DEEPNESS OF COLOR AND FEAR

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There are many films available today that examine race relations within the United States. Two of these films, *Skin Deep* and *The Color of Fear*, were designed to bring people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds together to communicate during a weekend retreat. *Skin Deep* consists of young college students interacting with one another and *The Color of Fear* introduces us to an older group of experienced adults. While the films themselves are deserving of extensive discussions, the purpose of this explorative paper is to compare the films while examining the experiences of two viewers who saw these films through entirely different racial and cultural lenses. I viewed the films as a white American male and my wife, Kaori, watched as a female Japanese citizen with American residency.

Prior to watching these films, I had not given much thought to what it meant to be white in America. Growing up surrounded by white people with little exposure to other races and cultures, I was insulated from race relations in this country for the majority of my upbringing. Kaori, although she is from an entirely different country, grew up in a similarly homogenous culture. Much of her experience with multiple races of people would come during her transition into life in America. Due to our comparative lack of contact with individuals from minority groups in this country, both of us were profoundly affected and moved by these two films. Many times we saw things in a similar light. However, in just as many instances, our different lenses significantly influenced our contrasting views.

A major difference between these two films presents itself when watched side by side. The confrontations and attitudes in *Skin Deep* are similar in spirit, but very different
in content, from the messages present in *The Color of Fear*. In *The Color of Fear*, we view the development of adults who have already spent their lives experiencing race relations in America. In contrast, the students in *Skin Deep* have only recently come to fully understand the implications of belong to their respective race. The college students have not internalized the lifelong pains of racism outside of educational institutions. As a result, we see the students embracing an ideology of hope that they can change society for the better. On the other hand, the adults in *The Color of Fear* have become more resigned to the fact that racism is prevalent in America, so they have less hope that society can be changed, and are more focused on each of us working to promote positive change in the individual.

One of the first surprises for me came when Kaori told me she was offended during *Skin Deep* when students said “my people” and “your people.” I assumed that since Japanese culture is generally considered collectivist, Kaori would not be so interested in individual expression. However, she took offense specifically because each person wanted others to know who they were as a person, yet continued to use language identifying “their people.” It seems my assumption that the Japanese encourage modesty and discourage excessive displays of individuality is based particularly upon the forum in which people are engaged with one another. Oddly enough, as an American, who stereotypically focuses on individuality, I didn’t even notice the language that Kaori picked up on. Her main concern was that speaking on behalf of their people, the students constructed barriers that did not allow others to get to know the individual. The only thing I was concerned with was the question of whether or not claiming individuality separated the individual from their people. This is a curious distinction between our
points of view that contradicts my assumptions of how we would view the film through our cultural lenses.

Our first major agreement surfaced when discussing David’s attitude in the beginning of *The Color of Fear*. David is a white man who thinks he is not racist. He wants everyone to stay calm and know he understands the challenges that they face. His argument is that we can all find happiness if we just strip one another down to the common denominator of humanity and treat each other with respect. Kaori felt that David spoke from the surface; that his language implied superficiality. I agreed that by distilling the human experience down to a theory of one, David disregarded the deeper traits that define each individual. The life experiences of people who have endured the challenges inherent to their race in America must be considered in order to understand a whole person. David has not dealt with such hardships as a result of being white, so he is unable to truly understand what it means to have lived life as an underrepresented minority.

Although Japan is comprised of 97% Japanese people, Kaori has spent enough time in America to begin to recognize the societal implications of our multiplicity of races. We may have very different cultural histories, but one historical trait Kaori and I have in common is that we belong to the majority race of our respective nations. It has only been since Kaori has moved to the U.S. that she has come to realize what it means to be a member of the minority. However, when she saw the black graduation ceremony in *Skin Deep*, she could not understand why that was necessary. I feel that it is important for the black students to celebrate their racial heritage and to come together as a united people to celebrate events that mark major achievements. Kaori, on the other hand, saw
black graduation as an example of black people purposefully fighting against the 
dominant white culture. She believes that this type of behavior reinforces segregation. 
Her recommendation was for the black students to come together in a post-graduation 
party without creating their own graduation ceremony in defiance of the majority. This 
opinion, I believe, is reflective of her general conviction in not making an example of 
one self by avoiding the potential for conflict. Although this may simply be her personal 
opinion, this method of conflict aversion aligns nicely with collectivist ideologies.

