

THEMED SECTION HIGHLIGHT

Community Change Interview with Dr. Wornie Reed

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Mary Ryan: We are doing our special issue of *Community Change* on the wake of the President Trump election and looking at ways of democratic community change and social justice activism and other kinds of responses that are happening within the community to institutional reforms, interpersonal struggles, community struggles, and the work of the Race and Social Policy Research Center at Virginia Tech seemed really pertinent to that discussion so we wanted to reach out today to Dr. Wornie Reed, the Executive Director of that Center to have a discussion about a lot of these issues. I am Mary Ryan and I am on the editorial board of *Community Change* and I am a doctoral candidate in the ASPECT program here at Virginia Tech, which stands for the Alliance for Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Thought and I am doing my dissertation on structural racism in the US federal government.

Jared Keyel: I am Jared Keyel. I'm a PhD candidate here at Virginia Tech in the Planning, Governance and Globalization program. I am also on the editorial board for *Community Change* and my research deals with potential possibilities amongst Iraqis who come to the US as refugees since 2003.

Mary Ryan: Thank you so much for joining us today Dr. Reed, I'll just read your bio briefly. Dr. Wornie Reed obtained his PhD in sociology at Boston University. Currently, he is a professor of Sociology and Africana Studies and director of the Race and Social Policy Research Center at Virginia Tech. Previously, he developed and directed social science research centers at three universities, including the William Monroe Trotter Institute at UMass Boston. Among his scholarly accomplishments: redirected the project assessment of the status of African Americans which involved sixty-one scholars and resulted in the production of a four-volume work published by Auburn House Publishers. He is the past president of the National Congress of Black Faculty and the Association of Black Sociologists. Currently he is a member of the steering committee of the Montgomery County Dialogue on Race Project. Again, thank you so much for joining us today. This interview is being transcribed for the *Community Change* journal which is a peer-reviewed in-house journal here at Virginia Tech. So, as I mentioned, you are the director of the Race and Social Policy Research Center at Virginia Tech. Can you tell us a little more about what the Center does and what you do in your role there?

Dr. Wornie Reed: The Center is primarily a research center and it does research on race and, as a result, social policy issues related to race. Significantly, for some graduate students, we also have a certificate program in Race and Social Policy where students can get the certificate if they take the course Race and Social Policy and then any of a long list of courses for nine other credits. So, that's four courses required to get the certificate in Race and Social Policy, so we have two or three students doing that every year. We sponsor an annual workshop that we call the *Combating Racial Injustice* workshop, and we cosponsor other events on campus with other groups, and we have involved a number of graduate students in the work at the Center. So, we are in the process of trying to produce some of that more formally than what we have done in the past.

Jared Keyel: And Dr. Reed, you recently spoke at the City Works Expo in Roanoke, Virginia. Can you briefly summarize for us your discussion there?

Dr. Wornie Reed: That might be a little difficult since I've given about three or four speeches since then, so let me see. I'm not so sure I remember what that one was all about. Let's see, I remember some of the things I said, but I don't remember what the whole thing was about. Did either of you attend that?

Mary Ryan: Unfortunately, I did not. We were both out of town.

Dr. Wornie Reed: Okay, then you could have reminded me of something and we could have been rolling (group laughter).

Mary Ryan: Well, we can jump to the next question if that's easier. They probably are things that you're talking about.

Dr. Wornie Reed: Right, so rather than trying to remember that, why don't you just ask me what you want to know?

Mary Ryan: So, we will jump into the good stuff. So where do you think we are right now, just kind of starting off broadly, in terms of race and diversity as a country? Are these times that we're in new or different?

