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Diet of disparagement: the racial experiences of black students in a predominantly white university

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As an unintended consequence of the Civil Rights Movement and the integrationist vocabulary that it engendered, otherwise progressive thinkers have been unable to describe the adverse impact of actions, attitudes and policies that are not necessarily intended as racist, but function that way nonetheless. Because racism has come to be popularly understood as the product of individual irrationality—aberrant behavior that society abhors—supposedly race neutral actions, attitudes and policies that systematically and predictably benefit whites and adversely impact people of color escape effective critique. This has created a problem on college campuses, where many black students continue to feel alienated and mistreated because of their race. This article argues that issues of race and racism remain important considerations in the lives of black students on predominantly white campuses.

I. Preamble

The US Civil Rights Movement brought about fundamental changes in American society—eliminating most forms of open discrimination based on race, and opening up previously segregated institutions to African-Americans and other non-whites. A great deal of that success was due to the ability of movement leaders to articulate their calls for justice in uniquely American terms—terms enshrined in such early American documents as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Thomas Jefferson's First Inaugural Address. Early and often in each of these documents, justice is equated with the transcendence of the rights of the individual over the interests of the state or any controlling group. Government exists, in the vision offered by Thomas Jefferson in 1801, to do no more or less than protect individuals' rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness by providing 'equal and exact justice

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to all men' (Jefferson, 1990[1801], p. 168). Such Civil Rights architects as Martin Luther King, Jr. brilliantly seized upon such language to argue for the protection of blacks as Americans looking to be included in the basic promise of protection of unalienable rights made to all citizens (Howard-Pitney 1990; King 2001 [1963]).

As a logical outgrowth of the Civil Rights call that equal protection of rights be provided to all regardless of race, we have gradually come to the current aspiration for a color-blind society, whereby justice is understood to require that we ignore existing racial categories, even when to do so may perpetuate racial inequities (Blum, 2002; Loury, 2002). Thus, as an unintended consequence of the Civil Rights Movement and the race-neutral vocabulary that it engendered, many otherwise progressive thinkers have embraced a myopic ideology that leaves us ill-equipped to identify (much less mediate against) actions, attitudes and policies that are not necessarily intended as racist, but function that way nonetheless.

Because racism has come to be popularly understood solely as the product of individual irrationality—aberrant behavior that society abhors (Pellar, 1995)—supposedly race-neutral actions, attitudes and policies that systematically and predictably benefit whites and adversely impact people of color have escaped effective critique (McIntosh, 1990; Jenson, 2002). The popular and narrow understanding of racism allows many Americans to retain privileges born of white supremacy, while escaping what has become the stinging criticism of being called racist (Smith, 1995; Ware, 1996; Parker, 1998). This has created a problem on college campuses, where both subtle and overt racism are still aspects of the social and cultural landscape (Feagin *et al.*, 1996), and where many students continue to feel alienated and mistreated because of their race (Sidel, 1994).

The basic problem of an inadequate vocabulary to describe racial harm to minorities is increasingly being addressed by a range of theorists who argue that race is central to the life of the nation's institutions (Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001), that race continues to be an important aspect of black people's experiences in this country (Smith, 1995; Loury, 2002), and that the road to an increasingly just society is not to erase race from public discourse and scholarly analysis, but to develop a sophisticated race-consciousness that accounts for the ways in which race operates today (Delgado, 1995; Moses, 2002; Rothenberg, 2002).

This essay ...

This essay, which is influenced by such arguments for the potential usefulness of critical race theory in the educational arena as those advanced by Ladson-Billings (1998) and Parker (1998), contributes an educational practitioner's perspective to this discussion. In it, I draw upon my nine years of experience as an employee on the campus of Midwestern University (pseudonym), a large predominantly white university with roughly 1200 black students in a student body of over 35,000. Based on my experiences in the formal roles of tutor, mentor, advisor and instructor to black and non-black students, I provide examples of how, and the extent to which, race and racism continue to operate in the lives of black students there. I provide examples of overt racism on

campus, of incidents that were not necessarily intended as racist but functioned that way nonetheless, and of the racially disparaging discourse that permeates campus life. I bring these together to present a portrait of a 'typical' state university—a university that is aptly described as institutionally racist.

