, particularly concerning the police murders of Brown and Garner, it is a lot bigger than we realize and it is not something that will go away if we ignore it.

The prolonged illness of racism reminds us of how large it really is. Robert Bernasconi, the Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Philosophy at Pennsylvania State University, discovers, as a European White male academic, the following observation:

Whiteness is not an exclusively North American phenomenon, or a North American invention, but it is in the United States that it has received one of the most vicious modern forms: a society of unprecedented wealth whose benefits are unevenly distributed largely along racial lines. (Bernasconi, "Waking Up White in Memphis", 2005, p. 18)

In addition, he contends that "...racism today has less to do with individual prejudices than it has to do with an institutionalized system of oppression" (Bernasconi, "Waking Up White in Memphis", 2005, p. 22). In other words, it is in the United States that racism exists. It is here that racism divides, not unite. It is also here that racism is no longer blatant and honest, but it is invisible and deceptive in our everyday lives. It could communicate as a friendly joke. It could rest in the minds of ambitious opportunists who decide to form educational corporations, with intentions to enslave students of color with thousands of debt with fast track promises of academic achievement. Further, it could move a food industry to sell cheap and unhealthy food to a particular community. Thus, what we have witnessed and continue to witness from these examples and the recent police killings is a rampant disease that needs to be wiped out.

Now that I have painted a picture of what racism is, how it lives, and how deadly it is, there are some who do not believe that racism was a motivating factor in the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. For example, former New York City Mayor Rudolph Guiliani argues the following in an interview on *Meet the Press*:

Ninety-three percent of blacks are killed by other blacks. I would like to see the attention paid to that that you are paying to this. What about the poor black child that was killed by another black child? What aren't you protesting that?...Why don't you cut it down so that so many white police officers don't have to be in black areas? (Guiliani, 2014)

I admit that Guiliani's argument raises an important issue, which is the responsibility of the collective to eradicate this conduct within our environments. It is sad that such treatment still happens. We will kill each other over someone of the opposite sex (or same sex), a cell phone, a pair of sneakers, a loss over a video game, or even from a facial expression. All of these actions remind us that we have work to do to heal our communities instead of just crying out racism. While Guiliani and proponents of his reasoning are right to argue that Black people are killing one another, it does not necessarily address the systematic implications of racism. Welsing notes that "these very disturbing individual- and group-destructive pathological forms of behavior are the *direct* and *indirect* by-products of a behavioral power system fundamentally structured for white genetic survival, locally and globally" (Welsing, 1991, p. ii). For this reason, we must expose the root of all the world's problems than just complaining about the symptoms.

Even all African-Americans do not agree that racism played a role in the treatments of Brown and Garner. Rev. Jesse Lee Peterson, founder and president of two organizations: BOND (Brotherhood of a New Destiny) and BOND Action claims:

Eric Garner's death was tragic, but it wasn't murder. It had nothing to do with race. Garner caused his own death by resisting arrest while suffering with pre-existing medical issues. Garner was asthmatic; he had heart disease, and he was obese. Garner was out on bail and had 31 prior arrests. If Garner didn't struggle with police, the altercation

wouldn't have escalated—and he'd still be alive today. (Peterson, 2014)

On the one hand, I agree with Peterson that Eric Garner did not have a clean bill of health or a spotless criminal record. Even Garner's widow concurs. Yet, on the other hand, I still insist that he did not have to die the way he did, receive the hostile treatment that the police gave him, or be ignored by tax-supported EMS workers. He was unarmed and did not resist arrest. You will see from the video that went viral that he was tired of being confronted and bullied without justifiable reasons. Tamir Rice of Cleveland, OH, a 12-year old Black boy, did not struggle with police, yet was killed before having discovered he had a BB gun. John Crawford III, a 22-year old Black man, did not resist the police, yet was fatally shot at a Wal-Mart in Dayton, OH while not pointing a BB gun at them. Moreover, Levar Jones, an unarmed 35-year old Black man, was shot in Columbia, SC after Lance Cpl. Sean Groubert, a White male police officer, asked for his driver's license. It is from these examples I conclude that Peterson's final statement falls short of a fact.

Now, after having brought out the concern of racism, what else should we do about it while protesting this disease? What Bernasconi wants us to do in our own context is to "take responsibility of what is taught, who does the teaching, and who is taught" (Bernasconi, "Waking Up White in Memphis", 2005, p. 24). What is he saying? Well, he argues that we need to examine closely what we are reading and what we are discussing. What kind of history are we given? Whose views are prominently shared and are eventually adopted? How influential is the media in transmitting such information and who are the consumers? The answer is that it is necessary for us to become attentive that biases, narrow-mindedness, and particular ideological stances can delay our quest for equality. Our antennas must also become raised and aware of whether certain beliefs and practices benefit a greater number of people or just a few. Hence, I agree with Bernasconi's advice that "we must keep the issue of racism, especially institutional racism, constantly at the forefront of attention in every context in which we operate: whether it be college admissions, recruiting majors, or curriculum development" (Bernasconi, "Waking Up White in Memphis", 2005, pp. 24-25).

Based on the arguments represented and examined here, will the aftermaths of Ferguson and Staten Island become a movement or a moment toward racial justice in our land? Will we, as a people, pursue this opportunity to mobilize, strategize, and wage war against a system that continues to reward inequality, injustice, and oppression at the cost of equality, justice, and liberation? The choice is ours. However, for this moment to become a movement, we should not return to "business as usual" and ignore the elephant in the room when the emotions disappear. This country has failed repeatedly to not only address this problem of racism, but has masked and buried it in the name of diversity, post-racial ideology and the American Dream. I invite you to join me with an open mind, a reflective soul, and an eager heart. Let us become comfortable to feel uncomfortable. Let us labor together, regardless of our social status and ethnic background, to eliminate our world from the disease of racism for good. In the same way, let us prepare and encourage the next generations to fight, hold decision makers accountable, and love one another.

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