RACISM IN ANTHROPOLOGY:
SAME DISCIPLINE, DIFFERENT DECADE

Additional findings of the Commission on Race and Racism in Anthropology and the American Anthropological Association
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Same Discipline, Different Decade

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The Commission on Race and Racism in Anthropology of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) was formed in 2007 to re-evaluate race and racism in the discipline and the association. The primary question facing the commission was what, if anything, has changed in the 35 years since The Committee on Minorities and Anthropology formed in 1972. This committee comprised of six members created a questionnaire that gathered information on the perspectives of minority anthropologists. Thirty-six individuals responded to the questionnaire which led to a 132-page report entitled *The Minority Experience in Anthropology* (Hsu et al, 1973).

As a person who began her undergraduate studies in anthropology over two decades after the report was released, I have chosen to discuss my experiences with race and racism as a student on both the undergraduate and graduate levels. A few questions were answered based on experiences working in a professional capacity both as a student and after completion of my studies. Instead of writing an essay, I have opted to revisit the questions posed in the original 1973 survey. In lieu of beginning with the personal information section, this paper will start with questions from Section II: Personal and Professional Experiences since they specifically address the question of what, if anything, has changed.
14. *Do you feel that your experiences have differed in anthropology either positively or negatively from those of non-minority anthropologists? If so, please tell us in what ways.*

My experiences have been positive for the same reasons that they were also negative. By this I mean that as an African American anthropologist I am often included on projects that deal with subjects concerning this cultural group. This exposure to various projects has been positive for my career in terms of hands-on experience and generating much needed income. It has also been positive to be a minority anthropologist since African and African American cultures are my area of focus.

At the same time my status as a minority anthropologist has also kept me limited in the scope of projects that I am actually considered for. As a small consulting agency my services are often only called upon when there is some component in a project that requires research in or contact with African American groups.

In this way my experiences differ from non-minority anthropologists in that they are often invited to work on projects that go beyond the area of their specialization. As anthropologists we should be sufficiently prepared to work with any cultural group; however those opportunities are not readily available for minorities in the field. It is not uncommon for a non-minority scholar who specializes in Southwestern Indian culture to suddenly become the Principal Investigator on a project that concentrates on Eastern Japanese cultures. This has rarely been the case in my experiences and those of other minority anthropologists with whom I’ve spoken. It is as though there is an unspoken, yet clearly understood, rule that as minority scholars we should only conduct research in or work on projects that relate to our own cultural group.

In an incident that occurred three years ago, I was hired as a researcher to help identify interpretive themes for a particular region. As a result of the data collected during that project as well as through prior personal research, I presented a Power Point presentation to a group of local historians and genealogists. The director of the interpretive-theme project which I had just completed was present in the audience. He was so impressed by the information presented that he made phone calls to various organizational leaders throughout the state expressing his happiness at learning some new information and the potential it had to boost heritage interpretation within the region.

As the time approached to apply for a second grant that would have allowed continuation of the project, the director was informed by another anthropologist who held a Ph.D., while I did not, that there was NO ONE in the area qualified to work on the second phase of the project and that progress should be halted until the following year. The project director took the advice of the non-minority Ph.D. anthropologist and delayed the continuation of the second phase of the project. In the meantime though, the project director hired a non-minority graduate student to conduct research on African American history in the region.
As a person who had studied under this professor and worked with her off-and-on for almost a decade I was: (1) insulted and offended that my ability to continue work on the project was brought into question; (2) not stunned that the Project Director took the advice of a non-minority Ph.D. over that of a minority with a masters degree; (3) reminded that as students our instructors do not always support our research efforts especially when it brings into question some of the information that they are presenting.

I have observed several other non-minority students working as consultants and researchers in this region and can not recall one instance in which their ability to complete a project, on which they had already worked for a period of a year, be questioned. So, why then was mine? Was it racism or professional insecurities?

15. Were your experiences as a student different from those of nonminority students? If so, please tell us in what ways.

Within the first week of walking the halls of the Social Science Department as an undergraduate, I observed 8 ½ X 11 inch signs announcing a slave auction as a fundraiser for a non-minority fraternity. Yes, my experience was different.

