

Immigration and the Fracturing of Community (Discussion)

Transcript of discussion held in Philadelphia on June 12, 1997

RICHARD RODRIGUEZ: This is the part of the meeting that's more interesting to me than to you because I can find out how much of this makes any sense to you. I'm willing to entertain any observations, objections, questions, insights. I will steal your ideas, I promise you.

MARTIN MARTY: Pardon?

RODRIGUEZ: I will steal your ideas.

MARTY: OK. By the way, I do have a Mexican granddaughter, so I'm beginning to be in the club. First of all, I you parachuted into a group that is talking exactly about what you're giving us, or at least you're putting on our agenda. I feel very much at home with that new agenda. Three times you used the word `meaning': once `the meaning of America'; once your waiter this morning `will change the meaning of Philadelphia'; and `what does California mean?' And I'm wondering whether you think there is such a thing as a search for the meaning of the larger culture, whatever it is. Should we seek it? What do--begin to look like? Is it a will-o'-the-wisp? Is it a dream? What do you have in mind when you--or are you being ironic?

RODRIGUEZ: Well, I was partly being ironic. I was being insofar as I'm American, I'm ironic. I don't think that the American inclines to 'the meaning.' And that's why I think we've always romanticized the immigrant as precisely sort of challenging 'the meaning.' There is -- I take it that there is in this country right now a kind of fatigue that is beginning to develop and a sense in which we have to find 'the meaning'. We cannot go living this life indefinitely. We may not need those people redefining us, on the one hand. On the other hand, we are tired of it. We see this kind of confusion in our own children and we yearn for a meaning.

But I use the term ironically and I see it as an impossible quest. I think one of the things I love so much about this country is precisely its wildness. I just find this country to be astonishing in its adolescence, that it just seems not to settle down. And every time you think you have it, it just sort of goes away and does something else. In that way, I've always thought that I don't speak English so much as I speak American, that this country, this language that we speak--the British have always said that, of course, that we don't speak English--but that the language that we speak is so much I mean, the world language--the American tongue--the reason it's the world language, because it's always been without fear of the world. It's always sort of absorbed the world. It has been willing to change and to steal the languages of the world. And I love that language very much. I'm very much afraid, as we begin now to speak of the US English movement, mandating that English be spoken here, and I think to myself, well, 'What is English?' You know, is the word 'sauna'--is that English, you know? I mean, is this kind of the Academie Francaise, where we sort of decide what is and what isn't?

The intensity with which the pioneers in the 19th century were willing to steal Spanish and make it English--mosquito, mesa--and make those Spanish words our language. That was the very arrogance that allowed for the creation of a world tongue. When we stop that, when we settle the tongue, when we settle the culture, we become, friends, it seems to me. We become something much less. And there are people in this country, I think, who really want to settle it. And I hope this Commission is not part of that process.

Yes.

ROBERT WIEBE: I take your bumper sticker 'Assimilation happens' to be, in a sense, the theme of your talk. Things happen. People want things, but in your scheme, that want becomes ironic, foolish, ineffectual. Because things happen. I wonder, is that the message you think would best serve this commission, to sense that when a person or groups of people in the United States choose to identify themselves in what would additively become a multicultural society, they're fatuous, they're against the current, that assimilation happens? They can't do that.

RODRIGUEZ: Uh-huh.

WIEBE: Is...

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, I do think...

WIEBE: Am I in tune with what you're trying to tell us? I'm a little disturbed, for us, I guess.

RODRIGUEZ: Well, don't be. I mean, I don't distinguish in my...

WIEBE: Or we would need to then look for the happenings and not paying much attention to what people...

RODRIGUEZ: Well, I asked one of the Commission members this morning whether there is an intent in future meetings to meet gang members, to meet high school teachers, to meet policemen, to meet missionaries from Mormon churches and so forth. I'd like to see between what I call the level of physics and the level of biology. I mean, the President's about to convene this meeting on race relations, and I think it's going to be very much physics, where Americans talk about what race is and race relations and these huge terms as though there is this thing called black America or this thing that's called white America and so forth.

At the level of biology, of course, we're listening to each other's music, we're falling in love, we hate each other, we're fighting, we're so engaged by each

other that we can we almost can't--are obsessed by each other. I mean, the level of biology--I keep thinking--you know, I'm working right now on the Jehovah's Witness, which I find--I'm studying the Jehovah's Witness. I've always been interested in that church, but it's really--you know, economically and culturally at the very bottom, and yet it is probably--the congregations that I have met are the most integrated of any society's I know of in the United States. And it is so easily integrated that you wonder, well, why do you do it and why cannot Harvard do it? You know, what's Harvard's problem? Why does USA Today report that college-educated blacks are so pessimistic when at this level America is so intensely at each other's face, you know?

I would just say to anybody who has to live in the world of physics, which is where you and I exist, that we be attentive to the world of biology and that we realize that there is something going on, a knowledge below that is going to revolutionize the top and it works that way. It does not come down from on high, you know? And it makes me nervous sometimes to even talk this way because already to suggest that I see the world from on high is to misidentify where I'm seeing the energies. They're coming from down bottom.

