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The Concealment of Racism in America: Rise of an Unseen Oppressor

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The Concealment of Racism in America: Rise of an Unseen Oppressor

Abstract

Overview: The progression of how racism manifests is observed in many areas of the world, notably in American literature. As evidenced by *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* by Frederick Douglass, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, and *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, racism has become more covert and more subtle over time; racism has moved from obvious and overt slavery in the past, to more concealed discrimination/segregation later on, and finally to the hidden institutional racism of today.

Author's reflection: My name is Justin Gabriel, and I am majoring in biochemistry at St. John Fisher College. I have strong passions for the pharmaceutical industry and the research/production of drugs and will likely be pursuing this interest in graduate school after I complete my undergraduate degree. In the spring semester of 2021, I was able to participate in the research-writing course of Racism in America with Professor Regan. In this class, the three books we read were all about one hundred years apart from one another, yet I felt they all shared similar concepts about racial issues. I drew connections from both these fictional and non-fictional pieces of American writing and was able to visualize a timeline of how racism has changed in our country over time, for better or for worse. The final product of that chronology can be found in my paper, "The Concealment of Racism in America: Rise of an Unseen Oppressor."

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English 1299-04

30 April 2021

The Concealment of Racism in America: Rise of an Unseen Oppressor

In May of 2020, George Floyd was killed at the hands of police after having his neck knelt on for over nine minutes. In August of 1955, a fourteen-year-old boy named Emmett Till was beaten and mutilated before being shot in the head and thrown in a river. In the overcrowded and unsanitary slave ships of the 18th century and far earlier, an estimated fifteen percent of all soon-to-be slaves transported from Africa across the Middle Passage died. While the deaths of Black people remain a constant in the history of our country, it is only racism that has changed form and mutated over time. Racism is now far different than it once was, for better or for worse. Racism has become more “silent” as the years have passed, meaning that it has become harder to point out just where it resides in our culture and civilization.

This progression of how racism manifests is observed in many areas of the world, notably in American literature. As evidenced by *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* by Frederick Douglass, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, and *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, racism has become more covert and more subtle over time; racism has moved from obvious and overt slavery in the past, to more concealed discrimination/segregation later on, and finally to the hidden institutional racism of today.

19th Century and Earlier

The racism that takes place in the 19th century, and earlier, can be described as blatant, open, and encouraged. Racism began to originate with the creation of race itself sometime around the 1500s, meaning that the concept of race is both a social construct and older than our country itself. As stated by the National Museum of African American History and Culture, “the false notion that ‘white’ people were inherently smarter, more capable, and more human than nonwhite people became accepted worldwide” (“Historical Foundations of Race”). Race was invented to be a descriptor that set apart people by their physical features, appearance, or other characteristics, essentially differentiating who was White and who was “non-White,” in order to determine who ranked below the Whites at the top of the racial hierarchy (“Historical Foundations of Race”).

During this time, overt racism in the form of rape of “lesser” races could even be encouraged and protected under the law, such as the legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which made children's legal status follow the mother (not the father, who could be a free, White man) in Virginia and other royal colonies in 1662 (“Historical Foundations of Race”). The doctrine, therefore “legitimized the exploitation of female slaves by white planters or other men” and safeguarded “the natural increase of the enslaved in the Americas” (“Historical Foundations of Race”). With more White, colonist men taking advantage of slave women, new names had to be conceived to disparage the offspring being made as a byproduct. These derogatory terms relate to what Komal K. Dhillon-Jamerson describes in *The American Behavioral Scientist* journal when she says, “racial designations, such as mulatto and quadroon, were used to categorize the children of these forced unions” (2089). Dhillon-Jamerson also notes concepts of colorism in slavery like how dark-skinned Black slaves were dehumanized in agricultural labor,

whereas light-skinned slaves were often craftsmen or house servants (2090). These classifications and sortings of different peoples into races and colors were made into a “justification for European colonization and subsequent enslavement of people from Africa” by the colonizing Whites of America (“Historical Foundations of Race”).

