

Misappropriation or Mongrelization?

Why I Choose the Latter

By

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As some of you know, I'm part of a local faith-based group seeking to find common ground on solutions to crime and homelessness in our community. The diverse group includes Buddhists, Catholics, Hindus, Muslims, Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, Russian Orthodox, among other Protestants, and a Unitarian. As diverse as we are, there has been nothing expressed among us but the deepest respect, honest curiosity, and growing friendship as we work together to help address our common concerns. As different as we are, we are all more alike than not because we are all, first and foremost, human beings, and all human beings are so closely related that there's more genetic difference between two chimpanzees living in the same troop than there is between any two human beings living on Earth.

This is a remarkable fact given that all apes, gorillas, chimpanzees, orangutans, and humans included are, as John Gribbin and Jeremy Cherfas say in their book, *The First Chimpanzee*, "so [genetically] similar that it is practically impossible to tell them apart."¹ Imagine that: It's extremely difficult to distinguish human DNA from Chimpanzee DNA and yet the genetic lineage between human beings is so narrow that a person born in China is more closely related to a person born in Sweden, or a person born in Mexico to a person born in England, than are any two chimpanzees living in a troop of only 25 to 80 individuals that are never more than a few miles apart in the same forest.

Yet, somehow, our species has always concocted reasons to believe we are so different from each other that we should remain segregated, if not at war with each other. One of those in the Faith-Based group I mentioned, who is a generation older than me, recently told us that she was seventeen years old before she ever drank from a water fountain or used a public restroom that wasn't for whites only. She simply wasn't allowed. Mixing, she was taught, was fundamentally wrong. Once, while on an out-of-town trip with her family, they entered a restaurant that did allow black patrons, which they learned only after they had ordered. But as long as there were blacks present, her father wouldn't allow let her to eat and, "So," she said, "I didn't eat." Fortunately, she grew up to learn the terrible fault in such thinking.

In addition to segregated public facilities, in the U.S. we lived in segregated communities with segregated schools, workspaces, restaurants, nightclubs, stores, medical facilities, and even churches. Many states had anti-miscegenation laws forbidding mixed marriages based on race. These laws were not declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court until 1967. And the Mixed Marriage Prohibition Act was among the first laws enacted in South Africa when Apartheid was established in 1949. Whether there were specific laws against it or not, however, many countries and societies frowned upon mixed marriages and discriminated

against outsiders, and some still do. These divisions have often been based on race and nationality, but also upon gender, class, sexuality, status, wealth, education, religion, politics, ideology, bloodlines, or simply which part of town one lives in. When I was a kid, living in a poor but what was also among the first integrated neighborhoods, not long after the Civil Rights ACT was passed, my nose was once bloodied by a Chicano kid who sucker punched me while simply passing me on the street. "Slimy ass white boy," he said, as he continued walking. Back then I could have as easily been jumped just for attending the wrong elementary school. Our society was segregated in so many ways in those days that it was best to stay close to home and to play in one's own neighborhood, which usually meant the confines of one's own block. I was two blocks away, on my way to the nearby 7-eleven when the bloody nose incident occurred. Just walking to the convenient store was risky business, as I learned on many occasions.

This kind of social puritanism, in which people don't mix or aren't allowed to mix for a variety of arbitrary and insignificant reasons, is so ubiquitous among human societies, and has been throughout time, no matter what color our skin, that it, sadly, is one of the qualities that proves we are all a lot more alike than we'd like to admit. "My only love sprung from my only hate! Too early seen unknown, and known too late! Prodigious birth of love it is to me, That I must love a loathed enemy." These words, from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, about the forbidden love of sworn enemies, are nearly 500 years old, and express well just how persistent our ancient segregationist instinct is.

Segregation, as we know, leads to cruel and unjust societies that too often undergo periods of violence and unrest. The solution to such cruelty, injustice, and unrest is its opposite, integration—mixing, stirring the melting pot. Growing up in one of America's first integrated communities, in which its black and white children, along with Hispanic, Chicano, Filipino, Samoan, Asian, and many others lived in the same neighborhoods and went to the same schools, I learn firsthand how well integration works. In the late Sixties and early Seventies, when I was still in elementary school, and when this new experiment had just begun, it was rough. We didn't all get along well, largely because we had been taught the fears and prejudices of our parents and the larger society. We were taught not to like each other. In many families, it was forbidden, and not only in white families. But by the time we'd reached high school, we realized, like most teenagers, that our parents were idiots and we became the best of friends. Later, in just a few short years, we all grew up to help elect the nation's first black President.

