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## **Fighting Bigotry and Promoting Equality in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

### **Introduction**

When I was growing up I often used to watch old Hollywood movies with my parents. I most distinctly remember watching Blake Edward's iconic film *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, marveling at the glories of high society American life and the beauty of the country my parents worked so hard to immigrate to. I marveled at the 1961 film's opening scene, entranced by Audrey Hepburn's delicately pale skin, sleek black Givenchy dress and extravagant jewels as she ate breakfast in the bustling streets of New York.

Shortly after the elegant opening, the film is abruptly interceded by Holly Golightly's landlord Mr. Yunioshi, played by white actor Mickey Rooney, who bumbled around his apartment due to his small eyes and yelled at Holly Golightly in a sharp and twisted Japanese accent. Having to watch Rooney's character interject with threats to call the police in such a distasteful manner as I was watching a classic American love story unfold left a bittersweet taste in my mouth; I was ever so entranced by Holly's social ascension from rural Texas to Manhattan, yet deathly afraid of being laughed and looked down upon as audience members did towards Mr. Yunioshi.

As I continued to watch the movie, the fact that all of the sophisticated high-society characters had pale, white skin only grew more and more alarming. Casting a white actor to portray such a foolish stereotype such as to humiliate an entire race of hard working Americans only seemed to spit in my face and tell me that I could never be as seemingly sophisticated or as elegant as Holly Golightly and her romantic counterpart Paul Varjak.

Being born and raised in America, bigotry seems to be the ever constant domestic issue, beginning from the mass enslavement of Africans and cultural genocide of Native Americans by European colonizers to modern-day white nationalist movements and inherent racial bias in every-day American institutions. Bias and bigotry plague America like a chronic disease that ironically pervades every human being regardless of race or gender in their everyday lives. It's an unavoidable truth that people have inherent

biases based on their experiences and what they've been told. However, it's up to us to combat the threat of bigotry, whether it's about racial equality or women's rights; whether talking to one person or leading a movement addressing the masses

### **The Challenges to fighting Bigotry**

Currently, when addressing issues regarding discrimination, racism, and bias, internet users, college students, and even politicians hurl insults towards each other; they are quick to accuse someone of being „racist“ or attack them for their beliefs. People who exhibit bias or „problematic“ attitudes are called racist, insulted, and „cancelled“ on social media platforms, which comprises thousands of users sending hateful messages and group-shaming the offender. Kaitlyn Bennet, a conservative college-age journalist who gained notoriety for open-carrying a rifle at her graduation ceremony from Kent-State university, faced swarms of liberal college students hurling cheap insults, throwing water, and shouting offensive chants on her campus visits.

Instead of changing Bennett's perspective on 2nd amendment and transgender rights, the protests only seemed to boost her platform and her esteem, gaining attention from national media stations and internet users throughout the country. After the acquittal of police officer Daniel Pantaleo for the death of Eric Garner in 2014, people across the nation launched protests in the name of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Frustration with the NYPD even led to Ismaayil Brinsley to shoot and kill officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu. An extreme version of protest against bigotry, the shooting did not change anything in the Grand jury ruling of Daniel Pantaleo and did effectively nothing to actually combat bigotry and racism within American Law enforcement. Instead, the Blue Lives Matter movement was launched in opposition, and the vicious dynamic between African Americans and police officers continued to plague America.

Most of the time, aggressive attitudes and violence make the offender feel threatened, which will only make them more resistant to change and more frustrated with society attacking them. Instead of combating bigotry, resorting to confrontation and „shutting down“ the opposition only seems to worsen the problem. It's evident that the current method of viciously attacking someone for using slurs or being bigoted and exhibiting your own moral superiority does not work; as New York Times writer Margaret Wrenkl said in her opinion article, “you need to stop yelling „Racist!“ at anyone who doesn't see the world exactly as you do. Somehow you need to find enough common ground for a real conversation about race. Very few people are stupid or irredeemably mean. They'll listen to what you have to say if they trust you'll listen to what they have to say back”.

### **What We Can (and Should) Do**

Despite the current intensely polarized political climate of the US, researchers suggest more effective ways to combat bias and prejudice. In 2016, a Florida study conducted by David Broockman and Joshua Kalla demonstrated that 10-minute non-confrontational discussions between canvassers and voters in the area were able to change voters' perspectives regarding transgender rights and reduce prejudice. By clearing the stigma and preconceived notions around transgender people and invoking a sense of empathy, canvassers were able to increase positive feelings by 10 points on their "feeling thermometer".

Instead of vilifying the opposing side on whatever issue there may be, people who want to fight bigotry must begin to look past their views and be able to treat the other side as human beings; the tolerant must learn to tolerate the intolerant. However, these sorts of productive, non-confrontational discussions prove to be scarce in today's climate. As intellectuals in the 21st century, we must all acknowledge that our knowledge of the world and our society is imperfect, and by engaging in productive discussion both sides may learn something. Instead of debating these urgent issues in a hotheaded manner that involves condemnation and frustration, we must discuss them in a way that both sides can empathize with the other and work together. Only with empathy and respect can people gain new perspectives and progress into a better society.

The next time you see someone expressing their discriminatory or bigoted beliefs, recognize your responsibility to promote equality and diversity, but don't be so quick to shut them down. Instead, with the compassion in mind, approach them calmly and treat them like a human being. Share your experiences with them and ask them to think about your side of the issue. Treat them as your equal, as two civilians who earnestly want to improve the world around them. Before you have an opinion on the issue, make sure to educate yourself. Learn about the various factors that play into the issue, the nuances and the challenges. Learn the facts, and don't let dogma or other people's opinions play into your own. Only as educated intellectuals can people fully grasp the aspects of an issue and work towards solving it.

### **Conclusion**

As *Breakfast at Tiffany's* reaches its climax and Audrey Hepburn's character realizes how lost and afraid she is despite her facade of cosmopolitan elegance, marginalized people around the globe feel isolated and cast-out by the evils of bigotry and hatred despite how long they've lived in their country. I slowly came to realize Mr. Yunioshi was not the only case of racism; there was also hundreds of years of intolerance and bigotry that's embedded in American culture.

However, I also recognized it is the duty of me and the people around me to foster a better society, whether it means combating bigotry, promoting equity and diversity, or being more inclusive. It's time for us to abandon vicious arguments that only lead to frustration; instead, we must learn again how to respect and empathize with others. We must take the time to educate ourselves, and facilitate civil discussion. It may need a lot of effort and a lot of discussions, but it may be the only way towards a better future.

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