

“This Ain’t the Ghetto”: Diaspora, Discourse, and Dealing with “Iowa Nice”

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Iowa’s most difficult and dangerous challenge for the next four years relates to how the state’s citizens and institutions address diversity in its neighborhoods, classrooms, and workplaces.

Since 1980, the state’s black population has grown from 1.4 percent to 2.9 percent, an increase of nearly 50,000 people. In the next 30 years, this population will reach roughly 169,000 – according to some estimates – and may come to make up the greatest number of non-whites in the state.

Yet, Iowa, in general, continues to struggle with talking about its changing culture, welcoming new arrivals, and with making communities safe for these new neighbors. Police, government, and schools – all with histories of overt racism, brutality, and segregation – continue to operate behind mythologies of urban danger and destruction that lead to veiled policies of discrimination locally. These officials are often led by Iowa news media that often carelessly frame newcomers through demonizing

racialized discourse, contributing to a complex system of racism rooted in notions of black villains from the belly of Chicago – black “refugees” and “transients” seeking refuge in the “country.”

Such discourse has real results. Look at Iowa City, specifically:

- Black children in Iowa City schools are suspended in disproportionate numbers to white students
- Black youth experience more incidents with police than whites
- Increasingly more black Iowans tell stories of being threatened with losing their jobs, their homes, and social standing if and when they speak-out against inequalities at work, school, or in their personal lives in our Iowa communities.

Another Problem?

Iowa Nice – a rhetorical tool in which conflict and controversy about anything we might be doing wrong that stifles public discussions about our problems. This mixture of kindness and passive aggressiveness, wide smiles and backroom grumbles deplete any actionable discourse to unveil and address racist, oppressive, or hateful actions tied to a particular person – or sets of people – who are “true Iowans,” those “from here.”

Iowa Nice is inherent in what we paste on billboards (“The People of Iowa Welcome You”) and saying nice things to your face that don’t reflect what we “really think.”

Iowa Nice is saying that suspending black youth or sending a disproportionate number of them to special education classes is pedagogically sound while ignoring conversations about altering teaching style and recruiting (and retaining) diverse teachers.

Iowa Nice is instituting a citywide nightly curfew for the entire city, but then only having enforcing against young blacks while refusing to entertain public discussion about the practice.

Iowa Nice is making black high school students wait hours to get a bus ride home after school – even though “home” is only a couple miles away.

Iowa Nice is believing that these students “enjoy” waiting to get home from the downtown bus terminal while surrounded by police officers with watching eyes and loaded guns.

Over the past few years, wide ranges of narratives about how Iowans deal – or don’t – with new arrivals to the state have been played out. Brave souls have told their personal stories of struggling to be accepted in Iowa, which appeared in a locally produced documentary, *Black American Gothic*, and in the Hancher-commissioned play, *Mayberry*.

These are great initiatives – ones that I have been happy to support – but we must remember that through such events, these become *public*

stories. Told on theatre stages, TV screens, and newsstands, they have been retold, rearticulated, appropriated for an audience.

It's time now for us to find and unpack personal, private stories from our neighbors, our friends, and many of our state's strangers and through them, we must acknowledge our own roles in Iowa's hostile and unwelcoming environment for outsiders.

This will be a hard transition.

A True Challenge

Our dominant regional values demand politeness and proper conversation. We teach our children that "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." But we must realize – if we don't already – that racism, hatred, fear, and oppression are impolite topics. It's impossible to have polite conversation about impoliteness, and *Iowa Nice's* strategy of avoidance is inhumane.

Scholars, politicians, and average citizens alike have called for "civil discourse" over the past few years. Unfortunately, civil discourse, the supposed antithesis of Iowa Nice that would allow us to talk about sensitive issues without anyone getting hurt, is Iowa Nice in a different guise.

Civil discourse isn't designed to create change by openly sharing ideas; it is a means by which to referee acceptable language, argument, interaction, intent, and position. Civil discourse suggests that conversations and debates should be polite – even when we discuss issues that are far from it, but both "civil discourse" and "Iowa Nice" silence opposition to dominant ideologies.

At an orientation I attended last year, a University of Iowa counselor spoke about dealing with the stress and interpersonal conflict of academia. In effect, it was a lesson in Iowa Nice.

"You shouldn't have friends who are critical," she said. Instead, she encouraged the small crowd to "surround yourself with people who are supportive."

What?

Since when did "being critical" become synonymous with "being mean?" And we should only be around people who are "nice?" Shouldn't we see criticism as a "critical lens" helping us to improve our communities? Indeed, civil discourse, like Iowa Nice, isn't designed to create change but is to referee acceptable language, argument, interaction, intent, and position and to silence opposition to dominant ideologies.

I saw this exact kind of silencing earlier this fall when I sought permissions to use language from *The Iowa City Press-Citizen* for a book project that focuses, in part, on public and news discourses about our changing state.

For the past three years I have been working on community engagement, journalism, and research in Iowa City's Southeast Side, a place where a good number of black Chicago transplants have settled.

It has also been a place criminalized and stigmatized by, among other groups, the local press.

In retrospect, I shouldn't have been surprised by the newspaper's decision to deny my request. I was surprised, however, to see behind the veil thanks to the inadvertent transmissions of emails from the paper about my request:

"I share ----'s concerns that Ted will paint some our news and opinion coverage in a less-than-favorable light," one email read. "(He was critical of us often on his blog when he lived here.) I just think we – as journalists – will end up looking even worse if he has to add, 'The Press-Citizen wouldn't give me permission to quote from the news stories.'"

Oh, boy. Critical, you say?

To truly explore race relations in Iowa, we must stop being silent, become more comfortable with conflict, and approach the issues of our day with the same passion that's used to institute racism through discriminatory policies and attitudes.

Iowa Nice just won't cut it anymore.