I entered the undergraduate program knowing I wanted to concentrate on African American studies. I was told several times by more than one professor that I should rethink my focus because people “just don’t care anymore” about slavery. Seven years later another minority student entered the program and the same professors informed her that her interest in African Americans and slavery would be a waste of time. She left the graduate program before completing it. Yes, our experiences were different. Since that time I have asked several of my non-minority classmates if they were discouraged to pursue their areas of interest. All replied they had not been.

As a graduate student my experiences were similar in some respects to my undergraduate years yet different in others. They were different in that I was encouraged to explore African American and African history as well as the various sub-groups that formed within those ethnicities. Graduate school was also different in terms of student cultural diversity within the graduate program. This was sometimes beneficial depending on a particular topic. Minority students sometimes brought a fresh perspective to the conversation which often stemmed from first-hand experience.

How my undergraduate and graduate experiences were similar are in the perception that at both academic institutions, there was limited confidence, if any, in my ability to perform important tasks associated with the department. As an undergrad, I was elected as treasurer for the student anthropology club. I was given full control of the collection of membership dues and issuing badges. However, when it came time for the only fundraising/special event which was usually handled by the treasurer, I was asked to turn the club’s checkbook over to a male non-minority student who was to be responsible for ensuring things would go smoothly. Incidentally, at the end of
the event, the non-minority student had overspent the budget by almost one hundred dollars.

Was the transfer of authority for this single—and the biggest—event an example of racism or sexism? Was it a combination of both or had nothing to do with either? I find it peculiar that my authority as treasurer was “temporarily suspended” and given to a student who was at least 10 years my junior. The fact that I had lived on my own from the age of 16 and was now in my mid-30s did not seem to provide enough confidence in my abilities to budget money and balance a checkbook.

As a graduate student, this lack of confidence in my abilities surfaced again when it came time to select teaching assistants. When I began the graduate program there were several minority students enrolled. Of those, three identified as African American. The one male student left before the end of the first semester due to financial hardship. The other two, including myself, were both females and continued in the program. By the time I had arrived at graduate school I had presented student and professional papers at conferences and workshops in several states. I was in the process of writing a book and had been a consultant for other researchers and academics working on a variety of issues pertaining to African Americans. Yet, when it was time to select teaching assistants, none of the African American or any other member of a minority group were chosen. The other African American student and I both approached staff and asked if we would be allowed the same opportunity to teach before we graduated. We were informed that the selection of teaching assistants for the remainder of this graduating class had already been determined.

My classmate opted instead to seek a teaching assistantship from the biology department and was allowed to teach classes there, yet she had not been provided the same opportunity within her own degree program. I didn’t push on the issue and regret it to this day for the experience could have benefited my professional career or helped as I am considered for assistantships should I enter a doctorate program. Since I received my graduate degree in 2007, I have found that at least two of the non-minority students who were given teaching assignments never graduated from the program and at least three have left the field of anthropology altogether. My minority classmate, who was allowed to teach in the biology department, has of this writing still not graduated. She is currently considering taking legal actions against the department which she feels has committed numerous discriminatory violations.

During my four semesters in graduate school, it was as though minority students were somehow deemed incapable of teaching and not for lack of information on subject matter since I maintained a 4.0 grade average as did other minority students. While I clearly understand that not every student can become a teaching assistant, it would seem that with a culturally diverse student population and in a field like anthropology, there would be a greater effort by faculty to diversify the people that potential anthropology students make first contact with.
Overall, as a graduate student it felt difficult to secure assistantships of any kind. Although I was awarded a research position during my first semester as a condition of my entrance in the program, by the second semester I had to reapply for it. I placed myself on the waiting list like my fellow students but was told that the positions had all been awarded. In a conversation with a non-minority classmate, I was informed that she had been offered an assistantship but had turned it down. It was later discovered that she had not requested any financial assistance or assistantships and was amused that the department had contacted her with such an offer. Armed with this information, I confronted the staff member responsible for awarding these positions since my name was next on the list. We were then able to work the situation out and I continued my education.

I can’t help but wonder if the African American male student who left the program due to a lack of finances might have been overlooked and sadly lost a chance to pursue a career in anthropology because he wasn’t given assistance. I also wonder what would have happened to me that semester had the non-minority female student accepted the assistantship that she not only had not requested but did not need. Was it racism that allowed the staff member to bypass a minority student on the waiting list for a non-minority student who had not requested any assistance? And if not, then what was it?

