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Aldemaro Romero Jr.
CUNY Bernard M Baruch College

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Beeman Studies Racism in Today's America

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“When I went to college at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, I became interested in sociology because it addressed issues of family and class dynamics and the issues that low-income working-class families struggle with. I avoided the racial element of it at first because my family and I had always been targeted as being among the few people of color in that community, and there is a kind of shame involved with that.”

This is how Dr. Angie Beeman explains how she came to be a sociologist. A native of Somerset, Pennsylvania, she went on to obtain a doctorate at the University of Connecticut and is now an associate professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College/CUNY.

When asked about the struggle of immigrants of color who try to integrate themselves into rural communities, she can speak based on her own experiences. “I saw this struggle with my Korean mother a lot, with not fitting in. I don’t know if she ever really found a place where she fitted. She tried to have friends among her neighbors, but she was able to be friendly with only the neighbors that her children were friends with. She also had to witness the children and neighbors saying racist things to her children,” Beeman explains.

Today American society seems to be afraid of talking about race in a constructive way, and Beeman has some opinions about that. “We just have to be courageous enough to be upfront and willing to address racism explicitly, and this is a problem very early on in children grades K-12. The way that children get taught about racism at a young age is a very color-blind way. Children have things like Black History Month, when they get bios of Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, which is all great; but they don’t understand racism, how it developed, and where it came from. What I find talking to young children when I have gone into the schools is that they are capable of understanding it.”



Dr. Beeman at her office.

Photo by Gulinoz Javodova

And, of course, one wonders what the future is for integration in the current political climate, not only in the U.S. but also around the world. “I think there are examples that we are coming along, but we may not see much media coverage of them. This is what I tell my students who are really pessimistic—that it is there and it is happening. You can see the moments and the developments, but you have to look for them because they won’t be on the news.”

And there may be bases for pessimism. After all, when Barack Obama was elected President, some in the media claimed that we had “achieved a color-blind society.” Now we see terrible things going on, so the question becomes: What happened? Beeman has an explanation. “A lot of people have argued that Donald Trump has given national permission for this sort of overt racism, I don’t think that with Obama the racism was gone;

it had just gotten quieter. The focus of my work is on the evolution of racism. When I talk about the evolution of racism, I always make sure to point out that racism evolved. This doesn’t mean that earlier signs of racism disappeared. If we have gone from a biological or scientific racism to one that is more cultural, to color-blind racism, it doesn’t mean that overt biological racism is gone; it means that as racism evolved, people have learned not to voice that racism.”

One big topic of discussion today is the use of the “n-word” by younger African-Americans but not by older ones, and one wonders whether there are profound intergenerational differences on that issue. “In the organizations I studied, those who had experienced the Civil Rights Movement felt that kind of tension with the younger members of the organization. One of the things they pointed out was that, because they had experienced the

Civil Rights Movement and saw people coming together, they were more positive in their outlook towards change. I remember one of them saying that ‘we are losing younger generations to social media and that younger members haven’t seen instances of people coming together’, so they are more pessimistic,” says Beeman.

That brings us to another issue, which is self-segregation, the tendency of groups to socialize in a significant way only with people of their own ethnic background. “I don’t think self-segregation is all completely negative. I think that it is protective, and there is some research that shows this,” says Beeman. “Having separate groups can create a safe space. It is more a question of asking what is going on in these different cultural groups.”

One area in which Beeman has worked is the study of lending practices when it comes to race. One would think that after the Civil Rights Act and other legislation, these discriminatory practices were a thing of a past. “They just get reformulated,” says Beeman. “People would say, ‘Well, I think we’ve come a long way, if you look at this and that.’ Change isn’t linear; social change is very complicated. It’s not that you have the Civil Rights Movement and everything gets better. It tends to be a U-turn and patterns that go back and forth.”

Looking at the history of racism, Beeman thinks that the racial income gap between African Americans and European Americans may have slightly decreased following the Civil Rights movement. However, in the late 1970s and early 1980s the gap increased again. “People don’t understand that. They don’t look at the complicated picture of what was going on in the late 70s. Like with Ronald Regan and his campaign to overturn affirmative action in the early 80s and to get rid of Civil Rights Movement. We look at the Civil Rights Movement, but we have to look at the countermovement too.”

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/238764268> He can be contacted via Aldemaro.Romero@baruch.cuny.edu