

Rebuking America's Racial Story

An Open Letter by Nader Granmayeh

Dear admitted Yale student,

As I settled into Yale's academic scene in August, one of the first lessons I learned was: "**race is a story**," an invented idea. The racial classifications we participate in a day to day basis serve to divide us.

This is how my English 114 seminar, The Racial Imaginary, was pitched to me before I elected to enroll in the class. **Race is a story**. I write to you, at the conclusion of this semester, with the intention of offering that new perspective on race in America.

**Race is a story.**

You ought to know I am speaking from a very specific perspective. I am a male born in New York City to parents of Iranian heritage. Despite not fitting traditional categories of "white," my skin color has afforded me great privilege in our society. Our class has interacted with pieces written by white authors that come off as self congratulatory and seem to want to divert attention away from them. The goal of this letter is not to do that. I, by no means, have been successful in changing my behavior to follow the goals I am going to set out here. In fact, part of my motivation behind writing this piece is to help me understand where I can adjust my behavior to make change. As you read this letter, it is important that I acknowledge I cannot speak to specific experiences of certain minority groups. I can, however, offer whomever is reading, regardless of race, a new lens to view our racial divisions through and a means of moving forward armed with that knowledge.

It may be clear to you how race physically impacts someone's body. Ta-Nehisi Coates' "Letter to my Son" primarily focuses on those who try to dispossess his agency over his body. News coverage and historical recounts of racism frequently focus on the physical harm racism manifests as. The incredible effort to expose these shortcomings in our society today becomes a problem, though, when it is the only story we consume. Prior to taking this class, racism felt like a hateful ideology that I could never imagine participating in. Our efforts were best spent objecting to the people who fundamentally believed in the inferiority of races and help correct back against the way our implicit biases impact minorities. This worthy and impactful goal is not the full picture, though. Racism exists at a much deeper level than this single story might suggest. I, for example, have never felt a threat to the autonomy of my body, but I can also speak to my own experiences with race and prejudice. More specifically, I can speak to my experience outside our racial hierarchy despite my "white" label suggesting I should be empowered by it.

My Iranian heritage is one that is central to my identity. At times, I feel incredibly isolated from my peers. My cultural practices are different. I speak a different language at home. My parents were raised in a different country. That country is a state sponsor of terrorism. The word "Iran" is synonymous with "nuclear threat" or George Bush's "Axis of **Evil**." Introducing myself as Iranian, or Persian as many Iranians prefer to say, to defend against Iran's connotations, is sometimes worrisome; people have all sorts of biases. My traditional Iranian name is hard to pronounce and even I have trouble with how to say it. My college application essay focused on this crisis around the identity that is so central to me. How can something so important to me be a constant source of stress and division? None of the threatens my body. Yet it still instills in me a level of discomfort. Slurs aren't frequently sent in my direction, although

the one time it was, six years ago, still sticks with me. These are experiences you would not know about had you simply looked at my classification as white. Very personally, a person of my heritage's story gets *erased* when I am lumped into the bucket of "whiteness."

When we talk about race in this binary, black or white way, we perpetuate the idea that there is something fundamentally different between us that exists at a human level. Whiteness, and race more generally, is a constructed phenomenon meant to establish hierarchy. Participating in these distinctions is our first mistake as a society. Categorizing people by the color of their skin is the very basis of racism. The first step in dismantling our racial hierarchy is refusing to participate in it to begin with. Push our administrators and admissions officers to explain why Yale must publish and track "racial breakdowns" of their matriculating classes. The reason is to prove the diversity of our student body. But Black, Asian, White, Hispanic are all markers to signal what you have experienced, not an actual reflection of how different we are. My "whiteness" is a lie. The connotation of that classification misses who I am.

I am not suggesting one should be "color-blind" or ignore racial biases. I am simply saying that our overarching goal should be to no longer distribute people into rigid buckets of race that erase our individuality and are meant to divide us. I should not have filled in that box applying to this school. Nor should I have told the ACT they can group me as white for their statistics, either. Yale got my story, but it came through from my voice, not from my racial identification. Do not continue to allow those distinctions to define you.