At one point in *The Color of Fear*, the question is asked: Why not just be happy 
as an American? This question, of course, is more accurately defined as a *concept* since 
the definition of what it means to be an American in the first place is tenuous at best. A 
member of a minority group in this country may wish to be considered African American 
or Chinese American, while a white person might simply identify as “American.” 
However one chooses to identify, each person is equally American, but the way one 
identifies indicates how a person defines their experience as a member of an American 
racial group. Being African American does not simply mean a person’s skin color is 
black. This identifier links the individual to their cultural history, their experience being 
part of that race in America, and what it means to that person to be an American.

Kaori was intrigued by the experience of Yutaka as he described his journey 
attempting to define what it means to be Japanese American. She saw a man who 
physically appeared Japanese, but was psychologically American. His journey is very 
different from hers. When Kaori is seen as non-American in this country, it is actually an 
accurate observation, because she does not claim to be American, and she has chosen to 
retain her Japanese citizenship. When she goes home to Japan, she fits right back in to
the majority race of Japanese society. However, Yutaka was struggling to define for himself what it meant exactly to be American. So, he traveled to Japan. In Japan, he found that regardless of his physical appearance, he was seen as an American. It was at this point that he came to realize this racial limbo that he exists within as a member of the minority in America who cannot re-integrate with the culture of his ethnic heritage.

Yutaka’s experience could be mirrored by any member of a racial minority in this country seeking their roots as a means of forming a racial identity. But the same is not true for a white person. If a Polish American goes to Poland and finds that they are not a Pole, their sense of self is hardly challenged because the person is still white, and therefore, still recognizes their identity as part of the cultural majority in America.

Kaori was quick to identify the bitterness of many students of color in the Skin Deep video. While I enjoyed watching the Latino student berating the white student for simply being white, Kaori found these scenes to be disturbing. She felt that the minority students were unfairly critical of the white students and that they rejected and attacked the white students without ever taking the time to meet the individual behind the white skin. For the minority students, this may have been one of the first safe environments where they were allowed to express their frustrations to their white peers. So, oftentimes it appeared to Kaori that students of color were oversensitive and that they were continually blaming white students for unintentionally racist behavior and attitudes. The confrontational scenes at the beginning of the film were necessarily painful to listen to, and the unfortunate result of such encounters is that those verbal onslaughts are taken personally. It isn’t until later in the weekend that the students process the earlier events and learn to separate the frustrations of an entire race from personal attacks.
Kaori also identified a key notion regarding race and the individual in *The Color of Fear*. The people of color want to be recognized as humans in much the same way that white people do. However, this doesn’t mean that people of color want to be white. Whiteness is not synonymous with humanity. The people of color in this film want to be visible in society as individuals, and they want people from other racial backgrounds to consider what it truly means that the person is a particular color. It is convenient to respond by stating that all members of society need to contribute regardless of their racial heritage. But when people are stripped of their cultural identity and forced into majority culture, they no longer are able to continue with what might have been their original way of life. At this point, a person of color has been reduced to an assimilated version of their potential self, with a white cultural shell superimposed over their identity. Victor and other members of minority groups in *The Color of Fear* are aware of this potential for cultural absorption, and they warn that a person’s color is indicative of who they are and what they have experienced at a race-related level beyond how they have managed to become productive members of society in a white America. Consequently, people should always be seeking to answer the question: What does it mean to be a person of color in America?

The students in *Skin Deep* answered the question of what it means to be a member of their respective race by revealing the influence of family. The role that family played shaping the identities of each student varied greatly. One white girl shared the fact that she had risked severing ties with her family by arguing in opposition to racist attitudes from her family members. On the other hand, the white boy recognized that his grandparents’ racist attitudes had influenced him greatly, yet he had not spoken out
against them. I could identify with both of these students because there were family members during my childhood who held racist beliefs. Grandpa would say things in Portland such as “when the blacks move in, the whites move out.” Many of the racist comments that I heard during my childhood affected me in unknown ways during my development to adulthood. However, I realize that I have a choice before me when it comes to understanding people of color and their experiences in this country. I can choose to be close minded, allowing my adulthood to be informed by the familial influences of my youth; or I can actively seek out individuals and ask them to share their stories, so that I can learn what it means to that person to be part of their particular race in America today.

