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Defining a Single Race in America: Human

Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Leonard Pitts Jr. challenges the concept of race in America in a presentation of the President's Distinguished Speakers Series



November 30, 2012 | Jill Rodrigues '05

Race is a social construct, an ephemeral one that cannot be defined and does not truly identify a person – and yet the concept wields so much power over so many in the United States and around the world.

To plant the seed of this idea at the beginning of his presentation in the President's Distinguished Speakers Series on Wednesday, Nov. 28, Pulitzer-Prize winning columnist Leonard Pitts Jr. showed images of celebrities and regular folks and asked the audience what they presumed to be a simple question: "Is this person black or white?"

Regarding tennis champion Andre Agassi and actor Brad Pitt, a few audience members ventured to guess white. Pitts said that many would agree with them – but not long ago, most Americans would have said Agassi's Armenian heritage and Pitt's Native American and Scots-Irish ethnicity would have branded them not white or "an inferior brand of white." And what about the South African-born Charlize Theron or Idris Elba, a British actor who launched his career as a drug dealer on HBO's "The Wire"? For Elba, "We'd have to call him African-British," Pitts says, while Theron's birthright is the "very definition of African-American and [she] probably deserves that term much more than me."

Pitts then shifted the exercise to defining men who appear to be the epitome of the “white gentleman.” When the faces of Gregory Howard Williams, a law school dean, and Walter White, the head of the NAACP from 1931-55, appeared on the screen, Pitts explained that although both men looked “white,” having black fathers consigned them as inferior to whites.

“I’m here to tell you tonight that race is the single dumbest idea in all of history,” Pitts said.

He was not asserting that race is not real, but that it is only an idea – a social construct that has profoundly impacted the way humans interact and has shaped the world as we know it.

“Race has started wars and genocides. Race has moved entire populations from one side of the planet to another. Race has justified rape, oppression, exploitation, and kidnap, robbery and murder,” said Pitts, who earlier in the day led a master class for journalism students.

“In our very own enlightened nation, here in the second decade of the 21st century, race is why somebody can’t get a job and somebody else can’t get home without seeing police flashers in the rearview mirror,” Pitts said. “Race is why somebody can’t get a cab in Times Square and somebody else doesn’t get the aggressive medical treatment that might save his or her life. Race is why somebody can’t get a loan to start a small business, and it is why somebody else is denied the right to vote because he was arrested with a joint in his pocket 10 years ago.”

Invoking persisting media coverage of Arizona’s controversial immigration laws, the Birther Movement surrounding the presidential campaign and a homicide that gripped the nation, Pitts continued:

“Race is why the citizens of Arizona, certain citizens of Arizona at least, can be required to show their papers to prove they have a right to be there and the President of the United States can be required to do the exact same thing for the exact same reason. Race is why a boy walking through a neighborhood, armed with nothing more dangerous than Skittles and a can of iced tea, can be mistaken for a threat and shot to death. Race is why the man who shot him can be questioned by police and then released.”

That race has no basis in scientific fact was deduced by the scientists who mapped the human genome, according to Pitts. In fact, he contends that humans did not have a concept of race until it became profitable. This can be observed particularly with the advent of America, when it became financially attractive to dispossess a people and find other people to work the land, he says.

“Race became the mechanism that justified this outrage,” Pitts said. “It became the thing which allowed one human being to inflict terrible damage on another human being, to behave in ways religion and morality wouldn’t allow. To do things that would shock the conscience and yet still be able to feel good about himself or herself because the person you were doing all these things to was not quite human like you.”

So when such a powerful concept has such prevalent influence, what can be done to assuage it, especially when talking about it causes feelings of anger, guilt and frustration? Some say the solution is to stop talking about race and the problem will disappear – but that’s “criminally naïve,” Pitts says.

The more people talk and get to know one another, he says, the more you realize you are the same. American issues should not be divided as white problems or black problems but united behind as American problems, he says.

“I am not interested in defining black or becoming white,” Pitts said. “I am interested in ending the myopia that afflicts so many of us in this country. I am interested in untangling the problems and inequities that give black and white their power. And I know that this will be a long process with benefits that I will not see nor my children will see.”

To Pitts, the restoration of balance and equity will take at least two generations to unfold.

“I have a granddaughter – she’s 3 years old – who imagines herself a princess and a superhero,” he told the engrossed audience. “And I want something better for her. And I know the process will take a long time. But the fact that it will take a long time is not an excuse not to begin it. It is rather a spur to begin it as soon as possible. If we do that then someday maybe my granddaughter and yours will sit in a space like this and somebody will give a test like the one that I just gave, flashing pictures of famous people and asking, ‘What race is this person?’ And our granddaughters will look at each other in confusion because the answer will be obvious to them each time: Human.”

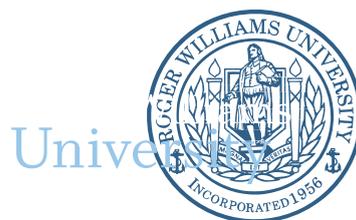
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