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A Writer's Perspective on Multiple Ancestries: An Essay on Race and Ethnicity

As an American of Mexican ancestry—a Chicano novelist—who came to adulthood in the fifties, I lived the first sixty-five years of my life in the twentieth century. Growing up in Austin, Texas, I learned in junior high school in the 1940s about what scholars call Texan Anglo and Texan Mexican conflicts. When I was a child, our Mexican parents used to call the Texan Anglos *americanos*. We were *mexicanos*. The *americanos* that we knew and those who went to school with us were poor people like us. Some differences were that some had blond hair and blue eyes, and the rubicund working men received higher pay than our Mexican fathers for doing the same construction work. Our *mexicano* fathers could never hope to supervise the blond-haired men.

Even as an elementary school child, long before I heard them called “white people”, I was attentive to the *americano* children’s nationalities; my little classmates’ parents were of German, Czech, Polish, English and Irish *ancestry*.

I emphasize *ancestry*, because due to international and postcolonial migrations national identities have become unreliable. In addition, people of different nations may or may not share common *multiple ancestries* and, at the same time, observe different cultural traditions and religions. *Genes and chromosomes, however, cut across national, cultural, and religious borders*. This is true of postcolonial England and France, and of Middle Eastern, Arabic, Latin American and other countries.

In junior high school, as I have said, I learned about some of the causes of Anglo and Mexican conflicts. When I was a child, only a few miles away from the elementary school that I attended, at another elementary school—Zavala in East Austin—American teachers were washing out children’s mouths for speaking Spanish. Teachers were making children write on the board fifty or a hundred times that they would not speak Spanish on school premises.

In doing so, the teachers were making the children ashamed of being Mexican, their language and culture, and psychologically, of themselves. Of even greater importance, the teachers were making the young *mexicanos* hate *americanos*—“white” Americans. I learned of this anger and hatred from barrio Chicanos in junior high school.

Also, beginning with my joint appointment in Chicano Studies and Latin American Studies at UC Riverside, California, in 1972, I learned from Chicano students in my university classes that historically this pattern of making *mexicano* children ashamed of their identity and hating Anglos was repeated long before the 1940s in countless places where large concentrations of Americans of Mexican ancestry have lived. Much Barrio poetry and theater of the 1960s published in anthologies such as *Voices of Aztlán: Chicano Literature of Today*, edited by Dorothy E. Harth and Lewis M. Badwin (NY: New American Library, 1974), and fictional novels such as *Pocho* by Antonio Villarreal (1959; NY: Anchor, 1970 ed.) and *Chicano* by Richard Vásquez (NY: Doubleday, 1970) deal with images of Chicanos and Mexican culture based on elements of our population in the U.S. that have been stereotyped.

Consequently, it no longer surprises me that today some people find it hard to believe when I tell them that the Texas teachers of my childhood and adolescence were wonderful, enlightened women. Each taught a different subject, and she knew it excellently. Being a person whose aim in life turned out to be to make all realms of knowledge my domain, I am nevertheless skeptical about multiple subject teaching credentials in the public schools. As one who has read internationally—novels, poetry, plays, historical and social sciences scholarly works—I am also skeptical about specialization. Given today's emphasis on testing and teaching to the test, my feeling is that education today discourages knowledge, creativity, and imagination.

I was fortunate to attend Palm Elementary School in Austin, Texas. From the third grade, an international program remains vivid in my memory. I remember standing on stage, facing an auditorium that was filled with teachers and children from the first to the sixth grade. Long before race and ethnicity became important subjects of study, the objective of the school program was to learn about cultures and nations of the world.

I was one of about twenty students selected to give a short, rehearsed talk. We all marched up to the stage one at a time, and, with a curtain behind us, we stood in line at the front of the stage, looking out on the audience, each of us holding the flag of a different nation. Individually, each of us began by telling the audience which country's flag we were holding and saying something about the country, the people, and its industries. I was assigned the flag of Czechoslovakia.

Except for Miss Herrera, our elementary school teachers had German, Irish and English last names. They were wonderful women, I repeat, and not a one ever made me feel ashamed of speaking Spanish or of being Mexican. Had they made me ashamed of my language, I might never have learned French and Italian.

I spoke only Spanish when I started school in first grade. Other Mexican children already spoke English and Spanish, and I am confident that their doing so helped me

a great deal. In my case, one morning it seems, I woke up and I could speak English and Spanish. I do not remember learning English, but I remember that in first grade—at Bickler Elementary School—the teacher had us reading Jack and Jill books and nursery rhymes, aloud. I remember the excellence of my teachers. I was insatiably curious and eager to learn.

