



MESSY DISCOURSE

Talking About Interracial Justice

BY NIK MITCHELL, PH.D.

There is no discourse in American life more fraught with danger than what happens around race relations in the popular culture. But what is the goal of these conversations? Is it the apparent “one-upmanship” reliant on “whataboutism” and cherry-picking data that abounds across social media and the opinion sections of many publications while ignoring history? If you look at the current state of discourse in popular culture, you would not be faulted for thinking this is the case, but it should not be this way. The stakes are too high. The goal of any discourse on race relations should be to bring about interracial justice in the United States.

Eric Yamamoto defines interracial justice as “hard acknowledgment of the historical and contemporary ways in which racial groups harm one another, along with affirmative efforts to redress justice grievances and rearticulate and restructure present-day relations.” This centers reconciliation as the means of establishing new relationships between communities, while repairing

ones with a history of antagonism.¹ If we are to have a just future we must recognize: 1) the anger of the subordinated as valid; 2) the idea of “responsibility” which allows for one to be the oppressor or oppressed or even both simultaneously; 3) the active pursuit of reconstructing damaged relationships between communities; and 4) the role of “reparation” as ending the relationship between subordinator and the subordinate through closing racial disparities in the quality of life.²

Having conversations rooted in interracial justice is understandably difficult. In this article, I offer up two principles for having these conversations.

The first principle of an interracial justice oriented discourse is the centrality of social justice. Social justice is, first and foremost, not an abstract principle; it is rooted in data and a concern for the quality of life. While it is currently in vogue to lump social justice in

with postmodernism or Marxism in popular culture discourse, social justice is its own world view. Fr. Bryan Massingale wrote, "justice is that state wherein the despised and outcast are respected and treated as worthy to dine as honored guests at the table."³ It is an ancient concept found in every religion. The United States has greatly benefitted from social justice centered movements like the women's rights movement, the civil rights movement, and the HIV awareness movement. Social justice is not a morally relative paradigm—it assumes an objective right and an objective wrong in regard to human dignity. It condemns both oppression and seeking revenge for past oppression.

The second principle of an interracial justice oriented discourse is a fidelity to history. There is a popular saying that "facts don't care about your feelings." I agree with that. Facts are stubborn and complicated things. Two contradictory views can be factual at the same time. For example, the immigrant story famously associated with Ellis Island is true—many European immigrants came to the U.S. because it offered them a life free from caste-based oppressions so common in their homelands, especially with regard to the Irish and European Jews. It is also true that until 1968 much of the domestic policy and institutional practice on all levels of government in the United States was the promotion of white supremacy and the oppression of communities of color. Any person of color born before 1968 was born into *de jure* or *de facto* Jim Crow where their repression, terrorizing, and pauperization were sanctioned by the state.

"White privilege" is a fact. Social justice has facilitated dynamic changes in America, but we are still within living memory of the United States as a segregation society. To say that white privilege does not exist, although we are a mere 50 years from the collapse of Jim Crow, is tantamount to saying that history does not matter. It is tantamount to saying that there was no slavery, there was no Jim Crow, and there were no lynchings. All of the evidence is fabricated. Black parents and grandparents are all liars, and there has been no crime. One can say "millions of people still suffer because of pervasive racism" and "there has been a great deal of progress regarding race relations in the last 50 years" at the same time and be factual. But the point of the fidelity to history is not to build identities around past grievances which

produce identity politics that hinder reconciliation.⁴ Rather, the point is to recognize the impact of the past on the present condition with the understanding that only when the present disparities are addressed can the past truly become past.

Nothing about interracial justice is neat because people are not neat when it comes to community. Humanity is messy. Race is messy. Racism is messy. Messy is good because it is real. Yamamoto wrote:

Healing racial wounds is messy and complex. It means not only handling current problems and conflicts but also restoring the psyche and the soul. In part, suffering is social and psychological. Long-term pain is often experienced not just physically but also as a reflection of one's relationships and perceptions of societal norms.⁵

Interracial justice oriented discourse is messy because it has to be.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Yamamoto, E. K. (2000). *Interracial justice: Conflict and reconciliation in post-civil rights America*. NYU Press, 21-22
- ² Yamamoto, 22-24
- ³ Massingale, B. (2010) *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*. Orbis Books, 39
- ⁴ Yamamoto, 24-25
- ⁵ Yamamoto, 62

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