WIEBE: But I hear you say that is things like energies and flow and happenings. I'm delighted to hear that change is coming from the bottom and not the top.

RODRIGUEZ: Yeah.

WIEBE: I'm not delighted to think that those changes seem to lie beyond the capacities of any groups to make choices about change which would have a significant effect on change.

RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think you can--for example, I think that--let me use the issue of illegal immigration. I think that part of what I'm urging is that it seems to me that there's a movement in the world right now that we cannot completely control. I think we can talk about improving of the way the border is policed. We can talk about certainly making the Border Patrol a much more efficient, a much more professional police force. But finally I'm arguing that there is something that this American notion that we sort of can will the

future to happen is fallacious, that it doesn't always work that way. There are energies that are beyond our willing.

It's sort of like--I remember watching this demonstration on--I'm scattering--but this demonstration for AIDS research at one of these annual meetings. I think it was in Toronto. And I thought to myself, 'What if there isn't a cure for AIDS?' I mean, where do we get the idea that if Elizabeth Taylor collects enough money, you know, we can sort of lick it or we can sort of deal with it? The thing I love most about America as opposed to my Mexican father's pessimism was that there was always this will in America that we can do it. If we decide to do it, we can get a computer in every classroom and so forth and so on.

Well, I don't want America to lose that determination, but at the same time, it seems to me that we have to move with a kind of willingness to move with the flow and to deal with the flow at the level at which both we have to respond to it, but we also have to realize that it's not totally within our control to manage, and that some patience with the world is required, it seems to me, and some patience with the future, that it's not going to be ours to settle. I don't know how else to say that. But I'm very much humbled by the energies of this society, which I'm very optimistic about, incidentally. I think something is being born in this society; it has not died.

Yes.

LAWRENCE LESSIG: I want to continue with Bob's question, I think. And it's really to push you on your refusal to engage the normative question that was asked to you about assimilation. I mean, I agree assimilation happens, but assimilation happens differently for the Turks in Germany, for the Hungarians in Romania, for the Serbs and Croats in former Yugoslavia, for the French [in] Quebec. It happens differently.

And I completely agree with you that we have no complete control over it, but that's a separate question from what a normative attitude should be towards it, right? I mean, there's a poetry--a beautiful poetry in what you've given us today, and forgive me for my lack of sensitivity to the poetry,

because I really am eager to figure out what the normative attitude should be here, because assimilation can happen very differently because of what we do.

And the question, I guess, then is what should we do? Even if I completely agree we can't control what's going to happen. I mean, your speech resonates in a way that you won't recognize with the morning speech yesterday, a kind of determinism that we can't do anything about. I think some of us want to resist. I want to know, first, what should we do and then we'll get to the question of what can we do--but what we should do here?

RODRIGUEZ: Well, let me answer the second question, 'What can't we do?' I think we cannot legislate people from meeting each other. I think we live in a too intensely narrow world now, where influences can sort of be segregated and kept apart. I remember being challenged that, you know, at 2 AM at one of these talk radio shows and some woman called up and said, you know, 'Don't you care anything at all about these Brazilian Indians, that they're losing their culture?' And I thought to myself, 'Well, you know, if I were culture minister in Brazil, the first thing I would do is teach them Brazilian Portuguese, for their survival.'

I am not going to legislate gringo evangelical missionaries out of Guatemala. I think that's foolish. I think it achieves nothing. I think that finally people are going to meet. I mean, that's one of the historical realities of the modern age.

And once they meet, I would like to argue, and this is where I think that sometimes the West is a little bit too guilty, with its sense that it is changing them--once they meet, of course, all bets are off, as in the case [of] Mexico, for example, you know --I remember at the Columbus anniversary--the 500th anniversary--there was all this lament about what the Spaniard had done to the Indian, and I keep thinking to myself, well, you know, I go to Mexico and I don't see that many Spaniards around, you know?

If they had won this, you know, where are they? And why is it that all these Indians are speaking Spanish? How do we understand that? Do we understand that as simply the triumph of Spain over the Indian, or do we

understand that it's some way as a triumph of Indian curiosity over the Spanish language.

But we know that in the United States, at the end of World War I, New York stole English from London. Right now Mexico has stolen Spanish from Madrid and we do not note that sufficiently, it seems to me--how the colonized become in some way as powerful as the colonizer, and that in that medium of assimilation the two are changed--or at least one is in jeopardy in a way that perhaps only Prospero knew. I mean, Prospero knew that Caliban was always willing to swallow whatever Caliban came in touch with, swallowed Miranda, swallowed Prospero's books--that there was something about the Indian that was enormously dangerous.

We know that about Asia. It annoys us that Asia is as imitative of us as it is, and that it takes us and somehow redoes us better. We keep insisting that, no, that isn't the way it should work. You know, Asia should come up with its own ideas, its own technology and so forth. Well, I think that that imitative principle may be the more interesting way of talking about what's going on in the world. It was a Canadian, after all, Marshall McLuhan, who said to us that 'You know, you Anglo-Americans who think that you have become the culture of the world, who think that, with guilt or with pride, who think that just because the Air India pilot landing in Moscow is speaking English now; just because the teen-agers of Bombay are dancing to Michael Jackson; just because the teen-agers of Peru are drinking Coca-Cola, that you are now masters of the world.' He said, 'At the very moment at which the world is taking your culture, it is their culture, that you have lost it. They have swallowed you up.'

