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The Year of Living Postracially

By COLSON WHITEHEAD

ONE year ago today, we officially became a postracial society. Fifty-three percent of the voters opted for the candidate who would be the first president of African descent, and in doing so eradicated racism forever.

How do I know? I have observed that journalists employ Google searches to lend credence to trend articles, so I compared recent hits on the word “postracial” with those of a previous year. There have been more than 500,000 online mentions of postraciality this year, as opposed to absolutely zero in 1982. Some say that’s because the Internet didn’t really exist back then. I prefer to think it’s because we’ve come a long way as a country.

There are naysayers, however, who believe that we can’t erase centuries of entrenched prejudice, cultivated hatred and institutionalized dehumanization overnight. Maybe we haven’t come as far as we think. That’s why I’d like to throw my hat in the ring for the position of secretary of postracial affairs. (I like postracial czar, but czars have been getting a bad rap lately.)

Call me presumptuous, but I’ve already bought three-by-five cards and jotted down notes. To wit: Sociologists say that racism is a construct, which means that our predicament is what we in the business world call a “branding problem.” Time and time again, attempts to reduce a wildly diverse community to an ineffectual blanket term have yielded diminishing results. “Colored” lasted 82.3 years, “Negro” less than half that. “African-American” was challenged by “People of color” after an even shorter reign. May I suggest “People Whose Bodies Just Happen to Produce More Melanin, and That’s O.K.,” or PWBJHTPMMATOK? It’s factually accurate, non-threatening and quite pithy. The N.A.A.C.P. says it’s on board if we pitch in for changing the letterhead.

Pop culture is the arena for our hopes, our fears and our most cherished dreams. It is our greatest export to the world. That’s why as your secretary of postracial affairs I’ll concentrate on the entertainment industry.

Some changes will be minor. In television, “Diff’rent Strokes” and “What’s Happening!!” will now be known as “Different Strokes” and “What Is Happening?” Other changes will be more drastic. “Sanford and Son” trafficked in demeaning stereotypes. In these more enlightened times, everyone knows that one person’s “junk” is another’s compulsive eBay purchase. A more postracially robust version features Sanford père as the genius behind a community-based auction site, with his son, Lamont, the reluctant Webmaster. Think of the opportunities for fleet-footed banter and sophisticated, pun-based aperçus. Like “Frasier,” but postracial.

Sitcoms about impoverished PWBJHTPMMATOKs adopted by rich white people will have to be a thing of

the past. It makes one uneasy, this retrograde idea that societal ills can be alleviated by the paternalistic Caucasian embrace. Less inflammatory, cute and therefore worthy orphans will come from a different sector, like those suffering from restless leg syndrome, a neurological disorder that affects an estimated 12 million people nationwide. Those living with restless leg syndrome often refuse treatment due to fears of social stigma, and I think a show like the one described above could raise awareness.

And literature? Take “Beloved,” the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Toni Morrison. Angry and hostile PWBJHTPMMATOKs have no place in this new world, whether corporeal or ectoplasmic. Can we dial it down to “slightly miffed” or “had a bad morning” PWBJHTPMMATOKs? Let us improve Ms. Morrison’s timeless classic. We keep the name — it’s so totally, invitingly post-racial — but make the eponymous ghost more Casper-like. Without making her Casper-looking. That would totally change the aesthetic intent of the book.

Film is similarly problematic. A re-imagined “Do the Right Thing” should reflect Brooklyn’s changing demographics, with a group of multicultural Brooklyn writers — subletting realists, couch-surfing postmodernists, landlords whose métier is haiku — getting together on a mildly hot summer afternoon, not too humid, to host a block party, the proceeds of which go to a charity for restless leg syndrome, an affliction that mildly inconveniences more people than you think.

In her seminal essay “Pimpin’ as Metaphor,” Susan Sontag wrote that “Given our nostalgia-mad society, a Blaxploitation revival is inevitable.” But one wonders, how do you stick it to The Man when The Man Is A Bro? We also need to up the ante of these neo-blaxploitation films by giving the protagonists additional obstacles to overcome, and let me tell you, restless leg syndrome is quite the obstacle, what with the anguished tossing and turning, tortuous shooting pains, and vain cries for sweet, merciful release from an unfeeling or absent God.

My plans aren’t mere abstract theorizing. As the secretary of postracial affairs, I want to get out there and engage the people, organize town halls, get up in people’s homes and faces. Eat their food. There’s a variation on an old parlor game that I use to ease people in. You write down on a card what race you were pre-postraciality, and stick it on your forehead so the other players can see. Then, prompted by their clues, you try to figure out what color you were before everything changed. It’s a real icebreaker.

I can’t do it alone. We each have to do our part. I’m just a sad, lonely man trying to piggyback on this whole postracial thing to educate folks about my restless leg syndrome.

Colson Whitehead is the author, most recently, of the novel “Sag Harbor.”

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