

The Asian Reporter

Volume 25 Number 3
February 2, 2015
ISSN: 1094-9453

The Asian Reporter is published on the first and third Monday each month.

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News Service **Associated Press/Newsfinder**

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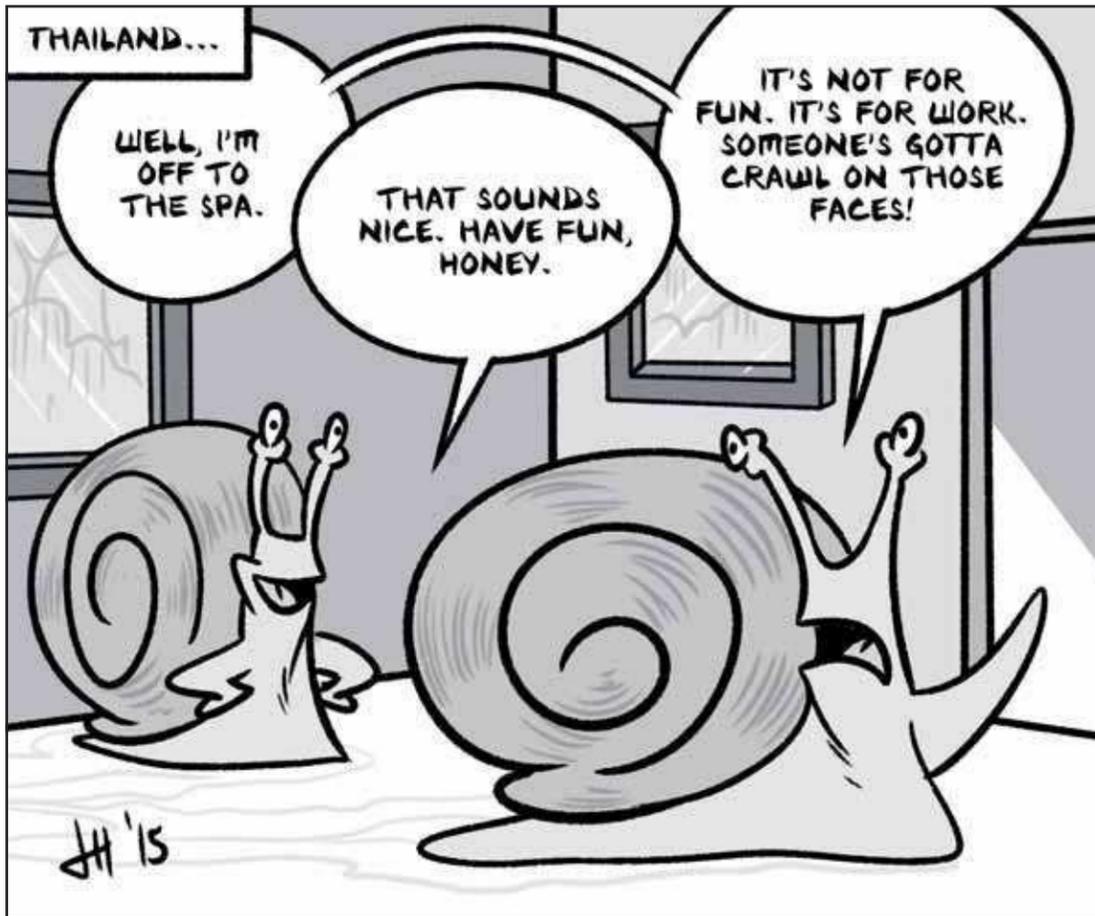
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MY TURN

■ Marie Lo



Blinded by colorblindness

In a progressive and liberal city like Portland, sometimes it is perceived as bad form to point out race and racial difference. Pointing these things out seems divisive and possibly racist as it seems counter to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous line about judging people not "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

King's powerful vision of racial justice is often reduced to the shorthand equivalent of being colorblind, as if being colorblind is both the means to equality and the result of having achieved it. What is missing in this reduction of his "I Have A Dream Speech," however, is his central message of freedom from state-sanctioned segregation and racial violence.

As recent events in Ferguson, Staten Island, and Cleveland — to name only a few — make evident, the idea that we live in a post-racial colorblind society is clearly fiction. Asserting colorblindness as the path to racial and social justice only reproduces the very kinds of marginalization and oppression that animated the civil-rights movement in the first place. As it operates now, "colorblindness" is not about overcoming racial inequality so much as it is blinding us to the realities of how color shapes our lives and determines whose lives matter and whose do not.

The problem with our understanding of racism, according to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva in his book *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, is that we understand it mainly as expressions of racial hatred or as acts of bigoted individuals who may have ties to white supremacist organizations. And given this definition of racism, it would make sense that to be "colorblind" would mean the opposite of being racist.

Bonilla-Silva, however, argues that such a definition blinds us from examining the systemic and institutional dimensions of racism, which is not the work of an individual, but a structure that is built on a long history of conquest, colonization, slavery, and oppression. It is this house of inequality that we live in, despite the gains of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and despite the fact that Barack Obama is the President of the United States.

When we talk about colorblindness, we rarely ask, "colorblind to whom?" Whose perspective is implied and affirmed in this discourse on colorblindness?

A colorblind approach, for example, sidesteps a crucial interrogation of our criminal justice system. In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the*

Age of Colorblindness, Michelle Alexander examines the criminal justice system as an instrument of legalized segregation. She argues that the segregation laws of the Jim Crow era have not been eradicated by the civil-rights legislation of the 1960s, but rather, they have been merely "redesigned."

Alexander examines how the war on drugs in the 1980s led to a vast system of incarceration and disenfranchisement that has disproportionately affected African Americans and people of color. While drug offenses committed by whites are often explained in terms of addiction and treated through rehabilitation and/or light sentencing, drug offenses committed by African Americans are often represented as an inevitable symptom of "black criminality" and subjected to tough sentencing laws. (A case in point is the historically lighter sentencing of cocaine possession, which is predominantly used by whites, and the harsher sentences for crack possession, which is predominantly used by African Americans. In 2010, the Fair Sentencing Act was introduced to address this imbalance.)

Once convicted as a felon, one is legally barred from voting and unprotected from housing discrimination. A past felony conviction can also lead to the denial of public benefits such as educational opportunities and food stamps. Currently, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, there are about two million people incarcerated at any given time, and while blacks make up 13 percent of the U.S. population, they make up 40 percent of the total prison population.

The emphasis on "criminality" as the explanation for the higher rates of incarceration of African Americans is a consequence of colorblindness. In effect, it has become code for "blackness" such that we need not mention race at all. Indeed, segregation has not only been redesigned, but it is enforced under a different name.

In "Viewpoint: Why Eric Garner was Blamed for Dying," Stacey Patton and David J. Leonard take to task the media focus on Garner's actions as well as those who have been killed recently by the police, such as Tamir Rice and Michael Brown, arguing that this shifts the focus from examining police protocols and the persistent representation of black criminality and leads to victim blaming. According to Patton and Leonard, we only need to think about the representation of violence perpetrated by white men as a contrast:

"Just think about the epidemic of white men who

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