Slavery and its effects were greatly detrimental, damaging, and hurtful to the Black population. Slaves in America worked long and arduous days, without proper care nor pay, to only be treated as lesser than cattle. A primary account of this subhuman treatment can be found in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, written by Frederick Douglass in 1845. Douglass was born into slavery sometime in February of 1818 in Maryland to his Black mother, but was left to only suspect that his father is a White man (and possibly his owner) (1). Growing up in the 19th century, Douglass is able to witness racist horrors like whippings, brutal beatings, and often murders almost every waking moment.

In chapter three of the narrative, Douglass recalls seeing a slave named “Demby” run into a creek to soothe his lash marks, where he is then threatened by his owner, Mr. Gore, to come out (14). When Demby refuses to move from his position after Mr. Gore counts to three, Mr. Gore raises his musket to Demby’s face and pulls the trigger “without consultation or deliberation with any one” (Douglass 14). As Demby’s body floats out of sight, Douglass can remember seeing that “blood and brains” marked the water where Demby had stood (14). This instance of apathetic murder in broad daylight is not a unique event for this period either. Douglass can also recollect how an old slave that belonged to Colonel Lloyd accidentally ambled onto the territory of Mr. Beal Bondly while fishing for oysters on a calm Sunday night (15). For this unconscious mistake, Mr. Bondly fired his musket onto the fishing old man and killed him (Douglass 15). In addition to this, the cousin of Douglass’ wife, who was no older than sixteen,

was beaten to death with a piece of wood for falling asleep while supervising a sleeping baby that happened to wake up and cry (Douglass 15). Black people would be shot for taking a step over an imaginary line or falling asleep. Slaves were dehumanized into creatures that were looked at as not being fit for this Earth, even as free sources of labor. Slave owners would rather end a Black man or women's life than have them have any sort of retribution or rebellion whatsoever. Racism was so apparent that a White person would more likely be seen using their slaves for shooting practice than giving them a decent meal.

Frederick Douglass' striking 1845 memoir shows how racism ran rampant throughout our country in the 19th century and far earlier, but remained unchecked due to the lack of desire from most Americans. For the murders witnessed by Douglass, punishment may have been given, but it would never be served (Douglass 15). In Maryland, Douglass says that killing a slave is "not treated as a crime, either by the courts or the community" (14). Killing a slave was more encouraged than it was punished. Murder of Blacks was more of a right than a crime. While this is no longer the case in our society today, at this time when Douglass was becoming a freeman, racism was overt and undisguised. An African-American could not wake up without wondering if this day would be the one they are slaughtered for not farming fast enough or addressing a White person with the right terms of respect. Racism was very much alive and operating at its maximum.

Within the 19th century itself, a movement towards covert racism can be seen with Reconstruction policies following the Civil War, after Douglass would have been granted his legal freedom. As detailed by Cynthia Scheopner in *Multicultural America: A Multimedia Encyclopedia*, the so-called "Black Codes" and "Jim Crow laws" were "aimed at changing as little as possible [to] the imbalance of power between the races" (1276). It did not matter that

Congress ratified the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, state lawmakers had found ways to hide racism within jurisdictions and continue their bigoted ways (Scheopner 1276). In some states following the Civil War, non-Whites could not serve on juries for White men and women, could not walk freely without written proof of employment, or were forced to purchase an expensive license if they wished to become an artisan, shopkeeper, etc. (Scheopner 1276). Racism was well on its way to covering its ugly face and seeping into the cracks where it could operate untouched.

20th Century

While more rights were being granted to African-Americans in the 20th century than in the centuries before, there were other, secluded racist ways they could be barred from escaping discrimination. The wrath of Jim Crow remained steady until the civil rights act of 1964, meaning that for more than half of the 20th century, discrimination and segregation were openly practiced in most of America (Scheopner 1276). The Fourteenth Amendment overturned the Dred Scott decision that African-Americans were property, but it failed to prevent decisions like that of *Plessy v. Ferguson* at the turn of the century, as described by Laurie Collier Hillstrom in her book titled *Plessy v. Ferguson* (40). The landmark case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* allowed for and upheld “separate but equal” policies that protected segregation in all aspects of life (Hillstrom 40). Freedom was granted to Black Americans, yet non-equal facilities kept them from accessing the best schools, the cleanest water fountains, or even the front of a public bus for more than fifty long years (Hillstrom 64). Non-equal facilities kept Black Americans from being truly equal.

