

Nygaard Notes

Independent Periodic News and Analysis

Number 637

February 15, 2019

The Rainbow Transformation

“White people have been the majority of people considered United States citizens since this country was founded, but that period is rapidly drawing to a close.” That’s New York Times commentator Charles Blow. He made the point in the opinion pages last June.

Then, on Thanksgiving Day the New York Times made the same point in a front-page article, saying: “The graphic was splashy by the Census Bureau’s standards and it showed an unmistakable moment in America’s future: the year 2044, when white Americans were projected to fall below half the population and lose their majority status.”

Last March National Geographic Magazine published a special “race issue”, in part to atone for the egregious racism served up in its pages over many decades. In that issue they summed up the coming demographic shift as “a change that almost certainly will recast American race relations and the role and status of white Americans, who have long been a comfortable majority.”

White people are far from comfortable when they ponder the idea of a United States in which racial minority groups collectively make up a majority of the population. It was in 2008 that the Census Bureau first reported that the USA will become such a so-called majority-minority nation before too long and the announcement, coming as it did just weeks before the election of the nation’s first black president, set off a backlash that has brought us—among other things—Donald Trump.

I call the coming demographic shift the Rainbow Transformation because I feel very positive about it. But the anxiety it has provoked among the country’s white population has been amazing to watch. Why are so many white people so anxious and fearful when we are informed of the coming changes in the racial makeup of the nation? I think the fear stems from two sources. To explain the first, we’ll travel back to the year 2012, when I wrote in these pages the following:

Many people insist on believing in a world where justice reigns; so many, in fact, that a theory has been developed to explain it. It’s known as the Just World Theory.

*Melvin J. Lerner started studying the phenomenon in the 1960s, and in 1980 he articulated the idea in a book called *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion*. According to Lerner, “We do not believe that things just happen in our world; there is a pattern to events which conveys not only a sense of orderliness or predictability, but also the compelling experience of appropriateness expressed in the typically implicit judgment, ‘Yes, that is the way it should be.’”*

*Or, as Sunil D’Monte in his humanist blog *Nirmukta* more succinctly put it in August of 2011, “According to this theory, [humans] are psychologically inclined to think that the world is fair, and that people deserve their happiness and their suffering.”*

To put it even more simply, to believe in a Just World is to believe that people get what they deserve, and that they deserve what they get.

I have also referred in these pages to what I call the Three Pillars of U.S. Ideology: Individualism, Dualism, and Fetishized Freedom. The key here is Dualism. The essence of Dualism is the belief in an either/or world. Donald Trump, for example, sees people as either “winners” or “losers.” Notice that neither has any meaning without the other. There can be no winners without losers, and vice versa.

OK, equipped with those two ideas—the belief in a just world and a thought system based in part on Dualism—we can discuss white fear of living in the coming majority-minority USA.

Guilty Knowledge

Among the many privileges that come with being white in a white-supremacist culture is that white people don’t →

Greetings,

At the very end of this issue of the Notes I pose a question. I don't answer it, because I don't know the answer. But I will say that the ultimate answer will be determined, in large part, by what we do, and what we do not do. The "Quote" of the Week says that the road we will travel "depends upon the choices of political leaders and the stories they tell." Even though it's my "Quote" of the Week, I don't totally agree with that. I say it depends upon the stories WE tell, and the wisdom of the choices we make about which stories we use to guide us.

That's what Nygaard Notes is all about.

Keep telling your story.

Nygaard

Rainbow *from page 1*

have to think about racism. This has led many people to conclude that white people are oblivious to the ongoing effects of racism in the modern world. Fantasies about the "post-racial" society heard during the Obama presidency's early days, and defensive comments like "My family never owned slaves!" reinforce the idea that white people are clueless. But I think white people are not as clueless as they appear at first glance.

Anti-racist educator and activist Robin DiAngelo, in her 2018 book "White Fragility," says that one of the reasons that white people get defensive when white privilege is discussed is because of "our guilty knowledge that there is more going on than we can or will admit to."

