

In Racial Transition

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Much ado has been made about the racial graffiti and threat to President-elect Obama that was found in the NCSU Free-Expression-Tunnel. Yes; the words written by those four students were reprehensible. And NCSU has responded appropriately, vigorously, to the full extent of the law. We all know it is impossible for an educational institution to guarantee that there will be no students enrolled who harbor racial, religious, or gender, biases. No employer can make such a guarantee either. What the institution must do is when biases come out in behavior, strike hard and fast at the perpetrators. Yet that must be within the limits of the law. Civil-rights are not African-American or Caucasian-American rights, but rights that protect U.S. citizens equally. We become Nazis when we want people persecuted in ways that go beyond what is lawful. If the state and federal laws are a problem, protest those laws. NCSU does not make the laws; the State of NC and Congress do that.

We live on a new racial frontier. In deep-South Louisiana, I grew up when Jim Crow still lived. All of my early education through high school (1957-1969) was racially segregated from whites. So in my life time, we have gone from segregation-by-law, to desegregation-by-law, to having an African-American President-elect. Yet, as dramatic as the election of Mr. Obama is, even saying that President-elect Obama is African-American isn't quite enough. Mr. Obama is bi-racial. So, we have also gone from segregation and race in black and white, to race as multicultural.

No wonder that leading up to election-day, there was interpersonal electricity. People couldn't stop talking. When the election results flashed and thundered,

people cried, laughed, threw up their arms, danced, collapsed, shook hands, and hugged each other, held their mouths; all in belief, shock, disbelief, joy, fear that this was happening in America.

On campus the next morning, I ran into Dr. Tom Stafford, who is NCSU's Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs. He told me about the racial graffiti that threatened the person of President-elect Obama. Dr. Stafford was shaken but went on with handling that business. My thoughts turned to what I would do in my "Interpersonal Relationships and Race" class. Instead of the scheduled lecture, I had already decided

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to have my students talk about the conversations they were now having and hearing given interracial event of Senator Barack Obama being elected President. Now I knew I would also lead a discussion about the racial slur and threat in the Free-Expression-Tunnel. All semester, you see, I have been introducing my racially mixed class to social psychological concepts that helped them to understand the forces acting on interracial interactions. Part of that has been helping those students understand how things were, and how much things have changed in America.

It's a new racial frontier. That is why in interracial interactions, people feel uncertain. We wonder, what is the right way to interact? But that anxiety does not make a person a bigot. After all whites and blacks are experiencing this anxiety. That anxiety indicates that as a nation we are living in a transition-time of

interracial uncertainty, tension and change. In interracial interactions, that is why people feel confused and jumpy. That is why hours after the election of our nation's first African American President we learned of threatening racial graffiti being aimed at that person. Both the positive and negative are in the interracial mix that is our nation today. Stalked by our uncertainty, events like the election of Senator Barack Obama and, or the appearance of a racial slur and threat make Americans feel even more confused and jumpy.

Even so, there are a few certainties. Despite what people may say, the Civil Rights Movement was not about changing the hearts and minds of white America. It was about obtaining "equal protection under the law" for black Americans. So in the case of the racial graffiti, the issue is not that at NCSU there are whites who dislike blacks. There will always be ignorant people. The question; what is the response of the institution?

Since becoming a member of the NCSU faculty in 1988, among other things I served as the university's first Vice Provost for Diversity and African American Affairs (2000-2002). So when it comes to diversity issues, I watch what the administration does with a careful eye. By my judgment, the university's response to the discovery of the racial threat was swift, dramatic and unambiguous. A strong statement from the Chancellor denouncing the behavior; an immediate investigation in cooperation with the Secret Service came quickly. Also coming quickly was a strong editorial from the Technician and a racially mixed student sponsored protest rally. Racism is not an individual problem. Racism is always institutional; does the institution support and encourage bigotry? Clearly our institution does not.