Describing the racial disparagement of and racial insensitivity shown toward Midwestern's black students is especially important given the chorus of popular writings which argue that race is no longer significant in African-American life except to the extent that African-Americans participate in and perpetuate a culture that is at best maladaptive to their current circumstances (Ogbu, 1990, 2003) and at worst pathological (Steele, 1990, 1998; Kotkin, 1992; Sowell, 1992, 1994; Hughes, 1993; D'Souza, 1995; Schlesinger, 1996; McWhorter, 2000). The emergent common sense concerning the unimportance of race and racism in US African-Americans' lives stands in contrast to my experiences listening to, working with and observing black students at Midwestern.

This essay has five sections. Following this preamble, the second section, 'Institutional Racism,' provides a conceptual frame for understanding the incidents and circumstances I go on to describe in the following sections. The third section, 'Racism and the Printed Page,' uses excerpts from racist pamphlets that have been distributed on campus, along with editorials and columns from the campus newspaper, to provide examples of how black students are rhetorically attacked as a group and their right to be on campus questioned. The fourth section, 'Individual Experiences with Racism,' relates individual students' stories and provides examples of how subtle racism can lead to black students' alienation from campus life. Their stories attest to the litany of racial microaggressions with which students regularly contend (Pierce, 1974; Solorzano, 1998). In the conclusion, 'Now What? Implications for Interacting with Students,' I call for campus professionals to exercise a sophisticated race-consciousness when dealing with students. This consciousness, which corresponds with Loury's argument for race-egalitarianism (2002) and Moses's call for race-conscious education policy (2002), would eschew color-blindness in policy and practice, and would acknowledge the existence of racism where it occurs, as well as the existence of incidents and circumstances where racial harm was not intended but was effected nonetheless. Such consciousness would require us to be proactive in our efforts to minimize potentially alienating effects of individual acts of racism. Developing and acting from the standpoint of a critical race-consciousness would undermine the institutional racism yet encountered by too many students on college campuses today.

Some notes on the source(s) of my reflections

This essay is written as a practitioner's reflection. It is informed by Critical Race Theory as well as by several years of interaction with students in the macro-setting provided by Midwestern University (pseudonym), which, for analytical purposes, is seen as 'a bounded environment in which particular situations, interactions, and behaviors accrue to it as normal by virtue of history, cultural values, and beliefs'

(Agee, 2002, p. 570). This essay is based in students' stories and my own observations of campus life (recounted in section four), and strengthened by the ample examples of everyday racist speech (recounted in section three). But even without the quoted examples from racist flyers and editorials, the stories and critical reflections offered here remain important. The stories and incidents that students shared with me (and which are consistent with those uncovered by other researchers [Sidel, 1994; Feagin *et al*., 1996; Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001]) create a troubling picture that responsible college educators and administrators should feel compelled to address.

Most of the conversations that inform section three on individual experiences with racism occurred when students came to me as an approachable authority figure on campus. As a young African-American in the employ of the university at different times for the Dean of Students office, the athletic department or the Black Studies Center, students came to me for advice, to ask about avenues of redress for perceived injustices or just for conversation. In some instances, I voice recorded conversations with students (sharing with them beforehand that I might eventually write about their experiences). Such recorded conversations were particularly useful in the construction of this essay. In most cases, however, and in all cases before 2000, I did not have the foresight to voice-record my conversations with students. Rather, when students visited me in whatever office I currently occupied, I usually took notes on a computer or on paper (in case a student's visit was to become the first step in attempts to help achieve redress for racial affronts on campus). Such notes were also useful for the construction of this essay. Most of my general reflections in this essay, however, are not grounded in specific conversations, but rather reflect ongoing observations of campus life, and black student life most specifically.

Finally, the stories and incidents that I relate herein are not likely to be surprising to many students, faculty or administrators of color. At the same time, some whites and others may inaccurately conclude that these stories are placed for 'shock-value' (as one early reader of this piece contended). In either case, the telling is of vital importance because the stories (and the supporting artifacts quoted in the section three) attest to black people's experiences as students on white university campuses. Rather than to shock, these stories are presented to help us to see and acknowledge institutional racism where it exists, and to lay groundwork to undermine that same racism to the extent that it operates in our various home institutions.

II. Institutional racism

The 'racial realism' of critical race theorists, along with the concept of institutional racism, provides a useful conceptual frame for understanding black students' circumstances at Midwestern. *Racial realists* argue that race continues to be an important factor in American life and culture (Bell, 1995). They view racism not as anomalous to American society but as inherent to its operations, both historically and in the present (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). Through their realist stance they call into question the idea that institutional structures are 'logically self-evident, objective, a priori valid,

and internally consistent' (Bell, 1995, p. 303). This stance positions thinkers to address the function and impact of institutions in people's everyday lives, as opposed to simply the abstract conceptualization of what different institutions are supposed to do and how they are intended to work. This realism, which is derived from the Legal Realism of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes and adapted to the emergent theoretical and practical work of critical race thinkers (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998), is ideally suited for studies of race relations at predominantly white universities such as Midwestern University.

