October 2013

Breaking Barriers: Racism @ Iowa State

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2014/iss1/14

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During the short span of the United States’ history, there is one recurring theme. A theme that may be exposed to circumstantial change, but is never truly eradicated—racism.
Let’s take a stride through the stained history of America together. Imagine flipping through your last history textbook—the cover is hard and thick, a little worn on the edges and the thin plastic casing is engraved with scratches and marks from past owners. The books are worn because of the idealism behind learning history—that those who learn history will not repeat it.

Flip through those smooth polyethylene pages of your textbook. Notice the creased edges of the sheets, indicating years of studied material, documented before your eyes the proof of human’s fault—their Achilles’ heel.

One page describes the explorers of the new world massacring Native Americans with infectious diseases. The next illustrates a blueprint of a slave ship maximizing its human cargo by handcuffing the live merchandise in a neat array. Still another shares the story of the trail of tears marked by bloody footprints tracking in icy snow. Skip ahead further, there is Martin Luther King Jr., and the overly briefed timeline usually concludes on a short segment about affirmative action.

This timeline’s existence in itself is proof of America’s—as well as humans in general—inability to cease the cyclical nature of racism in our history. I suspect that later editions will encompass current cases of racism that we are presently too blind to see. After all, is that not how history works—a ledger of our transgressions written in hindsight?

Racism is not always obvious, and that is part of its danger. It can have many different forms and it is usually less extreme than the examples printed in textbooks. The different levels of racism are so dangerous because they can easily hide in society. Jokes are a very effective disguise. Famous political activist, Angela Davis, said it best: “Racism is a much more clandestine, much more hidden kind of phenomenon, but at the same time it’s perhaps far more terrible than it’s ever been.”

Racism has the ugly ability to hide in people and it comes in so many different forms and degrees that it is difficult to truly see. Technically, racism is defined as “the belief that all members of each race possess characteristics or abilities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races.” That definition sheds light on the intuitive nature of racism. It is not always as explicit as segregating busses, but can live within us and unknowingly affect our judgments as people act on the inherent human characteristic to define oneself as an individual—as superior.

Iowa State has had a rich history in both diversity and racism. Some of our most famed alumni have helped write that history. George Washington Carver, a man born into slavery, became the first black student at Iowa State and one of the most influential scientists of his time. Jack Trice was the first black athlete at Iowa State. Unfortunately, his football career ended too soon when he tragically died from injuries incurred from a game against the University of Minnesota—exemplifying the perils at that time of being a black man in a violent white man’s sport.

Unfortunately, racism is still alive. Although we might not hear about it as often, the existence of multicultural organizations like the Asian Pacific American Awareness Coalition (APAAC) acknowledge its presence. There is little written on racism toward the Asian population in American history books and perhaps this indicates a bigger problem that the larger population has not realized their errors yet.

On campus, there is a Twitter feed called “People of ISU.” The webpage is designed in Iowa State decorum. Jack Trice Stadium is the page’s background. Cy holding a Cannon PowerShot is the cover photo and the profile photo is ironically a photo of a diverse group of students posing with their arms across each other’s shoulders. Candid photos are posted of students around campus. Some are obviously bizarre, such as a student riding in rollerblades in a USA speedo and vest linked to another student wearing a gorilla costume. Others are commonplace. Many of these commonplace photos are images of Asian students, doing nothing unordinary—just eating, on the CyRide or sitting in class.

Unlike some of the other photos on the feed, these photos were not highlighting humor, they were highlighting race. They were presented to the multicultural campus organization, APAAC.

The meeting was packed with 50 individuals giving their full attention to a PowerPoint
presentation with images from the Twitter feed. Anyone wearing a USA speedo and vest rollerblading on campus would be fair game for a laugh, but most agree there would be nothing funny about a photo of three white students sitting in class. It would seem mundane to post such a photo, and it likely would not be followed with a caption alluding to their race.

At first, some found the photos humorous—there were some snickers and side conversations in the background. In regard to the photo displaying three Asian students sitting in class with the caption, “birds of a feather flock together,” one discussion participant asks, “So when white people sit together, what is that called?”

The creators of the People of ISU Twitter page rejected an in-person interview and would not provide their names, but via email correspondence they were able to answer a few of the main questions that APAAC members formulated during the meeting. The creators say, “The purpose of this Twitter feed is to spread campus cheer. We know how tough and stressful college life can be, so we hope that through this page people can laugh a little bit and get their mind in a different place. (Even if it’s just for a moment.) Some of our content is a little edgy, and that’s always been an issue, but we try to tone it down and keep the content somewhat appropriate and non-offensive.”

As the discussion progressed, responses from the participants became deeper. Commenting on the overall message of the Twitter feed, one participant says, “I think maybe that’s just the attitude of the page. It’s that people recognize that they think it’s funny when people post people of minority on the page, so any chance they get, its already been on the page before, so why wouldn’t it be funny now.”

“I would disagree with the statement that they are doing ‘ordinary things,’” says one People of ISU creator. “Most pictures they send us of Asians, they are doing something bizarre [or] funny to our American culture. We don’t racial stereotype at all. In fact, three of the people managing this account are Asian. We just post what’s given to us that we think other people will find humorous.”