And we don't understand that. I don't think we have any idea how American the non-American societies of the world are now, and how we're almost like this kind of orange that has been sucked of its juice. We sit here now worried about the influence we have on the world when, clearly, the world has already taken our juice, has moved to some other kind of energy.

Does that get to something of your worry? What I worry about in your question is that somehow this deliberation--even answering that, that I can

decide, you know, that it was not all right for Nunez Cabeza de Vaca to leave Spain and to enter the Texas panhandle. He ends up, you know, he says in his journal, some morning in Texas. He ends up in writing in his journal that, 'The Indians have come this morning,' he says, 'at the hour that they promised and they have brought with them certain fish and grains for us to eat.' And Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, the great Spanish explorer of the New World, sits there on his haunches, eating the food that the Indians have brought. And then he says, 'They have brought their women and children to look at us.'

But nowhere in his journal does he wonder what the Indians are looking at, because, of course, he has discovered them. And what's interesting to me about Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca is because he becomes the first major Spanish figure in colonial literature who was Indianized, who is so radically changed, but by the time he goes back to Spain, he's a joke. His face is painted. He's become a savage.

That the notion of assimilation always has to be reciprocal, that something almost biological is going on there, and that the conversion of one society by another leaves both sides absolutely vulnerable in a kind of erotic way to the penetration of that I want to leave clear, that [it] seems to me that something is out of control here. And I'm not sure how to legislate that relationship with some kind of you know, some kind of Amherst Law against touching or whatever.

LESSIG: You do sound like you're giving us a way of understanding assimilation that makes it easier to accept. It sounds like a normative argument. You don't want to call it that, that's fine, but, I mean, now you've shown--I mean, it's beautiful, in a sense, the way you've redescribed it but why do you want to stop by saying-- why don't you want to say it's beautiful?

RODRIGUEZ: Because I'd like saying, rather, that it I like talking about its aggression. I like talking about it in its harshest aspects. I keep saying, do you know, to people who tell me what a--with regret--even the Catholic Church--my own Catholic Church, which regrets what it did to the Indian, and I keep saying, 'Well, you know, maybe--maybe you did--you were cruel to the

Indian. But the more interesting fact is that we stole the baby Jesus.' The baby Jesus does not live in Europe. The baby Jesus has moved to Acapulco. He now wears sunglasses in Acapulco.

He lives with us, and that the most interesting thing about the Spanish-Colonial adventure in Latin America may be not that the Franciscan priests forced the Eucharist down the Indians' throat; the most interesting thing is that the Indian swallowed the Franciscan priest. She forgot to close her mouth.

In 1531, there is this story in Mexico of the Virgin de Guadalupe, who's the great patron saint of Mexico. It's a most interesting story. You may believe it as you will or not, but in 1531, the story goes, that the Virgin Mary, dressed as an Aztec princess--and you may see her all over the United States where there are Mexicans the Virgin Mary, dressed as an Indian--not only an Indian, but an Aztec princess, speaking the language of the Aztecs, addresses a Spaniard--a convert to Catholicism, an Indian, who may or may not have existed, and tells him to go into Mexico City to tell the Spanish bishop that she wants a church here. And it's sort of like J. Alfred Proofrock. OK. He--you know, he doesn't have the big words. He says, you know, 'I'm not Prince Hamlet nor was meant to be. You know, I'm an attendant, Lord, one that will do this ...(unintelligible) progress.' Get somebody else, you know?

She says, 'No, I want you.' So four times he goes to Mexico City, and three times the bishop thinks he's out of his mind. And, of course, secular friends of mine say, 'Well, of course, this whole story is some kind of Spanish contrivance.' I said, 'Well, maybe, it is a Spanish contrivance,' but what's interesting to me about the story is that the Indians liked the story. And I think to myself, 'What did the Indians like about the story?' Well, four times the Indian has to go see the bishop and four times the bishop is reluctant, and that in 1531, the Virgin Mary, dressed as an Aztec princess, sends the Indian to convert the Spanish bishop. She has revolutionized the dynamic of colonialism in 1531. I think to myself, 'That's sort of interesting, the Indian converting the Spaniard.'

And there she is, on my plates at the yuppie restaurant in Santa Monica, you know, they put that Virgin of Guadalupe--she's sort of the patron saint of all the yuppies who live in the Hollywood canyons. I don't know where they got her, but there she is. And who would have guessed that she would end up in some home of a British artist friend of mine who lives in the Hollywood hills. There she is, over his bed, and I think to myself, 'I don't even begin to wonder about the dynamic of assimilation. It is so wild and so unpredictable that it's wonderful.'

Yes.

ABNER MIKVA: You came across to me--and to carry out what Larry was asking about--you came across as a cosmic optimist. You really think that things are going to be better in spite of anything we do, and that these things are going to happen, whether it's assimilation and stealing each other's culture and so on, and I sense that you're not basically upset or dismayed about this happening. It's going to happen. And that's much more--it's much easier to hear than what Kevin Phillips was trying to tell us yesterday. He came across to me as a very pessimistic bean-counter, and I'd much rather hear you, besides which you're more poetic.

