

It's Time To Put Down the Mochas & Moscatos: Race, Activism & Campus Revolution

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Abstract

In this essay, the issue of race is explored from a historical and social perspective, with a particular focus on educational institutions. The author calls for a stronger effort to dismantle racism; a more supportive and encouraging response to student activism by colleges and universities, and a rejection of neutrality in the battle with systemic racism.

Keywords: Activism; Race; Oppression; Education; Youth; College

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The Water

We've got black lives matter, brown
lives matter

afros cornrows closed fists

We've got Instagram, Facebook, Snap
Chat & cute phrases like

"I woke up like this"

We've got flashy cars and no sense of
self

designer clothes and no real wealth

We've got America raping our mind ...

The satisfaction of a societal quickie
then being left behind ...

We had sojourner, ida, and that brave
soul ella

We've got young people that think life
can't get any better

What we've got is ... grabbing at straws
and nothing to drink

We've got to think and learn and work
and yearn

for nourishment that can't fit thru the
narrows walls of a straw

We've got to push and shake and bend
and brake

the social laws that leave us behind

that encourages us to confine

our hopes and dreams into narrow and
dried up streams

Cause I'm trying to fill pails of
opportunity for my people to drink

Going down to the river and going in
deep

Willing to sink just trying to quench
your thirst

And I'll roll up these sleeves and I'll
hike up this skirt

and wade through waters of hard work

just to show you what you're worth

And I'll go in again and again, giving
and giving

And I'll come out of rough seas battered
and cold

beaten down and shivering

And I'll hold up that pail and I'll tell you
to

Drink self confidence, drink spiritual
repentance,

Drink these skills that i'll help you to
build,

Drink and be educated

And even when you're full—I'm going
to pour the water on you
Cause I cant stop until your saturated

Until you drown in a future that runs as
long and deep as the Nile

Until you're able to put boats on your
river and be a guide to ghetto civilians
... until you're able to give a ride to one
or a million

Until you're able to take my place and
deliver the hopes and dreams of living
up the river

And even if you live in a city or suburb

that makes it hard for you to envision my
words

Because you don't see any oceans,

There aren't any rivers around you,

The wells of opportunity have run dry...

Then we'll just have to try

this in the kitchen sink...

It's not a lot of water but its enough to
drink

And we'll explore opportunity anywhere
we can

And we'll forget cups and pails—I'll
catch it in my hand

And I'll tell you to drink knowledge,
drink peace, and drink love ...

And once you're hydrated and strong
and no longer tired

What we're going to do is start us a fire

Create us a spark to ignite our desire

To want more ... to be more ... to do
more for our people

To understand what it means to be free
not just equal

I don't want to be equal to people with
hate in their hearts

If I have to cuddle with prejudice and
racism

I'd rather live apart

I'm talking about mental health ... about
creating an agenda of cultural love to
take care of ourselves

We need that spiritual medicine for our
racial pain

That loving acceptance to counter the
social disdain

That empathetic knowledge of our
struggles and stress

That beautiful history that we should
never forget

Comfortable isn't acceptable

Half empty still ain't full

Luke warm won't stop a chill

And half the money won't pay the bill

So forget progress ...

I'm asking America why?
Yesterday today tomorrow, the question
is still the same ...

What to the slave is the 4th of July?

On Progress: What to the Slave Is the 4th of July?

In 1852 Frederick Douglass posed this question as he delivered an Independence Day speech to the Ladies of the Rochester Anti-Slavery Sewing Society. I'm sure they all expected him to speak on the beauty and importance of independence. But instead, what he said to them was, "This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*." His words spoke so much truth at that moment. They spoke to the hypocrisy of asking an escaped slave to deliver an Independence Day speech, during a time when this country had not yet truly ended slavery. Slavery didn't end in the United States until December 6, 1865. So his main point was, how can we celebrate freedom when all of our citizens can't experience it? I start with Frederick Douglass because he is a perfect example of having the courage to speak the truth. And 163 years later, I'm asking similar questions.

How can we toast to progress when so many of our young people are further behind educationally than they were when we were being educated in cold, one-room, wooden school houses? We've got big buildings that are being run like jails and nice books that students can't even read because their schools are failing them. And I ask, is that progress? How can we celebrate freedom, when a young boy can't walk to the store in his dad's neighborhood to buy candy and juice without being shot? And it makes me remember Emmett Till and wonder, is this progress? How can we celebrate freedom, when nine innocent people can't simply gather and learn and pray together, without being victim to prejudiced brutality and violence? And it makes me remember those four little girls and wonder, is this progress?

