Racism in the 21st Century

Racism is at work in the United States every day, yet the majority of white people are oblivious to it, asserts Associate Professor of Sociology Ashley “Woody” Doane, co-editor of White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism. White Out is a collection of original essays that examines how white racial identity is constructed and how whiteness contributes to the persistence of racial inequality. A landmark collection, White Out brings together works from across the disciplines of sociology, philosophy, history, and anthropology.

The Observer asked Darryl McMiller, assistant professor of political science at Hillyer College, to talk with Doane, also of Hillyer, about his book.

DM: Professor Doane, first question. Most people believe that because of the achievements of the civil rights movement, racism and discrimination are no longer significant. The title of your edited book, White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism, would seem to contradict that thinking. What are you and the authors of the articles in the text trying to let readers know about the continuing significance of racism?

WD: Actually, the phrase “The Continuing Significance of Racism” was a deliberate response to the title of a very well known book by William J. Wilson, The Declining Significance of Race. In 1903, African American scholar and activist W. E. B. DuBois referred to the “color line,” the problem of racial domination, which he said would be the problem of the 20th century. I think that the argument we’re trying to make is that it is also the problem of the 21st century. The forms of racism may have changed, but it remains a major problem in American society in the 21st century.

DM: What do you mean by the term white out that’s used in the title?

WD: (Smiles). It’s actually not connected to office products, despite what people may think! It’s drawn from my own background growing up in northern New England. A whiteout is a winter condition during a blizzard when the snow is so heavy, the whiteness is so overpowering, that the horizon line becomes indistinct. Vision becomes distorted, and the only things that one is really aware of are very dark objects. Given that the focus of the book is upon how white racial identity distorts our view of race relations, I thought that this image really captured what we were trying to talk about.
DM: What is “color-blind racism,” which you talk about in the text, and how does it differ from other forms of racism?

WD: Color-blind racism is, in a nutshell, the claim that because of the accomplishments of the civil rights movement, we’ve essentially moved beyond race in American society; that racism, except for isolated hate crimes, no longer exists; and that racial inequality is a thing of the past. It differs from other forms of racism in that it’s rooted in denial. Color-blind racism, I think, is often adopted by very well meaning people who really want to believe that racism doesn’t exist. Unfortunately, denying the persistence of racism creates a new set of problems. Given that inequality does exist—in such areas as wealth, income, and health—it becomes too easy to blame the victim and say that people are poor, people are unemployed, because of their poor morals, their lack of effort, their unwillingness to take advantage of opportunities that exist. The outcome of color-blindness is that it closes off any meaningful discussion of racism and it contributes to the persistence of white privilege and racial inequality.

DM: What do you mean exactly by “white privilege”? 

WD: White privilege really works on two levels. I think most people approach it in terms of the individual level, of the advantages, say, of not being profiled by police, not being shadowed in a store, of always being viewed as an individual. But I think it’s more important to view it on a structural level, to look at the advantages whites enjoy in the employment market, in the housing market, and in terms of the intergenerational transmission of wealth. These are the things that really contribute to the reproduction of racial inequality generation after generation after generation.

DM: Of the articles in the book, which one do you think best addresses the points that you’re trying to make?

WD: My own particular favorites are in the third section, which contains a series of articles based on qualitative data gathered from interviews with white Americans. I like the chapter by Heather Johnson and Thomas Shapiro, called “Good Neighborhoods, Good Schools,” in which whites talk about “good” neighborhoods and “good” schools in a way that is linked to race. The interviews illustrate how race shapes individual decisions and how the cumulative effect is to perpetuate residential and school segregation. There’s also a piece by Kristen Myers, called “White Fright,” which looks at some of the behind-the-scenes ways in which whites talk about race.

DM: And why are those pieces in particular your favorites?

WD: I think they’re very straightforward. They counter some of the denial of racism—he denial that whites still take race into account in everyday situations or when making major life decisions. Also, I like my co-editor’s piece at the end of the book, which is on the Latin Americanization of race relations in the United States. Eduardo [Bonilla-Silva] takes, I think, a rather bold look into the future and talks about the ways in which the racial lines in the United States are beginning to become blurred. He argues that, yes, the lines have become blurred, but that’s not necessarily a positive development; it’s one that will be used to maintain racial inequality, not eliminate it.

DM: What has been the response to White Out from scholars who study race in America?

WD: When a book comes out, it takes probably a couple of years to see what the response is going to be, other than getting e-mails from people who say they like it or having someone speak to you individually about what you’ve written. It really takes that long to be cited in journal articles and books because of the production time. I’ve begun to see it cited recently in articles, and I’ve seen it adopted for reading lists and for courses in different places. I’m hoping that this will continue. I think that we’ve brought together a group of people who have some very important things to say about race in the United States. I guess when you put that much effort into a book, you want to see it widely used. I would say that so far, I’m very encouraged.

DM: Finally, I know that you use some of the materials in White Out in your classes. How have students responded?

WD: I think they’ve responded very well. The two pieces I’ve used were the Johnson and Shapiro piece, “Good Neighborhoods, Good Schools,” and Kristen Myers’s piece, “White Fright.” I had the students write reaction papers after reading each article. The material definitely seemed to affect them. I actually spoke to Heather Johnson and told her about some of their responses because they were so striking. Students were shocked at the behavior of whites who were fairly openly using terms like “a good neighborhood” and “good schools” to draw very clear racial lines when planning where they were going to live or where they were going to send their children to school. Myers’s article looks at what happens when the microphone is switched off. Then we see the backstage behavior of whites, where, in many cases, racial expressions became much more overt and much more blatant. I think that was really an eye-opening experience for students and encouraged them to think about situations they’ve encountered in their own lives.