

Ruth Altamirano

Core Essay 4

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Racism is still a “thing”

When you walk down the street, how do you think people describe you? Maybe they would point out your height, how tall or short you are. Maybe they would talk about your sense of style and if your outfit fits a category society can put you in. How else would people describe you, maybe your skin color? Under what race would you fit? Does that define how you categorize yourself? Race is a system that categorizes people in society based on their skin color, yet is not a natural biological notion. Race has played a complex and significant role in US history as a means of oppression and segregation, specifically the “white” race oppressing the “black” race and later everyone who was not white. However, there are some people who believe racism has ended, saying things like “slavery ended so did racism” The reality is that race and racism is still a toxic prevalent force that plagues the United States. The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander describes how racism has become a system of oppression since slavery and Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates describes the present day effects of racism on the black body. Both books illustrate the ways in which race and racism has never left this country, a country famous for “liberty and justice for all.”

“The more things change, the more they stay the same”-Michelle Alexander

The author of The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, Michelle Alexander is a civil rights attorney who works for the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union). She, like most Americans saw Jim Crow laws as something of the past and even states that when she started to work as the director of the Racial Justice Project for the ACLU she recognized that there was a racial bias in the criminal justice system but that was it. However, she came to realize that not only is racism still prevalent in United States but we have a new racial caste system, mass incarceration. The New Jim Crow argues that “mass incarceration is, metaphorically, the New Jim Crow.”

According to Alexander, The New Jim Crow works like this. Once a black man is labelled a felon, (which became a political phenomenon by the War on Drugs) old forms of discrimination like employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps, and other public health benefits and the exclusion from jury service are “suddenly legal.” Alexander notes the differences between slavery, Jim crow laws and mass incarceration but there is a striking similarity between all of them , she writes “...operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race.” Mass incarceration is Jim Crow revamped, a real and extreme example of racism in the United States today.

This may not be enough convincing evidence of the prevalent force racism has on US society so I'll invite you to think of a time where you've heard a particular race had certain privileges, like getting off with a warning for speeding when stopped by a cop or being allowed to always speak their opinion, even when it's uninvited. I don't think I have to say what race of people are treated this way but, its white people. Here's another example, how come the news

and media is still talking about white privilege and white supremacy and *racism* if that “ended” when slavery was abolished after the civil war? Or how people of color still complain about being mistreated and murdered by police, but “that’s not true” didn’t the United States elect a black president?

“When we think of racism we think of Governor Wallace of Alabama blocking the schoolhouse door; we think of water hoses, lynchings, racial epithets, and "whites only" signs. These images make it easy to forget that many wonderful, goodhearted white people who were generous to others, respectful of their neighbors, and even kind to their black maids, gardeners, or shoe shiners--and wished them well--nevertheless went to the polls and voted for racial segregation... Our understanding of racism is therefore shaped by the most extreme expressions of individual bigotry, not by the way in which it functions naturally, almost invisibly (and sometimes with genuinely benign intent), when it is embedded in the structure of a social system.”

Analyzing this quote, it is easy to see why some people still believe racism is no longer an issue in our society. Michelle Alexander starts this quote by explaining old extreme examples of racism, which people can clearly write off as racism. Lynching and water hoses used to hurt African Americans in the past are clear examples of racism and a history of hurt and pain instilled in the United States. However, all these examples of horrible mistreatment were once legal. The author goes on to explain that “goodhearted white people” were the ones who ultimately voted for that legislation. They voted for Jim Crow laws and allowed slavery to go for years while “respecting their neighbors.” Analyzing further, the people of this country only understand racism as “extreme expressions of individual bigotry” for example the district attorney of Hearne, Texas who misused his power to incarcerate black people, mostly men. It is understandable that people don’t think racism is still alive because for the most part, we don’t see extreme cases of racism like those anymore. Alexander ends this quote by stating that the racism that exists today is “almost invisible” because it comes natural. It is embedded in our

political system, our judicial system, our police forces, our schools, it's so common and written in the laws that people don't see it anymore.

“But race is the child of racism, not the father”-Ta-Nehisi Coates

The #1 New York Times Best Seller and National Book Award winner Between The World And Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates is a book written as a personal letter from the author to his son Samori. Coates, who is a national correspondent for *The Atlantic* explores different ways in which the black body deals with the fear and risks of being black in the United States because racism is still an issue African Americans and POC in the United States face.

Coates explains that the “black body” is always afraid. He explains that this fear for black people is “unoriginal”. It was in the boys of the streets who wore “big puffy coats and full-length fur-collared leathers” who styled themselves this way to protect themselves from the world. He saw it in “their customs of war,” the way they entered a battle, a fight in the streets which confirmed the vulnerability of the black teenage body. He heard the fear in gangster rap and saw it in the girls of his neighborhood, who would “cut you with their eyes” and destroy you with their words. He saw the fear in his parents who would beat him for staying out too late, disobeying commands, or shinning too much light on himself.

While reading the book the reader can note that Coates admits his son's life is different than his. His son was born in a world where there was a black president, a world with smart phones and new ideas in innovative technology. However, the fear is still prevalent in Samori's world, explained by the death of Mike Brown and the unjust trial of his murderer.

These two books are clear examples of the force racism still has. How can anyone say that racism is not real? Do you not remember Philando Castile, a 32 year old black man shot and killed by police in Minnesota on July 2016. How about Samuel Dubois, Freddie Gray, Christian Taylor who was only 19, what about Mike Brown or Eric Garner? How does someone disregard another's life by ignoring this? Racism is still an issue the United States faces.

“But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.”

Analyzing this quote, Coates explains that racism is indeed still real because if it weren't they're would be no “racial profiling, white privilege even white supremacy” Racism is so powerful that it turns people against each other and made the United States the way it is, with the kind of president YALL elected. No one should ever forget the brutal history behind “Black is Beautiful and Black Live Matter.” No one should forget slavery and lynching. The people of this country should always remember that they allowed the black body years of suffering.

So, why do I feel so strongly about this? How does race and racism play an important role in my life? I am not a black woman, and my ancestors did not endure slavery for hundreds of years. I am a Mexican woman who immigrated to the United States. I remember learning about slavery and feeling my heart break at age 10. I remember hearing about Mike Brown and watching the video of Eric Garner pleading for his life. I felt angry and sad that I fled a city so notorious for the murder of female bodies, Juarez and immigrating to a country who does the exact same thing. I have been called a thief by the 45th administration. I have been labelled a trouble maker in school and I realized adults around me thought I would grow up to be a criminal and that shed the veil of invisibility racism seems to have. I remember the pain in my community

when a kid fell on the streets because of violence which the city ignored. The faces their mothers bore were cold and silent, no longer caring to feel angry because this is the world we live in. I remember the noise my mom's black leather belt made against my skin when she would strike me for coming home late. It was not because she was angry, but because she didn't want me to end up like those other kids who's life was taken with one single racist act. I live in constant fear that I will be deported from the only home I've ever known because privileged people don't want to understand me, they would rather brand me a criminal and drug dealer. I live in a world where racism affects my everyday life and I am not blinded by the new rhetoric used by politicians to describe my people. So, the pain of African Americans, and Central Americans and Syrians and Muslims and Mexicans is my pain too, and I will not ignore it or claim it no longer exists because the United States once elected a black president.

“You are growing into consciousness, and my wish for you is that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable.”- Ta-Nehisi Coates.