So, how do we measure progress? How far have we really come regarding the national sentiment about ethnically diverse communities? I often teach a class on diversity in higher education and I always include a segment on stereotypes. As I prepared the lesson plan for a class meeting where I planned to use large posters with images to engage students in a stereotypes exercise, I did a quick Google search for images using the term "angry Black woman." The search result shocked me. I found myself looking at multiple images of First Lady Michelle Obama. What about this highly educated, highly accomplished woman is angry? Google isn't always a vehicle to find truths, it also shows us a lot about social norms, stereotypes, and mass beliefs.

And understand that stereotypes matter. Stereotypes are the seeds of prejudice, and prejudice is what creates racism. So it's when someone begins to believe stereotypes, starts to develop prejudiced thoughts, and then is given power—like a job teaching children, a job running a company, or a job hiring employees—that they can begin to act based on their prejudiced beliefs. That's racism and that's dangerous. It's more dangerous for a prejudiced teacher to teach a child than it is for that child to be taught with substandard materials.

This concerns me not only as an educator, but also as a mother. I have a two-year-old son. He's a sweet, cute, loving little Black boy. And as happy as I was to bring him into the world, I am scared about the world in which he will live, because our society thinks of young African American men as criminals and thugs. As a Black mother, I'm not just thinking about what to feed him, what to read to him, or what learning activities to use to grow his basic

skills. I'm thinking about how it's not academically safe for him in public schools because Black and Brown children are being left behind. I just worked with a group of first generation, low-income students this summer and several had GPAs over 4.0 and could barely write a cohesive sentence. How does that happen? One student shared that she didn't write one paper her entire junior year in high school. How is that possible? I don't want that for my child. But I also don't want him in a private school where he is made to feel culturally isolated and racially ostracized.

As a Black family, we are thinking about where we can live so that our child is safe and free to be a wondering and exploring boy without being racially profiled by the police. We are concerned with how we can counter the ways that music and television might limit his perspective and encourage him to think negatively about himself and negatively about Black girls who are the cultural reflection of his own mother. I am worried that what is meant to entertain him and bring him joy might subliminally teach him to think that girls that look like me aren't beautiful—they are *ratchet* and worthless. And the question we should be asking is: Why am I having to think about this in 2016?

Black and Brown mammas are still worrying about their sons being safe in America because we have moved forward and have gotten nowhere. We're moving at a horse-and-buggy pace when it comes to social justice. In the past 40 years, the Black and White unemployment rates have barely changed. Black men are still being terrorized in their communities. Black children are still being undereducated. So in my poem, that's why I say forget making

progress. I want a revolution. Complete and total change.

Which brings me to coffee.

Avoiding Honest Dialogue: White Chocolate Mochas

I am a professor and a writer who spends a lot of time working in cafes and coffee shops. I am also a sleep-deprived new mother. Needless to say, I love me some coffee. In my purse, I carry my own stevia (sugar alternative) and straw (to prevent stained teeth). It's serious. But admittedly, I am one of those foofoo coffee drinkers. Give me a latte with a few pumps of caramel, vanilla, or white chocolate mocha. And this pulls me back to one of my favorite quotes by Malcolm X. Speaking on the need for strong and powerful activism to a group of grassroots activists in Detroit, Michigan, he said:

It's just like when you've got some coffee that's too black, which means it's too strong. What do you do? You integrate it with cream, you make it weak. But if you pour too much cream in it, you won't even know you ever had coffee. It used to be hot, it becomes cool. It used to be strong, it becomes weak. It used to wake you up, now it just puts you to sleep. (X, 1963)

The main issue is that we never really addressed our racial problems in the United States. After the Civil Rights Movement, we dramatically changed folks' situation in our country—changed laws and threw us all together without acknowledging that we didn't truly know how to live together. We didn't allow time for people to

truly adjust their eyes to a new racial reality. We changed policies and called it equality. And all folks did was figure out new ways to live separately and maintain the status quo. Blatant racism turned into institutional racism and became a much harder concept to battle. We didn't allow time for people to heal; for people to share their pain and purge their prejudice; for people to have real and honest talks about what they believed, what they had been taught, and what they didn't know about one another.

