LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

Century High School
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Are we losing our humanity?

Interview with Dr. Neal A. Lester
Dr. Neal A. Lester in his office at Arizona State University which is filled with memorabilia. He sits next to a doll fashioned in his image. “That doll was custom made by a local artist, Rebecca Ragan Akins. This was a gift from the AZ Humanities for my service as Board member and Board chair,” said Dr. Lester. Photo | Abwatukee Foothills News

Feature • Bridger Sorenson

Dr. Neal A. Lester, professor of English at Arizona State University and Director of Project Humanities, has spent over three decades writing, lecturing, and teaching extensively in the field of African Studies. He was the first African American professor to be tenured at the University of Alabama, as well to receive his doctorate in English from Vanderbilt University.

As Director of Project Humanities, Dr. Lester spends countless hours working to promote a more open minded and forward thinking community through workshops and events.

These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

Racism is a sensitive subject, especially in North Dakota because of a lack of diversity in a predominantly white community. Why are conversations about racism so difficult?

Well, what does that mean? You reference there’s not much diversity in North Dakota. You said you don’t really hear about racism. Why is it that you don’t hear about it or witness it?

My questions are why aren’t white people talking about their whiteness, and why are white people somehow imagining that you can be in the world
but not pay attention to what’s happening in the world?

The world doesn’t leave you in a bubble. You have news, you have stories that happen. You pay attention to what’s happening in other parts of the world.

To me, this needs to be a self-reflection—not on what Black people are going through—but what are white people experiencing that you feel that you don’t have any connection to race and or racism? What are people saying about what’s happening in the world, and why is it that racism happens to other people and not to white people who are the perpetrators of racism? Who are the creators of racism?

Racism is not just about race, though. Racism, as we are talking about it now, is really about these other systems that also play out when we talk about racism—like sexism, homophobia, classism, the economic race gap—which is huge, which involves education. There many ways in which racism is fundamentally unfair.

What this question shows me is that there is a certain kind of privilege that white people have which makes them feel they do not have to talk or think about race. That, to me, is the hardest question to ask: why are white people not talking about race?

Because white people don’t think they will have to talk about race.

Toni Morrison said that reality shows you’ve been affected by racism—when you think that it doesn’t affect you.

White people oftentimes don’t want to talk about race because they haven’t been expected to talk about race. They have been expected to talk about Black, Indigenous, People of Color, but not about white people. But if we get at the roots of what racism really is, racism has to be about whiteness because whiteness is a social construct, not individual white people.

James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, and others have talked about these manifestations of what we now know as “white fragility”. So why don’t people want to talk about whiteness? It means that there’s something you have to do to self-reflect if you haven’t been doing racial justice work. How have you been complicit in perpetuating racism? People can always question. If you haven’t, why haven’t you been questioning?

It’s the same argument that Justice Ginsburg gave us when she was arguing before the Supreme Court for women’s equality by saying that sexism affects men and boys negatively. So that’s the same argument with racism. Racism
affects white people because white people think they don’t have to talk about or think about it. It’s actually delusional. Because, if you’re only surrounded by white people, that means that you never have to question or be held accountable to your own whiteness.

One of the things that boggles my mind is this notion that so many white people have come out saying, “I don’t know what it’s like to be Black.”

Black people don’t all live monolithic lives. Just because I’m Black doesn’t mean that the other Black person and I have the same experiences. So rather than talking about whether or not you don’t know what it’s like to be Black, what you have to do is ask, what does it mean to be a humane individual, to be somebody who cares about people?

I would hope that someone wouldn’t have to see that eight minutes and 46 seconds in the killing of George Floyd to say, “That could never be my child.” But rather, they would see a person...
whose life was taken, not by natural causes, but by human lack of compassion, kindness, empathy, respect, all of those things.

**How might students and teachers navigate discussions about racism?**

I’m reluctant about giving people advice. I want teachers to reflect on their own relationship with race and their own relationship with the race of their students. The problem with giving advice is that sometimes the advice doesn’t work.

I would ask these questions. Are you paying attention to what’s happening in the world? Are you asking critical questions about what you’re seeing? If you’re paying attention, you have to open your eyes and care enough to see.

White people seem to want Black and Indigenous people to tell them what to do, and that’s extremely exhausting for the people who are experiencing racism. I’ve also used the metaphor: if you see someone drowning, do you have to wait to be told what to do? Assume that white, Black, and brown people are drowning in whiteness. This metaphor reveals that it is less about giving somebody advice than giving yourself the responsibility to do something.

You have taught a class solely about the n-word. Why did you start the class and what have you learned about this racial slur?