But the question is you're not suggesting that there are things that both the dominant and the subordinate groups can do about this assimilation process to ease the pains. As you indicated, there are pains connected with it. And I think that's what this group sort of sees its task as doing, is what can we do to make sure that there aren't any more broken heads than there have to be?

RODRIGUEZ: Well, in those human ways that you are compassionate--I don't mean to be careless about that. And I don't mean to celebrate the LA riot as an event as a carnival. It was a terrible, terrible--people died and people were beaten. And it was a calamity to Los Angeles. But I also say that something was born there. I don't know how else to deny that. You know that...

MIKVA: Can we not borne that thing that happened there without--and somehow minimize, diminish the anguish that the country had.

RODRIGUEZ: That's a very interesting question. I'm not sure we can. I've never been forced to say that and I'm not inclined to want to advertise that opinion, but I think sometimes culture, civilization gets created out of great chaos and negativity.

My optimism comes only out of a sense of finally the sense that people need to survive. People love their children. People want to protect their children. People want the best for their children. I'm so moved, all over the world, when you see people in movement, looking for something better. Nothing to do with choice, --something to do with some kind of animal instinct, to seek the new, to seek something improved. That this committee would stand and would try to make Dallas, Texas, and Los Angeles, or New York sort of more tolerant of that human need, I see as a useful function, but at some other level I also say, you know, this is going to happen regardless of whether we like it or not.

Yes.

WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON: Your optimism is refreshing. And you didn't choose a title "Immigration and the Fracturing of Community," but you did talk briefly about competition at the bottom between, you know, the broad category Hispanic and blacks. Could you elaborate a bit more on the nature of this competition, the short- or long-term consequences of this competition, and also would you be willing to entertain some thoughts about social policy options that ought to be considered, that might minimize any adverse social effects from this competition?

RODRIGUEZ: Let me go backwards. It seems to me that one of the great sins that the so-called Hispanic movement has committed against black America in the last 25 or 30 years is this very casual use of analogy, that we were, by analogy, comparable to black America and that the solutions to our predicament were to be found in the solutions of black America.

I do not think that is the case. I think that the dynamic of the experience of Hispanicity is a very different one, and certainly for Mexicans, the experience of being in the Southwest is very different from that of blacks in the

Southwest. There were towns, for example, in Texas, which imported Mexicans as a way of not having to rely on black labor. There was a possibility of interracial marriage for Mexicans, especially light-skinned Mexicans for generations that was not the case for blacks.

And this political use of analogies to justify one's position or to explain one's position by reference to the black experience seems to me to be not only historically fallacious, but extremely casual about the distinctiveness of group experiences, that in the first hand.

I want to say something almost the reverse now, and that was that I think it is absolutely urgent that black Americans come to terms with the fact that it is no lo--and certainly in places like Los Angeles, that it is not living in a white world, that the future--I mean, instead of worrying about the white university, it seems to me that by the year 2000--I think it's 2004 or 2005, all nine campuses of University of California--all nine campuses will be predominantly Asian in the majority. The whole dynamic of racism and affirmative action that we've been arguing about for the last 30 years, what will it mean in an Asian campus? How will we begin to describe what that dynamic is? What is the future for black teen-agers in the Chinese city of San Francisco?

That's the interesting question for me. And there is, right now, a kind of myopia in black leadership that just insists on that black and white conversation. I think it's extremely dangerous, extremely narrow, narrow focus.

Did you want to remark on that?

MICHAEL PIORE: Well, I mean, I just want to introduce the other view, and that is...

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, please.

PIORE: ...and that is that all these predictions about how the country is going to be 25 percent Hispanic or 25 percent--what--in the Census in 10 years or 15 years or 25 years, never come true.

RODRIGUEZ: Absolutely.

PIORE: And they don't come true because people reclassify themselves.

RODRIGUEZ: Absolutely.

PIORE: And the way they reclassify themselves is that all these other groups turn white. And so--I mean, there is capacity for the--I mean, I think you underestimate, in the way you present this picture, the capacity of the race issue, the division in American society between black and white to reassert itself on the map of this changing culture. I mean, I could describe my own family experience and I'm no more purely American and I've no more heritage of slavery or anything in a fundamental sense than you do.

And yet I've come in, as a third-generation immigrant, to see the world and understand American society in terms of black and white. And I've become white, although, that is in terms of the way this thing was structured, initially. In the way in which my ancestors were classified in the Census, I'm no more white than you are.

And so I mean, I think there is reason to--you know, to think maybe this will break down and so on, but I think that the picture you describe underestimates the capacity of this division between--that is the capacity of however much American culture changes, and I mean, what I think you really do capture is the fluidity of culture, the way it changes, the way language changes, the way American society has the ability to change.

And yet, there are certain themes that manage to persist for reasons that are really hard, perhaps, to understand, given the amount of change, and one of those themes is the way in which we have this ability to see the society in terms of black and white--and I mean, just to re-emphasize that, when you go to Latin America, people don't see the world in terms of black and white, and they have a vocabulary and they recognize a whole spectrum of color.