Dr. Wornie Reed: That's a good question and I got this question the night before last down in Wytheville where I was giving a talk, because some people are questioning, "aren't we so much better than we used to be?" and "why is there all this discussion about race?" And I say, it's very difficult to demonstrate that we are a lot better off than we were, in say, a couple generations ago. Very, very difficult. So, where we are, is in a pretty desperate, not too pleasant, situation. So, let me demonstrate. As I told the group the other night, a black man in New York state is two or three times more likely to be arrested today than a black man in Mississippi in 1920. A black man is more likely to go to prison today than back then. Black men and women go to prison at an increasing rate, up until very, very recently—the last few years—that there's been a little slow down in that. But for several decades there has been an increase in the incarceration of African Americans. Yet the crime rate has been going down for forty years. There's only been one little period of time when there was a blip up, but that was just in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Other than that, it's been going down. And we've been building so many prisons, like here in Virginia, that we have one that was never occupied because people are not being railroaded into prison fast enough to keep up with building the prisons. So, that's a pretty bad thing that says that we're not where we think we might be. There are some other examples that I could give, but the most critical one for me is the criminal justice system, which has always been used to kind of keep African Americans down and it is in full force right now. In fact, we were beginning to turn a corner, it seemed, with the use of the policies and practices statute that we have to go after police departments, if the Department of Justice thought that they were committing racial discriminatory acts in their policing. However, right now—last year this time—twenty-five police departments were on investigation, or about to be on investigation. Today we have zero, because of the change in policy. So, we are stepping *way back*, not a half-step back, this is way back. So that's one of the things that's happening. So, we are probably not as well off, we are certainly not as well-off as many people think. There was this whole long discussion in the 1990s about the growth of the black middle class and I was always looked at like I had horns when I would go around the country arguing that that's not so. The issue was that *every* class increased, but the middle class increased at a slower rate than the lower class of African Americans. But that's not what everybody was sold, including African Americans. We have a situation in Virginia where blacks and whites use marijuana at about the same rate. Yet, blacks get arrested at five times the rate of whites. And, by the way, as I explained this, one of the problems we have of convincing people about this, is people can't do arithmetic, so we're way behind in arithmetic too. Okay, because as I tell students if somebody gives you a number, but don't give you a denominator, ignore it. Because it doesn't have much meaning. It's got to be compared to what? Compared to previous data, or something or the other. So, in these lines people are saying, "but yes, are you saying they arrest people for smoking marijuana or having a lot of marijuana when they don't have it?" And I'd say "no." And they'd say, "well what's wrong with that? What's wrong with arresting someone who's guilty?" I say, "yes, but you should arrest everyone who's guilty and at the same rate," and that's not what is happening. In Virginia, African Americans are about 20% of the population, they are about 22% of all illegal substances users. But they are 75% of all people who go to prison. And that has implications all over every aspect of African America life and increasingly the life of everyone else. But, people are not paying any more attention to that than they

are about climate change. So, if we are better than we were say fifty years ago, it's marginal. Let me give you another example. We have in the Center, that I direct, the Race and Social Policy Center, we've been looking at employment discrimination nationally. So, we've been looking at national data from the census on income of employed persons. Fully-employed persons so that we cannot have the data be a little more difficult to interpret with people having varied levels of participation and labor force and so on. So, we are talking about people who are just fully-employed and compare their income. Okay, in 1967 African Americans made \$.65 for every dollar that whites earned. In 2005, they earned \$.66. We particularly look at this period because we started having the laws just a couple years before that instituted against discrimination. See, let's say in 1957 it was perfectly legal to discriminate. Okay, it's not in 1967, but *newly* not illegal. But we've had virtually no change in the discrimination in employment as we look at it for fully-employed people. So, where we are, is not where all too many people think we are. Okay, and post-racialists was so absurd that I've never entered a conversation about it. So, where we are, is not nearly where we should be.

Jared Keyel: And so then, in light of all of that context and the midst of this current political climate in the United States, has this influenced your work, that you're working on currently? The election of Trump in 2016 and some of the other things we've seen as 2017 progressed.

Dr. Wornie Reed: No, it hasn't influenced my work, not at all. We were already doing it because I've been seeing this racism forever. What we have seen with the Trump phenomenon is a presidential campaign that was based on race that too few of the national media is willing to admit. This was a white nationalist campaign. Simple as that. This is not to say, "this is the way we should *interpret* it." These are the words and the same things they did as they were running for office, a white nationalist campaign, and yet people, that is, many analysts and many major newspapers, want to make the argument that it's about disaffected workers. That's not true, by the way. Studies have been done that show that the voting population that was concerned about their economic futures that had some concerns about the future in terms of economic issues, jobs, and so on, the majority of people having that as a high priority in their thoughts and beliefs and feelings, voted for Hillary Clinton. The people who thought that minorities were taking the country over, taking it away from whites, the majority of those people voted for Trump. So, it was race, and so, one of the differences is, it hasn't affected my work but it's sometimes loaded with me trying to agonize over why we can't get more people to look at the data and admit what's going on. So, we kind of have a problem there.

Mary Ryan: So, you've spoken about your Center and the work that you're doing and in the last answer you started talking about the country's grappling with race. So, what changes, since the election, have you seen with the way the country is engaging with issues of race and racism?

