

Faces at the bottom of the well: the permanence of racism

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The Permanence of Racism by Derrick Bell is made up of nine chapters showing how racism is in America and how strongly it affects black Americans. Each chapter of his book presents a different fictional scenario through which we can see how the issues and problems of racism come to fruition. Bell's book is not only a compelling and interesting read, but it is also fascinating and real because it deals with individuals who have been directly affected by racism over time.

The way that Bell has written this book is very interesting because the chapters themselves can be read separately and out of order and yet it will still be just as effective as if you read the chapters in order. As sad as some of the writings may be in this book I do not believe that his message is one of despair. Rather I believe that for Bell he saw the permanence of racism in America as a challenge that blacks should meet head on.

Bell wrote this book to illustrate his belief that “ racism is a permanent part of the American landscape. The problem is that as soon as I express the view that racism cannot be vanquished by the enactment and vigorous enforcement of strong civil rights laws, most people conclude that I have given up, or surrendered, or worse, sold out. . . . I try to explain that a realistic appraisal of racism's crucial role in society, far from being capitulation, would enable us to recognize the potential for effecting reform in even what appear to be setbacks” (pg. 92). Chapter one of Bell's book is all about “ symbols” that make us think there is more equality than there actually is. One example of these symbols is said by the driver named Jesse B. Semple, “ A holiday for Dr. King is just another instance-like integration-

that black folks work for and white folks grant when they realize- long before we do- that it is mostly a symbol that won't cost them much and will keep us blacks pacified" (pg. 18). Basically, white people give the blacks what they want, as long as it does not cost the white population anything, just to say they can say they gave black Americans something but that something not actually meaning anything has changed in the long-run. Another example is " Still, symbols have been the mainstay of blacks' faith that some day they will truly be free in this land of freedom. Not just holidays, but most of our civil rights statutes and court decisions have been more symbol than enforceable law. We hail and celebrate each of these laws, but none of them is, as Semple put it, fully honored at the bank" (pg. 23).

Chapter two is all about blacks overcoming racism on the mental aspect in order to make actual change because the power that racism holds is not political or economic but rather it is fully mental. " Blacks discovered that they themselves actually possessed the qualities of liberation they had hoped to realize on their new homeland. Feeling this was, they all agreed, an Afrolantic Awakening, a liberation-not of place, but of mind. . . . they understood they need no longer act as victims of centuries of oppression. They could act on their own, as their own people, as they had demonstrated to themselves and other blacks in their preparations to settle to Afrolantica. . . . The spirit of cooperation that had engaged a few hundred thousand blacks spread to others, as they recalled the tenacity for humane life which had enabled generations of blacks to survive all efforts to dehumanize or

obliterate them. Infectious, their renewed tenacity reinforced their sense of possessing themselves” (pg. 45-46).

Chapter three is about the Racial Preference Licensing Act which allows employers to buy a license to discriminate. The argument is that black applicants would at least know what they are up against, and that white employers would have to suffer financially for discriminating. “ Under the new act, all employers, proprietors of public facilities and owners and managers of dwelling places, homes and apartments could, on application to federal government, obtain a license to exclude or separate persons on the basis of race and color” (pg. 48) Basically white Americans had a “ legal” way of being racist towards black Americans without facing the same reproductions as before. Racial licensing went so far as to deny blacks housing, jobs, etc. even if they were more qualified than a white applicant, “ whites tend to treat one another like family, at least when there’s a choice between them and us. So that terms like ‘ merit’ and ‘ best qualified’ are infinitely manipulable if and when whites must explain why they reject blacks to hire ‘ relatives’-even when the only relationship is that of race. So, unless there’s some pressing reason for hiring, renting to, or otherwise dealing with black, many whites will prefer to hire, rent to, sell to, or otherwise deal with white-including one less qualified by objective measures and certainly one who is by any measure better qualified” (pg. 56).

Chapter four deals with the romance between interracial couples and the related issues for both members of the party. Black women were always reminded of how unworthy they were, they were never smart enough,

beautiful enough, supportive, sexy, understanding and resourceful enough to deserve a good black man. The black men that black women prayed for were always taken by white women because a white woman would appear to provide a black man with access to formally restricted areas and symbolize achievement. It was like a way of moving out of the ghetto, of doing better for yourself if you were a black man who was dating a white woman (pg. 80).