RODRIGUEZ: Everything--yes.

PIORE: And yet every time--it's not just me, but it's certainly me--I walk through the world and I classify everybody automatically in the back of my head as either black or white, and it has very little to do with what their actual color is.

RODRIGUEZ: Do you see me as black or white?

PIORE: I see you as white...

RODRIGUEZ: As white.

PIORE: ...if you'll excuse my--you know, I...

RODRIGUEZ: Can I--there's a...

PIORE: And I think that that is something which is carried by the culture.

RODRIGUEZ: There's a moment in de Tocqueville. It's one of the most astonishing episodes, and when he comes on an Indian and an African woman walking together--do you know the moment?--and he sees them--he, the great European on his horse, and he sees them, and the moment in which they see him, the Indian makes a run for it into the forest. And the African waits for him to approach. And de Tocqueville, he, the great white man on his horse, sees in that different, but similar reaction the mutual tragedy of both races, he says. The African is too indebted and too held by her relationship to the white, too needing of the white approval. The Indian is too haughty, too unwilling to co-exist with the white and so forth. But nowhere does he wonder what the black and the Indian were talking about; or why they were so easy together; or what this other relationship was about that had nothing to do with him?

Now you tell me that the Indian is white. I tell you that this Indian went into the forest and she ran away from the white man. I tell you that there are relationships in America now that are forming that do not assume the centrality of the white in the experience, and that to get back to Professor Wilson's question, I think there needs to be a conversation in America, for example, the chapter that never gets written in the history books that I've

read, that has to do with, for example, with the black-Indian marriage, which was one of the most extraordinary stories of American meeting, American union, in the middle of a calamity, suffered by both peoples, that nonetheless happens, so that every African-American friend of mine will say in the middle of the conversation, 'Oh, by the way, did you know my grandmother was a Cherokee?' I mean, that Cherokee grandmother sure got around because she's in every family that I know of and it seems to me that there are other conversations that need to be raised now, that are not simply through the mediation of the white specter and maybe even the feminist movement, which is trying not to establish a conversation among women, that has nothing to do with Alexis de Tocqueville as a man. Maybe that's part of the same impulse in our time.

Yes.

CASS SUNSTEIN: Yes. These are some remarks about identity. Malcolm X once looking over a black audience said--the white man says, 'You're black. Turn around, look at yourselves. You're 1,001 different colors.' And the Federalist 10--let's go back a couple centuries--the Federalist 10 was about the problem, really, in some ways of identity politics though it had a different dimension and the idea was that small polities tend to break down into sharply defined two or three groups and those commonalities impossible. So what you want to do is make it so there are 1,001 different colors. And the way you do that is to enlarge the sphere. And the idea was with a large sphere, you'd have 1,001 and if you had 1,001 you have a kind of universalism.

Now we could compare Malcolm X, who's 1,001 different colors, he said, looking over a black audience, and said something quite like that about the world after coming back from Mecca. You can compare that with the idea--with the images of one group swallowing another and then being swallowed by the other group, which is a kind of non-Federalist 10 and non-Malcolm X conception of how people define themselves. And we can distinguish that from kind of--might call it liberal utopianism, which is a conception of identity as multiplicitous and involving innumerable diverse characteristics. So that when I see you, I guess I should say I don't see a Mexican or Hispanic.

I see someone who has, you know, innumerable characteristics and most of them are commonly held. And on that view, the difference between liberal utopianism and identity politics, to the extent that there is one, is identity politics is really insistent on one or two characteristics as defining. And that gives rise to the notion that if my grandchild, let's say, is Mexican, that that's a problem or a plausible description even.

Now what I couldn't figure out is whether your remarks--I guess this is why it was an essay or like poetry. I couldn't figure out whether it was a criticism of liberal utopianism or a celebration. I have components of both.

RODRIGUEZ: You know, I think of Tiger Woods and I think to myself of this controversy now about whether or not we should have a mixed-race category--again, this choice--should we acknowledge the reality or should we pretend that it doesn't exist, and the argument among black civil rights groups right now is really rather furious about whether or not this is diminishment of black identity, because after all it's not simply the way we are, it is the way we are perceived that is key. The problem with that argument, of course, is that you define yourself--not unreasonably, but you define yourself through the eyes of your oppressor. And as an American, there's something about that that I don't like. I really believe in self-determination.

I remember when once Bill Moyers asked me how I thought of myself, as an American or Hispanic. I said, 'I'm Chinese.' And that's because I live in a Chinese city and that's because I want to be Chinese. Well, why not? And you take it away from me, you know, if you're man enough to take it away from me.

I think it's a celebration of utopianism. I do think the distinctions exist. That is, I do think we are moving perhaps in response to this observation, I'm not talking about an America tomorrow in which it's going to find black and white no longer the distinguishing marks of separateness. But for many, many young people, that I meet, it sounds almost Victorian to talk about their identity now that way. They don't think of themselves in those terms. And they think of--they're already moving into a world in which skin or tattoo or ornament or movement or commune or sexuality or drug are sort of the

organizing principles of their identity. And the notion that they are white or black doesn't--simply doesn't apply to them. And increasingly, of course, you meet children who really don't know how to say what they are anymore. They simply are too many things. We're in such a world--in such an America, what will this body say? We still live in a black and white America? I mean, what do we say to Tiger Woods who insisted he's not African, because that would deny his mother's existence.