Integrated societies enable us to recognize our common humanity, which is the ethic Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. based his approach to racial justice and equality upon. "I have a dream that one day little black boys and girls will be holding hands with little white boys and girls." He never dreamt that more than fifty years after losing his life for this cause, many of the most socially minded organizations would instead be claiming that our individual identities makes us so different from one another that it is not safe for us to be with those who are

different and that we need different rooms set aside at our common assemblies and conventions where people of color can go to escape the suffering they have endured by merely being in the presence of white people, and that every identity group—racial, gender, sexual orientation—must caucus separately from everyone else, as now happens during many of our own religion’s national gatherings and meetings. He couldn’t have imagined that we would now call it racist for a white person to have been inspired enough to sing a black person’s song. It’s called misappropriation, sometimes cultural appropriation, an ill-defined ethic that is humanly impossible to adhere to because we cannot help but be influenced and inspired by each other, precisely because we are far more alike than we are different. All culture is human culture because we learn it from each other.

We exchange everything; ideas, language, music, art, literature, values, prejudices, even viruses, just as easily as it is for us to share and exchange genetic information and have offspring together no matter what color we are or what country we’re from. To claim that this is wrong not only puts an impossible burden on us, but it is as cruel and damaging and racist and divisive as those anti-miscegenation laws that once forbade mixed marriages and considered their children, like Trevor Noah, to have been born a crime. Despite the moral lessons we should have learned by now, whether from the fictional marriage of Romeo and Juliet, which ends in tragedy because it will never be accepted by others, or the real-life mixed marriage between Mildred Jetter and Richard Loving, who were charged with violating Virginia’s anti-miscegenation statute after they married in 1958, the case that led to the Supreme Court’s decision to rule such laws unconstitutional, a new kind of segregationism has reared its head in our society. Guised now as misappropriation, this neo-segregationism is being promulgated by the extreme Left, not, as in the past, by those on the far Right.

It is the idea that people of one identity group, mainly white people, should not be permitted to mimic the creativity of those from other identities, particular of those who have been historically marginalized. Shortly after the release of the my controversial book, *The Gadfly Papers*, in 2019, for example, I received an email from a Unitarian in Maryland who told me the disturbing story of a popular and accomplished white musician who often composed jazz pieces inspired by African American music. He was an active member of the Unitarian Universalist Musicians Network (UUMN) and was often invited to perform in UU congregations throughout the region. But in 2016, a black music director, according to the email, publicly “denounced [the performer] for cultural appropriation and denounced the UUMN for allowing his work to be sung at [its] conference.” The music director further characterized any “white composers who use jazz, gospel and other non-white idioms as ‘thieves’ who are ‘copying’ black culture and denying economic opportunities to black composers.” I can understand such sentiments toward someone like Elvis Presley who actually sang songs belonging to black performers, but not for performing one’s own original compositions only inspired by them. For we cannot help being inspired by the creativity and

beauty of others any more than we can help catch their viruses if we get too close, or to potentially share offspring if we get even closer.

Another, even more troubling if not ludicrous, example, involves the forced closure of Kook's Burritos, a food cart in Portland that had to shut down in 2017 because its white owners sparked demonstrations by protesters claiming they had "appropriated" the "intellectual property" of another culture by stealing recipes after they'd gone to Mexico to find. Criticism and protests mounted after one of the owners wrote, "I picked the brains of every tortilla lady there in the worst broken Spanish ever, and they showed me a little of what they did."²

Most of the cuisine we eat in North America is inspired by other cultures, and I dare say our diet would be rather bland and unappealing if this weren't the case. Whether we go to an ethnic restaurant or buy the ingredients and make it ourselves, our diet has been inspired by Mexican, Chinese, Indian, Ethiopian, Japanese, Italian, Irish, and a plethora of other ethnicities. This cannot be helped, because human culture spreads as sure as plants and animals and diseases do. As soon as we come together we learn each other's ideas and ways, which merge with our own and can change how all of us do things.

In the introduction to her new cookbook, *Masala: Recipes from India, the Land of Spices*, Anita Jaishinghani, who was born in India and owns a successful restaurant in Houston, Texas, explains that she cannot make authentic Indian food because authenticity is a myth. She says, "Almost all cuisines, in some way have an element of fusion, whether it is a result of multiple influences of foreign invasions like in India, human migrations across continents for survival, primitive tribes exchanging valuable techniques, or specialties like spices and other exotics traveling in ships around the globe to faraway lands."³ What she means, in short, is even Indian food isn't really Indian food. "Asking me to cook Indian food in America without using local ingredients," she says, "is like asking me to live here but not breathe the air."⁴

As the risk of being accused of misappropriating the ideas of Dr. King, who should be an inspiration to us all, no matter our color, he too understood that segregation is delusional thinking and that in reality "we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." During his 1965 speech at Oberlin college, King asked, "Did you ever stop to think that you can't leave for your job in the morning without being dependent on most the world?"