It is not my intent to paint a picture of anthropologists as all racists and/or professionally insecure. Just as I had some difficult times as a student, I also had some times that were made much smoother due to the help of non-minority anthropologists. I am convinced that I might have changed career goals as an undergraduate had it not been for two non-minority professors in the program. I felt sincerely welcomed as a student into the program and was given the needed emotional support to pursue my goals by them.

16. It has been said that the intellectual contributions of minority anthropologists are not given the same consideration as those of non-minority anthropologists. For example, the writings of minority anthropologists are often not reviewed in professional journals, not quoted or cited, and seldom used as required readings. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? If you agree, can you think of examples? If you disagree, please comment.

As an undergraduate, I was introduced to African American anthropologist St. Clair Drake (1911–1990) in a 2-3 page article about his contributions to the discipline. We never used his work in class nor that of any other minority anthropologists; I received the papers on Drake after asking for information on African American anthropologists. As a graduate student with a more culturally diverse curriculum, I gained exposure to African anthropologists through a course on African religions but no other minority anthropologist’s work was studied. When I discussed, with a senior scholar in the anthropology department, my concerns about this absence of minority
literature in graduate-level courses I was told that non-minority students “could not relate” to the work of minority anthropologists. I was given an example in which the department head had introduced a book written by a minority anthropologist to a graduate class several years back. While I cannot recall the name of the anthropologist nor her book title, it apparently discussed inner city living. The students, according to the professor, rejected the text provided as unbelievable and difficult to read. I don’t remember the other complaints, but as a result the literature was removed from the syllabus and no other minority person’s research replaced it.

I was stunned that a student’s inability to relate to a scholar’s work could disbar the information from the curriculum. I know I certainly had a stressful time relating to publications of Levi-Strauss and Kroeber, yet still had to read and comprehend their ideologies. I thought that was part of the point of graduate school—in-depth study of critical thinkers. I’m not suggesting this woman’s book helped shape anthropological theory like Levi-Strauss, however if we do not read and discuss the work of minority anthropologist. How will we know if they are providing valid theoretical perspectives? And if a required reading can be removed from the syllabus because students could not relate to the content and found it difficult to read, then surely Shakespeare’s work would be removed from all classrooms.

17. Do you feel that you have been discriminated against in your professional career because of race, color, or creed?

Yes ___ X ___ No ______

Please cite examples or comment. In thinking about how to answer, you may wish to consider some or all of the following aspects of a career line: (qualifications required for teaching and research positions, difficulties in acquiring beginning posts, awarding of half-time positions; salaries; promotions; tenure; pressure to publish; teaching responsibilities, e.g., course load, choice of courses, evaluation of performance; other aspects of the professional role, e.g., committee assignments, executive positions; employment outside the university; pressures for third-world or community involvement.)

As previously mentioned, one of the best examples of professional discrimination transpired during the project in which NO ONE in the area was qualified to continue working on it (See answer to Question 14). Although there are other similar examples of racism I could list I will only discuss another one having to do with creed.

In an attempt to discredit my research and downplay my righteous indignation at racist practices within the university and community organizations, my sexual preference was often used to explain my actions. One day I overheard a former professor state to a few of her peers and outside community leaders that many of “my problems” stemmed from “being in the closet.” As the conversation continued, she was actually
suggesting that if I could “get in touch” with my sexual identity I would be less confrontational. I still have not figured out how my perceived—in-the-closet—status would have affected my research abilities.

I never let the professor know I heard her comments, however it apparently was not the first time she tried to discredit me with such statements. The ironic part of the whole situation is that by that time in my life I had already been openly gay for over 15 years and was actively involved in lesbian and gay organizations including membership on the Board of Directors of a few groups.

What is most disturbing about these vicious attempts to silence me is that the actions have seemingly all been initiated by a non-minority anthropology professor and for what reasons I can only speculate—professional insecurity. How much have her statements harmed me in terms of potential employment opportunities and developing community contacts? I may never know, but I do know that these kind of trite actions only serve to undermine inclusiveness of ALL people in the discipline. It makes one wonder about the state of a discipline that professes to study cultures, yet discriminates against certain ones as a way to show professional incompetence.

