

# Black, Brown, and Yellow in New Orleans

By Lucas Díaz-Medina on May 10, 2016

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I'm an immigrant of color who speaks Spanish and happens to be rather light-skinned, as far as people of color go. When I think about it, I suppose being light-skinned has afforded me a small amount of benefit in the U.S. Then again, maybe not, but that depends on who's interpreting my life and my place in the world. Let me explain.

Saying that being identified as both immigrant and 'of color' has shaped my life in the suburbs and inner neighborhoods of New Orleans would be an understatement. My entire existence has revolved around determining if I am Black, not Black, something else, maybe brown, possibly a little *white*. And the question that has always bugged me remains today—why should this have mattered at all? Why does it still matter? And why should it ever matter tomorrow? Unfortunately, it does matter, and it matters too much.

New Orleans isn't any different than other cities when it comes to *race* relations. It has its significant share of bigots, racists, and institutionalized racism across every aspect of society. Just take a look at the latest news about [Lee Circle](#) and the other beloved local confederate monuments and you'll see what I'm talking about (regardless of how you lean). But I'm not interested in talking about the not-so hidden Black-*white* *race* issues playing out on Facebook or Twitter feeds.

No, I'm interested in sharing something slightly different, somewhat troubling, but potentially hopeful in New Orleans about other *race* relations. The other I'm referring to is the remaining lump sum of people of color who aren't African Americans or *white* Americans.

First, I'm assuming it's understood that there are no true *rac*es, as this is a concept invented to differentiate masters from slaves during American colonization, and later to more easily categorize non *whites* in U.S. population counts. This is why I have italicized the word – so that you notice. [Peter Wade](#) makes a good argument about the constructed nature of our modern concept of race in his book [Race and Ethnicity in Latin America](#).

Second, I'm assuming it's understood that the concept of whiteness is an intentionally constructed category designed to establish the superiority of *white* people in the U.S. after the Civil War, which is also why I italicize the one and not the other. So that you notice. I recommend [Making Whiteness: the Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940](#) by [Grace Elizabeth Hale](#) if you'd like a great read with extensive research behind this subject.

The fact of the matter is, these other people of color, typically newcomers, regardless of whether they were born in the U.S. of immigrant parents (or even grand- and great-grandparents, for that matter), or arrived as immigrant kids, teenagers, or adults, they all must make a serious racial choice at some point or another. Regardless if it's done consciously or subconsciously, newcomers have to deal with U.S. racial legacy and its current-day realities. Beyond their experiences with prejudice as immigrants, which are inescapable, they must come to terms with how they are going to fit in and deal with the Black-*white* *race* issue – because for some of them, there's actually a choice.

Take me, for example. I was seven years old when I arrived in the New Orleans area. My father looked like a Black man and my mother like a *white*-ish woman. My maternal grandmother and uncles, who also came to greater New Orleans in the 1970s, also looked *white*-ish. Before entering the States, I didn't think of myself as a Black person. In fact, my mother would often say disparaging things about 'Black' people, whatever that meant to her. Because of how we looked, we could distance ourselves from the *Black* *race*, or 'Black' people, as my mother would say.

I did this throughout my teenage life by defending myself every time peers challenged my skin color. I would skirt the issue by declaring either my non-Blackness or my non-whiteness, according to my audience.

When the girls would come up to me and ask, "What are you?" I didn't hesitate.

"I'm Dominican," usually rolled off my tongue before anything else, as if to say hey, I'm not Black or *white*, when what I was really saying was, I'm not of the *Black* *race*, as far as I know. Of course, I have also since learned that Dominicans have a very disheartening problem with the issue of Blackness, as well.

Over the years I managed to mature (luckily), learning and experiencing more about this Black, *white*, and *race* issue thing and the way it is interwoven into modern U.S. society. Eventually I realized that no matter where I came from, immigrant or not, I would be received, more often than not, as a *Black* person. I had to learn what this meant, and once I did, I accepted it. To some I may be Latino or Dominican, but it doesn't change that I'm of the *Black* *race*. Why? Because there's no denying I have some African heritage in me (I eventually learned of the history of the one-drop rule in the U.S.), which I have openly chosen to acknowledge.

