

# BEYOND Racism

EMBRACING AN  
INTERDEPENDENT  
FUTURE

More than a rejection of people's epidermic color, racism is a denial of that people's history and civilization; a rejection of its ethos, its total being. Diversity, however, is the universal condition of human existence, and the richness of human experience derives largely from interaction, intercommunication, and interchange among specific cultures. The truly revolutionary goal is not to eradicate differences... (but) to see that they are not made the cornerstones of oppression, inequality of opportunity or economic and social stratification.

-Abdias do Nascimento  
and Elisa Larkin Nascimento



The Comparative Human Relations Initiative  
HIGHLIGHTS & PUBLICATIONS

## LEAVING THE OLD WORLD for the New

Throughout the 20th century, 125 million people of African descent or appearance living in Brazil, South Africa and the United States and their allies struggled to overcome racism and inequality. Their efforts and sacrifices in pursuit of human rights have weakened the practice and ideology of White supremacy deeply embedded in the mores and institutions of their nations.

Legal racial segregation and discrimination in the United States and apartheid in South Africa came to an end. South Africa's Black majority achieved political power. African Americans, a permanent minority, began to move up the socio-economic ladder. And the largest population of people of African descent outside of the continent of Africa, Afro Brazilians, finally succeeded in opening a public debate on racism and its effects in their country.

But these changes do not signify the end of racism or discrimination, only a new phase. Years of inadequate investment in the education of people of African descent or appearance, sexism, underemployment or unemployment, social marginalization, and indifferent or punitive public policy still contribute to the maintenance of color-coded poverty affecting millions. These vestiges of past inequality, lingering negative racial myths, unfair institutional practices, and poverty interact and burden Black advancement.

As Brazil, South Africa and the United States enter the new world of the 21st century, it is time to leave racism behind, not just because it is the right, rational or fair thing to do, although it is. We must leave racism behind out of economic necessity and national interest.

Technological advances are creating transnational forces and developments that are changing the world. Information, ideas, capital and business flow instantaneously across national borders. Record levels of migration now bring diverse peoples into closer proximity. Population growth dynamics are creating new forms of intergenerational and interracial interdependence. Demands are sharpening for democratic accountability and fair treatment. Women's and human rights movements are becoming more prominent in commerce and international affairs. Finding better ways to promote power-sharing and reconciliation between groups and divergent interests is essential to peace and prosperity.

The technological revolution is creating an interconnected, global economy. Nations that have high poverty, crime and social disorder, small consumer or tax bases, and lots of people with low skills and empty stomachs are less attractive to investors and businesses than countries without such problems. The economic futures of South Africa and Brazil, where the scale of poverty is so large, depend in no small part upon improving the skills, lives and productivity of the poor and eliminating unfair barriers to participation in the formal economy. Though powerful, the United States also finds itself looking ahead to a time when growth and prosperity may not be sustainable. While people of African descent or appearance are a smaller percentage of the poor in the United States than in the other two countries, changing demographics in America and other market indicators portend the need for equitable efforts now to ensure a robust economy in the future.

Racism is a moral, social and economic problem. Finding ways to develop fully "human capital, irrespective of race or gender," the true wealth of nations, is the urgent challenge of the 21st century.

## THE COMPARATIVE HUMAN RELATIONS Initiative

The publications of the Comparative Human Relations Initiative (Initiative), a unique, collaborative examination of contemporary power relations between persons of European or African descent in Brazil, South Africa and the United States, survey this changing terrain. Formed in 1995, the Initiative is a forum for the exchange of information and strategies to overcome discrimination and inequality by people from the three countries. Using a comparative and multidisciplinary lens, the Initiative's aim is to contribute to diverse efforts around the world to combat all forms and variants of prejudice. Forms of prejudice are linked and interactive and must be uprooted together.

Racism is an international phenomenon that calls for both national and global responses.



## THREE NATIONS at the Crossroads

With a population of 166 million and one of the world's ten largest economies, Brazil is Latin America's largest nation and as big as the continental United States. Colonized by the Portuguese, Brazil imported the most slaves of nations in the western hemisphere and was the last to abolish slavery (in 1888). It is also one of the world's most unequal societies measured by income distribution. According to recent data, the richest 20 percent of the population receive 64 percent of the national income; the poorest 20 percent who are disproportionately of African descent or appearance receive 2.5 percent.

South Africa has a population of 41 million, over 76 percent of whom are Black, and is also one of the world's most unequal societies—a legacy directly linked to the policies of the apartheid regime that systematically deprived Africans of access to education and other rights and benefits. Almost 65 percent of South Africa's total income goes to the top 20 percent of the population; the poorest 20 percent, almost all of whom are Black, receive less than 3 percent.