In 2008, I was surprised when I saw the then Senator Obama being referenced with the n-word. That’s what prompted me to research this deeper and I thought I would teach a course because I really wanted to see if there was any credible explanation for why that word was being used to identify him and why there was a sense that too many Black people believe that you could sort of take that word back and take the power from it to use it as a term of endearment.

That’s when my real kind of digging deeper came. I started seeing minstrel songs with the n-word, and then I just started seeing it everywhere. It was in the children’s books, it was in the minstrel songs, and it was teaching kids how to count and teaching kids their ABC’s.

The word was everywhere.

And that’s when it was clear to me that there had been a lot of miseducation about the word. I have taught African American literature and slave narratives and I saw the ways in which this word was a way of shackling those who were enslaved—not just physically but also mentally. The n-word embodies all that negativity.
Is something that still persists even today with the casual use of it, whether it’s in hip hop or conversations between friends—who are Black or not.

We need to put the n-word in the context of class, language, and time period and understand words can disparage, dehumanize, and otherwise disenfranchise. There is nothing about that word its power and significance that has changed from the 1500s when it was first used to refer to Africans first encounters with Spaniards and Portuguese.

The minstrel songs were even used by Disney. That’s the one that sort of stuns audiences. When I present Disney tunes like “Jimmy Crack Corn” or “Polly Wolly Doodle”—even the ice cream truck song.

I’m saying this is a constant state of discovery.

Why do people cling to phrases like “I don’t see color” or “I’m color-blind” when issues of race come up in conversations?

Well, first of all, the statements are logically impossible unless they’re physiologically colorblind. The question is why do we have to equate “difference” with being “neutral”?

The reality is that you’re not colorblind. Why is colorblind some ideal that we’re supposed to be aspiring toward? Why is it so bad that we have to somehow pretend that difference doesn’t exist?

People need to be more critically aware and not just think through the lens of their own experiences. That’s what privilege is.

You can’t just say, “I’m anti-racist because I’m color blind.” That’s not an action. That is inaction. When you disrupt the status quo and you are actively engaged in making change, you take an action; your awareness of the state of the world is not an action.

**What do people need to enact change?**

I think it has to be about empathy. And I think it has to be about acknowledging with compassion and kindness other people’s lives because it’s too easy for us to imagine that the world revolves around us.

We have got to have the capacity to care about other people. You’ve got to have the capacity to care about—and not just care about it—but do something about. I can’t see your heart or your intentions. What I can see are your actions.

**What is Project Humanities?**

*Project Humanities* is a university initiative that brings individuals and communities together to talk, listen, and connect. We think that by doing this in a public humanities way, then we demystify this notion that humanity is solely an academic topic by people who go to a University.
The reality is that public funding is always threatened when you’re in humanities and the arts because people see humanities and the arts as extras. We see these as dessert. Reading a book, having a conversation about a film, art we see that those are not as essential as business, technology, and whatever else we think is essential and that you don’t have to explain or justify.

*Project Humanities* was an opportunity to use a model of public humanities—a project that didn’t start with disciplines like history and philosophy and English and language—but rather with how we can start trying to look at the ways in which we are all connected to other folks.

Nobody exists on an island. What is the quality and nature of those human ties that we then talk about?

We do all kinds of activities from workshops, hackathons, movie screenings, and the idea, again, is how to get people to talking and listening. With conversations with active listening, there’s the potential to connect and to change and to take action. These questions about racial justice have all been fundamental to our conversations.

*Project Humanities* was an extension of what I’ve always done in the classroom, as a faculty of color, but also as a faculty of color at a predominantly white institution.

I’ve taught African American literature. I teach culture, and I’ve taught on the
race and gender politics of hair. I also do community workshops on privilege and bias and on cultural appropriation.

This, for me, all connects to signature events that we have. One is a homeless outreach. Because we don’t just want to talk about humanity as a kind of intellectual, academic space. We also want to do what we can to be able to practice what we are teaching and preaching.

So every other Saturday—pre-COVID—we supported 150 to 200 adults experiencing homelessness in downtown Phoenix. We brought together anywhere from 20 to 70 community volunteers to be personal shoppers for those individuals, and we were there for two hours. Because of the pandemic, we’ve had to modify our efforts of going down to protect ourselves as volunteers and also our clients.

This is a foundation, and it’s about compassion, empathy, forgiveness, integrity, kindness, respect, and self-reflection. And these are not faith based—rather faith in humans. So all of our programs—whether it’s about minstrel equity, white supremacy, capitalism, racism, co-parenting—all of these are the foundation of humanity.

How are we better people? How are we better communities? How are we better societies? How can we be a better world?

Always at the forefront is this question, “Are we losing our humanity?”