

June 8, 2018 – BIG SURPRISE

A Columbia undergrad speaks truth to the campus and everywhere. He is a black man who thinks his people shouldn't live on stale grievances. The guys at Power Line think he will need a bodyguard if he keeps writing like this.

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But as the date approached, I learned that one of my friends had been fired and replaced. The reason? He was a white Hispanic, and Rihanna's artistic team had decided to go for an all-black aesthetic—aside from Rihanna's steady guitarist, there would be no non-blacks on stage. Though I was disappointed on my friend's behalf, I didn't consider his firing as unjust at the time—and maybe it wasn't. Is it unethical for an artist to curate the racial composition of a racially-themed performance? Perhaps; perhaps not. My personal bias leads me to favor artistic freedom, but as a society, we have yet to answer this question definitively.

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Yet there we were—young black men born decades after anything that could rightly be called 'oppression' had ended—benefitting from a social license bequeathed to us by a history that we have only experienced through textbooks and folklore. And my white Hispanic friend (who could have had a tougher life than all of us, for all I know) paid the price. The underlying logic of using the past to justify racial double-standards in the present is rarely interrogated. What do slavery and Jim Crow have to do with modern-day blacks, who experienced neither? ...

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Quilette

The High Price of Stale Grievances

by Coleman Hughes

They tried to get me to hate white people, but someone would always come along & spoil it.
~ Thelonious Monk (*Monk's Advice*, 1960)

As against our gauzy national hopes, I will teach my boys to have profound doubts that friendship with white people is possible. ~ Ekow N. Yankah (*New York Times*, 2017)

In the fall of 2016, I was hired to play in Rihanna's back-up band at the MTV Video Music Awards. To my pleasant surprise, several of my friends had also gotten the call. We felt that this would be the gig of a lifetime: beautiful music, primetime TV, plus, if we were lucky, a chance to schmooze with celebrities backstage.

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One thing, however, is clear. If the races were reversed—if a *black* musician had been fired in order to achieve an all-*white* aesthetic—it would have made front page headlines. It would have been seen as an unambiguous moral infraction. The usual suspects would be outraged, calling for this event to be viewed in the context of the long history of slavery and Jim Crow in this country, and their reaction would widely be seen as justified. Public-shaming would be in order and heartfelt apologies would be made. MTV might even enact anti-bias trainings as a corrective.

Though the question seems naïve to some, it is in fact perfectly valid to ask why black people can get away with behavior that white people can't. The progressive response to this question invariably contains some reference to history: blacks were taken from their homeland in chains, forced to work as chattel for 250 years, and then subjected to redlining, segregation, and lynchings for another century. In the face of such a brutal past, many would argue, it is simply ignorant to complain about what modern-day blacks can get away with.

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have only experienced through textbooks and folklore. And my white Hispanic friend (who could have had a tougher life than all of us, for all I know) paid the price. The underlying logic of using the past to justify racial double-standards in the present is rarely interrogated. What do slavery and Jim Crow have to do with modern-day blacks, who experienced neither? Do all black people have P.T.S.D from racism, as the Grammy and Emmy award-winning artist Donald Glover recently claimed? Is ancestral suffering actually transmitted to descendants? If so, how? What exactly are historical 'ties' made of?

We often speak and think in metaphors. For instance, life can have *ups* and *downs* and *highs* and *lows*, despite the fact that our joys and sorrows do not literally pull our bodies along a vertical axis. Similarly, modern-day black intellectuals often say things like, "We were brought here against *our* will," despite the fact that they have never seen a slave ship in their lives, let alone been on one. When metaphors are made explicit—i.e., *emotions are vertical, groups are individuals*—it's easy to see that they are just metaphors. Yet many black intellectuals carry on as if they were literal truths.

One such intellectual is Michael Eric Dyson, who recently shared the stage with Michelle Goldberg in a debate against Jordan Peterson and Stephen Fry. Though the debate was ostensibly about political correctness, it ranged everywhere from Marxism to 'white privilege.' Around halfway through the debate, Dyson said:

If you have benefitted from 300 years of holding people in servitude, thinking that you did it all on your own..."Why can't these people work harder?" Let me see...for 300 years you ain't had no job! So the reality is for 300 years you hold people in the bands...you refuse to give them rights. Then all of a sudden, you 'free' them and say, "You're now individuals."

