

The Case of Race: A View of New Zealand, Russia, and Japan

By: Brooke Ramos

America is becoming exceedingly more violent against its “melanined” citizens based on news media publications. In this country, we find ourselves conscientiously and continuously engaged in conversations about race and the shade of skin with which we were born. This contrasts with the preschool teaching that most American citizens received, which states that everyone ought to be treated equally. Research now shows that each of us shares 99.9% of genetic material. As a mixed Caucasian-Puerto Rican, born in upstate New York and raised for 22 years in the southeastern area of the United States, racial issues have largely sparked my interest. However, being raised in the “whiteness” of particular neighborhoods and schools by my white mother (with the cultural capital that subsequently afforded me) has provided shielding from the prejudice I could have encountered had she made different life choices. To be transparent, one such privilege of having a white single mother who sought higher education and maintained a career is having access to her home in a blended-family as I continue my college studies. This includes access to the famous video-on-demand service, Netflix. One gripping show, “Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee” with Jerry Seinfeld that featured Aziz Ansari (a 1<sup>st</sup> generation Indian-American raised in South Carolina), inspired the foundation for this writing when Mr. Ansari asked: [paraphrased] “What is racism like in other cultures?” Indeed, who are the targeted individuals and what do they experience? Let us explore these questions by traveling to New Zealand, Russia and Japan.

## Experience of Racism in New Zealand

Images of majestic cliffs, sparkling beaches, and trees ripe with luscious kiwi fruits sprinkle the imagination when New Zealand is mentioned. Truly, the locals are as diverse as their ecosystem, but conversely, less loved in the homeland. Movie director of *Thor: Ragnarok*, Taika Waititi, called his country “racist as f\*\*\*” in an interview not long ago in April of 2018, near the time of this writing (NZ Herald, “Taika Calls Racist”). What brought him to raise such charges against this beautiful nation? Many of the New Zealand “Kiwis” are made up of European, indigenous Maori, and Polynesian descendants. As in most countries afflicted with racism, those most closely related to “Euro-whiteness” are posited to cast racial slurs upon the unwanted minority. In this case, minority status belongs to the indigenous and Polynesian populations. Being part-Polynesian descended, Waititi acknowledged in his interview that most Kiwis profile a person that appears Asian and those of this appearance receive no hard-earned accolades for their accomplishments, thusly labeled (NZ Herald, “Taika Calls Racist”). Another native of Polynesian descent and the interview’s host, Ruban Nielsen, from the beloved band Unknown Mortal Orchestra, mentioned his transition to America was easy because no one could pinpoint his ethnicity. However, upon return to his country (despite his accomplishments overseas) he was met with, “Yeah, but you’re still Polynesian, so...” (Denney, “A Conversation, Culture & Growing Up”).

As of 2017, New Zealand’s Human Rights Commission has received over 3000 complaints of racism in the last decade from its population of about 4.7 million, similar in size to the state of Louisiana (Miller, “How Racist in New Zealand”). Most of these issues have arisen in the workplace. Interestingly, much of the slinging has been cast towards Asians and Whites,

both numbering near 600 complaints (Miller, “How Racist in New Zealand”). Labour MP Carmel Sepuloni of New Zealand explains that “racism comes... from a few different angles” if you are of mixed descent (Miller, “How Racist in New Zealand”). Acknowledging the indigenous Maori angle, overt profiling and institutional racism is evident. One writer for E-Tangata (an online Maori publication) delineates a time her son was profiled during a late-night search for a friend’s house in a wealthy area: “A local rapped on their car window and screamed: ‘You robbed my house!’” (Maniapoto, “Racism Few See”). This has happened to her own family, and many like hers, countless times. Beyond this, white kids have been known to receive “slaps on the wrist” for felonies, whereas Maori equivalents have historically received law-of-the-letter punishment (Maniapoto, “Racism Few See”). In response to these issues, Race Relations Commissioner, Dame Susan Devoy, launched “That’s Us” in 2016, a campaign and website for people who have experienced racism to share their stories (“That’s Us Launches”). Director Waititi also filmed a satirical advert for the NZ Human Rights Commission last summer, calling all Kiwis to support racism so that it can survive (NZ Herald, “Taika Calls Racist”). As these retorts are fresh, only time will tell if they have promoted the desired effects of bringing this nation of multiple communities together as one.