My childhood education was truly joyful. My father, a man with a superb third-grade education at a village school in Mexico, was my first great teacher. When I was eight years old he began to teach me how to read and write Spanish from the Spanish language newspaper *La Prensa de San Antonio*. He would bring me books in both languages. Without fluency in reading and writing Spanish, I might never have studied in 1960 and 1961, for two years in Mexico at UNAM, the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. In fourth grade, I found Saturdays and Sundays unbearably long because I was in love with a teacher in her twenties.

In those days, from elementary to high school, each teacher was a specialist in her subject (I had no male teachers until high school). At the beginning of class periods, before making assignments, teachers used to go over homework for the next day. In elementary school, I remember vividly, teachers were always helpful when we were doing our homework. We could go up to the teacher for individual help, if our homework presented difficulties. I remember completing homework in class very often. Teachers used to collect homework and they used to take it home to correct. The next day they would return our homework, corrected and graded. We also had study periods when we could do our homework.

Educational reform would benefit greatly from teachers like mine. Having a different, excellent teacher for each subject made for education of the highest quality. Infinitely curious, I loved the separate class in fourth grade on spelling and penmanship. In English classes beginning in third grade, I loved doing *correct* grammar exercises, identifying parts of speech and diagramming sentences. We were cautioned about overusing contractions and we were taught about auxiliary verbs. Word problems and fractions in mathematics were challenging and enjoyable; and learning about Alaska and Canada in social studies class opened our eyes to geography and people from other parts of the world and their cultures. In fourth grade, we also had a fascinating class that opened up the world of science. Art, from the very beginning in first grade, was my favorite subject. From first grade on, I loved the smells of classrooms, of books, chalk, glue, desks; and at the pencil sharpener, the mingled smells of pencil wood shavings, lead and machine oil. I remember buying my first fountain pen. The hissing sound of steam radiators in wintertime stays with me. In spring I would gaze out of classroom windows and daydream. I was alive with all of my child's senses.

As a novelist I have written fictionally of some of these experiences. From first grade on, I was an all A student. Teachers praised me. In elementary school, I learned that each of the subjects we were being taught had its own systematic methods and orderliness. I never cease to look back with awe and wonder at how each teacher was in command of her discipline. I cannot sufficiently emphasize that *learning was joyfully systematic and incremental*. I was a student with an insatiable appetite for joyful learning that later influenced my university teaching. I knew as a professor that young people performed better when they loved what they were learning.

On a personal note, I was fascinated by girls and women. Until under-graduate university days, after serving in the military, when I had started dating young women of German ancestry, with much self-consciousness, I thought all people of German ancestry hated Mexicans. Military service in the 1950s opened my eyes. In the 1960s, when I was in my middle twenties, I was a dropout graduate student. Living in Chicago and in New York City in those years, I received letters from my father, who now and then would ask if people where I was living hated Mexicans like they did in Texas during his young years. It surprised both of us that they did not.

In 1960s Chicago, however, I experienced a little discrimination from poor people with blue-blue eyes from the American South, and in 1967, in New York from a Jewish automobile insurance agent (who apologized for company policy), because to the former I appeared to be Puerto Rican, and to the latter, because of my last name I was to be treated like a Puerto Rican insurable risk. (One of my unpublished short stories is called “Those Blue-blue Eyes.”)

I also have childhood memories from the 1940s regarding people of African ancestry. We Mexicans could sit anywhere in regular movie theatres in Austin, Texas. However, in one movie theater, the Ritz, there was an upstairs section for “colored people,” as they were called at the time. Many years later, after becoming a professor, I learned that in other parts of Texas, and in places like Pasadena, Los Angeles, and San Bernardino in California, Mexicans were also segregated in swimming pools, movie theatres, and schools. But the first clear message about “white” racism towards blacks came to me in 1954, shortly after the news about Brown vs. Board of Education, the Supreme Court decision that ended segregated education legally.

Stationed in Japan during military service in 1954, I was part of a company of good old “white boys” from the American South. We were eighteen- and nineteen-year-old boys wanting to be men. One of them asked me shortly after the news came on the radio if I would want my sister to sit next to “niggers” and “colored guys” in school. To them I was not black. I was white like them, just of a darker complexion because I was Mexican. To me it was a surprise to learn then that some people had no preconceptions of

Mexicans. That was when military service opened my eyes about how others' perceptions influence one's self-perception.

