

A New Narrative Around Race

EDITOR'S NOTE: Autumn Brown is with the Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance (AORTA), a worker-owned cooperative of facilitators and consultants that helps organizations doing social justice work be more effective. Brown, who lives in rural central Minnesota, has recently facilitated workshops with Land Stewardship Project staff and members around the issue of racial justice (*see page 16*). During these trainings, Brown leads participants through discussions centered around this country's racial history and the long-term, systemic impacts of myths related to race, poverty and wealth. Brown recently talked to the *Land Stewardship Letter* about some of these issues. Below are excerpts of that interview. Episode 188 of LSP's *Ear the Ground* podcast features more of this conversation: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/933.

The Timeline of Race in America

"During workshops I present a timeline as a way to see the history of race in this country through the lens of white identity. The timeline continues to evolve as I learn more about the background to this issue. For me as a mixed-race person—I have both white ancestry and African-American ancestry—it's been an important part of my own development to understand what it means to be holding these multiple lineages.

"And one of the things that I found really interesting in my research was that white, as an actual legal identity, doesn't even appear in a legal document for the first time until like 1691. And the first time we see it appear, it's very explicitly in relation to who can own land within the colony of Virginia. And so from the late 1600s on through the 1700s and into the 1800s, we see this evolutionary process whereby the colonial governments and eventually the state governments are really trying to develop a system that when it comes to the right to own land, the right to vote, the right to access educational opportunities, the right to marry—those rights are afforded to some, and not others.

"And that process is what creates racialization in this country. So it's not like everyone showed up here having a race. This was a process."

Bootstrap Boondoggle

"There was this really interesting research that showed that it takes between 10 to 15 generations for a family to move from wealth to poverty, or from poverty to wealth, without any direct intervention. And that translates to about 300 to 450 years. When you think about how recently people were enslaved in this country, as recently as the 1860s, then you wouldn't expect people to



Autumn Brown

actually be accumulating wealth without direct intervention until the 22nd, 23rd Century.

"So then you look at this sort of American mythology that we have that if we just work really hard, if we truly make an effort and get ourselves educated, then we can change the trajectory of our family's history. During one generation a family, if a lot of things fall into place—a lot of those things being luck and tokenization—*may* be able to gain a certain amount of financial stability. And *maybe* if they're able to buy a home, or buy land, then that will give them the opportunity to pass that on to their children, and that's where that wealth accumulation begins. But that's the exception.

"The myth that we can work really hard and change the trajectory of our lives and the lives of our progeny without direct intervention I think is especially dangerous.

That myth is really used as a weapon against communities of color. Such a myth makes it really hard to see the reality of how hard it still is to actually accumulate wealth."

The Power of Narratives

"It's really, really hard to connect the dots when you have really powerful, cultural narratives that are telling a different story about race and immigration. And so one of the things we look at in workshops with LSP is, 'What are some of the cultural narratives that reinforce this picture that's not a true picture, and intentionally obscure what's happening?' When I've done organizing work out here in central Minnesota, one of the things that's been hardest to fight is the story people have of why communities of immigrants come here, about what they're contributing or not contributing, about what it means to be an American, what an American looks like."

What we have to do is figure out how to

tell a different story, and tell a really powerful story. A story that's uplifting and shows all that we have to gain from cooperating with each other. And those stories are there, those stories of victories, of wins, they're there. And they have to be intentionally uplifted.

"So that's what we started to see as more and more of these beautiful national campaigns recently took off. Like the campaign to fight the Dakota Access Pipeline—obviously it's a very local campaign, but it's also a national campaign and the narrative is so powerful, the narrative that, 'Water is life and we're protecting the water.' That is a powerful narrative that everyone can understand, right? It's not like, 'We're fighting these evil people.' It's rather, 'We're protecting the water, the water's our ancestor too, right?'"

Diversity is Strength

"There's really something there of thinking about human ecology as connected to the ecology of the land. I think that could be a useful story for people who are doing farm and land and agricultural work.

"And too I think in relation to the 'Water is Life' narrative, I think in rural Minnesota there's just so many communities of faith here that are deeply rooted in a sense of the sacred. And I think narratives that are uplifting the sacredness of life, and including land in that, those are very powerful. And I think they have traction here because people are really grounded in a sense of the sacred, in a sense of what it is that we're here for, and what it is that we're here to protect."

Building Local Wealth

"I do believe there is a way to build the financial health of rural communities that goes beyond this idea of revitalization, and is centered more around, 'How are we actually building wealth? How are we getting to keep our profits in our rural communities?' And that requires pretty systematic disinvestment from these multinational corporations that are sucking our communities dry. And so it requires a cooperation strategy."

When We Fight, We Win

"I have had those moments of despairing for my life and the life of my children. But I think there's an incredible awakening, and I don't think it's melodramatic to say that this is the moment. And this is the moment where we fight, or we lose. And so I believe, based on what I'm seeing, that we have the capacity to fight. And I know when we fight, we win." □