### **Experience of Racism in Russia**

Classic Russia evokes connotations of symphonic music, traditional Russian dancing to the likeness of that in “The Nutcracker”, beef stroganoff, as well as historical references to the Cold War and Stalin’s despotism. These are common conceptions of what Russia represents on a global scale, from the view of a young American. However, like New Zealand and America herself, Russia struggles with ethno-prejudices and racism. This country reformed in the early 90s, ascending from socialist dissolution to democratic ideals. During this early time, many

people related to “Eurasianism” which acknowledges Russia’s singular identity as both a European and Asian nation, comprised of many ethnicities (Shlapentokh 531). In colloquial terms, this could be likened to the temporary joy and spirit of cooperation a couple might feel after coming back together soon after a breakup, before the inevitable disagreements resurface. However, after the 2000s, Russian socio-political views of ethnicity and nativism quickly fragmented to support political rhetoric and institutionalized social policies (Shlapentokh 531 & Iarskaia).

The group which lays claim to policy-making and “native” status is anyone of Slavic origin. As V.N. Iarskaia notes, anyone who claims this status has been regarded as deserving greater rights in a territory than other nationalities, those of which interpret this practice as violating civil rights (27). The “native group” openly oppose and discriminate against ethnic groups of Asian, Caucasian (of the Caucasus region), and Latin descent using ethnic stereotypes like, “Caucasian ethnic gangs regularly do violence against other military servicemen” (Iarskaia 25). Iarskaia discusses that in European countries it is considered improper to acknowledge ethnonational origins when laws are broken, “whereas many journalists in [Russia] place special emphasis on ethnicity” and these demarcations result in a direct “hostility toward people of other nationalities” (24). Furthermore, sensitivity to minorities’ provocation of society has increased nationalist bias 24% since 2004 (Iarskaia 24). Similar to this writer’s Sociology anthology, *Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Social Class*, edited by Susan Ferguson, when “white” American men and women faced insecurity due to economic upheaval in the mid-90s caused by the decisions of corporations and capitalists, they “drew on a long tradition of racial rhetoric, blaming immigrants and Blacks” for their problems (114).

Iraskaia paints a picture that the ethnic discourse is continuously reinforced on the levels of military, academia, politics, and media. Though her paper was written in 2012, a more contemporary example from sports media arose this May of 2018 in the face of the looming World Cup. Reports from NBC News state that racist and anti-gay slurs have risen to 19 incidents from 2 and 10 accounts in the last respective seasons (NBCNews.com). A Nigerian Russian-born player commented that this could be a psychological tactic to unnerve the opposition, but the Fare Network holds that racial chants have increased due to the lack of ease in policing them (NBCNews.com). There has also been an increase in the use of coded messages utilizing symbols such as runes to signal other far right extremists in banners and visual displays (NBCNews.com). Congruent with American racial ideology “migrants... [become] a potent symbol of all the evils of post-Soviet society—the collapse of the empire, social polarisation and rising crime” (Shlapentokh 531). So far, the themes of vulnerable racial purity, increased concern over criminal activity, and economic worries plague both New Zealand and Russia. Has Japan crafted a similar form of human segregation patterns?

