

Race in American Institutions and Culture

On June 29, 2023, in a 6-3 vote, the Supreme Court effectively ended the practice of affirmative action in college admissions.¹ In the majority opinion, Chief Justice John Roberts wrote that, “eliminating racial discrimination means eliminating all of it.”² His assertion implies that the consideration of race in admissions, i.e. taking a race sensitive approach to promote diversity and offset often discriminatory practices like legacy admissions,³ inherently discriminates against other races, namely white and Asian Americans.⁴ Chief Justice Roberts maintained that the ruling does not prevent applicants from discussing how race has affected them but prevents schools that receive federal funding from using race as a factor for admissions. Justice Clarence Thomas summed up Chief Justice Robert’s opinion by claiming the United States has a “color-blind Constitution.”⁵

The concept of racial colorblindness in a legal setting was first established in the Supreme Court ruling *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) when the lone dissenter, Justice John Marshall Harlan, claimed that “our constitution is color-blind”⁶ meaning everyone is considered equal. Justice Harlan’s words were meant to convey a race-conscious⁷ approach to policy intended to promote equity. Racial colorblindness is the idea that to prevent bias, one’s race should not be considered or, in some cases, noticed.⁸ However, race is embedded in numerous political and social institutions throughout the United States, including education, medicine, the workforce, and environmental policy, complicating the view that to avoid bias one can simply ignore race. Another facet of race embedded in cultural institutions is the historical and contemporary foundation and promotion of segregation and white supremacist ideology in Christian churches since the 19th century, including with the founding of the Ku Klux Klan.⁹ In the face of the country’s racial failures following the Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and now, with the regularity of police brutality and the rise of hate crimes following the 2016 election, the United States, Dr. Eddie Glaude Jr. argues, needs a reckoning.

Throughout history, scholars and authors have embedded racial concepts and ideas into their work. Dr. Eddie Glaude contextualizes James Baldwin’s writing and centers it within our

¹ Melissa Quinn’s “Supreme Court Rejects Affirmative Action, Ending Use of Race as Factor in College Admissions” in *CBS News*, June 29, 2023

² *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, 600 U.S. 181 (2023)

³ Faye J. Crosby, Aarti Iyer, Sirinda Sincharoen’s “Understanding Affirmative Action” in *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 57, Jan. 10, 2006 <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.57.102904.190029>

⁴ “Breaking Down the Supreme Court’s Ruling Ending Affirmative Action in College Admissions,” PBS News Hour (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/breaking-down-the-supreme-courts-ruling-ending-affirmative-action-in-college-admissions>)

⁵ *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, 600 U.S. 181 (2023)

⁶ “*Plessy v. Ferguson*,” Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute (<https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/163/537>)

⁷ Douglas S. Reed’s “Harlan’s Dissent: Citizenship, Education, and the Color-Conscious Constitution” in *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, vol. 7, no. 1, February 2021

⁸ Evan P. Apfelbaum, Michael I. Norton, Samuel R. Sommers’ “Racial Color Blindness: Emergence, Practice, and Implications” in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 21, no. 3, June 2012

⁹ Carey Wallace’s “White American Christianity Needs to Be Honest About Its History of White Supremacy” in *Time*, January 14, 2021

own contemporary time. Through literary and moral studies, the United States' lie of purity and its value gap are brought to light. Acknowledging and learning from the morals of history and framing a future, not despite, but because of, the past, places a “moral weight” on the country’s stories.¹⁰ Drawing on lessons and knowledge from authors such as Baldwin is drawing on authors as witnesses to injustice and inequality, guiding us on a path towards reckoning.¹¹

¹⁰ Eddie S. Glaude Jr.’s “We Need to Begin Again: In the midst of a moral reckoning, America needs a third founding” in *The Atlantic*, July 18, 2020

¹¹ Eddie S. Glaude Jr.’s *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (Crown, 2020)