18. Some minority anthropologists say that in contrast to non-minority anthropologists they have been utilized in the following ways: field worker and interviewer; liaison to a minority, ethnic or cultural group; cultural broker-interpreter for majority member anthropologists; informant. Does your experience, both as a student and professional anthropologist now, bear out this assertion? If so, please tell us about it. If you disagree, please comment.

As an undergraduate student at a small university and with several active local historic and genealogical groups, I had the chance to work on many projects and in various capacities. I worked a total of eight projects that I recall and of those, I worked on two in each of the following categories: (1) field worker, (2) consultant, and (3) narrator. I worked on one project each as a (4) project coordinator and (5) an assistant researcher. In the two fieldworker positions, my assignments included Native American and multi-cultured groups. On the consultant projects, I was an advisor on African American cultures. The narrator projects included Native American and African American cultures. In the project coordinator position, I managed the collection of oral histories on African Americans; and in the final position of assistant researcher, I collected oral histories again dealing with African Americans. In both the coordinator and researcher positions my role was first as community liaison, then as interviewer.

In graduate school, I worked with two projects, one as a research assistant dealing with African American material culture and the second as a field worker at an African American archaeological site. I should perhaps also include the three guest lecturer classes I presented to introductory-level anthropology students. So, there were five projects total. The research assistant and field worker positions on the surface
could look discriminatory based on the question asked in this form; however my area of concentration in the program dealt with African Diaspora cultures and naturally I would want to expose myself to those types of projects.

The invitations as a guest lecturer were solely from a non-minority fellow student who was one of the ones chosen from my class to receive the teaching assistantship. On the three occasions I was invited to speak, I was told I could speak on any topic I wanted, but she would prefer if I spoke on some aspect of African or African American culture. This gesture on the surface could also be misinterpreted as narrowing me to speak only on minority issues and if it were not for my area of concentration I too might have taken it that way. Yet, what this non-minority student did was allow me a voice in the classroom setting that had not previously been afforded me by faculty. (These invitations to guest lecture provide an excellent yet simple example of how non-minorities can facilitate change in a racist environment).

It has been seven years now since I completed the undergraduate program making me the first African American female to do so. Since that time, I have published a book and am currently working on another one. I have presented at conferences and workshops throughout the country, and successfully nominated my alma mater for inclusion in a national program. I have almost single-handedly brought researchers to the region. Many of whom have added to our collective knowledge of minority cultures in the area, yet I still have not received an invitation to speak at the university’s anthropology club where I once served as treasurer of the group.

Are the actions of the university’s faculty racist or does it speak to their professional insecurities? Have I been “black-balled” for speaking up and challenging the status quo? And when I have publicly mentioned being asked in as a guest speaker, why am I continuously told to speak to the club’s president who never seems to know when there will be an opening.

19. It has also been asserted that minority anthropologists have been excluded from making theoretical formulations, interpretations of research findings, and policy decisions. Does your experience both as a student and a professional anthropologist bear out this assertion? If so, please tell us about it. If not, please comment.

Based on the above eight projects I worked with as a student, theoretical formulations were not a part of the final product. Six of the eight projects had an interpretive component; four specifically dealt with African American cultures, one with Native American cultures, and one was multi-cultural in scope. I was not included in the interpretation component in one of the fieldworker positions and in one of the consultant projects. My involvement with policy decisions was nonexistent in all eight projects.

As is typical with most students, all of my work had some supervisory component. That is someone had the authority to make final decisions on the projects direction and end products. As a consultant, I have more authority in terms of
project direction and end products, however most often I’m working for someone else. This means then that ultimately the final decision becomes the responsibility of the hiring agency. It is rare that I am able to conceive a project, procure funding, initiate and complete it without someone else having some say about what happens.

20. How do you feel about anthropology?
I entered the study of anthropology as a non-traditional student—African American, female, and over 30—so my decision to pursue this discipline had been carefully thought out. Perhaps the single greatest factor in my decision was the belief that anthropologists embrace cultural diversity and could therefore help to change existing stereotypes that divide people around the world.