Taken literally, Dyson's claims make no sense. No person has ever suffered 300 years of joblessness because no person has ever lived for 300 years. Of course, Dyson wasn't speaking literally. His 'you' refers not to identifiable, living humans, but to groups of long-deceased individuals with whom he shares nothing in common except a location on the color wheel. But by appropriating a grievance whose rightful owners died long ago, and by slipping between the metaphorical and the literal, Dyson was able to portray himself as a member of an abstract oppressed class and Peterson as a member of an abstract oppressor class. In his reply, barely audible over Dyson's sanctimonious harangue, Peterson put his finger on this rhetorical sleight-of-hand: "Who is this 'you' that you're referring to?"

Many black progressives use the myth of collective, intergenerational transfers of suffering to exempt themselves from the rules of civil discourse. Dyson, for instance, responded to Peterson's criticism of the concept of 'white privilege' with the finger-wagging rebuke: "You're a mean, mad white man!" Despite hurling this racialized insult, Dyson will likely face no consequences. The question naturally arises—what would have happened to Peterson if he had called Dyson a "mean, mad black man"? I think it's fair to say that Peterson would have received something less pleasant than the round of applause with which Dyson was rewarded.

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The Rihanna incident; the Dyson-Peterson debate; the Coates comment—the thread running through all three examples is that modern-day blacks are permitted to employ language and behavior for which whites would be condemned. And wherever these racial double-standards show themselves, appeals to historical oppression, and to a metaphorical 'we,' follow close behind. After all, it is argued, how can Dyson and Coates be expected to abide by a so-called 'politics of respectability' in a country that routinely humiliates and subjugates them. Indeed, all demands to uphold colorblind standards ring hollow in view of America's foundational plunder of 'the black body,' we are told. The 'black body'? Such abstract claims are rarely met with the concrete question: to whose black body are you referring?

* * *

By itself, the fact that black progressives like Dyson and Coates play by a different set of rules would not amount to a great societal injustice. But the biases of the chattering classes don't stay put; they seep out into the general populace, setting the boundaries of polite conversation, and coloring the political landscape in which laws are crafted.

Consider, for starters, the fact that racial double-standards have been enshrined in our college admissions system. A 2009 study by Princeton sociologist Thomas Espenshade found that Asians and whites had to score 450 and 310 SAT points higher than blacks, respectively, to have the same odds of being admitted into elite universities. Although it's possible to justify this double-standard without referencing historical oppression—for instance, by arguing that the benefits of increased ethnic diversity on campuses outweigh the costs incurred by whites and Asians—in practice, most defenses of Affirmative Action use the history of white racism as a key link in their argumentative chain. Of course, those who appeal to historical racism for this purpose gingerly sidestep the fact that Chinese-Americans were also lynched in the 19th century, Japanese-Americans were legally barred from owning land in the early 20th, and over 100,000 Japanese-Americans were forcibly interned during World War II.

When called upon to justify the fact that we make Asians work harder than whites and blacks to get into college, progressives appeal to principles like diversity and inclusion—goals which may indeed be defensible in some form. But there are good reasons to believe that these lofty principles are in fact anchored to an unthinking, reflexive bias towards blacks. In one study, participants were asked to decide between two similarly qualified hypothetical college applicants—a black student with a higher GPA, and a white student with a tougher course load. Participants chose the black applicant, citing the importance of GPA. But when researchers switched the resumes so that the white student had the higher GPA and the black student had the tougher course load, participants *still* chose the black applicant, this time citing the importance of taking tougher classes. In both cases, participants denied that race had anything to do with their decision.

An even cleverer study asked participants whether they would sacrifice an innocent person's life to save the lives of one hundred. The innocent victim was either named "Tyrone Payton" (a stereotypically black name) or "Chip Ellsworth III" (a stereotypically white name.) Right-wing participants were equally likely to kill the innocent victim regardless of their perceived race. Left-wing participants, however, preferred sacrificing Chip over Tyrone. What's more, left-wing participants were completely unaware of their pro-black bias.

But to call it a 'pro-black bias' slightly misses the mark. It is better described as a tacit acknowledgement that modern-day blacks must be seen through the filter of history—not as autonomous individuals living in the present, but as dominoes in a chain of causation that stretches back to the middle passage. Viewed through this historical filter, blacks cease to be agents, instead becoming "puppets at the end of a string...dangling there...waiting to be made whole," as Brown University economist Glenn Loury has put it. Once one adopts this stance of patronage towards blacks, it makes perfect sense to admit the black applicant over the white one, and to think extra hard before sacrificing Tyrone.