### **Experience of Racism in Japan**

Indeed, the beloved sushi innovators have created organizational parameters to segregate and exploit various groups of people over time. Japan is another beautiful island-country, one that teems with ecological and gustatory life for citizens and travelers alike. It has been featured on countless travel shows on American cable stations and headlined in textbooks on World War II. Some of these stereotypical observations of Japanese culture have informed racial profiling on its own soil. There is a group which has been marginalized for many years called the Burakumin, not unlike the Indian “Untouchables” caste (Ferguson 19). They have been historically attributed jobs like meat processing and funeral operation with which the Tokugawa caste system “codified

entrenched cultural ideas of defilement that stretch back centuries” (Hankins 162). This is the class that has been “prepping” some of the fish so many foreigners enjoy in Japanese sushi. Both Ferguson’s anthology and Joseph Hankin’s review of Amos’ *Embodying Difference: The Making of Burakumin in Modern Japan* acknowledge that there are no “...inherent characteristics that define them as Burakumin...” thus, natives and foreigners alike may encounter difficulty attempting to separate a Buraku from a crowd. Although Richard Werly notes in his article “The Burakumin, Japan’s Invisible Caste” that legislation has long since included this caste in the same citizenship ranking as other Japanese nationals, discrimination persists at economic and structural levels. It is believed association with a Buraku can bring bad luck and some are turned away from business and housing options (Werly, “Invisible Caste”). Caste-affiliated politicians also avoid this labeling to enhance social standing (Werly, “Invisible Caste”). Fortunately for this Japanese group, they can stand with other natives united by ethnicity and law, but their mixed-race compatriots are not so lucky.

Contemporary racism persists in varying manners among racially/ethnically “pure” Japanese and mixed-race Japanese. Ideas about racial purity stemmed from an isolationist policy which afforded the Japanese government to claim a separate identity that needed to be fostered and protected (Walters 3). However, in the mid-1800s, Japan became slightly more inclusive to Western society for the first time after opening its doors to the outside world, effectively ending closed-door Sakoku policy (Walters 4). Since closed-country policies could no longer conserve Japanese heritage in the face of novel globalist ideals, the country opted for a dreamy nationalistic ideology of “Nihonjinron”, an in-group-out-group marker of the authentically Japanese versus all foreigners (Walters 5). Since immigration laws and policies have fluctuated over the years, contemporary youth raised in bi-racial homes (along with their parents) find

themselves increasingly discriminated against for the actions of lawmakers who came before them. Although one might be considered ethnically and racially “Nihonjinron” on paper through the Japanese koseki family documentation system, one’s foreign parent may not belong. Consequently, that parent would be denied legal rights in such dire circumstances as deportation or as in the necessity to establish minority rights for their multiracial child (Walters 14).

Many even find their phenotypic differences exploited to uphold the Nihonjinron ideal. As Kyle Walters, a mixed Caucasian-Korean Japanese national notes, having multiracial celebrities featured in media protects the Japanese ideal of the wellbeing of the unit- “groupism” (Walters 11). This practice in highlighting those who differ from Nihonjinron in media outlets affords mixed-race individuals no more agency to “change the status quo” for what would seem to an American as the glorification of phenotypic differences (Walters 12). In fact, “speaking fluent Japanese and presenting the differences of Japan and the rest of the world makes white-Japanese biracial individuals perfect candidates to endorse the concept of Nihonjinron towards the younger audience who have been conditioned to like Caucasians, as well as broadcast a safe image to the older generations who might feel uncomfortable with foreigners” (Walters 17). Thus, the Japanese media has been using multiracial individuals as poster children for “what not to be” in Japanese society as an effort to uphold durable Japanese ethnicity within its population.

### **Conclusion**

America also seems to practice its individual form of isolationist Sakoku by manner of ignorance and sensationalism about discrimination on “American soil”. Its own media outlets have portrayed this society as having a problem with prejudice, especially for its former use of slaves to build the country. After reviewing the “case of race” from multiple loci on this planet, it is more evident that racism is not an American problem. It is a human problem. One, which

viewed objectively, begs the question: How could the preschool message of kindness and sharing become distorted to the effect that now, as adults, many policymakers, media writers, and local citizens alike have downgraded moral standards to that of tribalist protectionism? To define those who pose a threat before a real act of aggression in the civilized world mirrors the primal necessity of indigenous societies that prepare for tribal war. One hopes that global civilization has moved beyond these war-game tactics to reach for an inclusive, ideal society. Among others with the same-spirited message, civilization may apply the perspective of one harbinger of civil peace, Ghandi, who is quoted as having said, “The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members”.

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