The concept of institutional racism, as a companion to racial realism, goes beyond placing a label on egregious acts to also identify subtler, more deeply ingrained attitudes and actions that contribute to black students' alienation from the university. At a site like Midwestern University, it is not only occasional open acts of racism that create a hostile climate, but also unintended acts of ignorance, routine questioning and disparagement of black people's intelligence, and a history of excluding African-Americans from the institution.

A Senior Fellow at the Institute for Community Studies in England states that there are at least four definitions of institutional racism in contemporary use. Two of these are useful for capturing the nuanced aspects of black students' racialized experiences on the Midwestern campus.

> At the first, simplest level, institutional racism means … the imposition of rules and regulations [that] are discriminatory in effect, if not in intention. (Barker, 1996, p. 26)

But institutional racism also stems from:

> [T]he collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their color, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behavior which amounts to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantages minority ethnic people. (Barker, 1996, p. 29)

Another writer, who focuses on social relations in business contexts, offers that 'institutional racism refers to the informal barriers that exist in organizations that prevent minority members from reaching high level positions in the system' (Jeanquart-Barone, 1997, p. 477).

Most discussions that invoke the idea of institutional racism assume a definition rather than offer one, but nonetheless keep to a theme of subtle, often unintended acts that have broad implications and effects for people of color. For instance, a teacher writing in *Phi Delta Kappan*, a professional journal for educators, refers to 'the various unintentional forms of racism that were hiding behind the standard practices of my hard-working, well-meaning colleagues (and that undoubtedly lurked in my own)' (Hanssen, 1997, p. 694). Her idea fits well with a college professor who in an autobiographical article describes the existence and perpetuation of hostile climates for minorities (Neimann, 1995). In both cases, the actions (or inaction) of individuals are part and parcel of an overall climate. Also, in both cases, a negative climate for minorities is so deeply ingrained into the fabric of the given environment as to be aptly described as an institutional feature.

Institutional racism, then, is not automatically constituted and evidenced through the individual racist act, although such acts may provide evidence of institutional racism. Racist acts, even in an organizational setting, can be anomalous to the operations of an organization. In such cases, they would not be institutionally racist. Rather, institutional racism describes the collective effect of acts, policies, unwitting prejudice and the invocation of stereotypes that sustain an atmosphere which is hostile to the full participation and success of racial minorities. It is in this regard that I identify Midwestern University as institutionally racist and present it as an example of the continuing salience of racism to the life circumstances and choices of individual African-American college students.

Finally, it is worth noting that even as I provide examples of the ongoing existence of individual acts that collectively constitute an institutionally racist environment, this is not to 'excuse' academic failure among African-American students. Rather, this exercise is intended to help describe the environment within which students operate, so that they, and those who work with them, can more effectively formulate strategies and policies to promote their eventual success. Just as 'inventing reasons to cry racism' (McWhorter, 2000) is rightly condemned as self-defeating, so too should be the steadfast refusal to acknowledge and account for the ways in which complex issues of race and racism continue to affect students.

III. Racism and the printed page

Racist flyers, mailings, letters to the editor and other expressions of free speech constitute one facet of the institutionally racist climate of Midwestern University. During my time working with Midwestern's black students, racist mailings and postings were commonplace. From the fall of 2000 (when I became systematic in my efforts to take note of racism on campus) to my departure from Midwestern in May 2001, racially oriented hate literature was mass-distributed each semester. Some flyers exhorted white women not to date black men because black men were 'AIDS carriers' bent on infecting others. Another asked 'Got Diversity?,' and warned that violence and death await white people in America if 'the pushers of multiculturalism succeed in reducing whites to a minority.' Copies of a booklet sent through campus mail to students and professors purported to explain the differences among 'three biological races.' According to the booklet—separate editions of which were distributed in successive years and have been received by college professors and students across the country — 'Blacks, Whites and Orientals' differ in brain size, intelligence, sexual behavior, temperament and genitalia size. It describes blacks as concentrated on the low end of a scale measuring such characteristics as intelligence and temperament, but on the high end of a scale measuring penis size and sexual appetite (Rushton, 2000).

