# Sharing the Pain

## Why the media should enable the telling of racial grief

Americans, journalists included, have difficulty discussing racism openly. **Melissa Baumann** recently attended a media workshop where three stories stood out, pointing towards ways to cover race-related issues more deeply...

*My Mama is preparing to die. This is nothing new. She started to make these preparations when I was in fourth grade, 34 years ago...*

CARMEN DUARTE keeps crying when she reads about her mother. She is presenting her 36-part series for the *Arizona Star* on her mother's life, a life chronicling her mother's family leaving Mexico, her mother's labouring hard in Arizona's cotton fields, and now finding solace in her *santos* and the world of spirits.

It is beautiful work, written with compassion in the style of magical realism, though an authentically true story. It is one of the works honoured at the third annual "Let's Do It Better" workshop at the Columbia School of Journalism in New York – a three-day gathering of roughly 40 journalists from around the country to encourage a collective search for better practice in covering race-related issues and promoting diversity.

Duarte's mother Nala, we learn, was "yanked" from school at age 8 to help her family work; slaved for nearly 70 years at menial tasks to support *la familia*; and never shed the stigma she was born with – that she "would grow up stupid" *due to un gran susto* (a great shock) her mother suffered when seven months pregnant with her. When her father, the story goes, was knocked dead by a lightning bolt.

I later ask Duarte why she cries when she reads what she has written.

"I get very emotional when I remember my mother's face, when she was talking about the past," she says. "I can feel her pain."

Thoughout all the other presentations it echoes, a subtext not openly discussed, but for me the reason that we are all actually there, and what we need to learn: overcoming racism, healing the divisions of race, means feeling each other's pain – enabling people to share their pain, tell their stories and, if necessary, owning the hurt we have caused others.

As journalists we are well placed to do this – to foster empathy among people. But rather we choose, most often, to foster discontent and conflict. 'The pain I have caused you' is something most of us don't bother, or can't bear, to think about.

Americans, journalists included, don't like to talk about 'race' and the pain they may have inflicted. Unlike in South Africa, where accusations of 'racism' are flung around quite indiscriminately these days, the issue is mostly kept under wraps in US newsrooms. And the discourse at this workshop is no exception.

No one really talks about 'race' and 'racism', and certainly not their own, with the exception of one candid presenter who confesses his bias in undervaluing a television story about discrimination against Asian Americans. Participants seem grateful to him for mentioning the unmentionable.

"We have to concentrate on the work," says workshop director Arlene Morgan. "If we didn't, we'd lose them all."

But we also, in some cases, look at the context of the work.

There were no black editors among a staff of 1 100 at the *Los Angeles Times* when Lisa Richardson wrote her story about her family's genealogical search which led her to her slave great-great-great grandmother Lavinia and some white branches of the family tree. The white editors at the paper, Richardson suggests, just weren't that interested in her story – they didn't engage and left her pretty much on her own.

It was a painful journey, Richardson confides, one that never brought her back to her African roots, as she had hoped. *But I have reshaped my family*, she writes, *in ways I never imagined.*

Before the quest which led to Richardson's article, the family had traced their lineage firmly back to Lavinia's daughter Ellen, another Richardson – fathered in 1849 in Sumterville, Alabama by a white man named Jerry Dial, neighbour and brother-in-law of William Fulton, Lavinia's owner.

But "Going back to find Lavinia" (the story's title), Richardson's physical retracing of her ancestor's path and meeting descendants of Dial and Fulton, reframed her world.

*Lavinia lived and died a servant*, Richardson writes. *But in death she has attained a power that life never granted her. She is my family's Eve, our beginning and the person to whom we can furthest trace our roots. As generations of her children from that union now seek details of her life, back she leads us. To find her – and our own origin – we must look in places we have avoided for more than a century and see our family as never before: in black and white.*

> Translating racial grief into social claims was at the heart of the civil rights struggle. But it's time, as well, to return to the grief itself.