But this is the wrong stance to adopt towards any person. Granted, in an ultimate philosophical sense, none of us can claim to be the prime movers of our own behavior. We don't choose our genes and we don't choose the environment into which we are born. Yet we have every reason to believe that genes and environment combine to create the psychological profile that determines our cognition and behavior in each moment. In this narrow sense, we are all products of an unchosen past. But this is true of *all* people, regardless of race. The white criminal is no more deeply responsible for the mixture of causes that led him to offend than his black counterpart. Why is it, then, that historical forces are only ever invoked to explain the behavior of blacks?

Though we have not consistently lived up to the principle, liberal democracies decided long ago that the individual was to be the primary unit of moral concern and responsibility. What happened to your parents, grandparents, or fellow tribe members is supposed to be left at the door when it comes time to judge *your* actions. We do not give Jewish writers free rein to incite hatred against German people because the former's grandparents were murdered by the latter's. As tempting as such temporal displacements of justice might be, we've learned that indulging them creates an unending cycle of retributive violations.

But we make an exception for blacks. Indeed, what George Orwell wrote in 1945 seems more apt today: "Almost any English intellectual would be scandalised by the claim that the white races are superior to the coloured, whereas the opposite claim would seem to him unexceptionable even if he disagreed with it." Only a black intellectual, for instance, could write an op-ed arguing that black children should not befriend white children because "[h]istory has provided little reason for people of color to trust white people," and get it published in the *New York Times* in 2017. An identical piece with the races reversed would rightly be relegated to fringe white supremacist forums. In defense of such racist drivel, it won't suffice to repeat the platitude that 'black people can't be racist,' as if redefining a word changes the ethical status of the thing that the word signifies. Progressives ought not dodge the question: Why are blacks the only ethnic group routinely and openly encouraged to nurse stale grievances back to life?

* * *

A critic might object that I'm selectively discussing double-standards that favor blacks while ignoring those that favor whites. That's true. But my intent here is not to give an even-handed overview of all racial double-standards. Rather, I wish to point out the *meta*-double-standard in how we react to racial double-standards. When a black person is treated unfairly, our society

responds swiftly and robustly. Consider, for instance, the recent incident at a Philadelphia Starbucks in which two black men were arrested while waiting for a friend. Thought by many to have been motivated by racial bias, the incident soon had #BoycottStarbucks trending on Twitter, prompting Starbucks to shut down 8,000 stores for a half-day of anti-bias trainings. By comparison, when Taco Bell infected 65 people in three different states with E. Coli, hospitalizing nine, they temporarily shut down only fifteen restaurants. Chipotle shut down only 43 restaurants in response to a similar outbreak. That Starbucks shut down fully 8,000 stores belies the idea that our society does not respond adequately to anti-black racism. To the contrary, we treat isolated incidents of alleged racism like nascent global pandemics.

While mainstream media outlets know how to talk about anti-black racism, as of yet, most of them haven't figured out how to talk about less comfortable race-related topics—topics that don't gel nicely with the picture of modern-day blacks as helpless functions of history. Can we speak honestly, for instance, about the fact that blacks make up 14 percent of the population but commit 52 percent of the homicides? Or to state the problem in reverse, can we speak honestly about the fact that the same percentage of America's murder victims are black? Will purveyors of the idea that culture is irrelevant ever explain why blacks living in the same Los Angeles neighborhoods as Hispanics are nevertheless murdered at two to four times the rate?³ Do proponents of the idea that high-crime black neighborhoods are over-policed have a realistic solution to the epidemic of unsolved murders in such neighborhoods that does *not* involve more policing? And if they do have such a solution, will we ever be able to marshal the bipartisan coalition necessary to implement it when so many on the Left cannot even bring themselves to mention the statistics needed to describe the problem? Can we speak honestly about the social and psychological consequences of living in a community where known murderers roam free? Can we speak honestly about the economic externalities of high crime rates—the capital that is scared away; the higher prices businesses must charge to compensate for the increased risk of robbery? Or does the ever-present specter of white supremacy—and the attendant risk of trafficking in old stereotypes—really loom so large as to render frank discussion of these issues and their policy implications anathema?