One pamphlet, which I and other students, faculty and staff received on the windshield of our automobiles, was titled 'A Trial in Jasper.' It offers one racist's view of the trial of three white assailants who tortured and murdered James Byrd, an African-American, in Jasper, Texas on 7 June 1998. The leaflet's content and tone, which is

similar to many received by students, provides an example of the racist speech with which black students and others on campus regularly contend.

> Let me tell you, I've lived in East Texas … and I have a pretty good feeling for what it's like in that part of the country. There are, of course, too many blacks there, just as in many parts of the country. But in small towns like Jasper the Blacks are moderately well behaved. The police don't coddle them like they do in the big cities. The White people in East Texas aren't terrorized by them. And so John King [one of Byrd's murderers] didn't think much about Blacks or the situation in this country—until he was sent to prison for burglary and was exposed to a majority prison population consisting of Black criminals like James Byrd, the black ex-convict he was convicted of killing.
>
> I don't want to get into the gory details about what young White men are exposed to in prison these days, where the majority of inmates are very often black. It is hell almost beyond imagining for White Americans brought up in a genteel environment. For Blacks, homosexual rape is accepted behavior. It is not a rare occurrence; it is routine. It is the way they establish their barnyard pecking order. They rape each other when they must, but they prefer to rape Whites…. And even if a young white man doesn't get raped, it is something he is constantly aware of, something which he must constantly guard against. He is surrounded by Blacks who no longer feel the need to ape the White man in their behavior. Instead, they behave in prison in the way that is natural for them, the way they behaved in the jungles of Africa.

While such viscerally racist speech as quoted above occurs (or appears) on campus most semesters, it is not the norm. Normative racist speech on campus is not anonymous. Nor is it so extreme. Rather, it is more often expressed in the language of campus debate and promoted by university-funded organizations, and in these ways institutionalized as part and parcel of campus intellectual and civic life.

The school paper, for instance, provides a forum for dialogue and opinion among college students and others and is a lightning rod for an antagonistic discourse in which black students are frequent targets of attack. For individual black students, engaging in such a seemingly mundane activity as keeping up with daily news and events means subjecting oneself to white hostility from various faculty, staff, alumnae and other students.

An 7 April 1997 guest column is typical of remarks in the paper that question black students' academic ability and denies that they have a right to be present on campus as students:

> Racial preferences are the root cause of virtually all of the major problems on campuses today. They result in a student body with two groups, identifiable by race, essentially in different academic ballparks. An inability to compete successfully in the game being played necessarily results in demands that the rules of the game be changed, and thus are born demands for black and Hispanic studies and 'multiculturalism.'

Similar remarks semester after semester put black students on the defensive and alert them to the fact that many people in the university community assume them to be academically deficient and have little or no respect for them unless they are athletes. Often the comments are frank and apparently dispassionate, as in the 7 September 1999 guest editorial by a member of a group I will call the Young Conservatives. According to the Young Conservatives, 'short of lowering academic standards, there

is, arguably, no colorblind way of enrolling more minority students.' For such vocal students, faculty and alumnae, *any* admission policy changes away from GPA and standardized tests as the sole measures of academic merit and potential are assumed to lower standards in favor of admitting unqualified minority students. Ostensibly because of its favorable impact on minority enrollment, even the move to automatically admit the top-ranked students from high schools across the state has been criticized as 'lowering academic standards.' The same holds for such other admission policy changes as requiring students to answer essay questions as part of their application.

In addition to having their right to be on campus questioned, black students who choose black studies courses are unjustly put in the position of either defending their intellectual curiosity and academic interests or ignoring the vocal criticisms from other students and professors. Editorialists and guest columnists frequently offer amateur opinions as facts, as does the professor quoted above, who on 11 September 1997 was quoted as saying that:

> Blacks and Mexican Americans are not academically competitive with whites in selective institutions. I am not an expert on the causes. It is the result of cultural effects. These cultures do not encourage achievement. Failure is not looked upon with disgrace.

Echoing some of his other public comments he also offered that:

> When people aren't good at playing the game, the game has to be changed for them. That is why students are taking black studies instead of core courses like chemistry.

In a 3 March 1999 letter that continues the disparagement of blacks, a student interjected his thoughts into the ongoing war of words and wrote that:

> You said African-Americans are under-represented in positions like Connerly's [a regent for the University of California] but over-represented in prisons. Here's a radical thought: Don't commit crimes! That is a sure-fire way to keep someone of any race out of prison. I can hear you whining now, using what you learned in your useless sociology courses, that a minority's environment is more conducive to crime. Who gives a damn? You are implying that minorities do not have free will and are incapable of acting according to reason. That sounds more racist than anything Mr. Connerly might say.

