

O'Reilly's view: Too blind to see

Written by Dr. Lenora Fulani
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I was on a plane two weeks ago headed to California to visit my daughter when I first heard Bill O'Reilly's televised rant justifying the killing of 17-year old Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman.

I watched as my fellow passengers, primarily white, received their daily dose of racial polarization. It was a very disturbing experience.

O'Reilly's exoneration of Zimmerman was not based on Florida law, but on the rates at which Black males commit homicide – a rate he points out is ten times that of the Latino and white populations combined. Never mind that Martin was the victim, not the perpetrator. Of course, he throws in for good measure that 73 percent of African-American babies are born out of wedlock. These circumstances, according to O'Reilly, have nothing to do with the history of slavery or decades of discrimination and poverty, but instead are the byproduct of "Black culture," a code phrase, as we all know, for Black inferiority. O'Reilly appears to miss the fact that Black culture does not exist independently of American culture, even as the majority of African-Americans are relegated to the sidelines of America's prosperity – living in poverty. Any indictment, true or false, of Black culture is an indictment of American culture.

In his rant, O'Reilly admonished African-American leadership for failing to run ads telling young

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African-American girls to avoid becoming pregnant. Why haven't they advocated for strict discipline in public schools – no matter, by the way, how lousy the system is – and insisting on mandatory student uniforms? Is he serious?

African-American kids and their families don't need lectures. They know very well how the O'Reillys of the world see them. And they carry the burden, physically, psychologically and emotionally of a poverty and deprivation that they are often accused of producing but which is instead the birthright of being Black in America.

The problem with traditional Black leadership isn't their failure to engage Mr. O'Reilly's fantasy of what he calls Black culture. No, it's that traditional solutions – like the current organization of public education or the traditional partisan approaches to Black empowerment – do not yield development. If there's anything about Black culture that needs to change, it's the willingness to accept these old solutions.

I have spent the last three decades, along with my colleagues at the All Stars Project, in the poor African-American and Latino communities of this country. The so-called immorality of the Black community is not the issue as we are no more or less moral or immoral than any other community. At the All Stars, we engage a byproduct of poverty – underdevelopment. It is hard to grow and develop when one is relegated to the sidelines of a society, denied access to the mainstream.

We have also invested in introducing the poor, Black community to our white, wealthy donors to help to bridge the gap that the O'Reillys of the country exploit for political gain. That can be done. That is being done. But the O'Reillys of the world are too blind to see it.

What each brings to the table – the young people's struggles and their hunger to be included and the donors' experience and sophistication – creates a new kind of possibility for Black and white America to come together. African-American kids who live in the projects and in impoverished areas don't have the opportunity to be part of the larger world, to be part of the mainstream, as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said. However, if given the opportunities and the chance to grow, the toughest kids in our community embrace development. Poor African-American and Latino kids want desperately to be successful. They know that they've been earmarked to be left behind. That's a very painful and confusing and infuriating experience for both the kids and their parents. That's the truth of Black culture. That's the truth of American culture. That's what we need to change.