The United States, the world's remaining superpower, has a population of 276 million, of whom 13 percent are African American. Legalized racial segregation of Blacks in education was declared unlawful in 1954 and discrimination in employment, education, housing, voting and other areas was outlawed in the mid 1960s. Despite a recently brisk economy, the top 20 percent of income groups receive almost 46 percent of the nation's income; but the lowest 20 percent receive less than 5 percent. Data suggest that income inequality continues.

Brazil, South Africa and the United States are young democracies with large multiracial and multiethnic populations. Each was colonized by people of European descent who enslaved Africans. In the case of South Africa and the United States, following abolition, Africans and their progeny were by law segregated and efforts to grant them rights equal to those held by Whites were forcibly resisted. Not so in Brazil where de facto discrimination was and is the order of the day.

Each country's standard of living, economy and prospects are different. But gaps in wellbeing of such wide dimension between rich and poor and Black and White are still deeply troubling. They demonstrate that the practices and mechanisms by which opportunities are allocated are not working fairly and point to the need for change.



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## EMBRACING AN Interdependent Future

The world is changing—it will be even “smaller,” and its people and nations more interdependent in the 21st century. But one thing is certain: Racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination will not go away unless people and nations resolve to change and then commit, in ways large and small, to transformation.

In the struggle to overcome racism waged in the last hundred years, change came about through the cumulative efforts of many ordinary people, who saw that freedom and human rights are indivisible. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

*Racism is not a Black or White problem.  
It is a human problem that affects us all.  
It is also a solvable problem.*

We have choices to make. We can work now to create shared and workable futures or continue the mindless conflict that has robbed so many people of their lives and wellbeing in the past. Whether we created the problem of racism or not, we all share responsibility and have an interest in combating it.

The hope for a future beyond racism rests upon what each of us is willing to do in our lives, our institutions, our countries and abroad. We live in different societies, but increasingly in the same world. We are all the same beneath the skin.



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## Lessons

*There are many lessons to be learned from comparing these nations.  
Below, we share a few.*

**Race is an idea.** People often use the idea of “race” or race-related appearance as shorthand for identifying others. But most of us have no idea what “race” is or is not as a scientific matter. We prejudge others based on “race” and often give the concept meaning that it does not and should not have.

Science teaches us that there is only one real race, the human race. We are all fundamentally the same beneath the skin. Superficial characteristics such as color, hair texture or phenotype have nothing to do with intelligence or good character. The idea that some people are superior or inferior to others due to race is wrong. Nurture, not nature, creates power hierarchies and disparities among groups of people.

**Race is constructed in different ways in our three countries.** In Brazil, Africans were enslaved for almost 450 years.

Miscegenation between Whites and Africans (primarily White men and vulnerable African women), however, was encouraged in order to “whiten” the population. Today in Brazil “good appearance”—resembling the White European ideal—is what counts. For this reason, economically and politically, Blacks and Browns occupy the same low status. Whites, as a group, are dominant.

In America and South Africa, the idea of “race” is largely tied to lineage. In the United States, for example, where slavery lasted over 240 years, considering all children of slaves to be “Black” no matter what they looked like, was a ready way to add to the slave population. Today, most African Americans are “mixed” in the sense of having forebears of different heritage. However, they are still classified as African American, no matter how little or how much African lineage they have or what they look like. In South Africa, the majority of the population is Black African, but there are also people of East Asian or mixed lineage, who are considered “Coloured” as distinct from Black.

**Forms of racism differ, but consequences are the same.** In all three countries, however “race” is defined, privilege and poverty are color-coded. People who look like Europeans in color and phenotype have a “skin privilege”—they are part of the group in each country that has historically enjoyed a social, political and economic monopoly of power. A color- or race-stratified power hierarchy has come into being.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once observed that it is “difficult to awaken a man pretending to be asleep.” One of the major barriers to movement beyond racism is the inclination of many people to turn a blind eye to the misfortunes or abuses of others. Racism becomes “invisible” to them. But willing racism not to exist does not eliminate it. Nor is the aspiration to color blindness an action plan to eliminate the actual and present effects of racial discrimination and disadvantage.

One need only look at apartheid’s legacy in South Africa to see the consequences of unbridled racism and discrimination: injustice and inequality; poverty; an underdeveloped economy; a narrow consumer base; shortages of skilled labor; despair; and lack of governmental revenues needed to construct a social safety net. Whether it is the ghettos in the United States, the favelas of Brazil or the townships of South Africa, racism’s suffering quotient and costs are too high. Racism may sometimes be advantageous for a few people, but it is no way to develop the economy or improve the wellbeing of entire nations.

**What can be done to change the color-coded status quo? Many things.** There are no simple prescriptions for change. Racism is a system of institutionalized power that is embedded in different

ways in the cultures, histories, myths, mores, policies and institutions in these countries. Responses to it must be as varied.

Dr. Gunnar Myrdal once used the metaphor of a “vicious circle” downward to describe how factors such as race, poverty, lack of education interact to oppress groups of people. But he also posited a “virtuous circle” by which a good transformation can occur. Simply, when many factors interlock, change in one may set off a chain reaction of responses in all.