In other words, white people are not as oblivious as we like to pretend. White people well understand that there is a centuries-long European colonial project that has imposed massive suffering on people of color around the world. The "guilty knowledge" of which DiAngelo speaks is the knowledge that white people "benefit from, and are complicit in, a racist system" that was born hundreds of years ago and that continues to the present.

The European colonial project was a dualistic global system of "superiority and inferiority, privilege and subordination" the justifications for which were numerous, but which "all eventually coalesced into the *basic* opposition of white versus nonwhite." These are the words of philosopher Charles W. Mills, who goes on to say that the European thought system was one in which nonwhite people were not "people" at all, but what Mills calls "subpersons," a less-than-human category to be exploited, enslaved, and murdered with impunity. All for the purpose of reconciling the lofty Enlightenment ideas of the "inalienable rights" of the individual with the brutal practice of conquest. If the victims are, after all, not fully human, then they have no human rights.

This is the fundamental reason that racism was invented: To justify the otherwise unjustifiable.

White privilege may, to some extent, be successful in allowing white people to avoid thinking or talking or hearing about the effects of racism. But that doesn't mean that white people don't know—at least in broad brushstrokes—the truth.

And now we hear that the ultimate trump card—holding the majority in a majority-rules society—is about to fall into the hands of... THEM. ♦

Racial Justice in a Dualistic Culture

Just World Theory says that people get what they deserve, and that they deserve what they get. And if the great crimes of racism over centuries are understood to have been committed by, and for the benefit of, people identified as "white," then what does justice demand?

There are various ways to imagine creating a process of

seeking racial justice in the United States. We could initiate a Truth and Reconciliation process such as was undertaken in post-Apartheid South Africa.

Or we could initiate a process of re-engineering our economy to achieve explicitly anti-racist goals. A current example would be the just-introduced Green New ↗↗↗

→→ Deal, which has as one of its goals “to promote justice and equity by stopping current, preventing future, and repairing historic oppression of indigenous communities, communities of color, migrant communities, deindustrialized communities, depopulated rural communities, the poor, low-income workers, women, the elderly, the unhoused, people with disabilities, and youth.”

Both of these examples imagine a complex process of transformation and healing that would involve all sectors of society. Such ideas are hard to come by in the modern United States, where Dualism rules the day.

In the Dualistic world of winners and losers, the only justice that many people can imagine is a world where the white winners switch places with the nonwhite losers and the former winners get a taste of their own bitter medicine.

Given the scale of the crimes committed in service to white supremacy—which, as I’ve said, white people well know even if we resist talking about it—the news that white people might lose their majority status must conjure up images in dualistic-thinking minds of vengeance and punitive retribution such as the world has never seen. As Donald Trump might put it.

Speaking of Donald Trump, it does mean something when he conjures up (as he so often does) a Dualistic world of winners and losers. One obvious thing it means is that he is constantly reinforcing a way of thinking in which our world is a world of endless conflict, a world in which the best one can hope for is to be on the winning side.

That’s terrifying enough! But there’s more fueling the Trump backlash than paranoid fantasies of a future lynch mob coming after their former overlords.

Rule by the Bestial “Other”

Back in NN #600 I quoted McGill University scholar Joe Kincheloe discussing how the concept of “whiteness” developed as Europeans struggled to justify their mission of global conquest during and after The Enlightenment period, which peaked during the 1600s and 1700s. Kincheloe said,

“In the emerging colonial contexts in which Whites would increasingly find themselves in the decades and centuries following the Enlightenment, the encounter with non-Whiteness would be framed in rationalistic

terms—whiteness representing orderliness, rationality, and self-control and non-whiteness as chaos, irrationality, violence, and the breakdown of self-regulation.”

In fact, the dehumanizing of the nonwhite “other” had begun much earlier. Ibram X. Kendi, in his astounding book *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, quotes the author of “the first European book on Africans in the modern era”, Gomes Eanes de Zurara, who published his book, “The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea,” in 1453. In his book, Zurara reported to his European audience that the Africans “lived like beasts, without any custom of reasonable beings.” Indeed, “they had no understanding of good, but only knew how to live in a bestial sloth” due to “the great ignorance that was in them.”