Many years later, my affirmative action appointment, in Chicano Studies at UC Riverside in 1972 opened my eyes further. What I learned of affirmative action, on the basis of personal experience, during the years after my appointment made for a long story worthy of fiction. Much of my experience found its way into my novel *Voice-Haunted Journey* (Tempe, AZ: Bilingual Press, 1990) and into other fictional writings, published and unpublished. My first publication as a pioneer Chicano scholar, "I Am Joaquín as Poem and Film: Two Modes of Chicano Expression" (*Journal of Popular Culture*, 13: 3, Spring 1980), explored the connections between Chicano and Mexican thought and the influence of the Mexican Revolution on both.

In my own experience and recollection, we Americans up to the 1950s used to identify ourselves according to national origin, except for African Americans. I remember that during military service in the 1950s we young men would ask one another: what is your nationality? Curious in a favorable sense about our differences, we responded that we were of German, Italian, Polish, Jewish, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Jewish, or Irish nationality. But African Americans were always *black*, *Negro*, or "colored."

The historical experience of Americans of African ancestry and the consciousness of color within their community have been dramatically captured by Kathe Sandler's 1993 documentary film, *A Question of Color*. I had known of Mexican color consciousness from my own upbringing, but I later discovered that consciousness of color is to be found among other groups as well, among Vietnamese Americans, for example. Sandler's film makes pointedly clear the different treatment people of African ancestry have received since the fifteenth century. Spaniards called Africans *negros*, the Spanish word for *black*. During slavery times in our country, English-speaking Americans of rural and uneducated backgrounds and even educated Americans from the South had difficulty pronouncing the Spanish word. I conjecture that they came up with *nigrah*, and that in American southern states this term later developed into its pejorative derivative, *nigger*.

I have found it instructive to examine as a historical process the evolution of identity terms for people of African ancestry. From the Spanish introduction of slaves to their colonies in the fifteenth century a rigid race and class system developed in Mexico and Latin America, with countless terms such as *mulato* and *coyote* for "race mixtures" deemed unfortunate.

In the U.S., across the colonial period and down to the present, the English term *negro* was followed by *colored people* (and sometimes *mulatto* and *quadroon*), back to *negro*, followed by *Negro* capitalized, and then by *Afro-American* and *Black American* at the time of the Civil Rights Movement, and finally, after 1988, the term coined by Jesse

Jackson became *African American*. Identity was no longer racially based. At about the same time, Chicanos and people from other Latin American countries became *Hispanics* and *Latinos* in the U.S. The shift in self identity became cultural. In the case of U.S. Hispanics, the term was part of a commercial and political strategy.

I suggest that *colored people* is a term that recognizes the European slave masters' abuse of female slaves. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass commented tellingly on the changing composition of the multitudes of slaves being born in the South, whose fathers, like his own, were slave masters. It is no wonder that they looked very different from the slaves that were brought from Africa. Their complexions and their features were different from the original African slaves. Some were "light-skinned" slaves, and in literature the theme of *passing* and its psychological consequences became pervasive. Somewhere, I once read that slaves with European ancestry married one another in order to preserve their "whiteness." In Mexico, the re-publication of *La población negra de México: Estudio Etnohistórico* (México: FCE, 1946, rpt. 1972) by Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán created a controversy about Mexico's African ancestry (to my knowledge "The Black Population of Mexico" has not been translated into English). The bibliographies in books and online on slavery and race mixture in the U.S. and in Latin America are extensive.

In the U.S., the capitalization of the term *Negro* at the time of the Harlem Renaissance initiates a shift in the African American intellectual and cultural sensibility, towards favorable acceptance of the term imposed from without. Capitalized, as in W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903 (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003), *Negro* marks a conscious effort to instill pride in the African ancestry of descendants of slaves. It seems logical to me that the term *colored* made African Americans conscious of their European ancestries. The NAACP—the National Association of Colored People—was founded in 1910. Originally published in 1962, the French *Les poètes nègres des États-Unis* by Jean Wagner, translated into English as *Black Poets of the United States: From Lawrence Dunbar to Langston Hughes* (Urbana: University of Chicago, 1973), is an exhaustive treatment of early African American poetry in general, and of the poets of the Harlem Renaissance in particular. The Harlem Renaissance produced a great many literary works that dealt with the themes of "race mixture" and "passing."

Years later, during the 1960s, educated African Americans launched the Civil Rights Movement. Other activist blacks launched the Black Power movement that set the example for the social movements of Chicano, Asian and Native Americans. During this decade and the next, spokesmen for these movements promoted *racial* identities, emphatically. Paradoxically, they picked terms that race thinkers had previously imposed on our groups—*black*, *brown*, *yellow*, and *red*—and inverted their value. And today the

pejorative term *colored people* has been replaced by the preferred positive term, *people of color*. Today, one finds in a work by Dominican writer Julia Alvarez a publication with the inverted positive term “*A White Woman of Color*” (in *Half and Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural*, edited by Claudine Chiawei O’Hearn (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998). A panel at a multi-ethnic conference raised the question not too long ago: are Asian Americans the new whites?