In education, White support for integrated schooling and relationships could not be seen nor was it wanted. Researchers Maria Krysan and Sarah Patton Moberg found that only 30% or so of Whites in 1940 supported integrated schooling and that during the 1950s, less than 10% of Whites favored interracial marriage. This segregation moved into the workplace as well, with Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom reporting in a *Brookings* article that in the 1940s, “six out of ten African-American women were household servants who, driven by economic desperation, often worked 12-hour days for pathetically low wages.” Even after progress like that of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Sharon Austin of *PBS* reports that “in 1968, just 10% of white people lived below the poverty level, while nearly 34% of African-Americans did.” Like Austin and the Thernstroms indicated, progress in the constitution or laws or institutions only went so far, underlying problems like poverty remained in full force. As it turned out, separate was not so equal after all.

With Black people being able to work for a wage to support themselves and their families, free labor was being undone. However, this advancement could not be allowed to continue as the majority of White Americans would not happily work alongside a person of color. In the 1940s, it can be seen from Krysan and Moberg’s data that more than half of respondents agreed that “Negroes” should not have as good of a chance as White people to get any kind of job (Krysan & Moberg). Black workers had to be hidden away due to racist ideologies that persisted in our culture.

A novelized representation of this can be found in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, which deals with an African-American family struggling to get by in America during the Great Depression. Looking at the particular character of Pauline “Polly” Breedlove from this family, who is a mother of two and the primary breadwinner for her household, she exemplifies

discrimination in the workplace seen during this time (Morrison). Pauline works for a well-to-do White family as a house servant, one of the only jobs a Black woman would be able to keep in this century (Morrison). She must obey the commands of a little White girl, who calls her “Polly” instead of her real name or even Mrs. Breedlove, along with the rest of the White family because she knows she will not get work doing anything else (Morrison 108). Even when her daughter, Pecola, is burned by a spilled pie, Pauline elects to coddle the little White girl who merely suffered a stain from the incident (Morrison 109). In addition to this highlighted episode, there is another event where the White woman Pauline works for threatens to withhold her pay if she does not leave Cholly—her husband—because he had shown up to their house drunk begging for some money (Morrison 120). When Pauline refuses the White woman’s attempt at extortion and gaining more control over her, she is left without enough money to pay the gas man and can therefore not even cook on the stove in her own home (Morrison 121).

As substantiated by these scenes in *The Bluest Eye*, one can conclude that White people still retained control over people of color in the 20th century. Racism had developed from plantation owners possessing slaves to the wealthy holding control over Black blue-collar workers, evidently becoming more shrouded over time. Racism was no longer as glaringly obvious as it was during the times of Douglass, it had developed into a supremacist form not criminal in the eyes of the law. Looking at the overall portrayal, a picture of a housemaid harmlessly cleaning for a family can be seen. Looking deeper into the frame, it can be realized that behind the facade is a White lineage holding power over a helpless Black woman.

These concepts of superiority through discrimination continue to the end of the century. Jerelyn Eddings and Jeannye Thornton report multiple personal stories of experiences with “stealth racism” in the *U.S News & World Report* from 1995 (40). These stories include proof of

passive racism's camouflaged appearance, such as taxis jumping out of line to avoid taking a Black commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission or a Black photographer from the White House (Eddings & Thornton 40). In addition to this, an account is included of a Black man and his friend buying a new computer at a mall in a predominantly White neighborhood, only to be "blocked by two police squad cars" when leaving for visiting so many stores (Eddings & Thornton 40). Segregation or no segregation, racism will find a way to prop itself up and linger on in our communities. Only now, racism exists in masked forms that are still socially acceptable, no matter how damaging to the average person of color.

21st Century and Current Day

Moving into the current day and 21st century, racism is now increasingly more covert than in the past and can not be as easily seen with the naked eye. In the words of law professor William Y. Chin, "America has not extirpated racism, but has instead allowed it to mutate into a different form" (1). Chin elucidates how covert racism in the modern era exists at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels (4).

