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I'm a writer. I pretty much live in a notebook with my fountain pen. I also write poetry that mak...  
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## It's Not About Race!

Why do Black people think that everything is about race?



Image captured by William Ukoh

*This is a speech that I wrote for a local event. I thought I'd post it on Medium because it might help explain some context to white people.*

## Recently, I was the only person of color in a discussion group about race.

**A**lways fun for us. During the first meeting, I introduced myself by saying that talks about race are emotional.

*"I speak with a lot of emotion," I said, "and sometimes that emotion is anger. That should be allowed, because anger is a valid response to oppression. I'm not angry at you as an individual, but at a system of injustice."*

Sometime later, a man said that he hoped we could "rise above emotions." He wanted an "intellectual discussion" using logic so we could "really get to heart of the matter" without getting "derailed by emotions."

Now there is a heck of a lot of subtext there, and I really want you to understand it. But I need to lay a bit of foundation. So we're going to step back in time a bit so I can explain how a guy beating up his cousin a thousand years ago still affects how we act differently in the dining room.



By Stephen Dickson (Own work) [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

## A long time ago, there was this French cat named William.

One day, he jumped in a boat with a few hundred of his buddies and crossed the English Channel to pick a fight. That was when Norman France conquered Anglo-Saxon England.

Now when you conquer a people, you gotta make damn sure they know you're in charge. One of the best ways to do that is to make them speak your language. So French became the official language in England. Royalty spoke it, lawmakers spoke it. English was even outlawed in some areas. The French said their language was refined, proper, and that Anglo-Saxon was a crude, vulgar language of the unwashed rabble.

Total scam, of course. Anglo-Saxon English was just as refined, as beautiful, and it was hella poetic. But Billy and his boys had to convince "those people" that the French were "better." After awhile, the people started believing him.

*Here's the crazy thing: We still do.*

A damn lot of our words in English come from this period, and pretty much all of them seem... more refined, proper. This is why we "dine" at a fine restaurant but "eat" at a Barbecue. This is why we "drink" a beer, but might "imbibe" a 30-year-old bottle of Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

**You need this to sink in:** A dude makes up a bunch of crap about his cousin's language to justify three generations of oppression, and a thousand years later we still believe him.



Image captured by William Ukoh

## **We still believe William the Conqueror due to a remarkable thing called culture.**

**C**ulture is how we pass information about our world across generations. It's why our children speak our language, it's how they learn from us. Culture is why some humans eat with a fork, and some eat with chopsticks. Culture explains why someone standing really close while they talk to you might feel threatening to a European, but comforting to a West African. Culture defines what acceptable volumes are when speaking, and how women are expected to act in social situations.

*Culture defines all of our social expectations, but also our social prejudices. Every single thing we do and say, we do and say in the context of our culture.*

Now, making a culture normative—that is, it defines what is “normal”—is quite useful. The French used it well in England. Another time it was used was when West Africans were brought to this country as chattel slaves.

The society here in America needed a way to justify the enslavement of a people for no other reason than they looked a bit different. Like the Normans, they used culture to do it. Slaves were made to speak English but were

forbidden to read and write. In fact, the myth was promoted that they were slow and couldn't even be taught.

White people saw slaves as animals, apes or at best, "lesser humans." They expected slaves to work like animals too—long, hard, and without complaint. Naturally, slaves rebelled, slowing work or feigning sickness. Blacks were seen by everyone as inherently lazy, and lazy Blacks were beaten or killed.

White people expected slaves to be subservient—a particularly useful tactic since less than a quarter of whites actually *owned* slaves. Slaves had to do whatever any white person told them to do. This made all whites "better" than slaves, and supportive of the system.

And there were the sexual controls. White men objectified and raped Black women at will, while promoting the myth that white women's purity was threatened merely by the gaze of a Black man. This was particularly useful as a means to control both Black men *and* white women.

*All of these prejudices still reside in white culture.*

Antonin Scalia said that Blacks "should go to slower schools." This is a US Supreme Court Justice, folks.

Donald Trump said he believed that "Laziness is a trait in blacks." This is a man running for president!

A vegan activist Twitter account posted a picture comparing slaughtered pigs to lynched Black people. Leslie Jones rocked the Ghostbusters reboot and was immediately compared to an ape by racist trolls. Meanwhile Lena Dunham weaponized her white body against an innocent Black man because she felt insecure.

And apparently countless Black men would not have gotten shot in the back if they had "just done what they were told to do."