Discussions of race may or may not take into account the psychological significance of inverting negative perceptions into positive ones. The African American endorsement of a black racial identity was a defiant one, a psychologically complex response to race prejudice, denial of civil rights, social and educational inequality, and more. “Black is beautiful,” they began to proclaim in the 1960s. They did not choose to be called a separate race. If that were the case, they were left with no choice but to take pride in their blackness. One wonders how many Americans have an acceptable acquaintance with the enormous contribution of enlightened, educated African Americans and by other diverse men and women to U.S. intellectual, cultural, and social life, and to literature and the arts.

Contribution by members of other cultural groups are equally impressive—East Indian, Lebanese, Greek, Italian, Mexican, and others. Think of the countless Nobel Prizes in Literature, too numerous to mention, to persons of many nations, whose works were not included in the *Norton Anthology of Western Literature*, until sometime in the 1990s, when it was renamed *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*. The name changes from *Western* to *World*, plus the addition of *Masterpieces*, are very significant. Think only of two Pulitzer Prizes, one awarded in 1988 to African American Toni Morrison for her superb novel *Beloved* (1988), and another, awarded in 2000, to East Indian American Jhumpa Lahiri for the remarkable stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999).

In discussions of race and ethnicity in the U.S., identity terms raise questions about what they mean and circumscribe, and about what they leave out. Members within given groups disagree among themselves. *No spokesman of a group speaks for the entire group*. For example, as a collective term *African American* promotes unity, self-worth, and pride in *culture and ancestry* rather than in *race*. However, because of its associations with *race*, the term minimizes the *ancestral diversity* of the group and varieties of the African American experience. A Polish scholar, Ewa Luczak, has published an outstanding book on five African American expatriate writers—*How Their Living Outside America Affected Five African American Authors* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010.). Her book also examines varieties of the African American experience and conflict within the group in the U.S. during the turbulent 1960s.

Identity terms also raise questions and minimize the diverse multiple ancestries of other American groups and their particular cultural histories: Asian-American, Hispanic or Latino, Chicano, and Jewish American. For example, Asian Americans include people of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hawaiian and other ancestries. Young Koreans who know the story of how the Japanese enforced prostitution of young Korean comfort women and girls for Japanese soldiers resent the Japanese. In 1993 the Japanese government admitted using Korean girls for the sexual gratification of Japanese soldiers and apologized. Recently, on March 1, 2007, according to the local newspaper, Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe denied the forced sexual slavery. The actual story is told by George Hicks in *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997 ed.). Equally diverse, U.S. Latinos come from Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Chile, El Salvador, Argentina, and from other countries as well. In addition to the indigenous ancestors of some Latinos and Hispanics, other of their ancestors came from the Mediterranean, where since ancient times diverse peoples have mingled their genes and chromosomes.

The most recent phenomenon in the U.S. is that there are Americans whose parents are Armenian and Mexican, Mexican and Irish, Japanese or Chinese and German, African American and Korean, Jewish and African American, Columbian and Swedish, Vietnamese and Japanese, Vietnamese and Polish. Why do people with Asian or African ancestry tend to classify themselves as Asian American or African American, respectively, even if they have European ancestors? For example, President Barack Obama identifies himself as *black* on the 2010 Census. For some people the *one-drop rule* appears to continue to prevail. In some cases the choice is not voluntary.

Nowadays, some young Americans of different European origins express dismay that they can claim no individual identifiable ancestry. In their own perceptions they are simply "white." They call themselves "mongrels," and that is not the case—despite what reputable historians such as Daniel Boorstin (*The Americans*, 3 vols.) and Arthur M. Schlesinger (*The Disuniting of America*, 1991) may say—because like a great many Americans these Americans too are people of multiple *European* ancestries, not of multiple *races*. It is sad when they feel left out or feel guilty for their ancestors' "white people's" racism. One young American author, Janet Fitch, has resolved this dilemma for many people of European ancestry. The twelve-year-old narrator of her novel, *White Oleander* (1999), has blonde hair and her name Astrid is taken from Norse legends. The novel expresses a favorable view of ancestry in many passages. For example, in the following passage, Astrid's mother says: "We received our coloring from Norsemen," she said. 'Hairy savages who hacked their gods to pieces and hung the flesh from trees. We

are the ones who sacked Rome. Fear only feeble old age and death in bed. Don't forget who you are.”