Dr. Wornie Reed: There probably are some changes there, in that we have more discussion about race than we did before, and we have more people willing to say that something is racially discriminatory than we did say two years ago. So, I think that has changed. We don't have enough of the analysts in the mainstream media addressing how the lives of minority people are being changed by policies that are being implemented. They're spending too much time talking about the political issues without concern about the content issues. The political means, if they don't pass the tax bill, then they won't have done anything. We have very little discussion in the mainstream media. We have discussion, but not enough about what that would mean for everyday lives. For instance, the Trump administration has let the CHIP program expire. Okay. There may be dire consequences from that. Let me give you a for instance. When Mr. Reagan came into office in 1980 and started cutting all programs in what is now the Department of Health and Human Services, he cut the maternal and infant care program, and many of us predicted that it would affect the well-being and the lives of poor people and African Americans. And it did. For two years in a row, during the mid-1980s, the life expectancy of African Americans went down for the first time since we've been keeping a record of it because of the maternal and infant care. So, the Congress eventually put that back in order and things got back to the normal and regular increases in life expectancy. Because life expectancy is really based upon how many children live to not be children. It's not how many old people live to be older. But that's another discussion.

Jared Keyel: And, so, to kind of preface this next question, we see that some people understand racial disparities in the United States as a product of individual choices and behaviors. And so according to this view, low achievement is due to the fact that people of color are making poor personal choices and not taking responsibility for their own problems. And so how does your work dispel this misunderstanding?

Dr. Wornie Reed: We spend all of our time basically making an argument against that. That's kind of what we do. We have even published a piece out of the Center in the *Chronicle of Higher Ed* that's kind of related to that, but not directly. Whatever I talked about at City Works, it dealt with this. It dealt with the argument that the assumption that people have is that, "well, what is racism?" Racism is something that bigoted individuals do intentionally. And so, there's kind of two problems with that statement, even though the statement could be correct. But, it does not describe much. It describes a little part of what's going on. I dispelled the first one, which is intent. Intent is irrelevant. It does not matter. So, we spent a lot of time on that. Intent is irrelevant in things social. As a sociologist, I argue it is the most irrelevant term for any sociologist and most of the social sciences. Intent is seriously relevant in some psychological work and seriously relevant in legal work, because you must have intent sometimes to be convicted of a crime. But it is totally unimportant in things social. So, intent is irrelevant. Let's get back to spending the time looking at individuals and making the assumption that prejudice leads to racism. That is the main tenet of what I call the "institutionalized thought structure" in this country, is that, "well, racism comes from prejudice. People are prejudiced and therefore if they are, and it's unfortunate, and they therefore commit racism." That might be true, but that's the minor direction for the era. The more major direction of the era is from racism to prejudice. Because, no one is born prejudiced. It has to come from somewhere. So that is what we do at the Center and when I speak about how prejudice comes from racism, more so than the other way around because nobody is born prejudiced. It has to come from somewhere. It doesn't just pop out of thin air. Where does it come from? It comes from racism, and then we begin to talk about something larger than the individual. It's the environment in which the person grows, it's the place where they are. Whether it's media, social friends, the geography where they're from. It's the racism there. What I mean by the racism there, is not whether someone calls a black person the "n-word," I'm talking about whether or not they affect how well the black person lives; how well and how long they live. And to me, that's what real racism is. That's real racism. The other stuff, I call 'petty racism.' We spend all too much attention in this society on that. For example, as horrible as the Charlottesville riots were, it was all about symbolic stuff. As despicable as I've held Confederate symbols all my life; it's still symbolic. And while we're arguing over that, black people are going to prison, in Virginia, at almost four times the rate they should in comparison to whites for drugs. That's real racism. Now, to kind of summarize what I'm trying to argue here is that individual racism is of more minor consequence; but, I do admit that individual racism can be really, really serious. I use the example of the 1963 bombing of the church in Birmingham that killed those four little girls. This was an act of individual racism, there were three or four people involved, but it was not an institution, just these individuals, and it wasn't even the Ku Klux Klan, it was people that kind of belonged to it. These individuals bombed this church. Now that was horrible, so how can I minimize what they were doing? The most heinous thing that happened then was that they weren't prosecuted. That was a systemic issue. That was systemic racism. That's the racism that many of us have been fighting for decades. That they didn't prosecute it. They prosecuted it like fifty years later, sixty years later or something. Okay, I guess fifty years later. So, I probably varied from your question, but that's my response.

Mary Ryan: So, building off our conversation of racism and bringing in, a little more explicitly, some issues of white privilege and some of these ideas we're seeing public discourses of racial resentment as a potential motivator or explanation for the election of President Trump in 2016. So, what do you make of this? What do you think of racial resentment?