Here as elsewhere, 'minorities' and 'blacks' are referred to with little regard for the fact that they are present and in the conversation as well. Still, there are cases where minorities are referred to directly, as in this remark that appeared on 9 March 1999:

> I am getting sick and tired of hearing about all of this affirmative action bullsh**…. If you want to go to a nationally known school such as [Midwestern] but can't cut the grade, perhaps you should attend a smaller college, or community college, and transfer to [Midwestern] later when you meet the requirements. Don't bitch about unfair admissions policies because you slacked off in high school. Those of us not in the minority never seem to complain about pathetic issues such as affirmative action when we don't get accepted to a school or job. So why should you?

Most of the time, the remarks stay general, although the idea of undeserving black students still provides the context for discussion. That was the case in an article of

25 August 1999 that quoted a Young Conservative as saying, 'Affirmative action … said your unqualified but we'll admit you anyway.' It is also the case in the following letter from 28 January 1999:

> In the Jan. 27 Internet edition of the [Campus Daily], __ continues the liberal mantra of special privileges for a few. When are you bleeding hearts going to get it? If you can't make the grade in high school, you don't deserve admission to Midwestern. College admission is not a right, it's an achievement.

A search of the Midwestern University campus newspaper from 1996 to 2001 reveals hundreds of references to black students, affirmative action and the admission of black students. In most cases, blacks (and often Hispanics) are brought up as a subject of controversy. Often they are directly or indirectly insulted as well.

A factor that cements the institutional nature of Midwestern's harsh racial climate comes in the form of special forums, speakers and events that are framed in dispassionate and objective terms, but can be profoundly alienating for black students. Examples include a public debate featuring the former Dean of Liberal Arts and his successor. The subject of debate was the connection between biological race and intelligence, with Murray and Herrnstein's *The bell curve* (1994) as a backdrop for conversation. While the debate was framed as a congenial intellectual engagement among scholars, the subject matter, and more precisely the fact that that the subject was deemed worthy of debate, spoke volumes about the institution. It sent the message that as far as the university is concerned, whether blacks are inferior beings is an open question. For at least one black faculty member, the event was surreal and disturbing.

> Have you ever been to that place [where the event occurred]? It is hard to describe. [It is] plush, with overstuffed couches all over the place. And here we are effetely sipping sherry as we sit in the audience and watch these white folks debate our intelligence. It was surreal, profoundly alienating, [and] infuriating really.

Events that engender this reaction among African-Americans are by no means reserved for faculty members. Public forums, debates and speeches about Affirmative Action, university admission policies, collegiate athletics and other topics often come around to a stated or unstated focus on blacks and blackness. The same holds true for farther reaching topics, including the 'war on drugs' and prison reform.

As the professor mentioned above experienced firsthand, in many cases these debates are unavoidably inscribed upon black people's bodies. Black people are in the audience *and* the subject of debate, with their skin color and snap-judgements about their dress and demeanor marking them as exhibits in support of one argument or another. Thus, for black students to participate in the intellectual life of the campus often means offering their own dignity as a sacrifice to the pursuit of an invigorating intellectual atmosphere. For black people well beyond the Midwestern student body, such experiences can be humiliating as well as infuriating (Armour, 1997). On the campus of Midwestern, they are also part of everyday life.

IV. Individual experiences of racism

Although there are vocal racists on campus, egregious acts of racial animosity are not everyday occurrences. Nor do they dominate black students' lives. Nevertheless, a charged racial atmosphere exists. In addition to easily identified instances of racism and racist speech on campus, more mundane acts of unintended and often unrecognized prejudice also help frame black students' experiences at Midwestern. Not only do black students operate within an atmosphere where their worth as students is a frequent topic of debate but they do so as an extreme minority. Compared with their statewide representation as 13% of the population, they are under-represented in the student body, in the administration and in the faculty ranks, but over-represented as cafeteria workers and in other low-paying, low-status jobs across campus.

Given the convergence of these factors, Midwestern offers individual black students a difficult, demeaning and alienating racial climate. Moreover, many of the forces sustaining this climate are institutionally based and supported, and include tenured faculty, the school paper, registered student organizations and campus-sponsored events. While I would not go so far as to describe black students' experiences as agonizing, as do Feagin *et al*. in their text documenting the experiences of black students on a predominantly white campus (1996), Midwestern provides a racial climate that is similar to that which they describe in their work.

