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OPINION

To my African-American Brothers and Sisters

A love letter, I've long owed you

BY **RONAULT LS CATALINI (POLO)**

Salaam saudara saudara hitam manis (Peace, dear black sisters and brothers). This is the love letter I've long owed you. Long owed, because we're living next to each other, sweating a workplace together, determinedly dreaming a kinder America for our children – but no one's properly introduced us. Not the way our grandmas, yours and mine, always said good people do.

I am a New American. And I'm pleased to meet you. Thank you African America, for having us in your neighborhood.

Scholars call us “international migrants.” Evening news is full of our families' desperation. Diplomats and lawyers argue endlessly over whether we're refugees, or not. Politicians abbreviate our sorrow, and devalue our ambition, by calling us “immigrants” – an unmentionable word, until someone else brings it or us up first. Usually not in a nice way.

This love letter is so late in arriving, because we arrive in your

neighborhood shaken, badly. Social scientists say we suffer from profound dislocation, or traumatic discontinuities. Or both. Leaving cozy homes and ancestral homelands, hurts. Killed or disappeared loved ones, hurts even more. We know, dear neighbors, that this your history too.

And then trying to get inside America's accelerated mainstream, hurts. We are humbled by your pain, by your elders' and your ancestors' pain. From Jamestown to Memphis to Ferguson. 400 years of pain.

Early mornings, our working parents dash to catch their two-hour bus rides, while our elders rush to dress well their bright grandbabies, an expression of respect for their beloved teachers. We haste because we know our immigrant optimism will run out. Six to ten years we have, to integrate into America's mainstream. Then we disintegrate culturally. First individually then communally. Then we're done.

Many of us bright and bold enough to flee our failed states don't do so well in super-accel-

erated urban America. I mean no disrespect to that kind and creative America loved by everyone, everywhere. Our elders still weep about the respect Yank soldier-boys gave our wives, sisters, and daughters – after freeing us from Imperial Japan's occupation army. Everyone still smiles about the thick Hershey bars they gave our kids.

But because this is a love letter just between brown and black folks, asking to lay an honest foundation for our nascent relationship – let me tell you: Up close, many American institutions feel really heartless to us. Really loveless. To be clear, I'm talking about this nation's educational, financial, social, and law enforcement, machinery – not about our tired neighbors, not our over-worked bus drivers or school teachers.

This heartless machinery is bad, dear Black America, because in the absence of a deliberate relationship built on our agreements and differences, on our shared joys and sorrows, you and me will

daily acquiesce to institutionally-conditioned narratives about each other. Clichés incapable of carrying your or our cultural complexity, our simple sincerity.

These institutions are tough. After 150 years – after Presidents Lincoln and Johnson and Obama trying – the United States has still not integrated its black and white streams into a shared mainstream. Not even here, on the rich intersection of Rivers Willamette and Columbia. Here, so near our Pacific's grand clockwise sweep of energetic commerce, ambitious peoples, and new ideas.

You and me asking these staid institutions to do a better job of integrating our black and brown ethnic streams, is only asking for more heartbreak.

The neighborhood and work floor relationships necessary for you and me to circumvent these systems don't exist, yet. Not here. In fact, the opposite is true. New Americans quickly back away from black and white America's living history. From a bitterness so rutted into this otherwise blessed continent's face, that not a lot of Arabs or Asians, Pacific or Caribbean islanders, Spanish-

or Russian-speakers, dare get near its edge. Cuts dark as Martian canals. Scars clearly visible from space.

I wish, saudara saudara hitam manis (dear black brothers and sisters) that our love affair were less rushed. But there's a tectonic demographic shift rocking our shared continent. And given New America's numbers and our ambitions, we fear those staid systems will simply squander even more treasury and more misery to contain our school kids, our workers, our voters, our prayers.

We best start now, blending dreamers brought from our world-over, with African America's solid moral authority. We will ask your enslaved ancestors to bless us with their dignity. We will ask your civil rights elders to include us in their Sunday mornings. We dream this might liberate all that American kindness and creativity sequestered somewhere deep inside this grand continent.

Please let us know your thoughts. Please let us get to work.

Love, your new neighbor
Ronault LS Catalini (Polo) is a longtime Portland activist and community lawyer.



Shoulder to Shoulder on Racial Justice and Worker Rights

Our victories won and yet to be won

BY **ISAIAH J. POOLE**

Rick Smith hosts a daily radio talk show based in Carlisle, Penn., which bills itself as the place “where working people come to talk.”

Smith makes it his business to know the pulse of the labor movement.

But he admits to one area where his knowledge was uncomfortably thin: the ties between the labor and civil rights movements.

“My knowledge of the civil rights era was extremely limited,” he said in a recent interview. “Basically Lincoln freed the slaves, Rosa Parks was tired, and Martin Luther King made it all better.”

With both income inequality and racial inequities taking center stage in the political debate this year, Smith decided to use this summer to take his show on the road to learn about the historic intersections of the civil rights and worker rights struggles.

His “People's Tour” took him through key battlegrounds in the



South where civil rights and labor leaders stood shoulder to shoulder — through North and South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana.

In time for Labor Day, he posted the interviews online at TheRickSmithShow.com. Together they offer a rich audio library of victories won and yet to be won.

“We learned about James Orange, Fred Shuttlesworth, James Bevel, Ralph Abernathy, and many other” key black leaders from the 1960s, Smith said. “But also the support of Walter Reuther and James R. Hoffa,” white union leaders who played a key role in linking their movements to civil rights.

One leg of Smith's tour took him to the Rosa Parks Museum at Troy University in Montgomery, Ala.

“The story of Rosa Parks is a perfect example of the labor and civil rights movements working together,” Smith explains, recalling Parks' training in worker organizing at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. “The

training she received led to her being the face of desegregating the bus system in Montgomery.”

Smith says a high point of the tour was his time talking with the workers from the 1969 Medical College Hospital strike in Charleston, S.C. That strike began when a group of African-American nurses staged a sit-in at the office of the hospital's president and were subsequently fired.

King's widow, Coretta Scott King, participated in the strike, drawing national attention. The action furthered the work King himself was doing with Memphis sanitation laborers and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees when he was assassinated in 1968.

“Hearing their stories reinforced my belief that it is really all about community,” Smith said. “That strike had a little bit of everything. The prior two years of organizing by workers after six workers were unjustly fired, the coming together of the community after the strike began.”

The history of the labor movement is also filled with numerous points of tension with the movement for racial justice, ranging

from the battles against racial discrimination in the steel industry after World War II to today's face-offs between police unions and Black Lives Matter activists over shootings of unarmed black people.

Smith, who says he grew up in the projects in Cleveland, doesn't dismiss those tensions. But he's hoping workers across racial lines will focus on the stories of successful collaborations that led to societal change.

“In every city we visited, and with every story we heard, the call for equality, justice, fairness, dignity, and respect did not have a white face or a black face or a brown face,” he said. “It was the face of working people trying to live the American promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

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