This is the situation in Brazil, South Africa, the United States and around the world. People of good will are using the tools, talents and influence at hand to effect transformation. The situation is fluid and therein resides hope:

- There is an emerging consensus around the world that there are no “inferior” or “superior” races and all people entitled to fair treatment and equal rights;
- Governments, businesses and people have begun to realize that a key to national prosperity is finding ways to help people of African descent, women and other marginalized groups gain the health, skills and rights needed to be productive contributors to national life;

- People of African descent have enhanced access to political power and public resources to combat racism and to implement complementary and compensatory poverty-alleviation efforts;

- There is a body of experience around the world about how to promote unity, rather than division, among peoples, that can be harvested and used to support innovation and change;

- There are more well-educated and affluent Blacks than ever before with resources and influence to counter racism;

- Freedom movements of women of all “races” and ethnicities, other minority groups and constituencies are challenging closed systems in each country that primarily benefited White males; these efforts are creating new alliances to seek transformation;

- People promoting democratization and accountability, the rule of law, and free enterprise have begun to understand the importance of helping all people, irrespective of appearance, become engaged stakeholders in their own communities and nations;

- There is a growing yearning among peoples for peace and reconciliation. International human rights groups and other such bodies concerned with the excesses of global capitalism and the impact of technology are searching for ways to create sustainable and broadened development, prevent degradation of the environment, promote the sharing of scientific and technological knowledge, and recognize the role of all peoples and nations as part of our global ecosystem.

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## COMPARATIVE HUMAN RELATIONS INITIATIVE Publications

The Comparative Human Relations Initiative has developed a number of linked publications that amplify on the themes and ideas in this brochure, drawing on original sources and in the voices of the people in these three countries. Reports include:

- **Beyond Racism**, an overview report of findings by the Initiative’s International Working and Advisory Group, featuring first person profiles of outstanding Americans, Brazilians and South Africans involved in the struggle against racism and reflections of International Working and Advisory Group members.
- **Three Nations at the Crossroads**, in-depth, data-rich portraits and accessible historical reviews of Brazil, South Africa and the United States by Charles V. Hamilton, professor emeritus, Columbia University; Ira Glasser, executive director, the American Civil Liberties Union; Wilmot James, dean, University of Cape Town, and Jeffrey Lever, South African scholar; Colin Bundy, University of Witwatersrand; Abdias do Nascimento, Rio de Janeiro State Secretary of Human Rights and Citizenship; Elisa Larkin Nascimento, director, IPEAFRO; Brazilian scholar Nelson do Valle Silva, and a comprehensive historical timeline of key events related to race in the three countries.
- **In Their Own Voices**, a topically organized reader featuring articles, quotable quotes, and excerpted speeches by participants in Initiative meetings such as Ellis Cose, journalist; Frene Ginwala, speaker of the South African Parliament; Alex Boraine, vice chair, South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission; Emmett Carson, president, the Minneapolis Foundation; Gloria Steinem, contributing editor, Ms. Magazine; Mahmood Mamdani, professor, University of Cape Town; Njabulo S. Ndebele, vice chancellor, University of the North; Susan V. Berresford, president, the Ford Foundation; and many others.
- **Color Collage**, occasional papers on issues such as the origins of racism, the role of the media, truth and reconciliation efforts, globalization, economic inequality, and the religious community by authors such as Reid Andrews, professor, University of Pittsburgh; C. Eric Lincoln, professor emeritus, Duke University; Antonio Hernandez, director, Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund; and many others.

Books include:

- **Beyond Racism, Embracing an Interdependent Future** (working title), the Full Report of the International Working and Advisory Group to the Comparative Human Relations Initiative, including detailed citations, sources and annotated bibliography [forthcoming].
- **The Same Beneath the Skin** (working title), a comparative anthology, edited by Charles V. Hamilton, Wilmot James, Neville Alexander, professor, University of Cape Town, Antonio Sérgio Guimarães, professor, University of São Paulo and Lynn Huntley, Director, The Comparative Human Relations Initiative, which considers educational issues in the three nations, the costs of racism, international remedies, affirmative action, and future prospects for movement beyond racism in the three nations by recognized scholars and activists [forthcoming].
- **Tiranda a Máscara: Ensaios Sobre o Racismo No Brasil** (*Taking Off the Mask: Essays on Racism in Brazil*), a Portuguese language volume featuring papers by many leading scholars and Afro Brazilian activists [forthcoming].
- **Grappling With Change**, Yazeed Fakier, author (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers and Idasa, 1998), a look at how South Africans are coping post-apartheid.
- **Between Unity and Diversity**, Gitanjali Maharaj, editor (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers and Idasa, 1999), a reader on post-apartheid nation-building efforts.



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IS AVAILABLE in print through the Southern Education Foundation. The Initiative reports, additional commissioned papers, and other information are also available free of charge on the Internet.

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