Coates offers a similar framework in his open letter. He is sure to suggest people "believe themselves to be white" rather than inherently are "white," and that the racial classification itself

is rooted in a history of “domination and exclusion.”<sup>1</sup> In an interview with Barbara Fields Coates was clear that he was asking all Americans to “explore how the falsehoods of racecraft are made in everyday life, in order to work out how to unmake them.”<sup>2</sup> It is a constructed term; it is a **construct**. Thomas Chatterton Williams reiterated in a new book committing to teaching people to “*Unlearn[] Race*” that one’s “authentic identity is not whiteness.”<sup>3</sup> The pride you might feel about your culture and heritage is a separate classification than a general whiteness. I am proud of the Iranian community I am a part of and the traditions my family has passed down to be. I identify with being from the Middle East, but at its core, I am proud of my heritage, not of my classification.

Now, some might suggest, correctly, that the most impact we can make is by understanding our current racial system and working within it to even it out rather than devoting ourselves to breaking down the system entirely. I somewhat agree. I’d caution against losing sight of our main objective. But even so, as it exists today, there are still two impactful ways to break down the hierarchy established by race: decolonization and humanization.

Decolonization is a concept first introduced to me by an article written by Zoe Samudzi that our class analyzed. The article’s main advocacy, as given by the title, is rejecting the idea of a “diverse” education. Educators in today’s world, and notably at Yale, frequently “diversify” the range of topics their curriculum discusses and are satisfied with their attempt to be inclusive. This complacency is hugely problematic, as it “leaves oppressive structures in tact, and in fact,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFPwkOwaweo&feature=youtu.be>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/11/thomas-chatterton-williams-self-portrait-black-white/601408/>

insulates from criticism.” The theory is derived from a Ewe-Mina proverb: “until the story of the hunt is told by the lion, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” Applied in this context, as long as our attempts to diversify education relies on institutional and traditional stories, it will never give a clear and fair picture. Even worse, by repeating the institutional stories, like the United States’ decision to intern Japanese Americans during World War II, without the perspective of the hunted, the Japanese Americans, we re-enforce the story written by the hunter. A direct way to engage with this lesson is identify where your curriculum is falling short and guide discussion in class against it, if possible. Ask your teacher to include primary, first person narratives. If not, educate yourself on decolonized and personal narratives regarding the topic at hand. Research, read, explore the literature regarding the topic and learn what your traditional education misses. As I move forward, I plan on being active in class discussions when this problem arises. I want to show my classmates and educators that these stories are incomplete.

A similar curriculum shift needs to occur to include the idea of humanization. A lot of contemporary race discussions seem to unlink a person and their race; there seems to be very little connection between a human being and the debates being had over their bodies. Fundamentally, we need to inject humanity back into our discussions about race. Several African-American students at my high school voiced concern that our history curriculum focused too heavily on slavery, when the minority black population was treated as subhuman, and not enough on periods like the Harlem Renaissance, when black artistry and culture were on full display. This can often come as an effect of attempting to diversify our education. The stories told by the hunter will frequently try to downplay the humanity of the hunted. The problem is

that continual emphasis on impersonal stories that paint a race as subhuman re-enforce that notion in our heads. A student sitting through a year of history that continuously hears about moments Africans Americans were dispossessed of their body begins to internalize that hierarchy. Any educator that tells those stories, and they *should*, also has a responsibility to celebrate the triumphs and humanity of those same people. As students, you and I should take a similar approach to decolonizing work. Call out these errors when you see them. Push for more discussions about the humanity of the “hunted.” Even when discussing slavery, insist your teacher includes sources and stories that talk about how Africans Americans tried maintained their humanity and bodily autonomy. If there is institutional pushback, call this out in class discussions. Research on your own and present the evidence in papers and assignments. Do not accept the finality that “this is how it's taught.”

Most importantly, I'm also asking you to be respectful. Too frequently in our current discourse we accuse others of bad intentions. We are too quick to find mistakes, blind spots, negligence and assign a single story of malice. You are fortunate to be armed with this knowledge now. I am fortunate to go to an excellent school and lucky enough to get into this class. I am not morally superior to my peers who have not been afforded the same privilege. History teachers that don't do enough to incorporate the personal experience of Native Americans are not racist. Conflating their negligence, at worst, with a word used to describe those in our society who fundamentally believe in the inferiority of certain groups of people is a disservice and unproductive. As you go about doing your part to break the system we live in, I am asking that you channel people's desire to help and do not weaponize their mistakes against

them. Well intentioned citizens, like yourself, deserved to be pointed in the right direction, not chastised for being less informed.

We are in this fight together.

- Nader Darius Granmayeh