Dr. Wornie Reed: If it means that a pretty sizable segment of the population resented the society's acceptance of more non-whites into positions of power and privilege, and so on. If that's what it means then I think it was right on; in fact, that's what the election was about I would argue. It was about people who resented their loosening grip on white privilege. Okay, and Mr. Trump played into it. In fact, Mr. Trump does not get anywhere in this election without having created the "birther" issue. In the spring of 2016, the majority of Mr. Trump's supporters did not believe Obama was born in the United States. Okay, and even after he was nominated for the presidency, and therefore didn't have to share the Republican side, about 20% of his supporters thought that African Americans should not have been freed at the end of the Civil War. Now, those were new expressions of what some of us have been pointing out all along and I am a great follower of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which kind of keeps tabs on the hate groups and so on. So, I have seen them through the years so I know they've been developing. But, yes, I think racial resentment, in that sense, yes, I think racial resentment is a key issue. But it's a nice way of saying *racism*. All racial resentment, yeah.

Jared Keyel: And you've mentioned that you think that this institutional racism, particularly in prisons and the criminal justice system, is a very salient issue. Are there other issues that you see as particularly important at the present in the United States?

Dr. Wornie Reed: Yes, employment has hardly improved. So, I have pointed out some data related to full employment, but we have data, this data is like 20 years old, but we have data from the EEOC work throughout the period of the 70s, 80s, and 90s showing the discrimination, across the board, by industries. We have data on that. We have the data on that for Virginia. We have that data, the EEOC data, but we have some summaries of it in the Center. So that's another area, okay. To me, I spend much of the time on that and I'm trying to avoid getting into another area, which is health and medical care. Where I've been spending time for 40 years—okay, okay—on health and medical care. So, there are two areas; so, we have health, and we have medical care. In the late 1990s, Congress asked the Institute of Medicine to determine whether what folks, like me, were arguing all the time about the discrimination in the provision of medical care, whether that existed, and to what extent? Okay. Now, we are talking about the provision of medical care *independent of access*. We're saying, "once they get into the medical facility, do we have disparities?" And so, what the most prestigious medical body in the country decided after studying this for several years, they demonstrated with data they studied studies of this and showed that African Americans are discriminated against in the provision of medical care service are "watch bread." Okay. And what we mean by that is, typically, to think about it is a white person goes to a physician and has a set of symptoms and has a diagnosis. A black person goes to a physician and has the same set of symptoms and the *same diagnosis*, but they get different treatment regimens. That's happening all over the place. And, these are the kinds of things that matter, more than symbolic things. Okay. Now let's go to health. What we have come to now is to understand something a little bit more complicated; but, many of us have been pushing this and talking about it for years, is that the society itself has racially discriminatory elements that affect the health of African-Americans. To explain it, a couple of pediatricians decided to study this, what they called a hypothesis that this was racism: how is it that these upper-middle-class black women have so many more adverse birth outcomes than upper-middle-class white women. Okay. And they came up with the hypothesis that it was racism. And they tested it, and the way they tested it was to take a look at all the birth outcomes for European Americans in the United States, and African Americans, and Africans newly in America. Africans newly in America had the same rate of adverse birth outcomes as whites. African Americans didn't have so much higher. And then after Africans *from* Africa were here longer adverse birth outcomes became more and more like that of African Americans. So, we are talking about a society—so, some people deal with lot of things about society and don't deal with kind of factual things, like I like to point out, and this kind of supports their work.

Mary Ryan: So, this might seem like an obvious question, but why should people care about these challenges?

Dr. Wornie Reed: I used to have a phrase that I was trying to think of it the other day that I used to use to advocate that very point—Why...it's...I've forgotten the phrase that I used to use. I know I'm not going to think of it now because I couldn't think of it the other day. But, just like climate change affects everyone, okay, racial discrimination can have that same effect. It changes communities, such that we can measure communities and that rate of producing ill health. So, the issue is, for example, all of these people who go to prison, get out. And when they get out and are not able to get jobs, things happen that put other people's life and safety at risk. But, also, what happens in communities are degraded in terms of the kind of climate you have; and, that climate affects everyone okay, and so everyone living near a city is going to be affected by the deterioration of the city. And the more we do this to people, the more we cause a deterioration of some communities. For example, this following on your question, there is an assumption, based on that assumption that the ghettos are the result of some depravity of African Americans. When in my courses, we go through details and showing how they would develop, it's all a part of policies and practices—*racist* policies and practices—almost always. And then on top of that you have people who have less education and can't get a job. I mean, and this produces a situation such that 70, over 70% of all African American babies born in America are born to single women and we are not talking about morality; but, we are talking about the fact that half of these will be poor. And when you're poor, you are not going to live as long, and you have more problems; and, you'll have more problems with the society and it calls for much more money in taxes to educate these people and so on and on and on. So, everybody is in this together. And one of the reasons some people can earnestly, and honestly, ask that question is because we have such a heightened