Chapter five reminds us that talk, and action are two different things and that when it comes to racism both are necessary. I believe the verse from James 2: 26 best fits this “ For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (pg. 89). To me incorporating it back to race I see it as, you can talk about racism all you want but until you make some sort of action to take against it nothing will really change.

Chapter six focuses on the unwritten rules used whenever racism and racial issues are discussed. The first rule basically states, “ No matter their experience or expertise, blacks’ statements involving race are deemed ‘ special pleading’ and thus not entitled to serious consideration” (pg. 111), blacks are human beings that their suffering is so cruelly ignored to the point that they might as well not exist. A few points from the second rule state “ This phenomenon reflects a widespread assumption that blacks, unlike whites, cannot be objective on racial issues and will favor their own no matter what. ” (pg. 113) This was just another way to keep black people off the juries with cases that involved race. The third rule deals with “ enhanced standing,” even if the speaker has no special expertise or experience in the topic they are criticizing (pg. 114). The fourth rule basically states that when

a black person/ group does anything that the white community sees as outrageous the whites will recruit backs who will refuse/condemn the action stated by the black person or group. Super standing status is given to the blacks who respond and those who do not will suffer political and economic reprisals because they are seen as endorsing said statements (pg. 118). And finally, the fifth rule states “ True awareness requires an understanding of the Rules of Racial Standing. As an individual’s understanding of these rules increases, there will be more and more instances where one can discern their workings. Using this knowledge, one gains the gift of prophecy about racism, its essence, its goals, even its remedies. The price of this knowledge is the frustration that follows recognition that no amount of public prophecy, no matter its accuracy, can either repeal the Rules of Racial Standing or prevent their operation” (pg. 125).

Chapter seven is about the bombing of a black faculty at a prestigious college and imagines the amazing progress that is resulted from it. Victims of the bombing became martyrs to the cause of racial equality, long-dormant government agencies renewed the enforcement of affirmative action, protest marches were organized by civil rights groups, and the massive memorial service held at the Harvard stadium prompted a million college students to walk from their campuses to Harvard. The Association of Harvard Black Faculty and Administrators had been pushing to get more black faculty and administrators into Harvard seeing as 10% of Harvard’s undergraduate students were black. One month after the bombing a proposal was found among the late presidents’ papers, in a shortened version it read “ In

keeping with Dr. Du Bois' vision, I plan to issue a proclamation that, in commemoration of the centennial of his coming to Harvard, will inaugurate the Du Bois Talented Tenth black faculty recruitment and hiring program. The goal of this program is that by the earliest possible time, ten percent of Harvard's faculty and administrators should be black, Hispanic, or native American men and women" (pg. 132).

Chapter eight offers "raining data" as the way to get through to whites who seldom read books that will help them to get the information that they so desperately need. "Our long-held belief in education is the key to the race problem. You know, and I explained the old formula, education leads to enlightenment. Enlightenment opens the way to empathy. Empathy foreshadows reform" (pg. 150). Meaning once whites are given the true understanding of the evils of racial discrimination, then and only then, will they find a way that is easy to give up on racism.

Lastly in chapter nine America is presented with a crucial dilemma in which they consider sacrificing all black America for white gain. The Space Traders had proposed that they would give the United States treasures that they were in most desperate need of if the U. S. gave them all their African American citizens who lived in the United States. Naturally the white Americans saw no loss here, so they were eager to accept, "At least a third of the flood of phone calls and faxes urging quick acceptance of the offer expressed the view that what the nation would give up-its African American citizens- was as worthwhile as what it would receive" (pg. 163). Bell's words remind us that the battle against racial injustice is unforgiving and

unrelenting no matter what the target is. He asserts that racism is a malignant and enduring feature of American life that is ultimately liberating, which makes many black to keep striving for change in their society.

Whether you agree or disagree with Bell's work there is no denying the fact that his work is incredibly compelling in his diagnosis of what ails us racially and how incurable it is.