

What Divides Us Is What Connects Us

by Robin D. G. Kelley

Recently I took my nine-year-old son to see *Red Tails*, a film about the celebrated Tuskegee airmen—the African-American fighter pilots who were eventually permitted to take part in combat operations during the Second World War. While my wife and I are dyed-in-the-wool peaceniks, we made an exception for *Red Tails* because we thought the larger history lessons about U.S. racism and the black contribution to fighting fascism outweighed the film's romantic depiction of war.

We were mistaken. *Red Tails* proved to be just another action picture, devoid of politics and sanitized for our so-called post-racial era. After two hours of dog fights and strafing missions, a mystifying romance, and occasional racial slights and insults (perpetuated by Southerners, of course), we left the theater having learned nothing about what the war was about or why these men initially endured discrimination within the military. There is no mention of fascism, white (Aryan) supremacy, or Nazi death camps—just that the Germans are the enemy and they have jets. Predictably, the Red Tails exceed all expectations, obliterating the color line by earning respect in battle. Indeed, when the film's hero enters a U.S. officer's club only to be refused service, he starts a fight with the offending white soldiers, which just lands him in the brig (not beaten or dead). Later in the film, after the Red Tails successfully protected a squadron of bomber planes, the same white officers warmly invite the Tuskegee airmen into the club, where they joke about race and find common ground as men. Racism disappears. The lesson is clear: the way to end discrimination is not to fight back but to earn white people's respect.

The action enthralled my son, but the story left him with many questions. And it left me concerned about how far we've retreated from an honest discussion about race and racism in the U.S. For the next couple of days, we talked about the war, race, and the Holocaust; the horrors of genocide; how most Western nations, including the U.S., initially ignored fascism, Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, and the plight of the Jews; the power of the Nazi propaganda machine to blame Jews for the world-wide economic crisis; and the reasons why African American men and women saw fighting Nazism as a blow against racism—in Europe and at home. We also talked about what the situation in the U.S.: the continued segregation of the military throughout the war; the indignity of German prisoners-of-war eating in Southern restaurants that refuse to serve black soldiers; how returning black veterans were frequently denied good jobs, barred from voting in the South, and occasionally beaten and killed by racist mobs for challenging segregation or for simply having the audacity to

wear their uniforms. The point of all this is not to bring up old wounds or portray whites as a whole as hopelessly racist. Rather, I want to help my son understand racism's deep-seated, institutional character.

One of the few white parents we knew who had seen the film chastised me for dredging up all of this "negative" history. "Red Tails is terrific," he lectured, "because it *transcends* race. Those men transcend the limits of their own race to become patriots, to become part of their country." When I asked him if he was referring to the white officers, he looked at me like he didn't understand the question. His response did not surprise me. He expressed what has become the prevailing view in our post-racial era: don't speak about what divides us, only focus on what unites us. In the words of President Obama, often held up as a paragon of post-racialism, "when you start focusing so much on the plight of the historically oppressed . . . you lose sight of what we have in common."

In my twenty-five years as a scholar, twenty-one years as a father, and lifetime as an African American, I have found the opposite to be true: when we focus on the plight of the historically oppressed, we see even *better* what we have in common: our histories are bound up together, not just as a nation but also as a world. As James Baldwin once warned white Americans, "If you don't know my name, you don't know your own." In other words, what divides us is what connects us, and our effort to resolve or address those divisions also connects us. We miss this essential truth because our dialogue on race is bankrupt. We reduce race to "difference," "diversity," and "identity" when the real issue is power. We get caught up with why black kids sit together in the school cafeteria rather than asking: why do so few black and brown kids attend elite colleges and universities? Or, why are the poor disproportionately black and brown? Why are they overrepresented in prison? How have communities of color subsidized white privilege? Why do black and brown people have higher rates of unemployment? Why are sweatshop workers mostly Latino and Asian immigrants? Why is it that the median wealth of white families today exceeds \$113,000 whereas the median wealth for black and Latino families amounts to \$5,700 and \$6,300, respectively?

Our children may not know these statistics, or ask these kinds of questions. But they are more aware of the world than we give them credit for, and historical and contemporary racism shape all children's lives in profound ways. Some kids grow up fearing the police, while others come to see cops as sources of safety and protection. Studies have shown that black and Latino male students are being tracked for prison

as early as the fourth grade. Indeed, the Children's Defense Fund's shocking report, *America's Cradle to Prison Pipeline*, found that an African American boy born in 2001 has a 1 in 3 chance, and a Latino boy a 1 in 6 chance, of going to prison. While some may argue that these disparities have more to do with class than race, the fact remains that black and brown people are poorer. Why?