sense of individualism in this country. I argue that it is the overriding ethos of this country, individualism such that we say “I” more than “we”, such that it is becoming much easier now for people to say, “why should I care about that person, why should I pay taxes that would benefit somebody else?” A few people used to say that, many more people are saying it now. Okay, and they ask these questions because they have those kinds of ideas, but the reason for paying the taxes is it’s a consideration of “we.” And I have been making the argument recently that all the cultural differences between English-speaking people in America and English-speaking people in Europe, is European countries have more of a “we” approach. Not that they don’t have their problem. But they have more of a “we” approach and therefore they don’t tend to have in the past, until very recently, had that kind of argument about “why should I pay taxes for somebody else?” Okay.

Jared Keyel: So, we have covered the “why people should care about these challenges.” And our next question then is, how do we get more people to care about these issues and these challenges?

Dr. Wornie Reed: Well, I have a belief and it’s a belief that I operate on. That people—this is not new, this came from the black power movement, they used to say it all the time—people proceed as they perceive. And so, I spent a lot of time analyzing and looking at data about what people perceive and then I ask this question another kind of way, “what is it that people know and how do they come to know it?” Okay, and that’s a roundabout way of addressing your question of, “what do we *do* about it?” I think the very first thing we have to do is, to make people aware of these issues. For example, I’ll continue that, to make people aware of them, and then you can maybe talk about what to do to get rid of them. If you make them aware that racism is an attribute of institutions, that it’s kind of a waste of time dealing with individual racism. I spoke at a church the night before last, and I said that the rector of the Episcopal Church, he can deal with that, but the rest of us we should deal with the real racism. Anyway, I made a joke to myself, I forgot my train of thought. But, anyway, so people must have an understanding of things. For example, people talk about having a racial reconciliation in this country. We can’t have racial reconciliation in this country, I argue, this is my position. Because we haven’t done the first step. We *have to* have America, that is a large segment of people in this country, a much larger segment than we have now, of people knowing recent history. We don’t have people, enough people, knowing what happened sixty years ago or seventy years ago or eighty years ago or ninety years ago. So, they can have a reconciliation in South Africa because there was no debate on what had happened. They agreed on it. Whereas, we have never had a debate on it in this country. Too many people say, “well, I didn’t know this,” or “I didn’t know that,” or “I didn’t know the other.” Like, for instance, people don’t know when these flags and statues were put up in southern states. Some of us, I have known that virtually all of my adult life and others haven’t. We have to have people know things. Know stuff. And, they don’t. Because we don’t discuss it, we don’t discuss real issues. We do discuss a lot of symbolic stuff, but not real historical issues—from a 6th, a 7th, an 8th, or 9th grade level—I’m not talking about any advanced historical analysis. I’m just saying what happened here, what happened there. People can say, “oh I didn’t know when I was telling that my father couldn’t go to this school. I didn’t know.” How can they not know that? We can’t get to the next step until people accept that. We’ve never had it, we’ve never had that debate, that argument. I was hopeful many years ago since I was a youthful follower of the argument of reparations. The reason I followed reparations, I was saying that if we had a debate on reparations, then the people pushing it—like the people I was following—would have to explain “why.” But, also the people opposing it would ask, “why do you think we should?” Then they would be obligated to hear the “why.” So, we would’ve had that debate. And, to me, that debate is much more important than whether we got reparations. So, that’s what I mean by people proceeding as they perceive. So then, I’ll just give you an example. This fall I’ve given a series of lecture workshops in this Southwest Virginia [area] sponsored by the Episcopal diocese. It kind of stretches all the way down and all the way up to Staunton or somewhere. And we’ve operated on the basis of what it is that people have got to—need to—know, more stuff. We’re talking about knowing stuff. And the next step is for people to understand that to address it, we need to address institutional policies and practices. So those two things I try to get across and they’re about to move to the next step: trying to convene people to do things. Okay, and with the assumption that some of these people have been moved by our discussions.

Mary Ryan: So, you’ve talked a lot about education and knowledge as things that are absent from the public at large and we’ve already had the discussion. What else, if anything, is missing from current activism and what would you like to see people doing that you don’t see happening right now?