At the individual level, racist behaviors are the consequence of racist thoughts and assumptions that are informally learned by the "student" modeling after others around them (Chin 7). This theory of informal learning that Chin puts forward is described in Kim Mills' 2009 interview with Yale psychologist Dr. John Dovidio. In Dovidio's illustration of interracial interactions, he says how the media's portrayal of Blacks as being in poverty or involved with crime juxtaposes with the portrayal of Whites having social/political power and consequently breeds prejudice and "aversive" racism within the public (Mills). People don't know they're being taught to associate Blacks with criminal behavior and to fear them, yet they are being

taught in one way or another. Racist thoughts are inadvertently being instructed to the public, consequently creating individuals who are inadvertently racist to others. This method of informal teaching is undetectable at a level where many don't realize how intolerant their prejudices are—if they even realize their prejudices at all.

For institutional racism, it is covert because it does not involve directly racist acts by individuals, but rather “imperceptible processes and procedures of organizations” like schools, corporations, or even governments that affect sectors of society such as education, law, politics, and more (Chin 8). One of the many subdivisions Chin goes more in-depth into is the economic sector, where he focuses on how predatory lenders targeted communities of color before the 2008 Recession, selling minorities subprime loans with high-interest rates even though they could qualify for better, prime loans (11). Like the work of Chin, racial and ethics professor Dr. Rodney D. Coates found that Blacks and Latinos were “more likely to pay more to lease a car (Cohen 2003), to be targeted by subprime lenders (CRL 2006), and less likely to obtain key information regarding job interviews (Bonds 2002)” (244). Institutions are targeting Blacks and other minorities by design. Banks know that they can give poorer communities worse interest rates or outright refuse loans, even though community members may have suitable credit scores or wealth, and get away with it. Redlining residents of poor neighborhoods is something not often checked by law documents and the legal system, whether it is because of lack of knowledge or lack of care. Banks can freely deny these people equal access to simple things, citing low-income districts or creditworthiness, but never directly saying it is because of the color of their skin.

Lastly, Chin looks at social norms that promote inequality, or systemic racism (28). These norms can be seen in the workplace, where inequality is still practiced (Chin 31). Minority

workers are known to be treated more negatively by customers, evaluated more harshly by supervisors, and promoted less frequently than Whites (Chin 31). People will continue to treat minorities as lesser because of their inherited unconscious biases, even if they think they are being unbiased or not racist (Chin 31). The view that racism is no longer a problem because it is no longer overt is itself a factor of systemic racism and a social norm that the majority have widely accepted (Chin 28). Professor Rodney Coates also touches on the rooted unconscious biases that Chin is discussing, noting how the inculcation of covert racism from one generation to the next, elite or non-elite, creates a “closed feedback loop” that breeds “benign neglect” within the majority of our society (245). This neglect continuously pushes and presses minorities down lower and lower, with no hope of ever escaping (245). Coates further vocalizes this never-ending struggle by saying that “tradition, norms, and customs typically uphold, justify, or obscure [covert racism’s] operation” (243).

One of the sectors of our community that covert racism has its “tentacles” deeply lodged into would be the law system, more specifically, the “brave” men and women enforcing it. Police are supposed to be the ones protecting civilians and making them safe, but the opposite is true for non-Whites. This sad reality is told in the 2015 book *All American Boys* by Brendan Kiely and Jason Reynolds, where a story of police brutality is told from the perspective of both the Black victim and a White bystander of the same age.

It did not matter for seventeen-year-old African-American Rashad Butler that his ROTC uniform was in his duffel bag, all the store clerk perceived and the police officer believed was that a Black kid was stealing from a convenience store, which was far from the actual truth (Reynolds & Kiely). It did not take long for the officer to have Rashad beaten, bloody, and face down in the pavement for all, including Quinn Collins, to witness (Reynolds & Kiely 23). Quinn,

a White basketball player from the same school as Rashad, saw the officer—who was his best friend’s brother—“hitting the other guy, again, and again, smashing his face into the sidewalk” (Reynolds & Kiely 38). Quinn could only stare in shock as “the blood kept coming” and Rashad was beaten senseless in broad daylight outside a convenience store both kids frequented (Reynolds & Kiely 38). Although Rashad lived after suffering a broken nose and a couple of fractured ribs, he can be considered let off easy (Reynolds & Kiely 43). Day after day, a new name of the next Black person killed by police will make its way into the headlines, only to soon make its way out as it is replaced by another Black name.