This is the choice that immigrant and immigrant-descended people of color have to make when they live here. They can opt out of the Black-*white race* myth by stipulating their *neitherness-ness* (as I used to do as a teenager), or, as many do, they can choose a side — become of the *white race* or become of the *Black race*. How do people of color do this, say, if they're Chinese, Korean, Arabic, Indian, or Vietnamese, though? Easy, they simply have to approximate *white-ness* by taking on the views and ideas fueling the *white race superiority* myth, and they're in, sort of (like choosing to call yourself Bobby instead of Piyush Jindal, for example, when running for public office).

Recall the racial tension in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* between the Asian (forgive me but I can't remember which country they were from) storeowner and African Americans? How about the racial tensions between Mexican Americans and African Americans in Los Angeles throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s? These narratives share a similar thread that plays out in communities across the United States where different people of color live close to each other. Yet what is this thread?

Simply put, if you're a person of color other than of the *Black race* it is likely that you will place yourself somewhere along the Black-*white race* continuum. And, if your skin happens to be lighter than dark brown folks, and your hair softer than afros, it's very possible that your parents and grandparents located themselves somewhere toward the *white* side of the spectrum, just like my family did after arriving to the U.S.

Look at Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, for example. Do you honestly think these two individuals think of themselves as being closer to the *Black race* than to the *white race* just because they're from Cuba? I doubt either does, and you probably doubt it, as well. More likely, they both see themselves as either close to, or actually, *white* men. Just look at to whom they cater in their bids for public office.

This U.S. Black-*white* racial problem affects all newcomers (regardless of skin color) in very real ways, sucking us in and forcing us to consider on which side of the spectrum we fall. And if we come to the U.S. with already established prejudiced views about Black people, these are easily reinforced here.

We either buy into the *white* mythology or we don't. Either choice provides real-world consequences.

For example, when I headed up a Latino-serving nonprofit organization in New Orleans in the years after Hurricane Katrina, there was a great deal of attention given to the new influx of Latino laborers. News reports were interested in potential *race* tensions. Reporters who interviewed me always asked about Black-Latino tensions. They wanted more sound bites similar to the one aired on NPR's *All Things Considered*, in which a local Colombian contractor was asked about his labor issues and he openly stated that Black workers were too lazy to work, which is why he was glad to see the new migrant Latinos arrive. David Duke would have proudly called on this *white* wannabe, who flashed the type of potential Klansmen look for in their recruits.

Sadly, this guy's beliefs weren't, and aren't alone among people of color from other countries. The whole *white* mythology, constructed off its idea of superiority to the *Black race* (interesting how much of what is trumpeted as better about the concept of whiteness is only made possible as a differentiation from the concept of Blackness) is a global phenomenon that has given us South Africa's *apartheid*, Brazil's *racial democracy*, and the Dominican Republic's law *TC 169-14*, systems designed to ensure that *Black race* people stay where they deserve, which isn't usually a very good socio-economic place (in case you weren't sure).

When in Rome, do as the Romans — or so goes the saying, right? Ideas of who is superior to whom among different peoples of color comingle with the *white race* superiority myth, feeding the imagination of many people of color who are on the lighter side of the pigmentation spectrum with ideas of being, well, better than the *Black race*. And so they take on the same prejudices, the same misinformation, and the same 19<sup>th</sup> century racist ideas that still run amok in many communities today.

Like I said earlier, New Orleans isn't any different than other U.S. cities in this regard, but what I *can* say is that in my community work since 2007 I have seen evidence in this city that this pervasive myth can be tackled, and things can change.

A focus of mine during those initial Katrina recovery years was to find a way to make sure that different people of color got to know each other. Too often we isolate ourselves within our own communities—in short, we stick with the ones that look like us. When we do this, we leave all ideas about those other people over there to the public misinformation machine of rumors, innuendo, gossip, hearsay, bullshit, and so on. So I wanted to do something about it without knowing exactly what to do.

One day in 2008 I discussed this concern with an African American friend of mine and we agreed to begin a series of conversations. We invited African American and Latino leaders initially, and learned, as we had suspected, that people generally had few relationships with other people of color. Eventually this coalition of Black-brown people expanded to other people of color and convened regularly for three years before disbanding. In that time new friendships were forged and new understandings about each other developed. I found hope that if we worked at it, we could actually undo the damage of *white superiority* and racial difference.