When considering race and ethnicity in the U.S., other questions arise. What is a Jew? What is a Jewish American? There is some agreement among Jews and considerable disagreement. The argument that Jewish identity is not one of nationality is persuasive. My nationality is American, a Jewish person might say, who was born or naturalized in this country. But in the U.S. and all the countries of the Americas, are we not all *Americans*? Insisting that religion defines a Jew enjoys wide acceptance by practicing Jews, but what of Jews who do not observe Jewish religion? And what does it mean that children with Jewish mothers are Jewish, even if the fathers are not? According to Jewish tradition, the children of Jewish fathers and a non-Jewish mother are not Jews—why not? Do they not have Jewish ancestry?

People can change their nationalities and their religions, but they cannot change their genes and chromosomes—we cannot change our ancestries, but ancestries can be combined. Some Jews are Ashkenazim, others Sephardim, some are a combination of the two, and others identify themselves on the basis of birthplace and national origin; their citizenship may be Polish, Russian, German, Italian, Argentine, or Mexican. Other Latin American nations have Jews who are citizens of those nations by birth. To some Jews it does not matter that some of their ancestors were Jewish people. Jews, like many people in the arts, are citizens of the world.

Our genes and chromosomes cross national borders when our ancestors move. What does it mean to say, as Charles Chapman demonstrates in the *History of Spain* (founded on the multi-volume *Historia de España y de la Civilización Española* by Rafael Altamirano. New York: The Free Press, 1918), that some people from Mediterranean Spain (or Italy) have Jewish ancestry, as well as Arabic, Visigothic, Phoenician, Roman, and Greek ancestries? Consequently, Latinos, Hispanics and Mexicans are people of *multiple ancestries*. Carlos Fuentes, the Mexican novelist, says in *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1959) that “Mexico is a thousand countries with a single name.” The main character of the novel is Artemio Cruz, offspring of a *mulata* slave and a *criollo* father. Artemio has green eyes.

Classifications of Americans according to national, religious or cultural origins are useful. Racial categories, however, are unreliable, based on invented differences that are merely cultural and *biological*, but not *racial*. There is only one race: the *human race*! What I am suggesting is that we need to clarify our thinking about racial and racist ideas that we use, unexamined, out of custom.

Cries of alarm nowadays about the disuniting of America, about ethnic studies in our high schools and colleges, hostile remarks about illegal immigration, the backlash

against affirmative action, the move from the war on poverty to war on the poor, the pervasiveness of violence and hatred—these are symptoms of a nation passing through a mean and frustrating period in history. Americans are angry because they are helpless. They can do nothing about the billions of dollars wasted by government officials and politicians, the multi-million dollar bankruptcies that gobble up our tax money, the magnitude of corruption and greed. Americans are helpless against the unequal application of the law, blatant corporate gouging, or Big Business' disregard for unborn generations of Americans. Instead, helpless Americans shrug their shoulders about the blatantly scandalous conduct of presumably respectable Americans, and wage war on fellow citizens who are more helpless and more vulnerable than they are.

We were reminded recently, on Tuesday, January 25, 2011, by President Barack Obama's uplifting State of the Union address, that the country belongs to all of us. There was a time in our history when Americans of every background longed deeply to belong. Unfortunately, some citizens of our country were denied the human, civil and legal rights to which citizenship and the Constitution entitled them.

It is important for the opponents of Hispanic and Ethnic Studies classes to recognize that systematic exclusion, denial of human rights, injustice and racial intolerance engendered the Civil Rights Movements of which Americans are today beneficiaries. Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* and the character of Bigger Thomas address this longing of black people to belong and the denial of human rights. Wright's novel provides a telling portrayal of black stereotypes in the U.S. in the 1940s. This knowledge that we Americans have gained from scholarship and from literature and the arts produced by people whose ancestors were previously denied rights guaranteed by the Constitution to all citizens must be recognized.

The recent intolerance and hatred of the immigrants today expressed by some Americans in Arizona, in Texas and elsewhere shows that some Americans forget that even their European ancestors were also despised by people who believed in a *superior white race* from which their ancestors were excluded. At the beginning of the twentieth century American race-thinkers drew in the minds of Americans a *color line* between blacks and whites. American historians, Oscar Handlin in *The American People in the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954, rpt. 1967), and John Higham in *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925* (New York: Atheneum, rpt. 1963., 1972), have pointed out that American *nativists* (a polite word for *racists* or white supremacists), like Theodore Lothrop Stoddard, Madison Grant, and many others, gave scientific credentials to race prejudice. Stoddard, Grant and others extended the *color line* to European people from eastern and Mediterranean Europe, according to Handlin and Higham. In his Introduction to Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color Against White*

Race Supremacy (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), Madison Grant divided up Europeans into three white race categories: first, the supreme white race, with purity of blood, the *Nordics* from northern Europe; then the inferior whites, *Alpines* and *Mediterraneans* whose blood, Grant argued with admirable historical knowledge and scientific evidence, had been contaminated historically by race mixture with non-whites. It is historically true that the Europeans had mingled their genes and chromosomes with Asiatic people.

