DISCUSSING RACE IN RURAL AND OTHER NON-DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

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I.   INTRODUCTION

"It's never too late to give up our prejudices."[1]

"It's up to all of us—Black, white, everyone—no matter how well-meaning we think we might be, to do the honest, uncomfortable work of rooting [racism] out. It starts with self-examination and listening to those whose lives are different from our own."[2]

In America, issues of race are ever-present, yet rarely discussed. The "color blind" movement, prominent between the 1950s through the 1990s, attempted to teach that individuals should be viewed as if they have no race.[3] As a result of this messaging, many people—particularly white people—claim they "don't see color" when they interact with others.[4] The "color blind" movement, however, has backfired and is argued to have caused more harm than good over the long run.[5]

One of the drawbacks of the color blind movement is that it becomes an excuse to not talk about race. As the argument goes, if people "do not see color," then they cannot discriminate, so discussions about race are unnecessary.[6] Perhaps more extreme, some who believe in this perspective find discussions of race to be an element of division, rather than a road to

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[1] HENRY DAVID THOREAU, WALDEN 6 (John Elder ed., Boston Press 1997) (1854).

[2] Michelle Obama (@MichelleObama), TWITTER (May 29, 2020, 7:00 PM), https://twitter.com/michelleobama/ status/1266504767314034688?lang=en [https://perma.cc/FTH8-5GXE].

[3] Adia Harvey Wingfield, *Why Color Blindness is a Counterproductive Ideology*, THE ATLANTIC (Sept. 15, 2015), https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/color-blindness-is-counterproductive/405037/ [https://perma.cc/X8G7-BLV3].

[4] *Id.*

[5] *See* Reva B. Siegel, *Discrimination in the Eyes of the Law: How "Color Blindness" Discourse Disrupts and Rationalizes Social Stratification*, 88 CALIF. L. REV. 77, 87 (2000) ("[C]olor blindness discourse both constrains and legitimates practices that maintain racial stratification.").

[6] *See* Wingfield, *supra* note 3 (noting tha the color blind movement allows people to "avert their eyes" from racist practices).

healing.[7] Ultimately, this perspective can lead to the denial of racial inequalities and discourse that has racism-legitimizing outcomes.[8]

Because issues of race have never gone away, but were simply swept under a rug since the Civil Rights Movement, they could have been predicted to resurface. And resurface they did. The emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the mid-2010s[9] and the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 led to greater support for a variety of social justice issues surrounding the issue of race.[10] Relevant to this Article, the murder of George Floyd has led to a greater willingness to have productive conversations and education on issues involving race and equity.[11] Yet significant resistance still exists. Robin DeAngelo summarized this phenomenon as "white fragility"—or the

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[7] *See* Jacey Fortin, *Critical Race Theory: A Brief History*, N.Y. TIMES, (Nov.8, 2021), https://www.nytimes.com/ article/what-is-critical-race-theory.html [https://perma.cc/UL4J-QR7A]. This concept can be seen most dramatically in the political debate regarding whether critical race theory could be (or should be) taught at various levels of education. Critical race theory (CRT) is, generally speaking, a series of ideas founded in the idea that human beings are not biologically different across races and that legal and socioeconomic differences across racial groups are attributable to institutions maintaining advantages for white people; *see e.g.*, Ron DeSantis (@GovRonDeSantis), TWITTER (June 10, 2021, 9:39 AM), https://twitter.com/GovRonDeSantis/status/1402983754134704129 [https://perma.cc/5WTL-KXR7] (claiming that critical race theory causes people "to hate each other"); *see e.g.*, Exec. Order No. 13,950, 85 Fed. Reg. 60683 (Sept. 22, 2020) (prohibiting training on racial issues within the federal government on the basis that the training was "anti-American").

[8] *See* Phia S. Salter et al., *Racism in the Structure of Everyday Worlds: A Cultural-Psychological Perspective*, 27 CURRENT DIRECTIONS IN PSYCH. SCI. 150, 152 (2018). The problem with restricted focus on individual bias is that it obscures the institutional, systemic, and cultural processes that perpetuate and maintain race-based hierarchies. Taken together, the empirical evidence suggests that measuring racism only as overt individual bias may systematically understate the ongoing significance of racism. A cultural-psychology approach adds to this discussion by considering racism as a set of ideas, practices, and materials embedded in the structure of everyday cultural worlds.