- Because African Americans and Latinos convicted of crimes receive longer prison sentences than whites for the same crime.
- Because since at least 1934, the federal government and lending institutions have consistently lowered the value of homes in black and brown or "mixed race" neighborhoods, irrespective of the quality of the housing stock or median income of the residents. Consequently, the rising value of white-owned homes and the stagnant or declining value of black- and brown-owned homes are largely responsible for the racial wealth disparity.
- Because toxic waste sites and commercial landfills are more often than not located dangerously close to communities of color.
- Because racial discrimination in the job market ensure lower wages and fewer job opportunities for black and brown employees. African Americans, in particular, have been consistently denied employment because of stereotypes that, as a race, they are unreliable, likely to steal, and lack a work ethic. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, these ideas have become "common sense" in America, so much so that Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich can propose employing black children as school janitors in order to instill in them a work ethic!

Privileged kids of color are insulated from most of these circumstances, but they are not entirely immune. They, too, become teenagers and endure racial profiling by the police and retailers. And unless they are at the very top of their class, the threat of tracking looms throughout their school career. But even if one avoids incidents of discrimination, there is always the possibility of internalizing racism, of accepting the dominant explanations for inequality. Whenever my family leaves our relatively affluent, predominantly white Westside neighborhood and drive through sections of South Los Angeles, my son notices the smaller, rundown houses, the black and brown residents, and the increased police presence. Too often, the black men we see in our neighborhood are pushing shopping carts and sleeping on the streets. Unless we can talk openly and honestly about the history and policies that created these inequities, my son might see himself as exceptional. Like white kids who might conclude that certain racial "traits" (not racism) explains these sharp disparities, my own son could potentially blame the poor for their plight, and come to see those "ghetto dwellers" as inherently inferior.

If we are to deepen our conversation on race, we must first acknowledge that *difference alone does not explain racial tensions or hierarchies. Rather, it is the meanings assigned to difference that matter, and those meanings are generated, circulated, taught; they are part of a shifting public discourse we inherit and reproduce.* This is why, for the past two decades I begin my undergraduate courses with a simple injunction: racism is not ignorance, it is knowledge. Students usually respond with blank stares, for they have come to equate knowledge with "truth," and believe that if people only knew more about each other, racism would wither

away. I then spend the next few weeks demonstrating that racial categorization and hierarchy do not derive from natural instincts or human nature, but are products of a distinct political and intellectual history embedded in Western thought, from Aristotle, to the Enlightenment writings of Leonardo di Vinci, Francois Bernier, and Johann Blumenbach, to our very own Constitution. We read the most advanced thinking in the fields of 19th and 20th century racial "science," like the writings of the distinguished anthropologist Daniel G. Brinton who reported in an 1896 issue of *Popular Science Monthly* that "the black, the brown and the red races differ anatomically so much from the white. . . that even with equal cerebral capacity they never could rival its results by equal efforts." I also remind students that the architects of the Holocaust included leading German scientists.

One does not need a PhD to acknowledge the history and persistence of racism and other forms of institutional discrimination (sexism, homophobia, etc.). Nor is the struggle to eliminate racism the exclusive province of people of color. Anti-racism, after all, is not identity politics; it is an ethical position consistent with the values of a diverse, democratic society. It is up to all of us to read, pay attention, and be prepared to talk about these very difficult issues, for the ultimate objective is not to burden our children with stories of racism and oppression, nor to make them afraid, angry, or resentful. The point is to promote a commitment to social justice for all people and to develop a critique of racism that avoids the trap of vilifying whole groups of people or reducing the problem to interpersonal relationships.

I have found that the best way to avoid these traps and nurture an ethos of social justice is to involve our children in movements committed to change. My son and I volunteer with the Los Angeles Community Action Network—an organization, based in Skid Row, comprised of homeless people defending themselves against increased police repression and fighting for the creation of permanent affordable housing downtown. He has made art work and signs for demonstrations, toured Skid Row, spoke with the LA-CAN members. He saw with his own eyes that the Skid Row population was overwhelmingly black, and discovered that the city spent some \$6.5 million per year to police this fifteen-square-block area—nearly a million dollars more than the city's entire budget for homeless services.

When we acknowledge, interrogate, and stand against racism and other forms of injustice, we do not divide our community. We are building community – the Beloved Community for which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., fought and died. At the heart of King's vision of the Beloved Community is *agape*, a love that seeks "to preserve and create community. . . to restore community, to resist injustice, to meet the needs of my brothers [and sisters]." This has been the essence of King's dream—not a color-blind society that ignores discrimination or wishes it away by refusing to acknowledge it, but one in which color is not a badge of inferiority or criminality; where color does not determine the value of one's home, or who is more likely to see jail time versus probation, or who is the likely target to be purged from voting rolls. As long as we ignore racism and embrace the fiction that we now inhabit a post-racial era, King's dream—and our own—will remain elusive.

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