Dr. Wornie Reed: Well, I have a son who’s 40 years old—the older of my two sons—and I’ve told him all of his life that he is among a unique generation of African Americans. He’s a part of the only generation that

has ever been born and reached adulthood with no self-defining activism. We haven't had any since like the year he was born and until 2–3 years ago with the Black Lives Matter [activism]. We didn't have any African American activism. And, could you ask your question again? So, I don't vary off. Several things occurred to me. So, I want to make sure that I stay with answering your question.

Mary Ryan: So, it was in two parts- what is missing from current activism and what would you like to see people doing?

Dr. Wornie Reed: First of all, there was none. Now we have some and I agree and I think they have attacked the most egregious thing going on—the Black Lives Matter movement has—and some people don't realize it, but the theory behind the way they operate is grounded in a lot of socio-historical stuff. That's why you don't see any individual, primary leaders. They're intentionally following Ella Baker and Septima Clark to modern names in black American history that few black Americans even know. So, now, what would I like to see? I would like to see less attention to all the symbolic stuff and more attention to real things. For example, I think more important than even black men being shot in the back if they run away by police; which, by the way, was legal in 1980 and then it became kind of illegal in 1985, and semi-illegal in 1989. But, anyway, more important than that, is the damage done to African Americans, in particular, and America, in general, with the so-called drug war. I was privileged to be on a panel back in the 80's with the guy who discovered the existence of crack and he would say, "if you tell me the community that the crack is in, I can tell you without going there, where it is. But, it's interesting, the police when they get ready to crackdown on crack, they go to the black communities. When, if blacks and whites use crack, they don't use crack at about the same rate because blacks use crack at a larger rate than whites; but, that's the *only* drug they do. Okay. So, what would I like to see is more attention to the criminal justice issues that are not necessarily the police killings, but the drug issues. The fact that, for example, in Virginia I think I mentioned this earlier that blacks are 20% percent of the population and about 22% of all illegal substance users, but they're 75% of all people that go to prison. And, we don't have much protest about that, very little. So, I would like to see more of that. I think that's key. If that can be turned around, then many other things could be built with. But that's, to me, that's primary, that's the larger issue than any other one I know.

Jake Keyel: Our next question is, how do we go about tackling pervasive, structural, and institutional racism in our society? And maybe we've already covered that, so to ask a different way, what would different structures, alternative institutions, look like that are non-racist or are addressing these built-in structural racism issues?

Dr. Wornie Reed: I don't think we should try to establish new institutions. I think we should change the ones we have. Because a society's going to need institutions to do its work and they are going to turn out to be similar things to what we have. So, we have to change the policies and practices. So, I'm an advocate of changing the policies and practices. Let's discover what it is that's happening under the jurisdiction of this institution and can we trace that to some policies and practices? And I argue, if you ask that question, then you inevitably will. And *then*, we have to start pushing to change that. One of the things that some new activists like to do is, is say "let's go confront this legislator, let's go confront that legislature, or whatever. And, I think that's the wrong approach. I think the most important things is to get enough people behind you, and then you can send one or two people, and say, "we have this many people, who want this many things." I argue, and I might be wrong but I don't think so, that politicians do what people tell them to do. So, like right now, people are arguing about like the tax bill; of course, the people who are doing the larger telling are the ones who provide the big money. That's what some analysts are saying. But, by and large, if enough people get together to attack something, we may have some movement on it, I think; but I think it has to be specific. I think you have to go after specific things. And, so, a small group requesting specific things. I hate to see large groups—you have an auditorium of over one hundred people—let's decide what we're going to do—no—you have to have a few people decide what we're going to do *and then* discuss it with the large group and say, "are you with us?" And, if not, we'll go discuss it with another group to go push the issues. And, I think we can push and one of the things I guess we really need is the education, which I am talking about everyday educational of really what happened: "how did it get like this?" Okay, for example, we're debating right now the whole tax bill. How many people know, that in the 1950s, the top rate was over 90%? Not many people know that. So, we have to educate the public quite a bit. Okay, and right now it's kind of a losing battle. I shouldn't go into all of this, I guess, but I was an advocate in the late 1980s of the power of talk radio and people thought I was crazy as I was talking about it. But I've see *one person* change

the seatbelt law in Massachusetts, the most liberal voting state in the country. This guy, in 1987, changed the seat belt law—he made it such that only kids had to have/use seat belts—because he ranted and railed against it every day, every day. It was so bad the governor used to call him “the governor” because this guy was pushing stuff. And I say that to say, that the losing battle is that so much of the media are put[ting] out things that are not exactly correct, about the history of things and how they got to be the way they are. So that’s kind of seriously one-sided, so one-sided that I once read an interview with the guy who came up with the idea that the media was, that there was a liberal bias in the media, and the guy said—and this came out by the way in the 1990s, this was not out there in the 1970s—and he said, “nah, I didn’t think it was true. In fact, I didn’t think it would catch on like that. I just thought it was something we could deal with right now.”