Richardson often deflects the pain – of acknowledging Lavinia's servitude and 'rape,' of not finding 'missing' black relatives, of acquiring 'new' white ones – with humour. She tells us how a young descendant of William Fulton emailed her one day after the article was done. "What can you tell me about my great-great-great-grandfather?" she asked Richardson.

"He owned my great-great-great grandmother," was the reply, and Richardson tells it with a smirk of satisfaction.

"Then the white relatives wanted to do a cookbook together – *a cookbook!*" Richardson adds. "We said, 'what do we have to do a cookbook for, we know all the recipes. We used to do all the cooking!'"

Yet the weight – of the story, of the journey – persists. No longer can Richardson claim to be the child solely of 'the wronged' and 'the innocent'. She writes: "I am descended from both slave and master."

Getting around, getting over, framing according to 'race' means looking at identity

> Overcoming racism, healing the divisions of race, means feeling each other's pain

REUTERS

Black Fashion Museum founder Lois Alexander-Lane. Through fabric the museum recovers the role black women – many of them slaves – have played in shaping the way people have dressed through history.

- enabling people to share their pain, tell their stories and, if necessary, owning the hurt we have caused others.

more deeply, in more complex ways. Finally, the US Census allows people to check more than one box when it comes to the 'race' category. Jill Atkin Simms, the focus of another workshop presentation, now checks 'other'.

"Family Secrets", produced by Alice Pifer for ABC's *20/20*, follows Simms on a trail back into her shrouded – and painful – past. Early on Simms, perceptibly a 30-ish white woman, describes the "sense of shame" she had growing up in her family, because they were hiding something. What they were hiding was their black ancestry, which Simms confirms as she researches the life of her great-grandmother Anita Hemmings, the first African American woman to attend the prestigious Vassar College. Hemmings 'passed for white' there until her roommate 'outed' her; she graduated in spite of the scandal.

"I just was overwhelmed," Simms says. "I saw so many of my family in her. I was so proud of her. I just was overcome."

The 'Hemmings discovery' led to others – to Robert Hemmings, Anita's father and a relative of Sally Hemings, the former slave of Thomas Jefferson; to Anita's brother Frederick, one of the first black graduates of MIT; to Anita's daughter Ellen, who was 'raised white' according to the wishes of her mother and her light-skinned husband. This decision to 'live as whites' sadly segregated Anita's family from the rest of the clan, a decision which troubles Simms: "She denied her child and grandchildren a wonderful family." Her anger is mixed with an inherited sadness, the shared pain of identities forcibly hidden.

Simms' quest totally upended her sense of self. "I used to look in the mirror and I looked at my blue eyes, and my red hair, white skin, and I started wondering, 'What is blackness, and what is whiteness?'... I didn't realise how many forms racism took until I started looking at my own family."

The story, at least on film, has a happy ending: a celebratory gathering of the descendants of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson at Jefferson's former home, Monticello, in Virginia. Simms attends with her husband and young son, who wastes no time embracing a black female relative and asking: "Are you part of our family?"

Talking with relatives of a multitude of shades, posing for the grand family portrait on Monticello's steps, Simms is beaming. Like Richardson, she has discovered that she descends "from both slave and master"; unlike Richardson, she has just identified with the oppressed, not the oppressor. There's a huge difference.

Says Simms: "I felt like I truly belonged someplace for the first time in my life."

Listening to the pain, enabling its narration through authentic voices – that's what came through in these three stories about pain, about the pain of being poor and 'alien' in a land of abundance, the pain of acknowledging the oppressor in oneself, the pain of having to hide one's identity.

As Anne Anlin Cheng argues in her recent book *The Melancholy of Race* (Oxford University Press, 2001) we are much more comfortable with racial grievances than with racial grief. Translating racial grief into social claims was at the heart of the civil rights struggle. But it's time, as well, to return to the grief itself. As Cheng writes: "We need to take on the task of acknowledging racial grief in a theoretically and socially responsible way. A sustained focus on the intangible wounds that form the fissures underneath visible phenomena of discrimination should be taking place *in addition to*, not in place of, the work of advocacy."

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