That same year I worked with a Latina community advocate who had grown up in New Orleans and had extensive relationships within the African American community. Her work focused on helping migrant day laborers. While out on the streets, doing her job, she encountered a group of African American community leaders who were interested in helping the migrant day laborers in their neighborhood have a safe and secure place to wait for work. I joined the effort and for a couple of years we attempted to find a solution, African American and immigrant Latinos working together.

In 2010, a good friend of mine who runs an organization he originally formed to help Vietnamese people found that his neighborhood could be stronger if he could get the Vietnamese, African Americans, and newcomer Latino immigrants to come together. He and I talked about it and with his help we organized a series of conversations with neighborhood leaders, asking them to consider working alongside each other. It didn't take long for them to agree, but that was the easy part.

They worked hard to get past each other's conditioned prejudices and managed eventually to form a working coalition of different people of color. Agreeing to work on such issues as recreation, safety, and resources for youth in their neighborhood, they learned that they shared much more than they had previously believed.

An African American lady, an elder of the community, took my friend to the side one day and told him that in her heart she didn't trust the Vietnamese and could never see herself making friends with them. Despite this, she came to the coalition meetings at the insistence of a trusted friend, and over time came to find that she had room to grow. She thanked my friend for providing the opportunity to make her growth possible at her elder age.

These anecdotes highlight some of the instances in which I found myself involved with efforts that worked at erasing notions of racial difference or racial superiority. Unfortunately, there aren't enough such stories, and despite our best efforts, we often fail. That same Vietnamese friend who was able to bring different people of color from his community together couldn't find a way to deescalate a racist situation within his own organization.

In 2015 the water boiled over on racial tensions that had been building up among his staff. A Vietnamese staffer who had deep-seated racist ideas about African Americans began to show and share her beliefs, often insulting African American staff members. Instead of singling out the one individual causing emotional havoc, my friend and I opted to bring his entire staff together. I stepped in to conduct a workshop on the myth of racial difference as a way of letting everyone within the organization (African American, Latina, and Vietnamese) know that it was up to each and every one of them to break the cycle by not feeding this myth. For months it appeared that the workshop had had the desired effect, but eventually matters worsened dramatically, with folks either quitting or getting fired as a result.

Unfortunately, in our everyday lives we can't go around getting rid of the people who don't want to work with us or that don't agree with us. The only solution, it seems, for improving this thing we call *race* relations, is to go through the pain of learning that not only have we been fed an awful lie, but we have perpetuated it ourselves, as people of color, taking the easy road of fitting in with *white* folks and living quietly within the *white superiority* mythology, often without even realizing this.

New Orleans prides itself as being like a pot of gumbo, where cultures come together and harmonize to create a dish even more delicious than the individual components thrown together. And perhaps some of this is true, but the reality is that we have such a long way to go, even in New Orleans. Our gumbo right now is more like watery, dark soup without a well-made roux, like those knock-offs you find in restaurants in other cities not named New Orleans.

What I can say about New Orleans, and which I hope is mirrored in other U.S. cities, is that wherever I participated in *race* relations work I found African American people more than willing to get involved, and other people of color ready to set aside what they'd come to believe as truth. New Orleans has certainly shown me its ability to do this, but until we shred this myth of *race* and *white superiority*, there won't be a place in the United States, not even here, where *people* relations will improve, no matter their pigmentation.

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Lucas is a writer pursuing a doctorate in the City, Culture & Community program at Tulane University. He received his MFA from the University of New Orleans [Creative Writing Workshop](#) in fiction and has published a short story collection titled [Passing Unseen](#). His liner notes and narrative for Irvin Mayfield's 2005 Strange Fruit suite received favorable reviews from the *The New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune* and *Jazz Times*. As a grant writer, Lucas has secured millions of dollars for New Orleans area non-profits, including [Puentes New Orleans](#), an organization he co-founded in 2007. He has written engagement policies for the City of New Orleans, and published an article based on this work in the 2015 *Connections*, a Kettering Foundation publication. Recently, he co-authored a drama series concept and pilot episode with Hal Clark, Jr., which he hopes finds a production home in the near future.



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