

## **Break the Cycle**

Nicky Enright, May 2016

Recently during a discussion about diversity, a brilliant friend told me I sounded “like Rodney King.” She was referring to his question, soon after his severe, televised beating by a gang of L.A. police officers on March 3, 1991: “Can we all get along?” My friend presumably considered my opinions on racial matters naive or utopian or both. Although I don’t think I’m naive, I admit I harbor hopes for a racism-free future in the U.S., however many generations it may take to materialize. I hope because hopelessness is not a viable option and also because I reject the cynical negativity about “human nature” that turned Rodney King’s question into a national joke, one that pained us even as we chuckled. Perhaps Rodney King’s question is worth pondering anew: can we all get along?

In terms of racism, xenophobia, and immigration, a possible answer is that we don’t get along because we are heirs to - and continue to accept - the deeply flawed ideology of race, the pseudo-scientific fiction that purportedly confers selective advantages and disadvantages to particular groups of human beings. Even many of us who resist racism may unwittingly continue to accept the underpinnings of its ideology and to function under its edicts. In doing so, they fight the symptoms, not the disease of racism.

Fighting the disease, paradoxically, is both simple and complex; dismantling racism will require nothing less than a paradigm shift in our society. This may help explain why even many diversity professionals in academia, whose charge is to address institutionalized racism, tend to focus more on the symptoms, which range from micro-aggressions and profiling to institutionalized racism.

The paradigm shift requires that we begin to recognize and denounce the problem at its root; that is, the myth of race-based categorization. Nations that, like the United States, historically and heavily relied on slave labor face the most baffling quandaries about race at present. In its most absurd and official form, our national obsession with race is embodied in the ever-changing race and ethnicity questions posed in our national headcount, the U.S. Census. This is clear from the first census, handwritten in 1790, which counted only “slaves” and “free white people.” The most recent census, in 2010, listed no less than 21 named choices on the question of race identification. The ethnicity question had only 2 possible answers, “Hispanic” and “non-Hispanic.” Thus, in keeping with our state-of-the-art

racial fiction, U.S. citizens can possess only one of two ethnicities (one defined wholly as a negation of the other), but are permitted to choose, or mix and match, from at least 21 “races” listed. An additional box states, “some other race.” This seems to encourage citizens to invent a race. And frankly, why not? It couldn’t get much more perplexing. Nonetheless, the census pinpoints exactly where we find ourselves today, officially, notwithstanding any ongoing deliberations on how to tweak the categories for the next U.S. Census in 2020.

It should not surprise us that we are racist when we consider that we have been explicitly brought up to believe that racial differences exist and that they involve innate distinctions that designate some groups as superior and others as inferior. We are just the genteel and confused heirs of a flagrantly brutal, racist past with enduring repercussions. Fortunately, present-day scientific consensus debunks the concept of race as an objective biological fact, considering it a sociocultural construct. The differences we normally acknowledge as diversity are largely superficial, amounting to variations in skin tone, eye, hair color, or other physical attributes.

I frequently hear diversity professionals contradict themselves by saying that race is a social construct while at the same time using words, like multiracial or bi-racial, that only make sense if the conventional notion of race is accepted. Admittedly, we are - all of us - so deeply entrenched in the age-old paradigm of race that we can barely muster the language, let alone the vision, to transcend it. Still, it is essential that we find ways to reject this fiction.

To move from resistance of the very real effects of racism, to the dismantling of racism itself, we must tackle obsolete and discredited notions of racial difference. Of necessity, we must continue to address racism’s historical and tangible ramifications, and we must also accept that the process will take time. It took centuries to construct the racial framework that justified and still underpins the daunting inequities evident in our society; we will certainly not dig ourselves out overnight.

I know racism intimately, as an oppressive force, as most people of color do in America. I know firsthand that police profiling is not a statistical abstraction; it is a destructive and physical reality. Sadly, I have had no shortage of racist encounters in my life while in the pursuit of my regular affairs and dreams. Consequently, in saying that race is a fiction, I by no

means wish to imply that *racism* is a fiction. That would be naïve indeed. But it is a crucial distinction, without which, we remain locked in a cycle.

It is a function of the cycle that in the muddled parlance of today, I am considered a "person of color," instead of a "colored person." This minor tweak also shows how fundamental language is to dealing with our problem. In spite of ourselves, we reinforce the racist system simply by operating as if race is real, even if only by the language we choose.

