

Michael Karlin

Dr. Surbaugh

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Current Issues in Regard to Race Relations in America

To begin with, Cole's essay gives a summary of black culture in America over the last 300 years. He discusses how race in America is largely political in nature and the divide between races originally stemmed from laws surrounding the treatment of black slaves during the 1700's. From these laws, African Americans were forced into a separate sect of society, one that, originally, gave them very little room for freedom or social mobility. The article mentions that the only place blacks were really allowed to gather and express their culture freely was in the church and because of that, the "church became the hub of life in the black experience in America." Cole's work goes on to give a brief overview of the importance of the civil rights movement in helping blacks begin to break free from the political prejudices of the previous centuries. Next, Cole summarizes the deep infusion of African American culture with the overall popular culture of America. The jazz music of the 1940's grew and evolved into the rock and hip-hop cultures of today which both have great influence over the ideas and culture of today's youth. Finally, Cole discusses current trends in black employment, noting that many more African Americans are heading towards owning their own businesses or careers in corporate America. Overall, this article presents a brief overview of the history and progression of black culture in America.

The focus in West's article is on the current state of the racial divide in America. In regards to African Americans, West states that, "We have created rootless, dangling people with

little link to the supportive networks – family, friends, school – that sustain some sense of purpose in life. We have witnessed the collapse of the spiritual communities that in the past helped American face despair, disease, and death and that transmit through the generations dignity and decency, excellence and elegance.” Basically, according to West, black culture has become largely based on survival in a society that fails to recognize its role in providing aid. West mentions how traditional views towards African American culture still exist today, Republicans see the problem as the lack of morals in black communities and that if blacks (especially men) would stick with their families, help raise their children, and avoid a life a crime our racial problems would be ended. Democrats see the solution as being more government programs aimed at helping blacks assimilate into American culture. However, both sides tend to see African Americans as being a “problem people” and that their role should be to fit in to current culture. In other words, the problem is not with the system, it is with the people who want to become part of it. At the end of the article, West notes that in order for us to overcome our current racial divide, we must elect leaders that “can situate themselves within a larger historical narrative of this country and our world, who can grasp the complex dynamics of our peoplehood and imagine a future grounded in the best of our past, yet who are attuned to the frightening obstacles that now perplex us.” In my mind, President Obama certainly fits that bill and it is my hope that under him our country can begin to see some of the positive changes that West outlines which are necessary for ending, or at least beginning to close, the racial divide that exists in our culture.

Obama’s speech focuses primarily on the current state of race relations in the U.S., similarly to what is discussed in West’s article. He provides some brief background information on the civil rights movement and how we have ended up where are today, but the bulk of the

speech focuses on current views and his response to the words and ideologies of his former pastor, Reverend Wright. Most of the speech, in my opinion, is Obama attempting to get Americans to see race from the other side. To help white Americans see why black Americans might still feel fear, shame, anger, and even hatred towards white for a past of discrimination and segregation. And to help black Americans see why white Americans might feel the same emotions for programs like affirmative action, which some whites see as giving free passes to blacks even though their children have worked just as hard in life, if not harder. Overall, the main tone of Obama's speech is hopeful and it centers around the idea that America is a dynamic nation that can change and grow into a proud country that no longer sees anger and resentment on both sides of the racial divide, but instead sees the common history that every American shares.

The main purpose of Holder's speech is to open up a dialogue on current race relations in the US. He does this by stating that February, since it is Black History month, would be the perfect time to begin this dialogue. Holder provides some brief background information on black culture and the civil rights movements, but the main issue he keeps coming back to is the importance of starting a dialogue. He also discusses how it is regrettable that black history is clearly not seen by many as part of American history, as it is given a month of recognition, whereas it should be completely incorporated into classroom history curriculums. Overall, his point is a valid one, many people still feel awkward and uncomfortable discussing race and this is a dialogue that must be had if the divide between races is to lessen.

The article from the pitch on West is quite impressive. Although it doesn't get into West's views on race, it discusses the great lengths he is willing to go to for the sake of the Kansas City school district. This article filled me with more optimism than any of the previous

articles primarily because it was about someone who is actually out there and making a difference. While speeches like Obama's and Holders serve a function, mainly getting people to talk about race, it takes people like West who are out in the field doing work and gaining to support to turn those policies and speeches into reality.

As for my own personal views and reflections after reading these articles, I would say that I agree with the points made by all of these authors. Cole provides an excellent background on race in the US that helps illuminate why we are in the state we are in. The article from West presents current race relations from a slightly more aggressive perspective, noting on several occasions that if we don't shift directions and begin improving the dialogue between races, events like the L.A. riots will become more commonplace. Holder and Obama both make positive strides towards opening up the dialogue on race in the US. And finally, the Pitch article presents Airick West, a man who is doing phenomenal work for little monetary reward, and making a significant difference in the lives of many students. My only struggle with these readings is trying to find a way to incorporate racial issues and discussions into a high school biology classroom. I find myself going to the same idea I always do, spending time every unit talking about multicultural scientists and their contributions to the field of science, but I feel like there's more I could be doing, I'm just not sure what it is.