    I entered this discipline with the illusion that scholars in this field were surely open-minded, understanding of and sensitive to issues facing minority peoples of all kinds. As a new student in the discipline I recall being surprised to find there were several sub-groups within AAA, such as Hispanic, African American, Native American. I did not then and to some extent do not today understand the necessity for such cultural classifications for scholars. I wonder what it would be like to only have sub-groups in AAA that are defined simply in terms of geographic areas. Thereby leaving interpretations open to all scholars regardless of cultural affiliation. The commonality then is an interest in a region such as the Northeastern United States or Harris County, Texas. Instead, what I find is that in the year 2008, minority anthropologists, perhaps justifiably so, still must ask the question if anything has changed over the past 35 years.

    Another thought regarding anthropology is the tendency by non-minority scholars to justify study of a minority group based primarily on their Ph.D. status. I will attempt to clarify this statement with the following example. I am generally considered an expert on African American cultures in this region and can support this assertion through my curriculum vita. Yet, I have been told by some scholars that research on some subjects is best undertaken by a Ph.D. versus a scholar with a master’s degree. I can understand that statement on the surface, but not when it is applied in the following manner.

    An opportunity presented itself in which a large-scale project for the African American community had an opening for a researcher. Naturally I wanted to apply but was told by someone whom I respected that this project was better suited for someone with a Ph.D. Under different circumstances—another minority group for study—I may have agreed, but not in this case. The main argument presented by the other scholar was that the individual they had in mind already had a doctorate and had previous research experience with the local African American community, therefore she was better qualified.

    But was she really? Neither her thesis nor dissertation discussed African American culture, but she had worked on one project that included collecting oral histories while
a graduate student. One component of the project required community contact and grass-root level organizing, which I was later hired by her to do. My argument here is: how was she more qualified than I to complete this project? If I listen to the other scholar then the very virtue of her Ph.D. status is what sets her apart. I interpret that to mean that 2 years of academic studies followed by about two years of writing (dissertation) on a subject that had nothing to do with African Americans somehow made her “better qualified” than me.

What made me at least equally qualified as the person with a Ph.D. was living as and among African Americans for 34 years and having a masters degree with emphasis on the culture. Who was really better qualified? I am not by any means suggesting that only a member of the same culture group should study that culture. What I am suggesting is that a scholar who belongs to a minority group is as qualified to study that group as a non-minority scholar who has very limited experience working with the minority culture. Simply stated, a Ph.D. who did not focus her studies on this minority culture does not make the individual more qualified than a scholar who self-identifies with the sub-group of study.

21. Do you feel that anthropological studies in the past have rendered service or disservice to minority groups in American society? Please include specific examples you may know of in your answer.
Laurin Mcclaurin, William Gwantley, Zora Neal Hurston, and Lorenzo Turner are a few names of people that I can recall who have rendered a positive service. I am, unfortunately, familiar only with studies on African American groups in the U.S. This is because I sought research about this group for my area of focus. Otherwise I would not know works produced on minority populations. I think this is a direct result of non-diversified literature about or produced by minorities in undergrad and graduate-level courses.

22a. How do you assess the research which has been conducted on your minority group?
I basically look for the content and overall contribution the works make towards a better understanding of African American cultures. Is there something from the research that I can relate to or will incorporate in my own work? Does it provide me with a point of reference to better understand something that is uniquely of African descent? For example, after reading an article by Dr. Sheila Walker in which she discussed the origin of the name Ouida, I was able to apply this knowledge to my own research. While working on a project I met a non-minority woman who had the name Ouida. According to Dr. Walker, this name came from the port of Whydah in West Africa, which is where many slaves of the African Diaspora departed en route to the New World. When I informed the non-minority woman of the origin of her name, she explained that she was named after her mother’s servant’s daughter who was black.
22b. Do you think such work can be improved?
   Please comment.

There is always room for improvement in research techniques and strategies.

23. Can you suggest ways in which anthropology can be used to serve the needs of minority groups in the United States?

The only ways I’ve used anthropology to help a minority group is through the collection of oral histories and folklore, identification of culturally significant artifacts, and through the documentation of material culture. For several small minority communities this was the only way that their histories would be preserved since often no one else had documented them. I believe the greatest contribution I have made to minority groups is simply in the acknowledgment that they exist and lending a voice through which they add stories of their roles and contributions to the regional and local history.

24. Do you advise minority students to enter anthropology? Why or why not?

Yes, I do advise minority students to enter anthropology with the caution that they will not get financially rich but that as a discipline it can be richly rewarding in terms of personal satisfaction. Finally, I suggest to African American students that they would have the distinction of being part of a world-wide group of a relatively small group of people who can include in their self-identify the name anthropologist.