Among black students' countless interactions with non-blacks, perhaps those that are most powerful are neither the everyday non-offensive interactions, nor the outrageous acts of open, racially motivated hostility. Rather, some of the most poignant and lasting interactions may be those that involve subtle slights and misguided acts—by professors, fellow students, resident assistants, academic advisors or others in the university community—that lead to alienation among black students.

One student's story about her efforts to win a position as a Resident Assistant (RA) demonstrates how black students can find themselves in awkward situations due to the ignorance of white members of the campus community who assume that their own behaviors and norms are universal. The behavior the student described was apparently not intended as racist but functioned that way nonetheless. The student had applied for a Resident Assistant's position in one of the campus dorms, was selected as a finalist and invited for an interview. The interview went well until one of the current RAs conducting the interview asked, 'If you were a character on *Friends*, what character would you be?' The question created an awkward situation in the room when the black applicant explained that she had never seen the television show that was so popular among white audiences. Despite what she described as the interviewers' embarrassment and incredulity that she had not seen this show, the black applicant's non-familiarity was understandable since the show: (1) aired on Thursday night (the same evening as Soul Night, a bi-weekly dance on campus that is hosted by a black student organization and attended mainly by black students); (2) was scheduled against another television network's line up of *Living Single* and *Martin*, which featured all-black casts and were popular among African-American students; and (3) offered the scenario of an all-white group of friends living in an

apparently all-white New York City. Consistent with analyses of the television viewing habits of different racial groups (Levin, 2002), the show was simply not popular among blacks on campus—to the point that many simply had never even seen it.

The black student interviewing for the RA job felt that although the interview had started off well it became awkward and tense because of what she described as 'the way white people don't mean anything, but sometimes can just be ignorant that way.' Others would be harsher in their judgement and describe her experience as an example of institutional racism. To the extent that cultural difference based on racial norms was an important variable in her (non)hiring, such an assessment would be correct according to the definitions put forth by Bielby (1987), Jeanquart-Barone (1997), Carmichael (1967), and Hanssen (1997). Discussing the inability of school administrators where she worked to hire African-Americans, for instance, Hanssen offers an analysis that could just as easily have been written to describe the situation above:

> They failed to realize that the intangible edge during an interview will typically go to the person who most resembles those conducting the interview. If we rely on the 'subtle' impression as the definitive factor, then people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds will almost always be at a disadvantage. (Hanssen, 1997, p. 696)

Unfortunately, what the black applicant for the RA position wrote off as ignorance is routine on campus, and often contains racial overtones. Moreover, such everyday acts carry institutional implications. After all, the fan of *Friends* already was, and would presumably remain, a Resident Assistant in the employ of the university, while the black applicant failed to land the job. And while it is impossible to know whether this awkward exchange had anything to do with whether in the end she landed a coveted Resident Assistantship, the disappointment the black student felt over being asked such a culturally biased question in her final interview was real.

In group conversations and one-on-one, black students described specific incidents that reinforce the idea that the campus contains racist elements, as well as places where they are not welcome. Some black students described incidents where professors and students reacted to their race and size, mistook them for athletes and then assumed that they were poor students and only enrolled in college for their athletic skills. Black students who lived in an all-female dorm shared stories of dorm officials who asked them to produce identification upon entering their dorm building while white students who were only visiting walked in without being questioned. In separate conversations over the course of three years, three different black engineering students shared similar perceptions that their academic advisor in electrical engineering was trying to undermine their academic efforts. Each student reported that the courses he/she had been advised to take resulted in the concentration of many of his/her toughest required courses into one semester, while his/her non-black friends in similar situations had been advised to spread their difficult courses over several semesters. In other majors, black students shared with me a different story—namely that their counselors routinely underestimated their abilities, ignored their honors and AP courses from high school and recommended that they take remedial math or writing courses that

did not advance them towards graduation. Such cases taken together embody the 'contempt and pity' (Scott, 1997) with which faculty, staff, administrators and even other students have addressed issues of race generally, and African-American students specifically.

Many students who share stories of racial prejudice also state that the occasional slights have little impact on their day-to-day lives. However, they just as often appear to have been more deeply affected than they let on. Here, the four-year story of a particular student comes to mind. From Renee's freshman year on, her primary community of affiliation was the black student community. The most difficult challenge of her freshman year was a 'roommate situation' that came to a head one day when she and her white roommate got into an argument over her account of what she considered to be the racism of a specific professor. From this incident and others, Renee found that other African-Americans were more likely to understand her feelings and experiences than non-blacks. According to Renee, she learned early on whom she felt she could trust, and with whom she would be more guarded.