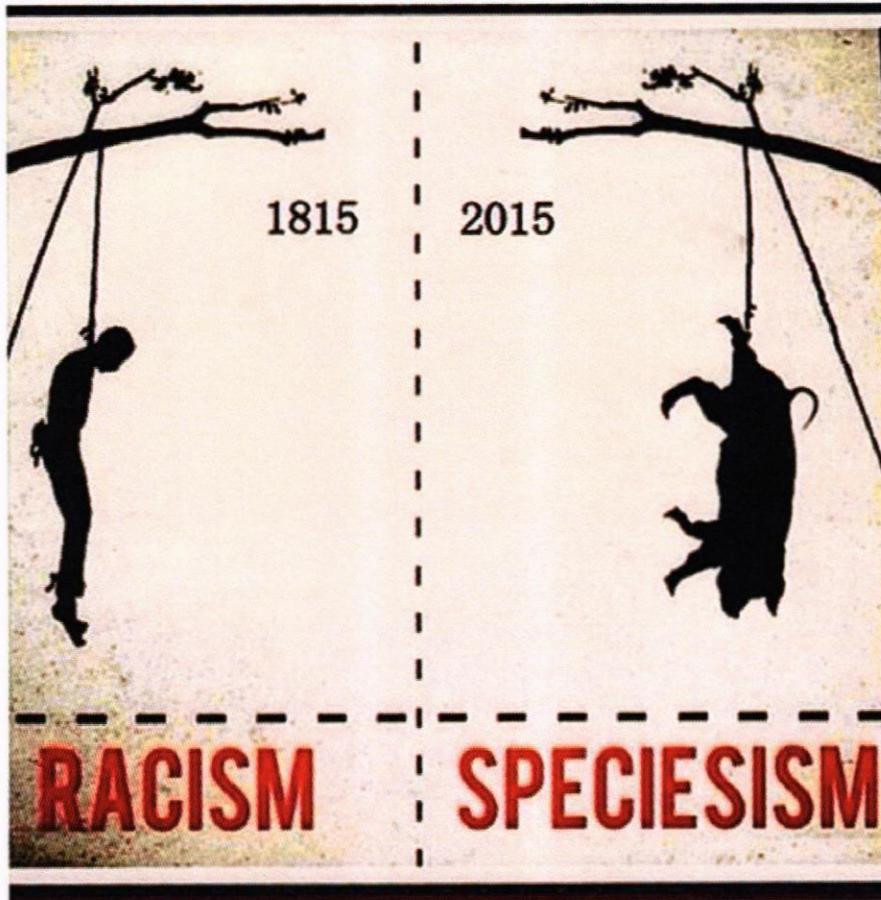


**Veganoso** ✓  
@veganososo



Only the victims have changed.

#vegan



A racist tweet about veganism, since deleted.

## I think that much of this thinking is subconscious.

Like thoughtlessly “dining” instead of “eating,” white people often carry prejudices about slavery without realizing it. That is why the white refrain of “slavery was a long time ago, get over it” falls on deaf Black ears. It’s not Black people holding on to slavery, it’s white people, carrying the prejudices in their culture.

It's a difficult problem to address. To paraphrase George Orwell, white people have prejudices about people of color because American culture has normalized whiteness, but the fact that people of color act "differently" further entrenches the "obvious correctness" of a white cultural norm.

Why is it normal to eat with a fork instead of chopsticks?

Why is it normal for a man to wear a suit to a business meeting instead of a loose, colorfully printed robe?

Why is it normal to sit in a chair instead of on the floor?

Why is a woman in a long gown and a bonnet accepted—archaic, perhaps, but accepted? Why is a nun wearing a black gown and habit accepted? Why is a woman in a burka and hijab somehow threatening?

Why do we teach the way we do? Write our laws the way we do? In short, why is our society the way it is?

All of these questions have the same answer: Because we live in a Western European society that was built by Western Europeans for Western Europeans to live in. This culture is so normative that most white people never have to think about it or even know it exists, because everything they do naturally fits the norm.

*Being normal makes everything else "abnormal"*

Damn near everything that Black people do *is already outside the white norm*. Black people talk too loud, they don't do what they're told, they "act out," they stand too close, they have weird hair, they dress funny, they shake their butts too much (which is fine if Taylor Swift does it).

When a white person says "It's not about race," they are pretty much always saying it when a Black person, or a Latino person, or a Muslim person is *not acting the way a white European would act or wants them to act*.

And so Black women having fun get kicked off a wine tour for "acting disruptive" when they were doing the same thing White women do every day. But it's not about race. If it's not, then it's about them not obeying the cultural expectations of white people—which amounts to the same damn thing.

“If you see something, say something” works really well when everyone looks and acts the same way. When they don’t, you have an Italian mathematician getting kicked off a plane because a white woman is scared he’s an Islamic terrorist.