Mary Ryan: So, switching gears a little bit from some of what we’ve been talking about, but still in the realm of cultivating social change what role do you see the University, broadly not Virginia Tech necessarily, but the University at large as a system, what role do you see the University playing in social change?

Dr. Wornie Reed: Well, people might’ve liked what I said so far, but they might not like what I am going to say from here on. But I have to say it, because you asked me and I have to give you my opinion. I think it is incumbent upon universities to present curricula that reflects the world. Okay, so this is going to be a long answer. So, I am going to need you to help me get back to the second part, but I want to do the first part which is almost like a preamble. I argue, and I have been saying this for at least thirty years, that universities are responsible for the racial strife on the campuses. How so? Universities play a major role, not the only role, but they play a major role in determining who is important, by who they have students required to study. So, through the years, things have changed a bit in recent years the way the core curriculum works nowadays; but, it used to be, for years and years, that students had to study about dead and alive Europeans and European Americans, but nobody else was required. Now, I don’t know whether even that’s required. So that’s what the change is. So, what happened is, white students could assume that this is their university. When even before my father could have gone here, people his age were working and paying taxes to build this place, that still couldn’t go here. So, they were still assuming it was their university. Then *even after* minority students come, they still assume this is their university. Why do they assume that? Well, because that’s what they learn. Because, they can go over here and take a course on Native Americans, they can go over here and take something about African-Americans and so on, but it’s not required. What is required, is the study about Europeans. So, I argue that they are responsible for the strife that occurs. So, what they need to do is to require that everybody, certainly in this country that is of any major segment of it, is required to be studied about. That’s the first thing they should do. And some people get concerned: “Well, who are you gonna choose to teach these courses?” See, I don’t care, because I think it is more important to have that as a fact than what’s in the course. Okay. So that’s one thing. Now, on the other part, other than that, I don’t think the university can have a major role. It can have a minor role, I don’t think it has a major role in the rest of it. Now, this has been a soapbox of mine since I was about 21 or 22. I am old now. You cannot go to an educational system and learn how to change the system. If you do, it’s kind of something extra. It’s a freak, it’s not the typical; because the purpose of an educational system is the maintenance and sustenance of the system. And anything that they do different from that it is counter to the system and it is not going to be accepted. So, that’s why I talk about the definitions of the situations and understanding things such it can be defined differently, so, how we define these issues, how we define who is important and so on. People say, “well, we have to go get people educated.” I say, no, not formally. Maybe informally. The civil rights movement had a *little* formal education behind it, but most of it was informal. And there were a few people, there was a professor I knew, who walked in class one day and told the students he was teaching a class in Negro history. I wasn’t in this class, I just wished I was, so I could say I was in this class. And he says to them, “what are you doing in class? What are you doing sitting here? History is being made down on the corner.” But that was not everywhere, that was just a few places where people like that and events like that were happening on that corner. But, by and large, it’s outside of the universities. I don’t think universities have any obligation for change. But I think the universities should have an obligation to have the debates and the discussions.

Jared Keyel: And so then, if not in the university, what and where do you see potential avenues, strategies for change, bright spots and so forth.

Dr. Wornie Reed: Oh, I could see it happening in the university, but I’m saying not *by* the university. In the university, but not by the university. Yes, I can see it in the university, because a lot of the civil rights

movement came from universities; but, not anything being taught there. So, I think to the extent to which we wait on that, we will never get change. In fact, I could go further, but I shouldn't. People are waiting on churches to step up. They didn't step up in the civil rights movement, churches did but not denominations. Now, people don't know that, so that's why we need to know these histories. There were very few black denominations that supported the civil rights movements. There were many hundreds and thousands of *churches*. Individual churches, usually Protestants and quite often Baptists, because in the Baptists churches they're owned by the local people. And most of these other religions, like the Methodist churches, are owned by the big body. So, the individual churches, mostly Baptists were the ones that did this, but many others did too because the congregations just did it; ok, but not the denominations. So, we can't wait on those kinds of things. We have to push it where we can. And one of the places, that can be pushed, is on campuses. But it is *people*, it's not the university. Other than the university having an appropriate curriculum of the society in which it is situated.