Discussing generational beliefs being handed down from parent to child led Kaori and I to an interesting discovery. Kaori, having grown up in Japan, is purely Japanese, so all of the generations before her have been the same race living in the same country. Contrast her experiences with those of many people who have grown up in America and the differences are numerous and remarkable. Most of us in this country are either of mixed racial heritage, or we can trace a single racial attribute back to a different country of origin. For Kaori, it is very difficult to understand the experience of, for instance, a third generation Chinese American; especially if the person does not speak Chinese and knows little about Chinese culture. Even the naming process causes confusion, because in Japanese culture, the child’s name is the first gift given to them by their parents. So, if a Chinese American has both a Chinese name and an English name, how can they synthesize an identity informed by the cultural significance of their given name? Viewing this through Kaori’s cultural lens, the name is linked to the language which is linked to
the culture which is linked to the country. So it does not make sense if these links are broken by relocation into a new dominant culture.

During The Color of Fear, another surprise for Kaori was hearing that even minorities have fear of other minorities based on overarching stereotypes. I understand that racism does not only occur between white people and people of color. Racist attitudes span a continuum that includes all races in this country. However, from Kaori’s perspective, she assumed that since all people of color have been oppressed by whites, then surely all minorities must join together in their struggle for equal rights and opportunities. Hearing an Asian person say that they believed blacks were lazy criminals sounds like a white voice is speaking through an Asian being. There may be some truth in that. But, stereotypes are pervasive, and they cross the divide from race to race within this country.

Skin Deep alerted Kaori and I to the complex challenges that our daughter will inevitably face in her lifetime as a mixed race person in America. Often it appeared that of the students struggling with race during the film, it was the mixed students who had the hardest time of all. If a person is half white and half Japanese, then they are not “white” and they are not Japanese, and eventually the question crops up: “So who am I?” White people have to struggle to understand what it means to have white privilege and how they should best behave as members of the majority – but they know they are white. Black people have suffered through generations of oppression in this country and continue to experience inequality in America – but they know they are black. Whether a person is black, white, brown, or red; individuals from each race have an identity informed by the fight being fought, the experiences inherent to their race, and the stance
taken by “their people.” But what if a person is half black and half white with non-defining physical features indicative of a single race? Can this person simply choose which race that they will belong to within American society? Is it possible to belong to both races? The individual may decide “I’m black” only to be rejected by the black community. Then, in an attempt to find a sense of place in society, the person might become resigned to being white. However, the majority may not extend privilege to one who is questionably white, thereby causing the person to experience the inequality and injustices suffered by the very minorities that will not claim him as their own.

Finally, it should be mentioned that David, at the end of *The Color of Fear*, touched Kaori and I the most. When he finally reveals the abuse and racism in his family history and at the same time opens his heart to explore his inner self, we find that fear is preventing him from accepting the realities of race relations in America. At this point in the film, the others in the group recognize that David is growing and able to learn from the stories of others; which is exactly what everyone wanted him to be able to do in the first place. In order to truly understand the pain of others, we must become vulnerable ourselves.

As people from two different cultural backgrounds watching these two films, Kaori and I were able to learn a lot from the films themselves, as well as from our subsequent discussions. There is much to be discovered by listening to the stories, family histories, and pain shared by others. For me, the greatest realization comes in recognizing that each person can teach me something about what it means to be a member of any given race in this country. The key to learning is listening with a vulnerability that will allow another to reach my inner depths, with the potential for
ugliness to be exposed, because only in this state will I be able to truly understand and grow. I cannot change the world on my own. Nor can I defeat racism and oppression. But I can learn from others to change myself and perhaps influence those around me by virtue of my own personal growth.
References