I met a young girl in San Diego the other day who told me--this was at a convention of mixed race children, in which the common habit is to define one parent over the other. In most white and black marriages, the habit is to define black over white. But this girl said that her mother was Mexican and her father was African. I said, 'What are you?' She said, 'Black-xican.' And I think to myself, 'You know, the vocabulary that the Spanish empire has, the recognition of multiplicity of possibilities, we do not have in this so--we do not have words to describe who we are anymore. And if we rely, I tell you, if we rely on the old vocabulary, we are doomed because no one is using it anymore. They're inventing their own words. Yes.'

EDNA ULLMANN-MARGALIT: I guess I'll go back to what Larry Lessig said before that I hear a lot of description in what you say and also I hear a lot of poetry in what you say and I'm still wondering about the way we're supposed to take this story. I mean, what is the narrative we tell ourselves? What is, if you want, even the myth that we want--or the mythology we want to have about those facts? To say assimilation happens is one thing. To ask whether we like it or don't like it is another. And what is the story that we want to tell?

Now I want to go back, if you'll allow me, just for a second. You know, in a way back to basics as far as I understand this country. There used to be a time of a melting pot ideology and this melting pot ideology is no longer around. I come from a country where also a melting pot ideology was the dominant one and it's no longer around. And what replaces it is something which is fracturing and something like multicultural or culture of diversity and each group or color or ethnicity celebrates its own identity. And the question still

is: What is the story we tell ourselves? Do we want to adopt a story of a diversity? Or do we want to adopt a story that leads towards the assimilation that you are describing in an optimistic way?

I, in fact, want to ask you one particular question which is: I hear in what you--there's some economic story to this and Professor Wilson mentioned, you know, that competition at the bottom there it--the story of the movement you told us is a movement pushed mostly by trying to get a better life and so on. But the assimilation story you are telling, I wonder if you agree or if you want to comment on the fact that the assimilation, if it happens, it's all about marriage and intermarriage. When you say, 'The grandchild may be Mexican.' That this is a way to assimilation. If we are willing to accept that, this is perhaps the only path that assimilation can happen. Do we want this? Are we fearful of this? What is the story we tell ourselves about our daughters marrying ...

RODRIGUEZ: Let me get to your largest question, what myth do we tell ourselves? You know, I think the person who got closest to it was Karl Marx. Marx said that--he predicted that the discovery of gold in California would be a more central event to the Americas than the discovery of the Americas by Columbus. And I think what he goes on to write--this was only in a brief essay. He goes on to write that the discovery of the Americas by Columbus was only the meeting of two tribes, essentially: the European and the Indian. But he said, 'You know, when gold was discovered in California in the 1840s, the entire world met.' That for the first time in human history, all of the known world gathered. The Malaysian was in the gold fields along side the African, along side the Chinese, along side the Australian, along side the American pioneer, etc., etc., etc.

For the first time and with calamitous results, the world was seeking gold in the same place at the same time, and they were at each other's throats, people were murdered and so forth. But that was an event without parallel and it is, I think, the beginning of modern California and why California, today, really is the mythology. It provides the mythological structure for understanding how we might talk about the American experience as not being biracial, but

the experience of the re-creation of the worlds--the re-creation of the known world in the New World.

MARGALIT: Yeah. If I may just...

RODRIGUEZ: Yes.

MARGALIT: One sentence further. To me, American was--is a country of immigration. In a way, many years ago, some decades ago, this discussion would have been extremely eerie to have, you know, 'Where do we stand on immigration?' Immigration is what this country is about and this country is a country of immigrants. Now why is it not eerie to us, today, to talk about immigration?

RODRIGUEZ: Well, there...

MARGALIT: Perhaps one reason is that we--the worry, really, is illegal immigration. That's one thing and not...

RODRIGUEZ: That's one thing.

MARGALIT: And the other is whether still--I'm trying to understand whether this country understands itself as a country of immigrations.

RODRIGUEZ: Hmm.

MARGALIT: And of assimilation.

RODRIGUEZ: There...

MARGALIT: Or has it stopped understanding itself that way.

RODRIGUEZ: There was a book taken with great seriousness by the East Coast two years ago called "Alien Nation" by a man named Peter Brimelow--Peter Brimelow who, I think, he's a South African become a Briton, become a Canadian, become an American who ends up writing a book about how we don't really need very many more immigrants in this country and his publisher--a man named Evans, who is married to this dreadful woman who

runs the New Yorker, he took that book around to the Congress and gave a copy to each congressman. And one of the arguments that Brimelow makes in that book is that--not simply that we didn't need anymore immigrants, but that this country should think very seriously about whether we need non-European immigrants, whether we can tolerate Asian and Hispanic immigrants particularly. Whether they are not so alien to the American experience that they introduce mythologies and come at the country from points of view that are absolutely dangerous.

