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### Against Colorblindness

The ideal of a colorblind society has had a profound influence on the development of the law and on our public consciousness.

Today, everyone claims to want a colorblind society. Ward Connerly wants a colorblind society; Arnold Schwarzenegger wants a colorblind society; and the civil rights community wants a colorblind society. We just disagree on strategy, right? Even the ballot argument voters will read on Oct 7<sup>th</sup> says: “We all want a colorblind society, but we won’t get there by banning information.”

I am against colorblindness. I am against even the goal of colorblindness. It saddens me that the best we can hope for is a society that is blind and indifferent to our tremendous diversity. I am concerned that the continued pursuit of the colorblind ideal will yield damaging consequences for civil rights law, and will make our society less willing to care about people of different races.

To aspire to colorblindness is to aspire to a state of being in which you are not capable of seeing difference. The colorblindness ideal is premised on the notion that we, as a society, can never be trusted to see race and treat each other fairly, or with genuine compassion.

For conservatives, like Connerly, the ideal of colorblindness is linked to the notion that race is something that should not be a public concern. Gross racial disparities in health, wealth, education and opportunity should be of no interest to our government, and racial identity should be a private matter, something kept to ourselves.

For liberals, the ideal of colorblindness is linked to a dream of racial equality; the hope is that one day we will no longer see race because race will lose all significance. In this fantasy, eventually race will no longer be a factor in mortality rates, the spread of disease, educational or economic opportunity, or the distribution of wealth. Race will correlate with nothing; it will mean nothing; we won't even notice it anymore.

My guess is that most supporters of colorblindness are more pragmatic than professed liberals or conservatives. In my experience, most people simply find it difficult to imagine a society in which we see race and racial differences, yet consistently act in a positive, constructive way. It is easier to imagine a world in which we tolerate racial differences by being blind to them.

The truth is there will always be racial differences among us. Even if the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow segregation are completely overcome, we will remain a nation of immigrants in a world that is divided by race and ethnicity. It is a world in which there is extraordinary racial and ethnic inequality, and our nation has porous boundaries. For the foreseeable future, racial and ethnic inequality will be a feature of American life.

This reality is not cause for despair. The idea that we may never reach a state of perfect equality -- a permanent racial equilibrium -- does not trouble me. What worries me is the real possibility that we, as a society, will choose not to care. We will choose to be blind to injustice and the suffering of others. We will look the other way and deny our public agencies the resources, information and tools they need to solve problems. We will refuse to celebrate what is beautiful about our distinct cultures and histories, even as we blend and evolve. That is cause for despair.

Seeing race is not the problem. Refusing to care for the people we see is the problem. The fact that the meaning of race may evolve over time, or lose much of its significance, is hardly a reason to be struck blind. I hope not for a colorblind society, but instead for a world in which we can see each other fully, learn from each other, and do what we can to respond to each other with love.

Justice O'Connor has set a 25-year deadline on affirmative action. She expects that, by then, we'll be ready for a colorblind society. I am often asked, how long do you think it will take us to get to a colorblind society? The pursuit of a colorblind society makes people impatient. I used to answer that question by talking about how long slavery and Jim Crow laws were in effect, and noting that it might take many, many years to overcome that legacy.

Today, I answer that question by saying: I hope we never get there. I hope we never become a society that is willfully blind to the many beautiful colors that bless the human race. I hope that we never become a society that is blind to the suffering of anyone, or indifferent to whether problems may exist within certain racial or ethnic groups.

I remember when I was in college and a white friend of mine accidentally said the word "nigger" in my presence. I was shocked and demanded an explanation. She said, don't worry, Michelle, I don't think of you as black. She meant it as a compliment, but I felt the insult. In that moment I understood that she was my friend because she did not see my blackness. I told her I want you to think of me as black, because that is what I am. I want you to see me, and love me, as I am.

I no longer hope for a colorblind society. I hope for a society that is capable of seeing each of us, as we are, with love. That is a goal worth fighting for.