Far from becoming a so-called self-segregationist, however, Renee went on to become a widely recognized leader *across* the Midwestern student community. In the word of one critical race theorist, she functioned as a desegregationist—comfortable and unhesitant to interact with others of a variety of races, and in a variety of racial milieux (Johnson, 1995). She participated in multiracial study groups, participated in voter registration drives, mentored other students and served as the student representative on a number of university committees. Nonetheless, Renee often stated that her success in academics, leadership and professional development had a lot to do with the fact that with white people she put on her 'game face,' and that only with other black students was she willing to relax and 'just kick it.'

None of the racial situations she recounted was egregious. Some simply hinted at a lack of commitment to black students that had cumulative, and in some cases tangible, repercussions for black students at Midwestern. She spoke of confrontations with a professor in her first year and of another difference of perspective between herself and her freshman roommate, this time as to whether black students were qualified to be at Midwestern. She mentioned invalid initial assumptions about her abilities among other students in the business school. She also spoke candidly of the advantageous position of being singled out for opportunities because, as a 'successful black woman with a high GPA and a record of community service,' she made the administration look good. Still, by the time Renee graduated her negative feelings about Midwestern outweighed the positive. I only realized the depths of Renee's alienation in one of our final conversations during the spring of her senior year.

One day we were talking about her experiences at Midwestern when I noticed that she was fidgeting with a small silver chain in her hands. I recognized the chain as one I had first seen three years earlier when she was a freshman taking my *Introduction to African-American Culture* class. One day after class she had come up to me beaming and showing off the sterling silver necklace, the pendent of which featured the Midwestern logo. As it turned out, she had just celebrated her nineteenth birthday,

and her father had sent her the necklace as a gift. She loved her father, and loved Midwestern, so the gift was one she treasured. Remembering her elation on that day still makes me smile.

Three years later, she absent-mindedly moved the chain from hand to hand like a disposable trinket. When I asked whether it was that Midwestern necklace she loved so much she answered with a resigned 'Yeah.' When I asked, 'why aren't you wearing it?' this stellar student and star of the administration stated that she didn't feel the same about Midwestern anymore and that about a year ago she decided she would never wear the chain again. As we both knew, one year earlier she had been involved in a bitter battle with the administration over the university's affirmative-action policies. In the end, the administration decided that the scholarship that had sustained her and other minority students through college would be eliminated after the graduation of all current recipients. The scholarship had gone to black and Hispanic honors students and had been a source of pride for her. According to Renee, its elimination meant that a door that had been opened for her and that she wished to see widened for additional promising minority students would instead be shut in their faces. She perceived a specific lack of support by the administration that amounted to a betrayal of black students. As a result, Renee felt that she would:

> … never [again] be able to look at this university with this unabashed joy and pride and ownership and feeling like I have this sense of belonging, because now I understand that I am a liminal person. I am on the outside. I am still here, but I feel like I am on the sidelines—almost in the game but almost out of the game, and being able to see both very clearly.

None of the alienating incidents that Renee recounted in our conversations was of the mean-spirited or violent type that we often think about when the topic of racism is discussed, but Renee's disenchantment nonetheless had a great deal to do with her status as a black student. It resulted from the accumulation of experiences that came to a head during her junior year, as policy changes at Midwestern offered what she perceived to be the truest statement of how the school felt about her and other black students.

Renee's stories, along with those of other black students, highlight that cultural bias, racism and simple inattentiveness to the interests and perceptions of black students are all aspects of black student experiences at Midwestern. In Renee's case, the accumulation of experiences affected a dramatic reversal in four years in the way she felt about the school—from a sense of ownership and belonging to an unfortunate sense of betrayal and marginality.

V. Conclusion: Now what? Implications for interacting with students

From the stories and texts I have collected over the years involving Midwestern's black students, three related points arise. First, the specter of race is a constant and nagging presence in black students' interracial relationships and experiences on campus. Second, these relationships and experiences may or may not be defined by overt racism per se. And third, regardless of *intentionality* associated with the existence

of a highly and perpetually racialized campus milieu, racial encounters and racism are critical variables in many black students' collegiate lives.

Even when open racism is not present, the specter of race gives rise to potential problems and miscommunications among black students and non-black students, faculty and administrators with whom they relate daily. One faculty member I spoke with was especially excited about what he saw as the importance of this aspect of black students' lives, the importance of extra-academic aspects of the relationships between students and faculty, and the delicate nature of relations between black students and non-black faculty.

