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Why We Must Talk About Race When We Talk About Bikes

SYSTEMIC RACISM CAN'T BE FIXED WITHOUT TACKLING IT WITHIN CYCLING.

BY TAMIKA BUTLER Jun 9, 2020



Courtesy Tamkia Butler

In the winter of 2014, I was just leaving a job at a nonprofit I had thought was my dream job. As a gender nonconforming, queer, Black woman, I was working on LGBTQ issues and leading a Boys and Men of Color program at an organization on the frontlines with community organizers. Unfortunately, as is all too common for women of color—and particularly Black women—in the workplace, I experienced racism and anti-Blackness. I was reeling. How could I ever find a job that would feed my soul in the same way?

That's when I learned about the Executive Director position at the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition (LACBC). At first, I wasn't sure about working at a bicycle organization. Sure, riding my bike made me feel free. I was still riding the high of pedaling 545 miles in the AIDS/LifeCycle fundraiser. I wanted to ride my bike everywhere in my daily life. And after the stress of being a civil rights lawyer and social justice nonprofit leader, the idea of a job where I got to be on my bike all day seemed absolutely blissful. I knew some of my friends would question how I could work at a bike coalition. After all, many see bike lanes as one of the first signs of gentrification.

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When I interviewed for the job, I told the board that, as a queer Black woman (who many people see as a Black man), I have no choice but to view everything I do, including my work, through those eyes. I made it clear that if they didn't want the LACBC to be a social justice organization, they shouldn't hire me. I must admit, I was a little surprised when I was offered the job. I took it, though, and never looked back. My initial feelings were confirmed—it was blissful. Most of my board members supported my vision of the bike as a social justice tool.

LACBC was the best job I ever had in so many ways. My team, our members, and the region we were fighting for, made me feel incredibly proud. I was motivated by how much promise our movement had—and by how much we were still falling short. Even though many people before me had spoken about the intersection of race, equity, social justice, and bicycling, I was the one being thrust on to national platforms to talk about bicycling and race.

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Once we can get past these things as a bicycle community, we can celebrate what bicycling should truly be about—the power to be free and move freely.

As a Black person in this country, I could never have talked about bikes without also talking about race. That hasn't changed. As the world is being ravaged by not one, but two deadly diseases—the coronavirus and anti-Black racism—that are taking Black lives and making it nearly impossible for my people to breathe, the racial inequities I was compelled to speak on then are still present. To truly make transformational change for all people who bike, we must go beyond a “Bike Month” or an occasional unity ride. We also must get beyond the narrative that only people who (too often self-righteously) make a lifestyle decision to bike are worthy of our targeted marketing campaigns, advocacy, and celebration. We must get past a strategy that assumes cisgender white maleness as the norm. We must get past an ethos of exclusion. Once we can get past these things as a bicycle community, we can finally celebrate what bicycling should truly be about—the power to be free and move freely.

I carried this opinion into every room, every speech, and every action I took as the Executive Director of LACBC. This made me unpopular with some members of the bike coalition, some board members, and some people outside of LA who complained that I was not talking enough about bikes. This made me the target of a racist LA City Council candidate and his supporters. These supporters believed they could look past

his being outed as harboring racist and transphobic views if he could get them a bike lane. To them, their white lives mattered more than anyone else's.

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Bicycling cannot solve systemic racism in the United States. But systemic racism can't be fixed without tackling it within bicycling.

Talking about things like gender, queerness, race, and white supremacy scares people. It makes them uncomfortable. Their resulting defensiveness makes them question your intelligence. Especially if being anti-racist means giving up their bike lane. Unfortunately, it rarely makes these same people dig deep and push beyond those questions towards understanding, compassion, being anti-racist, and confronting their own need to change. Because of that, I became used to the hate I received in various venues and formats.

But in the last few weeks, people seem to be waking up. Honestly, it's been tough to watch in the bicycling community. Seeing all parts of the industry, from private companies to nonprofits, making statements of support for Black lives might be intended to make Black people feel better. But what do these statements actually mean? Where is the action? Where are the apologies for the countless people in the bicycling world, long before me, who spoke up on these issues and were shut down and pushed out as a result? I want to feel hope, but I feel anger because I know that all of the things people are doing now should have been happening long before George Floyd died. Whether it's at the hands of police, due to a novel virus, or due to traffic violence—Black people have been dying at higher rates than white people for as long as there have been Black people in this country. It was always the right time to speak up, but people made a choice not to do so.

Courtesy Tamika Butler

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As happy as I am that people are joining the party now, I'm not sure if I can trust them. I'm not sure if they really know what this work is all about. But people are in this fight now, so they must start doing the work. And it's hard. It's draining. It's all-consuming. It's full of disappointment and pain. One-time friends will tell you to shut up and just talk about bicycling. You must push through, not be silenced. Be prepared to make mistakes, but then keep going.

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Bicycling cannot solve systemic racism in the United States. But systemic racism can't be fixed without tackling it within bicycling. With the rise of bicycling during this global health pandemic, this is the moment to educate the casual beach cruisers, fully-kitted weekend warriors, the urban planning students who can't wait to ride back to campus—all of us—on the systemic oppression of Black people, Indigenous

people, and all People of Color. This is the moment to look at the racism institutionalized in our companies, media publications, nonprofits, planning firms, and government agencies, and hire a workforce that reflects the diversity of our communities, at every level and in every position. This is the moment to invest in continual and consistent education of our employees. This is the moment to do more than issue a statement. A statement is the least that can be done. Those in power must change, relinquish some of their power, and get out of the way to make room for those who are ready to lead and are equipped to identify anti-black practices and policies.

When we allow ourselves and our colleagues to perform our work in isolation, without consideration of the killing of Black people, our work lacks impact. People of Color know that racism and racial bias in policing and infrastructure planning is a major factor in our safety and in our ability to succeed as we move about our communities. Any conversation about bicycling that fails to explicitly and affirmatively acknowledge this disparity is one that lacks true vision, honesty, and effectiveness. This has been true in the past, continues today, and will be true tomorrow—unless we change it. The question is are you just talking about bicycling or will you be part of that change?

Tamika Butler was the Executive Director of the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition from 2014 to 2017. Butler is currently the Director of Planning, for California, and Director of Equity and Inclusion at Toole Design Group, a planning, engineering and landscape architecture firm. She is also the Principal and Founder of Tamika L. Butler Consulting, LLC, where, through consulting, training, and public speaking works, she shines a light on inequality, inequity, and social justice.

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