That is a fascinating chapter of American immigration and social history, when Europeans of so-called "impure blood" were classified as members of inferior "colored" races. To curtail the emigration of Jews, Hungarians, Poles, Greeks, Italians, Armenians and other Europeans, American nativists with impressive academic credentials mounted a campaign against them in scientific journals and books, raising a cry of alarm about "the rising tide of color" that threatened to contaminate the blood of the great white race in America. As John Higham points out, the proponents of white race supremacy were eminently successful in 1924 in "closing the gates" of immigration and in establishing quotas for people from other countries who wanted to emigrate.

One of the great contributions of scholarly works on race and ethnicity in the U.S. has been the rewriting of history and the reinterpretation of the past. Two excellent examples will suffice. Roger Daniels has suggested in his book, *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and The Struggle for Japanese Exclusion* (Berkeley: U of CA Press, 1978) that Hitler and the Nazis adopted U.S. nativist concepts against Jews and other "inferior" peoples. Daniels has written extensively about the internment of American citizens of Japanese ancestry. A second author, on behalf of Mexicans, Américo Paredes in his 1957 book *With His Pistol in his Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin: UT Press, 1958), demonstrated that Texas historian Walter Prescott Webb had stereotyped preconceptions about Mexicans and Texas Rangers' attitudes towards Mexicans, and that these made their way into Texas history books. Daniels and Paredes demonstrate how racist ideas made their way into American minds by being developed in American books, scientific journals, newspapers, and other written works.

In historical, literary and social sciences scholarship, and in arts and letters, the achievements of African Americans, Chicanos, and of other Americans of diverse ancestries are clearly demonstrable. Now, however, too much is at stake. Preferred identities and achievements against adversity are responses to exclusion, injustice, inequality, racial discrimination, and denial of rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution to all citizens of the U.S. Consider how being locked into racial categories influences the way we perceive and regard a great American writer like Toni Morrison. For example, Toni

Morrison is a great American writer. She is a great woman writer. To African Americans she is a great African American woman writer, a vivid reflection of African American's great creative potential and achievements. Because of our nation's shameful past, mitigated by America's recognition of her art, she is a great African American writer.

Looking back to 1963, we see that we passed through a hostile period in our history, as the film *Mississippi Burning* illustrates. The doctrine of white supremacy is clearly expressed by characters that represent the race thinking of the Ku Klux Klan. How many Americans know that during WWI Madison Grant, a major proponent of white race supremacy, extended to Germans his favorable conception of the great white race? After WWI however, when the U.S. had been at war with Germany, Grant rewrote his tract on white race supremacy, and deleted all praise for German people. The war had turned Germans into "huns." According to John Higham, in the later 1918 edition of his 1916 book *The Passing of the Great Race*, Grant wrote that the pure German blood had been contaminated by Asiatic blood. One cannot deny the German's Asiatic ancestry. When one looks at some German people the Asiatic ancestry is evident in the shape of the eyes, in the complexion and in the absence of body hair.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, because of race thinking, Americans of German, Jewish, Italian, Irish, and Polish ancestry—today classified as *white*—experienced race discrimination, in addition to people of African, Mexican, Chinese and Japanese ancestry. In fairness to Americans, within the very social sciences professions in which the process of giving scientific credentials to invented racial differences was taking place, a revolt against racism developed.

Unfortunately, perceptions and misconceptions of race and ethnicity persist; we learn them from books, from newspapers, the news, movies, talk shows, and more. Sensationalized media coverage keeps race notions present in people's minds. Fortunately, false notions and misconceptions of race can be unlearned. For this reason, it should be of great concern to all of us that across the nation Americans of every background and social class are discussing and raising questions about race. The need to express grievances or to lament past injustices and inherited guilt should be understandable.

In recent years *the racism of the past inevitably touched the innocent "white" descendants of those who used to be beneficiaries of race differences and inequalities*. Racism that victimizes any human being victimizes every one of us. Regrettably, when a hostile climate of race consciousness exists we can see racism even where it does not exist.

The date 1954 marked a significant year in American history. As I have said, in that year the U.S. Supreme Court, to the credit of this nation, ruled that separate but equal education was unconstitutional in the United States, and by extension, so was segregation. Overnight, from one day to the next or even years later, court rulings and new legis-

lation do not change attitudes and perceptions about race that were inherited from ancestors and the social life of the past. Unfortunately, *good old boys* are still around.