You get up in the morning and go to the bathroom and reach over for the sponge, and that's handed to you by a Pacific islander. You reach for a bar of soap, and that's given to you at the hands of a Frenchman. And then you go into the kitchen to drink your coffee for the morning, and that's poured into your cup by a South American. And maybe you want tea: that's poured into your cup by a Chinese. Or maybe you're desirous of having cocoa for breakfast, and that's poured into your cup by a West African. And then you reach over for your toast, and that's given to you at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. And before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you've depended on more than half of the world.

This is the way our universe is structured; this is its interrelated quality. We aren't going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.⁵

King's words remind me of sociologist Amitai Etzioni's book, *The Monochrome Society*, printed by Princeton University Press in 2001. "I show herein that the vast majority of all Americans, whatever their background or race, basically hail the same virtues and have the same dreams and aspirations. Moreover, far from growing apart, we are coming together through intermarriage and other processes ... The record shows that, in American society, diversity continues to be the well contained by Unity,"⁶ meaning, once again, that we are all far more alike than we are different, and we don't need anyone segregating us to protect us from each other.

This is the reason contemporary luminaries, like philosopher Philip E. Devine insists that "dealing with human diversity requires a shared conception of our common humanity and that the more aware we are of the pervasiveness of diversity, the more important such a conception of human nature will be."⁷ It's important to grasp what he's saying here, that he's not saying we shouldn't sometimes emphasize individual identity, only that when doing so we must also lift up our common humanity, something the extreme Left rejects almost entirely. "The resolution of cultural conflicts," Devine says, "requires more than anything else a recognition of the shared humanity of everyone involved."⁸ These sentiments are echoed by political scientist Francis Fukuyama, who says in his book on *Identity*, "The rise of identity politics in modern liberal democracies is one of the chief threats they face, and unless we can work our way back to more universal understandings of human dignity, we will doom ourselves to continuing conflict."⁹

And this is the problem with the neo-segregationism heralded by today's illiberal Left, including many in the Unitarian Universalist Association—it does not work. On the contrary, it only serves to further divide the human family and runs contrary to the work of Dr. King and all that social justice movements have worked to promote and accomplish for the centuries, that equality and inclusion increases the more we recognize how similar we are and that it's okay to be inspired by each, to commune with each other, to live with each other, to love each other, and to become one family.

In 1989, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, issued a Fatwa with a death decree against novelist Salman Rushdie for publishing his novel, *The Satanic Verses*. A brutal attempt was made just last year to carry out the order, from which Rushdie is still recovering. Not that his critics actually read his book before wanting him dead (I know the feeling), but in another of his works, Rushdie succinctly explains the heart of what it is about:

Those who oppose the novel most vociferously today are of the opinion that intermingling with a different culture will inevitably weaken and ruin their own. I am of the opposite opinion. The *Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation

that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. The Satanic Verses is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves. Throughout human history, the apostles of purity, those who have claimed to possess a total explanation, have wrought havoc among mere mixed-up human beings.¹⁰

I agree that people ought to have a right to protect and be compensated for their creative works and intellectual property, and we have copyright and trademark laws to make this happen. But this new unwritten rule, enforced by social media mobs, that we cannot be inspired or influenced by those around us who are just a little different than us is as impossible an expectation as it is inhuman, immoral, and divisive. The solution cannot be for us to march in the streets until we shut down a tiny burrito-shack just so afterward we can feel like we made a real difference while, perhaps, eating the Chinese food we picked up on our way home. The solution cannot be to blacklist and prohibit a talented musician from playing in our churches or anywhere else because he happens to be a white Jazz player. The solution to the conflicts in our societies today is not to become even more divided than we already are. It is not to return to a no-mixing, segregated society. The solution, as we have always known, is to come together, able to celebrate and support our differences by first grasping how fundamentally alike we are. As Rushdie says, “Like many millions of people, I am a bastard child of history. Perhaps we all are, black and brown and white, leaking into one another, as a character of mine once said, like flavours when you cook.”¹¹

¹ Gribbin, John, and Chervas, Jeremy, *The First Chimpanzee*, Barnes & Noble, New York, NY, 2001 (2003)., p. 5.

² <https://pdx.eater.com/2017/5/22/15677760/portland-kooks-burrito-cultural-appropriation>

³ Jaisinghani, Anita, *Masala: Recipes from India, the Land of Spices*, Ten Speed Press, California/New York, 2023, p. 11.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Dr. King first delivered this sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where he served as co-pastor. On Christmas Eve, 1967, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation aired this sermon as part of the seventh annual Massey Lectures.

⁶ Etzioni, Amitai, *The Monochrome Society*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, p. xv.

⁷ Devine, Philip E., *Human Diversity and the Culture Wars*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT, 1996, p. 153.

⁸ Ibid., p. 120.

⁹ Fukuyama, Francis, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, NY, 2018p. xvi.

¹⁰ Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (p. 394). Odyssey Editions. Kindle Edition.

¹¹ Ibid.