

## Review – Say It Loud!

Written by Angie Beeman

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ANGIE BEEMAN, AUG 28 2022

### ***Say It Loud! On Race, Law, History, and Culture***

**By Randall Kennedy**

**Pantheon, 2021**

Professor Kennedy's book, *Say it Loud: On Race, Law, History, and Culture*, is described as his magnum opus spanning two decades of scholarship. This is an accurate characterization of an extensive collection of essays that analyze the nuances of resistance, empowerment, the complexities and contradictions of Black leaders, and white liberal racism. These essays build upon Kennedy's earlier ideas, offering reflection and revision over the course of his impressive career. In the first essay, Kennedy covers the history of African American pessimists (WEB Dubois, Marcus Garvey, and Elijah Mohammed) and optimists (Frederick Douglass, A. Philip Randolph, and Martin Luther King, Jr.). Among the pessimists were those who advocated for separatism, arguing that integration was a harmful illusion. Optimists included Douglass, who strategically used the US Constitution to fight for greater equity. While Kennedy recognizes that pessimists could start off as optimists and vice versa, he does not analyze the complexities of that process in leaders, such as Malcolm X, who some might argue embodied healthy levels of both pessimism and optimism, despite how he has been portrayed in sanitized or whitewashed curricula. Many scholars, who point out the persistence of antiblackness and racism, are silenced as pessimists or cynics when in fact they point to this inequity because they believe it can be changed. Kennedy does offer a brief analysis of optimism and pessimism in his own life; how his mentors and family members influenced his perspectives and how he came to see distinctions between genuine hopefulness and the façade of hopefulness as manipulation. Rather than analyzing this as an intersection of both pessimism and optimism, he views himself as a less confident optimist, concluding that "I evince hopefulness largely out of habit and a forlorn yearning on behalf of my children. But I do not expect in the remainder of my life to glimpse, much less enjoy, a progressive racial promised land" (p.30).

Derrick Bell is an important example of what might be called "pessoptimism", so it is fitting that Kennedy follows his first essay with one called, "Derrick Bell and Me." Kennedy finds Bell's interest-convergence thesis unremarkable, questioning "What realist ever doubted moving a dominant group to reform its ways involved either overcoming that group with force or convincing it that reform would serve its own interests" (p.39). To a critical race theorist, Bell's thesis may seem obvious, but not to white academics, which may say more about them than the limits of Bell's work. I believe part of Bell's goal was to expose the weaknesses of liberal methods. While critical of some of Bell's scholarship, Kennedy is certain to point out Bell's genuine commitment to social justice and humanity, assisting strangers in need and mentoring and nurturing students and faculty, especially women of color.

Several of Kennedy's essays address "the George Floyd moment" (p. 94). In chapter 5, he outlines this moment at Princeton University, interrogating demands to hire more faculty of color. Kennedy states, "Care must be taken to look for talent in places other than the familiar haunts of Ivy League searches" (p. 98). This reduces inequity to a pipeline issue. There is also the problem of symbolic representation. Is hiring faculty of color enough if we only recruit a quiet diversity, one that will provide the desired optics, without challenging status quo university practices? Scholars such as Feagin, Vera, and Ducey and Cazenave have argued that academia rewards those who uphold the dominant racial discourse, and harshly evaluates scholars who address racism explicitly in their research, teaching, and service. Kennedy's example of white dominated boards of education co-existing with Black college presidents who are "trapped by dependency on whites for financing and other essential resources" and who are "victimized by

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many of the same aggravating racial humiliations” illustrates this dilemma (p.106). Under these conditions, universities cannot adhere to the academic freedom Kennedy wants to preserve.