You know, you think back to the way the Chinese were treated in the 19th century in California and it is quite clear that something about the Asian immigrant did not sit easily with this nation of immigrants. And it was more troublesome than Protestant and the Catholic and Jew. It was that they were coming at the country from a totally new direction. They were restricted in their movements within the cities. They were normally excluded and kept to the outskirts of town or within Chinatowns. They were kept from reuniting with their wives. The inclination was once their labor was done, send them back. And the number of Chinese in California who escaped that tyranny only by ending going East--'Go East, young man'--in order to escape the tyranny of that anti-Chinese behavior on the West, is still very much alive and I think in California.

There is a fear right now of Asia that on the West Coast that very much has to do with the fact that we don't know--it's not simply about the immigrant, it's specifically about those immigrants. We don't know what to make of them, frankly. We don't know whether they fit into the American scheme of things. That's the answer to the question.

Your question about marriage I think is absolutely right. I don't know whether marriage is the word I would use. Certainly eroticism--I find that we are falling in love with each other all the time. And people desire each other and people want each other. You know, I think to myself--you know, the day Columbus arrived in 1492, the Indians came out to greet him and the historians have always said, 'Oh, you know, pity that tribe. They were all to die of the plague.' You know, and I think to myself, 'Well, hell, you know,

maybe they died of the plague, but don't miss the point. I mean, they were curious about these people. They saw these people and like the cast from some soap opera and they were getting off a boat and I'd be curious, too.'

You know, this is within the human mind to be interested in something that is new. And ultimately I might even be in love with them. I might be in love with that which was foreign to me. The possibility of even wanting to become them, of wanting to eat them. I wanted to eat you people in this room a long time. And I still do.

AMY GUTMANN: Two comments on a talk that was wonderful to listen to and to think about. One is, at the beginning, you distinguished Hispanics from blacks by saying there is no Hispanic race. Well, there is no black race either...

RODRIGUEZ: That's true. Yes.

GUTMANN: ...and there's no Asian race.

RODRIGUEZ: Exactly.

GUTMANN: And so there is no distinction there. There's a distinction between the experience of people who are identified and identify as black or Hispanic Americans in this country by the facts of slavery, discrimination that has roots that are unlike the discrimination that any other group, whether it be Jews or Hispanics of all the sorts that you spoke about, have had. And I think that's an a--I mean, that's not a common thought among Americans. I mean, most Americans do see if there is any race they really believe there is a race, at least, of blacks. But the genetic differences that can be accounted for by the difference between Asians and Caucasians is 1-100th of a percent--.0001 of all the genetic differences between us can be count--OK.

The second observation is much more positive. It goes to something about immigration that you're talking about. Immigrate--there's always been a force--this is a country among other things--I mean, one of the predominant aspects of this country is it's a country of immigrants. But there's always been a lot of resistance to that and a lot of political and social battle over

immigration and the question for you is if what you have talked about--which I accept and I think needs more voice in this country--is how many lives in this country have been enriched and bettered and are wonderful because of the fact of immigration and intermarriage and cultural exchanges so it's all mixed up in a morally good way. I mean, and in an aesthetically good way, often.

I mean, there are bad aspects to it, too. You know, there are bad things that can happen this way, too. But if we exalt that, as you do, surely there are arguments that flow from that for what kind of health-care policy, see what kind of immigration policy we have, do we educate--I mean, there are lots of policy arguments about whether illegal or legal immigrants should get health care, should get education, should--how they should be treated by our civic associations. There are different religious--do some religious groups exclude blacks? I mean, the history of Mormons and blacks has not been a pretty one in this country.

So I'm just begging you not to resist some of the policy implications of the kind of wonderful exaltation that you have and that your life represents of the kind of mixing that can happen in this country if people welcome it as opposed to resist it.

RODRIGUEZ: No, I don't resist it. I came to you today...

GUTMANN: No, you don't.

RODRIGUEZ: I came to you today, though, as a journalist. And to describe an America that I see forming. And I'm not a policy--my interest is not in policy or in the determinations of a body like this. I respect your deliberations. But I'm much more interested in the reportage at this moment than I am in any conclusions. I do think that there are very serious policy considerations of this sort that you're raising. I do think, however, that sometimes the truly revolutionary things that are going on in this society are sort of happening almost regardless and almost without anybody being aware of them. I mean, I tell you, we are going to wake up one day and it's all going to be changed and we're going to say, `When did it all change? You know, why didn't The New

York Times tell us it was going to happen? You know, where was Maureen Dowd when we needed her?' You know, she was going on about Bill Clinton's sex life.

I agree very much with your comment about the 'no black race.' There is no white race either to make the point over here. There are mythologies and I'm in the business of--insofar as I'm in any business at all of demythologizing of these identities, and suggesting their complexity and the dynamism of individuals to meet and learn and fall in love with people different from themselves. That much is very much what I've examined in testimony today. And that's all I give you, that this is a very complicated pr--I have only time for one more question and there was a patient questioner on this side.

DAVID BROMWICH: Thank you. I guess--I'm from California, too, and I regard your talk as not at all poetic but scientific.

