The Critical Condition of Race

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"I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about any way the social and political equality of the white and black races—I am not, nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office; nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will ever forbid the two races to live together on terms of social and political equality. And in as much as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race."

Abraham Lincoln, 1858

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An examination of U.S. history reveals that the "color line" of race is a socially constructed category created to differentiate racial groups and to show the superiority or dominance of one race—in particular, Whites—over others (Banks, 1995). Every major societal institution offered legitimacy to this racial hierarchy—ministers preached that God had condemned people of color to be servants; scientists measured the heads, brains, faces, and genitalia of people of color to prove that whites were genetically superior; white teachers, teaching only white students, taught that people of color were less evolved cognitively, psychologically, and socially; the media, from vaudeville to television, portrayed people of color as idiots and/or dangerous thugs; and the criminal justice system endorsed a double standard of justice, including its tacit approval of mob violence against people of color (Ehrlich, 1973). While Asa Hilliard asserts that "racism is real; race is not," racism requires a rationalizing ideology and it is "race," that is used to justify the dominance of one group over the other. If that is not true, then why do people of color in American still lag behind whites in terms of income, wealth, occupational and heath status, educational attainment, and other relevant social indicators (Silva-Bonilla, 2001)? Though we may be entrenched in denial or in debate about what *race* means in America, we cannot deny that racism is "normal, not aberrant in American society," (Delgado, 1995, p.xiv) any more than we can disregard the critical condition of race and the historical context of racial oppression.

Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom (1999) would argue that racial progress in the U.S. is the largely suppressed story of race and race relations over the past half- century. Further, " the *serious* (emphasis added) inequality that remains is less a function of white racism than of the racial gap in levels of educational attainment, the structure of the black family, and the rise in

black crime," (p. 534). In other words, the foundation of progress for many people of color is no longer fragile; progress is real and solid. Derrick Bell (1987/1992), however, would argue that "racism is permanent," and the use of racism as a means of destroying economic unity between whites and people of color was a major motivation for the perpetuation of a race as an ideology. Martinez (2005) contends that "whiteness would not exist without blackness to defend its superiority, nor does whiteness exist without envy of blackness," (p. 97 as cited in Adams et. al. 2000). Thus, Bell argued that what we designate as "racial progress," is not a solution to the problem, but rather a regeneration of the problem in a particularly perverse form. Yet, he would ardently defend the need to fight against racism, deeming it both necessary and meaningful. Though Bell"s position may seem paradoxical and in fact, counterproductive—*fighting for something that will never change*—perhaps while acknowledging the inextricable presence of racism in U.S. society, he understood greater the breadth of racism that had the potential to stretch beyond America"s shores and to creep deep into the fabric of other cultures.

Marble (1992), defines racism as "a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians, and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color,"(p.5). His definition is significant because it shifts the discussion of race and racism from a Black—White discourse to one that includes multiple faces, voices and experiences. Takaki (1993) supports this notion by suggesting that "we are a multiracial society and that race can no longer be defined in the binary terms of white and black," (p.68 as cited in Adams, et.al, 2000). However, it should be understood that when a race is placed in the category of „other," it runs the risk of being treated as if invisible and in fact, inferior.

Consider the Latinos whose "skin color affects," their self-perceptions and their "psychological well-being," (Telzer & Vazquez, 2009, p. 358). In this culture, lighter complexion was equal to more advantages as there was a connection between "dark skin and poverty," (Rodriguez, 1982. p. 116 as cited in Adams et. al., 2000). Consider Muslims who became targets of hate crimes because of "Islamphobia", and as a result have been marginalized even to the process of "racialization" which has failed to make them "white," or "non white," (Love, 2009, p. 422). Consider the Jews whose identity took the form of a yellow star and whose existence was almost annihilated because of a borrowed American ideal of race superiority—Nuremberg Laws (1930s) were adapted from the Jim Crow Laws (1876) and enacted on a national level. Consider the Native Americans who were not viewed as real human beings but rather as a celluloid manifestation of a mystical fantasy or as passive and powerless victims (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002). How is it possible that there isn"t a *race* of people who have not been affected by socially constructed racial categories, be it positively or negatively? One reason is clear—the historical context of race and the fundamental conviction that people of color are inferior is still deeply rooted and too commonplace in America and beyond.

As long as educational and social institutions continue to participate in perpetuation of race superiority by bestowing educational resources on the privileged and rewarding their cultural capital, racism will continue to flourish. Until people of color are valued more than twenty-eight designated days a year, and diversity embodies the heart and soul of promise, of opportunity, of what might be, for a socially just fully democratic society—people of color will continue to be marginalized and invisible. Until we can understand that diversity, democracy, and sovereignty are not simple abstractions or lexical logs, but that they carry whole domains of human experience insofar as the words diversity, democracy, and sovereignty constitute a shared

field of reference as they are built on the backs of human lives, human stories, and personal individual reality, (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002) people of color will continue to be marginalized and invisible. Until we, on a deeper level, go about "unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations," (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p.11) and transform a world "deteriorating under the albatross of racial hegemony," (Barnes, 1990, p. 1865)…the hierarchy of race will remain and our place in America society, in critical condition.

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