I'm reading a book right now about the integration of neighborhoods in Detroit. It's telling the story of Black people moving north during the great migration and eventually moving out of the Black bottoms in northern cities into White neighborhoods and the sheer terror that they faced. It wasn't just hate for Black folks that drove the White neighbors to form mobs and terrorize anyone that dared to move into a White community, it was also the belief that Black neighbors would drive down property values. As soon as a few Black families moved in, White families moved out, and the neighborhood became a perceived ghetto. Can you honestly say that in 2017 people still don't feel this way? A video posted last year on Facebook of a police officer slamming a young black girl down at a pool party after White parents at the community pool complained and harassed the Black kids, telling them to go back to the projects, shows us our progress. There is an immediate belief that one or two Black youth are okay, but too much Black and Brown gathered in one place is a problem—they don't belong.

This is the result of not admitting and dealing with our racial past. Of putting on a good face and living a fantasy. Many of us do it in our personal lives. We have failing marriages and dysfunctional homes

but we put on a fake and phony face in public so no one will know. We do it well because our country showed us how. We hide behind the facade of fabulous lives, well-manicured lawns, and concepts like the home of the free and the land of the brave, yet we aren't even brave enough to have real and honest conversations about our shortcomings as a nation. If we are too scared to talk, how can we have the courage to do something as drastic as change?

The Need to Admit, Address, and Confront

The saying goes: Lilies that fester smell far worst than weeds. Lilies are beautiful flowers. Weeds are eyesores; they're ugly and pop up everywhere. But as beautiful as lilies might look, if you leave them unattended, never throw them out, or change the water, they start to smell. They will stink up your whole house. Weeds might be ugly but they don't stink. This is what's happening in our country. It looks pretty on the outside but we have let our racial issue fester unattended and its now stinking up our country.

Race has been so much a factor in the fabric of America, how could we believe it would just disappear with time? This is a place where folks used to bring a beer and a blanket to watch Black men be burned at the stake. And they took pictures. That's what selfies used to look like in the United States. And we are supposed to believe that everything just suddenly became okay because time passed or because laws were changed.

Laws change behavior; they don't change hearts and minds. And the very space that could do that—our education system—constantly falls short. As an educator, I really don't understand how a

student can go through 12 years of public education in this country and not study race in a full and intentional way. Why are most of my students talking about it for the first time in college? We need to talk about it.

Years ago, I heard Dr. Cornel West use the phrase “lovingly challenge” and I adopted it as a way of being. I lovingly question policies and administrative structures at my institution. I push for change. We need to do this in all of our spaces where we have the power—lovingly challenge our companies, schools, neighbors, friends, and family members. This doesn’t require you to be in a constant state of rage—that will kill you. You might kill a policy or a stereotype, but when you’re mad all the time, a bit of yourself also dies in the process. So we need to learn how to be brave enough to bring it up and loving enough to push our friends, families, coworkers, and colleagues without pushing them away. You might not be able to change the world, but if you can’t even work on your own family, there is a problem. If you can’t encourage a positive change in the minds of your friends, that’s a waste of a friendship. Times like these help you to truly know who your friends are. I don’t mean who is truly your friend, but rather who your friends truly are—what they think and believe. We can no longer say that it’s only ignorant, uneducated Americans who have prejudiced thoughts. All we have to do is scroll through Facebook.

Race on Social Media

My Facebook friends list is full of folks with college degrees—highly educated and very successful in traditional terms. But as the riots of the past few years unfolded, my feed was bombarded with folks calling the rioters in Missouri and Baltimore savages. Savages and animals. Current racial

incidents have gotten people to be really honest about what they actually think. I was shocked that people I knew and their friends were referring to African Americans as animals that need to be exterminated. These are educated adults between the ages of 35 and 45. So then why would we be surprised that a young 21-year-old would walk into a church in Charleston, South Carolina, thinking the way that he did? The United States has a real addiction to oppression, sexism, and racism.

And the first step in any process of recovery is admitting you have a problem. That’s why folks in Alcoholics Anonymous always start with “My name is ... and I am an alcoholic.” You have to acknowledge what you need to change. Admit it. Talk about it. Say it out loud. Social media has made folks brave in a cowardly sort of way. You can post comments without fearing for your life. So many people are daring to actually say out loud the ignorant things that they think. And, as a race educator, that’s a good thing to me. We need spaces of honesty so that we can see how bad a problem race is in America. I can’t get anywhere with educating prejudice out of folks if everyone is sitting around being politically correct and dishonest. Realness is what we need. We have to create spaces where we can fully and honestly purge prejudice.