> I mean, what are we doing as teachers? What are you doing when you mentor athletes? We're all cheap shrinks for God's sake. Think about the importance of the relationships we have with students, especially when we deal with race. It is not as though we are teaching to program Java; we are dealing with issues that are much more sensitive. These relationships can have psychotherapeutic dimensions. There is a way to think systematically about this dimension of many student/faculty relationships. But with black students there is a whole new complication. [Still], you can speculate in a plausible way about the potential problems that can develop in the relationships between black students and white professors.

While this professor was more interested in spurring deeper consideration of important issues than in offering final words on complex issues, his insights are nonetheless instructive. Not only did he acknowledge the frequently touchy nature of interracial relations generally, and in the coming-of-age setting of a university campus specifically, but he also recognized the need to formulate race-conscious strategies to deal with the complex issues that arise on racially diverse campuses. Such strategies should not exist in isolation but rather be part of a comprehensive approach to student life that recognizes, attempts to account for and incorporates the range of difference that exists among students on campus.

Such race-conscious strategies should also be transformative instead of additive (Garcia, 1999), and should not be so solidly group-based that they reify simplistic notions of racial culture (Urcioli, 1999). Instead of, for instance, trying to improve a racist climate by creating another student life program that 'celebrates' the heritage of this or that ethnic or racial group, or that teaches the 'toleration' of difference, we should be identifying and rooting out institutional practices that perpetuate an alienating and hostile climate. This involves dealing with students as individuals—listening to their concerns, and working to address the issues they identify. For instance, once we learn of a student's unfortunate experience interviewing for a resident assistantship and decide there may be cause for alarm, we should be prepared to assess the relevant hiring procedures and, if necessary, to make appropriate adjustments to improve the process. Likewise, once we have collected repeated stories of problematic advising from specific academic units, we should step in, assess the units' advising and, again, make adjustments where necessary. Taking time to listen to students and respond directly to their concerns may be messier than planning a Black History Month celebration, but it may also be more likely to affect positive change in the campus climate. Moreover, in academic and student-life offices across campuses, this sort of responsiveness should not be the responsibility of one or two minority associate deans or

untenured faculty but should rather be a top-down articulated priority of the administration as a whole, and of its individual units. Nothing short of an anti-racist articulation of values and corresponding anti-racist action will rid a campus of ongoing institutional racism.

The trouble that arises when we begin to acknowledge and listen to black and other minority students is that we may find it difficult to accept that their experiences are not consistent with the university's vision of itself. To acknowledge and seriously address such phenomena as the systematic racial disparagement of individuals is to acknowledge institutional racism—something that universities like Midwestern are often loath to do. But coming to terms with such realities is ultimately a hopeful act. It creates space for university personnel to learn about and then strategize to eliminate the institutional forces (or simple inertia) that facilitates the existence of hostile climates. Of equal importance, acknowledging the ways in which a university environment contributes to the routine disparagement of its own students creates space to support students through and beyond their negative experiences of racism (or sexism, xenophobia, class prejudice or any number of potentially alienating encounters). In short, when we, as institutional representatives, acknowledge and address our institution's shortcomings in such areas as race, we actively counter, rather than participate in, institutional racism.

Finally, it is also important to note that the challenge of negotiating complex and occasionally hostile environments need not be viewed as automatically traumatic. Because the United States is a plural nation, negotiating the difficult issues that arise at the intersections where people from different backgrounds meet is simply another aspect of coming of age in America. Those of us who work with students in such capacities as academic advisor, advisor to student organizations or instructor should neither avoid discussions of race and racism when they come up, nor should we deny students' pain, anger or frustration at occurrences of racism. At the same time, we need to avoid treating racism and difficult racial encounters as all-powerful or life defining. Treating a racist act as life defining gives power to the act and disempowers the student. We should instead acknowledge complex issues of race and racism where they occur, and work with individuals and groups to minimize their potentially harmful psychological and alienating impact. Such a race-conscious (and necessarily personal) approach would not deepen divides among students, as is asserted by some (Bennett, 1992; D'Souza, 1992; Schlesinger, 1996; McWhorter, 2000). Rather, in conjunction with the recognition of religious, gender, class and other issues—it would be part of a critical cultural pluralism (Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995) that protects individual students even as it demands their attentiveness to complex issues of identity, difference and personal development in a plural society.

Notes on contributor

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