Since the turbulent years of the late 1950s to the 1970s, many young and decent Americans learned, unhappily, about social conditions in this country that they never imagined existed. On television sets in American homes across the nation black people leapt into living rooms, pursued by police, German shepherd dogs, and firemen with fire hoses. Poets and novelists, dramatists and filmmakers have explored and given artistic expression to many varieties of the American experience that are distinct to and shared by members of the population whose cultural groups had been and continue to be under-represented in many areas of American life. They were once called “minority groups.”

In academia, social scientists, ethnic studies professors, historians and literary critics have created new areas of intellectual inquiry. Outside and inside of academia, during more than fifty years, an immensely valuable and enlightening body of creative works and scholarly literature by and about African, Chicano [Latinos, Hispanics], Asian, and Native Americans, and by and about Americans of European and Middle Eastern ancestry, has taken impressive hold on the national consciousness. New knowledge challenges old misconceptions and unreliable classifications of race and ethnicity. Sympathetic partisans of so-called “racial” groups and, admirable intentions notwithstanding, the excess and proliferation of what one might call “race talk” unfortunately perpetuates grass roots misperceptions and false notions about race. Too many well-meaning people write about race issues, harmfully, despite good intentions. First, many Americans speak about regrettable personal experiences, without a knowledge of the past. Secondly, when we write or talk about *race*, when we speak of “White America” and “Black America” and “people of color,” *paradoxically we continue to give credence to classifications and categories of race that are unreliable, false, inaccurate.*

There is a danger of too much race talk. We are locked into classifications and categories of race that have been imposed on us; inverting their value and using them as if they were valid, we perpetuate unreliable categories of human beings. Americans forget the nomenclature that in our past history divided citizens into groups and expressed contempt for them. How can one speak of *race differences in America* without being reminded of *terms* such as: *mick, spick, wop, kike, polack, hun, kraut, chink, jap, and gook*, in addition to *meskin, greaser, nigger* and other terms?

The social sciences nomenclature of race and ethnicity was initially meant to be useful in classifying knowledge about human beings from non-Western parts of the world. Social sciences knowledge and scientific information became unreliable and misleading when it was used to promote notions of racial superiority and inferiority. Terms like *race, primitive people, Western and non-Western people* became loaded.

In the U.S., for example, one might ask: What is the meaning of *race mixture*? *Mixed marriages*, *bi-racial* marriages, *multi-ethnic* and *multi-racial* children are terms that accept the conceptual basis of race. How many races can there be? To what race does a person with one parent of German and Irish ancestry and the other parent of Japanese ancestry belong? To what race does the child of Native American, African and Spanish ancestries belong if the latter ancestry includes Arabic, Visigothic (Germanic), Greek, Roman and Jewish genes and chromosomes? Why is a blond, blue-eyed, fair-skinned person “black,” who has a preponderance of Irish and Scottish, English and German, a touch of Jewish ancestry, and a distant African ancestor? Why?

I am sympathetic to people who are asking why we cannot stop focusing on race. Why we cannot have united people in the United States. The people who should be unifying us are dividing us. In a climate of unprecedented anger and hatred, our present President Barack Obama (like Bill Clinton before him) has not been allowed to be president. We are divided into rich and poor, Republicans and Democrats and Independents, those that have and those that have not, working class people and the wealthy. Banks and the automobile industry, the gasoline and cable companies, pharmaceutical companies and HMOs, the war on the poor, hostile drivers on the freeway, cell phones, and insurance companies—place us in the most precarious conditions of national life. A united country is something that we never have been. Perhaps the time of WWII was an exception, except for African Americans.

Today, however, international universities are trying, and some like UC Riverside in the U.S. are succeeding to recognize the importance of diversity among our student and U.S. populations. In Spain, Holland, Germany, Latin America, and in other countries in Europe too, like the University of Warsaw and its Institute of English (and American) Studies, impressive strides are being made. In matters of *race and ethnicity* in the U.S., we can work to enlarge understanding, and we can take comfort in the knowledge that because race prejudice is learned, it can be unlearned.

History has taught us that in truth the true American patriots are African Americans, Chicanos, Native Americans, and other American allies who criticize the betrayal of our nation's ideals of liberty, justice, and equality. It is important therefore to understand that the complex of attitudes, beliefs, and values to which under-represented groups subscribe is the end product of denials, historically, of civil and legal rights, human rights, and social equality.

At American colleges, universities and high schools, Black Studies, Chicano Studies, Asian American and Ethnic Studies classes, scholarship, literature and the arts, and campus clubs have been brought into existence, propelled by the most natural human response to exclusion, a sense of not being permitted to belong in the larger society.