At the turn of the 20th century, Italian-Americans committed crime at three times the rate of German-Americans. The issue was not danced around, to say the least. But the moment one makes this comparison, one runs into the brick wall of history. Italians, it will be argued, were not brutally enslaved and formally subjugated in America, nor were they trailing centuries of deadly stereotyping. Here again, I question not the truth, but the *relevance* of these appeals to history. Those who fall back on such appeals act as if they are content to live in a country where the state monopoly on violence—which has been a precondition for peace and prosperity in the developed world⁴—has yet to fully penetrate high-crime communities of color. They act as if they are content that homicide is the leading cause of death for black men and boys age 15-34—a fact which cannot remotely be said of any other ethnicity/age group in the country. They act as if they are content with this grim status quo, so long as we keep the abstract threat of white supremacy at bay. Of course, they are not *actually* happy with this status quo. But from the way in which they stonewall anyone who mentions these facts; from the way in which left-wing media choose to amplify inflated concerns about the police over under-reported concerns about crime, and from the way in which many on the Left replace honest disagreement on these topics with mind-reading accusations of racism, one could mistakenly get the impression that the Left is content to sacrifice thousands of underprivileged black men and boys per year on the altar of progressive sensibilities.

Given America's brutal history of white racism, it is understandable that the pendulum of racial double-standards has swung in the opposite direction—indeed, it is a testament to our laudable, if naïve, desire to fix history—but the status quo cannot be maintained indefinitely. Cracks in the

reparations mindset are beginning to show themselves. Whites are noticing that black leaders still use historical grievances to justify special dispensations for blacks who were born decades after the end of Jim Crow—and many whites understandably resent this. Asian students are noticing that applying to elite colleges is an uphill battle for them, and are understandably fighting for basic fairness in admissions standards. The majority of blacks themselves are noticing that bias is not the main issue they face anymore, even as blacks who dare express this view are called race traitors.

As these cracks widen, the far-Left responds by doubling down on the radical strain of black identity politics that caused these problems to begin with, and the far-Right responds with its own toxic strain of white identity politics. Stale grievances are dredged up from history and used to justify double-standards that create fresh grievances in turn. And beneath all of this lies the tacit claim that blacks are uniquely constrained by history in a way that Jewish-Americans, East Asian-Americans, Indian-Americans, and countless other historically marginalized ethnic groups are not. In the midst of this breakdown in civil discourse, we must ask ourselves—academics, journalists, activists, politicians, and concerned citizens alike—if we are on a path towards a thriving multi-ethnic democracy or a balkanized hotbed of racial and political tribalism.

Coleman Hughes is an undergraduate philosophy major at Columbia University. His writing has been featured on Heterodox Academy's blog as well as in the Columbia Spectator. You can follow him on Twitter [@coldxman](https://twitter.com/coldxman)

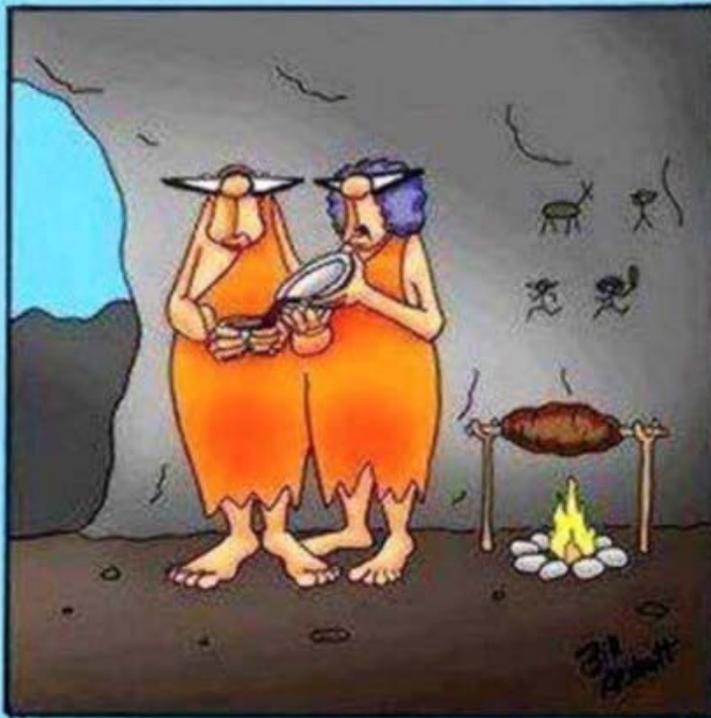


Lefty Lucy

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WINE PAIRING IN THE STONE AGE



“Simple rule of thumb; if it tries to eat us, serve with red. If it runs away from us, serve with white.”

Meanwhile in Florida