Zurara went on to become “Portugal’s chief royal chronicler.” An English translation of his book was published in London in 1896.

The construction of the nonwhite “other” lodged deeply in the hearts and minds of the conquering Europeans as the imperial projects extended beyond Africa. Kendi explains that “almost from Columbus’s arrival, Spanish colonists began to degrade and enslave the indigenous American peoples... transferring their racist constructions of African people onto Native Americans.”

We’ve seen that a part of what fuels the fear among whites of the coming Rainbow Transformation is the suspicion that the new majority might use its power to exact vengeance for centuries of injustice, in a perverse sort of Just World equivalency exercise. But the visceral fear—panic, even—evoked by the idea of a nonwhite majority goes deeper.

The panic at the thought of a nonwhite majority is tied to the European idea of nonwhites as beasts, as “subpersons” who embody “chaos, irrationality, violence, and the breakdown of self-regulation.” This is what leads white nationalists like Pat Buchanan to ask “How does the West, America included, stop the flood tide of migrants before it alters forever the political and demographic character of our nations and our civilization?” By “our” Buchanan and his nativist followers mean “white,” and the stakes are high: “We are truly dealing here with an ideology of Western suicide.”

Charles Blow explains that “All manner of current policy grows out of this panic over loss of privilege and power: immigration policy, voter suppression, Trump →→→

Justice *from page 3*

economic isolationist impulses, his contempt for people from Haiti and Africa, the Muslim ban, his rage over Black Lives Matter and social justice protests. Everything.”

Then-candidate Trump said in 2016, “Real power is fear.” And the greatest fear in a fundamentally racist society like the United States is the fear of the racially-defined Other, the subpersons who will soon be in the majority, threatening to plunge all of us into a hell of “chaos, irrationality, violence, and the breakdown of self-regulation.”

Trump is not the leader of the white-supremacist backlash against the coming Rainbow Transformation, but he and his Wall are powerful symbols of it. It’s important to

remember that our resistance cannot be effective if it’s aimed only at the symbols. Demagogues like Trump and Buchanan rely on terror, the racist terror that lives in the hearts of too many of us. Our struggle against Trump must therefore be a struggle against the racism that brought him to power, not just a “high crimes and misdemeanors” impeachment that is aimed at the individual.

As the United States continues on its way to becoming a majority-minority nation, it remains to be seen how we will respond. Will we actually see a Rainbow Transformation as we build a truly multicultural, life-affirming nation that has a place for everyone? Or will we continue our slide towards becoming a Make-America-Great-Again, apartheid-style garrison state in which the white minority rules by force? ♦

“Quote” of the Week: *“Toward Empathy and Collective Solidarity”*

This week’s “Quote” of the Week is from the inaugural issue (Summer of 2016) of the remarkable publication “Othering and Belonging: Expanding the Circle of Human Concern.” The first article was authored by John A. Powell and Stephen Menéndez, and included the following words:

“Political and economic instability is an objective condition under which demagoguery becomes a more likely political strategy. The end of the Age of Empires during World War I and the end of the Cold War mark two prominent historical junctures in which tribalism, ethnic tensions, and other forms of othering became especially salient. As empires fall, solidaristic nationalist identities may give way to latent or subordinate group-based identities...”

“Belonging is the most important good we distribute in society, as it is prior to and informs all other distributive decisions. We must support the creation of structures of inclusion that recognize and accommodate difference, rather than seek to erase it. We need practices that create voice without denying our deep interrelationship.

“We cannot deny existential anxieties in the human condition. These anxieties can be moved into directions of fear and anger or toward empathy and collective solidarity. In periods of turbulent upheaval and instability, the siren call of the demagogue has greater power, but whether a society falls victim to it depends upon the choices of political leaders and the stories they tell.”

Nygaard Notes

P.O. Box 6103

Minneapolis, MN 55406

E-mail: nygaard@nygaardnotes.org

Web: www.nygaardnotes.org