A domino effect set off and the discussion began to flourish. “Someone can unintentionally post stuff like this, meaning the best, but still have it be regarded as racist. So you can say, “I didn’t mean anything by this picture,” but if people take it as racism and [are] offended by it, it’s still racism,” says another APAAC member.

APAAC brought up a very good point—intention.

The group then discussed what they would consider to be crossing the line. One member referred to the 2011 YouTube video “Asians in the Library,” where UCLA student, Alexandra Wallace filmed a video blog voicing her opinion on the manners of the “hordes of Asians” on campus. She continued to rant about Asians talking on cell phones at the library during finals week and mocked their language.

“There are definitely different levels [of racism], like the UCLA girl doing the “ching chong” or whatever. She was blatant and obvious, but then most people do it with a certain subtlety where you’re not sure if that was supposed to be funny or [if I should] feel offended,” said APAAC president Lan Pham.

Whether or not a statement has crossed the line is often times questionable from both the speaker and the audience. When statements that can be perceived to have racist or discriminatory intent surpass privacy of intimate conversations and become widespread to the public it is not uncommon for an iron fist to confront the problem head on. In response to the YouTube video “Asians in the Library”. UCLA Chancellor Gene Block posted his own official video for UCLA students calling for “greater civility in discourse on campus.” Even at Iowa State, administrative authority intervened on the controversy over the word “squintey” in the past Iowa State Daily column “Just Sayin.”

Toward the end of October, APAAC has a Hate Wall Event. The event spans two
days and focuses on the recognition of stereotypes and hate, which can be affiliated with those belonging to minority groups. The event earns its name by the physical creation of a wall that exhibits the afflicted stereotypes and hate. When the event reaches its end, members tear down the wall, metaphorically breaking the barrier.

Breaking the barrier is a beautiful image, but wouldn’t it be even better to prevent a wall from forming?

Peng Yu, an international student in Computer Science definitely would be in favor of diminishing racism on campus. When confronted with the images from the people of ISU Twitter feed, Yu responds, “I don’t know the guys in these pictures, but I feel sad for them. It’s sad that someone is making fun of them.”

“I think it really needs to be stopped,” Yu says. “I don’t see anything funny about this. Everybody has some embarrassing moments. I feel that some of the American people don’t actually know about us—the Chinese people. They think we are in some Qin Dynasty, we wear small shoes, and we have long hair in a ponytail, like old-school Chinese people shown in movies—but our lives are actually on the same level as them.”

Out of the large group of 50 APAAC members, only a subset of the club spoke out. Those that did began having greatly varying opinions. “I don’t really see the racism in some of these pictures—not all of them—but some of them,” one member says. “Seems like a lot of the photos are of international Asians. I can tell that it’s an international Asian, just by the way they dress or by the way they speak English, but it seems like most of this is international,” another member says.

Racism is not only skin color versus skin color. At Iowa State, it appears that racism acts upon much more specific divisions, like cultural differences in the way people dress, eat and speak.

Are we so accustomed to living in a society so imperceptibly interwoven with racism that we’ve become blind to it?

“They are just Americans,” Yu says. “Their fathers or mothers are Chinese or Korean or Japanese, but based on their lifestyles, what they eat, how they speak—they are totally American. I think white people distinguish themselves against Asian Americans because of skin color, but international Asians just treat Asian Americans as Americans.”

Iowa State is known to be a university that applauds diversity. It is important that as students—and as Cyclones—we not only accommodate the desire for international students to study here, but truly welcome them and incorporate them into our lives. For those that have had a study abroad experience, imagine what living across the world would be like if you were ostracized for something that you cannot change—like your skin color. The cost of tuition, exuberant living expenses and home-sickness would not feel worthwhile for studying abroad when you’re halted from making new friends or immersing yourself in the culture because the native students won’t include you.

Yu says that it wasn’t difficult for him to open up and try to meet new students during the beginning of his journey at Iowa State, but that’s not always the case. Some of his friends haven’t felt as welcome. “I have some friends who have already gone back to their country,” he says. “They don’t feel like this is the place that they want to stay. They think that they would have more fun studying in China.”

Despite Yu’s affable demeanor, he often finds himself putting more effort into forming friendships with American students than the other way around.

The People of ISU Twitter feed is a small part of the entirety of racism at Iowa State. It appears that, as students, our biggest problem is removing the barriers within ourselves that segregate us from people who look different. The reality is, the more that we try to define ourselves from others, the more defense mechanisms we use and it becomes less and less visible that we are hurting ourselves and those around us. Racism is truly a double-edged sword. It hurts others for reasons unknown to them and that they cannot change and it limits us from gaining diverse perspectives and making new friendships.

In hopes of fixing this problem, Yu advises other Chinese students to pave their own journey at Iowa State. “Show them some international culture or the situation we are having. Show them that we are not living in some backcountry. They feel like we are from another world, like we are not from Earth. There is no information to give them the view of the people of China. That might help.”

We may all have different backgrounds, interests or styles, but in a sense we are all the same—we are all Cyclones. Either barriers can be built to divide and segregate, or barriers can be broken for a more inclusive atmosphere. Ultimately though, the choice is yours.