Let me just briefly characterize a view that I think is fairly prevalent and ask you what you think of it, though, I think I know. And it's a view about culture, which says that cultural identity informs personal identity, that if you don't have it, something that gives you density, texture, thickness, robustness--that really characterizes you in a way that mere individuality can never do, that that's going to be missing from your life, and that therefore the good of this Canadian concept of multiculturalism is it gives us identity in the main way that makes later on individuality possible.

I think that's a very--somewhat guilty--but a very prevalent, right now, liberal mainstream view, which for all I know Bill Clinton means to endorse or has--have thought through and--and goes go along with. And I just wonder what the implications for that view are in the description you've offered of California and Mexico.

RODRIGUEZ: I'd offer the countertheory and that is to really become--you know, I've worked with gang kids as a reporter. I did a piece for a German magazine recently with these kids who are as far from being Huck Finn as you could imagine American kids of 14 and 15 as being. At a very point in which you'd expect them to sort of get on the raft and go down the

Mississippi, they are, in fact, looking for family. They are, in fact, looking for home. They are, in fact, looking for blood. They are, in fact, looking for Canada. And they insist that this little motley group of murderers that they have with them is their bro', their clan. These guys will stay with them. These guys--`He's my bro' and he's going to watch my back. This is my real family.'

And I think to myself, you know, did I read Huck Finn or was that some kind of Irish thing that the nun gave me that didn't make any sense in my--I thought American teen-agers wanted to leave home; I thought they wanted to sort of get on with it, you know, find out what's on the other side of town. Increasingly, because American teen-agers do not have family lives that are recognizable, they are turning now at points in which we might have expected some kind of movement into the public realm, they are turning very privatistic and looking for communes or for family in adolescence.

And it's one of the most perplexing things about the American experience. We're almost unwriting it at this moment. The business that you--which suggests to me that the people who are really going to be the individuals in our society, in the coming generation, are going to be coming from strong Chinese, strong Russian, strong Mexican families. In other words, you can only become an 'I' in the public realm after you have a strong sense of we in the private realm, it seems to me. At least that was my own progress.

As to cultural identity, it seems to me also that one of the things we did not talk about now, because we have used certain, and I think, arbitrarily, certain Canadian/Richard Nixon categories as ways of talking about our culture. We use those as sort of the determinant ways of understanding who we are or how we understand it ourselves. Well, I don't think of myself as Mexican. I think of myself more powerfully as Spanish Catholic. I think of myself very powerfully as Californian. I think of myself very powerfully as homosexual. I live with a gay community that I don't make. I live culturally within five or six cultural families and the notion that one Canadian designation is sort of the way I'm living my life, it's just not true.

The problem that most kids are having right now is that they live with too many cultures, and they don't know how to negotiate between those different cultures, which are often clashing. My Catholicism and my homosexuality, for example, and the fact that I have allegiance to more than one culture, I have friendships in one culture that do not extend to the other culture. And I end up wending my way among five or six or seven different cultures. And the notion that Canada offers me is finally too sterile, too simple, so sad. And I remember standing in Toronto--I was speaking to the Canadian Library Association--I had a wonderful opening line. I said that Canada had always struck me as the largest country in the world that doesn't exist. Nobody laughed.

And here we were, we were at this motel and near the airport at Toronto and all these planes were coming in from Bombay and from Buffalo and here we were like Victorians, you know, talking about culture as though it was this little thing we brought from the old country, you know, and that that's what we were going to hold true to. And the Canadian government actually supports Croatian ethnicities that are, I find, Nazi in their ideology. But let that pass for the moment and when we talk our multiculturalism. And I thought to myself, you know what did the teen-agers of Toronto, what could they make of this room except that we are like some kind of Victorian princess who simply does not realize that the world underneath her petticoat is very muddy and messy. And that she belongs, at least, to five or six cultures already. And that is what it means to be American. That is certainly what it means to be of California in 1997.

I come to you as a man of many cultures. I come to you as a Chinese and unless you understand that I am Chinese, then you've not understood anything I've said to you today. Thank you very much.

STEPHEN P. STEINBERG: OK. Thank you, Richard Rodriguez and Joyce Appleby for a really fascinating discussion this morning. We're going to break now to move into the individual working groups. You can take about five minutes to get a cup of coffee or something to drink. As a reminder, the group on Culture and Behavior will meet in the--let me get my rooms right--

the Exhibit Room, which is the room going out to your right. The group on Leadership in a Democratic Society will meet in the Reading Room, which is the room on the left, where Cheryl Faulkner has been the last two days. And the group on 21st Century Community will meet in the Lounge Room, which is behind the stage just going through the door to your left, over there.

It is now about five after 11. The working groups can go as late as 1:00. We will then come back into this room--which will be reset for lunch--have lunch and then--resume with the afternoon sessions.

A reminder, we gave you lists of suggested participants in each of the working groups. Those are only our kind of rough and ready suggestions as to where you might find the discussion most interesting. If you would prefer to be part of a different group, please feel free to go there. If you would let one of the staff members know that that's your preference, either during the session or afterwards, that would be helpful to us in keeping track.

Going forward, it is certainly possible to be part of more than one working group conversation. And if you let us know, we will help you arrange that. So take a brief coffee break and then let's move into the working groups. Thank you.