And we need to be honest—many of our own friends are prejudiced and classist. We have work to do in our social circles and you absolutely have the power to create change there. But too often we shrink away from having truly challenging, life-changing, and intense conversations with our friends or colleagues, because we don’t want to be seen as constant complainers and disrupters. Nothing spoils a party like that angry radical “fight the power” friend. And

on the job, there is the added weight of being labeled the “angry Black man or woman” if we choose to push and challenge in the office. We don’t want to be the voice of disagreement blaming everything on racism. We are often so committed to wearing our hard-earned professionalism and privilege with dignity and honor that we simply don’t want to come off as rude or radical.

I’m not suggesting we need to harass or be hostile. But we do need to take a stand or simply stand up. John Henrike Clark, a major historian within the field of African American Studies, once said that for someone to walk over you, you must bend in order to balance them on your back. It is only when you stand up that you can knock oppression off your back. They may not have been perfect and eloquent in their approach, but if those young people had not taken to the streets in Missouri and New York City and Baltimore, then places like South Carolina and Alabama, which have held on to their racist heritage so tightly, would have never moved so swiftly to denounce and take down the Confederate flag. They didn’t want any part of riots down there. If college students all over the country had not died in, sat in, or walked out, we probably wouldn’t see the mass sweep of new diversity positions being created on campuses around the country.

We often praise the students who “bleed” the school colors, cheer at every football game, and walk the line of being good, model students. Many of these students will graduate and not make one difference at their university. Yet, it is because of the historic student activists who occupied, sat in, rallied, and marched on our campuses that major structures like cultural centers, ethnic studies departments, and multicultural affairs offices even exist.

Activist students made those things happen. Making any entity better, whether it is a school, a company, or a country, is not achieved through rhetoric that makes us feel good, but rather through action and calls to action that inspire us to do good. And understand, while hiring a chief diversity officer is a good first step, one staff member can’t solve the campuses problems. It takes true institutional commitment to restructuring policies, resources, services, curriculums, traditions, staff, and business practices in order for us to see substantive change on college campuses. Working for justice is not easy.

This brings me to Moscato.

Racial Justice Ain’t Easy Work: Drinking Sweet Wine

These are the days when “fabulous” folks order bottles of Moscato with their dinner. This makes me laugh because Moscato is a sweet wine. It is meant to be paired with dessert or a small plate of fruit and cheese. It’s not dinner wine. But my generation, we need watered-down wine—essentially juice with a bit of alcohol—because we can’t take the bitterness, earthiness, and boldness of dinner wine. I did another quick search on Google for Moscato. One of the first hits was an article written by Sam Sanders that shared the fact that African Americans and Latinos have overwhelmingly embraced Moscato as their wine of choice. Sanders (2013) goes on to note,

But despite moscato’s popularity, the strange thing about hip-hop’s fascination with the beverage is that the wine is not at all high-end. It’s a relatively cheap white wine made from the muscat grape. And moscato is really sweet and has low alcohol

content. Sweet enough and weak enough, in fact, to make a wine drinker out of anyone. ... People who don't think of themselves as wine drinkers, who are intimidated by the idea of a wine tasting, who would never, ever try to search out "earthy tones" in a deep red—those people drink moscato.

“Sweet enough and weak enough to make a wine drinker out of anyone.” It is so easy to be lukewarm revolutionaries. We want to drink the wine of revolution, but we want it to be smooth, sweet, and trendy. We love throwing a fundraising event that allows us to dress to impress. We love developing a scholarship (often for our own kids). We run willingly to a park clean-up. We throw ice over ourselves and change our profile picture to the latest image of protest. (Here is me wearing a hoodie. Here is me with my hands up). The reality is that work for justice often isn't pretty, fabulous, or tasty. Creating social change is often ugly, grueling, and tiring—but it is also life changing. This is the work that makes history. Oppression is not as simple as individual motivation; it is a more complex system of policies, practices, and structures

that keep many folks on the margins of our society. And it will take hard, grueling work in every field of endeavor to create change—economics, education, social services, medicine, criminal justice, psychology, the arts, law—all of us have role to play in changing our society and dismantling racism and classism.

Fighting for justice has never been nice and easy. Ask the abolitionists about how ugly that fight is; talk to Harriet Tubman about the true *gullyness* of the work; have a conversation with Ella Baker about community commitment; sit a bit with Dr. King in a jail cell or a hospital room; confer with Malcolm as he watches over his family with a shotgun; interview the suffragists; reach out to the Black Panthers and Black Liberation Party members who are still living in exile or in jail; and walk with Cesar Chavez and the farm workers who would immediately start up a new protest after each victory was won. *La lucha continua*. It is time to put down the Moscatos and to pick up an adult beverage. It's time to stand up. Let's take our activism as seriously as we take our coffee. And from now on make it bold, black, and extra hot.

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