

*Closet Chickenology*

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CHAPTER TEN

I Peer Into Chicken Noodle's Mirror

*So it wasn't very long after the end of the second millennium of the Common Era that the fabled Closet Chickens appeared. They took comfort in one another as they faced the end of that time and the beginning of something else. In their vision of the future, in the something-else that would follow, I saw that the Chickens would begin by enacting race. But it would have a new face: "indigeneity."*

*Chickenry would together embark into a future in which archeology would learn to become indigenous. The Chickens would decolonize archeology and remove it from the exclusive control of oppressive and insensitive white colonizers. Indians would empower themselves as a race. Toward this end the Chickens would help each other and their chatter would be heartening as they went forth to perform their almost impossible feats in the world, battling injustice, empowering Native racialism, creating indigenous archeology; studying the details under the surface, layer after layer... lifting up a corner of the earth to see the past, to change the future.*

*It would be serious work indeed. But they would also laugh together and be supportive and warm in their coop. For the coop would change the status quo into something positive. And if they couldn't change the world, they could at least enhance what they liked about it.*

*And the Chickens would do race, yes. They understood that race had a serious flaw, a serious problem: it told a lie about the nature of humankind. They heard the news about race but could not stop themselves and they went on doing it anyway. And this seemed good to them, something good to aim at. This was the essence of their dream.*

*Full of hope they were; for they were the Closet Chickens.*

When the next millennium opened for business, I stepped inside of it and entered the coop. Pausing to think of the Closet Chickens, I often smiled to myself. Their optimism and enthusiastic idealism felt good to me. I listened to them and they... some of them listened to me.

In the warmth of the Closet Chicken coop I shared the glow of it, even though I didn't share their vision of things. As I saw it, the fundamental logic of the coop rested on acceptance of biological racialism. Wasn't this a problem? I thought so.

Maybe other archeologists and anthropologists accepted the practice of race and race was just something that everybody did. Maybe race had always been done that way in American archeology and in the academic community and throughout the American world, and maybe even beyond in the wider universe. And maybe the Chickens would do it like that too.

But we didn't necessarily have to do the things of race the same way everyone else did those things. We could do it differently. Standing just inside the entrance of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I began to consider what to recalibrate.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the idea of race as an explanation of human biological diversity had been rejected by academic anthropology. For some reason, however, race hadn't died in the academy. It was still going strong in the next millennium. It had given rise to the Closet Chickens. What would we do with it?

Maybe the coop could be different. We didn't have to do the kind of archeology and anthropology that had characterized and filled the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Maybe we could help each other figure out what to do with race – things that I would never think of by myself. I appreciated their chatter. I stood inside their magic circle and asked for their help.

The coop seemed an opportune place to play with ideas and implications. Whatever response Chickenry might have to my thoughts, I needed a place to experiment with saying things about race that might sound wise or foolish or both.

Speaking my mind, I felt surprised at first when I realized that the Chickens intended to just proceed anyway with race as their unquestioned bond. Race would define the coop. The Chickens would enact racially based indigeneity, racially based nativeness, racially based Indianness.

Even so, feeling my way into the beginning of the millennium, the coop seemed full of hope, and I found myself thinking that whatever came next in my life, maybe I could do it among these archeologists.

Excavating myself to look for the inward meanings of selfhood and racial identity, I wasn't an archeologist, so it was necessarily a somewhat clumsy enterprise. I must have looked like a looted city in those days. As the coop arose and made itself in the image of race, I reminded myself that it hadn't been easy for me to question and challenge race in my life. Race is profoundly personal. People don't usually want advice about profoundly personal matters like racial identity even when they ask for it, and no one had asked me for any advice.

All the Chickens had things they wanted to say in the coop. Important things. Whether or not any of the other Chickens ever took up the challenge of confronting race with me, it would be interesting to hear their chatter. In those first years of the coop, I tried to say things that mattered, but did I know what mattered?

I had to keep trying to figure it out because race is fundamentally damaging to our humanity. It distorts the nature of humankind. This is a profound truth about

racial identity. It does not reveal to us a mirror-image of ourselves; instead it distorts what can be seen and the stories we tell about what we think we see.

We should reject race. If this option does not yet seem a realistic choice for most people, we can at least learn to treat race as culture.

Race doesn't dwell in our physical selves; it sits deep inside the more mysterious workings of our minds. Knowing that race is not an inherent manifestation of the physical self, we must redefine the whole elaborate social structure of racialism as a purely social artifact. Race is a set of malleable guidelines, not a rigid biological reality.

Detached from the anchor of biology, we should recalibrate race into cultural ethnicity. And if we treat race as a form of ethnicity, then racial identities become optional for everyone. This outcome is inevitable because when we free race from the illogic of pseudo-biology, we must also drop the associated biological authenticity tests. Liberating ourselves from pseudo-biology, racial identities become self-empowering options subject only to the exercise of personal preference.

This mode of race might well perpetuate racialism, but it is at least an inclusively integrative cultural alternative to the traditional practice of race as a set of exclusively segregated identity structures. We need not do this as race. Instead, we can redeploy race into pure ethnicity. In so doing, we free ourselves to acknowledge that all Americans have absorbed varying amounts of cultural racial identities of every color. Everyone has absorbed racial Indianhood in varying degrees; everyone has more than a few drops of black culture; everyone has some cultural Hispanicness and Asianness and whiteness.

Recalibrating race into ethnicity, we enhance the ways we can connect with each other. We can take open pride in our mutual ethnic Indianness, our mutual ethnic blackness, the manifold complexity of ethnicity as pure culture. And taking pride together like this, it would be impossible to practice racism. This recalibration of race would put an end to racism.

Treating racial identities as optional for everyone, as cultural ethnicity available to everyone – treating race as an inherently inclusive outcome of culture, not biology, this strategy would undermine the exclusive preferential ranking of racism because the practice of bioracialism is the basic ingredient necessary for the practice of racism. Truly hoping to defeat racism forever, we must defeat race itself. In defeating race, let it be seen for what it really is and for what it has actually always been: flexible ethnicity hidden under inflexible pseudo-biology. Liberated from racial biology, we can negotiate all we might wish across the complicated terrain of ethnicity and personal identity.

If we wish, we really can choose to give up race.

Thinking such things at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I stood up in the coop and spoke to the Closet Chickens. Whatever I said or didn't say, I said things

the way you say them with your heart. The Closet Chickens paused in their doings and listened.

I said, *Let us free ourselves and be free.*

*We'll be free, I said, Free at last.*

*I kept saying things like this. It was an exciting time for the Closet Chickens at the beginning of the third millennium of the Common Era. I stood inside their magic circle and they made me feel very welcome. I loved the warmth of their excitement and their enthusiastic idealism.*

*I glimpsed them as they spoke to one another in their communal coop. And they went here & there upon their errands, doing all the things they did. They held their celebrations on alluring green islands. They convened to consider the underlying truths they sought, the deeper mysteries adrift inside the world. They gave names and took them. They were determined, wise, proud.*

*I stood elsewhere upon my paths in the world and often heard rumor of their mysterious doings. I saw that they didn't want to come with me on my journey. Even so, some of them listened to everything I said. And no one knew what to do about it; some of them listened closely and it wasn't easy.*

*I feel sad when I think of this. And I feel happy, too.*

*Let us feel foolish and wise and sad and happy.*

*Let us feel free to feel free.*

*And they listened upon their pathways in real time. And upon my twilight path oblique to theirs, upon my path in imaginary time, I watched them as they set forth to make a difference, as they saw it, a good difference.*

*For they were the Closet Chickens.*