25. Can you suggest ways in which anthropology can be made more relevant for minority students?

As I began to answer this question I decided to conduct a mini-survey asking ten randomly chosen minority high school students if they would consider a degree in anthropology. Seven of the ten did not know what anthropology was, two confused the discipline with paleontology, and the one student who knew what an anthropologist was felt the discipline would be too hard to complete.

An introduction to the relevancy of the discipline for minority students might begin at younger ages. How can we expect a minority student to aspire for a career choice they are unaware exists? And if it doesn’t exist in their minds how can we show the relevancy? More efforts are needed to bring anthropology into the classrooms of minority student populations. When this information is presented to young students, they should sometimes see minority faces during this process. As the old phrase goes “seeing is believing.” I know it would have been helpful for me during my six years of course work before earning my masters degree to have had ONE required reading by an African American anthropologist. That single act would have validated for me that I too could publish a book that might one day be part of an anthropology class syllabus.

26. Can you give an estimate of the number of students of minority background at your university or institution who are interested in anthropology?

Undergraduate: The university that I attended as an
undergraduate no longer offers a bachelors degree in anthropology largely due to low student enrollment. When I graduated the program in 2002, I was the first African American female student to do so.

Graduate: I do not have any figures for the number of minority students currently enrolled at the university where I received my master’s degree. However, I was the only African American student who received a graduate degree in 2006 out of a graduating class of approximately nine students.

27. Knowing what you know now, if you were starting a career would you become an anthropologist? Why or why not?

Yes, I would still become an anthropologist because it suits me as a profession. I’ve met some good people and learned a lot about sub-groups in American culture. I would still choose this discipline for the hope I still hold for its ability to facilitate change in racist policies and attitudes. Mostly I would choose this career because through it I have been able to contribute a different interpretation to the long standing folklore, myths, and untruths that were and are still to some extent being told about Africans and African Americans in this region of the country.

28. Further study: Would you agree to participate in a follow-up interview in order to facilitate the work of the Committee?

Yes __X____ No ______

About a month ago I went to a local pow-wow and as expected, there were several groups represented that I was accustomed to seeing. But, it had been several years since I attended this event and was pleasantly surprised to find that Indians of various skin-color were present. It was not the skin-color that surprised me, but that they were at this particular event, which was being held on the university campus and partially sponsored by the social science department.

This was the same group of folks who, just a little more than a decade earlier, informed me that William Katz’s book *Black Indians* was not valid because he did not cite his work. It’s not that I brought the material in to be included as part of the syllabus. I simply wanted to know why information like that was not being shared in the multitude of classes available on American Indians. After all, one of the biggest components of the program was the expertise available on the study of Indian cultures.

I bring these two incidences to light because they show where the university staff’s attitude is today compared to just a little more than a decade ago. These two stories suggest that change is sometimes indeed slow, yet steadily in progress. The anthropologists who responded with shock, disbelief, and alarm to the Katz book were, at least a few, in attendance at
the Pow Wow with the dark-skinned Indians. There were also more cultural diversity among the crowd of observers.

It was later that evening that I realized that my professors had learned at least some of their racist thinking from within the discipline of anthropology where they were told that a dark-skin person when noted among Indian groups in colonial Louisiana are slaves and not part of the Indian society. This misinformation they then passed to their students, who passed it on as teaching assistants, etc. But for students like me, who grew up knowing about the existence of black Indians because there was evidence of them in my family tree, the denial of these black people made me suspicious of their knowledge as instructors. Mostly though, it always made me question what they told me versus what I knew or suspected to be true. In some ways it made me a better researcher since I always felt as a student that I had to see it for myself.

So, in the year 2012 as I answer the 1972 questions from The Committee on Minorities and Anthropology regarding race, overall YES there has been some change even here in the rural South. Am I satisfied with the rate of change? NO. Do I think there should be some responsibility by anthropologists to study and publish findings on racism within the discipline? YES. Do I think there are enough non-minority professors willing to fight for the necessary changes without fear of losing tenure or some other prestigious position? NO. Am I hopeful that change is possible and will occur over time? YES
Bibliography

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