



## 8. LABRADOODLES AND PROJECTION

*Now I can understand your tears and your shame.  
She called you “boy” instead of your name.  
When she wouldn’t let you inside.  
When she turned and said  
“But honey, he’s not our kind.”*

*Janis Ian, Society’s Child*

**B**y late fall Rui had gotten his three month round of vaccinations, which allowed him to play with other dogs. He was interested in every dog he met, and even riding in the hatchback of our Toyota Echo, he’d stare out the window in fixated fascination whenever he spotted a dog out in the world. Since he clearly couldn’t smell or hear them from inside the car, Diana and I were surprised how clearly he could distinguish between those things that were dogs and the rest of the world. Given that the range of dog sizes and breeds was greater than any other animal, how did he know that a Great Dane and a chihuahua were somehow like him, and a pussycat wasn’t? But while Rui didn’t distinguish between breeds of dogs, others did. And most curiously, they weren’t even dogs.

Walking Rui one day, I met my first dog racist. She owned a pure-

bred white standard poodle, Molly, who was beautifully coiffed and groomed in that traditional poodle way. Molly was straining at her leash, barking and trying to leap on Rui in exactly the same way Rui tries to leap on dogs he wants to play with. Her owner called her back into a sit, and said, “Molly doesn’t like cross-breeds. She only plays with real poodles”.

I smiled, feeling incredulous, and responded, “Sounds to me as though there might be some projection going on there.”

“Oh no,” said Ms. Molly, “I don’t think Molly’s projecting anything.”

And since there was clearly nothing more perfect that could be said, Rui and I wandered off.

Rui is a labradoodle, a descendent of poodles and Labrador retrievers. When Diana and I were debating what kind of dog to get, we talked to friends who had dogs, some of whom are purebred and some of whom are not, (the dogs, not the friends.) They had generally advised us to get the same kind of dog they had, but none of them said much about the difference between purebred and other dogs. I have a cousin who raises golden retrievers, and I was surprised when she said labradoodles weren’t a real breed. Some internet research opened my eyes to how the kind of prejudice that exists about people also exists about dogs. Here are typical quotes from Rui’s ancestral organizations.

*A Labradoodle is nothing more than an expensive mongrel.... These crossbreeds are a deliberate attempt to mislead the public with the idea that there is an advantage to these designer dogs. The crossbred dogs are prone to all of the genetic disease of both breeds and offer none of the advantages that owning a purebred dog has to offer.*

Labrador Retriever Club of America

*Do not ever allow your stud dog to be bred to a bitch of another breed. If you are a member of a breed club, this could put you*

*in line for charges being brought against you. Why? This is not responsible behavior if you are protecting the Poodle.... Beware!*

Poodle Club of America

It sounded like General Jack D. Ripper bemoaning the dilution of the purity of the white race in “Dr. Strangelove”.

But there is of course one major difference between humans and dogs in regards to racial prejudice: dogs are too smart to believe this nonsense. When I take Rui out for a walk, he meets both purebred and crossbred dogs, and despite what Ms. Molly claimed, there’s no difference in how they treat one another based on breed. Pure breeds aren’t snotty, or hostile to “lesser breeds without the law”. Rui is attracted to poodles and other doodles. When I took him to his first “doodle romp” I was amused how all forty doodles shared a particular way of playing (more batting of paws than most dogs). It’s very clear that such purebred prejudice is a human foible, not a canine one. Dogs intuitively know what Wikipedia says, “As all dog breeds have been derived from mixed-breed dog populations, the term ‘purebred’ has meaning only with respect to a certain number of generations”. Dog breeds in their current sense only go back to 1873, and the English Kennel Club. And current DNA research has proven the concept of races among humans is just as invalid as it is among dogs.

When I taught high school, I often noticed how attractive the students from mixed racial backgrounds were. In a number of Native American spiritual traditions, including the one I practice, the term “rainbow peoples” is used for those whose ancestors are different colours. It’s a term of respect, and if one has to have names for races, it’s as good as any. But it seems clear to continue pretending these hugely artificial constructs have a real objective meaning is both biologically wrong and sociologically harmful. Darwin (who didn’t believe in races) pointed out that there were two, three, four, five, eleven, sixteen, twenty-two, or sixty-three races according to the current experts of his time.

If, as Raymund Nash said, “Horse sense is what keeps horses from betting on what people will do,” then maybe “dog sense” is what keeps dogs from caring about races and pedigree. Surely it’s finally time for humans to put those divisions behind us, even at the cost of being shunned by the Poodle Society of America, or their racist equivalents.

Brave words, but all prejudices are easier to disown than to remove. I noticed a few weeks later how when someone (often male) asked (in a certain tone), “What kind of dog is that?” I’d casually answer that Rui was 5/8 poodle, and 3/8 lab. Now this is true (his maternal grandmother – a first generation labradoodle – was crossed with a full poodle, so his mother was 3/4 poodle, while his father was a labradoodle), though pedantic. But the underlying message was Rui was not a mutt, that his breeding was as deliberate as any purebred dog. Given my earlier comments on racism, I have to acknowledge there’s a whiff of hypocrisy in the air here. All I ask is you don’t hold it against Rui.

Racism isn’t the only prejudice humans project onto dogs. I was walking Rui in our back alley, and encountered a neighbour walking his dog. He was a man in his fifties, whom I mentally called Popeye, as his weatherbeaten face reminded me of the childhood cartoon I once watched. We hadn’t talked much, but as we both had dogs we started chatting while our dogs did the canine equivalent. Suddenly Popeye grabbed his dog and jerked him away from Rui. I asked what was wrong.

“They were kissing each other,” he said, “and they’re both boy dogs!”

I looked at Rui, then back at Popeye, and decided this was a battle I wasn’t going to take on. It would take more than spinach to cure Popeye of this particular disease. I suddenly came to a deeper appreciation of the old joke, “The more I see of people, the more I like my dog.” Rui and I just turned and walked off down the alley in the opposite direction.