To be sure, some progress has been made combatting racism, but the foundations of racism, the authority of the racial fiction, remains intact. This is easily demonstrated by most Americans' agreement that Barack Obama is our first "Black" president. This understanding signifies that the "one-drop rule," formulated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to facilitate the oppression of the enslaved, is still very much in effect. President Obama's mother was "White," and he was entirely raised by his "White" family, but he is not widely considered the first "bi-racial" president. However, whether he is considered the first "Black" or "bi-racial" President, this represents no progress in dismantling racism at its foundation.

We appear to go around in circles in the fight against racism. I believe the reason is that we make little attempt to dismantle the racist *ideology* that forms the basis of so much documented injustice.

The continued acceptance of the fiction of "race" should be considered racist by definition; it is highly questionable to continue to assume that "race" is legitimate. The old ideology and habitual patterns have to stop, and though difficult to resist pragmatically, linguistically, and even existentially, this is how we begin finally to counteract the ingrained and damaging myths that have been instilled in us. Anyone with a grasp of history knows that the status quo is racist; hence, to combat racism we must oppose the status quo.

Not coincidentally, the difficulty in dealing with the foundations of racism is built into the system. It is precisely when we get closer to the heart of these issues, that we risk being dismissed as naïve or reactionary, even by intelligent people dedicated to combatting systemic racism. In addition, some people make similar-sounding arguments simply to dismiss racism and the struggle for equity, such as the "color blind" position. There is so much confusion about these issues, and that serves to keep us on the cycle of the status quo.

In effect, if we acknowledge that race is a sociocultural construct, we will no longer be able to talk about people even being “White” or “Black” or “of color.” In the long term, these words would lose their meaning, except as historical categories from the racist period.

This is a complicated point in the struggle, and we may ask ourselves, “How will we transcend a fiction that permeates our language, national life, and all our institutions?” James Baldwin recognized this when he expressed the crux of the matter by saying, “As long as you think you’re White, I’m gonna be forced to think I’m Black” (*The Price of the Ticket*, 1989 film).

To build a post-racist society, we would have to acknowledge that:

- Ethnicity is culture.
- Race is a social construct whose sole purpose is to divide people and maintain “White” supremacy; i.e., the status quo.
- Though there may be Black cultures (ethnicities), there is no Black race.
- Though there may be White cultures (ethnicities), there is no White race.
- Being “bi-racial” or “multi-racial” is an outcome of the sociocultural construct of race.
- Even if it were possible to establish with any precision, which it is not, being “White” should not entitle anyone to privilege or to feel that he/she is “normal,” the “standard,” or “superior” in any way to anybody else of different skin tone.
- Being “Black” - were it possible to establish with any precision, which it is not, should not endanger anyone’s life and prospects, or subject anyone to demeaning or offensive treatment or cause him/her to feel inferior.
- The one-drop rule must be eradicated and be seen for what it is, a fraudulent social and legal principle of racial classification to divide and conquer human beings, one that denies individuals their wholeness.
- There is no scientific basis for the idea of “race purity.” All people alive today are descended from common ancestors who lived millions of years ago in Africa. The human race is closely related.
- Educating the youth in these specific matters is an essential step on the road to confronting the fallacy of race.

Tackling racial injustice at its foundation is anything but naive. Quite the reverse, it is transformative. Without an in-depth re-education and redefinition of ourselves, our future generations will be powerless to think or act any differently than we do today. The cycle will continue.

An end to racism becomes conceivable through the deconstruction of race. We have never attempted a change of this kind. On the contrary, our history books have routinely whitewashed the genocide of Native Americans and glossed over the African slavery that built the country's wealth. To transform this country we must confront this painful history, expose it, and differentiate it from the present and future. That would be radical - and healing.

I continue to hope that one day our racist era will seem as distant and brutish as that of the gladiators in the Roman Empire or colonialism in the Americas seems to us now. It is possible. Colonial Spain coined dozens of terms to describe people in the New World, including but not limited to, *mestizo*, *castizo*, *mulatto*, *morisco*, *torna atrás*, *lobo*, *zambaigo*, *cambujo*, *albarazado*, *barcino*, *choyote*, *chamiso*. Today their *castas* (castes) are mostly a thing of a bygone era. If you have never heard many of these terms, try to conceive that we could reach a point in the U.S. where our own language and lifestyle, based on fictitious racial classifications would sound as outdated and absurd as that of the Spanish empire does today.

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### **Three Links:**

James Baldwin quote: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUknb68MWLE>

Nicky Enright website: <http://www.lightbolt.net>

Image to accompany text: [http://www.lightbolt.net/misc/sense\\_us.html](http://www.lightbolt.net/misc/sense_us.html)

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