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Think Piece  
Race Dialogue Is Back, But  
Did Racism Ever Go Away?  
by Anthony Asadullah Samad

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America is talking about race again. With *Crash* winning the Oscars and Ice Cube co-producing a series on race called *Black/White* on FX, race dialogue is back! But did racism ever go away? Or did it just change forms and go underground? It has been well documented over the past five years (since the turn of the century) that the racial disparities of the last half of the 20th Century are still very much in evidence today. In some instances, they are greater than they were 40 or 50 years ago.

These studies, that come from everywhere, from major universities to private research institutions to civil rights organizations, all say the same thing: that race is still very much prevalent in American society, whether we talk about it or not. So since race differences never went away, can we also assume that racism never went away? Of course, we can. Thus, the need for a renewed race dialogue. America is not colorblind. It's so blinded by color that it just can't see racism. Like looking into sun with Ray-Bans, the glare doesn't make that object in front of you disappear. You will still run into it if you don't make an adjustment in your vision. America never made the adjustment. That's what the movie, *Crash*, was about: our refusal to acknowledge race until it confronted us.

Race dialogue took a decade-long hiatus (since President Bill Clinton's attempt to raise a national dialogue on race almost ten years ago) as America came up with race "fatigue" after the Soon Ja Du, Rodney King, O.J. Simpson racial episodes of the early 1990s. Of course, Clinton's efforts were an attempt to bring forth what some called "the Third Reconstruction," to address the racial disparities left over from the unfinished work of the 1960's war on poverty that was interrupted during the Nixon, Ford and Reagan administrations. By the time the Reagan Revolution came along, Reagan had declared that poverty had won, and it was time to end "race policies." By the time George Herbert Walker Bush came into office, America had developed colorblindness and public policy initiatives were "race neutral" and any discussion about race, race

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differences, and most critically, racism were now persona non grata in social circles and viewed as politically incorrect in the public domain. Nobody wanted to talk about race anymore, and opinion leaders went to great lengths to convince us that race no longer mattered.

Foolish proclamations were made by a new phenomena, the Black Conservative—a new type of Negro that was used to deflect any discussion on race and racism. One such fool, Larry Elder, went on national television (20/20) and said, "There is no racism in America." When I want comedic relief, I don't put on Steve Harvey, or Cedric "The Entertainer," or D.L. Hugley. I put in that tape of 20/20 of Larry Elder saying "there is no racism in America."

America, as a nation, tried so hard to believe that racism no longer exists, that we just began to ignore even the most obvious demonstrations of racial mistreatment. Hurricane Katrina was a revelation for many who came of age in the Post–Civil Rights era, the era where the notion of race–neutrality also came of age. It's also the age where America came apart – so much so that Colorblindness became the new "Jim Crow." White flight to the "burbs," deconstruction of affirmative action, economic boons of the 1980s and 1990s, re–emergence of white privilege, the decline of public education and the 9/11 attacks were all reasons to ignore race over the past 30 years. The separation in wealth, knowledge, geography and the nation's shift in political ideology allowed us to deflect the race debate on every front.

Now America got a chance to see how a simple natural catastrophe had such stigmatizing racial implications. While the debate is much more stratified (multi–focal) than the historical black–white (bi–focal) race politic, race was (and still is) the underlying factor in a time when class conflict (the politics of the rich versus the poor) is emerging as the biggest social threat in America today. While race has long been at the root of the poverty question, there are some who still refuse to believe that the evacuation delay in New Orleans, and the subsequent evacuation support efforts in Houston, and other cities, wasn't about race. America still can't see what it refuses to acknowledge. But a refusal to see something doesn't make it disappear.

Author Tim Wise, appearing before the Urban Issues Forum last week, stated that "Whites don't get it" when it comes to understanding their own privilege, racism and how it affects others not part of the "in–group."



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"Whiteblindness," as Wise called, is a refusal to understand their own pathology with respect to race prejudice, the privileges that race affords them, denies others, causing society (largely themselves) to ignore some very fundamental "danger signs" that, because of their own race biases, don't frame all white males as suspect, which caused the Columbine school massacre and the Oklahoma City bombing to occur despite all signs – two events hidden by white America's "blind spot" – while causing every Black (male), Arab, Muslim, and now Latino (because of the anti–immigrant backlash) to be met with suspicion, to be perceived as the biggest threats to society, profiling them as un–American, un–democratic, un–patriotic and ungovernable (terroristic). White radicals who terrorize are just sick, troubled or misguided and suspicions are limited to their individual acts. Driven by the xenophobic fears of Whites and passed on to sub–culture populations, all of our biases we have been propelled by the dominate culture's attitude on race and race tolerance.

America has crashed and burned on the race issue the past two decades. But now, at least, the dialogue has returned through the subtle entrée of art imitating life. Or is it life imitating art imitating life...? The race dialogue being a throwback of white minstrels imitating Blacks by wearing blackface then acting out their pre–defined perceptions of black intellectual and cultural behavior, allows us to watch movies and television to sympathize with acts of racism and differences in racial treatment we thought were days long past, but Blacks knew – had never went away. It only went away in the eyes of Whites refusing to see race.

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As we know, turning one's head doesn't solve the problem. It just allows the trash of racism to pile up in the house until the stench becomes unbearable. Somebody has to say something or somebody needs to take out the trash. Well, the movie, *Crash*, and Ice Cube's *Black–White* series have decided to say something, calling out the stench.

Colorblindness was a ploy to refuse to acknowledge race, but racism is as plain as it's ever been. Thanks to the arts, we again smell the stench of racism. Now it's time to take out the trash.

*Anthony Asadullah Samad is a national columnist, managing director of the Urban Issues Forum and author of 50 Years After Brown: The State of Black Equality In America (Kabili Press, 2005). He can be reached at [www.AnthonySamad.com](http://www.AnthonySamad.com).*