All this simply because people of color have a different cultural foundation. Because they are not allowed to act within their culture.

*If a white person can still “dine,” can still carry the European culture of a thousand years ago, then surely a Black person can carry some West African culture of a few hundred years ago. Surely a Muslim can carry the culture of her parents.*

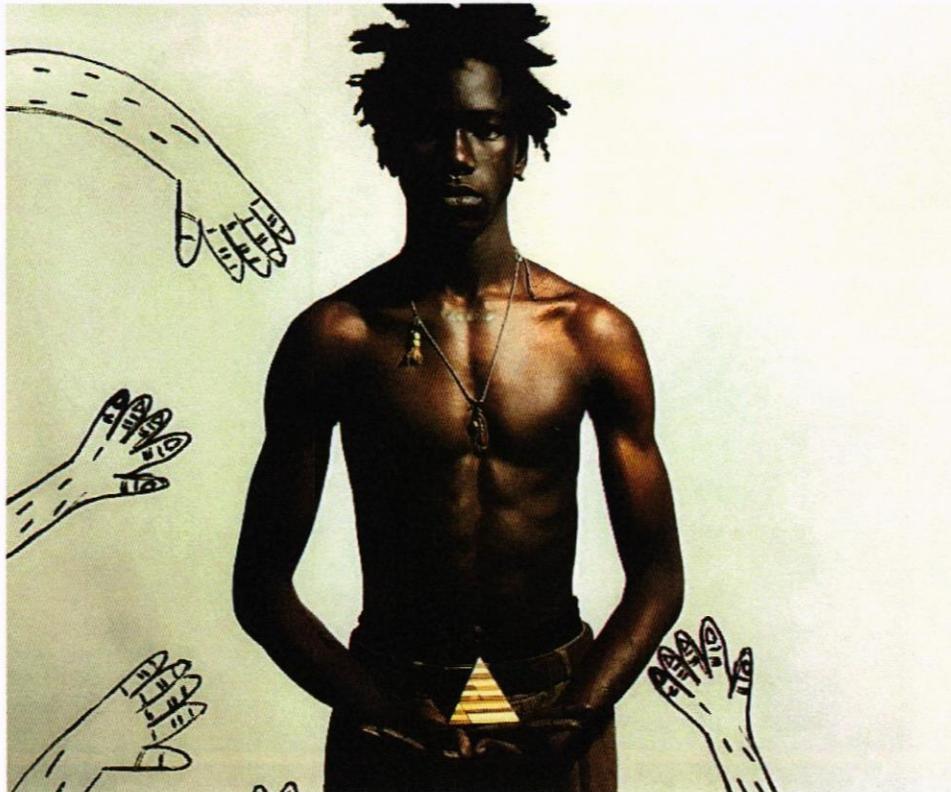


Image captured by William Ukoh

## **This is the subtext I talked about.**

**T**his is why I sat in a discussion group on race and was angry that a white man was telling me we should “rise above emotions” and “get to the heart of the matter” by talking about race intellectually and avoiding emotions.

Why do we need to center a discussion about racism in the white cultural experience? Why do we need to communicate using Western cultural norms? So, we can talk about race, but we shouldn't talk about race the way a Black person carrying West African culture would talk about it? We should avoid their anger and pain? It would be "better" to talk about it in a way that Western Europeans will be comfortable talking about it?

*In other words: "Let's make sure everyone is speaking our language and knows who's in charge."*

And I'm sure he didn't even know he was doing it, because he can't see that white culture is normative. Every single thing white people do and say is done in the context of normative white culture, which they don't have to think about.

## **Why do Black people think everything is about race?**

**B**ecause everything a person of color does is done while knowing they are *not* part of normative white culture. We have to think about everything we do and every word we say. Am I saying this too loudly? Do I look like I might be stealing? If I complain about these working conditions, will they call me lazy? Why did this teacher tell me I can't be an engineer when I've got a 3.8 GPA? Why am I being pulled over when I did nothing wrong?

We think about this *all the time*—so much that it's mostly unconscious by the time we're teenagers. But we don't talk about it because when a conflict comes up with a white person that is "not about race," it would take too damn long to explain all of this to them. And we'd have to explain it over and over to every white person we meet hoping they will "get it."

And most of the time, they won't get it. Most of the time, they can't see their own culture, much less someone else's, meaning they have no idea what the hell we're talking about anyway. So either we get angry, or we just close our eyes, nod our heads, and say things like "Yeah, using the Socratic method to talk intellectually would probably be a good way for us to discuss systematic racism."

*"Yeah, let's do it your way."*

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