The struggles faced by both Rashad and Quinn in *All American Boys* perpetuate the effects of individual, institutional, and systemic racism and how they affect people of color daily in the 21st century. The story of *All American Boys* may be fictional, but the concepts are not. A Black boy could be bending over in a store, but all the store cashier or police would see is a potential criminal, something not unlike the death of George Floyd in March 2020 (Reynolds & Kiely). The police officer can then take this prejudice and weaponize it, throwing Rashad—who is still a minor—on the pavement and nearly killing him (Reynolds & Kiely). The policeman is allowed to do this because he has a badge over his heart that earned after training and education, which conveniently neglects racial relations and anti-racism. The police forces of nowadays have been recognized as inherently favoring one race over others, whether it is through racial profiling or unfair drug-related arrests. This hidden hand that pushes along Whites and smacks down Blacks can be marked as an expression of covert racism.

With Black people no longer in the shackles of slavery or in the setbacks of segregation, there are other ways they can be held back. These new ways are unrevealed and secretive, not seen every day by those on the outside looking in, yet are always present. As Khiara Bridges

discloses in *Time* magazine, “while Black people constitute 12% of the U.S. population, they constitute 33% of the prison population” (Bridges). The police act out the hidden flaws of the institution as a whole, carrying out their personal intentionally or unintentionally racist views with the power given to them by the state and local governments. Police can stop whomever they want, whenever they want and can investigate things that are completely unrelated to the original reason for the stop (Bridges). Officers of the law can use force; they are practically given licenses to kill (Bridges). As vocalist and activist Zach de la Rocha once sang out, “some of those that work forces are the same that burn crosses.” Police officers can bluntly act out their racist beliefs and leave Black people behind in body bags. Rashad is lucky to escape with his life because so many victims before him, as well as after, did not.

Police brutality is not the only form of covert racism that can be discerned in the 21st century. As accentuated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, racial disparities can be detected in healthcare. As hypothesized by Rebekah J. Walker in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, it is possible that “increased exposure to Covid-19 among Black Americans is attributable to greater representation in service occupations and a greater likelihood of living in inner cities with high population density” (e77). The history associated with inner cities has left many Black Americans with both less economic and educational opportunities than Whites that expose them to social risks with severe negative consequences (Walker e77). Years of structural racism have left these people with a lack of financial resources that lead to problems such as “food insecurity, housing instability, and limited access to transportation” (Walker e77).

Nancy Krieger similarly takes a look at the presence of covert racism in the COVID-19 pandemic in the *American Journal of Public Health*. Krieger found that in the US Census Household Pulse Survey, “for the week of May 28 to June 2, 2020, fully 44% of Black non-

Hispanic and Hispanic households reported they had no or little confidence they could pay the next month's rent, more than twice the already alarming 20% reported for White non-Hispanic households” (1621). In addition to this, the percentage of Blacks/Hispanics who often or sometimes did not have enough to eat was more than double that of Whites (Krieger 1621). Even in 2021, where COVID-19 cases are still on the rise and the vaccine is only now being slowly rolled out, covert racism is still undeniably causing harm and great suffering to the Black community. The pandemic highlights how a system that disproportionately aids African-Americans will cause Black people to be more acutely affected than their White counterparts. This behind-the-scenes racism in healthcare is just one confirmation of whether or not racism has become more subtle over time. Covert racism is indirectly killing African-Americans through the medium of SARS-CoV-2 at this very moment.

Counterclaim: Is Police Brutality Not Overt Racism?