[9] *See* Frank Rudy Cooper, *Cop Fragility and Blue Lives Matter*, 2020 U. ILL. L. REV. 621, 623 (2020) (describing the Black Lives Matter movement as a result of police shootings between the years of 2012 and 2016).

[10] *See, e.g.*, Arian Campo-Flores et al., *On the Anniversary of George Floyd's Killing, Debate About Race Reaches Across American Life*, WALL ST. J. (May 25, 2021), https://www.wsj.com/articles/george-floyd-death-anniversary-11621912455 [https://perma.cc/6G7F-5FQB] (discussing the far reaching effects of the death of George Floyd in American life).

[11] *See, e.g.*, Gregory S. Parks, *"When They See Us" The Great White Awaking to Black Humanity*, 21 U. MD. L.J. RACE, RELIGION, GENDER & CLASS 1, 11-12 (2021) (describing the death of George Floyd as a turning point among white Americans to consider and discuss important topics, including policing).

difficulty of white people to examine their own lives as a product of systematic advantage and a general unwillingness to even discuss the topic.[12]

When these conversations about race take place, they can manifest in a variety of forms. In some places, conversations about race are part of a sponsored program by federal, state, or local governments to encourage understanding, healing, or better community relations.[13] In other instances, these conversations are part of a broader governmental initiative around reform in areas such as policing, social safety net (i.e., welfare) programs, and educational curricula, to name a few.[14] In other instances, these conversations occur within workplaces, schools, and places of worship.[15] These conversations may be structured as book clubs, listening sessions, roundtable discussions, working groups, advisory groups, and any number of other formats.[16] In this Article, we provide examples and suggestions that can be implemented across all of these situations and conversation formats. In our discussion, we focus on discussions about race that occur in rural and other non-diverse communities.

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[12] *See generally* ROBIN DIANGELO, WHITE FRAGILITY: WHY IT IS SO HARD FOR WHITE PEOPLE TO TALK ABOUT RACISM (2018) (discussing resistance to engaging in the topic of social advantages for white people).

[13] Many communities in the United States are currently undergoing truth and reconciliation projects dealing with past injustictices to Black and Indigenous communities. *See, e.g.*, *Truth and Reconciliation*, CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS, https://www2.minneapolismn.gov/government/departments/racial-equity/what-we-do/ongoing-work/truth-reconciliation/ [https://perma.cc/J8BZ-SBSK] (last visited June 4, 2023) (describing a truth and reconciliation project that began in the fall of 2020).

[14] For example, the Straus Institute at Pepperdine University has been working with the Los Angeles Police Department on a two-year project aimed at dialogue involving the local community. *Empowering Our Community Through Mediation*, PEPPERDINE UNIV. CARUSO SCH. OF L., https://law.pepperdine.edu/straus/beyondthedialogue/ community-collaborations.htm [https://perma.cc/TNL3-8GJG] (last visited June 4, 2023).

[15] Resources exist to have discussions about anti-racism in workplaces and other community settings. *See, e.g.*, *Anti-Racism Toolkit*, STAN. UNIV., https://cardinalatwork.stanford.edu/anti-racism-toolkit [https://perma.cc/X2SN-SVYF] (last visited June 4, 2023) (providing tools that workplaces can use to have difficult conversations).

[16] The American Bar Association, for example, published a curriculum on anti-racism for use within local legal communities. *Syllabus: 21-Day Racial Equity Habit-Building Challenge*, A.B.A https://www.americanbar.org/groups/labor_law/membership/equal_opportunity/?login [https://perma.cc/T89A-BP8V] (last visted June 4, 2023). Penguin Books has free book club guides for popular titles in anti-racism. *Discussion Guides for Antiracist Book Clubs*, PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE, https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/articles/discussion-guides-for-antiracist-book-clubs/ [https://perma.cc/9X3V-WVL4] (last visited June 4, 2023).