

Anger, silence, racism and change: Let's talk for real



LIA SALICCIA

"And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger."

- Audre Lorde

Gulp. This is not easy to write. But to remain silent on the issues of racism, anger and failure to open dialogue that now hang silently heavy on the shoulders of the *Emerald* would be betraying myself.

I'm referring to a recent series of events: the mug shots of three African-American men accused of sexual assault that ran front-and-center in the *Emerald*; allegations of racism, and that the only reason the photos were printed was to reveal that these men were black; and a flyer circulated around campus consisting of jumbled headlines, the three aforementioned photos, and the words, "PORTRAITS OF WHITE RACISM," threading together photos of *Emerald* staffers, including the one you see above.

Emerald columnist Martin Fisher already defended the printing of the photos and denounced the flyer, and staff members have met with representatives of several student unions to discuss portrayal of people of color in this paper. Why bring up this touchy issue again after things are dying down? Why not just let it go?

I can't. Not when my face is being used to represent a mode of hatred of which I do not feel a part. Not when there are people, even one person, who believes this paper may be racist. Not when this paper has not adequately addressed charges of racism.

In his column (*ODE*, Nov. 12), Fisher says the photos of the men would have been printed had the men been white. He uses as an example the printing of a photo of Michael Patrick Ryan, a former University student who raped a woman in the dorms and fled to Idaho, where he killed himself.

Fisher also cites other examples of newspapers, including the *Register-Guard* printing photos of alleged criminals who were white people, and nobody suggested that all white people were vilified.

Let me suggest that the issue is more subjective, less black and white. I look at that front page and see mug shots of Perkins, Shelley and Barnes. The combination of the classic "criminal mug shot" photos, the placement of the pictures on the front page, in the center of the top of the page remind me of a "wanted" poster. It was the image of three large, staring black faces leaping out of the top of the page assaulting the reader before anything else, copy included, that is offensive to those who called the printing of them racist.

I don't believe it was the *Emerald's* intention to appear

racist. However, I have to question the judgment of those who couldn't understand why people thought we were racist.

Without a thorough examination of ourselves, our values and our practices regarding sensitive issues we cannot hope to elevate ourselves above the level of a high school paper.

As a university paper, we need to address the images we are presenting, especially when we live in a town where black people are truly a minority, and where many students, not knowing many people of color themselves, get their impressions of them from crime reports. This paper does not exist in a vacuum, and if we are responsible for just one white person's urge to cross the street when they see a black face approaching on the sidewalk, then we need to hold ourselves accountable.

Without asking ourselves the often emotional questions, "Who will be offended? Do we have the right to offend them for the sake of news? Why do allegations of racism offend us so much?" then this paper will never reach out to those who have turned their backs on it already.

And that's why I have to address the "portraits of white racism" flyer and the way it made me feel. I cannot, as some have suggested, let it go so that the person/people who crafted that flyer would hold no more power over me. Nor can I write it off as a juvenile act. Nor can I accept the argument that "people who know you know you're not a racist."

Again, the issues are not that simple. Somebody saw those photographs of the three men on the front page of the *Emerald* and believed they indicated white racism. Somebody believed that discussing their anger with us was a waste of time and chose to anonymously charge the entire staff of racism, and cut out pictures of our white faces to substantiate those charges against boring, pointless *Emerald*.

If the placement of the photographs of the three black men — beneath the word "Charges" — suggests to any reader that Black Man equals Rapist, then the flyer suggests by the placement of the photographs of the six men and two women, beneath the word "Charges" suggests that White *Emerald* Employee equals Racist.

That is the charge that I believe has been leveled against me, and that is the charge to which I must respond. And to whomever crafted that piece of paper — which ended with the word "Think," printed in large letters — I have thought about this a lot. I am still thinking. And I now must speak to you.

I wish you could feel like you could come forward and speak your mind instead of hiding behind your anonymous anger. I understand that you may feel like you would be wasting your time.

But that doesn't change the fact that by placing my photograph on a flyer as a way to demonstrate white racism, presumably without knowing me or the others whose pictures you have reproduced you have accused me of being something I have worked my whole life not to be. And you hurt me. And you made me feel afraid.

Afraid that I may have been

unconsciously harboring racist notions all along. Afraid that if someone is capable of this type of anger, they are capable of more serious manifestations of rage. Afraid that if I write this, I will both alienate those whom I'm trying to reach, and those for whom I work. Afraid that this column will be viewed as nothing more than an expression of white guilt.

"Guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we all flounder; they serve against none of our futures," writes black feminist lesbian poet activist Audre Lorde. This writer has helped clarify for me that I must not remain silent about issues that hit my heart.

When I read Fisher's column, I saw defensiveness. When reading mine, some may claim to see guilt. But to bring up another valuable lesson I have learned from Lorde, though both guilt and defensiveness are counterproductive, I would rather be accused of both than to stay

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silent.

Because silence, or the inability to express anger, breeds not only misunderstanding but eventually hatred. And, if I may bring up another wisdom of Audre Lorde, "Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change."

My goals are nothing short of opening a dialogue between peers in order to understand the distortions between us. The larger implications of race differences, and media representations of them, need to be

addressed and not swept under the rug.

My goals include for both our staff and for the student body we serve to look deep into our hearts and examine the racial divisions that threaten us all, and to provide an environment in which the person who made that flyer would feel comfortable coming forward with the accusations he or she has leveled. My "object," like that of the "we" in Lorde's essay, is change.

And until change occurs, I won't be silent.

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