

Hate Takes the Bus

A University of Oklahoma Fraternity's Chant and the Rigidity of Racism

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This week, when video was posted showing members of the University of Oklahoma's chapter of Sigma Alpha Epsilon gleefully engaged in a racist chant on a bus, some people were shocked. Others, like me, were not.

This was just video confirmation of a racism that envelops us like a fog, often just as evanescent and immeasurable.

Some people seemed surprised because these were millennials, and college students to boot. Both because of generational easing and educational enlightenment, weren't these sorts of things supposed to be vestiges of the past?

After all, as the Pew Research Center put it last year, "Millennials are the most racially diverse generation in American history," with "some 43 percent of millennial adults" being nonwhite.

A 2010 Pew report found that "almost all millennials accept interracial dating and marriage." An MTV poll of millennials found that "84 percent say their family taught them that everyone should be treated the same, no matter what their race," and that 89 percent "do believe that everyone should be treated the same no matter their race."

But these numbers can be deceiving. They don't herald an age of egalitarianism as we might think.

As New York magazine pointed out in a January article on its Science of Us site, the problem that obscures some disturbing persistence of racism is that these polls lump all millennials together and don't separate white millennials from the rest.

The magazine reported the findings of Spencer Piston, an assistant professor of political science at Syracuse University who found that "younger (under-30) whites are just as likely as older ones to view whites as more intelligent and harder-working than African-Americans."

Furthermore, the magazine printed this exchange:

" 'White millennials appear to be no less prejudiced than the rest of the white population,' Piston told Science of Us in an email, 'at least using this dataset and this measure of prejudice.' "

In the same vein, as data from the Race Implicit Association Test published in the January/February issue of Mother Jones magazine showed, pro-white biases were also strongest among people 65 years old and older, although people 18 to 24 ranked second among the age groups.

It is in this environment of dualities that today's young people exist, dealing with the growing pains of increasing diversification grinding against unyielding racial attitudes.

And we must acknowledge that the most deleterious effect of racism they face isn't about hurt feelings or exercises of poor, outdated social graces, but rather about the actual material effects of racism as it suffuses society and becomes embedded in our systems.

Real psychophysical injuries can result from confrontations with overt or even subtle racism. There is a real and worthy conversation taking place in this country now, particularly among young people, around the idea of microaggressions — slight, often unintended discriminatory comments or behaviors.

The idea of racial battle fatigue — that “chronic exposure to racial discrimination is analogous to the constant pressure soldiers face on the battlefield,” as Psych Central put it — is also gaining currency and exposure.

Indeed, as The Atlantic pointed out in 2013:

“A growing literature shows discrimination raises the risk of many emotional and physical problems. Discrimination has been shown to increase the risk of stress, depression, the common cold, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, breast cancer and mortality. Recently, two journals — The American Journal of Public Health and The Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race — dedicated entire issues to the subject. These collections push us to consider how discrimination becomes what the social epidemiologist Nancy Krieger, one of the field's leaders, terms ‘embodied inequality.’ ”

Here is where it's important to recognize how much of an influence the fraternity systems have in these areas.

As a major examination of the United States fraternity system published by The Atlantic last year pointed out:

“Fraternity men make up 85 percent of U.S. Supreme Court justices since 1910, 63 percent of all U.S. presidential cabinet members since 1900 and, historically, 76 percent of U.S. senators [and] 85 percent of Fortune 500 executives.”

If this trend continues — and there is no indication that it won't — the boys on that bus and others like them will be tomorrow's leaders, and the attitudes they carry

with them out of school and into the wider world will have a real impact on real people's lives.

(In full disclosure, I pledged a fraternity in college and wrote about that experience in my memoir, including how the noble missions of national organizations can be utterly overshadowed by the destructive, renegade rituals of local chapters.)

This is why the vileness displayed on that bus matters: It was a reflection of the distance that must still be covered, and the rigidity of racism and the casualness of hate. It can wear a smile and be set to a tune.

We have to understand what that hate is. Hate is never about the object of the hate but about what is happening in the mind of the hater. It is in the darkness of that space that fear and ignorance merge and morph. It comes out in an impulse to mark and name, to deny and diminish, to exclude and threaten, to elevate the self by putting down the other.

What happened on that bus was bigger than just that bus; it was a reflection of where we are.