

Opinion

What 'Minnesota Nice' Sweeps Under the Rug

The beloved stereotype about our state's cult of politeness would have you believe that there's no toehold for white supremacy here.



"The Furnace of Adversity, 2021" Chase Hall is an artist born in St. Paul, Minn. His colorful strokes on cotton canvas aim to create a visual language of resilience and empathy, in hopes of a racial literacy to better understand the painful inheritances of the past and its resonance with the present. Chase Hall

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By David Lawrence
Mr. Grant is a screen
April 16, 2021

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» Twin Cities.

MINNEAPOLIS — Minnesota has always imagined itself as someplace special, a place apart. This attitude has irked our neighbors in the Dakotas, Iowa and Wisconsin, and they have never suffered our swagger and hubris gladly.

That sense of specialness springs, at least to some degree, from our geography. We're a Midwestern agricultural state like our neighbors, but our heavily wooded landscape laced with thousands of lakes is home to the headwaters of the Mississippi River — and home to the farthest northern and western shores of the greatest of the Great Lakes, an interlinked waterway that snakes across the continent to the St. Lawrence Seaway, directly connecting us to the whole world. And so, incongruously, we have a major seaport in Duluth.

But even though its geography intimately connects Minnesota to the rest of the country, the Cool Blue North also can feel *isolated* from the rest of the country. So, whatever hot-button issues may be raging in the rest of America, there's sometimes a false notion here of being above the fray, somehow.

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Minnesota Is One of the Best Places to Live in America. Unless You're Black.

The state's reputation belies some of the country's largest racial disparities.

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During the long, deadly period from the 1870s through the 1940s, when white mobs burned Black communities, killing thousands of Black folk from coast to coast, Minnesota's Black community was small, widely dispersed, and largely spared. During the ugly spate of public lynchings that terrorized Black America, especially in the 1910s and 1920s, there were only [three documented lynchings of Black people](#) by white mobs in Minnesota. Three too many, but still. During the height of the civil rights movement, the liberal leaders of Minnesota's industry and civic life loudly and publicly supported the struggle.

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But our elders here were not shy about reminding these civic leaders that not many years prior, Black citizens couldn't eat at many restaurants or sleep at many hotels, even in downtown Minneapolis or St. Paul. And people old enough to remember still harbor bitter memories of how the once-thriving Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul, a prominent center of Black life in Minnesota, was callously destroyed by the advent of the I-94.

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The home of "Minnesota nice" — that deeply rooted stereotype about our state's cult of politeness — would love to believe that there's no substantial toehold for white supremacy here. But the stereotype has always been about the maintenance of a *superficial* kind of civic politeness, about preserving the *appearance* of peace and only the best of intentions.

It's a culture bent toward sweeping nagging, uncomfortable issues under the rug. This, paired with the blind spots that encourage us to think we're doing better than we are, has lulled many Minnesotans to sleep, the resulting complacency having helped lead to some of the worst racial disparities in the nation.

The needless death of Philando Castile in 2016, followed by George Floyd's death last year and the trial for his killing underway (and now, incredibly, in the midst of the trial, the tragic, senseless death of Daunte Wright during yet *another* traffic stop) have made

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Minnesota a major national focus of our collective challenge to deal meaningfully with this issue — and all the issues of systemic racial inequity, policing and justice. Minnesota has had a rude awakening to the fact that it is *not* above the fray. It sits in the middle of the country and very much in the middle of the fray.

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Our unwillingness to understand the profound, deep-seated, systemic nature of white supremacy has lulled many into thinking that police reform might get off to a meaningful start by simply weeding a few bad apples out of the force. But you can't even start weeding out the bad apples until you've taken a clear-eyed look at the culture that allows them to burrow deeply into a department's ranks.

In the summer of 1991, when my son turned 14, he and a group of friends were walking a buddy home in our South Minneapolis neighborhood when they were suddenly stopped by the police. There were five kids. One was white. Their white friend was pulled aside. "Well, well, we got ourselves a little race traitor here," he was told. This is disturbing on several levels, but language about being a "race traitor" isn't just casual racist talk: It's very specific to movement white supremacy. Talk that's only going to spill out of the mouth of someone involved in it.

We're right to be deeply concerned about the havoc and lost trust that the actions of an overtly racist officer can cause, and police reform must mean much more than watch-dogging the decisions of individual officers. But that's precisely how law enforcement suddenly shows up in an average citizen's life: An officer decides to pull you over.

The most dangerous, most life-threatening police stop I've ever endured happened here in Minneapolis, back in the 1970s. But I must also say this: The best, most positive police stop I've ever been part of happened here, too, much more recently.

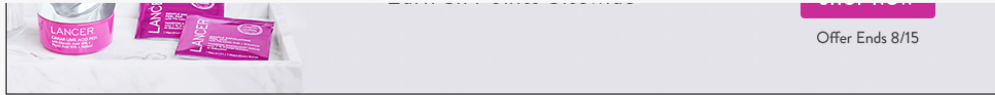
I was driving my grandson to school, and we were late. I was speeding. Nothing egregious, but I was cruising above the posted speed limit, for sure. The white officer who pulled us over listened to my flustered apology, looked at me, looked at my grandson. Then I watched as it dawned across his face that he had an opportunity to demonstrate for the kid that this is how a police stop is supposed to go. It was a show for his benefit. I knew it, and the officer clearly knew that I knew. The show ended with a mild verbal warning.

But when this incident occurred, I was already a graybeard, and no longer fit the profile of the young Black man whom law enforcement widely sees as a potentially dangerous problem — all the time, anywhere he goes.

My grandson drives himself around these days. And for the next 20 years or so, he will fit that profile. And he will be vulnerable and in danger anytime he's out in public. This is a fact. And unless and until this fact changes, all our hearts will be in our throats every time he ventures out — whether it's to go serve his community as a

firefighter or pick up a gallon of milk — until we see that he's safely home again.

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The likelihood of his safe return home should not be a roll of the dice, should not depend on being lucky enough to get pulled over by a good cop having a good day. The true core issue is that in addition to enforcing the kinds of laws we can all agree on, law enforcement has also been used in a thousand different ways, large and small, to enforce the second-class citizenship of people who look like my son, my grandsons and me.

And through a thousand battles, large and small, we need to be about the business of dismantling this bulwark. Now is as good a time as any to begin — and Minnesota is as good a place. Ready or not, the camera has pulled in tight for our close-up, and the picture doesn't look very nice. But the whole world is watching.

David Grant is a writer and playwright in Minneapolis. He teaches screenwriting at FilmNorth and at MN Prison Writing Workshop.

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