Theirs was and is the very same human longing to belong that in the past led immigrants to seek the comfort of communities like those they left behind. Social scientists call those communities *ethnic enclaves*: the shtetl, Chinatown, Little Tokyo, little Hungary, little Havana, the barrio, Germantown, Harlem, and Greektown, among others. These are the places in America—in all the Americas!—where ancestral cultures, language, and traditions clash and fuse with those of the adopted countries and enrich and enhance the national repositories of our combined legacies and cultural inheritance. We can see that the U.S. embraces many varieties of our languages, culture, intellectual history, arts and letters, cuisine, and above all, our multiple ancestries.

The social protest movements have not been directed against American ideals of justice, fair play, equality of education and opportunity, or against the American dream. This too, must be remembered. Fair-minded people believe in ideals that have been repeatedly betrayed in the past. No one can argue that some of our American ideals are to be lamented or that justice is not colorblind. The social movements have been directed at the betrayals of American ideals. The protests have *not* been against colorblind justice, but against those who enforce, legislate and implement laws, *against those who are not colorblind.*

As I hope to show with my most recent anthology of short stories by young Americans of diverse backgrounds, *American Identities: California Short Stories of Multiple Ancestries* (New York: Xlibris, 2008), it is comforting to know that our schools, colleges and universities bring good young people—students of diverse immigrant backgrounds—into proximity with each other. Of good heart, they are discovering each other. Young people are vulnerable, and when they see this about each other they tend to form a camaraderie that helps them to look beyond race, even when, in the larger world, the media still dwells on it. In my heart I believe most sincerely that *the concept of multiple ancestries* is more fair and accurate than the countless misconceptions and unreliable classifications of race. There are no races in the world at large. There is only one human race. Genes and chromosomes are *biological*, not racial realities.

In 2011 we are still speaking of race, and regrettably we shall continue to do so, because we are locked into a complex process, historically, of which the younger generations of Americans of diverse *multiple ancestries*—“multi-racial” and “multi-ethnic” people—are the end product. Too many people need a shared group identity. We must respect that need.

Again, the experience of African Americans is dramatically instructive. Toni Morrison for example, winner of a Pulitzer Prize, is an American writer. She brings honor to all people, to the international world of arts and letters, to our entire nation, to all Americans, even as she shows where our country has failed some of its citizens in the past. But Toni Morrison is black, an African American, a woman, a writer.

African Americans share in the glow of the honor she brings to the world. Ideally, some insist, we should see her as a great writer. Ideally, yes. I concur. But our history has denied such an ideal recognition, as well as other ideals. African Americans have a natural, a most understandable right to claim her as one of their own, because consciousness of exclusion in the past persists and also in the conscience of those who know the African American past. This must be understood.

Finally, in the United States, African Americans *are not a race*. They are a people of *multiple ancestries*. Only Americans of African ancestry, many of them descendants of slaves, have been denied the right to claim their ancestors from Ireland, England, France, Eastern Europe, Spain, Scotland, Korea, China, and elsewhere. Like a majority of Americans today, African Americans, like Latinos and others, are *people of multiple ancestries*.

Long before the convergence in the Americas of people from Europe, Asia, and Africa, peoples of similar ancestries had converged in the Mediterranean, and they mingled their genes and chromosomes. People with the same genes and chromosomes have been divided by national boundaries, by cultural traditions and customs inherited from distant ancestors, and by varieties of languages and religious beliefs.

White America and *Black America* are terms that create divisive abstractions. Other terms also name abstractions: *urban America*, *blue collar America*, and *rural America*. Recent terms that create abstractions are the ubiquitous *American white male*, the ethnocentric *European colonizer*, and the *tea party people*. Cruelty, violence, and killing, and other evil propensities that one can name are to be found in all peoples and countries of the world in other historical periods.

So long as politicians of ill will and their ilk succeed in dividing us, so long as people continue to express contempt for others, so long as politicians wage war on the poor and on artists who exhibit a social conscience, so long as we discuss issues in terms of *race*, then people will continue to suffer, and in the political and social transactions, as in those of the heart, it will always be helpless children and vulnerable young people who will suffer most. Greed permits too many people to live comfortably with complete lack of concern for human health, for the unborn generations, and for the state of the world after they are gone.

To end on a positive note, our national culture—*race and ethnicity in the U.S.*—has been greatly enriched, despite adversity, during the past fifty years and more, beginning with the important 1954 Supreme Court decision that brought honor to all American citizens with a healthy conscience. The year 1954 ushered in a period of American history in arts and letters, and in scholarship, that permits us today to see the diversity of Americans as a people of *multiple ancestries*.