Kennedy also criticizes demands for anti-racism committees to investigate and discipline racist behaviors. He believes that such committees would cause distrust, but one could argue that this distrust already exists in current university processes. Research on bullying and targeting within academia reveals problems in the investigation process such that university employees do not feel protected by existing mechanisms to report and resolve their complaints. In fact, employees see the process as a sham designed to protect the institution and not them. Kennedy rightly questions “How would the antiracism committee...decide to investigate a complaint” (p.101). We could propose this same question to offices and committees already in place. How do offices of equity decide to investigate other kinds of complaints (e.g. sexual harassment)? Could the proposed antiracism committee use the same decision process, or could this committee form and think of better methods to ensure a fairer process? In those cases where multiple complaints have been documented over time, what other measures could be implemented to ensure that racist incidents do not lead to greater distrust? These issues affect not only the recruitment of faculty and staff of color but also their retention, and this goes beyond the pipeline.

In chapter 7, Kennedy discusses the debate over whether Princeton University should strip Woodrow Wilson’s name from its School of Public and International affairs. Kennedy’s position is that no one is perfect. For example, Malcolm X once subscribed to the belief that all white people were devils. However, as Kennedy notes, he repudiated this belief later in life. Malcolm X was a self-critical, reflexive person who thought deeply about equity. We cannot say the same about Woodrow Wilson, who showed little reflexivity or humility in reconsidering positions on equity and humanism the way that Malcolm X did. These dimensions of Malcolm X were evident in his ability to forge deep interracial connections to promote equity across racial lines. His close friendship with Yuri Kochiyama exemplified this skill. Kennedy makes an excellent point — that we must hold people accountable when they make racist claims, regardless of their racial and ethnic background — but some might question whether the racism of Woodrow Wilson and the mistakes of Malcolm X are equal in considerations of memorialization. Kennedy later argues that Clarence Thomas should be ostracized, which seems contradictory to his earlier argument that Woodrow Wilson, though problematic, should not be ostracized due to the contributions he made to Princeton University. Why not afford Thomas the same consideration? This tension is not completely resolved. Kennedy’s solution to the politics of memorialization is “addition rather than subtraction” (p. 120). That is, keeping the names of disreputable people, and adding more memorials honoring those who have seen little acclaim.

Another interesting chapter addresses the policing of racial solidarity. Drawing on the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., Kennedy argues that all collective action is burdened by traitors, free-riders, and opportunists, and that some policing of racial solidarity is necessary to address this. He also gives examples of people (e.g. Clarence Thomas) who are guilty of betrayal to the collective and who should be excluded.

As a sociologist who studies racism and liberal ideology, I was also drawn to Kennedy’s analysis of white liberals. Here, Kennedy reconsiders his earlier criticisms of Philip Elman, a lawyer who wrote the government’s brief in *Brown v. Board of Education*. While Kennedy fairly credits Elman for his work, he notes typical problematic white liberal behaviors in Elman’s “self-aggrandizing grab for historical credit” (p.349). Kennedy dedicates several pages to Elman’s accomplishments to make it clear that his criticism comes not from a place of scorn but of critical analysis. I see this as indicative of the white fragility scholars of color still navigate. In fact, Derrick Bell once stated that he softened his criticisms by using allegories so that white people would listen.

Overall, Kennedy’s chapters raise provocative questions, but seem disconnected or contradictory at times. For example, Kennedy interrogates criticisms of respectability politics but praises the Movement for Black Lives for “disciplined militancy.” Yet, this movement has critiqued respectability politics, daring to confront, interrupt, and openly challenge politicians such as Hillary Clinton in a way that even some progressives see as disrespectful. This leaves me with many questions about the distinctions between disciplined militancy and respectability politics and the point at which respectability politics contributes to the racial shame Kennedy writes about in Chapter 11 — what Joy DeGruy characterizes as “post-traumatic slave syndrome” or Chou and Feagin see as trauma from constant self-censorship, overwork, and strategic self-presentation as a means of gaining white approval and surviving racism.

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Scholars looking for this conceptual analysis may be disappointed, but Kennedy's views on these topics offer insights for new ideas. What is also promising about this work is that it illustrates how even the most prominent and established scholars can embody the self-reflexivity necessary to tackle pressing issues of the day. Kennedy evaluates his own perspectives, showing how they have changed. This is an important work that will provoke interesting discussions and can be easily integrated with other materials in both undergraduate and graduate courses.

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### **About the author:**

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