Jared Keyel: And where then do the ideas that motivate positive change come from?

Dr. Wornie Reed: People who talk about it, push it, I think. I really do. We don't have enough forums and discussions nowadays; as us old-timers like to say, "you don't know what it was like when you could have one every week, at a minimum." So, it comes from those kinds of things. We don't have enough discussions. And, when we do, many students don't attend them. In the olden days, they would. You would have to have larger places than we have nowadays for them.

Mary Ryan: So, drawing to a close, but one of the big areas that we haven't really talked about—directly at least—we have touched on it implicitly; but it wouldn't be a true interview with a sociologist if we didn't ask about intersectionalities. If we think about intersectionality and advocacy across multiple issue lines, how can that help us address some of the core problems of racisms that we're experiencing in the *status quo*? Are there any specific issues that come to your mind related to intersectionality today?

Dr. Wornie Reed: Well, Annette probably told you that I was a good guy, but he didn't tell you that I come from a different angle a lot of times. Okay, and I don't know whether I am ready to get in trouble with most of the people around here. But, I'd probably try to find a way when I was 35 or so to moderate this. But I am not gonna do that now, I am gonna answer your question; and so, the chips are just going to have to fall where they may. The short answer to your question is no. Okay. Now, you would obviously want to know why I say no. No, I don't think that dealing with intersectionality will help anything. I think dealing with every group that has some disadvantage, dealing with everyone of them will. I am not a great proponent of studying intersectionality. But, almost everybody I know is. And here's why: I was involved with a lot of debates and discussion when we were talking about civil rights and then we started adding in gender rights. And I like to think I was part of a small group of people that helped the women's movement got kick-started. You know, not as a leader, but as one of the people involved. I am a strong supporter and advocate of women's rights. However, to me, I am more of a quantitative scholar than not. To me, if you say intersectionality, in quantitative work we have independent variables and we have intersection variables. Okay. Now, if you can demonstrate to me, that after you take—after you study—let's say you are looking at race, and gender, and intersectionality. If you analyze race, and then analyze gender over and above race, or race over and above gender, however you wanna go about it. And then if you can come up with some measure of intersectionality *beyond* those, then I would be with you. Maybe there are some, I haven't been looking for them. I've just never heard them explained, like that. I argue that there is nothing left once you've studied *all* about race and *all* about gender, I argue there's nothing left. So, intersectionality is just a nice way of saying that we should look at both of these, to me. But people have taken it to mean more. I had a student who was big into it, and we had kind of an argument. She was not a quantitative student, so I brought my quantitative star who knows more statistics than I do. And I said, "what do you think of this?" And she agreed with me, the quantitative model. And she said, "well, there are two books I want you to read and maybe you will change your mind." My student, who is now a professor herself, said. I haven't gotten around to reading those books, so that's why I was hesitant to say. Not that I object, but I just haven't gotten around [to reading those books]. Because I would want to read something that would cause me not to have my position, if it is wrong.

Jared Keyel: So, as we come to a close, are there any other issues that we haven't talked about yet, that you think are important in this current moment historically? Anything else we want to discuss before we close?

Dr. Wornie Reed: Well, I guess, not to you guys, but if you were newspaper reporters, I would say they need to stop putting so much credence into symbolism. For example, Barack Obama was elected. People made up some outrageous assumptions. And I won't even go into the most substantive outrageous assumption, because you know there was the assumption that he was a liberal. I argue that he wasn't. So why do you have that assumption? But, in the broad scope of things, I think people would argue and agree that he was a liberal, but not a progressive as some people thought he was. But how was that going to improve, to contribute to racial progress? I didn't think so. Well, now, let me just stop. His election in and of itself, kept nobody alive. And it is not that I wasn't for his election, as I told a group I cried like a lot of other African Americans when he was elected. But, I was not as surprised as others. Because Colin Powell would have won easier, I don't know whether you know about that or not. Colin Powell was the leading Republican candidate in 2000. And if Colin Powell had won the Republic nomination, I think he would have won the general election a lot easier than Barack Obama did in 2008. But, that's all I was saying: we spend too much time with what I call symbolic stuff, and not real stuff. For example, we have gotten to the point of describing racism as a kind of philosophical attribute of individuals, as whether they are racist or not. Way away from the meaning of racism, because it doesn't matter what it is, whether they are deep down in, it's the "X" that they do. That's another thing that we need to, we could start with. And we get there by emphasizing this symbolism, I think.

Jared Keyel: Thank you very much for taking the time to talking with us this afternoon and thank you for this very interesting discussion.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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