Due to police brutality and its effects, such as the public homicide of a Black person at the hands of the police, one may argue that police brutality is overt racism and that racism has not become more covert over time. On the contrary, these assumptions would be uninformed and incorrect as a result. While the death of an African-American can be patently seen, the reasons as to why these men and women are allowed to be killed and are allowed to keep being killed are unobservable. The death of one Black man is overt racism, the deaths of many Black men would be covert racism. The way law enforcement agencies hand out badges to the same people that would stare at a Black person for their different hairstyle or attire is despicable. The people that get behind the wheel of a police cruiser and carry a Glock handgun in their holster will pepper spray a Black man for not having plates but will let others off scot-free if they are White.

While Whites are 64% of the U.S. population, they make up 30% of jails (Bridges). While Blacks are 12% of the U.S. population, they make up 33% of jails (Bridges). With Whites having almost double the population of Blacks, there are still more African-Americans imprisoned in our country. These uneven numbers highlight the problem that is larger than one or two police officers, it goes much higher up to the foundation itself. Instead of fixing the problems of places like inner cities and the lack of support for the minorities that reside there, “our nation responds by building more prisons and jails” (Bridges). Much like what is seen with COVID-19, our criminal-justice system documents how Black people are left susceptible to harm and with little to no control over their well-being and health (Bridges). Our society should protect, help, and care for African-Americans—yet, that fails to be seen.

As researcher Stephan A. Schwartz reports, “the rate of fatal police shootings among Black Americans was much higher than that for any other ethnicity, standing at 30 fatal shootings per million of the population as of June 2020” (280). While African-Americans make up 13% of the U.S. population, they represented 26% of people shot and killed by police since 2015 (Schwartz 281). While African-Americans make up 13% of the U.S. population, they represented 36% of unarmed people shot and killed by police since 2015 (Schwartz 281). While African-Americans make up 13% of the U.S. population, they are being killed at disproportionate rates that can not go neglected nor overlooked (Schwartz 281). Trends can be seen that point to a significant, broader view of failure to ameliorate disparities over time. As found in a *Boston University Law Review* study, “the offenses marked by the greatest racial disparity in arrest rates in 1980 are more or less the same as those marked by greatest racial disparity today” (Schwartz 282).

There is indeed a systemic problem with the police force in our country that puts people of color at a “non-trivial” risk of being killed by those sworn to protect (Schwartz 281). From the beating of Rodney King to the killing of Breonna Taylor or George Floyd, there have been far too many “bad apples” to say that racism exists only at a minuscule, individual level in the police force. Derek Chauvin, the man who ended the life of George Floyd in March of 2020, had at least 17 complaints during his time with his department: so why was he not stopped (Hawkins)? Why did the three officers with Chauvin allow him to put his knee on Floyd’s neck for over 8 minutes? There exists a bigger issue of compliance that allows these “bad apples” to run rampant in our society. In the words of Desmond Tutu, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” Our police force is all too frequently neutral in these situations, choosing to ignore the crimes of the oppressors that slaughter members of our community. Covert racism exists at the institutional level within our criminal justice system, the police officers are the ones who get to cheerfully execute its demands.

Conclusion

As Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.” It is no question that racism still exists within our culture at large. Since before the United States was even a concept, the Black people living on this land have been abused and tormented. This torment has transfigured year after year from slavery to segregation to institutional disparities, each time becoming more and more hidden. Whether it be on plantations or in inner cities, Black people and other minority groups will be held back to benefit others. With active racism becoming socially unacceptable, those in power have to find legal ways to discriminate, from “separate but equal” up to mass incarceration. Nowadays, people of

color will be redlined at banks, herded into tenement slums, and tossed in jail if they dare step out of line. Bigotry has never left our country, it has always been there, in the shadows or in the forefront. In an effort to stay existent, covert racism has taken the place of overt racism.

Nevertheless, it is up to the people of America to take note of and take charge against racism no matter what shape it may shift into. As racism becomes more coveted, there is more of a responsibility on the average citizen to be educated on their fellow Americans and the struggles they face. It is no longer enough to not be racist, one must be anti-racist. Xenophobia and intolerance have to be subdued further until it no longer exists in our culture as a whole. Invisible racism has to become more visible, people's lives are depending on it. Recognizing the movement towards covert racism over time is simply the first step in a long journey of rectifying enduring racial disparities in the United States and beyond.

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